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Trauma In the Acting Process: My Role as Camae In the Mountaintop and the Implementation of Practical Techniques for Empowerment

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ABSTRACT

Actors often use their life experiences to evoke emotions and give a compelling performance. Connecting with personal experiences for a role, however, can manifest traumatic experiences. Trauma in the acting process can trigger difficult memories and emotions, which affects the actor's well-being. In graduate school, I discovered that trauma was a detriment to my artistic freedom in the acting process. Without the appropriate tools to address trauma, it affected my well-being and caused me to burnout. Furthermore, trauma was ignored by those involved in the creative process and there was an expectation to mask emotions for the sake of the process.

In this thesis, I will examine my acting process for The Mountaintop and the practical techniques that I used for the role of Camae. This thesis will share my story, define trauma (from a character, personal, and familial perspective), examine how the implementation of practical techniques empowered me in the acting process, and envision my post graduate endeavors as an artist. I argue that acting and voice techniques can play an important role in addressing trauma and empower an actor in their creative process.
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To God who has given me this gift to share with the world

My parents, Angelee and Anthony, and the rest of my family for their love and support

My committee: Chloë Rae Edmonson, Holly E. McDonald, and Belinda Boyd

The MFA Acting cohort of 2023

In loving memory of Imani Douglas, my mentor and director.
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CHAPTER ONE: MY STORY

This is an introduction to my artistic journey as an actor for utilizing the practical techniques that I learned in graduate school to dismantle trauma. Before graduate school, I was lacking the confidence and preparation in my acting process. This chapter shares my story and the life events for attending an acting graduate school. Specifically, the three roles that forced me to confront trauma (personal and character) before I was able to identify it: Harriet Tubman, Lady in Blue in For Colored Girls Who Considered Suicide when the Rainbow is Enuf, and Salima in Ruined. These experiences are the framework for addressing trauma in the role of Camae in The Mountaintop and implementation of practical techniques for empowerment.

In 1998, my dad boarded me on an airplane from Kingston, Jamaica enroute to Brooklyn, New York. At the age of five, I could not comprehend the change of relocation. I did not develop the coping skills to deal with that situation. Outcome: tantrums. My mother noticed at an early age that I was an energetic and creative leader. For instance, the children followed my lead as I transformed into an airplane. Imaginative play developed creative skills that I honed as an actor including expression and creativity. Initially, when my father came to New York the family dynamic was healthy. The negative outside influences caused animosity between my parents was a factor that cause early stages of play deprivation in my childhood. Being a Jamaican-born woman is the one of the best gifts, but it comes with some challenges, more specifically, our communication style. In retrospect, some of my parent’s disagreements were a result of poor communication skills. In the same way, I did not know how to effectively communicate my emotions which impacted my grammar, comprehension, and learning abilities.
My childhood consisted of traumatic experiences such as remedial classes, family disputes, and bullying from other children. Theatre came into my life at a time when I did not have an outlet for expressing my emotions. In elementary school, I was placed in remedial classes because I was not performing well. The structure of those classes with one-on-one instruction and rigorous assessments made me feel inadequate. Some of my peers verbally harassed me for being in remedial classes, this made it difficult to make friendships because they assumed that something was wrong with me. Bullying from my peers lowered my self-esteem. Therefore, I had built up anger towards anyone that sought to demoralize me. My emotional outburst as a child derived from those traumatic experiences. At home, the family dynamic was toxic for my young mind to process. There was negligence from my family when it came to my emotional support and communication. My parents did not develop the skills to deal with their own trauma, so they had frequent disagreements. As a result of dealing with these traumatic situations, I retaliated by fighting. I received countless in and out-of-school suspensions for compulsive behavior. Then, an opportunity was presented by my first-grade teacher to perform as Harriet Tubman in the Black History Month showcase. She saw my passion for learning about Harriet Tubman and thought that the role would be a positive form of expression.

Portraying Harriet Tubman was the first role that led me to regaining my confidence and fueled my future ambitions in the arts. I found my purpose performing on stage at the lowest time in my childhood. The stage was a platform for expressing the lack of confidence I had from remedial classes. In the embodiment of Harriet Tubman, I was able to find self-identity and explore the issues that affected my self-esteem. First, my reenactment of Tubman leading the slaves to freedom boosted my confidence because I was chosen to perform this significant moment in America’s history. Secondly, I realized that my voice was a powerful conduit for
telling this narrative as the students and teachers were captivated by my performance. Lastly, I discovered a creative identity through my passion for acting this role. My creative identity brought back the joy that was missing from my childhood as it sparked my love for acting.

After performing in the Black History Month showcase, I looked for other performance opportunities. The high of portraying Harriet Tubman led me to join the glee club and the step team. I confronted my lack of confidence by making a continuous effort to perform onstage. I was fascinated with the acting styles that I discovered in performance: stage and vocal presence, dedication, the ability to transform into a role, and audience engagement. Moreover, acting in this role was escapism that allowed me to leave behind my life issues and focus on telling the character’s story (Peterson). In brief, this role is the initial reason I dedicated my life to acting to understand its modes of addressing trauma.

During middle school, my family decided to move from Brooklyn, New York to Jonesboro, Georgia. The change of environment brought temporary tranquility to our household. My parents maintained ineffective communication and trust issues. It upset me when my parents argued, so I lashed out at my peers and teachers. I was placed back in speech classes at Love Joy Middle School where my confidence was diminished again. My mother received calls from the administration office about my disruptive behavior and she sought additional resources for academic improvement. After school, I walked to the library to meet the tutor that my mother arranged for me. My motivation to strive for academic excellence was suppressed by negative emotions that I could not address.

The summer of 2008 my father enrolled me in the Kaleidoscope Arts program. Instantly, the passion that I experienced in the role of Harriet Tubman resurfaced. I knew the arts were a beacon of hope for a dysfunctional youth like me. My parents recognized that acting was my
niche and that I found solace in it. Kaleidoscope concluded and my father received information about a fine arts magnet program that was conducting auditions for prospective students. The audition requirement for theatre consisted of one contemporary monologue that did not exceed two minutes. When my mother took me to the audition, it was an intimidating experience because an opportunity of this magnitude could change the trajectory of my future. The audition monitor walked me into the room where the auditioners introduced themselves and asked me questions about my monologue. The questions were based on the selection and context of the piece. Then it was time to perform, and I forgot my lines. I cried on the way home because I did not get the desired outcome from the audition. A week later, I auditioned again for the program and brought my passion for acting into the room. As a result, I received an acceptance letter for the program. However, admission to this program was the gateway for the obstacles that I encountered as an actor. For example, when I was not cast in the first show for the program’s season, my response to the rejection was self-degradation, “I’m a failure,” and “I’m not a good actor.” The teacher for that show did not see my potential, so I had to prove that I was good enough to be in the program. I danced on a chair and cartwheeled across the room to get cast in Disney’s High School Musical on Stage.

Eventually, the theatre teachers I worked so tirelessly to impress resigned. Ms. Riley and Mr. Bowie had replaced them the following year. Mr. Bowie made an audition announcement For Colored Girls Who Consider Suicide When the Rainbow Is Not Enuf by Ntozake Shange and asked me to audition for it. At that time, my parents were going through a divorce which disrupted the family structure. I battled with depression during the divorce, which made it difficult to focus on preparing for the audition. In addition, the pressure was intense at school with rigorous academic coursework and acting assignments. I avoided coming home by staying
late at the library to prepare my monologue for the audition. During my audition, I had an emotional breakdown making it the first time that I was vulnerable in front of someone outside of my family. I read the sides for Lady in Blue, Lady in Red, and Lady in Yellow. Lady in Red resonated with me the most because I saw my mother’s pain in her story. Lady in Red was dealing with the grief of her children being thrown out of the window by an abusive partner. Similarly, after the divorce my mother struggled with these emotional symptoms: resentment, depression, and grief. *For Colored Girls…*, is a chorepoem that tells the story of seven African American women who have suffered oppression in a misogynistic and racist society (Shange). The women’s stories of abortion, rape, domestic violence, resilience, and joy epitomized the experiences of the women in my family. For that reason, this play was the groundwork for exploring my feelings of anger, loneliness, inadequacy, and fear.

The cast list was posted in our theatre classroom the day after auditions. The rehearsal was a two-week process in preparation for the regional one-act competition. Due to the time constraints, there was no room for error. Mr. Bowie expected the cast to show up to rehearsal memorized. He trained our bodies for stamina through high-energy choreography. Lady in Blue’s abortion monologue was terrifying to act onstage. The image of blood between my thighs and a dead fetus was overbearing for a sixteen-year-old to act. Mr. Bowie gave me the freedom to explore the lines in the rehearsal room, but my body immediately shut down. The character trauma was not addressed in the rehearsal process for the actor’s safety. That is why theatre students have memories of traumatic events that link to the acting process. Acting out the abortion forced me to confront my discomfort associated with stage intimacy and vulnerability. For instance, it was difficult to open my legs in front of an audience because I was dealing with body insecurities as a teenager. Looking in the mirror was unbearable as I was not comfortable in
my skin. I discovered in my acting process my ability to connect with characters on an emotional level. Lady in Blue’s guilt, shame, and self-hatred resonated with me, making my connection to the inner monologues more meaningful. In the acting process, my emotions fluctuated from frustration to sadness, and I was afraid to tell the director. Crying on stage was cathartic, and it was essential for me to purge those negative emotions for a successful performance. This acting process was the introduction of character trauma and its effects on the actor.

After high school, I decided to attend college for acting. It was evident that I was born with the abilities to be a good actor, but I needed training to improve. I was accepted into Kennesaw State University’s theatre program in Kennesaw, Georgia. The theatre department produced diverse shows that piqued my interest such as Ruined, a Pulitzer play written by Lynn Nottage. Ruined is based on the true stories of Congolese women who have experienced trauma, such as rape, abandonment, and abuse. This production was another occurrence of trauma in my acting process, and this experience became the impetus for examining origins of trauma in The Mountaintop. In preparation for the Ruined audition, I read the play and was disturbed by the sexual violence inflicted on the character’s bodies, specifically Salima. I thought the role would be good for me because it required the actor to cry on command, which I have done in previous roles. While this may be true, I encountered problems portraying Salima, such as burn-out, emotional exhaustion, sleep deprivation, and digestive disorders. For the first time in my acting process, a character’s trauma had affected my health. In the rehearsal hall, I was anxious about the blocking for Salima’s monologue because I did not have the techniques to safely navigate my emotions. A warm-up or meditative exercise would have been instrumental for relaxation in rehearsal and performance. I worried that if I did not cry on command, my acting would not be compelling. On opening night, three hours before the show started, I was in urgent care for a
stomach virus. The director advised me that my understudy would cover my track if I was not able to perform. Surprisingly, I was able to muster enough strength to perform that night.

_In a dark corner off-stage, I curled up in a ball as I watched cast members enter and exit the stage. Every time I entered the stage as Salima, my stomach pain intensified. In Act Two of the play, I almost vomited on stage in front of the audience. Salima’s abduction monologue was quickly approaching, and I was terrified, so I closed my eyes on stage. Suddenly, I heard a baby crying, the theatre transformed into a forest, and I saw the rebel soldiers standing in front of me with menacing smirks. I had no choice but to confront the trauma as I said “My baby was crying. She was a good baby. Beatrice never cried, but she was crying, screaming. ‘Shhh,’ I said. ‘Shhh.’ And right then... A soldier stomped on her head with his boot. And she was quiet._

_(A moment. Salima releases:)_

_Where was everybody? WHERE WAS EVERYBODY?!” (Nottage 68)._

The figures in _Ruined_ that committed such a diabolical act toward women reminded me of men I have witnessed violently attacking women. Misogynistic culture written in _Ruined_ had a negative effect on me based on previous interactions with men that have similar traits. It evoked traumatic memories, which caused physical health problems in this acting process. After _Ruined_, the emotional blockage and physical health problems I had experienced from that production manifested in other acting processes. I was determined to end this cycle of agony, so I decided to apply for graduate school. While researching top graduate school programs in the United States, I came across URTA, a recruiting event for prospective students to be seen by recruiters from prestigious theatre programs. My mentor, Imani helped me prepare a contemporary and classical monologue. At URTA’s audition, self-doubt manifested because I did not make it to the final round for the New York University (NYU) grad acting program the previous week. When I
entered the audition room, I stopped breathing as I stood before all the theatre representatives. The monitor asked me to slate and then she started the timer. I started the monologue with a lot of tension, then 10 seconds into the performance my emotions flowed effortlessly; channeling my pain from being rejected from NYU. In addition to high praise for my performance, I received over twenty callbacks and ten offers which gave me the validation that boosted my confidence. I was on my way to the sunshine state after I accepted University of Central Florida’s offer.

In 2020, the COVID pandemic upended lives across the world and caused many to be in a state of panic. The theatre department adjusted its training to keep the students safe and satisfied. Therefore, classes and performances were on zoom. My goal in this program was to gain acting techniques for character development, script analysis, and voice agility. I admired actors who mastered those techniques while bringing their own life experience into their process. These actors are compelling to watch because their performance has nuance, emotional depth, and creativity. The heart of an actor is showcased in their performance when they are truthfully and emotionally invested. I was determined to learn the acting techniques to perform at the level of a professional actor.

The first year of graduate school offered classes in movement, voice, theatre theory application, and acting. In Stage Voice I, Professor Majkowski led us through warm-ups and provided readings to understand the mechanics of the human voice. As a cohort we studied the anatomy of the human body, specifically areas where sound is created. Professor Christopher Niess’s taught movement techniques from Ruben Von Laban and Frederick Matthias Alexander, ensemble building games, and risk and safety. In Acting Studio I taught by Jim Helsinger, I learned acting techniques for Shakespeare plays such as paraphrasing, verse line, grammatical
breath, and scansion. These classes were beneficial in breaking bad habits and developing techniques.

Due to Covid, all productions in the first semester were on Zoom, and trying to apply acting techniques online is not the same as applying them on stage. Creating theatre using an online platform was a new experiment for actors, directors, and playwrights. When I performed on zoom in *How to Catch Creation*, the excitement that I felt performing live was absent. Additionally, the technical issues, such as connectivity and audio problems were a distraction in performance. For the entirety of the performance, I lacked intimacy and connection. Zoom failed to capture the connection between each actor in performance due to lag. However, it was a great opportunity to connect with the audience in a new way. When UCF started to produce live theatre again, I was not cast in any of the productions. In searching for other performance opportunities, I found that the Garden Theatre was holding auditions for *The Mountaintop*. Flashback to the summer of 2017 my mentor, Imani, took her mentees to see the L.A. Theatre Works’ production of this play. I was enthralled by Karen Malina White’s performance as Camae, and I added it to my list of dream roles. This is a great role to discuss my acting process because of the discoveries made, physical and vocal choices, and its challenges.

The Garden Theatre provided a link to submit my audition to be considered for their season. I decided to tape a two-minute cut of Berniece’s monologue from *The Piano Lesson* by August Wilson and *Shadowland* from *The Lion King the Musical*. These were selections from my audition repertoire that showcased my strength as a performer. After a successful audition, I was invited to attend the callback for the role of Camae. The callback was nerve-wracking because it was my first in-person audition after Covid. In the holding room were other actors, anxiously waiting for their opportunity to leave a lasting impression on the creative team. When I
entered the theatre, I was met with a warm smile from the director, who invited me to play in the space. I took ownership of the room, filling it with my voice, and making every action deliberate. The significance of this callback is that the creative team fostered a safe space for the actors to play. It was the first time I experienced ease in an audition.

The easefulness from that audition was interrupted when I received news that my mother had undergone an emergency surgery. I remember sitting in one of the rehearsal rooms at UCF calling my grandmother and the hospital, praying for a positive outcome. My mother needed additional care, so I flew to New York for two weeks to be by her side. It was disheartening to see my mother in such severe conditions, it affected my emotional state. When I received an email to play the role of Camae I was overwhelmed. I did not know if I would be capable of committing to the process. My mother’s recovery inspired me to examine trauma in my acting process to find the practices for healing as well as intergenerational trauma.
CHAPTER TWO: DEFINING TRAUMA

Understanding trauma and its occurrences in my acting process is important for implementing acting practices that leads to empowerment. First, I will introduce my research on trauma from scholars in the clinical field, Cathy Caruth, Bessel Van DerKolk, and Resmaa Menakem. Caruth and Van Der Kolk’s books are a framework for studying trauma through the lens of psychoanalytic and literary theory. Secondly, I will define trauma, intergenerational and familial. Lastly, I will explore how personal, familia, and intergenerational trauma has manifested in my acting process. Trauma is a complex term that most people either misuse or are unable to identify. It is defined differently based on a person’s culture, status, upbringing, and race. Moreover, my purpose for defining trauma is to protect my physical and emotional well-being and reduce re-traumatization in my acting processes.

In Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History, Caruth provides the readers with narratives of traumatic experiences through works by European philosophers, psychoanalysts, and filmmakers. She defines trauma as “a wound inflicted not upon the body but upon the mind” (3). A “wound” is the Greek definition of trauma (Caruth 3). The wound in the mind is not healable like a wound in the body, it is experienced unexpectedly and can go unnoticed. Therefore, the trauma can manifest in survivor actions and flashbacks. Caruth uses this definition to argue that these narratives have “stubbornly persist[ed] in bearing witness to some forgotten wound” in their deficiency for understanding traumatic experiences (5). Through the lens of Sigmund Freud’s trauma theory on latency, Caruth explains that traumatic experiences can repeatedly occur to taunt survivors (4). In the vein of latency, when traumatic symptoms are unrecognizable to the victims, they are not conscious of reliving their trauma.
Caruth believes that the involuntary repetition of these traumatic experiences occurs suddenly, which causes survivors to have nightmares and flashbacks. Most importantly, she suggests that the reliving of trauma does not remain in the unconsciousness, it is manifested in the attempt to “claim one’s own survival” (Caruth 64; emphasis in original). Caruth denies the singularity of these trauma narratives, she urges scholars to find new modes of listening and reading trauma, which has inspired me to articulate my trauma experiences. Overall, Caruth has successfully clarified how trauma can be addressed through her reinterpretation of trauma narratives using Freud’s theory.

Caruth’s findings of traumatic experiences affecting the mind correspond with Van Der Kolk’s research on trauma in the neurobiological field. In his literary work, *The Body Keeps Score: Brain, Mind and Body in the Healing of Trauma*, Van Der Kolk transforms the reader's understanding of trauma through clinical neurological studies and offers practices for healing. He defines trauma to be “intolerable and unbearable” (1). In his research, undergirding all aspects of trauma related to the brain, Van Der Kolk points out that trauma “compromises the brain area that communicates the physical, embodied feeling of being alive” (Van Der Kolk 3). Thus, he offers these methods: “1) top down, by talking, 2) utilizing other technologies that change the way the brain organizes information, and 3) bottom-up: by allowing the body to have experiences that deeply and viscerally contradict the helplessness, rage, or collapse that result from trauma” to help survivors with their recovery (Van Der Kolk 3). Additionally, he states that trauma is not just an experience that happened in the past, but “an imprint left by that experience on the mind, brain, and body” (Van Der Kolk 21). Using storytelling to illuminate victims’ trauma experiences, he eloquently demonstrates their process of healing through therapeutic practices in this book. In the same fashion, Van Der Kolk praises the effectiveness of art, music,
and dance therapies which enable victims to overcome silence that comes with fear (244). In brief, this book provides a plethora of information on trauma and treatments to mental health professionals as well as anyone interested in this study.

Another mental health specialist, Resmaa Menakem, has also addressed trauma experiences by offering cultural healing practices for victims in his book, *My Grandmother’s Hands: Racialized Trauma and the Pathway to Mending Our Hearts and Bodies*. While this book was written for everyone, Menakem speaks to three types of readers: people with Black bodies, people with White bodies, and people with police bodies. In the realm of neurobiology, Menakem defines trauma as the body’s defense mechanism against something it perceives as a threat. This response begins when the brain senses that there is danger and without cognition, it goes into survival mode. Significantly, he highlights that trauma is distinctive to every individual and how they respond depends on their experiences and history of trauma—the passing of trauma in the body from one generation to the next. Also, Menakem defines intergenerational trauma as a contagious disease that spreads from parent to child, (38) with emphasis on historical trauma and trauma in DNA expression.

My interest was aroused by this book for its deepened analysis of trauma retention in bodies, intergenerational trauma damages, and the tolerance for emotional and physical pain for settling our bodies to eliminate traumatic responses. Menaken sheds the importance of differentiating *clean pain* and *dirty pain* for healing. Clean pain allows us to tolerate our discomfort so that we confront it with honesty. Dirty pain is the result of avoiding harmful experiences such as violence and death that leaves us wounded. Menakem offers these practices for healing: relaxation of muscles with the nervous system in mind, acceptance of any pain, awareness of emotions in the body, and purging of negative energy (Menakem 7). Given this
information, I can bravely move forward in addressing my family and intergenerational trauma that has manifested in my acting process.

In defining trauma, these authors have encouraged me to sort through specific areas of trauma in my family. The impact of intergenerational trauma is significant as it relates to family dynamics. For example, a mother may not be able to give emotional support to her children because she has not healed from her trauma. Members of the family use coping mechanisms to ignore trauma. These coping mechanisms are denial and minimization (“Intergenerational Trauma”). Trauma memories that are “deeply poignant or meaningful” should be addressed with the tools given in clinical research to interrupt trauma cycles (Menakem 43).

To start the exploration of family trauma, I will share the time I went missing at the age of nine. This event caused a rupture in my family as they did not know how to deal with the possibility of losing their two daughters. We were on the local news and my parents were taken into custody by the police that same day. The police did a thorough search of their house as if they were the perpetrators of the crime. My mother shared with me that she could not eat or sleep. Two days later we were escorted by two police investigators back safely to our home in Brooklyn. My parents were elated that we returned home. The effects of trauma were connected to this one event; however, if trauma is not addressed or treated it can accumulate over time and show up in other areas in our lives.

Another example is the repetitive nature of trauma that exists in my family’s communication with each other. Sometimes they used demeaning language, abrasive tones, and impulsive behaviors to respond to disagreements. To reiterate, trauma permeates from one generation to the next generation, thus, as a child I adopted their styles of communication. Young children are highly susceptible to the trauma of their environment because their nervous system
is not fully developed to overturn it (Menakem 38). Trauma can be compounded over generations if not healed from it. This vignette illustrates intergenerational trauma within my family:

There was no one I could express my emotions to concerning the separation of my parents. I looked to my mother who was imprisoned by her burdens as she too was dealing with her emotions. We were muted by the silence of the unknown and frozen by fear. I needed my mother to nurture me from this pain. However, my mother was trying to process her trauma from the absence of her mother, who left when she was a child to find better opportunities for the family. Similarly, my grandma was not raised by her mother. I felt more estranged from my mother than ever during the divorce.

Consequently, intergenerational trauma can cause parents to be emotionally unavailable to their children. My mother and grandmother both internalized the trauma of not being raised by their mother. My grandmother was raised by her grandmother when her mother sent her away. She had to leave her children in Jamaica to find opportunities in America. The traumas of my mother and grandmother were passed down to me. This made me susceptible to anxiety, lack of emotional awareness, and low self-esteem. Therefore, communicating my feelings to family members was difficult because we did not have the knowledge and emotional support to address trauma. Disagreements escalated very quickly and fractured the relationships in our family. For instance, there were moments when family stop speaking to each other due to disagreements. Similarly, my mother and I stopped speaking for a month due to a disagreement. With this newfound realization of intergenerational trauma, I can end the cycle of this trauma by utilizing the meditative techniques from graduate school to bridge the gap with my family. The yoga
poses are effective for bringing tranquility to the mind and body of those dealing with trauma, which I will introduce in the following chapter.

Additionally, my mother had to endure being in the shelter while she was pregnant. This hardship caused her to shut down, thus, making communicating difficult. Menakem states that trauma can compound when an unsettled body encounters another unsettled body (Menakem 39). An unsettled body is an uneasy body. Trauma compounds in the unsettled bodies of families that face stressful situations together (Menaken 78). My mother and her siblings share the trauma of their mother leaving Jamaica to make a better life for them. Over longer periods, the trauma can spread to the entire household: husband, wife, and children. As a result, intergenerational trauma is a domino effect that causes infinite suffering to bodies over the years, if not addressed.

The definition of trauma as well as the exploration of intergenerational trauma has inspired me to be the one to break its cycle. Before graduate school, I did not know how to address the emotions that complicated my acting process. With that said, I have the knowledge to identify intergenerational and personal trauma responses such as low self-esteem, anxiety, guilt, helplessness, and shame that manifested in my acting process. Therefore, I can control my reactions to triggers that come with playing a role due to my awareness of traumatic responses. Although it may be uncomfortable to have conversations with my family about trauma, it can help start the healing process. In the next chapter, I will introduce the techniques that gave me the confidence to step into the role of Camae as well as dismantling trauma.
CHAPTER THREE: VOICE AND ACTING TECHNIQUES

As I prepared for the rehearsal for our production of The Mountaintop, I knew that this play would be a great opportunity for me to apply the techniques I learned in graduate school because it was a demanding script with an unconventional format. When I read the play, I instantly fell in love with Camae. I resonated with her vibrant persona and heartfelt story. The role was nothing like anything I had done before. It was challenging because it required a level of focus and commitment that I thought I was not capable of giving. However, having techniques in my actor’s toolkit empowered me to address the trauma that emerged in my acting process. The application of techniques in the process refined my performance, giving me the confidence to trust in my acting abilities. Voice techniques helped me take ownership of the language and effectively tell the story. With the proper voice techniques, an actor will have a healthy vocal instrument.

This chapter comprises two sections with associated subsections that explore different technical aspects of my voice and acting tool kit that were essential for dismantling trauma in my acting process. In the first section of my “Daily Warm-up,” I will demonstrate the implementation of the daily vocal practices that led to the discovery of breath awareness, deep habits, and the natural voice. This warm-up is grounded in the work of Kristin Linklater, Pasty Rodenburg, and Dudley Knight (Majkowski). The next section on “Acting Techniques” shares key strategies that I used to address trauma in my acting process, which is based on the Konstantin Stanislavski system practiced by many actors across the world. This section will particularly emphasize the techniques of actioning, imagination, and play analysis.
Daily Warm-Up

The exercises in my daily warm-up have taken me out of auto-pilot and expanded my awareness to respond to different situations that arise in my process. Alignment is the first step in my warm-up. Rheumatologists define alignment as “how the head, shoulders, spine, hips, knees, and ankles relate and line up with each other” (“Proper Body Alignment”). The exercises calmed my nerves from character trauma. A character that has suffered trauma can be reactive when they feel threatened. Camae and Dr. King lived in a time when there were bombings, assassinations, harassment, and police brutality to terrorize Black people. Under those circumstances, they were people who were in fear for their lives. Camae may be perceived as tough, but she internalized trauma from her untimely death. When reincarnated as an angel, she attempts to clean up other people’s mess and does not know how to deal with her mess.

As an empath, I resonated with the fear that Camae embodied, causing my fear to arise to the surface. However, I did not want fear to limit my curiosity in my process. With this in mind, I started my warm-up with alignment exercises that addressed the impacts of trauma which were tensed muscles, shortness of breath, and bad posture. For example, rolling around the keystones of my feet strengthened my connection with my breath, improved my posture, and decreased tension (see Appendix A: A full outline of my vocal warm-up). Standing with my feet in parallel and my knees unlocked created a ready position for my body to be receptive to changes. Without these exercises, my voice and body were not operating at their full potential. The triggers from previous acting processes exhausted my voice because of straining and insufficient breath support.
Voice production depends on the alignment of the body for speech to flourish. When an actor is not in alignment “the head and neck region result in adaptive changes to the muscle that elevates the larynx and disrupts pitch control and resonance” (Arboleda and Frederick 91). To reiterate, rolling around the edges of my feet is a great alignment exercise that grounded me while unlocking areas of tension in my knees, shoulder, neck, and spine. I discovered muscle knots in my feet as I was developing the physicality of Camae. These are derived from bracing whenever negative thoughts arise in my process. I was able to identify the area of tension in my feet by doing this exercise consistently.

Personally, trauma has made it difficult for me to connect with people and communicate my feelings. Trauma was the reason that my voice lost intonation due to fear of speaking. The resonance exercises increased my ability throughout this process to speak with precision and confidence. Resonators are a series of cavities going from big to broad at the base and gradually getting narrower toward the top of the ladder (Linklater 187). In my voice warm-up, I focused on warming up the resonators for fuller sounds and a controlled voice. In the rehearsal process, the resonator was effective for pitch, rate, and volume. The resonators were vital for inflections, tonality, and volume without the need to push the voice. Linklater offers the resonator ladder as a guide from where sounds resonate in the body, it starts in “the body from the chest to the mouth, teeth, sinuses, nose, and skull” and it is a potent image to employ the mind to engage the muscles for vocal fold support (Linklater 252).

Coming into this process I was terrified of the profanity that was in the play as a believer of Christ. I made this comment because I know many believers of Christ who use profanity are reprimanded and receive judgment from other believers. Additionally, profanity was used as a threat in the environments that I lived in, so I was alarmed. The resonator exercises changed the
negative connotation of profane words by offering playful ways of approaching them. For instance, the woofer and tweeter exercise allowed me to explore higher and lower octaves that gave humor to the delivery of the profanity. The woofer is the base, and the tweeter is the top of the ladder, where vocal range “three to four octaves can be mapped and your use of it can become physically familiar through regular travel” (Linklater 252). Warming up the body with the woofer exercise produced full and dark sounds. I used the woofer sounds to punctuate repetition and operative words. One example of this is, “Mmph, mmph, MMPH! These goddamn folk got you chain-smokin’ harder than a muthafucka” (Hall 12). The audience laughed at my delivery of this line. Hall uses a plethora of literary devices to help the actors convey the story: alliteration, repetition, and hyperbole, to name a few. I played with tweeter sounds on “harder” and “goddamn” and woofer sounds on “chain-smokin” and “muthafucka.” The line had different cadences by the activation of the tweeter and woofer sounds. I changed the volume and stress on each “Mmph” to top each word from woofer (dark tones) to tweeter (light tones).

Both character and personal trauma can compromise the voice. Another exercise for resonance and relaxing the body are tremors. Tremor exercises create vibratory sounds that pass through the vocal tract (Knight 36). The tremor connected me back to my breath and a place of safety whenever I was frazzled by changes in the process. The back bend exercise was vital for relaxation and for breath to flow through my body. I tend to hold my breath when I'm triggered or not confident in my acting choices. This stretch is a reminder that breath is powerful and can be used to overcome fear. The articulation exercises empowered me to communicate words in the play that made me timid.

The articulators are implemented in making clear sounds and language simple. Linklater describes articulation as “it is the uniqueness of each individual that rich and creative
communication comes” (Linklater 295). The articulators are lips, teeth, tongue, soft palate, hard palate, and facial muscles (Rodenburg 221). Speech is a wonderful concoction of muscles dancing in your mouth is the image that Rodenburg paints for voice enthusiasts (Rodenburg 222). It eliminates the fear of wanting to get it right for the first time. In The Mountaintop, the text was challenging to speak due to layers of Memphis dialect, inner tempo rhythm, and pitch variation. The blending, forward placement, and articulation exercises were instrumental in my warm-up for speech clarity. This journal excerpt describes the musicality and complexity of the text:

The train is moving fast. Rehearsal is a train ride. It is a 90-minute train ride going 100 mph. Once the show starts it does not stop. The words are like the lyrics of a song, flowing on its rhythms and pace. Camae’s lines are chaotic like jazz and smooth as blues. Her inner tempo rhythm is smooth as the saxophone, jarring as the drums, and buzzing as the trumpet. Camae is a ticking jukebox, and her words are like a pulse that keeps us alive.

Before graduate school, my jaw clenched whenever I was uncertain about my actions and intentions during the process. I noticed that the jerking of my head and pulling my chin towards my chest enclosed the passage of breath. Therefore, my jaw locked, and the articulators (lips and tongue) didn’t have the space in my mouth to formulate the sounds. The sounds that came out of my mouth were mushy, slurred, and not supported by breath. Warming up in the theater before performances were essential for testing the quality of my voice in that space. I observed that my voice can fill the room when I have a target and activation of the transversus to support the breath.
Tongue twisters were my saving grace when it came to speaking with an accent. I am sensitive to accents that are associated with trauma memories. For example, southern accents bring back the memory of a Georgia police officer who used his authority to belittle me, so exploring a Memphis accent was triggering. The tongue twisters were fun and eliminated the burden of speaking the accent. Accents are used in plays to highlight geographical locations and social status (Knight 265). I needed to speak with a Memphis accent to highlight the language spoken in that region. Also, Hall honors the Memphis accent by including words such as “King” and “shol” in the play. She writes the accent in the play as an indicator for the actor to speak it as it is written. It was challenging to speak this accent because it reminded me of my encounter with that officer. However, I learned to embrace the accent with the repetition of tongue twisters that allowed me to tap into my childlike imagination, such as “Peter Piper,” “Sally Sell Seashells,” and “Big Black Bug,” along with others.

Repetition of tongue twisters increases mental and articulation agility so that you can speak at various pitches and speeds. Articulation exercises keep the body relaxed and releases useless tension. I focused on elongating vowel sounds and lightly tapping the consonants. The research I conducted on Memphis accents falsified my assumption that all southern accents were the same. The Memphis accent differs from a Georgia accent due to its rhoticity, the “r” is stressed in words such as bar, hard, farm, and charm. I watched videos of Memphis musician B.B. King to listen to the rhythmic structure of the accent. Other primary sources came from Memphis’s working-class people. To sum up, tongue twisters are great for pronunciation, fluency, and they strengthen speech muscles for words that are difficult to speak.

In the beginning stage of my warm-up, the yoga stretches and poses that Professor Majkowski offered to me were uncomfortable. This is mainly because I was not breathing
through the stretches. It was apparent that my habitual breathing patterns were the reason for the tension in my body. The modified pigeon and modified bow are the poses that I felt the most discomfort with the existing tensions in my shoulders and hips. When I focus on the breath in concerning the voice, I discovered that it can be relaxing. According to the Merriam-Webster dictionary, breath is the action of inhaling and exhaling. Breath is the ignition for voice production as a storyteller. When I think of breath, I think of wholeness. From a scientific approach, breath is necessary for cellular respiration and necessary for meditation. The impact of breath on humans is vast and is often overshadowed by distractions in our daily lives. Some of these distractions are trauma symptoms, such as low self-esteem and anxiety. It is the daily awareness of breath that has helped me remain sane and focus on being present. For instance, the savasana pose that I learned in Stage Voice calmed me whenever I felt anxious. It is a relaxation pose that promotes focus on the breath. To get into the savasana pose, I laid on my back with my arms and legs extended, eyes closed, and took long deep breaths. In moments of exhaustion and panic from extensive rehearsal and two show performance days, this yoga pose refocused my breath by bringing me into a meditative state.

*The Mountaintop*’s acting process was empowering due to the awareness of breath, which other processes lacked. For example, I brought my yoga mat before performances to do my warm-up to relax any muscles that were constricted. In previous acting processes, I was met with fear of being inadequate. However, having a step-by-step warm-up refocused my energy on preparing myself for the performance. I did not have to prep for the emotionally heightened moments. Rather than trying to force the emotion, I allowed myself to feel the emotions of Camae. When I developed an awareness of breath, I could exhibit a wide range of emotions with ease. Therefore, breathing exercises have alleviated tension in my shoulder blades which caused
shortness of breath. Before I was afraid of embarrassment and failure of not living up to the audience’s expectations, so I pushed myself to perform even when I did not want to. Initially, acting was a safe place for expression, and it changed when I was overwhelmed by the emotions from the acting process. The feeling of sadness was potent that it was hard to disengage from it outside of the performance.

Breath Awareness

The awareness of the breath comes with knowing the body map as it helped me find places where sounds could be created with ease. Body maps consist of organs, muscles, tissues, joints, nerves, ligaments, and tendons (“Human Body”). Dudley Knight, author of Speaking with Skill, states “To hear sound fully we must hear silences” (7) and “the listener is fully open to the silence, and the energy of listening comes from the attentiveness of every cell of the body” (8). Breath that circulates in the spaces where sound is created produces vibratory sensations (Knight 8). These sensations are indicators that the breath has encountered the musculoskeletal system: soft tissues and bones for sound to travel throughout the body (“Neck Muscles”).

In addition to learning the mechanics of sound creation, I learned that the vocal tract cannot produce good vocal quality when the muscles are constricted. When I started my daily vocal warm-up, I observed that my left shoulder had more tension than my right. The effects of the tension in my left shoulder were connected to stress, poor sleeping habits, posture, and trauma wounds. The tension in my left shoulder impeded my ability to articulate because the neck muscles that connect the base of my skull to my spine, which helps with speaking and movement of the shoulders, were not getting enough oxygen (“Neck Muscles”). The muscles that affect articulation are sternocleidomastoid which is “the largest muscle in the neck, helping
you move your head, extend your neck and control your temporomandibular joint” (“Neck Muscles”). When the actor knows the muscle’s functions, they can achieve true relaxation with practical techniques that can lower the rate of muscle tension (Lessac 47). One of the exercises that I implemented before The Mountaintop performances for breath support and relaxation was intercostal breathing from side to side, down and up, front to back, and a big beach ball. I laid on my yoga mat to feel where the breath was flowing in my body. Also, I closed my eyes to block out any external thoughts. After doing this breathing exercise, I felt grounded and could focus on my objective. I did not succumb to the effects of fear because I was at ease entering and exiting the stage. Here is a journal entry of the outcomes of my warm-up:

My warm-up this morning was a breath of fresh air. The wedges that I had for my warm-up were to see the body map, to release my shoulders, and to have a variation of pitch. I felt my stretch get deeper as I squeezed every muscle in my body and released everything to gravity. I noticed my left shoulder was no longer tensed during Camae’s monologue at the end of the play. In the exploration of my senses in my warm-up: I saw the bile curtain in the motel room, smelled the coffee, and ashes from the cigarette; I heard people chattering from a distance, thunder, raindrops, footsteps; I could taste the whiskey, tobacco, and the coffee; I felt the heat from the coffee, the rain drops. This exercise sharpened my believability on stage as well as my concentration. I was one hundred percent focused on what I was doing on stage and the fear of messing up the performance subsided.

Knight recognizes that “fixed speech” is not reliable training for the actor’s vocal toolkit (Knight 4). He gives applicable exercises for actors that do not attempt to change their voices, instead,
they are for the actors to skillfully use their voices. Linguist and author of *Word on the Street*, John McWhorter states, that when “languages shed sounds and endings, they are always developing new one[s]” (McWhorter 14). To reiterate, my way of speaking is not incorrect because language is always changing and therefore new languages emerge. My voice required vocal practice that did not try to change it. Knight mentions we must be able to produce verbal sound actions that everybody who speaks our language can understand easily (Knight 4). My voice has been shaped by trauma and, thus, my ability to speak. I was afraid to speak in public due to taking remedial classes which shattered my self-confidence. Many people that I had conversations with did not know that I had taken speech classes for five years. In primary education, I was teased for my mispronunciation of words. Therefore, when my voice was critiqued by a director or teacher, I took it to heart.

In collegiate productions, directors have told me to stop yelling or condemned me for being boisterous. Yet there were some words I had to yell for the audience to hear. My voice suffered fatigue because I was straining my neck muscles. Contrarily, high school drama teachers told me to project. Growing up in a Jamaican household my parents were loud, and I adopted that trait. There is a misconception about projection that was taught in high school that students should breathe in their diaphragms to sound louder. In graduate school, we focused on coastal breathing (breathing into the intercostal muscles). Stage voice classes clarified that the human voice fluctuates in volume and intonation. To sustain volume in performance the actor needs to use their transverses to support the breath and the articulators (lips, tongue, teeth, alveolar ridge, velum, uvula, and the pharynx) to shape the sounds (Knight 36). Yet, even once having the insight into these techniques, I felt the need to push to fill the theatre. In the rehearsal studio, I was mindful of vocal strain, so breathing after every punctuation was crucial. However,
when I got into the theatre the nerves overpowered the technique, causing me to push. The nerves derived from the fear of evoking emotions that are difficult to warm down from a performance. On the positive side, finding a target in my warm-up quieted the voices in my head that made me question my choices in performance. Having a target gave me a direct path for the sound to travel to avoid vocal pushing. I activated my transverses as I breathed toward my target (the other actor) using the side-to-side plane of breath. There was ease and effortlessness in the delivery of my lines. Here are six steps that I used for breathing in my target: (1) I took a breath, (2) I saw the target, (3) I supported the thought with the transverse, (4) I used the impulse to direct my thought to my target, (5) I expelled the thought on my target, (6) I took a breath again for the next thought.

Pasty Rosenberg is another voice teacher whose practices honor the uniqueness of a person’s voice. Her practices aim to free the voice so that individuals can express themselves authentically. In her book, *The Right to Speak*, Rodenburg uses the term ‘vocal imperialism’ to describe how a person is judged based on their accent and/or dialect (Rodenburg 11). Vocal imperialism was a new term that I used to examine the traumatic experiences with my voice. When humans have conversations, they can make snap judgments. Such judgment leads to assumptions about our upbringing, education, race, social status, and abilities (Rodenburg 10). A snap judgment is defined by the Merriam-Webster Dictionary “as a hasty decision or opinion,” and a biased opinion about someone's voice is demeaning. Rosenberg states that it is “demeaning and criminal to tell anyone that their mother’s sound or accent is not good enough to speak the great texts” (Rodenburg 5). The acting process for actors would be inclusive if voice teachers and directors were more aware of voice condemnation. A silenced voice is an oppressed voice, which can be traumatic for those who have been misunderstood. Therefore, the body and the
voice work in tandem for expression at a point where the actor can confidently use their voice. Rosenberg gives readers a road map for reclaiming confidence in their voice and declaring their rights through vocal exercises. These exercises encourage the speaker to do “simple checks” to limit the need to push:

- A yawn, or even just thinking of a yawn, will take pressure off the throat and save the voice.
- Begin to vocalise with a silent 'h' at the start of any vocalization and especially before any words that begin with vowels. This eases the transition into speech and smooths its passage.
- Stay in contact with the word, need the word, trust the word, breathe the word. Don't rush ahead and lose the effect of being 'in the moment' as you speak. This last bit of advice is really about taking your right to speak. Don't let yourself be bullied by events, a speaking challenge, yourself, or others when you speak. Don't start until you are ready. Most of all, don't push! (Rodenburg 164)
- Gently massage your face all over. Then move all of your facial muscles- as many as you can experience-independently. These are such areas as the cheeks, mouth, lips, ears, nose, eyes, brow. (Rodenburg 182)
- Just lift and drop the shoulders; a bit more than a shrug but neither a violent nor wrenching action. Lift them up to your ears and then try shifting them in various positions from there before dropping them down again. As you drop them don't predict their final position of rest. (Rodenburg 181)

I have incorporated those exercises in my warm-up for relaxation. The need to push derived from insecurities that I dealt with at an early age. For instance, I struggled with the
pronunciation of words in primary school which resulted in isolation from others. Isolation was a coping method I used to avoid conversations that would involve demeaning expressions, accent shaming, and snap judgments. I was proficient at spelling the words, but shaping vowels and consonants were hard. According to the Merriam-Webster dictionary, the schwa is “an unstressed mid-central vowel” and appears in most American words such as the first and last vowel in America. In Jamaican Patois, a language influenced by African language and the British Isles, the schwas differ from the American schwa. In the American schwa, the vowels, a, e, i, o, or u, and syllables are unstressed, whereas Jamaican Patois uses unstressed syllables to an a, e, i, o, u sound (Smith). Therefore, it was hard to adapt to speaking American vernacular because unstressed vowels and emphasis on syllables differ in Jamaican Patois. My hesitation towards public speaking derived from a lack of voice education and training. With the knowledge that there is no superior language and that all sounds are important for linguistic diversity, I feel empowered to use my native language in my process. Additionally, I am not fearful to speak Patois because I learned to accept this language as a part of what makes me unique, and it is imperative for the stories that I will tell. However, some habits are associated with speaking my native tongue. To identify habits that are impeding vocal freedom and kinesthetic awareness is key.

Deep Habits

To liberate the voice, there needs to be kinesthetic awareness of vocal habits that obstruct breathing. There is no overnight prescription to fix the voice because it needs time to mature. However, good habits can combat bad habits so that the actor can achieve desirable results to communicate. Rodenburg states that habits “physically manifest themselves as holds or
barriers to the sound we make” and can damage our vocal instrument (20). According to the Merriam-Webster Dictionary, a habit is “a settled tendency or usual manner of behavior,” especially one that is hard to give up. The habits that prohibit my vocal freedom are: self-judgment, pushing, clenching my jaw, muscle tension, and locked knees. In my acting process, I’ve addressed those habits through vocal exercises from my vocal warm-up (which was originally developed by Professor Majkowski and listed in Appendix A):

- Gently drop your chin to your chest. Rotate your left ear to your left shoulder, breath, then chin to chest. Unlock your knees and release your shoulders. Rotate your right ear to your right shoulder. Place your right hand on your head and remember to breathe through these stretches. The left fingers are pulled towards the ground in the opposite direction of the right shoulder. Rotate the left arm in a pointer finger up, reach towards the ceiling, and scrape down the imaginary wall, arms release towards the ribs and breathe. Repeat this exercise on the right side.

- Slide your hand off your head and then chin to chest. Make a basket, place it on the widest part of your skull, then release your elbows to gravity. Gently look over to the right elbow (breath). Chin to the chest. Look over to the left elbow (breath). Chin to the chest. Release your hands. (Majkowski)

This centering exercise is essential for unlocking facial muscles such as the jaw and masseter for effortless speech. The vocal exercise in the daily warm-up is designed to get the body into a state of relaxation. Therefore, relaxation can promote more ease when speaking and healthy breathing patterns. Trauma can lead to habits that can constrict the voice of its freedom. In Ruined, I was nervous that I would not be able to cry on cue, so I resorted to my habit of pushing. In The Mountaintop performance, I did not have to push for emotional delivery as Camae, I learned to
be aware of breath, which allows me to be present in the moment; then, the tears came with ease. Relaxation is the goal for my warm-up because it alleviates the tensions in my body that can make acting difficult.

Triggers are inevitable in the acting process, but vocal freedom can empower the actor to communicate their needs. If you are inclined to pause and take a breath, please do so. It is not easy to share the fears that live deep in the body. To reiterate, habits are an outcome of trauma, and they can be hidden if vocal practices are not implemented in the actor process. Rodenburg states that

If the breath is affected and altered by even a quiver of emotion (the remembrance of a sad or funny event, a slight shock like a near miss in a car, a gasp of recognition when we suddenly meet an old friend) as it always is, then it must follow that more powerful violations or grieving which are not immediately purged will penetrate deep into the breathing mechanism and lodge there like parasites feeding off the breath until eradicated. (85)

“Purged,” “eradicated,” and “parasites” are visceral images of trauma’s penetration of the voice. The importance of designing a vocal practice that releases trauma is the key to a healthy sustained voice. If I knew that trauma affected the breath in that capacity, I would have taken the initiative earlier to preserve it. The awareness of trauma as the root of voice complications is eye-opening for people that are having difficulty expressing themselves. Before graduate school, I experienced shortness of breath or tightness in the chest during performances. The air passages where breath is supposed to flow freely were constricted by tension in the body. When I’m eager or upset, the tension in my body arises. The sounds were distorted due to a lack of breath support. During rehearsal, the director was blocking one of my long speeches and I took a deep
breath that engaged my transversus to speak the text. The action of taking in enough air to support the entirety of the speech was a skill that elevated my performance. As a result, I was confident in my abilities and my voice to perform an uncensored speech. Camae’s boldness inspired me to take risks with the techniques that I learned. Therefore, I explored the nuances in my voice by changing the pitch, intonation, and inflection frequently. I did not want to be stuck in one way of speaking, so I aimed for variation in my delivery.

In hindsight, I should have included meditation in my daily practice, because it would have lessened the triggers that I experienced in past processes. The meditation that I have integrated into my later work has given me an awareness of the traumatic incidents that are like parasites to my breath. Meditative awareness was one component of eradicating the habitual breathing patterns that were associated with painful experiences. Although I have learned the breathing mechanism, I haven't mastered liberating the breath; this mastery is achieved through daily practice.

To conclude, the awareness of the obstruction of breath can help the actor troubleshoot problem areas in their voice. Breathing techniques such as tremoring, expansion and reduction, transversus activation, and tweeter and woofer exercises provided me with vocal clarity and flexibility for speaking the text in *The Mountaintop*. Trauma experiences have debilitated my voice, so in my acting process I focused on triggers, and manipulators such as softening, controlling, and pushing the voice. Hesitation and shyness are considered a manipulator and humans tend to shy away from conversation that involves emotions. Hesitation is not beneficial for the progression of my processes so releasing rejection has brought me the peace that I needed in this process. Rodenburg observes that “we usually excuse the hesitator or other types of non-communicators as being shy or reserved. Many are severely blocked and inhibited speakers or
need to face the fact that help is required” (Rodenburg 35). I urge actors to ask for what they need in their process. In the rehearsal process of *The Mountaintop*, director Felichia Chivaughn led the cast through “I am, I want, I feel, I need” exercise. This allowed me to be vocal about the process and for the creative team to offer support. It also allowed the actors to be truthful to their present circumstances. Trauma tends to find its way back into my process, but checking in with the breath is beneficial for staying present in the moment. In previous productions there were few moments of checking in with the actors; Chivaughn has implemented a practice that I can use in other processes.

The Natural Voice

Linklater’s *Freeing the Natural Voice* offers a series of exercises for voice teachers, singers, and non-performers. The techniques displayed in this book aim to “develop and strengthen the voice as a human instrument and to present a lucid view of the voice” for human communication and sustainability (Linklater 17). Linklater addresses the readers as actors so that they may consider themselves as performers in their daily routines. She mentions that there is a distinction between the “natural” and “familiar” (Linklater 7).

The actor cannot explore their full range of emotions if there are intellectual, physical, emotional, and aural blocks in their process (Linklater 8). Linklater's initial steps in voice work are physical awareness and relaxation. She advocates for the unification of the voice, body, and mind so that actors can develop bodies that are open to impulses and reticence. The actor must develop a body that is present by activating all five senses. The natural voice “reveals the inner impulses of emotion and thought, directly and spontaneously” (Linklater 17). To achieve the natural voice, the actor needs to engage in consistent vocal exercises such as freeing the channel
is “a channel for sound through relaxation of tensions in the jaw, the tongue and the throat,” and resonating ladders are the placement of sound in resonators by “directing your voice to move up and down the resonating ladder” (Linklater 252). The natural voice can be blocked by habitual tension, so this exercise is instrumental for relaxing the body for breath to function. Linklater emphasizes that the neurological system is the central point for the body to activate impulses of emotion, imagination, psyche, and intellect.

Linklater mentions that the body can break away from habitual tensions by moving the body in new ways (Linklater 22). Slouching was a habit that affected my ability to explore the physicality of Camae fully. I slouch subconsciously. It is a habit whenever I felt defeated by rejection. I attempted to eliminate it by mimicking the postures of women in the 1950s, which consist of walking straight, bust lifted, head up, spine straight, and walking with one foot in front of the other. However, my replication of those movements was a temporary aid to the habit. The marriage of body and mind through voice exercises brought out movements that I did not know existed. I noticed through my impromptu dance session in rehearsal that authentic movement evoked a vocal response from me that I used for character development. Additionally, Linklater offers a sensory exercise, which is about finding inner relaxation by awakening your senses. Through a series of visuals such as envisioning “your spine as if it were a great tree rooted” to transforming that image to a vibration of sound (Linklater 97). Imperatively, these exercises are for actors to “rethink the usage of the voice rather than re-doing sounds” (Linklater 11). Furthermore, Linklater exercises have been adapted by other voice practitioners and implemented in my vocal daily warm-up.

In essence, there are no quick fixes for vocal issues. The vocal practices were effective in preparing my voice to speak with confidence to navigate trauma. I learned that being consistent
with these practices brought awareness to habits that were connected to trauma symptoms, such as anxiety and fear. The exercises provided safety for the body and voice through relaxation; this laid the foundation for a more technical approach to acting, which I outline in the next section.

**Acting Techniques**

This section focuses on the acting techniques that I used in my process to prepare for the role of Camae in *The Mountaintop*. These techniques are based on the Stanislavski system and are practiced by many actors across the world. I will introduce Stanislavski’s acting method. Then, I will examine specific techniques such as actioning, imagination, and play analysis, which sharpened my toolkit for addressing trauma in this process.

Stanislavski was a Russian theater practitioner who founded the training method, the system. Theatre and film actors have studied the system and its influence on contemporary acting methods and theories. Stanislavski’s method was introduced to me in high school. My approach to acting was unstructured and attention-seeking. I was intrigued by the communal gathering of actor-spectator dynamics where the actor was a mere reflection of the real world. Stanislavski’s approach to acting is that acting is art; life is art. I was taught that acting is a craft, but Stanislavski’s mantra is “art is the code for ‘life,’” so that the pressure associated with acting is alleviated and the artist can be flexible on stage (*An Actor’s Work X*). Stanislavski was an actor before he became a theatre practitioner and director. In 1888, he founded the Moscow Society of Art and Literature; his acting experiences derived from the direction of professionals within the society (Wynman 4). The Duke of Saxe-Meiningen’s acting company had a significant impact on Stanislavski’s concepts of theatre (Wynman 4). It is history from there on, as he played lead roles in classic plays such as *Othello* and created a fresh approach to directing and acting styles.
In the implementation of Stanislavski’s techniques, I gained a natural ease to embody characters, heightened imagination, and joyful impulses that recaptured the freedom in my acting process. Stanislavski’s system encourages bringing authenticity to the process. In order to create life on stage, the actor should invest themselves in the work (Wynman 15). I continue to cultivate techniques that work for me to become a robust performer. Stanislavski claims that the system has no founders and that it derives from within us (An Actor’s Work 611). He believes that everyone is born with the ability to create, and this ability is stifled when we try to force something artificial. Stanislavski encourages us to dissect the system and put it back together to understand its structure. It is important to know that such a system cannot be acted, it is a guide for the actor to work out at home and put aside in performance. The rehearsal process is where the components of the system can be tested. Therefore, I will discuss the components of the system that worked harmoniously to make my process successful.

I used Stanislavski’s techniques to shift my mind to a creative state by coming to rehearsal prepared and researching contextual information for the play and role. It would have been a disservice to myself, the director, and the cast. If I brought my distractions into the process. However, there are life experiences and trauma responses that bleed into my work, tarnishing the art that is created. For example, during the table read for Ruined, I was triggered by the mutilation of women's bodies which caused me to sob to the point that I had to remove myself from the room. My body became super tense, and my focus was discombobulated. From that moment, I could not recover from that trauma response, and it trickled into the rehearsal process. The actions and objectives that I played on stage were based on my own trauma from the play instead of being character-driven. In The Mountaintop, I had a different approach, as I was familiar with the story, and it did not make me feel uncomfortable. This experience was
different because the director had an open discussion on the relevant themes in the play and its impact on the actors. I remembered talking about the degradation of Black women in America and their bodies as commodities. This topic was triggering, but I found solace in talking about it in a safe environment where I was encouraged to speak. To reiterate, acting is art and can be achieved when you understand its beauty of it, and the conversations at the beginning of the rehearsal process can be a catalyst for the actors to comprehend the art within us.

Actions

The first technique that empowered me to have confidence in making bold choices in my acting process despite the pressure of failure was actions. An action is fueled by purpose. At the beginning of each performance, I was sure of the tactics that I was using to achieve my objective in the play. My intentions to play those actions was clear to me and the other actor. As Stanislavski notes, “acting is action;” therefore, the marriage between the two produces a performance that has intention. Preparing the actions to use in rehearsal subsided the feeling of insecurity and anxiety because I knew exactly what I was doing every moment in the process. Previously, in other acting processes, I did not take the time to choose an action for every beat change therefore my acting demonstrated a lack of preparation.

When I act without actions, my performance becomes a generalized piece of theatre with an unclear objective. I was more concerned about my acting than experiencing the play. The actions in this process introduced me to structure in planning and to approach the process with respect for acting. I spent several days working on my action in the mirror, repeating them out loud to test whether it would work in rehearsal. Ultimately, I did not see the effectiveness of my
actions until I had the other actor in the room to respond to them. The two types of actions that I utilized in my process were: physical and inner. Physical actions are acted outwardly, and inner actions are acted inwardly (An Actor Prepares 39). Physical action is tangible tasks that are directed towards another actor on stage (Whyman 43). Inner action is about experiencing or encountering an event (Whyman 43). It was experiencing that kept me focus on the moment with the other actor. I felt victorious when I was able to influence them to do and think something. Doubt and uncertainty that came up in the process were repressed by my ability to convince the other actor with the actions. Actioning encourages a balance between the physical and mental qualities of the character which drives the actions played by the actor. Here is an example from my journal entry of playing an action that I used in rehearsal:

In today’s rehearsal session, my action was to comfort the other actor. In the stage direction, the character stumbles and faint when it thunders. The moment I saw the actor fall to the floor; he was in a vulnerable state. The emotion that he was exuded compelled me to act. I saw the fear in his eyes and the uncertainty about what is to come. When he had fainted, my focus was to rehabilitate him. I touched his face, helped him slowly breathe, made eye contact, and slowly spoke to him. The actor was receptive to the actions and therefore was able to play his actions. The given circumstances required immediacy with my action so that the story could move forward. If I hesitated about playing the actions because I could be triggered by the event, there would be a disconnect between my character and the other actor.

The purpose of this rehearsal was to see if the actions worked because I did not want to doubt my actions and get distracted by negative thoughts. The actions were tested and all of them could be used to calm the actor during his panic. The confidence I exuded on stage was a result of having
actions that worked in rehearsal. On that account, I wrote three actions for every new thought or beat change (see Appendix C). Stanislavski influenced theatre practitioners in *A Practical Handbook for the Actor* breakdowns actioning:

> To live truthfully under the imaginary circumstances, is action and moment. Action is what you go onstage to do, the physical process of trying to obtain a specific goal, often referred to as the objective. Moment is what is actually happening in the scene as you are playing it at any given instant (Bruder et al. 8)

The actions must be specific or else it will be generalized, they will be unclear to the audience and your scene partner. Notes I received in previous processes indicated that my actions were not clear. My reflection on those sessions caused me to shut down whenever I encountered difficulty with playing an action. The action was not clear because I had no knowledge to choose the right actions. I felt stuck physically and mentally. Hence, actions are at the core of my process to increase my focus, confidence, and energy to combat character and personal trauma in the process. Camae’s trauma derived from the life events that made her feel unworthy of love and happiness. The actions helped me expel those feelings on stage by focusing on listening, reacting, and being in the moment. I had some hesitation relating to certain emotions of Camae because it reminded me of my struggles. The feeling of shame came to the surface in the process, but actions gave me a task to focus on so that I would not be lost in the emotions. When I sat on the edge of the bed in the motel room, my objective was to amuse Dr. King. Although I was disturbed by the events that led me to this moment, the actions gave me precision and concentration in responding to the other actor. Actioning empowered me by connecting with the other actor, trusting in my choices, and acting with confidence that removed the doubt in my process.
Imagination

Imagination is fundamental for creativity in acting. Without imagination, I reached a state of stagnation due to avoiding it in my process, as I feared that it would trigger a traumatic response. Nonetheless, imagination introduced fun as well as wonder back into the process. For example, transforming into a 1940s spunky and comical maid required imagination in order to recreate the atmosphere of the play. Early on, I read the play several times to deepen my understanding and interpretation of the play and role. Camae’s essence started to surface, and I discovered the qualities that make her beautiful through imagination. For instance, the image of God inspired my perception of Camae: divine, bright, and flawless. In the play, Camae describes God as “gorgeous/She the color of midnight and Her eyes are brighter than the stars” (Hall 37). The power of imagination happens when it transforms negative experiences into positive ones. The monologue starts with the image of the weight of the world on my shoulders, but when I saw God, all the cares of the world drifted away. I was fixated on God. Therefore, having a focal point for the images allowed me to stay in the moment while playing the actions. Stanislavski defines imagination as “the magic ‘if’” and the given circumstances. It not only tells us what the author, the director, and the others have not, but it gives life to everything that the play encompasses (An Actor’s Work 62). Some images came from the actor’s lived experiences and can be difficult to recreate throughout the run of the production. Stanislavski states that the importance of imagination is the primary source for acting and either can make or break an actor’s career (An Actors Work 63). Imagination can be developed by letting your imagination wander, from experiencing the moment or revisiting a memory. This is a journal entry about the utilization of imagination that created empathy in the process:
You perfect? This is a question that was asked by Camae and a question that I often reflect on. There were so many imperfections in my acting and personal life that held me back from succeeding and believing in myself. This monologue is one of the most compelling yet dangerous to perform. It brought me out of my comfort zone to answer the questions that this piece demanded and empowered me to confront the negative thoughts. The image of a man clasping his throat around my neck was terrifying and perplexed me. It was my duty as an actor to see these images so that I could find a truthful emotional response to this piece. This is Camae’s breaking point. I could feel the weight of the world on my shoulders, and I wanted to escape from reimagining the night of the murder, but seeing God calmed me. Instantly, the image of terror was transformed into a celestial being surrounded by light. I was able to reconcile with the murderer because this image changed how I perceived darkness. It affirmed that there is a higher power that will intervene to remind us that good exists in the world. The image gave me hope, joy, and peace at the end of the piece. There was a release of anger when I envisioned the man getting overpowered by the powerful light that was beaming from God.

Imagination requires empathy for the actor to experience what the character is going through. I was open to my imagination and experienced the emotions of my character that I was able to effectively emulate in performance. The imagery was helpful in the re-imagination of traumatic experiences with a new perspective by gaining a sense of control and solace. It offers a new understanding of perspectives and releases tension.
Play Analysis

Analysis is the study of a text to understand its intended meaning. The analysis of a play requires imagination and intellect to know what the play is about. Stanislavski used the *round-of-the table* analysis, in which “the troupe would sit and discuss the play at length” because complex/abstract plays required more in-depth research and intellectualizing for understanding them (Wynman 51). Stanislavski notes for artist analysis means to feel and our exploration of the play is based on our institution. This type of knowledge produces fervor that is necessary for the motivation to start the creative process (*An Actor Prepares* 104). The enthusiasm I had about the creative process came from the analysis that sparked a fire within me to make discoveries in the rehearsal process. This formalist analysis was introduced to me in my advanced level Acting class, which encouraged me to study the text via a thorough outline that encapsulated all the necessary details I needed to know about the play. It is an outline for researching the play’s genre, location, given circumstances, culture, character analysis, economy, and objectives. From a literary preceptive, formalist analysis is an extensive examination of the play: “the characters, the settings, the tone, the point of view, diction, [themes,] and all other elements of the text which join to make it in a single text” (“Writing a formalist”). Play analysis is the framework that provides in-depth research for specificity and spontaneity. Tortsov, Stanislavski’s acting teacher, urged the actors to read the plays with understanding to avoid false interpretations of their roles (*An Actor’s Work on a Role* 7). To avoid false preconceptions, the actor should not over-intellectualize the play, it requires a balance between imagination and intellect (*An Actor’s Work on a Role* 9). For that reason, I read the play with curiosity and excitement to avoid redundancy in my acting choices. If I had read it using my mere intellect, my acting choices
would be set in stone. Additionally, as Stankinvaslavi notes “the more intricate the thinking, the further it leads away from creative experiencing and to a mere intellectual acting or playacting” (*An Actor’s Work on a Role* 9).

Reading the play thoroughly, formulated my thoughts, objectives, and actions faster; this lowered my anxiety because I felt prepared. If the actor doesn’t fully flesh out what is happening in the play “they find themselves forced to handle a multitude of superficial, unrelated details, so many that they become confused and lose all sense of the larger whole” (*An Actor Prepares* 126). Confusion in my acting process manifests in difficulty thinking and inconsistency in my performance. Play analysis counteracted the ambiguous presumptions that came about in my process. The analysis of the play gave me the ability to make clear objectives, actions, and given circumstances, and inspired my creative impulses.

For example, I identified the musical undertones through intellect and cultural analysis of the play which inspired the embodiment of the text. Chivaughn and I choreographed a powerful interpretive movement piece that went along with the text, informed by the musicality in the play. Here is a selection from my research that highlights the emergence of Memphis music:

> It is a generation with a new sound. Soul, gospel, rhythm and blues, rock ‘n’ roll, and other genres of music all have their roots in the city of Memphis. With Beale Street as its home, Memphis’ sound was uncontainable. W.C. Handy wrote the first blues song published in America- Memphis Blues in 1912, Elvis Presley began his recording career at Memphis’ Sun Records, and B.B. King got his start on Beale Street. Memphis’ music has a history that spans decades and genres. In the 1960s, the Memphis Sound, a mixture of blues, R&B, and soul, was created at Stax Records featuring the work of Otis Redding, Isaac Hayes, and The Bar-Kays and more (*Memphis Music*).
There was no denying that music was embedded in the play because of its rhythmic and poetic qualities. Music is an essential element of the Memphis culture and Hall’s incorporation of it in the text interpretative piece at the end of the play. Here is a journal entry about the integration of text, music, and movement inspired that my creativity impulses:

The director had an idea to choreograph *the baton passes on*, the poetic text at the end of the play, to create a dynamic ending. She played a variety of music from gospel, jazz, and soul. Gospel music has a catchy beat which made me move at a faster pace. I mimicked the stomping and clapping that I would see at a Pentecostal worship service. I leaped across the room, jumped on the cubes, and twirled with the sheet as if I had wings. The beautiful thing about this experience was reclaiming the power to follow my impulses by permitting the music and text to guide me. The music captured the essence of the text with its uplifting melodic tones along with the movement that transcended me to a higher dimension. The images of the African American experience from 1960 to the future from the text were brought to life with expressive movements that translated the human conditions, feelings, and emotions. I discovered hope in the interpretation of the text because Gospel music has a positive impact on my well-being and strengthens my faith.

This section of the analysis revealed that culture is key to understanding how music can empower the actor. I was able to find inspiration in the music to develop movements that were symbolic of the events in the play. Additionally, the music reduced negative feelings because I experienced joy, peace, and control over my mind. The music ushered in a spiritual connection with God, and it was translated into a powerful transformative piece that touched the audience.

The benefits of this play analysis are to engage with the play that is deeper than just reading, it raised questions that have inclined me to be more attentive in analyzing the play.
Stanislavski suggests that actors should fully analyze a role to avoid a monotonous performance. He mentions that when an actor does not understand the perspective of their character and the play, their actions are unclear to the audience. Perspective is “the harmonious relationship between arrangements of the parts of the entire play and role” (An Actor’s Work 458). I was interested in finding harmony in my process to get peaceful outcomes that will protect my creativity. Stanislavski’s observation on the importance of analysis is that

Only when an actor has thought about, analysed, and lived the entire role and a broad, distant, clear, colorful, alluring perspective opens out the before him can his acting, so to speak, task the long view and the not short view previously. Then he can play not individual tasks, speak not individual phrases but whole thoughts and passages (An Actors Work 458).

With no perspective on the role, my choices in the process would be redundant. For that reason, I avoided making concrete assumptions about my character. (Wynman 52). Learning lines is important for the progression of the production, but if the actor just knows their lines and don’t leave room for spontaneity, the performance can be boring. Therefore, having a thorough play analysis gave me the freedom to let go of the memorization. There was no need to fear the process because I knew the play well, from moment to moment. To reiterate, this perspective has influenced me to think about Camae’s life story beyond the play to experience different shades and nuances in my acting. Stanislavski’s Six Questions, adapted by Uta Hagen, is a way to get the actor to work on specificity in their roles. The given circumstances are the framework for these six questions: who, what, when, where, how, and wherefore. Stanislavski acknowledges from his training that the given circumstances of “if” is a word that the actor must answer:
First, you must have a clear, personal view of all the Given Circumstances which you brought together from the play itself, the direction, and your own imagination. This gives you an overall picture of the character and his circumstances…You must sincerely believe that such a life is possible in the real world. You must become so used to it that it becomes an intimate part of you. If you can do that, then the truth of the passions or feelings that seem true will arise of their own accord. (*An Actor’s Work* 53)

Thus, the given circumstance in the play is established early in the acting process so the actor can prepare to step in the shoes of the character they are portraying. This freedom was achieved when I integrated research and personal opinions to develop the role, a balance between intellect and creativity. The research informed my opinions about Camae. This technique was effective in sustaining the foundational mold of Camae for further exploration of the role. The perspective on a role is an intimate part of an actor’s process that can be frightening but rewarding when approached with care and attention. Below are sections from *The Six Steps*, an analysis of the role:

Who am I? I am twenty-seven years of age. I am strong, blunt, charming, caring, playful, personable, fiery, and funny. A down-to-earth individual who has experienced hardships as a Black woman living during the Civil Rights era and Jim Crow South. I am on a journey of forgiveness for those who have hurt me. I learned how to forgive when I saw God for the first time. I love to make people feel good because I believe it is my duty calling. I have been raped, abused, and mistreated by men. Laughter makes me resilient, and I enjoy comedy.
The first question required me to gather information from what people had to say about Camae and how she perceived herself. I learned about her fears about life and the hardships that she had to endure. I assumed based on the information given in the text that Camae had been sexually assaulted by her uncle.

KING: Well…you’re pretty

CAMAE: I KNOW. Even my uncle couldn’t help himself. You have fun tonight?

(Hall 9)

The audience gasped when I said that line and I had a similar response to it when I read the play. If the audience had an audible response to that line, then there was a possibility that it triggered them. An actor can sense when the character is in danger or have been harmed by another character. Having completed this analysis, mentally prepared me to confront trauma because it magnified the issues that needed to be dealt with early on in my process. Consequently, I could say the line without succumbing to the weight of it. It took effort and self-control to keep my composure on a topic that pertains to violence against women. However, the concoction of all the techniques that I have acquired in graduate school trained me to handle character trauma with composure. Also, the analysis tests the knowledge of who your character is and the part of yourself that is used to develop the role into a human being. The marriage between the role and myself derived from examining the play and finding that Camae and I had similarities which were useful to answer these questions: how do I perceive myself? What are my relationships? What do I want? What do I do to get what I want? Even though I used some of my own experiences to answer these questions, I also had to stay true to the information given in the play, but my curiosity brought nuances and ideas that made this acting process unique.
Taking note of the relationships relating to the given circumstances defined my behavior towards people in the play. This is an important step in the analysis so that I could choose the appropriate actions to play. To define Camae’s relationship with people and objects in the play, I will share this journal entry that explores Camae’s relationship with her family:

I discovered that my mother was a maid, she cleaned houses for a living. She wanted my siblings and I to have an education so that we would not have to work domestic jobs. My father worked on the railroad and was murdered when I was ten years old. He was a dedicated worker, picking up long shifts so that he could provide for his family. On his days off he would take us to the park to see the ducks. They raised children five children, four girls, and one boy. I was the was the second to last child from my parents my sisters. Lorraine, the oldest, cooked and took care of the house when my parents were working. She nurtured and cared for us like a mother. I had a better relationship with her than with my mother. Uncle Tommie was my father’s younger brother. He was an alcoholic and came over to our house whenever he needed a place to stay. I was terrified when he came to the house because he would stare at me with his big yellow eyes. One night when I went to use the toilet, to my surprise he was standing in front of the door. My worst nightmare become my reality that night. I hated him from that moment and despised the part of myself that he took pleasure with.

The relationships that were established in this analysis created subtext, underlying thoughts, or conversations, that added an extra layer of depth to my performance. Having the subtexts for the lines was a place of safety to deal with my character’s emotions by saying something without saying it aloud. If my motive was to suffocate the other character, the subtext could achieve that without the character knowing. It gives the actor the willpower to say what is on their mind.
discreetly. Understanding family relationships in the play allowed me to see the good and bad sides of the character. I created a backstory based on the relationships that were solidified in this process that made my acting more engaging to act and watch. Additionally, Camae’s relationships gave me insight into the conflicted ideas in the play such as self-hatred. When I was aware of the conflicts that Camae faced I could focus on solutions. My character’s story may be unpleasant to someone in the audience. I have done the groundwork it does not affect me in that manner. In previous acting processes, I was overwhelmed by the process because the analysis was non-existent. I experience a lot of mood swings because I did not conduct thorough research. However, the analysis was a guidebook for the actor that includes the mannerisms and background information whenever I got confused or could not connect with Camae.

What do I want? This is a question that has two parts: scene and play objective. The objective is the character’s goal with a play. Here is a list of Camae’s objectives:

- I want to usher Dr. King into Heaven
- I want to complete my mission

What is my immediate need or objective?

- I want to calm Dr. King, (To comfort, to serenade, to embrace)
- I want to leave the motel (To tease, to alarm, to manipulate)

These objectives were created based on the given circumstances in the play. Stanislavski had another term for objectives: bits and tasks. Here is his commentary on bits and task: “There is a creative Task stored in each bit. The task arises organically out of its own bit, or vice versa gives birth to it” (An Actor’s Work 142). The task is the motivation for the character. Tortsov explains when analyzing the play, it should be divided into bits to find the “hidden deep” (An Actor’s Work 142). On that account, the objective and the action should work in tandem. If the objective
lacks an organic connection with the action, then the actor will force it. That is why analyzing the text thoroughly can avoid the mayhem in the process. By listing my objectives and the corresponding actions above, I have demonstrated that analysis creates a structure for the actor to work with precision.

This approach in preparation for my role increased my focus, motivation, and intention. I knew what my character needed at any moment in the play. That is the power of analysis. In the rehearsal studio, it was beneficial to have the luxury of time to test the actions. If the other actor responded to the action, that was an indication that it was successful. Finding actions that work for the scene or play is more interesting to do than acting an emotion. The play was more active when I knew my objective since I was doing something to the other actor. To that end, there was less time to doubt myself when I was actively engaged in achieving my objective. For instance, when a line was dropped in performance I knew exactly where to pick up the next line due to analyzing the play. Therefore, the process was fun because I was able to let go of the intellectual approach and be more creative in this process. It is a play after all. My traumatic symptoms became less of a concern in this process due to the confidence that I developed in the application of voice and acting techniques. Graduate school was difficult because it required me to approach the process with this much commitment, time, precision, curiosity, and preparation. These techniques gave me the willpower to overcome the trauma that I experienced in my life and gave me the right skills to do the work for success in *The Mountaintop*. 
LOOKING FORWARD

The three years of my life spent in graduate school were quite a ride. My cohort began our studies during Covid-19, and *The Mountaintop* was my first live show after the pandemic. There were moments when I questioned whether continuing my education was the right choice. My learning process involved a lot of trial and error, in which I discovered that some acting techniques were more successful than others. Later, during my professional internship at Orlando Shakes, I observed that performing in shows while going to school was challenging.

Nonetheless, I kept reminding myself of the reason I came to graduate school: to get techniques to apply in my acting process. Based on the outcome of this thesis, I am confident that the techniques I acquired in graduate school will continue to dismantle trauma in creative spaces. The next step is to start applying these techniques to my acting processes in the professional world. Working outside of academia will create opportunities for me to share these techniques with other actors, and vice versa. My mission for future work is to establish equitable spaces for all artists to create. I plan to conduct more research on trauma-informed spaces where original work can be devised in confronting trauma.

When I was searching for resources to write my thesis, Chloë Rae Edmonson, my chair, suggested *Black Acting Methods* by Sharrell D. Luckett with Tia M. Shaffer. Although I was not able to use it to support my thesis, in the future I want to apply the techniques offered in this book. Specifically, the book focuses on personal sustainability, which is important for any actor that wants to have a thriving career. I believe these techniques will give actors, especially Black actors, the tool to thrive in liminal spaces. Today there is a call for equitable creative spaces where Black actors’ voices can be heard, and their work to be produced. I am excited to see how
the application of *Black Acting Methods* will continue my efforts to dismantle trauma in the acting process.

This process has inspired me to advocate for what I need so that I leave empowered and not broken. Speaking up is not confrontational. It is an opportunity to ask questions about the trajectory of the production. When I felt unsafe during *The Mountaintop*, I was encouraged by my director Felichia Chivaughn to share my concerns so that she could address them. When a conflict arises, I have the agency to speak up and ask the necessary questions to move forward. If I don’t feel good, I speak up. When the director asks me to make a choice that goes against my values, I speak up. If a cast member’s action makes me uncomfortable, I speak up immediately. Speaking up is empowering for the actor who often feels limited in their process.

During the rehearsal process for *The Mountaintop*, I realized from day one that speaking affirmations is key to creating a positive atmosphere for the entire creative team. “I am worthy” is an affirmation I said on the first day of rehearsal and continue to speak in all rehearsal spaces because it mentally prepares me for challenging moments. I know “I am worthy” because I performed *The Mountaintop* in a once-segregated theatre; I witnessed its impact on the community; I took the necessary steps during difficult moments of the process. My voice mattered before, during, and after the production. Chivaughn, as my director, also reminded me that I was worthy.

Reflecting on my process, I was the one to dismantle the cycle of trauma, personal and inter-generational. This inspires me to create a solo show. The show will depict trauma passed down three generations: grandmother, mother, and myself. In writing this show, I will incorporate the *Black Acting Methods*, my own spiritual practice, music, and dance. My heritage must be highlighted in this show because we are all Jamaican-born women. My goal is to
produce this regionally and eventually transfer to Broadway. The style of this solo show will be documentary theatre, like Anne Deavere Smith’s *Twilight: Los Angeles, 1992*.

In closing, the actor is not invincible to burnout, stress, triggers, and trauma. If you suspect trauma in your own process, the right techniques can help you overcome it. When trauma is not addressed intentionally, it is a missed opportunity to deepen our awareness for healing. Every process is different, but choosing to bring your authentic self to the work is empowerment. I want to experience the joy of acting again in other processes. Therefore, moving forward, I will continue to engage in conversations on trauma and make theatre training more equitable for immigrants and actors of color.
APPENDIX A: VOCAL WARM-UP
Warm-up Worksheet (borrowed from Professor Vivian Majkowski, UCF)

- Stand six inches apart. Gently roll around on the edges of your feet. Awareness of your breath and your body map (include an image of it) in space is vital
- Find your keystones (navicular bone that act as the keystone of the arch in the foot) by dropping the jaw, unlocking the knee as you release the sound in the space
- As you find the whole foot on the ground check up the kinetic chain: release any tension in the ankles, knees, and hips
- When the feet are planted on the ground it carries the entire weight of the body lessen spinal pressure
- Adjust your spine at the center of the body and release your heels into the floor so that the spine is malleable and not compressed. The neck is up and forward
- Do a survey of your body map from skull to your toes. Left foot forward, right foot back, lower your center of gravity
- Start to gently rock your right arm. Put some more energy into that motion as the hands go around and swing. Gather a little more energy from the transversus as you go the opposite direction and swing. Bring those feet back into parallel let your arm fall to gravity
- Right foot forward, left foot back lower your center of gravity and start swing your left arm. Put some more energy into that motion as the hands go around and swing
- Gather a little more energy from the transversus as you go the opposite direction and swing. Feet parallel
- Choose a target inhale and haa-aa-ahh and bring your left knee up
- Start swinging your legs open, think about the diagonals of the body
• Get some more energy with support of your transversus kick it up and kick it back and kick it up and let it go.

• Inhale your other knee up. Gather more energy with support of your transversus kick it up and kick it up and kick it back and let it go. Shake it all up and on three big X

• Release to gravity

• Acknowledge the thoughts of the past and future (breath) as you come into the present moment

• Allow yourself to go deeper into breath as we go through the planes of breath

• Think down and wide breath and inhaling into those intercostal muscles

• Let’s look at side to side breath (inhale through the mouth and exhale on haaa-aa ahhh)

• Planes of breath: Down and up breath, front to back breath, big beach ball breath

• Place a thumb down on the belly button, hands on the lower abdominal

• Create a grapefruit for your Dan Tien (lower abdominal area) and gently from there paint up the lumbar, thoracic, cervical vertebra.

• Let sound flow up the vertebrae into the skull

• Use your other hand to tap the third eye open

• Release back into the big X

• Inhale into the widest part of your ribs and release breath on a (haaaa-aa-ahhh)

• Ignite the vocal focus line and feel the vibrations in your body

• Arms back into the big X

• One foot on the ground knee in the air the other foot on the ground knee in the air

• Left knee up to the chest than right knee up to the chest

• Give yourself a hug a rock gently from side to side
• Inhale your image for contracting and squeeze all the muscles in your body
• See the down and wide inhale your image for stretching. Stretch your eyeballs open, tongue, breathing into the ribs
• Inhale and shake all the muscles in your body
• Big X releases gravity. Release all extraneous thoughts
• Open up our five senses: taste, touch, sight, sound, smell
• Move that image in the Dan Tien
• Come back to the room where you are now
• Wriggle your knees, toes, ankle, wrist, spine
• Make your way back to the big X
• One foot on ground, the knee in the air then the other foot on the ground knee in the air.
  Bring one knee up to your chest then the other knee up to your chest. The arms are perpendicular to your body.
• Flop your knees over to the left. Stacked one on top of the other.
• Inhaled and ahh those knees up to the left elbow
• Pick a tempo that is suitable for this warm-up.
• Reinvestigate in the knee being up to the left elbow
• Heads turned in the opposite direction of your knees
• Release to gravity and discover your transversus on a gentle huh
• Top knee rolls over on your belly other knee follows
• Inhale and on an ahh flop your knee to the right
• Bring your knees up to the right elbow
• Heads turned away
• Start the arm circle on a different tempo
• Reinvestigate your knees up to the right elbow and discover the transversus on a huh
• Roll over onto your back starting with your left knee on an inhale followed by your right knee
• Right foot on the mat then left foot follows

Backbend
• Feet on the ground, tuck hands to do a backbend, push pelvis upward towards the ceiling

Activating the Transversus
• Come up onto the tabletop position
• See your cupcake with a candle and place your upper teeth on the bottom lip
• Inhale blow through your teeth 1, 2, 3, 2, 1
• Go back long on the mat, bellies towards the mat

Tremor Exercise-Modified Bow
• Use the left hand to hold the left ankle
• Then use the right hand to hold right ankle
• Tighten your glutes, thighs, back,
• Release those muscles to gravity
• Think about your given circumstances and how it affects your breath,
• We begin by pushing down to go up, pushing the feet down towards the mat, releasing the neck, the shoulders, and the glutes
• Let sound fall out of the body
• Staying present with the breath and accessing breath where it’s accessible
• Inhaling into the planes of breath that are available to you
Back into child pose
Walk your fingers to the edge of the mat
Then to the left of the mat
Breath into those right ribs
Walk your fingers over to right
Breath into those left ribs
Walk to center and release to gravity
Let’s get the woofer open
don one leg up the other
Grab an elbow, then the other elbow
Shimmy that out activate the transversus

Tweeter Resonance Exercise
Place a triangle with your fingers underneath your third eye
A bi-labial trill unvoiced, then a voiced bi-labial trill
Tongue out an unvoiced trill then a voiced trill
Big professional yawn tongue behind the lower bottom teeth
Let’s paint the bones of the forehead by humming a light forward m

Getting Up
Tuck your toes under, make your feet as wide as the mat, and roll back into leapfrog
Tail bones up in the air, standing hanging over, comes up three phrases, four counts in
each phrase
Gently shimmying up the spine one vertebrae at a time and let the head be the final thing
that comes into place
• Get back on your alignment
• Find a target and exhale outward on an haa-aa-aah

Centering
• Gently drop your chin to your chest. Rotate your left ear to your left shoulders, breath, then chin to chest. Unlock your knees and release shoulders. Rotate your right ear to your right shoulders. Place your right hand on your head and remember to breathe through these stretches. The left fingers are pulled towards the ground in the opposite direction of the right shoulder. Rotate the left arm in a Pointer finger up, reach towards the ceiling, and scrape down the imaginary wall, arms releases towards the ribs and breath. Repeat this exercise on the right side.
• Slide your hand off your head and then chin to chest. Make a basket, place it on the widest part of your skull, then release your elbows to gravity. Gently look over to the right elbow (breath). Chin to chest. Look over to the left elbow (breath). Chin to chest. Release your hands.
• Place your fingers in the masseter or facial muscles. Then, up the temporomandibular joint, into the temporalis, down over the TMJ, into the masseter muscles. Warm up your pisiform bones and slide them through the masseter muscles. The neck is free, forward, and up.
• Twist your lips in opposite direction
• Place your pinky fingers at the corner of your lips. Pull your lip corners up, down, and diagonal. Take your pinky out from the corner of your lips. Inhale and exhale on a trill
• Stick your tongue out, left, right, up, down, and around
• Inhale and exhale on haaaa-aa-aah
• Then do a big professional yawn blending, extending, forward placement

• Finger painting from light to dark

• Feet apart, pick a color for woofer and tweeter, light color for tweeter sounds and dark sounds for woofers sounds.

• Start from woofer to tweeter region, rotate your hips in figure eights, activating the transverses

• Chewing a light M

• Place your target in the room, trill and release it on Haaa-aa-ah

• Chew a light M again, trill and release on unvoiced stop-plosives “b”, “d”, “g” voiced stop-plosives"p", "t", "k".

• You can do a variation of unvoiced and voiced stop-plosive “buh-puh-buh”, “duh-tuh-duh”, and “guh-kuh-guh” (Majkowski)
APPENDIX C: PLAY AND CHARACTER ANALYSIS
Formalist Analysis (borrowed from Professor Michael Wainstein, UCF)

Spectacle

Define the play’s genre: Magic Realism

Magical realism is a part of the realism genre of fiction. Within a work of magical realism, the world is still grounded in the real world, but fantastical elements are considered normal in this world.

Given Circumstances: Martin Luther King Jr. recuperates at his motel room at The Lorraine Motel after delivering a sermon at the Mason Temple in support of the sanitation workers.

The show opens with Martin Luther King Jr. calling after a friend to pick him up some Pall Malls. As he reenters the room, he attempts to write a new speech. He soon calls down to room service for a cup of coffee. In an attempt to write his speech, there is a knock at the door and Camae enters the scene. King invites her into the room, and they chitchat about the storm, God, and Mason Temple. He asks her for a cigarette, and she pulls out a Pall Mall and lights it for him. King convinces Camae to smoke just one cigarette with him, much to her chagrin as it is only her first day and she doesn’t quite know the workplace protocol on smoking with guests. King comments on her beauty and Camae begins cussing, immediately after feeling very guilty for having cussed in front of a preacher, when the phone rings. It is King’s wife, Corrie. He chats with her and lies about drinking tea. The phone is passed to his daughter Bernice, who has been having trouble sleeping. Wishing her a goodnight, he hangs up the phone and returns to Camae. She reprimands him for lying, they discuss her name, and King asks her for her advice on his mustache. They share her last cigarette and King pulls out tomorrow’s paper, reading the date, April 4. Reading, King reveals that people are worried for his safety and his own home has even
been bombed. As the thunder cracks, King jumps and his breath becomes labored. He reveals the sound of thunder does scare him quite deeply because it sounds like…fireworks.

King calls Camae pretty a second time as they begin to discuss the state of Detroit and the people there. Camae reveals she believes that walking or marching is not making any difference and it is about time people started making moves that are more serious. King asks her if she is an honorary Panther and expresses his frustration over the exploitation of riots for colored televisions. He tells her about the Sanitation March and how this peaceful protest, turned into an opportunity for looting. He talks about how he was whisked away, but badly wanted to stay and he mentions a young man, Larry Payne who had been recently killed.

King begins to wonder why his best friend, Ralph, has not yet returned. Camae teaches him how to smoke and soon shows him exactly what she would do if she were in his position. Her message for her imaginary crowd is for the black man to build his own life and community outside of the white society. She states that there is nothing that the white man has, that the black man needs, so “Fuck the white man”. He hears what she is saying and recognizes how tired he is and Camae asks how it is that we are all the same. King responds saying, we are all scared. King worries about Ralph and Camae pulls out an entirely new pack of Pall Malls. They begin to talk about the differences in the black community and the social hierarchy. King tells Camae if she were a man, she would be Malcolm X and that prompts her to call to the heavens and tell Malcolm X what King thinks of him. She laughs and King is terrified. King tells her he doesn’t like the way she talks about God, and she responds saying God doesn’t mind. Camae reveals that Malcolm is in heaven and that King will see him there soon, that God is a woman, and that God
likes King. Thunder rolls and King grabs at his heart exclaiming, “I can’t breathe”. Camae gets very worked up as King also beings to lose his cool. She calls him Michael and tries her best to calm him, but this only agitates him more. He accuses her of being in the CIA and stalking him. He attempts to throw her out, opening the door to his hotel room, but a wall of snow barricades him in. Camae reveals that she is in fact an angel who has been sent to help King to the other side. She tells King his daughter had prayed that he should not die alone. Camae was God’s way of answering those prayers. King begs to stay. He claims his work is not yet finished, that he has too much left to do on this earth and is not ready to die. He recognizes that he had begged for a break, for sweet release, but when faced with the prospect of death he retracted those pleas. He talks about plans and begs for more time. Camae agrees to call God and puts King on the phone with her. King begins talking with God and soon devolves in to yelling at her and God hangs up. King and Camae have a pillow fight and king begins to cry as he asks Camae to hold him.

Camae reveals her back-story as King attempts to call his wife or leave directions for his followers. He asks when it will happen, if it will hurt, and if she will be there. She takes care of everything and brings King to “the mountaintop” as she reveals the future to him. She shows him each person who carries on the baton, each world event and painful time. Camae puts her hand on his shoulder as he takes a breath and blackout.

**Time**

*Analysis:* The play takes place in room 306 at the Lorraine Motel on April 3rd, 1968. The main action of the play takes place on that night.
Inspirational connections: King delivery of his last sermon at Mason Temple reassured that he accepted his martyr. There was the time for King to prepare for this sermon. He had dwelled on the prospect of his early death, preaching his eulogy.

Place, or physical environment

The motel room door creaks open. It is raining outside, a storm. There is a red and yellow motel sign that is lit up outside. There is a table, windows, rotary phone, two beds, balcony, and a desk. The motel became a destination for blacks and appeared in the Negro Motorists Green Book or “Green Guide,” which identified establishments that welcomed black travelers when Jim Crow restrictions offered limited options for services and lodging. Inspirational Connections: This is a memorial site for Martin Luther King, Jr.

Society:

On February 12, 1968, 1,300 Black sanitation workers in Memphis began a strike to demand better working conditions and higher pay. Their stand marked an early fight for financial justice for workers of color as part of the civil rights movement. The strike also drew Martin Luther King Jr. and fatefuly became the setting for his “I’ve Been to the Mountaintop” speech and his assassination. Hauling trash, sometimes in the pouring rain, was a taxing and dirty job. Yet the city of Memphis expected garbage collectors to work long hours for meager wages and without overtime pay. Their compensation, 65 cents per hour, was so low that many were eligible for welfare and food stamps. Inspirational connections: Civil right movement, the death of two black sanitation workers, Echol Cole, and Robert Walker, galvanized the sanitation workers to strike.
Economics

Analysis: King was working on his Poor People Campaign when he came back to Memphis to support the sanitation workers. A march on Washington mall to advocate for underprivileged Americans of diverse races. The sanitation workers’ movement was “one that was explicitly about the link between economic injustice and racial injustice,” says Sokol, so it was "exactly the type of thing that King was working on."

Intellect and Culture

Analysis: A new generation of sound

With Beale Street as its home, Memphis’ sound was uncontainable. W.C. Handy wrote the first blues song published in America- Memphis Blues in 1912, Elvis Presley began his recording career at Memphis’ Sun Records, and B.B. King got his start on Beale Street. Memphis’ music has a history that spans decades and genres. In the 1960s, the Memphis Sound, a mixture of blues, R&B, and soul, was created at Stax Records featuring the work of Otis Redding, Isaac Hayes, The Bar-Kays and more. The men and women dressed in their Sunday’s best. Modest dressing, cocktail dresses, suits, and ties. Camae’s press and curls getting wet in the rain.

Spirituality

Analysis: Throughout his civil rights career, Dr. King was a practicing Baptist minister. He considered it his highest calling:

But before I was a civil rights leader, I was a preacher of the gospel. This was my first calling, and it remains my greatest commitment. You know, all that I do in civil rights I do because I
consider it a part of my ministry. I have no other ambitions in life but to achieve excellence in
the Christian ministry.

MLK considered his politics to be inseparable from his religious beliefs. In "Mountaintop," Dr. K
repeatedly invokes Jesus, urging his audience to avoid violence and to follow the example of
the Good Samaritan. He also alludes to the "Creator" of the Declaration of Independence, that
big Geppetto in the sky who, we're told, creates everyone equal.

Dr. King uses these various forms of religious belief in "Mountaintop" to explain and justify
social-justice activism and to assure his audience that their efforts will succeed. After all, Jesus is
on the side of justice, and he can put the points up on the scoreboard.

Camae constantly apologizes when she cusses in front of Dr. King. King reprimands Camae
when she blasphemy God. They both honor God will for their life and extend his grace to each
other. Camae acknowledges that she is a sinner, but God extends mercy and grace towards her.
God give her a second chance to cleanse her soul for eternal life.

**The World of the Play**

This play is the humanization of a lionize Civil Rights leader. Hall wanted to depict King
humanness in the play so that the audience can place themselves in his shoes. To inspire the
audience that they too can be agents of change. King believed that were all God’s children and
we should treat each other as such, regardless of race, creed, or sexuality, The paly challenges
King’s understanding of God as Camae blasphemies this religion. King was held in such high
regard, but he was just a man who had to confront fear and his martyr. Camae is King’s guardian
angel who ushers him to the other side. The atmosphere of the play is humorous, reflective, whimsical, ominous (threatening), fearful, and tense.

**Character Analysis:**

Camae is twenty-seven-year-old women

**Type:** strong, blunt, charming, caring, playful, personable, fiery, funny

Down to earth individual who has experienced hardships as a black woman living during the Civil Rights era/ Jim Crow South.

**Role in society:** She was a maid; this was a common job role for black women in the 1960s.

**Physical traits:** young, beautiful, pretty

**Mental traits:** Camae is on a journey of forgiving herself and others that have hurt her. She learns to forgive by extended grace and compassion to King. She wants to make people feel good because it’s her calling. “Speak by love. Die by Hate”. She says anything that comes to her mind to vent. She embodies trauma from being raped, murder, and abuse. She laughs to keep her soul alive.

**Conflict of objectives:**

- The lightning/weather is a distraction against Camae revealing that she is an angel sent by God. King is terrified of the lightning, paranoid about the FBI, death threats, and people harming him and his family.
- King becoming erratic
- King’s resistance to dying
- Berniece prayers
Willpower:

- Obedience to God
- This is the only way for Camae to receive eternal life and a second chance from God. To usher King to the other side.

Complexity: She realizes that it’s difficult to tell an esteemed civil right leader that he will die violently by the hands of a white man. She has no other choice but to follow the instruction of the creator to redeem her soul.

External Actions:

- Camae stands in the doorway, one hand holding a newspaper over her head to catch the rain, the other balancing a tray
- She waits for King to let her in his motel room
- She set the tray on the table
- King asks about the cost for the room service. She states that it is on the house and suggests that she pay her a tip for getting wet in the rain
- King starts coughing. Camae suggests tea instead of coffee
- King mentions that he is hoarse from shouting. They talk about his sermon at Mason Temple
Uta Hagen’s *The Six Steps* (Hagen, 134)

**WHO AM I?**

- **What is my present state of being?**
  - I’m an angel sent by God to usher Martin Luther King Jr., from this life to the next. He is my first assignment since I pass over to the other side. I don’t want to reveal my identity when I first encounter King, so I engage in light conversation with him. I don’t know how he will react when I tell him he is going to die by a bullet tomorrow.

- **How do I perceive myself?**
  - I’m wild, funny, attractive, sassy, flirtatious, comforting, and playful. I like to make people laugh. There’s so much pain in the world so we laugh to keep ourselves from dying. I’m hard heading. I fight for what I believe is right. I’m not afraid to get my hands dirty if needs be.

- **What am I wearing?**
  - A maid attire, heels, apron, pearl necklace and earrings. I’m carrying a newspaper and the cup of coffee that King requested.

- **What are the given circumstances?**
  - **What time is it? The year, the season, the day?**
    - It is April 3rd, 1968, in Memphis, Tennessee at The Lorraine Motel room 306
  - **At what time does my selected life begin?**
    - Night
  - **Where am I?**
• Stormy Night, room 306 at the Lorraine Motel

○ What surrounds me?
  • A table, windows, rotary phone, bed, balcony, desk
  • Monsoon, rainy, stormy, snow

○ The condition of the place and the nature of the objects in it?
  • The décor of the motel room is simple. The curtains are thick to block the sun out and intruders. What are the immediate circumstances?

○ What has just happened, is happening?
  • I was murdered last night in a back alley. I went to heaven to receive judgement for my life on earth. God gave me an assignment to usher Martin Luther King Jr. into heaven and wash away my sins

○ What do I expect or plan to happen next and later?
  • I will have to reveal to King that I’m an angel sent by God to usher him into Heaven. I will tell him that his time on earth has transpired. He will have to pass the baton on

• What are my relationships?
  ○ I’m new to this environment. I never met King in-person so I’m a bit anxious to see him in the flesh. I don’t know if I will be able to convince King that God had sent me here to take him on the other side. I notice when King gets flirtatious, and I’ll change the subject of conversation. I’m aware that he is a married man and a father of four.

• What do I want? What is my main objective?
  ○ I want to complete my mission
• My immediate need or objective?
  o I want to engage King in conversation with me. I want to alert King of his mortality. I want to comfort King. I want to tease King
  o What is in the way of what I want?
    ▪ King’s resistance to his martyr
    ▪ King’s temper when he suspects that I’m spy or a part of the FBI
    ▪ Time. King needs more time to finish his sermon. Camae must complete her assignment.
  o How do I overcome it?
    ▪ I attempt to deescalate the situation and comfort him
    ▪ I reveal that I’m an angel sent by God. I listened to the prayers of his youngest daughter. The prayers have touched my heart
    ▪ I call him by Michael to calm him down

• WHAT DO I DO TO GET WHAT I WANT?
  o How can I achieve my objective?
  o What’s my behavior?
    ▪ Compassionate, caring, sincere, bossy, blunt, reflective, self-aware, assertive, charismatic, enthusiastic, talkative
  o What are my actions?
    ▪ See script
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