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The Mentor Relationship in African American Adolescent Literature

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THE CARL AND WINIFRED LEE HONORS COLLEGE

CERTIFICATE OF ORAL EXAMINATION

Roynetta D. Douglas, having been admitted to the Carl and Winifred Lee Honors College in Fall 1997 successfully presented the Lee Honors College Thesis on December 6, 2001.

The title of the paper is:

"The Mentor Relationship in Black Adolescent Literature"

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Gwen Athene Tarbox". The signature is written over a horizontal line.

Dr. Gwen Tarbox, English

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Dr. Ben Wilson". The signature is written over a horizontal line.

Dr. Ben Wilson, Black American Studies

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Elizabeth P. Amidon". The signature is written over a horizontal line.

Dr. Elizabeth Amidon, English

The Mentor Relationship in African American Adolescent
Literature

Roynetta D. Douglas
Honors Thesis
Fall 2001

The mentor relationship in African-American adolescent literature underscores the idea that young people can benefit from the counsel of caring adults outside their immediate families. In this ethnic specific subgroup, families may often suffer from financial strain due to single parent households or lack of career options. For that reason, many African-American adolescents either seek or happen upon a non-familial adult who helps them navigate through adolescence. This type of relationship, with its success and its pain, is vividly apparent in many novels geared toward young African-American girls. In The Skin I'm In (1998) by Sharon G. Flake and Only Twice I Wished for Heaven (1996) by Dawn Turner Trice, for instance, the mentor and mentee relationship is the primary focus unlike in many other novels, where the mentor is treated as a peripheral element. Moreover, both Flake and Trice create narratives in which the mentee's journey through self-discovery is quite similar that of the mentor. Indeed, it is through dual transformation that the mentor-mentee relationship becomes a successful one.

* * *

In The Skin I'm In, Maleeka Madison's transformation from beginning to end is quite remarkable, especially as Flake makes it clear that Maleeka faces both economic and attitudinal changes. Maleeka is a student at a contemporary, inner city Philadelphia middle school. Unbeknownst to Maleeka, the school hires a new teacher, Miss Saunders, who is a businesswoman from a local advertising agency. She decides to leave her lucrative position in order to give back to the economically challenged community by teaching at a local school. Before even formally meeting the school's new faculty member, she systematically highlights every negative quality Miss Saunders could

possibly have by noting, “First off, she got a man’s name, Michael. Now who ever heard of a woman named that? She’s tall and fat like nobody’s business, and she’s got the smallest feet I ever seen. Worse yet, she’s got a giant white stain spread halfway across her face like somebody tossed acid on it or something” (1). Part of Maleeka’s reason for attacking Miss Saunders stems from her own situation; she, too, is a persecuted individual. As a tall, skinny and dark-skinned girl, Maleeka has had to endure the taunting and derogatory remarks from her peers, in particular from John-John McIntyre, who intends for his jeers to cut so deeply that they pierce the soul. He produces this rhyme to taunt her, ““Maleeka, Maleeka-baboom, boom, boom, we sure wanna keep her, baboom, boom, boom, but she so black, baboom, boom, boom, we just can’t see her”” (3). Having to listen to these types of remarks daily from John-John and other students, who join in his barrage, Maleeka understandably turns her venom onto another person whom she deems in a worse predicament than herself.

Maleeka’s school life, however, is only one contributing factor to her reason for disliking Miss Saunders; she is also influenced by Charlese Jones, another student whose poor academic record and lack of self-esteem compel her to terrorize everyone -- even the teachers fear her wrath. Char is cruel to Maleeka, but Maleeka endures her ridicule because Char loans her new clothes everyday for school. In a sense, Maleeka buys Char’s friendship and part of the price includes holding her negative opinions about Miss Saunders.

Maleeka’s home life is also bleak and unfulfilling. Since the death of her father when she was ten years old, Maleeka’s self-esteem plummeted. At one point she even admits that: “I didn’t used to mind being this color. Then kids started teasing me about it.

Making me feel like something was wrong with how I look. And when Daddy passed away, that just made things worse... I don't get it. I think I'm kind of nice-looking. Why don't other people see what I see?" (41-42). Albeit a sweet and kind gesture, her mother's homemade clothes didn't remedy the situation. Maleeka is aware that her family does not have much money so she wears the clothes her mother makes without complaint even though in most cases her mother's sewing is flawed. She refuses to mention her opinion of her clothes because she also recognizes that sewing alleviates her mother's stress and grief.

Between her home life and school, Maleeka is in need of guidance. Unfortunately, her mother is unavailable due to her own problems, and good friends are in short supply. For those reasons, Miss Saunders is the person who uniquely fits the position because she epitomizes the purpose of a mentor. As she enters McClenton Middle School, she is quite conspicuous. Miss Saunders initially appears as a lost faculty member attempting to find her way to the office. Physically, she stands out due to her tall, full-figured body. Designer suits and shoes clad her enormous frame. Her most distinctive feature, however, is her face. She lacks melanin in the shape of a blot on her face. It is this birthmark that leads her to seek out Maleeka, perhaps with the goal of bolstering the girl's self-esteem. Miss Saunders intuitively knows that Maleeka has self-esteem problems by just looking at her because of the color consciousness within the Black community. Black people, due to the racial stereotype that have been perpetuated throughout history, have a tendency to tease people who are dark-skinned. This type of torment is common and Miss Saunders attempts to combat the effects it has on Maleeka. By illustrating that "it isn't the kind of skin people have that make them great," (Tarbox,

77) Miss Saunders fights to tear down a mentality that has poisoned the minds of African-Americans for centuries. Their first encounter seems innocuous on the onset. Miss Saunders approaches Maleeka and says, "Excuse me. I'm trying to find the principal's office. I know it's around here somewhere. Can you help me?" (2). She innocently requests directions to the administrative offices, and Maleeka waves her hand in the general direction as a reply. As she turns to begin her trek down the hall, Miss Saunders pauses and bestows a sensitive but kind compliment on Maleeka, by adding, "Maleeka, your skin is pretty. Like a blue-black sky after it's rained and rained," (3). Because skin color or lack thereof is the source of pain for Miss Saunders, she is astute in highlighting Maleeka's sensitive spot, also. That simple statement especially with the added explanatory notes illustrates Miss Saunders' unique knowledge of Maleeka's circumstances and personal struggles. As it turns out, Miss Saunders' own past qualifies her exclusively for the position as Maleeka's mentor. One special and intimate way to know another's pain, embarrassment or humiliation is to have experienced those feelings personally. Miss Saunders did.

Miss Saunders also expresses her past pain to her students by doing an in-class exercise where the students are to describe what their faces say to the world. This particular scene uniquely bonds Miss Saunders and Maleeka. In an attempt to expose the extent of Maleeka's lack of self-confidence and esteem, Miss Saunders poses the question to Maleeka first. Before she utters her answer, a male classmate insults her in front of the whole class, "Maleeka's face says she needs to stay out of the sun," Larry Baker says. "Naw, man, Maleeka's face says, Black is beautiful," another male student interjects in an attempt to defend Maleeka (16), but the damage is irrevocable.

At the end, Maleeka tries to humiliate Miss Saunders in like fashion by posing the question back to her. Not catching the bait so quickly, Miss Saunders strategically asks the class to participate. She wants to know what her face communicates to them. Initially no one wants to offer a statement. She probes by letting them know that she hears their whispered insults in the halls. Finally, Maleeka utters, “Not to hurt your feelings...but...I think it says, you know, you’re a freak,” (18). As if only talking to Maleeka, Miss Saunders gives her autobiography culminating with the fact she now likes herself, which did not occur overnight. As a young person, Miss Saunders used to hold the same opinion of herself. She explicitly tells the class that her face says that she is “sassy, sexy, and self-confident” (20). Through this historical map of her journey to self-acceptance, Miss Saunders is laying out the goals she is going to try to help Maleeka achieve. Since she knows the process better than anyone, she is able to construct a plan to bring it to fruition.

Maleeka, however, is not so enthusiastic about receiving Miss Saunders or help. By paying her a compliment, Miss Saunders also embarrasses Maleeka. Their subsequent meetings mirror the first one. Of course, the reason Maleeka has these adverse feelings towards Miss Saunders is because Maleeka is being challenged. Miss Saunders questions her choice of friends and her waning interest in academics. Changes are hard and at times painful, but that is exactly Miss Saunders’ objective for Maleeka. By getting Maleeka to see the negative personality traits her friends have and how they are not edifying to her academically or socially, Miss Saunders reasons that her self-confidence and esteem will be elevated.

The hidden cost, however, is the price Miss Saunders will be making. If Maleeka is to endure change, which is difficult, Miss Saunders has to endure a comparable situation. She will have to revisit her own painful history to ensure Maleeka's successful venture through this rough period of change. Miss Saunders' first installment is made when she tells her autobiography to the class. She relays to them how she wished nightly that her face would be all one color and how each morning her disappointment would deepen. In addition to prayers, personal and congregational, her grandparents and people of their generation, tried different concoctions to no avail. Finally, she resigned to accept that God is her creator and He loves her. Therefore, she should love herself. To her students, her process appears easy, but Miss Saunders qualifies her declaration of feeling sexy, sassy and smart. She admits that it was not miracle. It takes time and determination to reach the point of self-acceptance. By exposing her history, Miss Saunders makes herself vulnerable to these students. This action is necessary to prove to Maleeka publicly that she is not alone. Others go through pain and humiliation also.

Her next installment is made during a private conversation with Tai, a colleague and friend. At this point, the reader and Maleeka witness Miss Saunders' sensitive side. Having been friends with Tai since college, Miss Saunders is able to lower her defenses and welcome Tai into her heart and confidence, "telling [Tai] how when she was little, she prayed to God to make her face perfect. 'He didn't,' she says, 'so I tried to make up for it. To be perfect in everything else I did'" (114). While relating her inner pain, Miss Saunders is unaware that Maleeka entered the auditorium. Maleeka eavesdrops on their conversation, thus discerning the true effect the students menacing comments have on Miss Saunders. Tai tries to sympathize, "I know the students have been hard on you.

The picture on the blackboard. The name-calling in the halls. Kids telling you to buy a new face.” Miss Saunders replies, “I don’t want to talk about it,” thus shutting the door on Tai’s invitation to share her pain (114). That is not to say that Miss Saunders is not truly a confident woman. She is just caught off guard. Witnessing the taunting and scathing remarks thrown at Maleeka daily by her friends, rips Miss Saunders heart apart. They are vivid reminders of her past, her history and even in some ways her present. Even though pain is accrued through this process, it is a necessary evil to encounter in order for healing to occur. When Maleeka’s presence is realized, Miss Saunders is furious. Maleeka promises to not breathe a word to anyone, but Miss Saunders is not quick to put her confidence in Maleeka; however she must trust Maleeka in order for this relationship to be productive for all involved.

In the end, Miss Saunders uses a wonderful tool to help Maleeka begin her process of healing by asking all of the students to work on a creative writing project in pairs. Maleeka, without the help of her partner, decides to write a slave narrative in journal form. This exercise proves to be quite therapeutic. It is apparent from the slave girl’s name, Akeelma – a reworking of her own name--, that Maleeka is using this journal to release her own pain. Even Maleeka begins to confuse her life with that of her character:

Mostly, I’m thinking and writing in my diary- our diary,
Akeelma’s and mine. Lately it’s hard to know where
Akeelma’s thoughts begin and mine end. I mean, I might be
starting off with her talking about how scared she is with
the smallpox spreading around the ship and killing people.

Then I end up the same paragraph with Akeelma saying she's scared that maybe people will always think she is ugly. But I'm really talking about myself. I'm scared people will always think I'm ugly," (96).

Despite these moments of self-doubt, Maleeka is as anxious to write her journal project, as Miss Saunders is to read her entries. This little exercise does achieve its intended purpose because often Maleeka is unsure who is actually experiencing the action and relaying the words. Maleeka and Akeelma become one entity almost. Plus without any encouragement, Maleeka enters her journal in a public library contest. This action, without encouragement from any outside source, demonstrates her heightened level of confidence. In addition to entering, Maleeka also wins the contest. She finally emerges as her own bright and shining star.

This slave journal opens another interesting facet of this novel. It places it uniquely within the African American experience. Even though the extent of Maleeka's knowledge about slaves is unclear, her bond to them is beautifully illustrated in her journal. Akeelma, her main character, voices similar concerns as any young girl would have like:

Worse than no food and stink everywhere is having Kinjari see me now. Momma would say I am a vain and foolish girl. Here dying and wondering what some boy thinks about me. But I can't help it. In my village, Kinjari's family would know my family and maybe arrange for us to be married. Even at my age – thirteen. But no one would ask to marry me like this. Sitting in my own filth.

My head shaved clean to keep lice away. Skin dry and ashy like tree bark ate away by the desert wind (26).

Akeelma is, in way, Maleeka's ancestor, but she, too, has issues with self-doubt and lack of self-esteem due to her appearance. In addition, she chooses a time period where others are punished and abused due to their skin color. That is not to say that Maleeka consciously chose this topic for its social parallels, but Flake did. She brings this tale forward for two main reasons. First, she takes the issue of self-esteem out of time. By illustrating that hundreds of years ago girls still wanted boys to like them even when they had a hard time liking themselves, Flake bridges gaps across generations. Second, she places an ethnic specific stamp on this piece. The slave experience in America is unique to Africans and their descendants. By almost pinpointing the origin of self-hatred within the African American community, she opens the door to eradicate it. She isn't placing blame. This is evident in the fact that she doesn't place a color on the slave masters. Her focus is on the slaves, Akeelma and Kinjari, her crush. However, the history this slave journal implicitly contains should not be overlooked. It is through this past that pride in the race develops. By writing and becoming intimate with her foremothers, even through fiction, Maleeka is able to learn that her dark skin is a credit to her heritage not a feature that should be shameful.

* * *

Unlike Flake's novel, Dawn Turner Trice's novel Only Twice I Wished for Heaven is not primarily for adolescent readers, thus the issues and themes introduced in this novel are more complex and adult-oriented. At its genesis, Trice's novel was written for a more mature audience, but due to its adolescent protagonist, younger readers'

interest was aroused. It is also the intricate, interlocking storyline that distinguishes this novel from the straightforward plot of Flake's novel. This is a stylistic difference that more fully illustrates that Trice intends this novel for an adult audience. This story about 12-year-old Valerie Nicholae and 11 year-old Tempestt "Temmy" Saville is told from the point of view of 70-year-old Miss Jonetta Goode and 31-year-old Temmy. Despite the narrators' distance from the events, Trice still convincingly recreates a childlike person through the innocence Temmy infuses into her younger self, but the lapse of time adds a mature outlook that cannot be ignored.

Trice's novel is an example of the bildungsroman genre that contains two interwoven coming of age tales. The first concerns Temmy, who moves from her home on the far south side of Chicago to an elite community subdivision named Lakeland. Because of this disruption and its effects on her parents, Temmy has to find outside influences to help guide her through adolescence. Temmy's mother is unavailable due to her own feelings of loneliness; her father begins questioning his earlier, more socially conscious, views and looking outside the home in his new position as a teacher in the Lakeland school to have his emotional needs fulfilled. Looking for a mentor among her father's colleagues would prove useless to Temmy as well. These teachers are more preoccupied with superficialities than with the true mission of educating their students.

With all immediate adults lacking the needed knowledge or time to help, Temmy travels outside her safely constructed subdivision to the dangers that lie in the neighboring 35th Street community. A tall, ivy-covered fence, designed by the Lakeland developers to shut out the "real" world, divides Lakeland and 35th Street. When Temmy, homesick for her old south side neighborhood, crawls through a gap in the fence, she

encounters a tall, alluring, and charismatic street preacher in the person of Alfred Mayes. As Temmy reaches out to touch him, her future mentor, Miss Jonetta, snatches her from behind. Sensing the danger Temmy is encountering and knowing she is from behind the fence, Miss Jonetta reprimands her for sneaking over to 35th Street and commands her not to return because 35th Street is not safe like her Lakeland home. Temmy promises, but both she and Miss Jonetta know that Temmy will return and when she does, Miss Jonetta will assume the mother-like role and protect her. Upon introducing Miss Jonetta, the second coming of age tale is presented. Interspersed throughout the novel are flashbacks in which Miss Jonetta recalls her own passage from adolescence to adulthood. By describing these events, Miss Jonetta's fierce protection of Temmy and dislike of Alfred Mayes are put into context.

Over the next few months, Temmy returns frequently to Miss Jonetta's store, O'Calas, on 35th Street. Miss Jonetta quickly becomes Temmy's friend and confidante, and the young girl shares her feelings of loneliness and isolation because she has been unable to make friends due to her inability to conform to the bourgeois society of the Lakeland community. As a motherly mentor, Miss Jonetta soothes Temmy's fears and encourages her to have the confidence not to let the opinions of her peers define who she is. Not only does Temmy run through the fence to find comfort and assurance about school, but also to gain understanding about her parents and to share her concern about Valerie. As her family continues to grow distant, Temmy seeks Miss Jonetta to voice her concerns. After seeing her father sitting too close to one of his students, Temmy tells Miss Jonetta that she thinks her father no longer loves her. It is not until Miss Jonetta explains that "a man is a weird animal" and that "if you give your papa some time he'll

begin to come back to you” (100) that Temmy calms down and lets go of her fear. Miss Jonetta has the exact same effect on Temmy when she talks about Valerie. Before they ever get to meet, Miss Jonetta knows that Valerie is often absent from school and is ostracized by the school children also, but without arousing Temmy’s suspicions, Miss Jonetta investigates Valerie’s life to alleviate her own worries.

At first, Miss Jonetta is concerned with protecting Temmy from becoming ensnared by Alfred Mayes. The more Miss Jonetta tries to curb her interest with stern warnings, the more Temmy desires to learn more about Alfred Mayes. Her curiosity is quenched when she sneaks past O’Cala’s one day and attends one of his sermons on 35th Street. He immediately is drawn to her and begins a conversation with her quite innocently. As he begins to shuffle a deck of cards to illustrate that “one thing about the Master is that he’ll give you a second chance” (144), Judd, a friend of Miss Jonetta’s and a frequenter of O’Cala’s, shows up, and Temmy is again snatched from Alfred Mayes. In fear of upsetting Miss Jonetta, much like a child would be afraid of upsetting a mother, Temmy begs Judd not to tell Miss Jonetta. Instead of agreeing to her promise, Judd tells her to say away from Alfred Mayes. Trying to do anything to insure that Miss Jonetta never finds out, Temmy immediately agrees. It is here that the hold Alfred Mayes has on Temmy is broken, but the memory of his physical being especially, his flashy rings, which are gold, is indelibly burned in her brain.

Beyond Temmy’s captivation with Alfred Mayes, Miss Jonetta treats Temmy’s concerns and fears with sensitivity. To Miss Jonetta, they seem to be standard adolescent issues. It is not until Temmy begins to speak of her friend Valerie that Miss Jonetta starts to become concerned. The first day Valerie attends Temmy’s class, Temmy could not

sneak through the fence fast enough to tell Miss Jonetta. Upon entering O'Calá's, Miss Jonetta notices that Temmy is unusually excited: "Today... in school? We got a new girl named Valerie Nicholae. Well, she's not new, but this was her first day back. And she sits right in front of me. She used to live over here; her Mama still does and she's not at all like the other Lakeland girls," (84). Part of the reason Temmy gravitates to Valerie is because she seems to be the most genuine person Temmy has met inside the walls of Lakeland. In this way, Valerie complements Miss Jonetta's role in Temmy's life.

Lakeland, due to its location and development, is very much an escape from reality. The Lakeland community tries to make life easy and nearly perfect. This is evident in the mere construction of the subdivision. For example, all the windows facing east toward 35th street appear to be real windows from the outside, but on the inside, they are cement blocks, thus making the statement that life outside Lakeland does not exist. Also to keep the water of Lake Michigan blue, the management uses food coloring to perpetuate the façade of perfection. Valerie shatters this image, and Temmy, rejecting the pretense, is attracted to her.

Valerie's presence at Lakeland is totally different from her peers. She lives in Lakeland because her brother, John, who is the head laundry man. In exchange for his labor, they receive housing and Valerie may attend school. Their apartment is far from luxurious. It is in the dark, hot basement of building five-thirty-five; Valerie's room is smaller than Temmy's housekeeper's sewing room. Needless to say Valerie is quite poor. Despite her living quarters, Valerie still tries to attend school. Unfortunately, her attendance is sporadic at best. She will attend class consistently for about a week, but then she is gone for another week or two. At first, Temmy is quite concerned, but then

she begins to relax a bit with the routine. Like clockwork, everyday Valerie is present a yellow Nova awaits her after school to take her outside the safety of Lakeland. Each time she returns, Temmy becomes a bit more concerned about her friend not because of her absence but due to the changes in her personality. Temmy notices that she “dragged her up to the blackboard” in class and “began to slump, almost rooting herself in her chair” at the end of the school day (161). Each time Valerie returns to school, she is more withdrawn and secretive. It is during these times that Temmy’s curiosity is piqued about what actually happens while Valerie is outside of Lakeland living on 35th street.

As days pass, Temmy excitedly talks of her new and only friend at Lakeland. Even though Miss Jonetta previously warned Temmy to steer clear of those uppity Lakeland girls, Temmy tries to highlight how different Valerie is from the other students because she has “lots of color” (84). Temmy offers to bring Valerie to O’Cala’s for Miss Jonetta to meet her, but since Temmy travels through the fence secretly, Miss Jonetta discourages Temmy from bringing a friend with her. Once Temmy shares the fact with Miss Jonetta that Valerie’s mother is a part of the New Saved street ministry led by Alfred Mayes, and that Valerie still stays in a housing project on 35th Street, Miss Jonetta’s concerns about this child grows. She begins trying to protect Temmy from the influences Valerie brings from 35th Street and searching for ways to protect Valerie from the evil that surrounds her also. In order to protect both of these young girls, Miss Jonetta, much like her counterpart Miss Saunders, must revisit her own painful childhood and growing up on 35th Street.

As a girl, Miss Jonetta moved to the south side of Chicago with her father and sister. Due to her wild and adventurous nature, she succumbed to the allure of 35th Street

in general and Alfred Mayes in particular. Because she knew it was forbidden, Miss Jonetta and her sister, Essie, snuck out of their “bedroom window like two men tipping out on their wives” (45) and went to 35th Street where they saw women wearing clothes that left their mouths gaped. When they entered a nightclub where a woman was singing the blues, Miss Jonetta first laid eyes on Alfred Mayes. As the woman on stage was singing, a man “strutted up to that woman” and “grabbed her fanny and they squeezed and hugged and touched each other as they did a slow, nasty dance,” (48). Through this action, Miss Jonetta becomes captivated by Alfred Mayes. As they re-enter their bedroom window, Aunt Ethel meets Essie and Miss Jonetta. Being bolder and more recalcitrant than Essie, Miss Jonetta is consequently thrown out of her house because her Aunt Ethel, being a part of the New Saved Christian street ministry, disapproves of Miss Jonetta’s thirst for excitement.

With nowhere to go, Miss Jonetta returns to the same nightclub where she first encountered Alfred Mayes. As she sets in the bar trying to figure out what to do, Alfred Mayes reappears and asks, “‘What’s a pretty young thang like yaself doin’ out so late?’” (108). Being young and naïve, Miss Jonetta tries to lie and say, “‘I got friends I’m waiting on,’” (108). Alfred Mayes, knowing the street life better than she does, offers her a place to stay and she accepts his offer. Soon he puts her to work in his whorehouse. Inevitably, she becomes pregnant and claims that it is Alfred’s child. In return for her work, Alfred kicks her out, and she reluctantly returns to Aunt Ethel’s house by her father’s permission because Aunt Ethel does not want her to return. There she lives in the “damp and cold” (113) basement without any contact with Essie or Aunt Ethel would “make me leave no matter what Papa said Baby or no baby,” (113). She gives birth to a

baby girl, but Aunt Ethel quickly takes the child away without letting Miss Jonetta see or hold her child. After few days pass, Aunt Ethel returns and tells Miss Jonetta that she must leave. When Miss Jonetta asks about her little girl, Aunt Ethel says that the child did not make it even though she heard the baby give a strong cry shortly after birth. While Miss Jonetta begs to see her deceased daughter, Aunt Ethel just repeats the 23rd Psalm ignoring Miss Jonetta's cries.

In a daze, Miss Jonetta wakes in a stranger's house. It is owned by Hump, a man who becomes a good friend of Miss Jonetta's. He takes care of her just until Alfred takes her back with promises of "I'm a changed man," and "You don't have to work no more, just be my woman by my side," (118). Being only 17-year-old, Miss Jonetta believes him. Not two days pass before Alfred tries to force Miss Jonetta back into the whorehouse. They fight, and she grabs a candlestick from the table and hits him. As she stumbles backwards, he hits his head on a pipe and cracks his skull. After standing over him for a few seconds, she "stumbles out of her heels" (120) and runs for her life. When she finally does stop, she enters O'Calá's store where she remains as its proprietor until Temmy arrives some 40 years later.

Given that she had been traumatized by sexual abuse as a girl, Miss Jonetta is thus very concerned when Temmy recounts how Valerie tries to kiss her. Indeed, it is "the kiss" that really sets into motion the destruction of Valerie and 35th Street. After the Lakeland community's debutante ball, Valerie stays the night at Temmy's house. That night Valerie's "whimpering noises, sharp staccato rants mixed with muffled breaths that sounded as though she was in pain" (187) wakes Temmy. Too afraid to wake her parents, Temmy checks on her friend. As Temmy tries to wake the girl, Valerie "put her

arm around my waist and her lips against [hers],” (189). Temmy says, “It wasn’t the tight lipped kiss Gerald had given me one day after school. It was a grown-up kiss that kept me up the rest of the night, pressed against the far side of that full-sized bed,” (189). Knowing that it wasn’t an innocent kiss and unable to approach her parents, Temmy tells Miss Jonetta the next day, and Miss Jonetta embarks on a search of her own. That night, Miss Jonetta sends her friends, Judd and Fat Daddy, to Valerie’s housing project to find out about the girl’s family. When they return to O’Cala’s, they tell Miss Jonetta that Ruth, Valerie’s mother and -- as it turns out -- Miss Jonetta’s niece, sells Valerie to men to pay for her drug habit.

Before Miss Jonetta can take care of the situation, Temmy steps in to help her friend. Without knowing the circumstances of the situation, Temmy walks in on Alfred Mayes as he is molesting Valerie. Without seeing his face, Temmy recognizes him by his gold rings. Embarrassed, Valerie runs from the apartment and jumps off the ledge to her death. Temmy witnesses everything, and Alfred Mayes is blamed. Showing up just after Valerie’s death, Miss Jonetta quietly ushers Temmy back to the ivy fence of Lakeland. Knowing that the real world made a crashing introduction into Temmy’s life, Miss Jonetta tries to assure her that everything will be okay.

Suddenly the citizens of the Lakeland community, which had never shown an interest in 35th Street, take up Valerie’s cause. Though children die over there everyday, her residence at Lakeland lends importance to her life. This designation causes the city to finally carry out its plans to tear down 35th Street. Upon learning this, Temmy realizes that Miss Jonetta and her friends will be forced to leave. Temmy, not being able to cope with not seeing Miss Jonetta, makes a final trip beyond the fence. During this last visit,

Temmy tells Miss Jonetta that her family is “leaving Lakeland because nobody came to Valerie funeral,” (296). When Temmy inquires about Miss Jonetta’s plans, she says, “I don’t know. I just know it’s time to pull up from here. Been here too long. Too long,” (299).

Even though she fears disclosing her past and losing Temmy’s respect, Miss Jonetta writes Temmy five letters, in which Miss Jonetta explains her life before and after 35th Street. Miss Jonetta knows Temmy “couldn’t understand right off, “ but Miss Jonetta “hoped with all that was in [her] that one day the words would rock” Temmy (292-293). It is this group of letters that help Temmy to cope with and grow from this experience. Miss Jonetta knows the pain that comes with seeing incidents best forgotten because of her life as an abused child, but through her struggle of healing, she knows how best to guide Temmy to peace. However, Miss Jonetta must sacrifice her pride and disclose painful truths about herself to a child who loves and respects her. At this point, Miss Jonetta realizes that continuing to keep her past a secret will not help Temmy heal. Moreover, Miss Jonetta knows that secrets “don’t always stay down. They rise like hot bread; spread like melting butter, “ (7). Therefore, like Miss Jonetta had to finally expose her past, she knew that one day Temmy would have to reveal the truth about what she saw, even if it is just to herself. Without the lessons from Miss Jonetta as guidance after they separate, Temmy would not have been able to tell her secret because it would have consumed her.

* * *

In these two novels, it is the mentor-mentee relationship that guides the protagonist through the difficult times. Granted both of Maleeka and Temmy have at least

one parent, but they are not available to meet their child's needs due to the difficulties and issues that are prevalent in their own lives. For this reason, outside assistance is needed. Through these non-familial relationships, Temmy and Maleeka gain the confidence they need to break through the problems they face. In Maleeka's case, her issue is a typical adolescent problem based on social and emotional insecurity. She, like many adolescents, does not like her looks, so she tries to become someone she is not. It takes the guidance of an older, more mature person to assure her that she is normal and is able to overcome these insecurities. Unlike Maleeka, Temmy has larger issues to deal with and overcome. At 11-years-old, Temmy witnesses her friend's suicide. For obvious reasons, this event shatters her innocence and throws her into the larger world of ideas before she is capable of navigating through this alone.

Due to their need for help and assistance, Maleeka and Temmy seek mentors either intentionally or unintentionally. Miss Saunders, unlike Miss Jonetta, seeks out Maleeka because of her own history. She discerns the problems Maleeka is encountering and with the desire to give back to the community decides to take an active role in this student's life. Maleeka rejects the intrusion, but after a while realized the positive qualities to having a "true friend." Temmy, on the other hand, returns to Miss Jonetta's store because she desires a real connection with someone. After leaving the "real" world for Lakeland, she no has the genuine interaction with her family nor does she have the chance to make new friends at school. Miss Jonetta attaches to Temmy also. Her reasons are not totally altruistic. Surely, she wants to protect this child from the dangers that lie outside her door, but this child offers her something she has never truly had – love.

Because of her past as a prostitute, Miss Jonetta has had quite a bit of rejection, but Temmy does not see her that way. Miss Jonetta is Temmy's breath of fresh air.

These two girls receive help and grow from these relationships, but the mentor also grows. In order for these girls to mature, the mentors must expose their wounds. Though this is painful, both Miss Saunders and Miss Jonetta make the sacrifice. Miss Saunders has to endure the taunting of her students, which are a reminder of the road she travels earlier in her life. The reader only catches glimpses of this, but that is enough to witness why she is attached to Maleeka. Miss Jonetta's history is more fully illustrated. Though the reader knows the extent of her hardships, Miss Jonetta does not desire to relay her story to Temmy until she is forced to leave 35th Street. Even though she decides to write her life in letters, her decision to give them to Temmy as she is leaving shows two things. First, she realizes that many of the lessons she wants to convey are too mature for Temmy to understand right now. Therefore, she has the letters to go back to when she needs a reminder, which Temmy does quite often. Second, Miss Jonetta is still afraid. By waiting to give them to Temmy as she leaves, Miss Jonetta does not have to witness her reaction. Though Miss Jonetta knows that Temmy loves her, not receiving that type of love leads Miss Jonetta to hold it delicately.

Analyzing this special type of relationship within the bildungsroman genre shows how both the protagonist and supporting characters must learn from each other in order to grow. Moreover, it illustrates how non-familial adults have more of an impact on a child's when the parents are too busy to help even though they may have the desire to assist, like Ms. Hilary Clinton said, when she paraphrased the West African proverb, "It

takes a village to raise a child.” Adolescents have a peculiar way of gravitating to those who can help them even, if they seem to resist such help at first.

The mentor-mentee relationship is a part of a larger tradition within African-American literature, in particular, and the whole African-American community in its entirety. The idea of an older, more experienced woman reaching back to teach her daughter from her painful history is the crux of text written by Black women. For example, Harriet Jacobs’ novel Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl, is a story of a slave girl who resists her slave master’s advances and through a seven year stay in an attic escapes to the North. It is through this autobiographical text of pain and shame that Jacobs tries to teach young girls that, they should rejoice in not being slaves and to keep their purity at all costs. Due to its long history, the mentor-mentee relationship is quite effective. For this reason these texts are not only part of the bildungsroman genre, but also a member of the larger African-American Experience.

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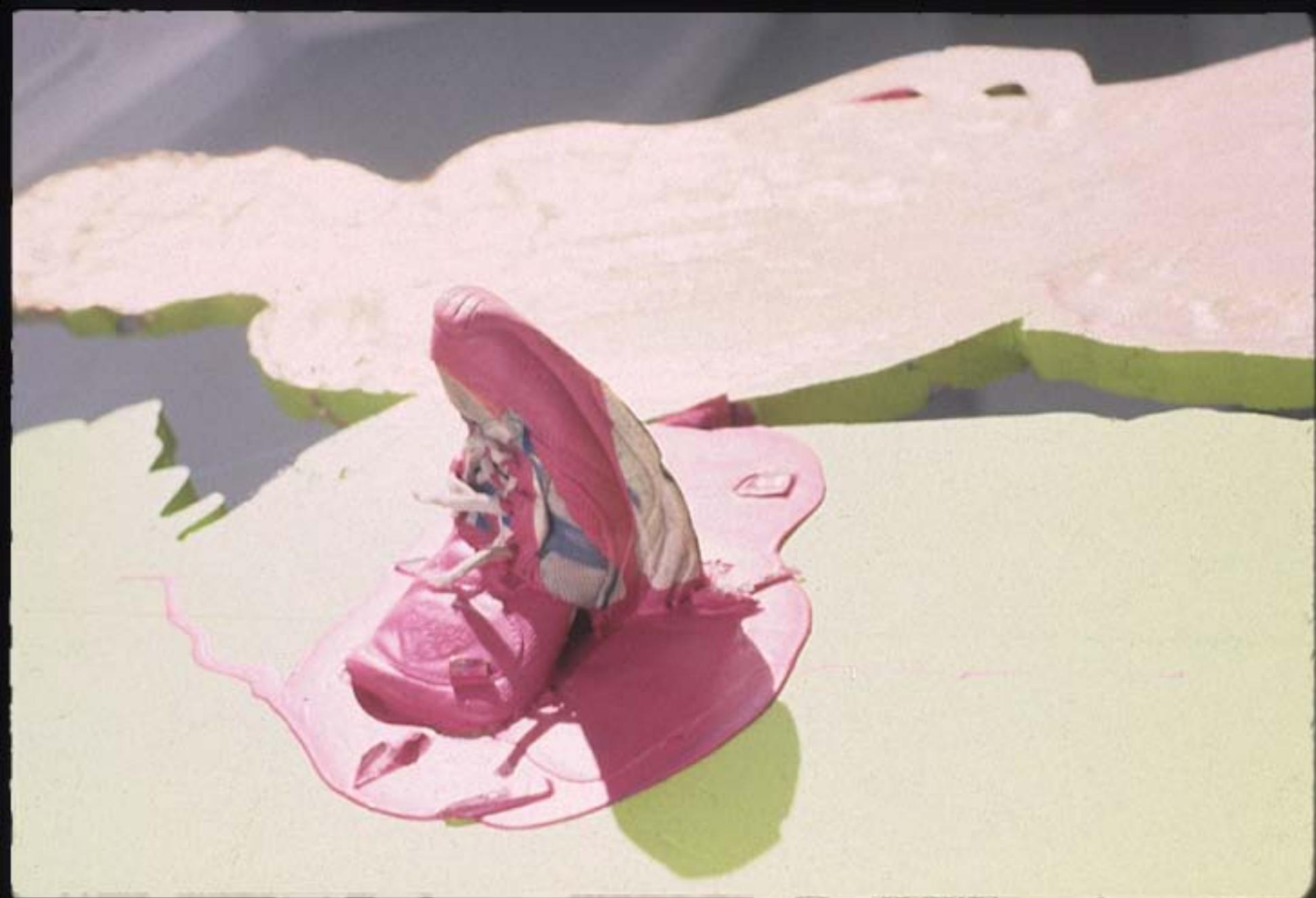
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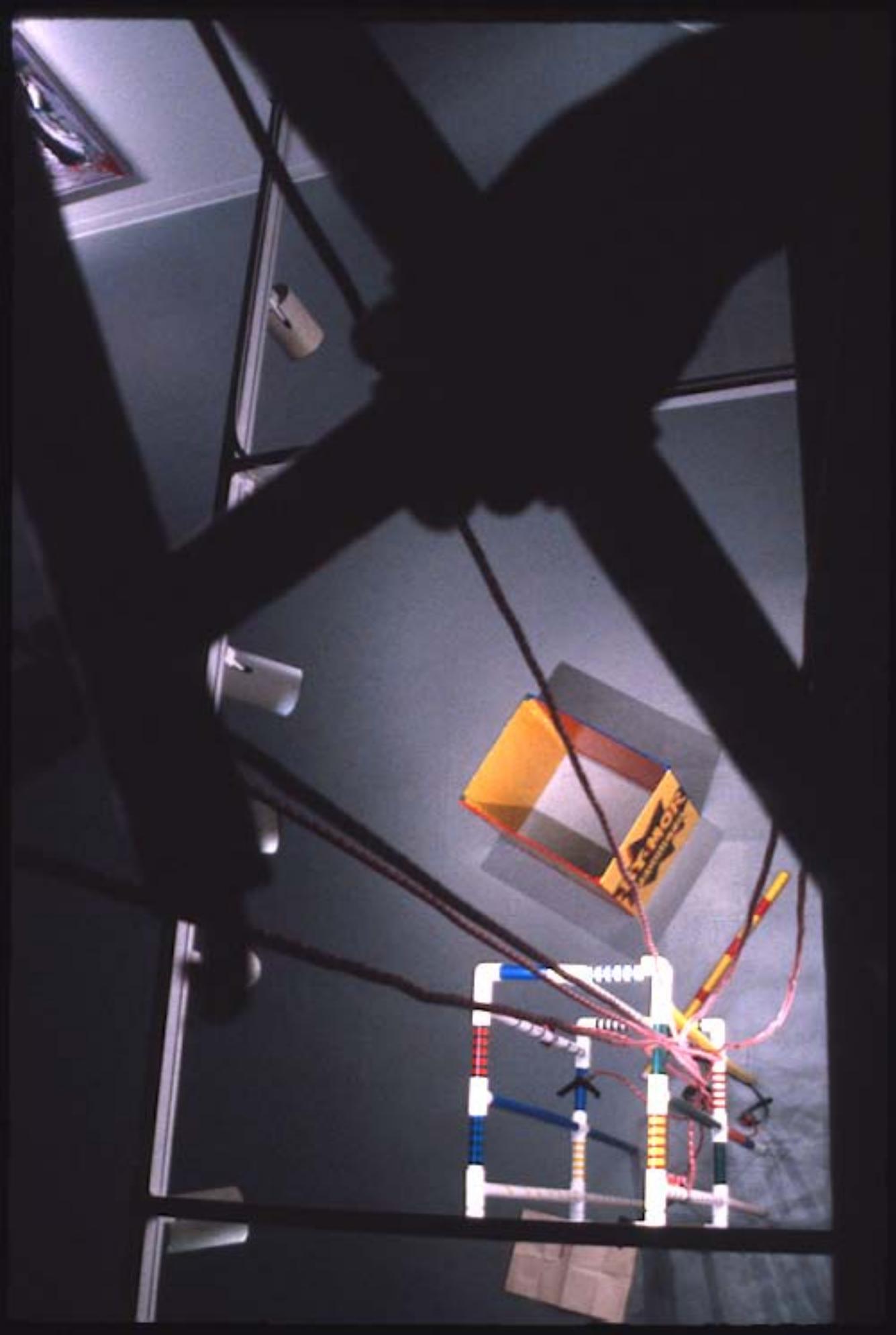


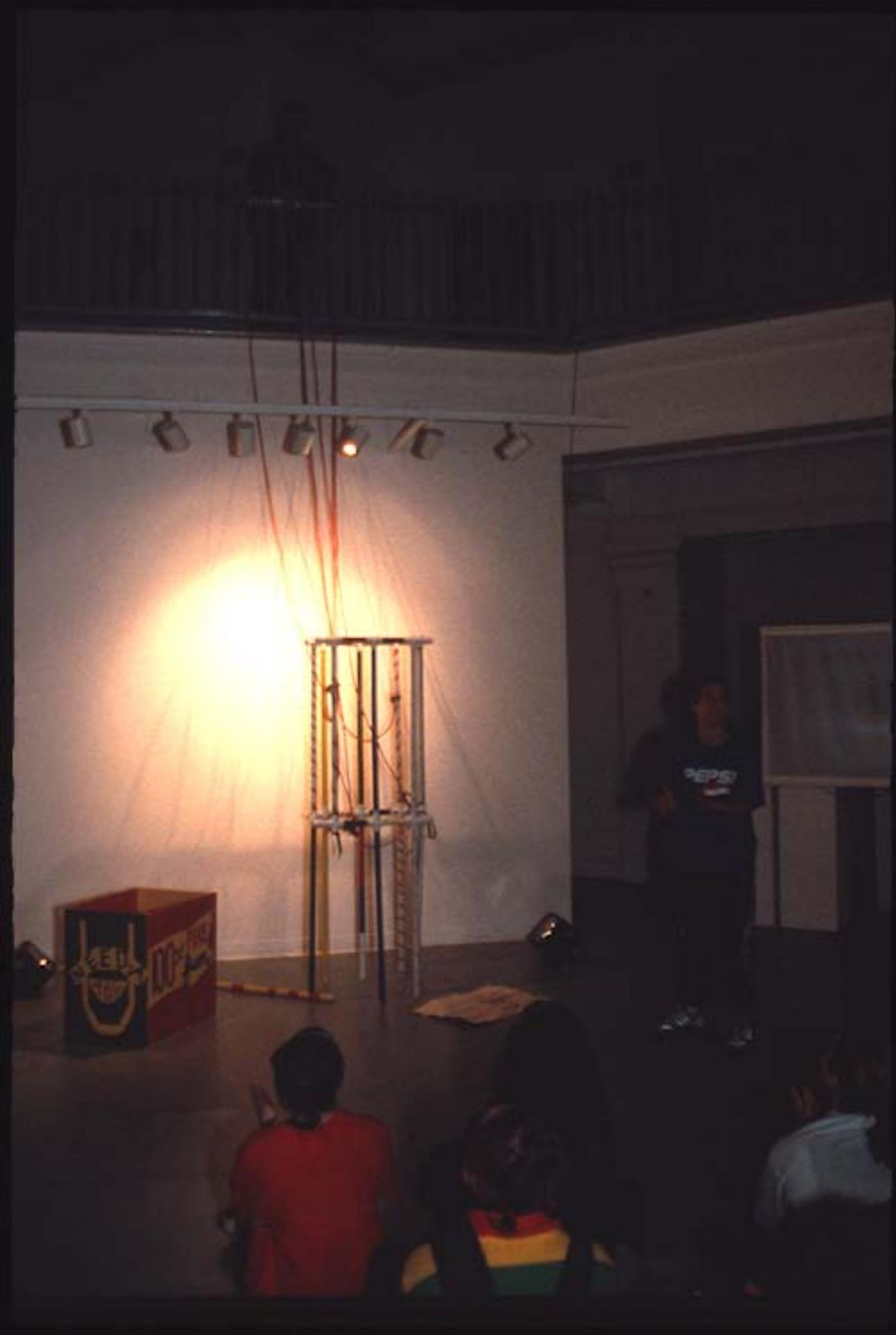




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