Bedeviled Beauty: My Journey Through White American Theater Institutions

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Bedeviled Beauty: My Journey Through White American Theater Institutions

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
The University of New Orleans
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts
in
Film and Theatre
Performance, Acting

By

J’aiLa Christina Price
B.F.A., Musical Theatre, Reinhardt University, 2021
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Dedication

To my most precious gem, my sister—there will always be a bridge.

To my granny, my forever protector and advocater: Who knew your blue dress would go so far?
Acknowledgments

I sincerely thank God for grounding me and illuminating my path throughout this journey.

Thank you to my ancestors, whose enduring legacy of resilience and wisdom is a constant source of inspiration.

Thank you to my parents for their boundless sacrifices and unconditional support. You both have been the cornerstone of my journey. I am eternally grateful.

Thank you Michael for your faith and upliftments throughout these three years. Your unwavering motivation and nurturing encouragement have helped me finish strong.

Myni, thank you for this cherished bond of sisterhood and friendship. Our written theses of Blood at the Root have officially bound us. Let us keep soaring like Brenda.

Justin Maxwell, your mentorship has broadened my horizons and introduced me to new realms of art and knowledge. Your faith in me and inclusion on my committee have been pivotal in my artistic values.

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Kevin, I am immensely grateful to you for taking me on as your advisee within the middle of the school year, and I eagerly anticipate the continuation of our mentorship.

Lastly, Thank you to my beloved New Orleans family, for your warm embrace—providing me with a fertile ground for personal and professional growth. An indelible mark has been etched upon me.
Table of Contents

Dedication .................................................................................................................................iii
Acknowledgements..................................................................................................................iv
Table of Contents......................................................................................................................v
List of Figures............................................................................................................................vi
Abstract......................................................................................................................................vii
Section I - Introduction ............................................................................................................1
Section II The Africans Not the Greeks ..................................................................................4
Section III The Classical Gurus: A Lesson in Needing More...................................................13
Section IV The Gap(s).............................................................................................................20
Section V The Bridge...............................................................................................................32
Section VI Post-Production......................................................................................................51
Section VII Conclusion............................................................................................................54
References...............................................................................................................................56
Appendix....................................................................................................................................59
Vita.............................................................................................................................................137
List of Figures

Figure 1. A diagram of Stanislavski’s system.................................................................22
Figure 2. Gordon Parks “American Gothic” 1942.........................................................44
Abstract

Game console: Oculus Quest
World: American Theater Institutions
Player: Minority
Place: United States
Level: “Ain’t no way.”

This thesis explores the contrast between the Westernized philosophies ingrained in my education and my identity as a Black female artist. It sheds light on the difficulties of pursuing higher education in the arts and the gaps that arise from limited exposure to culturally diverse Black resources, revealing the systemic issues in Western performance education. The paper also discusses the insights gained from my journey as a Black female artist, focusing on my thesis performance of Blood at the Root, which is specifically analyzed for its utilization of Black ritualistic methods and theories. In addition, it reflects on the beauty inherent in this personal and professional journey, emphasizing the significance of healing and growth within the context of artistic expression.

Keywords: Identity, Afrocentric, Black Acting Methods, Theater, Blood at the Root, Rituals, Black-centered resources
Section I
Introduction

In the realm of theater education, the predominantly White landscape often constrains Black actors—hindering their ability to cultivate a strong sense of identity through essential Black-centered resources. This disparity is particularly pronounced within higher education settings, where aspiring actors gather to refine their craft. Yet, this lack of diverse resources poses a significant barrier, depriving students of knowledge imperative to their artistic expression and journey toward success.

Society, unfortunately, is still in a time where general higher-educational acting training is rooted in European classical training and predominantly operates within that framework. Theater history classes start with “The Greeks” and end with “Modern and Contemporary Theater...often White ‘influential’ male playwrights and practitioners.” Acting 101 is based on text like Russian theater practitioner Konstantin Stanislavski’s book, An Actor Prepares. The taught philosophies in the class do not venture far out of Stanislavski’s parameters outside of “making it your own.” The institutionalized theater season productions are generated through a White contemporary filtered lens that must include classics like William Shakespeare. Most people (Black and White) pursuing some theatrical degree, unless attending an HBCU, have had this same foundation of theatrical knowledge taught to them. Black resources are significantly limited in classrooms. From the beginning of the actor’s education, there is no sense of identity Black actors can relate to, which increases the gap between fundamental techniques, discovery, and exploration—another delay in artistic growth. Gordon Parks, the first African-American director to produce a major Hollywood studio film, says, “I’ve known both misery and
happiness, lived in so many different skins it is impossible for one skin to claim me. And I have felt like a wayfarer on an alien planet at times – walking, running, wondering about what brought me to this particular place, and why.” It’s unfortunate that the beginnings of many actors’ careers sound like this. They struggle in a cycle of boundless research and effort, grasping onto strings that will never connect or relate to them.

Time after time, class after class, workshop after workshop, and more than not, the foundations used to teach acting are rooted in European performance systems. Gordon was right when he called America an alien planet, and dramaturg Sydné Mahone when she called American Theater “a White patriarchal institution” (2002, p. 258). Yes, an actor’s job is to truthfully express the story of a specific character under their given circumstances with commitment and intention. (Wow, even I am describing terms in the same direction I am trying to move against. Darn Konstantin). But this is not the actor’s only job. African dramatics and Black implementations make great foundations for the actor to start from a grounded presence, not only in their lines and movement but also in their knowledge, theater history, and play repertory. This basis gives actors their roots. They need to claim their own. They should not have to “put on so many different skins” before claiming their own (Parks, n.d.). Identity is indispensable to their souls as artists.

The challenge with Black actors living in multiple skins or putting on many masks without a firm grasp of their own identity is that it may impede their accessibility to truth. Truth stems from a foundation of sincerity, honesty, and authenticity within oneself. A significant aspect of acting involves one’s own essence. When actors embark on character development by delving into their own understanding of self within the world, they initiate their journey from a
rooted standpoint where they can evolve and authentically embody the nuances of their characters. When the Black actor cries that nothing is working and they do not know why, when the gap increases between the person and character, when every character they put on starts feeling “off,” this is when the actor delves into their core issues and dismantles any barriers that have been distancing them from their characters. But how do they claim their identity? When and where do they search?

This research explores the lack of exposure to Black theater in my acting training. It highlights the importance of African and Black theater in developing a sense of self-identity among actors. The paper delves into the often-overlooked African theatrical roots that form the foundation for Black methodologies. It emphasizes the significance of these traditions and aligns with the breakthroughs within my thesis production process of Blood at the Root by Dominique Morisseau. As the journey unfolds, the paper illuminates the profound impact of African traditions and Black-centered theater on shaping my artistic endeavors and my sense of self, paving the way for a deeper exploration of identity and artistic expression.
Section II

The Africans, Not the Greeks

African theater and performance have always existed and contributed to one another long before contact with Greek and Western civilizations. Ancient Greece is commonly referred to as the origin of theater, and the Greeks are frequently referred to as the first group of people who discovered theater. But that is not the case. In *Black Theater: Ritual Performance in the African Diaspora*, Victor Leo Walker II “Introduction” states “many performative modes of expression [are] rooted in the ancestral ethos of black Africans in the Diaspora” (2002, p. 13). Africa’s rich and vibrant theatrical culture is rooted in ritualistic and spiritual storytelling mechanisms. Specific modes of expression discussed in this chapter include dance, masquerades, ceremonies, passages, and more. Although not categorized as “theater” by the conventional disciplines from European standards, they are a necessary part of theater history that must be shared more often so actors and others can broaden their understanding and focus on what theater is.

Because African theater does not come from a systematic approach, the terminology challenges Western Europeans and contributes to its limited integration into institutions today. According to Soyinka (1976, as cited in Walker II’s, 2002), the “Western European man later reduced [these] specialist terminologies through his chronic habit of compartmentalization (p. 13). Africa’s ritualistic approach to theater brings communities together, celebrates native culture, creates and retells stories, and welcomes ancestors. Walker II (2002) states, “the vast majority of black Africans in the Diaspora share experiences of what folklorist, scholar, and cultural historian Alan Lomax [1990] refers to as ‘the African style of collective creation’ rooted in the performative rituals and ceremonies of the community,” (p. 13). In an article, writers
Diakhaté and Eyoh state Africans “did not name their theatre; rather, they lived it” (Diakhaté and Eyoh, 2021). Their traditions are a means of human development and how they go through society, learning, experiencing, and favoring their ancestors. Editors Igweonu and Okagbue state that, “African theatre and performance is functional. In other words, it is not just entertainment but is often geared towards fulfilling particular social or aesthetic functions—hence, it is performative at its core” (Igweonu & Okagbue, 2013). African theatrical events have a significant function in society, incorporating music and dance, storytelling, costuming, participants, and an audience. Nothing is without purpose. Each element serves a motive. The music, usually the beating of drums, tells the story just as much as the storyteller. Each pattern moves from person to person, navigating their movement through an organic rhythm. Thanks to Africa’s middle region, ritualistic patterns of drama can be observed and serve a vital purpose in keeping alive African traditional societies that still are in action today (De Graft, 2002, p. 23).

In Nigeria, the Yoruba people gather to perform masquerade dramas. These dramas incorporate music, costumes, masks, dance, and ceremonies to convey stories for ritual, spiritual, and entertaining purposes. Although many include the same creative elements, they are intended to serve society in entirely different ways. Among the Yoruba people are three masquerade dramas demonstrated, the Egungun, Gelede, and Egwugwa festivals.

The Gelede festival is synchronized with the agricultural calendar and is typically set at the beginning of the planting season, the dry season. Its function is to praise and honor the “mothers” who serve as protectors and providers over the community, spreading fertility and prosperity over their harvest and people. During the festival, a spiritual connection to the land is enhanced and brings everyone together. People today still hold this festival between March and
June. Another reason for the festival is to appease the mothers because of their destructive behavior, which will materialize if they are not at peace. Scholar Ulli Beier (1967, as cited in De Graft, 2002) mentions it as the “placation of witches” (p. 24). He also emphasizes the “purpose of this dance is to provide entertainment to the witches and keep them in a good temper and—at the same time entertain the townspeople at large who had been excluded from the night ceremony” (Beier, 1967, as cited in De Graft, 2002, pp. 24-25). The nighttime ceremony Beire refers to is the Efe ceremony. It comprises a series of preparatory activities preceding the main Gelede festival, including the consecration of masks, ancestral prayers, drumming, dancing, singing, and more. The complete festival fortifies communal bonds and strengthens kinship ties among the people.

Following the Gelede masquerade drama, the Egugun festival specifically addresses the ancestors and, as Beier (1967, as cited in De Graft, 2002) says, “the worship and appeasement of the dead” (p. 23). Egugun means ancestors, and during the festival, the villagers, representing egunguns, wear elaborate and detailed masks and clothing that cover their entire faces and body. Instead of following the agricultural calendar like Gelede, the Egugun masquerade drama occurs under religious and spiritual considerations throughout the year. The function is to nurture and honor the connection between the deceased ancestors and the living in a celebratory way. They perform rituals and dances that celebrate their ancestors and bring pride to their community. As individuals cover their faces with masks and their bodies wrapped in beautiful cloths, the Egungun spirits come to life, commanding the audience with every movement. Their Egunguns bridge the gap between the spiritual and worldly realms. Chanting, music, grand movements, and swirling create a synchronized harmony that captivates the audience with awe-inspiring messages. The heightened purpose of this performance further claims its status as theater.
Theater should never be purposeless. This festival qualifies as theater for several reasons. Beier (1967, as cited in De Graft, 2002) confirms:

The Egungun dancer does not merely display the mask; He acts the part. The mask he uses is usually a face mask, and it is supported by the appropriate costuming. . . In each case, the masquerader learns the appropriate dance and style of singing. In some groups, little stories are enacted. The Sango worshipper begins his display, is interrupted by policemen, and finally bribes his way out of trouble. The harlot often does a kind of strip-tease act—displaying long cloth breasts and embroidered pubic hair—and she may frequently do a mock copulation with the police or some other character (p. 24).

The mini-stories mentioned from an Egungun festival bridge religious aspects with themes of satirical artistic commentary. The Sango worshipper can be understood as praising a devotee of the Sango who controls the forces of nature. The policemen and the harlot are opposing factors of the religious action and can be interpreted as forces going against traditional practices, distractions that may pull society away from their beliefs, and moral ambiguity. Like the Gelede, this ritual blesses the community with guidance and gives reverence and respect to the ones who came before them.

Egwugwu is another masquerade drama in the Ibo (or Igbo) society, which functions as a mediator to settle contention in society. The Egwugwu parallels between the Gelede and Egungun. Masked spirits represent ancestors, harmony is reinforced, and order is maintained. It emphasizes social, religious, and judicial communal life. The Egwugwu represent the ultimate authority and again conceal their identity with masks, bright attire, and even props. The Egwugwu masquerade drama is a significant cultural tradition among the Igbo people of Nigeria, particularly those of
the fictional Umuofia clan, as depicted in Chinua Achebe’s novel *Things Fall Apart*. De Graft reassures that this account can be considered true as it is related to closely observed facts (2002, p. 23). The scene opens with an issue between two families and the Egwugwu presiding over the trial, wearing the traditional long robes and masks to obscure their identity. Achebe (1958, as cited in De Graft, 2002) observes:

And then the egeugwu appeared. The women and children sent up a great shout and took to their heels. It was instinctive. A woman fled as soon as an egwugwu came in sight. And when, as on that day, nine of the great masked spirits in the clan came out together, it was a terrifying spectacle....

Each of the nine egwugwu represented a village of the clan. Their leader was called Evil Forest. Smoke poured out of his head...

Okonkwo’s wives, and perhaps other women as well, might have noticed that the second egwugwu had the springy walk of Okonkwo. And they might also have noticed that Okonkwo’s was not among the title of men and elders who sat behind the row of egwugwu. The egwugwu with the spring walk was one of the dead fathers of the clan. He looked terrible with the smoky raffia body, a huge wooden face painted White except for the round hollow eyes and the charred teeth that were as big as the man’s fingers. On his head were two powerful horns. . . (p. 24).

Although these characters were recognized as members of society, the circumstances within the story and dynamic costumes transported the audience to a different world. It was a world the characters created through the events acted out—a world the audience had no other
option but to accept and believe. English poet and philosopher Samuel Taylor Coleridge later coined this as the suspension of disbelief. Some critics call the Egwugwu performance impersonation. However, “we are quite close to the art of drama and the spirit of the secular theater” (De Graft, 2002, p. 24). Most theater started from a place of impersonation. Even the Greeks had mimetic elements.

One of the most compelling examples of African dramatic arts, rooted in intentional mimesis, is Anansesem—the tale of Ananse the spider (De Graft, 2002, p. 25). Originating from the Akans of Ghana, this story is passed down through oral tradition from one generation to the next. Storytellers skillfully impersonate the characters, engaging the audience with a call-and-response element. Through expressive movement and gestures, often accompanied by rhythmic drumming, vivid imagery is created that brings the events of the story to life. Ananse is described as a trickster who outwits the other characters in the story, usually other animals, in the setting. It teaches wisdom, resourcefulness, and perseverance. “The techniques of these Akan storytelling groups vary, but the more promising groups show a more marketable sense of dramatic creativity, making quite impressive use of improvised dialogue, props, costume, and disguise makeup... constitut[ing] as sheer theater” (De Graft, 2002, p. 25).

Among other things, the Egwugwu, Gelede, and Egungun festivals, as well as Anansesem tales, share a common trait: they possess a collective energy that unites their communities, much like the goal of theater. Other African stories are also rooted in theatrical arts, such as Domei narratives told at the end of the harvest season, Koteba performances in Mali that mimic the spiral movement of a snail with elements of comedy, and puppetry shows held before planting and harvest seasons. Furthermore, dances like the Engoma and Indlamu and initiation
ceremonies like Ulwaluko in Xhosa culture contribute to this rich theatrical tradition. Author De Graft (2002) identifies:

In terms of dramatic evolution, the step from the original religious function to the entertainer seems fairly straightforward, although historically it may have been difficult and taken a long time to achieve. . .But from all accounts, a similar process must have taken place in ancient India and the cultures of the Far East, in sixth-century ancient Greece and in medieval Europe (p. 24).

Recognizing Africa’s diverse theatrical roots offers insight into multiple origins of theater.

Alas, the collapse of theater in Africa is a well-known cycle of oppression, significantly impeding its development. Moreover, there is a lack of pre-colonial documentation regarding African theatrical methodologies. With 54 countries and over 2,000 languages, most of Africa’s theatrical origin is lost in prehistory. It is understood that because of the many different languages spoken in Africa and the lesser written languages, even the most guarded and reliable oral traditions would not have lasted throughout time. Much of the documented text about Africa originates from the post-colonial era, leading researchers to assert that African theater emerged only after Western influences. I do not believe this. De Graft (2002) points out how and where dramatic art flourishes and the conditions needed for it to prevail at a high degree:

1. A world view which predisposes the people to ritual practices requiring a strong element of role-playing;
2. An inclination to narrative expression, based on the community’s own history and legends, myths, and folklore;
3. A strong feeling for social solidarity which, with the emergence of an embryonic form of drama from the interaction of conditions 1 and 2 above, foster the resultant art form not only as an expression of the community’s ethos but, perhaps more important, as a means of further strengthening its sense of cohesion and identity;

4. A system “notation” through which most successful dramatic creations are communicated to wider audiences and, what is more, conserved and kept in sure memory for future generations; and last but not least,

5. Freedom or protection from such traumatic historical experiences as ruthless religious, political, and economic domination by aliens (p. 27).

Inevitably, Africa’s theater development lacked the last two conditions necessary for progress, resulting in a halt in its momentum. Because of the intrinsic connection between secular and sacred realms, it was not possible for one to survive without the other. Fortunately, in the 21st century, Africa’s pre-colonial theater history is not unteachable. It should be taught as basic knowledge and woven into early theater history as a foundational framework. Moreover, it is important for actors to understand Africa’s rich theatrical heritage to gain a comprehensive understanding of theater’s origins and to advance Black theater. Recognizing African origins validates the cultural heritage and racial identity of Black actors. For African-Americans, it is crucial to embrace the African side of the hyphen and not erase it. Author James Hatch (1987, as cited in Holton 2002) teaches, “As acquaintance with things African grows, [actors] will come to know how really vast and invisible the African influence on all American theatre has been” (p. 252). By studying the history of African drama, actors have come to understand the importance
of self-surrendering. Starting from this place will ignite spontaneous improvisations, unlock creative impulses, and bring a sense of authenticity and identity as they approach future work.
Section III
The Classical Gurus: A Lesson in Needing More

Regrettably, the actor’s journey does not initiate from a culturally diverse lineage; rather, it fails to foster any profound authenticity and identity within them. Paul Harrison (1997), in his article *The Crisis of Black Theatre Identity*, cites Playwright August Wilson’s (1984) *Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom*, highlighting:

We done sold Africa for the price of tomatoes. We done sold ourselves to the whiff man in order to be like him. Look at the way you dressed ... that ain’t African. That’s the White man. We trying to be just like him. We done sold who we are in order to become someone else. We’s imitation [W]hite men.

After actors learn the Greek and Roman origins of theater, the developmental trajectory of theater education unfolds as follows: Medieval and Renaissance Theater, encompassing morality plays and the works of William Shakespeare; Elizabethan and Jacobean Theater, including the Globe Theatre and the achievements of Christopher Marlowe, Ben Jonson, and others; Restoration and 18th Century Theater, featuring the works of Aphra Behn and William Congreve; 19th-century theater movements, such as Romanticism, Realism, and Naturalism, alongside playwrights like Henrik Ibsen, Anton Chekhov, and George Bernard Shaw; and finally, the exploration of Modern and Contemporary Theater, encompassing Expressionism, Surrealism, and Absurdism, as well as the works of playwrights from the 20th and 21st centuries, such as Bertolt Brecht, Tennessee Williams, and August Wilson.

Within theater history, it is necessary for all artists to learn how theater evolved. However, figures of European descent should not be the only influences taught. In the standard teachings of the development of theater, there is a noticeable disparity in the attention given to
Black innovations, movements, playwrights, and styles compared to the focus on Euro-American history. While necessary advancements and explorations in Westernized theater are extensively covered, Black contributions, also necessary, are often minimized.

A mere mention of African dance during discussions of ancient civilizations serves as a token acknowledgment. Often cited, slavery is the excuse for inadequate records of development, leading to a superficial grasp of Black theater history. Even in discussions of modern and contemporary theater, only clipped references to postcolonial Black theater are made. Within this reality, actors are left with the valuable core of how mainstream theater was crafted but lack roots that could be groundbreaking for their character development. I am one of the many results.

From my undergraduate studies to graduate school, the figures whose performance methodologies have left an inevitable mark are Constantin Stanislavski, Vsevolod Meyerhold, Lee Strasberg, Sanford Meisner, Uta Hagen, and Stella Adler. Whether directly or indirectly, these traditional techniques have enriched my acting process by teaching me how to articulate and analyze dramatic work. Yet, their teachings have also restricted my artistic development—dictating my trajectory into the Westernized mainstream theater industry.

My foundation

Constantin Stanislavski (1863-1938), influenced by Gerhart Hauptmann, Emile Zola, George Bernard Shaw, and other renowned playwrights of his time, cultivated many of the major acting techniques used today (Butler, 2022). His prevalent ideology behind script analysis encourages actors to extensively prepare their written work prior to embodying the character. A precise knowledge of the story is key for all members of play production. Butler (2022) emphasizes Stanislavski’s “radical innovation of table work” reviewing Stanislawski led his students from the Moscow Art Theatre “through the text line by line around a table, until a
shared understanding of the play evolved” (p. 24). Table work is essential and commonly completed within the first rehearsal day after casting. The most prominent thing Stanislavski created was the system. Most of his techniques are established in the system, which I, and many others, incorporate today. It is a step-by-step systematic acting science used to unlock the core of truthful behavior/acting. One of the original techniques from the system is the Magic If.

Stanislavski believed actors needed to look deeper and broaden their imagination. I practiced the concept as follows: If I were this character in this situation, how would I react? Given circumstances are a prominent factor throughout Stanislavski’s teachings. They are the background and environmental conditions controlling the character’s fate. Stanislavski learned (from Pushkin) the belief that “the truth concerning the passions, verisimilitude in the feelings, experienced in the given circumstances, is what our intelligence demands of a dramatist” (Butler, 2022, p. 62). Moreover, a comprehension of beats—marking the emotional shifts, objectives—defining what the character desires, and tactics—determining how the character aims to achieve their goal, also wields significant influence.

An element of Stanislavski’s that I have been instructed to implement, but do not to an extensive mark, is effective memory, “[t]he [s]uperconscious through the [c]onscious” (Butler, 2022, p. 47). With strict concentration, it is used to recall core memories through specific stimuli and muscle memory. Stanislavski summarizes, “Actors must experience their roles, living the imagined reality of the character truthfully” (Butler, 2022, p. 67). Refer to figure 1.
Given Stanislavski’s exposure to numerous figures who later became foundational in Westernized theater principles, my methodologies comprise a blend of his varied philosophies. While some aspects of his beliefs have been emphasized, revised, dismantled, or refuted, Stanislavski remains a primary influencer. One such figure is Vsevolod Meyerhold (1939-1940). He rejected Stanislavski’s acting styles. However, similarly to Stanislavski, his stock of playwrights had influenced his thinking. Examples include Ibsen, Chekhov, Hoffman, and William Shakespeare. Meyerhold “felt that if he stripped away all the fuzzy stage business and elaborate settings of Stanislavski’s work [it would force] stillness on the actors, “which would result in actors being so grounded a transcendental experience would occur between the audience (Butler, 2022, p. 50). Meyerhold believed in anti-realism vs. Stanislavski’s hold on realism. “Of
course, it is a stage! Why pretend it isn’t?” (Butler, 2022, p. 102). Aside from Meyerhold’s biomechanics, he contributed to the “inspiration for the American avant-garde as it sought to overthrow [Stanislavski’s Method] and psychological realism” (Butler, 2022, p. 102). However, my guilty pleasure in avant-garde experimental works and postdramatics is a result of Hans-Thies Lehmann, Lee Bruer, and Adrienne Kennedy.

Sanford Meisner (1905 - 1997) studied under Lee Strasberg, a direct descendant of Stanislavski’s teachings. Strasberg promoted the controversial Method Acting, which I consciously avoided. Nevertheless, I embraced Meisner’s approach, known as the Meisner Technique. Its repetition exercises aimed to liberate me from the pitfalls of overthinking and excessive intellectualization in storytelling. Yet, my restricting learning paradigms and the absence of self-identity and representation in my undergraduate theater department posed initial barriers to my acceptance of this contemporary method. I also wrestled with Meisner’s other techniques, such as living truthfully under imaginary circumstances, active listening and reacting, emotional preparation, and independent activity. Pettiford-Wates (2017) agrees “The traditions of Stanislavski, Chekov, and Grotowski may have prepared my physical instrument in pursuit of a professional acting career, but they did not nurture my spirit nor feed my soul (p. 107). Foremost, integrating aspects of African and Black theater into my college training could have catalyzed a more liberated and authentic beginning to my early acting journey.

Uta Hagen (1919-2004) and Stella Adler (1901 – 1992) were some of the few notable female figures in the annals of mainstream theater I was introduced to, offering a refreshing departure from the predominantly male narrative. Both Hagen and Adler were deeply connected to Stanislavski, as evidenced by Hagen’s “nine questions” and Adler’s emphasis on substitution and improvisation. Stella Adler’s practical approach to acting resonated with me, offering a
balance between the structured techniques of Stanislavski and the more fluid methods of Meisner. Honestly, being that most of their principles are parallel to Stanislavski, it was their journeys as female actors navigating the world in the 19th that intrigued me. Adler (2012) famously said, “Life beats down and crushes the soul, and art reminds you that you have one,” encapsulating the resilience that I yearned for. It would not be until pursuing my higher educational degree in New Orleans that I would be reminded of that soul Adler speaks of.

**The findings**

Given the limited resources that failed to reflect my identity as an actor and individual, I found myself in a position many Black artists can relate to. While I appreciated the opportunity to receive acting training at the collegiate level, I also felt constrained. On one side, it enhanced my preparation for performances, yet on the other, it overly emphasized technical aspects, stifling my *truthful behavior*. Pettiford-Wates aptly states, “Training that is devoid of any recognition of cultural identity and cultural location is risking creating artists who are technically proficient but may be morally and socially dysfunctional or disconnected from the authentic self and their community” (2017, p. 121).

A personal incentive commonly told to me and my Black colleagues is that Euro-American conservatory training enhances my versatility as an actor, enabling me to approach a wide range of artistic endeavors. While this assertion holds some truth, it also rings hollow. It molded me into an adequate actor, adept at working within the confines of the White majority’s norms. However, it also limited my exposure to alternative perspectives and stifled my authenticity. My theory is that if I had commenced in training of my own representation and explored the developments of pre-colonial and post-colonial Black theater alongside Euro-American advancements, my acting approaches would have seamlessly accessed truth.
Unfortunately, I lacked exposure to alternatives that could, at the least, uphold and authentically inform my craft as a Black performer. Consequently, I struggled to bridge the noticeable gap between the Westernized philosophies ingrained in me and my identity as a Black female artist.

All I knew for sure was that something was off.
No matter what I did, nothing felt right or good. Whether I was numb from the same Westernized teachings and materials given, I felt the disconnect between my identity and my acting education. Specifically, there are six reasons why “It was off.”

**Gap #1 Lack of diversity in board representation and curriculum instruction**

In their book *Black Acting Methods: Critical Approaches*, authors Cheryl de Luckett and Tia M Sheffler explain, “The nature of pedagogy is grounded in the questions of what to teach, why to teach it, and then how to teach it” (2017, p. 2). Gap#1: Institutions propagate White, Eurocentric, acting-based styles under the belief that they represent the most effective approach—not solely because it stems from their historical roots/traditions as a student but also from the perceived success it has yielded them. Here are my reasons why White instructors keep falling into this cycle of entrenched pedagogy—continually ensnaring their black acting students:

- They do not perceive anything wrong with it;
- They lack any inkling of desire to change and adapt their pedagogy;
- They lack knowledge of where to start or how;
- Broadening and enriching their teaching with Black, non-Eurocentric material challenges them and exposes their vulnerabilities despite the expectation that they are revered authorities possessing all-encompassing knowledge.

In my opinion, a professor who embodies all these characteristics simultaneously is unfit to fulfill the educator role. Educators need to abstain from disregarding the instructive needs of their students. As a Graduate assistant serving the role of a professor at The University of New
Orleans (UNO), I recognize that when teachers need more expertise in the subject matter, it often obliges them to engage in more extensive preparation than their students. They contemplate, if they lack mastery of the material, how can they effectively impart it to their students? Indifference is unacceptable. Action is imperative.

By the spring semester, my teaching repertoire consisted of six courses. At UNO, I had yet to gain experience teaching or learning two of my six courses. Despite initial anxiety and excuses, I chose transparency with my students, acknowledging my limitations in certain areas. Far from diminishing my standing as their instructor, this approach fostered trust and engagement. I emphasized a collaborative approach, encouraging feedback on our journey together. Teachers often say they are constantly learning from their students, but what weight does this adage hold if one fails to apply these insights? Embracing a willingness to change and grow professionally and personally is paramount for educators. If unsure how to proceed, asking for guidance is the first step towards progress.

One swift method to amend predominantly Eurocentric teaching approaches is through increased representation—bringing someone into the classroom who is already cognizant of the issues above and directly aligns with the necessary changes. However, while hiring a Black professor may seem like the ideal solution, it often serves as a scapegoat for the underlying reasons. Furthermore, although enhanced representation may appear to offer a simple remedy, it remains a persistent challenge, particularly given the arts’ consistently low funding compared to other disciplines. Monetary constraints are frequently cited as the rationale for refraining from hiring new Black personnel, leaving Black theater students stuck. While Black representation in college theater departments undoubtedly holds significance, it is equally necessary for White instructors to commit to and fully diversify their “Eurocentric theoretical framework of
performance” (Luckett & Shaffer, 2017, p. 2). Ultimately, both are needed to harness and encourage a sense of theatrical education grounded in Black lineage, culture, and acting theories.

**Gap #2 The paradox of Black-centered void**

During my undergraduate and some graduate classes, monologues predominantly hailed from playwrights like Tony Kushner, Steven Schutzman, Christopher Durang, Oscar Wilde, William Shakespeare, and Anton Chekov. Works by Tennessee Williams and August Wilson were occasionally sprinkled into the mix. (For the longest time, I did not even know that Tennessee Williams was White, considering they gave any of Tennessee Williams’ material to Black actors.) Regardless, I was in a predicament, constantly presented with material that did not resonate with me. Luckett and Shaffer express this material as othered material. They “anthologize for the actors who continuously engage with ‘othered’ material in classes, material never met for them” (Luckett & Shaffer, 2017, p. 13). While the material I received was suitable for workshopping, it notably lacked representation of Black identity. To diversify options, my undergraduate professors further supplied a list of “monologues for women.” Of the 17 pages of theatrical works listed, two were Black playwrights Ntozake Shange and August Wilson, mentioned under the “Overdone Monologues” section. From Ntozake Shange, only one of her plays, *For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide / When the Rainbow Is Enuf,* was listed. August Wilson’s *Burn This* and *The Gingham Dog* were also included. These sheets and the instructors who shared them were to provide a range of material contributing to students growing their repertoire and knowledge of American theater. Although the selections were diverse, as they were mostly made up of Jewish Americans and Irish and English playwrights, they were still White and significantly outweighed the number of black playwrights/plays taught. This ideology fixated on my belief that the American theater industry was synonymous with White
theater, with Eurocentric material as the sole standard. Despite the overwhelming presence of White-centric content, I obediently accepted the provided material, believing it to be sufficient preparation.

As Luckett and Shaffer aptly express, “Often times, in the majority of U.S. acting classrooms, just like in other subject areas, White-ness overtly and covertly pervades the text and linguistic structures, and those who do not share a White lineage or hue are de-centered, misaligned, and exiled from theater history that they rightfully co-constructed” (2017, p. 1). This glaring absence left a significant gap in my repertoire, a sentiment shared by many other Black individuals in the same setting. My 2024 survey on theater education and cultural representation revealed that 100% of 30 students in their theater programs noted a substantial lack of resources focused on Black representation. The absence of adequate space for Black students in their creative environments has resulted in feelings of isolation, discouragement, and obstruction. Even allies expressed dismay at this troubling reality. The students’ testimonies expose this deficit has not only hindered their development as performers but also as individuals.

Often, “traditional acting classrooms have alienated students of color. . .Actors are robbed of having a culturally diverse education” (Luckett & Shaffer, 2017, pp. 11 & 13). Drawing from their own experiences, Luckett and Shaffer seek to empower actors like me who have encountered or suffered from this lack of representation. With their book, they seek to “save acting classrooms from operating as one of the most culturally segregated places in the United States and to acknowledge that there are many ways for acting students to convey their ‘truth’ of a character or ‘truth’ of self in traditional and non-traditional performance spaces” (Luckett & Shaffer, 2017, p. 13). Their anthology aims to diversify acting education, challenging the cultural isolation that plagues many classrooms.
Truthfully, I consistently overlooked the paradox of my limited education. I even took comfort in my familiarity with Westernized acting traditions, mistakenly considering it as diversity within my repertoire. In truth, it was narrow-minded. I felt assured in my capacity to portray White characters onstage, perceiving no barriers to my performance. Nevertheless, despite being transparent, I felt profoundly unseen within my program. My roles included the understudy for Martha Corey in *The Crucible*, Kimmy in *The Good Times Are Killing Me*, ensemble in *Pippin* by Roger O. Hirson, and the nun Sister Margareta in “The Sound of Music.” The absence of Black identity in these productions contributed to my disengagement. Consistently, professors would ask me, “Do you even want to be here?” I did. However, I did not enjoy the environment of my undergraduate program. While I loved performing, I struggled to connect with the characters I portrayed and the predominantly White cast and directors surrounding me.

**Gap #3 Theater program discrimination**

**Incident 1**

Unfortunately, this gap grew more expansive with intentional and ignorant discrimination within my undergrad. During my first year, I was cast in the ensemble for the musical *Pippin*. While attending a costume fitting, the hair and makeup person made derogatory comments about my curly, coily hair, referring to it as a *mop*. This comment deeply affected me, as it came from someone in a position of authority who was supposed to enhance my appearance according to the director’s vision and the requirements of the character roles. I felt shocked and disheartened by the discriminatory nature of the remark. My hair posed a challenge for the stylist, who struggled to figure out how to design it. My confidence was undermined, and that night, I asked my mom to put a curly ponytail in my hair for the upcoming performances. The previous derogatory
statement left me feeling petrified and wary of trusting any stylist not of color to do their job for me as they did for other cast mates. I felt apprehensive about how future stylists would observe my hair and worried about potential negative comments or a lack of competence in styling it for performances. The stylist who called my hair a mop would be the same stylist for all productions throughout my 4 years of undergrad.

**Incident 2**

Another significant incident at my undergraduate institution occurred when I was cast as Chiffon in *Little Shop of Horrors*. I was thrilled about this role as I deemed it the first time I had a significant part in a college production, especially one that featured an original Black role. Obsessed by actresses like Tichina Arnold, Tisha Campbell, and Michelle Weeks, who portrayed the Ronnettes in the movie, I eagerly rewatched the film and told my parents, “I’m playing Tisha.” However, my excitement was dampened with confusion when I learned that the Ronnette roles were double cast and double and color cast—with my group being Black and the other being Latina/White. Each group performed on alternating weekends. My group had the first set of the weekends while the other cast had the closing weekend, and when we swapped out nights, we became part of the ensemble. No other roles were double-cast in this way. Now matured, despite the director’s explanations, I realize there was no valid reason for this segregation.

**Incident 3**

During a musical theater workshop class, my instructor introduced the idea of a cabaret centered around the era of musical theater throughout the 1900s. As he outlined the timeline and assigned songs, tensions arose when the idea of accurately portraying black artists of the time emerged. It became clear that the musical numbers chosen, based on contributions from Black performers in the 1900s, were not uplifting. Instead, only negative or minimal contributions from
Black artists were highlighted, often reinforcing racial stereotypes and mocking Black culture. As he emphasized accurately portraying the chronological timeframe, suggestions that black men were to perform menstrual songs surfaced during the conversation. Before the instructor could finish, students voiced their concerns about the apparent issues with the selection process. Witnessing the ignorance and disregard for my identity as a Black actor, coupled with the lack of recognition for contributions from people of color, was profoundly disheartening. It was even more distressing attempting to convince myself that the discriminatory nature of this situation was nonexistent. I endeavored to remain unbiased and reassured myself that color was not the issue. Despite my efforts to remain transparent and objective, the systemic biases in my theater education became increasingly evident throughout my experiences. Rather than attributing each event to racism, I accepted it as the norm at predominantly White institutions. Instead of fostering growth, this environment hindered my sense of self.

**Gap #4 Minority among majority**

Despite my outgoing personality, I felt my identity slipping away in spaces where I did not feel safe or comfortable. Whether during class discussions, productions, rehearsals, or even walking the hallways adorned with non-black theatrical contributions, I increasingly experienced a pervasive sense of fear. This fear manifested into a reluctance to fully engage in my acting classes or program, hindering my personal growth as an actor. Unfortunately, this sentiment of feeling unsafe and uncomfortable extended to my involvement in university festivals and conferences within the theatrical realm, like the National Association of Teachers of Singing (NATS), Southeastern Theatre Conference (SETC) Convention, and the GA Thespian Conference, where I served as a college representative. These spaces were touted as high-opportunity environments but also predominately White. It seemed that no matter where I went, I
was constantly reminded of my minority status. The paradox lies in the fact that I was already aware of this reality, yet I struggled to navigate my path through it all.

**Gap #5 The voice**

One coping mechanism I developed was what I called *the voice*. The resources I began to rely on to navigate through theater conferences and my entire undergraduate career were not strengthening my cultural identity in an empowering way. The theatrical material consistently provided to me proved devoid of personal impact, leaving me drained and disconnected. It never felt authentic. Luckett and Shaffer describe this as the phenomenon of actors “[losing] their color” in various productions (2017, p. 13). As a result of repeatedly “losing my color,” I unintentionally adopted *the voice*, a manner of speaking that naturally emerged whenever I assumed a character. *The voice* was strengthened as I consistently received praise for my articulation, delivery, and strong projection, seamlessly fitting into the world of Westernized theater culture they needed me to fit in. However, the downside became apparent over time: *the voice* never truly reflected my identity, yet no one intervened to correct it. Eventually, this artificial mask became a hindrance, exacerbating the gap between my true self and the characters I portrayed. As I became increasingly aware of its limitations, I struggled to break free from its grasp, unsure how to unlearn what had become second nature.

Drawing from my foundational teachings and the repertoire of plays I encountered, I increasingly grappled with the challenge of identifying with each character. Luckett and Shaffer present a pointed inquiry: “How can all actors possibly present an authentic representation of humanity through a racially monolithic thought stream” (2017, p. 7)? Education steeped in a cultural framework that centers on Eurocentric identity holds profound implications for actors’ methodologies and expressive techniques. Pettiford-Wates (2017) asks “Can [Black performers]
be [their] authentic self, fully embrace [their] cultural and spiritual continuum and work on the Broadway stage or in the Hollywood film industry without wearing the mask” (p. 109). I share the perspective of Luckett and Shaffer that “prioritizing [Black works] is pivotal to fostering a sense of identity” (2017, p. 3). Given that prejudiced Eurocentric influences shaped my own identity as an actor, I not only was deterred from engaging with Black literature, but it also instilled a reluctance to confront texts of Black origin.

**Gap #6 Fear**

Upon completing my undergraduate degree, I realized I only portrayed one black character, read zero black plays, and participated in zero black-centered mainstream season productions. This absence of Black material instilled fear and doubt in me regarding Black roles. Deep down, I recognized the problem but struggled to confront the fact that my sense of self was at the core of my conflicts.

I was cast in an all-Black university production at the University of New Orleans for the first time. While rehearsing *Hoodoo Love* by Katori Hall, I began to grasp how wide the cracks were in my undergraduate Eurocentric training. My first Black director, Richon Wallace, could readily discern my internal and external struggles within my accustomed employment of European and Westernized acting methodologies. “You are such a technical actor,” she would always say. Pettiford-Wates (2017) shares “the most difficult obstacle. . . at times, [is] to let go of the linear thought process (p.113). In *Black Acting Methods: Critical Approaches* Luckett and Shaffer explain similar techniques that Wallace used when directing *Hoodoo Love*. The Black acting methods contrasted with my prior knowledge and revealed:

Rituals, processes, and techniques rooted in an Afrocentric centripetal paradigm where Black theory and Black modes of expression are the nucleus that informs how one
interacts with various texts, literary and embodied, and how one interprets and
(re)presents imaginary circumstances. . .filling the perceived void of Black acting theorist
(Luckett & Shaffer 2017, p. 2).
This experience represented a stark departure from the White productions and directing styles.
What I assumed would be helpful tools from my undergraduate training instead acted as barriers
that impeded my emotional expression.
Throughout each rehearsal with Wallace, we engaged in an ongoing battle where she
pushed me to propel past the impediments I had unwittingly erected. My storytelling lacked
authenticity and emotional availability. Pettiford-Wates (2017) detects,
Western/European cultural thought and process so permeate [one’s] own thought and
culture that [actors] seem more content and comfortable to fit into a ‘form’ rather than
explore and push beyond its boundaries—boundaries that cause so much frustration,
limiting both [individual’s] human and artistic potential (p. 113).
I not only hesitated to delve into deeper truths but suppressed natural impulses out of
fear of portraying characters that reflected my cultural and ancestral background onstage. In the
book Black Acting Methods: Critical Approaches, Dr. Cristal Chanelle Truscott’s chapter,
“SoulWork,” explains that emotional availability is being aware and grounded in your emotions
in order to freely and safely engage a constant state of exploration that allows for infinite ways to
experience a given moment” (2017, p. 47). In Hoodoo Love’s rehearsal spaces, I felt safe to
express myself as a person, yet I struggled as an actor to fully immerse myself in the text and
delve into my character’s circumstances. Freedom is essential in SoulWork, fostering a “state of
emotional improvisation for every line, every moment” (Truscott, 2017, p. 47). Wallace
emphasized the importance of grasping this concept.
Taking on the role of Candy Lady in *Hoodoo Love*, an elderly overseer in her community, and witnessing the depiction of other black characters in the play addressing personal issues I was unprepared to confront proved to be my biggest acting challenge. I felt incapable of sharing a story so closely intertwined with my life experiences and intimately familiar to my community. I lacked all the necessary tools to portray Candy Lady effectively. Wallace provoked natural tendencies and movements rooted in Black ritualistic ideas, but I refrained from embracing them due to doubt and previous traditional influences.

During the production process of *Hoodoo Love*, I became aware of how much I had allowed my identity to slip away from me during my collegiate acting training. I also grew frustrated with my undergraduate education, realizing that while progressing in Westernized mainstream acting traditions, I struggled significantly with Black acting theories. Gratefully, *Hoodoo Love* marked the beginning of my awakening process. I needed to cease constraining my emotions. “SoulWork is a space where the emotion is just as big as the intellect and gives intellect the freedom to be flexible” (Truscott, 2017, p. 49). Although I did not fully master or completely embrace Afrocentric expression like SoulWork, I recognized that I required the integration of ritualistic processes and Afro-dramatic concepts to unlock emotions and facilitate healing, sensation, and growth throughout my storytelling processes.

**Conclusion**

Nevertheless, internal and external struggles augmented the divide between my artistic development and identity. Throughout my undergraduate years, I teetered on the edge of an identity crisis, but with the support of other Black performance arts students, I managed to maintain my sanity. In addition, previous mentors from before my university years served as a quasi-support group. Together, we assisted each other in navigating the challenges of our
predominantly White performance arts programs. One student stood out for their unwavering advocacy for more diversity in the program, spearheading the creation of a yearly Black student showcase aimed at celebrating the rich culture within each other’s community. I found solace in these rehearsal and performance spaces and similar environments. Surrounded by individuals who experienced similar discrimination and shared a desire for a more diverse education, I felt at ease.

Such spaces served as reminders of the importance of self-awareness and identity. I knew who I was, but I faced challenges maintaining that identity onstage during productions and with the material presented. Director Wallace aided me in acknowledging the divide I had been denying. She helped me understand that although my acting abilities had not been nurtured from their natural roots in Afrocentricity, it was not too late to bridge the gaps.

Whether one actively seeks it or not, the bridge will always appear, and truth will inevitably reveal itself. Even if you do not find it, it will find you. It is never too far gone. Sibley (2017) states, “You either get ‘it[,]’ or you understand that knowledge is power and, therefore, you have potential to get ‘it.’ The ‘it’ I am referring to is the art and science of being Black” (p. 124). Genuine authenticity emerges when one stops striving to embody something they are not and were never meant to be—revealing the beauty within the bedeviled.
Section V
The Bridge—GA to NOLA

Everything in this world is the result of a cause and effect. A current individual is a result or culmination of their backgrounds, experiences, and relationships. As actors, this builds one’s identity. Looking through my life and observing my acting journey, I have created this analogy:

A bridge is under construction, and obstacles litter the path toward one’s goals. Though the way may be chaotic, solace is in companionship and moments of joy amidst challenges. Even amid explosions and disaster, persistence prevails—knowing each moment shapes individuals. As the destination nears, gaps yet to be filled lie ahead. Realizing progress requires effort, one presses forward, building upon what lies ahead.

Compared to my first year of graduate school, where I worked on Hoodoo Love, my experience working on Dominique Morisseau’s Blood at the Root (BATR) was pivotal in my acting career. Director Watson accepted BATR as her thesis production during our final year of graduate school at UNO. From the start, everything fell into place. I was ready. I felt a firm sense of self, equipped to bridge any divides and navigate challenges that might hinder truthful storytelling.

During my audition, I performed Taylor’s monologue from Stickfly and a spoken word piece, “On Virtue”, by Phillis Wheatley. BATR became my thesis performance, and my growth became evident during rehearsals. The rapid development and revelations I experienced while immersed in the creative community of New Orleans influenced this pivotal moment of self-assessment. The environment bolstered my confidence in my identity and ability to authenticate characters. The truth and freedom I embraced shaped my performance as Raylynn in BATR.
B\textit{ATR} is based on an actual event known as the Jena 6 incident, which occurred in Jena, Louisiana. Morisseau began writing the play in 2011 based on the racial events in 2006. The Jena 6 is a group of six Black teenagers from Jena, Louisiana, who were involved in a highly publicized case of injustice in 2006. The incident stemmed from racial tensions in the town, particularly regarding the treatment of Black students at Jena High School. In August 2006, a black freshman, Justin Purvis, asked permission to sit under a tree in the schoolyard, a spot traditionally reserved for White students (Morris, 2023). The black community was outraged and sparked protests the next day when they discovered three nooses hanging from the tree. In December 2006, a fight broke out at the school, resulting in a White student being beaten and hospitalized. Six black teenagers were arrested and charged with offenses ranging from battery to attempted second-degree murder. The severity of the charges, especially in contrast to the minimal punishment given to White students involved in the previous altercations, drew national attention and led to protests and demonstrations addressing racial bias in the criminal justice system.

Around the central issue of injustice, Morisseau’s adaptation unravels multiple events involving a group of high schoolers. In addition to the social and systemic racism, the teenagers navigate through identity crises, relationships, and social activism throughout the school year. As tensions escalate, the life-altering altercation unfolds, putting justice and a young boy’s fate at stake. Relationships are tested, and the characters confront the harsh realities of prejudice and discrimination—leaving the audience to grapple with moral ambiguity.

\textbf{Concepts and artistic methods}

Director Watson provided me with an opportunity for reflection and further self-discovery. Guided by Black ideologies rooted in ritualistic practices, the production process
served as a healing space where compassion, acceptance, and community were prioritized. The experience not only added to a newfound sense of freedom but served as the best representation of bridging the previous gaps that hindered my emotional availability. Equipped with new tools, a grounded sense of self, and armed with fresh techniques, I approached *BATR* rehearsals with a sense of vulnerability and recognized it as a unique opportunity to share a story resonating not just with Louisiana locals but echoing a too common narrative of systematic injustice. Every actor and character’s journey was treated delicately with Watson's guidance. She comprehended the cast’s challenges, respected their boundaries, and acknowledged their limitations. Though I encountered moments of resistance, I remained committed to overcoming any fears and insecurities that threatened to resurface. My objectives during this journey were focused on conveying truth throughout rehearsals and onstage by:

- Discovering my authentic voice,
- Portraying an archetype rather than falling into stereotypes,
- Embracing emotional availability,
- And increasing freedom and flexibility.

However, something I did not expect to encounter on the ride of *BATR* rehearsals was the strong sense of community my director cultivated with the ensemble. The ensemble was an integral part of the show, and Watson focused on cultivating our community for the first two weeks of rehearsal. Although rooted in a Black story of systematic and social injustice, *BATR* is not just relatable to Black people but also to people of non-Black identity. Those interrelationships were crucial to truthfully telling this story. Our ensemble was special and compiled a range of individuals. It was necessary for Watson to unify the actors as one voice so that everyone could live authentically within the story. Professor Ted Cantle (2012, as cited in
Sibley, 2017) expounds on the importance of community cohesion saying: Community cohesion means that “people from all backgrounds feel that they [belong] and [are] valued, [enjoy] similar life opportunities, and [interact] with people from different backgrounds to break down myths and stereotypes and build trust” (p. 123). I did not really realize the strong community Watson had built within the ensemble until our first time running through the show. Up until that point, we engaged in ritualistic warmups like soul train lines, dance-led warmups, collaborating, and devising rap sessions. Almost all of our warmups involved hip-hop music or organic sound. Watson broke the actor’s hierarchy. Where normally actors would not have authority, we all collaborated and embodied the soul of the play. The authors notes specifically read that:

This play is built on the idea of a devised production. What this means is that the work on the page is really only half, and the ensemble is intended, along with the director, to put their own signature on the work in a more defined and pronounced way the ensemble builds the pictures (Morisseau, 2017, p. 5).

My conviction regarding the importance of community closely mirrors the sentiments expressed by Dr. Truscott, the founder and artistic director of the Progress Theater. In her discussion, she delves into an exploration centered on community and emphasizes the significance of nurturing interconnected factors. Race, class, generation, and spiritual identity all aim to foster unity through diversity, facilitating cross-community healing and promoting understanding (Truscott, 2017, p. 49). Without the genuine camaraderie in BATR, my breakthroughs and moments of self-discovery within myself and the narrative would not have been as impactful. Within this nurturing environment, I could fully delve into my potential. Together, we forged one of the bravest ensembles I have ever experienced. Without the BATR ensemble, many of the personal
goals I aimed for during this production would not have come to fruition. My first objective was to eradicate the voice and discover my authentic voice.

**Discovering my authentic voice**

During *BATR* rehearsals, Watson took a unique approach by working with me and other cast members from the outside in. Before physical rehearsals commenced, we collaborated on Raylynn’s character chart, delving into details like her mannerisms, clothing, and even her scent. This process grounded my understanding of the character so that when it came to delivering lines, I already had a clear sense of Raylyn’s pitch, matching her appearance and demeanor. Moreover, Morisseau’s text is pulsating. With its spoken word moments, it reminded me of a choreopoem. However, Morisseau’s story is not as unconventional as the most popular choreopoem by Ntozake Shange. (Shange pioneered the term choreopoem with her play *For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide / When the Rainbow Is Enuf*, which premiered in 1976.) A choreopoem is a hybrid theatrical form combining poetry, dance, music, and often visual art to convey narrative or thematic messages. Specific to Moriseau’s play, *BATR* has heavy ensemble moments that embody poetry, dance, and music. She includes in her author notes, The language of this play should drive. There is a rhythm to it that flows and moves as poetry. As much as possible, there should be little breaks between lines or within passages of text. Let it flow.” With this being the case, at every rehearsal, Watson would have some type of ‘90s or 2000s hip-hop music underscoring our lines. This helped *us feel* the vibe and pace and even find our pitch within the character and scene.

However, despite having a clear idea of how I envisioned Raylynn’s voice, the real challenge lay in maintaining consistency. While Raylynn’s voice was only slightly lower than my usual speaking voice, my tendency to raise my pitch, particularly when excited or onstage,
posed a difficulty. However, due to the groundwork laid, consistency was not difficult to maintain. I found that staying completely present was the central focus I truly needed, and regardless, truth within the text would effortlessly succeed.

**Portraying an archetype rather than falling into stereotypes**

Screenwriter Truby (2007) clarifies: “Archetypes are fundamental psychological patterns within a person; they are roles a person may play in society, essential ways of interacting with others. . . [T]hey cross-cultural boundaries and have universal appeal. . . [E]ach type expresses a fundamental pattern that the audience recognizes” (Truby, 2007, p. 67). He advises screenwriters to ensure that an archetype does not transform into a stereotype. “Always make the archetype specific and individual to your unique character.” (Truby, 2007, p. 67). This advice is also true for actors. On the other hand, a stereotype is an oversimplified and often prejudiced belief or image about a particular group of people, like the historically limited portrayals of Black people in Hollywood films as maids, thugs, low-middle class, or other narrow roles, perpetuating harmful misconceptions. I used to fear unintentionally reinforcing these stereotypes, particularly when portraying roles personally related to my culture, wrestling with concerns about how my performance might be perceived and whether it would contribute to negative stereotypes. This apprehension stems from the realities of being Black in America, where stereotypes have long influenced perceptions and opportunities. Just as Gordon Park’s iconic photograph (figure 4.1) challenged societal norms, productions like *BATR* similarly aim to shed light on the pervasive injustices and inequalities faced by marginalized communities in the South and across America.
Compared to portraying CandyLady in *Hoodoo Love*, my connection with Raylynn was more immediate, allowing me to find authenticity more easily. However, some aspects of Raylynn’s story were difficult to confront. For instance, while her cadence resembled mine, her vernacular initially differed and posed a challenge. Particularly, using phrases like “Y’heard” felt awkward and forced, as it didn’t align with my natural speech patterns. Nevertheless, I gradually found a sense of authenticity within Raylynn’s character through rehearsal and incorporating the language into my daily life. Scholar Harrison (2017) says:

Do not become seduced into what I call “performing Blackness.” This type of performance involves superficial responses to the surfaces of African American speech, body movement, and “attitude” that lead toward stereotypic portrayals of Black life. There is a vast difference between stereotype and archetype. The archetype patrol is a rooted and reliable construction of African American social history and culture.

Revisiting and rediscovering that archetypal cultural sensibility is greatly recommended (p. 217).
Following Harrison’s advice and director Watson’s guidance, I delved into delicate subjects. I took a deep look into Raylynn’s background, understanding her experiences and motivations. I explored her inner life and emotional journeys to portray them as three-dimensional characters with depth and complexity. However, the one that held the most importance and helped me gain confidence and comfort within the script, was intertwining aspects of my own personality into the character.

**Embracing emotional availability**

**Raylynn’s monologues—fear and insecurities**

Within the *BATR* ensemble, I felt very at ease, especially when it came to dancing. Dance is not just my background; it’s something that resonates deeply with me. Music, rhythm, and movement are innate qualities that make me feel good. Whenever I had the chance to incorporate movement into my performance, everything would naturally fall into place—the text, the rhythm, and the pace. However, outside of *BATR*’s ensemble, I struggled with more intimate scene work. I was hesitant toward solo pieces. I found greater enjoyment in rehearsal settings where the focus was less on me as an individual and more on how the group collectively drove the story.

Regrettably, I refrained from expressing my emotions while emotionally disengaging in some monologues and scenes. Two monologues delivered by Raylynn were particularly challenging. The first one, titled Raylynn’s Reflection, occurs at the beginning of the play. I struggled with navigating the shifts and flow of this piece. Raylyn discusses how “Today ganna mean somethin’ different” (Morisseau, 2017, p. 11). She desires change, highlighting her inclination towards breaking the rules. Simply put, Raylynn is a rule breaker, and I follow the
rules. As Raylynn discusses “liv[ing] life on the edge” and “participating in the world,” she reveals it has been “three years since . . . mama passed” and recalls her daddy crying (Morisseau, 2017, p. 11). She ends with how she will break the rules to “stamp out apathy” and announces her running for class president (Morisseau, 2017, p. 11).

Specifically, within the opening monologue, I had trouble portraying Raylynn’s reflection about her mom. The mention of her mother’s death initially felt out of place to me, and I found myself skimming over it, afraid to confront the emotions it evoked. However, Watson encouraged me to delve into this aspect of Raylynn’s character and tap into my own emotions and experiences. Moreover, she could feel my apprehension and squared away time to work through the monologue. I dreaded this moment. Why? Because I knew exactly where she would lead me—and I was unsure if I was prepared to go there. Nonetheless, I persisted.

Watson gently asked how I would feel if I were in Raylynn’s situation and had experienced a similar loss. I dreaded dwelling on painful memories that hit too close to home. Sadly, this scenario is all too common, with many experiencing the sudden or tragic loss of a loved one. Although Raylynn does not explicitly mention how her mother died in this section, it is revealed that her mother was shot on her porch in a drive-by, a detail later revealed by Raylynn’s brother, De’andre.

Despite my initial reluctance, I understood that portraying Raylynn’s life authentically required me to embrace the personal truths within myself. During the same rehearsal day, with just Watson and me, the protective barriers I had erected around myself began to crumble. As an actor, I often hear the saying, “Trying not to cry is more powerful than crying.” However, Watson (along with local New Orleans directors like Wallace, whom I’ve worked with before) does not subscribe to this belief. She encouraged me to release my emotions rather than hold them back.
This support led to a cathartic release of tears. I could barely get through the monologue, but Watson pushed me to persevere. In the end, she expressed, “Now that we’ve addressed the root of hesitation, we can scale it back.” She guided me in expressing my truth, helping me understand where it resided within my body, its weight, and how, although the goal wasn’t to cry throughout the entire monologue, I could still convey the loss of a mother. This process helped me embrace my authentic emotions, allowing me to better embody Raylynn’s multifaceted character. While she is portrayed as strong-willed, it is crucial to showcase her pain and vulnerability, highlighting the complexity of human emotions and the realities of self-expression.

**Final monologue**

Much of my internal struggle within *BATR* originated from either a fear of vulnerability or insecurities about my identity, causing many of my obstacles and breakthroughs to overlap. In addition, I felt a lot of apprehension towards the ending monologue, as I placed significant pressure on myself since the speech closed the show and served as an uplifting message to persevere onward. The speech builds up into a powerful call for revolution, advocating for breaking the rules ‘Til ain’t nothing left to break. ‘Til ain’t nothin’ left to fight for’ (Morisseau, 2017, p. 76). I struggled to connect with the latter part of the speech because Raylynn is portrayed as “Little Miss Black Power,” while I personally shied away from the “power to the people” ideal. I have never participated in any protests, including the 2020 George Floyd protest movement or the resurgence of the Black Lives Matter Movement. As a young black woman, the thought of publicly protesting against racial inequality, racism, and discrimination filled me with apprehension. I could not shake the realities of violence and aggression against marginalized communities in scenes of social activism. My activist approach differed greatly from Raylynn’s confrontational methods. While she boldly attacks issues head-on, I am more inclined towards
peacekeeping. This contrast led me to question if I was letting down my community. As an actor, I felt inadequate to step into Raylynn’s shoes and lead a revolutionary moment, fearing they were too big for me to fill.

Nevertheless, Watson balanced the scales, guiding me through the monologue and easing the burden of guilt I carried. She urged me to shed preconceived notions of my inferiorities compared to Raylynn. She relieved my self-imposed pressure and laid the groundwork for progress. As an actor, I recognized my tendency to begin the speech with medium to low stakes, never reaching the desired destination. I understood that I could not embody Raylynn’s speech until I embraced our differing styles of activism. I had to reconcile my guilt for not participating in public protests within my community—healing from within. Despite being a natural mediator, I acknowledged that protests were not my default approach. However, I have risen to the occasion in similar past experiences. These realizations marked the essential connection between Raylynn and me—where I could proudly display Raylynn’s boldness as a defiant rule-breaker while also acknowledging that same spirit within myself under suitable circumstances.

Acceptance

While not a monologue, another significant moment arose during partner work, specifically in the scene between Raylynn and her best friend, Asha. In this instance, I had to address preconceived insecurities and determine how to approach them in a manner that would empower my acting abilities. Asha is White, and the paradox she lives in is a world where people consider her to be “actin’ black” or accept her as ‘black by association’ (Morisseau, 2017, p. 33). Honestly, my initial response to Asha’s character in the play was that she seemed Blacker than I did, and I feared the audience might agree. Asha appears confident, adorned with large hoop earrings, and speaks in a blend of Southern drawl and Black culture. Wrestling with insecurities
While maintaining confidence in my identity was a recurring challenge. This problem certainly stems from Pettiford-Wates’s (2017) statement that:

Within… Western models of arts training and traditional Western European methodologies… the fact is that many actors lose themselves (the spirit of who they are). … At times, during life[s] journey, [actors] have been paralyzed on the road, frozen at a particular place and time of traumatic experience or transformative moment, and inadvertently have left something behind, a moment of our authentic selves (p.p 112 & 115).

I had to remember I could not “play” Black. I am Black.

In the scene, Raylynn and Asha are not communicating because Asha chose not to participate in the protest. In *BATR*, Raylynn labels Asha as “apathetic” (Morisseau, 2017, p. 60). This labeling was distressing, considering I struggled with the same feelings of inadequacy from Raylynn’s concluding speech, convincing myself that I was not apathetic. Ironically, I have portrayed both Raylynn and Asha in real-life scenarios and understand both perspectives. However, as a peacemaker, I still resonated more with Asha. In this moment, Asha struggles with her identity, a typical challenge for a teenager navigating the world’s complexities, and Raylynn is consistently self-discovering, strengthening her values and beliefs. I also envied Raylynn’s ability to articulate and justify the validity of her emotions.

One of the best moments for elucidating this paradox is: Asha asks Raylynn “Everytime somebody get in a fight nah. Everytime somebody do somethin’ stupid…now it always got to have somethin’ to do with…bein’ Black?” A couple of lines down Raylyn analogizes “What if somebody spit in yo’ face and tell you it wunn’t disrespect? That make the spit feel better to you?
That make it any less spit? ASHA. Naw, but – RAYLYNN. Spit is spit. It’s disrespect. It’s violence. Just cuz you call hate a joke don’t make it one. ‘Specially when ain’t nobody laughin’ (Morisseau, 2017, pp. 60-61).

Pettiford-Wates (2017) acknowledges actor Joseph Anthony Carlson’s values of self-reliance and self-validation, emphasizing the need for actors to draw upon their own experiences and understanding. Carlson (as cited in Pettiford-Wates, 2017) explains the importance of understanding Ritual, Poetic, Drama, (RPD), a form of deep personal acting training focusing on “self-determination” and self-definition, specifically for the person and artist (p. 120). Following the validation of my emotions and those of each character, the dispute between Raylynn and Asha marked a significant healing moment within my Black Theater journey. It pushed me to cultivate empathy for both characters. Initially leaning towards Asha’s viewpoint, I understood that Raylynn’s flaw throughout the play lies in her steadfast beliefs, which prevents her from genuinely listening to alternative perspectives or lifestyles. If I were in Raylynn’s shoes, my reaction to Asha’s ignorance would have been different. However, the beauty lies in discovering truth in Raylynn’s responses through this contrast—navigating within that character’s flaw.

The cathartic breakthrough occurred a few rehearsals later when Watson reminded me, “[Raylynn is] mad” (Morisseau, 2017, p. 59). This clarification helped my castmate and me grasp the scene’s trajectory fully. Focusing solely on the world within our given environment, actively listening, and truthfully reacting, I could be present and live authentically within Raylynn’s and Asha’s perspectives. The result was gratifying. Raylynn and Asha cried together as the scene unfolded, revealing the pain each harbored based on their deeply held beliefs and the strain it placed on their friendship.

**Increasing freedom and flexibility**
Flick of my pen

Most of my instances of freedom and adaptability stemmed from collaborating with BATR’s ensemble. An intriguing paradox I encountered, reflecting on the ensemble’s role, was the initial lack of confidence I felt with Raylynn’s transformative closing monologue contrasted with the confidence and freedom I experienced in one of the actual protest scenes within the play. Several days after the nooses are publicly hung under the tree, in front of the Principal and District Attorney, the students of Cedar High express their objection and demand change and just punishment for the racists. Since most of our ensemble pieces were hip-hop-based and involved dance and movement, I found portraying activities, like protesting, more comfortable. Feeling supported within the collective granted me access to my emotional availability, allowing me to begin from a connected place. The specific BATR demonstration was a piece the ensemble devised in the early rehearsal periods. We incorporated Call and Response, improvisation, and expressive individualism. Truscott (2017) defines,

Response is supportive and empowering. . . It is the start of the collaboration, (big ‘C’) and all of the collaborations and cycles of call and response that will eventually make the whole. The nature of Call and Response. . . [is] the realm of art-making that allows for the possibility of infinite discovery in the development of a work versus loyalty to a presupposed outcome (p. 45).

With the help of continued discussions and explorations with my cast mates about this scene, I began to break down specific phrases the protest animated. “We will Not be moved,” “We got our rights,” “We have a right to stand,” “We have the right to learn,” “We have the right to live,” and then the last line the DA says “I can take away your life with the flick of my pen” (Morisseau, 2017, p. 40). Within these phrases, each one held its significance to me. I started to
reflect on the numerous occasions I have overlooked my rights, failed to stand up for my values, or doubted my worth. Every rehearsal and performance of this piece proved to be therapeutic for me. It felt like I was redeeming all the instances where I remained silent, felt diminished, or lacked the confidence to assert myself. On stage, I was able to bask in a sense of triumph.

In contrast, the DA’s last line, “I can take away your life with the flick of my pen,” struck a nerve (Morisseau, 2017, p. 40). I started to ponder the unfortunate truth behind that statement, not just on a political level but also within collegiate environments. As minorities, students may experience an unjustifiable amount of pressure to pursue higher education. Some aim to break the cycle of low income and attain economic stability. For instance, similar to collegiate athletes, in BATR, De’andre places great importance on his education and the chance to play football, representing the most accessible route for him to achieve success and upward social mobility.

Like many others, I am a first-generation student, the first in my immediate family to attain a college degree. During BATR’s scene rehearsal, I reflected on the value I placed on my education. I could not help but contemplate how significant a piece of parchment holds in my community and my sense of responsibility towards my education. It reminded me of the influence that college institutions exert over me. I was fueled by my ambition to arm myself with the essential tools and degrees to serve as a role model for other Black students in higher education and professions. However, the scene also highlighted the harsh reality of still being vulnerable to similar injustices and discrimination from those in positions of power.

The stark realization that “They” hold all the power concerning one’s “uphill mobility” underscores how easily the opportunity can be exterminated. Ultimately, within the protest and play, claiming victory each night served as a confidence booster, brimming with affirmations that empowered me as a Black student. Working with a flexible framework within the protest scene
allowed me to invite spontaneous improvisation and movement throughout each scene as a storyteller inside the collective and as an individual.

Muscle memory

After the initial production of BATR within UNO’s seasonal theater program, I let the personal milestones and acting progression I made throughout BATR’s production sink in. Each moment of self-discovery and implementation catered to my actor journey and would continue to serve me. However, by February 2024, BATR was selected to perform at the KCACTF’s Regional 6 festival. Prior to this honor, BATR’s initial rehearsals during UNO’s regular season started September 18th, 2023, and closed November 18th, 2023. By February 17th, 2024, the ensemble and I had one week of rehearsals for KCACTF—before mounting BATR one last time at UNO as an invited dress rehearsal.

This extension is not the longest production run I have had within a show; however, considering the heavy material and effort it took, it was the most daunting. I realized my lines and blocking had a stiff rhythm during the new rehearsals. My storytelling fell stagnant. It was so hard to break up my pattern of speech. I could sense myself fighting against my muscle memory and ability to truthfully and spontaneously react. I remember sharing this dilemma with the BATR family in our final rehearsal debriefing session. One of my cast mates shared, “Let go. You are just overthinking.” It was not until the next day, just a day before the invited dress, that it finally clicked. The preconceived rhythm melted away, and I was back to actively being present within the story. Because of the constant engagement and deep listening, I had endless freedom throughout the play in the last two show runs and during its post-production.

Embracing emotional availability
Establishing a safe environment throughout the rehearsal process not only facilitated essential challenging conversations and character development but also ensured the stability and security of every element and person involved in the production of *BATR*. A critical moment arose when Watson prepared her cast and production team to discuss the use of nooses, which is crucial for two key scenes in the play—the one in the middle where students form a tree and the end when nooses drop from the ceiling. During this discussion, Watson addressed prop safety and the emotional impact that this particular prop had on individuals. Seeing a noose up close was the first time for many of us. Therefore, the space allowed us to confront and share our emotions within the ensemble. Sitting in a circle, Watson emphasized that the rope was a rope until it transformed into something else. Our scenic designer/prop manager was designated as the only individual authorized to handle the nooses. The space served as a safety net for everyone, allowing acknowledgment of any discomfort regarding the prop to be exposed before integrating it into rehearsals.

As we went around the room discussing our feelings about the noose, I was moved by the perspectives and personal experiences shared by my castmates, many of whom were not people of color. For me, the emotion stemmed from the stark reality that this rope was used to torment my ancestors—a sensitive subject that pains me to give any deep thought. However, being in that circle allowed me to embrace vulnerability and acknowledge these emotions rather than suppressing them, ultimately fostering a sense of availability that allowed the story of *BATR* to impact me profoundly. As we concluded our discussion with hugs and a sense of unity, I realized that, as Truscott (2017) says, “I was [now truly] ready for the work of peace and progress” (p. 46).
In my personal encounters with the noose props, there are two significant breakthroughs where I vividly imagined and empathized with each potent scene. In _BATR_, there is a moment where Raylynn stands out in the crowd, peering at the tree with nooses. A few lines later, she expresses, “Nooses. Hangin.” Like vines (Morisseau, 2017, p. 29). The characters stare into the crowd between the dialogue and a remix of Billie Holiday’s _Strange Fruit_ plays. To me, my three lines felt misplaced and incoherent. It was not until Watson instructed me to visualize the significance of those nooses that I could concentrate on the emotions they evoked rather than the text itself. After re-envisioning and letting Billie Holiday’s (1939) underscore, “Strange fruit/Blood on the leaves and blood at the root,” impact my spirit, the words oozed out.

Furthermore, during _BATR_’s final performance at the festival, I experienced an unforgettable moment. At the end of the play, Morisseau (2017) instructs, “(Slowly, three nooses are illuminated in silhouette. Hanging from the tree. Joined by three more. Then hundreds)” (p. 76). Prior to this, Watson had provided an explanation for each set of nooses. The three nooses suspended above my head symbolized the nooses hung from the school tree. Three more nooses dropped above the jail cell, totaling six nooses onstage as the Jena 6. The remaining nooses descended above the audience’s heads, signifying the past and my resilient ancestors who walked the earth before us.

During KCACTF, an unusual occurrence occurred when those three sets of nooses failed to drop. While this was a technical issue, I would not have realized the nooses did not drop until Watson casually remarked that night, “I thought you knew.” I panicked because I could have sworn they did drop. I felt them drop. I heard them drop. They dropped...but they didn’t. What I experienced was a profound ritualistic practice embedded within the play. Within those moments, the secular world of the play merged with the spiritual world, and the profound
experience was unforgettable. Pettiford-Wates (2017) echoes, “(R)itual is an altered state of consciousness. It is related to the universal self and the collective rhythms and experiences of the universe. The truth of the universe is. . . inner knowledge that after every sunset there will be a sunrise” (p. 110). Moreover, Author Nouryeh (2002) expounds:

[M]ojo and sayso... depend on [one’s] understanding of the spiritual heritage of the black community. . . The possession of two elements—the power to create order in life through sacred and secular rituals, and to invoke the power of the spiritual realm through language or Nommo Force—is the meaning of mojo and sayso. With the knowledge of how to maintain the relationship between one’s sense of oneself in the present and one’s spiritual ancestors through action and words, anyone can survive in life without becoming overwhelmed. (p. 286)

In that last performance of BATR, the Nommo Force proved its transformative power to me. I will be eternally thankful for this spiritual exchange bestowed upon me.
Section VI

Post-Production

After the production of *Blood at the Root*, I emphatically confirmed the theory of freedom and flexibility I discovered when I participated in Region 6’s KCACTF Irene Ryan Acting competition. After the initial video audition and submission, there were two more rounds where the actors competed in person with monologues and scenes within six minutes.

During the semi-final rounds, I competed with a monologue from *This is Our Youth* by Kenneth Lonergan, and my partner, Emani White, and I did a scene from *Maria Kizito* by Erik Ehn. We did our first and last rehearsal for our scene in less than 24 hours. We read the scene in that short time span and rehearsed what we could. We noticed that Maria Kizito is an unconventional play, meaning it has avant-garde characteristics and lives outside the normal confines of a well-made play. Compared to a well-made play, unconventional plays have non-linear narratives and unconventional themes and subject matter. As a result, it leads actors and directors to innovative approaches on the outskirts of Westernized techniques. With that, I was able to simplify and release all intellect. For instance, the first thing I did was figure out how the play felt in my body. It felt like a dance between the two characters, Fire and Refugee.

My character, Fire, overpowered Refugee until it consumed her. I incorporated improvisational dance techniques that flowed throughout the story, including ritualistic and spontaneous processes. The few discoveries I could have in the short rehearsal were an intense amount of freedom in vocal variety, fluidity of movement, and liberating behavioral reactions from my partner’s actions.
Although Watson was focused on ensuring everything was set for our BATR performance the next day, she helped White and me devise our unconventional theatrical performance. With the BATR performance at the forefront of our minds as well, White and I released any possible anxieties and knew all we could do was not only do our best but trust ourselves in our abilities and talents. The next day, immediately after the BATR performance, White and I were called to perform. With our central focus being trust, we performed like we had nothing to lose. The surrendering of traditional and technical methodologies enlightened me. This enlightenment made me realize I must trust my culmination of theatrical knowledge and approaches. I do not need weeks of rehearsal time to perform truthfully.

After being selected to move to the final rounds of the competition, my partner and I were overjoyed but worried about how we would stay consistent and recreate or improve the experience we just had. With the other festival meetings and workshops occurring, we could not rehearse the scene again before our final performance. However, within the creative environment the festival facilitated, I could implement and experiment with even more approaches outside Westernized conservatory standards that would directly improve my performance. In the next round, in addition to This is Our Youth, I performed a second monologue from For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide When The Rainbow Is Enuf. After my last monologue, White and I seamlessly transitioned into our scene, where we blacked out and had a spiritual and transformative experience that surpassed our expectations. Some of these experiences are hard to quantify, but it felt something like this: Committing willingly and wholly and immersing ourselves in the process of self-relinquishment—living in between the spiritual ancestral and secular world. A couple of days after our performance, at KCACTF’s closing ceremony, they announced my name as the Region 6 Irene Ryan Scholarship recipient. The entire experience and
A sequence of events served as a revelation to the spiritual power within connecting with ancestors and all the energy around them.
Section VII

Conclusion

My journey is a testimony to the unwavering strength and determination inherent in every Black actor as they navigate their unique path. As a black female actor, I contemplate my journey thus far and feel a sense of compassion for where I stand today. I have come to appreciate the beauty from within the underlying struggles and challenges that have shaped my path. Every facet of my undergraduate, graduate, and life experiences, alongside my cultural background and maturation, have played a role in molding my storytelling methods and how I articulate them. It has been a paradox of a constant yearning for representation within my undergraduate theater department and in the material I engage with, coupled with a fearful reluctance to fully embrace Black-centered opportunities when they finally presented themselves in graduate school. Despite my timid progression in discovering approaches outside of Eurocentric acting styles, I was able to take control and reclaim my sense of self.

At this juncture, having developed a solid grasp of Westernized acting theories, I am ready to delve deeper into the Afrocentric roots of theater. Recognizing that much of acting revolves around one’s identity, I will commit to prioritizing self-exploration as the cornerstone of my teaching practices as a professor. A central aspect is guiding students toward self-definition, discovery, awareness, consciousness, analysis, and actualization. Professor and artistic director Kim Moore shares, “Life is not solely about being Black or any other label you might ascribe to your being, it is about being Present” (Morisseau, 2017, p. 214). Commencing from a foundation of self-realization promises liberation and adaptability for actors to thrive in their creative pursuits. I will empower and support individuals who, like myself, have felt adrift in the voids of their performance education. Through Black theater, I endeavor to heal those who have endured
hurt or ostracism within theater programs that marginalize their culture. Embracing diverse methods, techniques, theaters, and opportunities that center Black culture and heritage while fostering freedom from traditional standards and restrictions is paramount. Importantly, I acknowledge that this project cannot be undertaken alone, and thus, I continue to advocate for love and community among like-minded individuals, as well as those with differing perspectives. Our collective space has no void; everyone has something valuable to contribute. No matter the challenges encountered within White American theater institutions, Black actors have a right to learn and thrive from a place of identity, just like their non-minority counterparts.

John Lewis implores, “Never let anyone—any person or any force—dampen, dim or diminish your light” (2012). A person’s light is a reflection of their soul. The soul is what one needs to act—to live. It is necessary for Black actors to hold the torch that burns within their souls to do the work that must be done, to tell the stories that must be told. Therefore, claim it. Reclaim your power, manifest your truth, and redefine the very foundations upon which you stand.
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Blood at the Root

by Dominique Morisseau
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*Blood At The Root* was commissioned by The Pennsylvania State University School of Theatre and premiered on March 28, 2014 at Penn State Center Stage. The performance was directed by Steve H. Broadnax III, with choreography by Aquila Kikora Franklin, lighting design by Nathan Hawkins, scenic design by Karl Jacobson, costume design by Carly Reeder, and sound design by Liz Sokolak. The stage manager was Gwen Byrnes and the assistant stage manager was Maria Baratta. The cast was as follows:

RAYLYNN .................................................. Stori Ayers
TORIA .................................................. Allison Scarlet Jaye
ASHA ....................................................... Kenzie Ross
JUSTIN .................................................. Brandon Carter
COLIN  ................................................... Tyler Reilly
DE’ANDRE ................................................... Christian Thompson
This play is built on the idea of devised production. What this means is that the work on the page is really only half, and the ensemble is intended, along with the director, to put their own signature on the work in a more defined and pronounced way. The ensemble builds the pictures (i.e. the tree) out of their bodies or creative maneuvering.

The movement that De’Andre does can be dance or other inspired movement. But Hip Hop inspired, always.

Most importantly, the ensemble of miscellaneous characters (i.e. Students, Principal, DA, Student Body, etc) can be assigned as suggested in the parenthesis (based on smaller productions), or reassigned as a larger and more ensemble cast. The only thing that is pertinent is that the main scenes and monologues assigned to the core students (Raylynn, De’Andre, Colin, Justin, Asha, and Toria) remain intact for the story to work. All places where their names are written in parenthesis can be reassigned as needed.

Also important: The language of this play should drive. There is a rhythm to it that flows and moves as poetry. As much as possible, there should be little breaks between lines or within passages of text. Let it flow.
This story is inspired by a series of incidents, media reporting, and social action in Jena, Louisiana in 2007.

I dedicate this work to the resilient young men who make up the Jena 6.
The Student Body

(An arrangement of multi-character voices. Performed as a continuous piece of text, but staged as separate characters. The following lines can be distributed as suggested, or re-assigned to various ensemble members of the cast.)

STUDENT (RAYLYNN).
  It’s a hot day in October

STUDENT (TORIA).
  Hot hot

STUDENT (ASHA).
  Real hot

STUDENT (JUSTIN).
  Melt butter on the street – hot

STUDENT (COLIN).
  Walkin’ over coals with bare feet hot

STUDENT (DE’ANDRE).
  Heads noddin’ to a hype beat hot

STUDENT (RAYLYNN).
  It’s just hot

STUDENT.
  Hot hot

STUDENT (JUSTIN).
  “We ain’t got no race problems here” –

ALL STUDENTS.
  NOT

STUDENT (ASHA).
  “This ain’t ’bout what you thank” –
ALL STUDENTS.
   NOT
STUDENT (TORIA).
   “This was all just a prank” –
STUDENT (RAYLYNN).
   NOT
STUDENT (JUSTIN).
   It’s just hot
STUDENT (RAYLYNN).
   Hot hot
STUDENT (TORIA).
   Anger rising in your throat hot
STUDENT (ASHA).
   Belly feelin’ full of smoke hot
STUDENT (COLIN).
   So frustrated you could choke hot
STUDENT (DE’ANDRE).
   It’s just hot
ALL STUDENTS.
   Hot hot
STUDENT (JUSTIN).
   Air so still there ain’t no breeze
STUDENT (ASHA).
   Unmowed grass up to your knees
STUDENT (TORIA).
   Books and papers and eighty degrees
ALL STUDENTS.
   Only Whites sit at this tree
STUDENT (COLIN).
   Whole town stuck in 1960
STUDENT (RAYLYNN).
   Ain’t the way it ought to be
STUDENT (JUSTIN).
   But that’s the way it is
STUDENT (TORIA).
   Ain’t the way it ought to be

STUDENT (ASHA).
   But that’s the way it is

STUDENT (DE’ANDRE).
   Until something’s gotta give

STUDENT (JUSTIN).
   ’Til then we just stay hot

STUDENT (COLIN).
   Too hot

ALL STUDENTS.
   Hot hot

STUDENT (DE’ANDRE).
   Have Not

ALL STUDENTS.
   Hot hot

STUDENT (RAYLYNN).
   Want not

ALL STUDENTS.
   Hot Hot

STUDENT (JUSTIN).
   Live not

ALL STUDENTS.
   Hot Hot

STUDENT (ASHA).
   It’s just hot

STUDENT (COLIN).
   So damn hot

STUDENT (RAYLYNN).
   Feelin’ like summer when we in the fall

STUDENT (DE’ANDRE).
   Air conditionin’ at the mall

STUDENT (RAYLYNN).
   Hot
STUDENT (ASHA).
Hot

ALL STUDENTS.
Hot day in October...

(Lights shift.)
Raylynn’s Reflection

(Lights up on RAYLYNN.)

RAYLYNN. You know what day today is? – Today a hot as hell day at school. Today the day my ten-page paper in Miss Lawson’s class is due and I over-wrote and have eleven. My brother say I’m the only person he know do MO’ homework than I’m given. Today I don’t care what’s on the lunch menu cuz I probly ain’t eatin’ it no way. Today different. Today got a weight to it. Today makes three years since my mama passed. Today I woke up to the sound of my daddy cryin’, even though he pretended like he wunn’t. Today my brother walked outta the house befo’ breakfast was finished talkin’ ’bout he wunn’t hungry. Today I ate extra flapjacks just so I wouldn’t waste no food cuz Mama used to hate that. Today gonna mean somethin’ different, y’heard. Today can’t be like no other day. Today gotta count for somethin’.

(Beat.)

You got to live life on the edge. That’s what Mama always say. Used to. Break a rule or ten so you remember ain’t nothin’ more powerful than your own will. People with no will apathetic. That’s what she say. Apathy. Ain’t nothin’ worse than it. Gotta have passion. Even if it’s fo’ sellin’ drugs. At least it’s activity. You can always take that energy and turn it into somethin’ productive. But just sittin’ back and suckin’ up air and not participatin’ in the world around you – ain’t nothin’ mo’ selfish than that. I’m gon’ participate. Got to.

(Beat.)

Today is hotter than the devil’s ass. Today is the first day of Autumn Equinox. Today the trees is all full of color. Today a day fo’ change. Today I’m gon break a rule. Or ten. To stamp out apathy.

(Beat.)
Today I’m announcing my decision to run for class president. Rule break number one.

(Shift.)
D Day

(RAYLYNN and ASHA in front of the school on the lawn.)

(A white girl sits under the tree and reads a book.)

RAYLYNN. Hot as hell. Need some shade.
ASHA. You oughta stick to it.
RAYLYNN. Ain’t got no support.
ASHA. Forget about support. Gotta gain support. Just go out for it Ray.
RAYLYNN. Ain’t never been one befo’.
ASHA. Class president? Been one every year since the school opened!
RAYLYNN. Never one look like me.
ASHA. Whassitmatter – look like you! Be one like you now. Who care ’bout what it ain’t never been. Whassitmatter?
RAYLYNN. Maybe don’t matter. Maybe do. Be a uphill battle to win this race. (Shift.) Why folk even say that anyway? Uphill. Instead of what – a downhill battle?
ASHA. It’s a stupid saying. Whoever made it up was probably dumber than Alice Miller in fifth period Econ.
RAYLYNN. You see how she was lookin’ at me when I said I might run?
ASHA. Alice Miller?
RAYLYNN. Looked at me sideways and all sorts a crooked.
ASHA. Alice Miller is dumber than rocks.
RAYLYNN. Like I smelled un-showered or rotten-egg-like or somethin’.
ASHA. Like unwashed drawers or somethin’?
RAYLYNN. Asha, I’m serious.
ASHA. Or like Jesse’s breath after eatin’ pork rinds.
RAYLYNN. I mean really serious.
ASHA. His breath be smellin’ bad after them rinds though – don’t it?
RAYLYNN. It do.
ASHA. Like Lawd boy! What kinda hot sauce do you put on them thangs? Smell like shitfire and hell comin’ outta his mouth!
RAYLYNN. He still got the support of the whole football team. That’s how he’s even in the race. And they gonna be hard to win over. Got some kinda code of brotherhood or somethin’ ’tween ’em. Even for the stupidest thang. They stick by each other like flies to horseshit. And it don’t get horseshittier than Jesse, ya heard me.
ASHA. Well I’m datin’ E-Money now so maybe I can get ’im to sway ’em to your side.
RAYLYNN. You datin’ E? Since when?
ASHA. Since the other day when he told me I got a nice ass for a White girl.
RAYLYNN. He say that to you?!
ASHA. In front of half the team.
RAYLYNN. And you ain’t smack him across his face? I woulda smacked him across his face.
ASHA. I did. And then I handed him my cell number.
RAYLYNN. What you do that for?
ASHA. I like a man with honesty.
RAYLYNN. That ain’t honesty. That’s disrespect.
ASHA. I thank disrespect is thankin’ it and not sayin’ nothin’. If you thank I got a nice ass, just say so. Get all the particulars outta the way. That’s what I like.
RAYLYNN. You like it cuz you crazy.
ASHA. I like it cuz it’s true. I got a great ass.

(DE’ANDRE runs on, catching a football being tossed to him.)

DE’ANDRE. (Yelling offstage.) Shut up maine! Thas why yo’ mama smell like cornchips and toe jam!

(He comes sloppily over to RAYLYNN and ASHA and puts his arm around RAYLYNN playfully.)
Whaddup big sis.

**RAYLYNN.** Boy get offa me. You smell like testosterone and dollar-sto’ cologne.

**DE’ANDRE.** All the shawties love my cologne.

**RAYLYNN.** All the shawties in yo’ head.

**DE’ANDRE.** Gimme some chips.

**RAYLYNN.** Ain’t got no chips.

**DE’ANDRE.** You got somethin’. I know you ain’t eat all them Cheetos you had earlier.

(**RAYLYNN** digs in her bag and pulls out a bag of Cheetos. She throws it at **DE’ANDRE.**)

(ASHA pulls out a nail file and begins busying herself – preoccupied.)

**RAYLYNN.** Here fool. Go’on get outta my face.

**DE’ANDRE.** Whaddup woadie?

**ASHA.** Whaddup D.

**RAYLYNN.** De’Andre why you botherin’ us? Ain’t you got practice right now?

**DE’ANDRE.** Naw. Practice cancelled for today.

**ASHA.** Cancelled for what? E ain’t tell me it was cancelled.

**DE’ANDRE.** Ain’t go into details. Sign on the locker room do’ [door] just say it cancelled. But it must be somethin’ kinda serious. We got a game next week and Coach been vexed tryin’ to get us in shape. He don’t neva just be cancellin’.

**RAYLYNN.** Well where you headin’ now?

**DE’ANDRE.** Goin’ over Derrick house fo’ a bit. That’s where e’erbody gon’ chill.

**RAYLYNN.** What about later? Wit’ Daddy. ’Spose to go’on down to the site –

**DE’ANDRE.** Ain’t talkin’ ’bout none of that right now.

**RAYLYNN.** You ain’t gonna go?

**DE’ANDRE.** Ain’t talkin’ ’bout none of that right now. That what ya’ll wanna do, ya’ll go ’head on. But I ain’t goin’ to no graveyard.
RAYLYNN. But what about Daddy –

DE’ANDRE. (Ignoring RAYLYNN.) Ay dere’ Asha, E said to tell you he gon’ be at Derrick’s.

ASHA. What he tell you to tell me that for? He can’t speak for himself?

DE’ANDRE. I ’ono.

ASHA. Tell him I don’t be takin’ no second-hand messages. He know how to text me.

DE’ANDRE. Whateva. Just tellin’ what I know.

RAYLYNN. What I’m gon’ tell Daddy? What you want me to say ’bout why you not comin’ wit’ us…even though you knowin’ what it mean to ’im?

DE’ANDRE. Say whateva you want. You an’ him can hold onto them bad memories ’til they make you crazy. I can’t do it no mo’.

RAYLYNN. Ain’t all bad memories.

DE’ANDRE. Maybe not to you…

(DE’ANDRE turns to walk away.)

Tell Daddy I be home lata. Catch you when I catch you.

(DE’ANDRE tosses his ball up into the air, catches it, and disappears.)

(RAYLYNN looks after her brother for a moment.)

(RAYLYNN turns her gaze on the tree. ASHA pulls out a compact and is now preoccupied with refreshing her makeup.)

ASHA. (Mumbling to herself.) Sending me stupid messages. What am I? Some groupie?

RAYLYNN. You know what day today is?

ASHA. What you mean?

(Beat.)

RAYLYNN. Nevermind.

(RAYLYNN keeps her gaze on the tree. And the students sitting underneath.)
ASHA. You know what you oughta do?
RAYLYNN. Sun is killin’ me right now.
ASHA. Start a list of slogans. You be real good at it with all them lofty ways you be thankin’.
RAYLYNN. I hate slogans.
ASHA. Every candidate got slogans.
RAYLYNN. ’Cept me. Slogans ain’t for me. Sound like bullshit and lies. That’s all.
ASHA. Ain’t got to be lies. You make it sound like poetry.
RAYLYNN. Poetry can sound pretty and still be a lie. No slogans.
ASHA. You just got to see it. Can’t have no campaign without slogans. I’m gon’ come up with somethin’ and show it to you on a poster.
RAYLYNN. Ain’t sho ’bout no poster –
ASHA. – Just trust me.

(RAYLYNN turns her attention toward the tree again.)

RAYLYNN. You notice how it always been the same kinda people sittin’ under that tree? Neva nobody different?
ASHA. I ain’t neva really paid attention.
RAYLYNN. Ain’t never seen nobody like me sittin’ under that tree. Ain’t never been nobody like me run for class president. You ever look up one day and realize you been doin’ the same thing for so long, you ain’t even sure why? Like you just followin’ rules and ain’t never stop to question – why it’s a rule in the first place?
ASHA. I’ono. Maybe.
RAYLYNN. Today feel like a different kinda day. Don’t it?
ASHA. Different how?
RAYLYNN. New rules-kinda different.
ASHA. What you talkin’?
RAYLYNN. I’m gon’ get me some shade.
ASHA. What for? Don’t go over there. Ain’t nothin’ but a bunch of snobs and cliques sit under that tree.
RAYLYNN. And today...me too.

(RAYLYNN walks slowly but decisively over to the tree. ASHA watches with terror.)

(The shade of the tree washes over RAYLYNN. All students and onlookers are illuminated in a moment of stillness. Shock. Disgust.)

Rule break number two.

(Sounds of a schoolbell ringing.)
The Cutting Room

(Lights up on TORIA and JUSTIN in a classroom. There are press materials all around in prep for the school paper.)

TORIA. That’s a good article. That’s a good fuckin’ article. Why everytime I submit somethin’ do you have to shit on it Justin?

JUSTIN. It’s too long.

TONIA. Long and good.

JUSTIN. Doesn’t matter how good it is. It’s too long.

TORIA. Then tell me where to edit it. I can take constructive criticism.

JUSTIN. No you can’t.

TORIA. Don’t tell me I can’t. I’m tellin’ you I can!

JUSTIN. You can’t. You suck at criticism.

TORIA. Says who?

JUSTIN. Says Melissa Bordeaux, our most recent story editor to quit. Says JoAnn Seaver before that. Says Michael Hendrix and Barry Stevens and Collen Smith –

TORIA. This is a crock a shit.

JUSTIN. And you cuss too much.

TORIA. Like fuck I do!

JUSTIN. Had to use so many symbols to bleep out your language in that last article, it looked like the whole thing was written in alien code.

TORIA. It was about freedom of speech. I was cussing to make a point.

JUSTIN. Well your point almost got our whole edition shut down and nearly got us all put on probation. I promised Principle Miller I was going to do a better job at monitoring proper content for this paper and I’m sticking to my word.

TORIA. Justin, I’m tryin’ to be a journalist. In real life. Do you get that?
JUSTIN. I don’t see what this has to –

TORIA. In real life! Not in some pretend lil’ high school basement where the most interesting thang in print is whether or not we’re having fake horsemeat on the lunch menu or who in God’s name among the popular and stuck-up is gonna win Prom King and Queen. I am not interested in whether or not the auditorium gets a fresh coat of paint before December or whether or not the football team wins a single game this year. I am not interested in these pathetic little trifles that make up our sad existence as sheltered brats this side of the Mason Dixon line. I am interested in the true art of journalism. I want to tell the stories everybody else at this school and in this town is too pussy to cover –

JUSTIN. Jesus Toria –

TORIA. Like how many girls at this school have covered up their abortions because their parents are too primitive to allow a sex-ed course that isn’t taught by eighty-year-old Mrs. Wellsley who wouldn’t know how to model puttin’ on a condom if she had a ten-foot penis statue right in front of her –

JUSTIN. God Toria!!

TORIA. Or how about the number of boys on the football team who’d rather be dating each other than all the girls they swap semen with –

JUSTIN. Toria seriously!

TORIA. – but because we’re so anti-homo they take it out on every chick at Cedar High and that’s why the number of relationship violence is like – sky high right now –

JUSTIN. You don’t have the stats to prove that.

TORIA. I could get them.

JUSTIN. But you don’t have ’em –

TORIA. Or like how about the fact that none of the black students on campus hardly ever hang out with any of the white students on campus or vice versa because we’re all a bunch of racist pricks –

JUSTIN. Toria, enough!
TORIA. You know I’m tellin’ the truth.

JUSTIN. It’s a student paper. A STUDENT PAPER. We’re not trying to change the world or disrupt capitalism or bring down the government. We’re just giving people something interesting to read while they’re waiting on the bus or have a free period or somethin’.

TORIA. What’s our readership Justin?

JUSTIN. I’m not doin’ this now. I’ve got to finish getting this layout done.

TORIA. Is it still ten people? Or did we drop to five this month?

JUSTIN. You know I’m working on a new layout to increase our popularity.

TORIA. (Mocking him.) OH! Gee! A new layout! That’s what’s gonna save our dyin’ paper! While every other delusional student at this school is networkin’ on Facebook or bloggin’ about what colleges they wanna go to, you’re workin’ on some new colors for the layout. You’re changin’ the font from Times New Roman to Comic Sans and that’s really gonna make everybody lose their shit and run to pick up a fuckin’ paper!

JUSTIN. I don’t have time for this Toria.

TORIA. Just print my fuckin’ article.

JUSTIN. It’s about where to get good birth control. Do you seriously think I can print that?

TORIA. It’s not just about that – it’s about protecting yourself and having a healthy teen sex life. Did you even read it carefully? Or did you get so excited at the word “birth control” that you skeeted on yourself before you could finish?

JUSTIN. You know what Toria? I’m the editor now. I’m the editor and the copier and the publisher and everythang else this dyin’ paper needs, and I’m also the one student who hasn’t stopped talkin’ to you for basically everythang because you’re so obviously annoyin’. So write another damn article or else walk cuz I ain’t got the time to argue with you no more about it.
(JUSTIN turns away from TORIA and continues working on his layout.)

(A defeated TORIA is silent for a moment.)

TORIA. (Meekly.) It’s our senior year.

JUSTIN. I know.

TORIA. I want to cover somethin’ amazin’. Just once. Just to leave my handprint here, y’know? You’ve got to understand what that means. Aren’t you sick of just bein’ invisible at this place?

JUSTIN. Who say I’m invisible?

TORIA. Oh Justin, please. You’re more invisible than me. And I’m damn near a ghost.

(Shift.)

I don’t want this year to be like every other one, y’know? Where folks like us get lost forever into this abyss of nobodies because we’re the only ones who know we’re alive. Still waitin’ on this place to give back, y’know? These past three years I ain’t done nothin’ but give and give to this hellhole, and ain’t hardly reaped nothin’. But I decided this year…I can. Finally find a purpose for what I am at this school. I’m an investigator. And I can’t leave this year without fully definin’ what I am. This is the year I can etch myself into stone. Be a journalist. That’s what I want Justin. Don’t you?

JUSTIN. Maybe.

TORIA. Then let me have a shot to break the rules a lil’ bit. Write somethin’ excitin’.

JUSTIN. Can’t do birth control. Got to answer to too many people. They’ll shut it down.

TORIA. Goddamn Justin.

JUSTIN. But if you can find another topic ’fore I go to print in three days, I promise to give it a fair read.

TORIA. So you admit you stopped at “birth control”?
JUSTIN. Three days Toria. Go get your ballsy story and keep it under two thousand words. And it better fit in the new layout.

TORIA. You ain’t sayin’ nothin’ but a word.

(Lights shift.)
The First Vote

(In the school hallway. COLIN and RAYLYNN are next to each other at their lockers.)

RAYLYNN. You on the football team?

(COLIN looks around himself. Realizing she’s talking to him, he responds cautiously.)

COLIN. Yeah.

RAYLYNN. Senior this year?

(Again, and with a little surprise, he responds cautiously.)

COLIN. Yeah. So.

RAYLYNN. Transfer student, right?

COLIN. Yeah. So.

RAYLYNN. Okay. Cool.

(COLIN looks at RAYLYNN stoically. They both go back to their locker business.)

It’s like three of ya’ll this year. Transfer students.

COLIN. I know.

RAYLYNN. Cool.

(Beat.)

My brother play on the team too. Runnin’ back. De’Andre.

COLIN. He a junior.

RAYLYNN. Thas him.

COLIN. He’s good.

RAYLYNN. Guess so.

COLIN. Big ego.

RAYLYNN. Thas him. What about you?

COLIN. Quarterback.

RAYLYNN. Thas one of the good ones, right?

COLIN. You don’t know the game?
RAYLYNN. Not much. Just enough to scream touchdown when they kick the ball through the H lookin’ thang.

COLIN. Naw that ain’t a…nevermind.

RAYLYNN. Football ain’t my kinda thang. Just show up for D. Sometimes. When he ain’t gettin’ on my nerves.

COLIN. …

(Smiles.)

…

RAYLYNN. Class was kinda crazy today, right?

COLIN. Yeah.

RAYLYNN. Miss Hooper and them pop quizzes.

COLIN. She give ’em a lot?

RAYLYNN. Only when she in a bad mood. Like if she had a bad date the night befo o’ somethin’. But you can sometimes tell when she ’bout to go out that night. She come to school wearin’ them skinny jeans that she can’t hardly fit into. You see her dressin’ that way, you know you betta study up on yo’ notes lata on. Almost all a her dates be bad. Can’t catch a man if she put silk panties on a fishin’ line. Don’t nobody wanna put up with alla her personality. Sound of her voice make me wanna cut my ears off most of the time.

COLIN. It real high-pitched and squeaky.

RAYLYNN. I rather get run over by a truck than listen to her talk all night.

COLIN. Mack truck.

RAYLYNN. Exactly.

(They laugh faintly for a moment.)

(Beat.)

You ain’t like… You don’t seem like no football player.

COLIN. What you meanin’ by that?

RAYLYNN. Ain’t meanin’ nothin’ bad. Just way we talkin’ right now. Can’t get most of ’em to say two words to me, ’less they askin ’bout D. But you just got…ease or somethin’.
(Pause.)

COLIN. You the first person that done really…

RAYLYNN. What’s that?

COLIN. Nevermind.

(Another pause.)

RAYLYNN. I was wonderin’…

COLIN. Yeah?

RAYLYNN. If you was plannin’ on votin’ on class president. Like, if you had made up yo’ mind yet?

COLIN. Ain’t really thought ’bout it. Got too much other stuff on the brain.

RAYLYNN. Oh.

(Pause.)

Well if you get to thinkin’ ’bout it…maybe you vote for me. I’m runnin’.

COLIN. Is you?

RAYLYNN. I am.

COLIN. How come?

RAYLYNN. It’s just time.

(Pause.)

COLIN. Yeah – maybe…

(ASHA enters the hallway. Approaches RAYLYNN urgently.)

ASHA. Where you been at? Been lookin’ for you for like ten minutes.

RAYLYNN. Been right here.

ASHA. You ain’t heard??

RAYLYNN. Heard ’bout what?

ASHA. Lawd, girl… Shit done hit the fan. After you went and sat under that snob tree yesterday, they say two other ones done it too.

RAYLYNN. Other ones like who?

ASHA. You know what I’m sayin’. Ones like us.
RAYLYNN. Like us?
ASHA. Black, fool!
RAYLYNN. Asha – yo’ ass ain’t hardly –
ASHA. And now shit done hit the fan.
RAYLYNN. What kinda shit?
ASHA. You got to come...you got to come see...

(Asha begins pulling Raylynn off. She tries to pull away.)

(Raylynn snatches free for one sec. Looks back at Colin.)

RAYLYNN. I’m Raylynn. Or you can call me Ray. That’s who to vote fo’.
COLIN. I’m Colin. See you...

(Asha pulls Raylynn off.)

(Colin looks after them for a second.)

(Shift.)
Willie Lynch

(A suite.)

(Music.)

(Movement.)

(The staging/embodiment of three nooses being tied to a tree begins to happen as the following dialogue occurs.)

JUSTIN. So it went somethin’ like this. School assembly the other day. New transfer student. Didn’t know the ropes. Asked some kinda question. ’Bout that tree. That huge oak tree sit in the front of our school yard. Call it “Ol’ Devoted” cuz of how long she been planted there and never hacked or diseased. Got years of carvings and marks on it. Most folk ’round here know to just walk past it and leave it be. Know how things is at this school. These people eat with these people. Those people eat with those. These folk hang out with these folk. Those folk hang out with those. Ain’t nobody got no problems with it. Ain’t worth questionin’. What’s the use? It ain’t hurtin’ nobody. Folk like who they like. Wanna be near who they wanna be near. And just so happen that folk like to be around other folk they got stuff in common with. That’s just what it be. Now everybody know that the tree out front – “Ol’ Devoted” just be a hang-out spot for some of them cliques. But one of them new transfer students come down from North Carolina. Ain’t know what it’s like down here in Louisiana. Ask this question in front of the whole school. Ask –

STUDENT (DE’ANDRE). Can only White people sit under that tree out front?

STUDENT (TORIA). He was tryin’ to start trouble.

STUDENT (ASHA). They always tryin’ to start trouble.

STUDENT (COLIN). Didn’t sound like trouble to me.

STUDENT (RAYLYNN). Was a fair question to ask.
JUSTIN. And then the student got taken out of the assembly. Got reprimanded by half the faculty for bein’ disruptive. But later that day, this one senior got somethin’ in her head about Ol’ Devoted. Say that senior –

RAYLYNN. They call me Ray.

JUSTIN. – announced she’s running for class president. Say she just felt fed up yesterday or maybe like some kinda martyr. Who knows? Say she went over to where that tree was and sat down underneath it. Call it gettin’ some shade. Then say after while, two other students done went over...maybe followin’ her lead. Three black students sittin’ under a tree that everybody else know be a hangout for these cliques.

TORIA. White cliques.

JUSTIN. And now today...whole school is in an uproar. Come out to the yard at lunchtime, and that’s when everybody see. Three nooses hangin’ on the branches of that great oak tree.

RAYLYNN. Three nooses.

COLIN. Three nooses.

ASHA. That’s what everybody see.

JUSTIN. Three nooses hangin’ on the branches of that great oak tree.

(The music increases.)

(The symbol of the tree is illuminated.)

(The symbol of the nooses rocking back and forth.)

(RAYLYNN is illuminated among the crowd. She stares at the tree. At the nooses.)

(The sound of laughter.)

STUDENT VOICES (ASHA/TORI). It was just a prank

STUDENT VOICES (COLIN). What’s the big deal?

RAYLYNN. (In disbelief.) Nooses. Hangin’. Like vines...

JUSTIN. And it went just like that. That’s what the story is.
(The image of the nooses on the tree remains, but less dominant. The lights are softened.)

(Lights illuminate TORIA, who now sits before JUSTIN and has joined his realistic world.)

TORIA. And you’re gonna let me write it?

JUSTIN. With just the facts. Yes.

TORIA. What facts? Are there really just facts to this? Or lots of shades of gray here, Justin?

JUSTIN. Toria, you wanted to do an interesting story that we can print in the paper. I’m giving you an interesting story.

TORIA. So I’ll talk to some folks. Get their side of the scoop. Find out why somebody would do somethin’ so racist –

JUSTIN. Not racist, Toria. You’re puttin’ too much opinion on it. They’re just callin’ it a prank.

TORIA. A prank?

JUSTIN. That’s what Principle Miller is callin’ it –

TORIA. It’s nooses, Justin.

JUSTIN. It’s rope hangin’ from a tree, Toria. Rodeo rope.

TORIA. We ain’t got no rodeo teams here, Justin!

JUSTIN. Toria, look. I’m not gonna argue with you. I’m doin’ what I promised. I’m givin’ you a story to cover.

TORIA. ’Cept you don’t want me to really cover it.

JUSTIN. I just want you to do what you s’posed to do as any good journalist would. Be objective. Don’t get carried away with your feelins. Just state the facts.

TORIA. Feelins is what makes good writin’, Justin. The rest ain’t nothin’ but empty words on paper.

(Shift.)

Don’t you got no feelin’ ’bout alla this yaself?

JUSTIN. What’s that ’spose ta mean?

TORIA. Seein’ them ropes danglin’ from that tree like…

(Beat.)
If I was you it’d make me feel some kinda way. I know that much.

JUSTIN. You got somethin’ you tryin’ to say to me Toria?
TORIA. I’m just askin’.

JUSTIN. Well don’t ask. In fact, I’m right and tired of alla your questionin’. You question everything I damn say. And ’less you forget, I’m in charge. I’m the one to do the questionin’. So take the story or back off. But don’t ask me another gotdamn thing, Toria. I swear.

(Pause. TORIA and JUSTIN glare at each other.)

TORIA. Yessir, boss.

JUSTIN. That’s right. That’s exactly right. And don’t fuckin’ forget it.

(Shift.)
The Pot Callin’ The Kettle

(Lights up on ASHA.)

ASHA. People don’t know this ’bout me but I used to have a lotta anger. You might not think it by lookin’ at me, but I could really throw down. When I was nine, my mama and daddy got a divorce. Was fightin’ and fightin’ all the time and couldn’t never get on the same page. So they split. I went to stay with Mama in Florida for awhile ’fore she moved here to Louisiana. But when I was ’bout ten, I started gettin’ in all this trouble at school. Fights and everything. Just mad all the time and didn’t know why. So my mama sent me over to live with Daddy in Georgia for a coupla years. He had himself a new wife and everythang. Livin’ good in Hotlanta with a new house and all that. Wife was a black woman. Her name Sharon and she was cool as hell. I liked her out the gate, and that’s sayin’ a whole lot cuz I ain’t like nobody out the gate who be datin’ my daddy. But she was somethin’ special. Treated me like a daughter. Didn’t try to replace my mama or nothin’ like that, or even act like she could. I think that’s what I liked about her. She was just real easy with me. Ain’t had her own kids, but had a bunch of nieces and nephews and she told ’em to call me cousin. So they did. Used to hang with ’em whenever it be a family get together. They say “whaddup cuz” like that, and I remember feelin’ for the first time like I belonged somewhere. Like finally I ain’t need to fight no more cuz I was in company that felt like home. And I stopped being so angry all the time. Angry at Mama and Daddy. Angry at myself, even. Angry at the world.

(Beat.)

After while, Mama called fo’ me to come move with her here. I was like twelve. But I wunn’t the same no mo’. Ain’t feel as comfortable back here. Not ’til I started hangin’ out again with...
(Beat.)

They used to call me “black by association.” Alla my friends and play cousins in Hotlanta. But here they just call me “fake” or “wannabe” or “actin’ black.” But you know what I thank? If actin’ black mean bein’ like Sharon… Mean findin’ family and love in places you wunn’t expectin’. If it mean not bein’ angry unless you got good reason… Then maybe we should all be “actin’ black” mo’ often. That’s all I got to say ’bout that.

(Shift.)

(Music.)

(Movement.)

(Lights illuminate RAYLYNN and ASHA.)

RAYLYNN. It happened the next day. After seein’ those three nooses hangin’ like…vines. Somethin’ had to be done. Somethin’ just had to be.

ASHA. So D come around. He say –

(Lights up on DE’ANDRE. The world becomes naturalistic.)

DE’ANDRE. Ya’ll see that shit?? How they just hung them shits on them branches like…like what was that? A threat or somethin’?

ASHA. A prank – Principle Miller callin’ it.

DE’ANDRE. Thas bullshit. Wouldn’t be no prank if shoes was reversed.

RAYLYNN. You mean if roles was reversed. How shoes gon’ be reversed?!

DE’ANDRE. Whatever. You know what I’m meanin’.

RAYLYNN. Be walkin’ ’round backwards.

DE’ANDRE. What they gonna do ’bout it? Thas what I wanna know.

ASHA. One of them Jesus freaks in my fourth period class. Bet that’s who hung ’em. They was lookin’ at me funny when Ray sat under that tree.
RAYLYNN. Or if the shoe was on the other foot. Maybe if you said that.

DE'ANDRE. Who cares what I said!

ASHA. Or maybe it was that hash gang that be sittin’ up under there gettin’ higher than a bluebird most of the time and don’t never get in trouble for puffin’ on school grounds – talkin’ ’bout it’s medicinal. Medicinal my ass.

RAYLYNN. Principle ain’t say who it was. Just say they gonna deal with it private and the students be punished.

ASHA. Heard whoever they is gettin’ detention.

DE'ANDRE. That’s it? Detention? What kinda punishment is that??

RAYLYNN. Give detention for misbehavin’ in class. Missin’ homework assignments. Not for no noose.

DE'ANDRE. Not for no threats.

ASHA. Detention with Mr. Snodder and all that fartin’ he be doin’ be more like prison. Gas chamber.

RAYLYNN. Still. It like a slap on the wrist. Ain’t really justice. Ain’t really fair.

DE'ANDRE. What we gon’ do about it, hunh? Talk about it while we straight gettin’ disrespected! We gon’ just take it, hunh?!

RAYLYNN. Ain’t gon’ just take it.

ASHA. What you meanin’?

RAYLYNN. I thank it time to revisit that tree.

DE'ANDRE. Thas what I’m talkin’ ’bout.

ASHA. Revisit it…for what?

RAYLYNN. For defiance.

ASHA. Defiance?

DE'ANDRE. Start a rally!

RAYLYNN. A demonstration.

ASHA. For who? For what? Why we gotta do anythang else? Already sat under it and made yo’ point. Now just gotta let them fools get in trouble by theyselves.
RAYLYNN. Ain’t about trouble. It’s about principle. ’Bout who belong where. ’Bout who got the freedom to be somewhere and who don’t. I ain’t tryin’ to back down from no noose hangin’ –

DE’ANDRE. Racist ass nooses hangin’ –
ASHA. Maybe it wunn’t racist.

(DE’ANDRE and RAYLYNN look at ASHA incredulously.)

DE’ANDRE. How it’s not gon’ be racist? What else it gon’ be?
ASHA. Be just…stupid.
DE’ANDRE. Aight then. It’s stupid AND racist. They usually go hand in hand, ain’t it?
RAYLYNN. Wasn’t right.
ASHA. I know it wunn’t right, but it was what it was. Stupid fa sho…but that don’t mean we got to get involved with it. What you got to go causin’ more issue ’bout it for?
RAYLYNN. Causin’ more issue?
ASHA. I ’ont mean it like that.
RAYLYNN. You thank it’s somethin’ wrong with what I done?
ASHA. Naw. I ain’t said that. I just thank maybe…
RAYLYNN. Maybe what?
ASHA. Maybe we ain’t got to get all wired up ’bout the whole thang. It just a tree.
DE’ANDRE. Awwww shit.
RAYLYNN. Ain’t just a tree to me.
ASHA. I’m just sayin’…
RAYLYNN. I don’t know what you sayin’.
ASHA. …

…

DE’ANDRE. Ay look – it’s time to make ourselves seen and heard, y’know? We gon’ do somethin’?
RAYLYNN. I’m goin’ – you comin’?
ASHA. I can’t afford to get in no trouble. Promised my mama I wunn’t gon’ have no issues this semester.

RAYLYNN. Fine then.

ASHA. That don’t mean I ain’t... I’m still ya girl.

RAYLYNN. Yeah. Sho. Of course.

ASHA. We still good, right?

RAYLYNN. ...

...

Sho.

...

...

Let’s go D.

(RAYLYNN and DE'ANDRE head for the tree. Music increases.)

(Shift.)
(COLIN is isolated.)

COLIN. It was like some shit out of a Civil Rights documentary. Like the kind they be showin’ in class. And most of the folks be fallin’ half asleep. Seen this one kid in third period start droolin’ on the desk when we was watchin’ this one – Eyes on the Prize it called. Real interestin’ to me, but guessin’ not to most everbody else. I interested cuz it’s nice to know what done happened before I showed up somewhere. Nice to know how thangs used to be and that thangs as they is now come from somethin’. It all got roots. Way somebody choose not to sit next to somebody in the lunchroom – got roots. Way somebody got problems with the flag somebody else wear on they t-shirt – got roots. Way some people talk the way they talk, or hang out with who they hang out with, or love who they love, or hate who they hate – all got roots. It feel halfway comfortin’ knowin’ it ain’t just start with us. That it been this way. That somebody’s been plantin’ these awful feelins in the soil somewhere. Long before we came along and started pulling up crops. We been digestin’ this same stuff, grown in this same soil, and ain’t even know it. So I like seein’ stuff like that…Eyes on the Prize…documentaries on the Civil Rights Movement. When that happened today at school…when those students went and stood under that great oak tree…Ol’ Devoted they call it… Look like some kinda protest. Look like somethin’ like from another time. From a Civil Rights Time. And it got me thinkin’…what kinda crop is the folks after us gonna dig up? Is it still gonna be from this same ol’ soil? Or is we ever gonna plant somethin’ new…

(Shift.)

(A moving tableaux of a protest being formed. 
STUDENTS wear black hoodies covering their
bowed heads, or something that might suggest these are all black students, though it is filled with the entire ensemble. Lighting should assist as well.)

(Beatboxing. Drumming. Sounds of urban teen life fills the space.)

(The **ENSEMBLE** becomes different players in the following sequence:)

(**STUDENTS** surrounding the tree.)

(**PRINCIPAL MILLER** and the **DA** face the group with bullhorns.)

(Alternative: Their lines can also be pre-recorded or spoken offstage over a mic so they remain an un-seen and powerful presence.)

(A vocalized Hip Hop/Spoken-word-inspired soundscape should inform how the following lines move.)

**STUDENT CHORUS.**

Weeee WILL not… We WILL NOT be moved!

Weeee WILL not… We WILL NOT be moved!

**PRINCIPAL MILLER.**

Students of Cedar High

**STUDENT CHORUS.**

Weeee WILL not… We WILL NOT be moved!

**DA.**

If you don’t stop these protests—

**STUDENT CHORUS.**

Weeee WILL not… We WILL NOT be moved!

**PRINCIPAL MILLER.**

As your principal I’m warning you –

**DA.**

If you don’t stop these protests –

**STUDENT CHORUS.**

Weeee WILL not… We WILL NOT be moved!
PRINCIPAL MILLER.
    I have the local District Attorney here –

DA.
    If you don’t stop these protests –

STUDENT CHORUS.
    Weeee WILL not... We WILL NOT be moved!

PRINCIPAL MILLER.
    Please disassemble this gathering immediately

DA.
    Gang activity

STUDENT CHORUS.
    Weeee WILL not... We WILL NOT be moved!

PRINCIPAL MILLER.
    Or the authorities will be forced to take action against you

DA.
    You ain’t got the right

STUDENT.
    We will NOT be moved

DA.
    I can erase you from sight

STUDENT CHORUS.
    We will NOT be moved

DA.
    You must not know my power

STUDENT CHORUS.
    We will NOT be moved

DA.
    Been standin’ here for hours

STUDENT CHORUS.
    We got our rights

DA.
    I can take away your life
STUDENT CHORUS.
    We got our rights
DA.
    I can take away your life
STUDENT CHORUS.
    We will NOT be moved
DA.
    With the flick of my pen
STUDENT CHORUS.
    We will NOT be moved
DA.
    Want me to say it again?
STUDENT CHORUS.
    We have a right to stand
DA.
    If you don’t stop these protests
STUDENT CHORUS.
    We have a right to learn
DA.
    If you don’t stop these protests
STUDENT CHORUS.
    We have the right to live
DA.
    If you don’t stop these protests
STUDENT CHORUS.
    We have the right to live
DA.
    I can take away your life with the flick of my pen
PRINCIPAL MILLER.
    Students at Cedar High, listen real good
DA.
    If you don’t stop these protests, I can take away your life with the Flick. Of. My. Pen.
(The DA lifts his pen and notepad and glares at the STUDENTS.)

(The STUDENTS fall silent.)

PRINCIPAL MILLER. Please disassemble from the tree immediately before disciplinary action is taken.

(Shift.)
The Aftermath

**TORIA.** Yesterday at Cedar High, Black students gathered in front of Ol’ Devoted during lunchtime in protest of the three nooses being hung from its branches a day prior. The group was quickly disassembled when Principal Miller, the DA and local authorities arrived to break up the protest. Their concern:

**PRINCIPAL MILLER.** We don’t want no gang activity here on school grounds.

**TORIA.** But the students had different things to say about that accusation:

**DE’ANDRE.** Ain’t nobody in no gangs.

**RAYLYNN.** Why would they call us a gang? They call the students that put those nooses up a gang too?

**JUSTIN.** Personally, I don’t think a protest was necessary. What’s it really change?

**ASHA.** Something can be stupid or disrespectful without it bein’ about race.

**TORIA.** Lately it seems like there’s been growing unrest happening at Cedar High, and things may fall more apart before they come together.

(Shift.)
Sacred Secrets

(COLIN and RAYLYNN in the back of the schoolyard – bleachers. Mid-convo.)

COLIN. So I was standin’ front of that Piggly Wiggly on Jefferson askin’ for change to catch the bus back home cuz by this point, school was almost over. Was cuttin’ class all day but knew I had to get home or I’d have hell to pay. Had spent my last dime at the Big Boy tryin’ to get me some lunch, so I start beggin’ folks for whatever they had. Quarters. Dimes. Even pennies. And thas when this fella with this raspy voice say to me, “How much y’need, dere?” And I look up, starin’ straight into the face of Philip Frazier –

RAYLYNN. Of Rebirth Brass Band?!

COLIN. The original founder.

RAYLYNN. You’se a damn lie.

COLIN. Swear it.

RAYLYNN. I’da peed myself.

COLIN. Almost did.

RAYLYNN. What you say to ’im?

COLIN. At first I ain’t said nothin’. Soon as I saw it was him, I just went dumb. Couldn’t remember my own name for a second.

RAYLYNN. Then what happened?

COLIN. Then he get impatient wit me, like “I say what you need dere?” So I say – real stupid-like – “Um…can I have a quarter for the bus sir?”

RAYLYNN. (Laughing.) You shut up! You ain’t still ask him for a quarter!

COLIN. Couldn’t think of nothin’ else to say.

RAYLYNN. I’da told him how he the most amazin’ tuba player in the whole south. I’da told him ain’t no band better n’ Rebirth. I’da told him he’s a god.
COLIN. You’d’a asked him for a quarter to catch the city bus ‘fore yo’ mama find out you been skippin’ school all day!

(They laugh.)

RAYLYNN. So that why you come here? Got kicked outta yo’ old school for skippin’ too much?

COLIN. Somethin’ like that.

RAYLYNN. Why you skip? Ain’t you had no good classes? Or you just some kinda rebel?

COLIN. At my ol’ school, shit just wunn’t really good for me.

RAYLYNN. What’s that mean?

COLIN. Just mean what it mean.

(Beat.)

RAYLYNN. Well I guess that’s enough studyin’ for one afternoon.

COLIN. You a good tutor.

RAYLYNN. Ain’t nothin’ to it.

COLIN. Real patient and cool. Don’t make me feel stupid for ’bein behind a lil’ bit. Hard to change schools in the middle of a semester.

RAYLYNN. I figure it must be. You need help again, just ask. I come meet you this period. It’s better than makin’ copies for Mrs. BJ all hour long.

COLIN. Thanks.

(Pause.)

RAYLYNN. You believe all that happened yesterday?

COLIN. ’Bout that tree.

RAYLYNN. Policemen come up and tell us to get outta there like we was criminals or somethin’.

COLIN. I saw it. Was like ten of ya’ll. Look like somethin’ outta Civil Rights or somethin’.

RAYLYNN. Felt like it too. Only thang missin’ was the dogs chasin’ us.
COLIN. Seem unnecessary, you ask me. They ain’t need to do all that. Just let folk be where they wanna be. Do what they wanna do. Ain’t got to be all that police and DA and none o’ that.

RAYLYNN. You come to this school at a crazy time. Or maybe you right on time. I ain’t sho yet.

(Pause.)

COLIN. You got lots of fight in you. I can tell.

RAYLYNN. Fight in me?

COLIN. Like for belief or something. That seem like a good thing.

RAYLYNN. Guessin’ I get that from my mama. Daddy say she used to find injustice in everythang. Write a letter to the supermarket if they ain’t have fresh vegetables. Write a letter to the transportation authority if the buses was runnin’ late. Write a letter to the mayor if a road had too many potholes in it.

COLIN. Sound like she stay busy.

RAYLYNN. Used to. She gone now.

COLIN. Oh. Sorry.

(Quick pause.)

RAYLYNN. It’s alright.

(RAYLYNN and COLIN are silent. Neither is moving.)

COLIN. You…um…

RAYLYNN. Yeah?

COLIN. I like you.

RAYLYNN. (Surprise.) …

Oh.

...

COLIN. Sorry. I ain’t mean to –

RAYLYNN. Naw…it’s okay.

(Pause.)

COLIN. I just meant, um…
RAYLYNN. I mean I think you... I just ain’t never... I ain’t been with no boys that look like... I mean my friend Asha, she white and her boyfriends be whatever kinda race she feel like bein’ that day. But me, I just ain’t never... I mean maybe?? But I just ain’t never thought about datin’ nobody like you before –

COLIN. No, um...

RAYLYNN. Oh you ain’t mean –??

COLIN. I, uh –

(Awkward pause.)

RAYLYNN. Oh God I’m so... I mean, Jesus, I oughta... I could just... I should go.

COLIN. Ray, I ain’t mean –

RAYLYNN. Naw, it’s – I just need to...

COLIN. It ain’t you.

RAYLYNN. I feel stupid.

COLIN. You ain’t stupid.

RAYLYNN. I shoulda known you wasn’t meanin’... I mean why would you...

COLIN. It ain’t that. It’s just...

RAYLYNN. Just as a friend, right?

COLIN. Well yeah.

RAYLYNN. Great. Got it. Gotta go.

COLIN. Ray, wait.

RAYLYNN. What.

COLIN. I – it ain’t you.

RAYLYNN. You keep sayin’ that.

COLIN. Cuz I mean it.

RAYLYNN. Well whassit mean?

COLIN. Means I’m –

RAYLYNN. You – what?

COLIN. ...

...
RAYLYNN. *(In slow realization.)* You…mean you…don’t like… I mean ain’t attracted to –

COLIN. Don’t wanna talk ’bout this no mo’.

RAYLYNN. …

…

Shit.

COLIN. …

…

…

RAYLYNN. I ain’t know you wuz that way.

COLIN. That way? What way is that?

RAYLYNN. You know like… I mean… Not tryin’ to offend you or –

COLIN. Psshhh – I gotta get goin’.

RAYLYNN. Colin –

COLIN. I said I gotta get goin’.

RAYLYNN. Okay.

*(Pause. RAYLYNN and COLIN fill in the awkward silence with nothing.)*

*(Finally COLIN grabs his bookbag and starts to walk off. He stops.)*

COLIN. I decided I was gon’ vote for class president. Was plannin’ to cast my vote for you. Just ’case you was wonderin’.

*(RAYLYNN – confused and uncomfortable.)*

*(Shift.)*
Slippin’ Thru

(JUSTIN is isolated.)

JUSTIN. Things at Cedar High can be real divided. Lots of lines get drawn and everybody wanna know what side you standin’ on. Now me? I get by like I always done. Be studious. Be focused. Be attentive. That’s never done me much for popularity. Doesn’t give me the most friends. Keeps me...well... I don’t like Toria callin’ it invisible. I mean what does she...who does she...she doesn’t know me. Nobody knows me, that’s the point. But at this stage in the game, I’m not askin’ for that anymore. Sure, it might’ve bothered me when I was a kid. What kid likes to be the outcast? Sure, it might’ve made me sad or like some story from a after school special. But that’s not the case anymore. I figured out that none of that matters anymore. Folks like me... there’s no space where we really fit, y’know? No side we really make sense on. I’ve always just existed in the cracks. So when they come askin’ me where I stand, what do I say? Whose side am I supposed to take? Black kids protestin’. White kids prankin’. What side am I supposed to be on when don’t none of them ever... when ain’t none of ’em really...when I just seem to belong to myself. And that’s it. That’s the side I’m on. But here at Cedar High, everybody want you on a side. Wanna know where your loyalties lie. And what I got to say about it? Who’s been loyal to me? Find me one person that can answer that question, and I’ll tell you what side I’m on. ’Til then, it’s all about bein’ objective. That’s the only way I know to survive. In the cracks...

(TORIA enters JUSTIN’s world.)

TORIA. Justin you heard about it?

JUSTIN. Heard ’bout what?

TORIA. Fight broke out in the cafeteria. Some members of the football team got into a altercation!

JUSTIN. What kinda altercation?
TORIA. Where you been at? Down here buryin’ your nose in articles while major dysfunction is happenin’ all over this school!

JUSTIN. More dysfunction?

TORIA. There’s a story in this! Come on, we’ve got to jump on it!

(Lights shift.)
Telephone Game

(The ENSEMBLE on stage sporadically. Adding their account into the pot as chaos ensues around them.)

STUDENT (RAYLYNN). I was just sittin’ in the lunchroom mindin’ my business.

STUDENT (COLIN). I was eatin’ with my friends and somebody yelled “fight fight” just like that.

STUDENT (JUSTIN). I saw ’em. It was like six Black students. I saw ’em.

STUDENT (ASHA). It was like twenty of ’em.

STUDENT (COLIN). A hundred.

STUDENT (RAYLYNN). It was six.

STUDENT (DE’ANDRE). They was jumpin’ on this white boy.

STUDENT (TORIA). That ain’t what I saw. I saw a white boy and a black boy get into an argument. Then the white boy hit the black one. Thas what I saw.

STUDENT (ASHA). I saw the black boy hit the white boy first.

STUDENT (JUSTIN). I ain’t see nothin’. I was just mindin’ my business.

STUDENT (COLIN). They play for the same team. That’s what I heard.

STUDENT (TORIA). Two football players got into that argument.

STUDENT (RAYLYNN). Somebody said somethin’ about somebody’s mama, I think.

STUDENT (TORIA). Somebody called somebody a fag, I think.

STUDENT (JUSTIN). Somebody used a racial slur.

STUDENT (RAYLYNN). I thank they was all just tellin’ “yo’ mama” jokes. Thas what we do sometimes. White boy musta took it personal. It ain’t personal.

STUDENT (ASHA). I thank the black boy got mad at the white boy cuz he ain’t got a mama no mo’. Can’t tell a “yo’ mama” joke to somebody with no mama.
STUDENT (COLIN). I heard the black boy was the one startin’ the “yo’ mama” jokes in the first place. How you gonna tell “yo’ mama” jokes if you don’t want somebody sayin’ one back to you.

STUDENT (TORIA). I heard it ain’t had nothin’ to do with no jokes. I heard it was somethin’ that happened during practice.

STUDENT (DE’ANDRE). I heard they got into a fight during practice the other day.

STUDENT (JUSTIN). I heard the coach found out one of the boys on that team is a faggot.

STUDENT (TORIA). You ain’t supposed to call ’em that. It’s racist.

STUDENT (RAYLYNN). It ain’t racist to say faggot.

STUDENT (DE’ANDRE). Well it’s somethin’. You ain’t ’spose to say it.

STUDENT (JUSTIN). I heard Coach shut down practice the other day to deal with the…

STUDENT (RAYLYNN). Homosexual.

STUDENT (ASHA). You ain’t supposed to say that either.

STUDENT (COLIN). You ain’t supposed to say homosexual?!

STUDENT (TORIA). It still sound offensive.

STUDENT (DE’ANDRE). Everythang is offensive now?!

STUDENT (RAYLYNN). Then the black boy –

STUDENT (ASHA). You ain’t ’spose to say that neither.

STUDENT (RAYLYNN). What you ’spose to call ’em?


STUDENT (JUSTIN). African American.

STUDENT (DE’ANDRE). Just call me black.

STUDENT (TORIA). Then the black boy ended up bumping into the white boy.

STUDENT (RAYLYNN). Can you still say white?

STUDENT (COLIN). What the hell else you gonna say?

STUDENT (ASHA). Just American?!

ALL STUDENTS. We all American!
STUDENT (COLIN). Well why everybody else get to be called somethin’ FROM somewhere and all we get is a color?!

STUDENT (DE’ANDRE). Ain’t nobody made ya’ll a color. Ya’ll made ya’llselves a color. And everybody else one too. Don’t be tryin’ to change the rules now.


STUDENT (DE’ANDRE). I’m just sayin’. Yo’ great-grandparents did.

STUDENT (TORIA). The white boy and the black boy and the faggot.

STUDENT (JUSTIN). Sound like a bad joke.

STUDENT (RAYLYNN). Don’t you dare say faggot again. I’m gon’ smack the next person say faggot.

STUDENT (ASHA). And it wunn’t three people. Just the white boy and the black boy.

STUDENT (TORIA). Ended up bein’ a whole bunch of black boys.

STUDENT (RAYLYNN). They joined in.

STUDENT (JUSTIN). What they join in for? They was all startin’ trouble.

STUDENT (DE’ANDRE). Thas just the code of brotherhood. You see one of yo’ peeps throwin’ down, you got to join in.

STUDENT (COLIN). Well they joined in I guess. All joined in and ended up jumpin’ that white boy.

STUDENT (ASHA). I heard they was all plannin’ to jump that boy from the beginnin’.

STUDENT (DE’ANDRE). Why would they do that?

STUDENT (RAYLYNN). Thugs.

STUDENT (JUSTIN). What makes ’em thugs?

STUDENT (TORIA). Thuggish behavior.

STUDENT (ASHA). Like jumpin’ folks!

STUDENT (TORIA). What if somebody jumped the black boys too? What if it was just payback?

STUDENT (ASHA). What if it wasn’t? What if it was just random hate?
STUDENT (RAYLYNN). Naw, I heard one of them black boys was jumped last week at a party by some white boys.

STUDENT (COLIN). Maybe this was payback.

STUDENT (RAYLYNN). Still don’t make it right.

STUDENTS (JUSTIN & TORIA). Ain’t none of it right.

STUDENT (ASHA). Whatever happened to the white boys that jumped that black boy at that party last week?

STUDENT (TORIA). Nothin’.

STUDENT (DE’ANDRE). They get in trouble?

STUDENT (JUSTIN). Nope. Nothin’.

STUDENT (RAYLYNN). Well it wunn’t on school grounds. This was on school grounds.

STUDENT (COLIN). Whas gon’ happen to these boys today?

STUDENT (TORIA). They’re in a shitload of trouble.

STUDENT (JUSTIN). Major shitload of trouble.

STUDENT (COLIN). Heard that white boy got sent to the hospital.

STUDENT (JUSTIN). Say he got beat up pretty bad.

STUDENT (TORIA). This got somethin’ to do with those nooses hangin’ from that tree?

STUDENT (DE’ANDRE). This got somethin’ to do with that protest that happened the other day?

STUDENT (COLIN). Or is it all just random?

STUDENT (JUSTIN). Is it all just random??

STUDENT (TORIA). What’s gonna happen to those boys now?

STUDENT (RAYLYNN). The white boy in the hospital. And them black boys…

STUDENT (JUSTIN). The six of ’em.

STUDENT (ASHA). Twenty.

STUDENT (COLIN). A hundred.

STUDENT (RAYLYNN). It was only six.

STUDENT (ASHA). Heard they done got arrested.

STUDENT (TORIA). I know one of them boys.

STUDENT (JUSTIN). I know one of ’em too.
STUDENT (TORIA). Say the white boy... He’s new to this school...transfer student. His name’s Colin, I think.

(Flash. COLIN breaks out of the ENSEMBLE and freezes into a pool of light.)

STUDENT (JUSTIN). Other one I know. That’s Raylynn’s brother, De’Andre.

(Flash. DE’ANDRE breaks out of the ENSEMBLE and freezes into a pool of light.)

STUDENT (ASHA). And both of ’em are in a shitload now. A real shitload.

(Shift.)
Interrogation

(COLIN and DE’ANDRE are isolated in separate pools of light.)

COLIN. I was just mindin’ my business. Like I always do. Like I do everyday. Don’t got time to be worryin’ ’bout nobody else.

DE’ANDRE. I gots a plan. Gonna get drafted and get outta here. Go pro.

COLIN. Buy my mama a new place for herself.

DE’ANDRE. Move my family to a new ’hood.

COLIN. Same dream us all got.

DE’ANDRE. So you probly ain’t thankin’ I’m ’bout nothin’ neither. Same dream.

COLIN. Same plan. Same slim chance.

DE’ANDRE. Probly ain’t thankin’ I got good odds.

COLIN. But you check my stats – tell me I ain’t brung my A game to every play I made this year.

DE’ANDRE. Tell me I ain’t somethin’ ripe to get picked.

COLIN. So why would I wanna go messin’ that up, hunh?

DE’ANDRE. You thank I’m part of some gang or somethin’?

COLIN. You need ta check my stats cuz you ain’t got it right.

DE’ANDRE. You got me wrong if you thank I do anything to kill my chances at havin’ somethin’ better. And I ain’t got no problems with no folks of no kinda...

COLIN. I ain’t got no feelins on race or...

DE’ANDRE & COLIN. This ain’t got nothin’ to do with that.

COLIN. Not for me no way.

DE’ANDRE. I hit somebody – sho.

COLIN & DE’ANDRE. But that was in self defense.

DE’ANDRE. Why would I wanna mess all this up, hunh? You tell me why would I wanna… I got plans.

COLIN. For my mama. Roof of our house ’bout to cave in. You know that? My mama sittin’ there like she watchin’ it in slow motion and ain’t got no money or no job to
do nothin’ ’bout it. It gonna cave in on her and she can’t stop it.

**DE'ANDRE.** Lost my mama. Years ago. Got shot right on our front porch. Driveby. And now my daddy sit on that porch ’til he rot. You know that? He sit there like the whole porch gonna collapse on ’im and he can’t stop it.

**COLIN.** But I can. Go pro. Buy my mama a new house. Get drafted straight outta here.

**DE'ANDRE.** Move my family outta this ’hood so we ain’t got to think on this no mo’. Won’t even have to go to no college. I got on a fast track to somethin’ better. So why would I —?? Wouldn’t mess this up, y’heard? Not for no...

**COLIN.** Not for nobody, ya heard?

**DE'ANDRE.** Like I say...

**COLIN.** They came after me. I ain’t started nothin’.

**DE'ANDRE.** I was provoked. I ain’t started nothin’.

**COLIN & DE'ANDRE.** And that’s the truth.

*(Shift.)*
This Just In...

(TORIA is typing on a laptop, composing a news article. The tone of her piece is very “objective,” as she continues to correct and re-correct her own point of view.)

(Simultaneously, DE’ANDRE dances or enacts a movement piece/tableaux symbolizing his arrest.)

TORIA. Today at Cedar High
Six young male students
Black male students
Were arrested for assaulting
 Allegedly assaulting
I gotta be clear
 Allegedly assaulting
A young white male student
After an altercation broke out on school grounds
And now the campus is in an uproar
The campus is divided
And six boys’ lives
Six students’ lives
Six young men’s lives
Are left hanging in the balance
Six young men
Some of them on the football team with promising college careers
Have been arrested and are awaiting the charges.
This could be a huge tear in the community of this whole campus.
And the lives of six young Black male students hang desperately in the balance, as we wait –
And wait...
And wait...
And wait...
And wait...
For the results…

(She presses “enter,” submitting her article to the school newspaper.)

(With pride.) Send.

(DE’ANDRE’s piece ends with him being ushered away in handcuffs.)

(Shift.)
Sayin’ What Need To Be Said

(RAYLYNN is at the lockers. ASHA approaches her.)

ASHA. Ain’t heard from you in a coupla days.
RAYLYNN. Been busy.
ASHA. Heard about D.
RAYLYNN. Everybody ’cross the whole school heard about D.
ASHA. They done arrested him?
RAYLYNN. Got him sittin’ in jail. Like some criminal.
ASHA. Jail?? Goddamn.
RAYLYNN. Been suspended indefinitely, Miller say.
ASHA. What about the other guys?
RAYLYNN. All six of ’em. Suspended and in jail.
ASHA. Colin get suspended too?
RAYLYNN. No. But ain’t seen ’im. Ain’t been to school since it happened.
ASHA. I just can’t believe it. None of this.
RAYLYNN. Can’t you?
ASHA. Just can’t believe how thangs done turned around here in the last few days.
RAYLYNN. Turned around? (Hmph.) Prefer thangs like they used to be, hunh?
ASHA. I ain’t said that. I just mean…
RAYLYNN. What you mean?
ASHA. Shit Ray, why you got so much attitude at me?
RAYLYNN. Cuz I’m mad.
ASHA. Mad at me?
RAYLYNN. At everythang. Maybe the whole damn south.
ASHA. Mad cuz I ain’t come stand under that tree with ya’ll?
RAYLYNN. You can do what you wanna do.
ASHA. I ain’t know what to do ’bout that. I ain’t know how to feel.
RAYLYNN. So you do nothin’. Just suckin’ up air. Apathetic.
ASHA. I ain’t apathetic. Don’t call me that.
RAYLYNN. What is you?
ASHA. I ’ono. I just ain’t feel like...for some reason...it ain’t feel like I belonged out there.
RAYLYNN. Belonged out where?
ASHA. With everybody. All the black students.
RAYLYNN. You always been with us befo’. Lookin’ and pretendin’ like you us. But just when we go to stick our neck out on the line, all of a sudden you don’t feel like you belong?
ASHA. That how you seein’ it??
RAYLYNN. How else I’m ’sposed to see it?
ASHA. I ’ono. Truth is, I ain’t never felt so White ’til all this start goin’ on.
RAYLYNN. You is White.
ASHA. I know, but I ain’t never felt like it. Most of the time I’m around ya’ll I just feel like...one of the same. But soon as it started bein’ a thang... I dunno. Soon as it started bein’ like a statement or whatever –
RAYLYNN. Must be good for you.
ASHA. What’s that mean?
RAYLYNN. To be able to put it on and take it off whenever you want. Not me. I don’t get to choose. I got this fo’ life.
ASHA. Why it gotta be such a thang all of a sudden? Why it got to mean everythang you do be about that? Everytime somebody get in trouble nah. Everytime somebody get in a fight nah. Everytime somebody do somethin’ stupid...now it always got to have somethin’ to do with...bein’ Black?
RAYLYNN. You askin’ me that?
ASHA. I’m askin’ anybody who got the answer.
RAYLYNN. I don’t know the answer. I don’t know why it be a thang all the time. I just know I ain’t make it that way. I’m just reactin’. I ain’t put those nooses on that tree.
ASHA. What if it wunn’t ’bout race? Just what if?

RAYLYNN. What if somebody spit in yo’ face and tell you it wunn’t disrespect? That make the spit feel better to you? That make it any less spit?

ASHA. Naw, but –

RAYLYNN. Spit is spit. It’s disrespect. It’s violence. Just cuz you call hate a joke don’t make it one. ’Specially when ain’t nobody laughin’.

ASHA. Shit! You so impatient.

RAYLYNN. Impatient with who?

ASHA. Everybody that don’t see stuff fast as you. That don’t make us yo’ enemy.

RAYLYNN. Ain’t said it did.

ASHA. Ain’t gotta say it.

(Pause. RAYLYNN is quiet. Not sure how she feels about this statement.)

(ASHA backs away. There is a moment of stillness between them.)

(More silence. They search for words. Nothing.)

(Finally, a new subject:)

It’s hot then a bitch today, ain’t it?

RAYLYNN. Yep. Ain’t feelin’ nothin’ like October. Feelin’ like July.

ASHA. The whole world gonna explode into a ball of fire cuz we all overheated and can’t do nothin’ but fight each other.

RAYLYNN. That’s pretty morbid, Asha.

ASHA. I know it. Datin’ E done made me morbid. He got a sick sense of romance. Spend the whole evenin’ with him watchin’ that horrible documentary Faces of Death. Who in the hell wanna spend a date night watchin’ a million different ways of people blowin’ up and dyin’? I think I’m gon’ have to expire this unbalanced relationship.
(RAYLYNN cracks a smile at ASHA. Suddenly ASHA rushes to her bag.)

Oh shit! I almost forgot…your campaign poster.

RAYLYNN. I told you I ain’t want no –

(ASHA pulls out a poster, rolled up in her bag. It is beautifully colored and well thought out. On it –
RAYLYNN’s name and a slogan that reads:)

(“Raylynn Harris For Class President…Because It’s Just Time.”)

(RAYLYNN is taken aback. She revels in the poster.)

RAYLYNN. It’s…

ASHA. I know you don’t like slogans // but I heard you sayin’ this befo –

RAYLYNN. Amazin’.

(ASHA stops – finally registering that RAYLYNN enjoys the poster.)

(They stare at it in silence.)

ASHA. I ’shoul do hope D don’t get in no more trouble, Ray. He ain’t no kinda bad and I hope they seein’ that.

(RAYLYNN quickly remembers something.)

RAYLYNN. Shit – I almost forgot. I gotta go.

ASHA. Where you goin’? I come with you.

RAYLYNN. No I… I got to take care of somethin’ for my brother…on my own.

(Shift.)
Press – Ure

(Lights up on the school press room. JUSTIN works on the finishing touches of the layout. TORIA enters.)

TORIA. You got it?
JUStin. Got what?
TORIA. The article I sent you? I know I emailed it at the last minute, but there was just so much to cover.


TORIA. I started to do that...keep the issues separate. But then I figured with all what’s been goin’ on, maybe they ain’t so separate. Students in detention for hangin’ nooses on a tree. Six Black students in trouble for jumpin’ one White student on the football team – with possible homophobic undertones. A Black student runnin’ for class president for the first time in the history of this school –

JUSTIN. Well goodie for you for doin’ your homework Toria. Now explain to me how all that’s supposed to fit into my layout.

TORIA. Justin screw your layout! Did you read my article? This is the type of journalism that could single handedly save our press!

JUSTIN. Single handedly?
TORIA. I’m just sayin’ –

JUSTIN. Your article ain’t makin’ it. I’ve taken submissions from the two sophomores and one junior who wanted to contribute. They followed the guidelines.

TORIA. You did what?
JUSTIN. I’ve filled the slot.
TORIA. You – you’re bluffin’.
JUSTIN. Am not. There go the test run right there. Soon as I get this border lined up, I’m goin’ to final print.
(TORIA snatches up the test run papers and reads urgently. She flips through the articles.)

TORIA. You’ve gotta be fuckin’ kidding me.

JUSTIN. I’m not kidding.

TORIA. Underclassmen? You’re going to fill the senior press with articles from underclassmen?

JUSTIN. You’ve left me no choice.

TORIA. These articles are bullshit. This one is a report on the different types of afterschool activities. Do you know that?

JUSTIN. I know that.

TORIA. I mean, and this one…a debate on whether or not we should keep vending machines in the basement or move ’em to the second floor. Are you serious??

JUSTIN. It’s a good debate.

TORIA. It’s bullshit and you know it. It doesn’t deal with anything real that’s been going on at this school.

JUSTIN. No. It doesn’t provide another platform for drama. That’s what you’re really mad at.

TORIA. Drama?!

JUSTIN. That’s right.

TORIA. You’re out of your fuckin’ mind, you know that?

JUSTIN. Don’t swear at me, Toria. You’re pushin’ it.

TORIA. I’m pushing it?! Justin what in the hell?! I mean even for you this is ridiculous. You know my article was good. I did what you said to do. I was objective. I pointed out the holes on all sides. I thought about the Black students and everythang they musta been feelin’ this whole week like it happened to me –

JUSTIN. It didn’t. It didn’t happen to you.

TORIA. It’s my job to imagine if it did. The way those students got arrested for that fight. Tried as adults. Don’t that make you just a little bit... I mean as one of ’em –

JUSTIN. One of who exactly, Toria?
TORIA. A Black guy Justin. Jesus – why are we tiptoein’ around sayin’ it all the damn time? I’m White. You don’t see me havin’ no problems with sayin’ it.

JUSTIN. You’re also obnoxious.

TORIA. Might be, but ’least I ain’t ’shamed.

(Beat. JUSTIN turns to look at TORIA directly. His eyes pierce her.)

JUSTIN. What – what’d you just say to me?

TORIA. You heard me. And I ain’t apologizin’.

JUSTIN. You think you know what I am? You think you know me?

TORIA. I know enough.

JUSTIN. You don’t know a damn thing about me. Call me ashamed. ’Shamed of what? Bein’ Black? That’s all you got?

TORIA. Why else you stay quiet with all this racial stuff goin’ on?

JUSTIN. Maybe I don’t have no strong opinion about it this way or that. You ever think about that?

TORIA. That’s bullshit. My granddaddy say opinions and assholes – everybody’s got both.

JUSTIN. I ain’t your granddaddy.

TORIA. You hide from every possible thang that actually deals with somethin’ real. Everytime I bring up some kinda injustice, you dodge the conversation. Tell me to be objective ’bout every damn thang! How can you go through life bein’ so removed all the time?!

JUSTIN. You said you wanna be a journalist in real life? What you think they do? Their whole operation is about not lettin’ stuff get to ’em. Not takin’ life so personal. Just seein’ a thing as a thing and not gettin’ yourself tied up into it.

TORIA. A good writer can see themselves in everyone.

JUSTIN. I can see people who look like me doin’ stuff I’d never think to do…actin’ in ways that ain’t natural to me…but cuz we got the same skin I’m supposed to see
myself in that? Most folk at this school don’t know or care whether I’m alive or dead, but I’m supposed to see myself in them??

TORIA. Some shit is just upsettin’ no matter who you are.

JUSTIN. Who are you to tell anybody else what to care about?

TORIA. I’m just me. You ain’t the first person to be invisible. You thank I don’t know what it’s like to be on the periphery all the time? You thank any of these girls here invitin’ me to they parties or any of these boys ’round here askin’ me for a date? But that don’t make me thank less of ’em. Makes me sorry for ’em.

JUSTIN. You know what I been called by them? The people I’m supposed to see myself in?

TORIA. How am I supposed to –


TORIA. Justin, I don’t need to –

JUSTIN. Lame. Wack. Corny. Weak nigga – cuz I don’t like to fight.

TORIA. Justin’, okay. I get it –

JUSTIN. Punk. Soft. Gay nigga – also cuz I don’t like to fight.

TORIA. Alright Justin, you made your point –

JUSTIN. Corny nigga. Any kinda “nigga” you can think of except “my nigga.” Never “that’s my nigga.” Never anything welcomin’. Just the stuff that keeps me separate. Every year. Same shit. Same names. Same insults. Cuz I don’t match...cuz I don’t fit the thing in your head or their head or somebody’s head of what I’m SUPPOSED to be. Well you know what you can do with your SUPPOSED to’s? Go fuck yourself with ’em! Cuz I don’t care how you wanna see yourself. But don’t tell me how to go through life. If I didn’t go this way...if I didn’t remove myself from all the hate and pain and anger that’s thrown at me every damn day – I might lose my shit and knock everybody’s head off! You
get it?! So ’til you’re livin’ like me, don’t fuckin’ tell me how to survive!

(Beat.)

(TORIA is dumbfounded. JUSTIN is startled by his own liberation. He tries to regroup himself. Finds something to keep himself busy.)

(A long moment of silence.)

(Then:)

I gave the story to you. Told you to state the facts. Why you always got to color it with somethin’ else?

TORIA. I ’ono, Justin. Seem to me like that’s where the truth is…in the color.

(TORIA leaves.)

(JUSTIN, alone and contemplative.)

(Shift.)
Cop A Plea

(RAYLYNN and COLIN in the front yard of COLIN’s home. They are alone. It is near dusk.)

RAYLYNN. Hope I ain’t botherin’ you none.
COLIN. Yeah, well…
RAYLYNN. Your mama look like I was interruptin’ yo’ dinnertime or somethin’.
COLIN. She’ll get over it.

(Pause.)
RAYLYNN. I like the way she keep her flowers. Real neat.
COLIN. It’s alright.

(Beat.)
RAYLYNN. My brother… What you gonna do about him?
COLIN. You seriously askin’ me?
RAYLYNN. I’m askin’ you.
COLIN. What you thank I oughta do?
RAYLYNN. Talk to the DA. Get ’im to drop the charges.
COLIN. You can’t be serious.
RAYLYNN. Why can’t I?
COLIN. I get him to drop ’em and then what?
RAYLYNN. Let even be even.
COLIN. It simple as that to you?
RAYLYNN. Ain’t said it was simple. Nothin’ ’bout this whole thang is simple. Just even. Fair.
COLIN. You know what he done?
RAYLYNN. Ya’ll got in a fight.
COLIN. They jumped me.
RAYLYNN. Not D.
COLIN. Yes. D.
RAYLYNN. He say he was provoked. By you.
COLIN. That what he said?
RAYLYNN. You ain’t call him nothin’?
(COLIN is quiet.)

Outta his name like that. Somethin’ racial that I ’ont even wanna repeat. You don’t think that was provokin’?

COLIN. He tell you what he called me?
RAYLYNN. He say he ain’t call you that.
COLIN. You know what that feel like?
RAYLYNN. He say he ain’t say that.
COLIN. He laughed at it, didn’t he?
RAYLYNN. Laughin’ ain’t the same as callin’.
COLIN. That word…ain’t nothin’ funny ’bout it. Hate that word.
RAYLYNN. The team just bein’ stupid. Makin’ dumb jokes.
COLIN. Just like them nooses was a joke?
RAYLYNN. That ain’t…

...  

...  

That ain’t the same.

COLIN. ’Course it ain’t.
RAYLYNN. And what you call him wunn’t no better.
COLIN. ’Cept I hear ’em callin’ it to theyselves all the time.
RAYLYNN. Still ain’t yo’ right to repeat it.
COLIN. I was mad. Offended.
RAYLYNN. Don’t make it better. Everytime somebody hurt all they wanna do is hurt back. It don’t make nothin’ better.

(Pause.)

COLIN. You know why I left my last school?
RAYLYNN. Cuz they ain’t likin’ yo’ lifestyle?
COLIN. Cuz couldn’t nobody make sense of me. See if I was a...a faggot...I ought to be lookin’ like some kinda sissy or bein’ soft-like. They know what to do with that. Make sense to ’em. But bein’ on the football team... playin’ just as hard as the other fellas...harder even... that don’t add up in they math. That make ’em real
nervous. If somebody seem normal like me can be this way, then it only be a real thin line ’tween them and me. And don’t nobody like that. Not nobody.

RAYLYNN. I ain’t treated you that way.

COLIN. I ain’t know you was – that way…ain’t that what you say?

RAYLYNN. I ain’t mean nothin’ bad by that.

COLIN. Nah? What you mean, somethin’ good?

RAYLYNN. Nah but like…what – you want me to say sorry?

COLIN. I ’ont want you to say nothin’. Don’t do me no favors.

RAYLYNN. (A confession.) Well I ’ont agree with it. K? Just tellin’ the truth.

COLIN. Agree with what? What’s for you to agree with? Ain’t none of this about you! Who care if you agree? What that got to do with nothin’?

RAYLYNN. That ain’t somethin’ make sense to me. You want me to ’pologize for how I was brought up? I ain’t never had to be around that befo’.

COLIN. What if I told you I ain’t never had to be around people like you befo’? What if I told you that my mama say all kindsa thangs ’bout yo’ brother that I ain’t gonna repeat. What if I don’t agree with who you are neither?

RAYLYNN. That don’t make no sense.

COLIN. No, it don’t.

(Beat.)

RAYLYNN. (A plea.) He’s my brother.

COLIN. I know who he is.

RAYLYNN. We lost our mama. Three years ago. Said they was tellin’ “yo’mama” jokes all through practice. Thank that ain’t fuel him none? You know how that affect him?

COLIN. What do I care what fuel him? He done what he done. You see this gash right here? (Points to his eye.) This don’t care ’bout no fuel. You know what they done to my ribs? Want me to show you the bruises?
RAYLYNN. No.

COLIN. Tell me ’bout no fuel. We all got somethin’ that fuel our anger. That don’t make it alright.

RAYLYNN. I ain’t said it make it alright! But we ain’t just talkin’ revenge. They gon’ try him as a adult. You know that? You know what that mean? Say that DA callin’ it attempted murder. You know that?

COLIN. What that got to do with me?

RAYLYNN. You hearin’ what I’m sayin’?! – We ain’t just talkin’ you gettin’ some kinda payback. We ain’t talkin’ hurtin’ yo’ pride or your feelins or even a coupl’a bruises.

COLIN. Couple?

RAYLYNN. This the dirty south. Fights happen all the time. My brother been jumped ’bout three times in his life. One time he was only thirteen and had suffered a concussion. You thank the older boys what jumped him gon’ to jail? They ain’t done nothin’ but go on ’bout they lives and grow up eventually. Ain’t no DA talkin’ to us and makin’ no big case out of it.

COLIN. How’s that my fault?

RAYLYNN. Ain’t sayin’ it’s yo’ fault. Ain’t sayin’ it’s alright what happen to you. I ain’t sayin’ my brother wunn’t wrong for fightin’ you even though you called him outta his name. But what you doin’…this ain’t no temporary punishment. You press these charges and you messin’ with his life, y’heard me? With the life of my whole family. You really thank that’s justice?

COLIN. I don’t thank none of this is justice!!

RAYLYNN. What you been through ain’t nothin’ new. You thank you above a ass whippin’? We all get ass whippins! The rest of us just got to deal. That be life!

COLIN. Get out. I don’t want you here no mo’.

RAYLYNN. Wh–?? I…wait – wait a minute –

(COLIN stares at RAYLYNN. His eyes are raging.)

COLIN. Nah. Ain’t no wait a minute. Time for you to go.
RAYLYNN. You ain’t even hearin’ reason.
COLIN. I done heard enough a yo’ reason.
RAYLYNN. Colin –
COLIN. I say leave.
RAYLYNN. Shit, I…

...(RAY looks at COLIN needfully. Did she go too far? She slowly begins to leave.)

(Stops.)

(Tears in her throat.) You know…even though you the way you is…even though I don’t all the way get it… I wouldn’t wanna see nothin’ bad happen to you. Wouldn’t wanna take away yo’ freedom or yo’ life. Cuz ain’t no comin’ back from that.

(Shift.)
Survival Code

(Music.)

(DE’ANDRE is illuminated. He is in jail. He starts to make a Hip Hop beat with his fist. Other prisoners hear and join in on the beat, one by one. The ensemble becomes a chorus of fists beating out a rhythm on the floor, walls, whatever.)

DE’ANDRE. Behind the lines – behind bars / ain’t remember the rules
Mama gave me lessons / early on I been schooled
Behind the lines / behind bars / ain’t remember the rules
Mama gave me lessons / early on I been schooled
Black face / male body / always a threat
It’s the rules it’s the rules ain’t remember the rules
Hands high / out of pockets / keep anger in check
It’s the rules it’s the rules ain’t remember the rules
Don’t look in the eye
No saggin’ at night
Keep hands out of pockets
Hold ’em in plain sight
Nod to the officer, never get smart
Hold back the defiance / keep the rage in ya heart
Don’t matter you right
Don’t matter you true
Black face / male body / ain’t gon’ listen to you
Don’t matter you hurtin’
Don’t matter ya pain
Black face / male body / you always to blame
It’s the rules it’s the rule ain’t remember the rules
Everybody gonna fight but only you do the time
It’s the rules it’s the rules ain’t remember the rules
Black face / male body is always the crime
Mama gave me lessons / Early on I been schooled
Shit hell gotdamn I done fo’got the rules
Mama gave me lessons / Early on I been schooled
Why the hell / how the hell did I fo’get the rules
It’s the rules //
It’s the rules //
Ain’t remember ain’t remember ain’t remember the rules
It’s the rules //
It’s the rules //
It’s the
It’s the
It’s the
It’s the
Ahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh

(Movement or Dance symbolizes him trying to break free from his prison cell, as the prison walls close in on him.)

(In a separate pool of light, TORIA is illuminated.)

TORIA. My granddaddy – he say we come from a long line of abolitionists. Told me he used to shuttle folks back and forth in the Civil Rights times when they was doin’ that bus boycott. Say before that, my great-great-grandmamma and great-great-granddaddy used to moves slaves to the north. Say we come from people that believe freedom don’t happen by itself. Ain’t just for one group. Can’t be free if everybody else around you is chained. If we don’t know how to connect to a struggle besides our own, we’re all screwed. That’s what my family believed. Say everybody always got a part to play in whatever world they livin’ in at the time. Every generation. And what you do with your part will determine whether it added value or destruction.

(Beat.)

It’s ’spose to be our turn now. (Pause.) Wonder what we gonna add??
(Liberation.)

(Lights reveal RAYLYNN.)

(She holds up a sign that says:)

(“Drop the Charges Against D.”)

(ASHA joins RAYLYNN’s side. She carries another sign that reads:)

(“Free the Cedar 6.”)

(The other ensemble members begin to circle with signs:)

(“Suspension Over Prison.”)

(As they chant over and over under a Hip Hop-inspired beat:)

ALL STUDENTS. Free the Cedar Six!
Free the Cedar Six!

(Ongoing.)

(The rally circle moves quicker and more intensely as DE’ANDRE struggles more intensely in his movement/dance to get free.)

(Then suddenly, COLIN enters and watches the rally. The circle stops abruptly. Will there be a fight?)

(DE’ANDRE continues to move with aggression to get free.)

(COLIN approaches RAYLYNN and looks at her sign. A moment of silent negotiation between them.)

(She hands COLIN a sign, but he doesn’t join. He doesn’t fight. He just looks at the sign, and the rally, in an elongated moment of consideration.)

(The circle begins to resume in marching action as COLIN remains outside of it, contemplative.)

(Suddenly, DE’ANDRE breaks out of the handcuffs! They can be physical or imagined. But he is definitely free.)
(He embraces the freedom through movement and space. A celebration!)

(Lights isolate RAYLYNN.)

RAYLYNN. Today is a new day. Like everyday, I guess. Today still hot as hell. Seem like this heat wave ain’t never gonna break. Gonna have to adjust to it, maybe. Today De’Andre ate breakfast with us. Out on bail. Back at home. We hope it stay that way. Today my daddy wrote a letter to the Governor of Louisiana on behalf of the Cedar Six. My mama would be proud.

(Beat.)

Today is a debate at school for the student body. I got my bullet points ready. Today is not about waitin’ on change. Today about breakin’ rules. More rules everyday. ’Til ain’t nothin’ left to break. ’Til ain’t nothin’ left to fight for. ’Til the work is done. Today I ain’t the same as I was yesterday. Yesterday gone. Today is here. Tomorrow is coming.

...

...

...

(RAYLYNN looks upward...out into a new horizon.)

(She smiles.)

(Lights illuminate a tree in the distance.)

(Slowly, three nooses are illuminated in silhouette. Hanging from the tree. Joined by three more. Then hundreds.)

(RAYLYNN looks back at the tree, as the ghostly memory of the nooses remains, reminding us of what can never be forgotten.)

(She turns back out to the horizon.)
RAYLYNN. Yep. Tomorrow.

(Lights fade on RAYLYNN. On the ENSEMBLE. On the nooses.)

End of Play
Vita

The author is a native of North Georgia. She earned her Bachelor of Fine Arts degree in Musical Theatre from Reinhardt University in 2021. She joined the University of New Orleans theatre graduate program to pursue an MFA in Acting. She is a member of Alpha Chi and Phi Kappa Phi honor society. In 2024, the author was honored as the recipient of the Region 6 Irene Ryan Acting Scholarship at the Kennedy Center American College Theater Festival 56.