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THE TEMPEST
DEFENDING PROSPERA- THE IDEATION OF SPIRITUAL LINEAGE
AND PRACTICE IN PERFORMANCE FOR AN AFRO-HAITIAN
AMERICAN ACTOR

By

Iva- Kristi Maria Papailler

B.A., The University of Louisville, 2009

A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of the College of Arts and Sciences of the University
of Louisville in Partial fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Fine Arts

Department of Theatre Arts

University of Louisville

Louisville, Kentucky

May 2014

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A Thesis Approved on March 24th, 2014

By the following Thesis Committee:

Professor Nefertiti Burton

Dr. Amy Steiger

Professor Karen Chandler

DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to God, Jesus Christ, my ancestors and all of the protective, benevolent divine entities. To my father, Dr. Hubert Papailler and mother Mrs. Lutitia Papailler without whose undying support, patience and guidance this would not have been possible. It is also dedicated to my daughter Maya Berkley whose strength of character, daring spirit and dedication to performing in all areas of her life with integrity is in part the inspiration for completing this degree. Finally, it is dedicated to my brother Hubert Jou Jou Papailler for insisting I pursue acting even before I ever imagined my place on the stage. Thanks Jou.

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I would also like to thank the teachers who have proven crucial to my development as an artist and citizen of the world. They are Professor Nefertiti Burton, Dr. Rinda Frye, Charlotte Nellis, Lorna Littleway, Sue Lawless, Dr. Amy Steiger, Dr. Lundeana Thomas and so many others.

ABSTRACT

THE TEMPEST

DEFENDING PROSPERA- THE IDEATION OF SPIRITUAL LINEAGE AND PRACTICE IN PERFORMANCE FOR AN AFRO-HAITIAN AMERICAN ACTOR

Iva-Kristi Papailler

March 24, 2014

Imagine: William Shakespeare's final hero, Prospero and all of his beautiful and majestic White, Italian maleness played by an Afro-Haitian American actress. Something changes. No longer does the audience see a traditional view of the character onstage. The audience sees a woman of African descent delivering lines written for a man of European descent. They may or may not question what they are seeing: certainly, I the actor, must. My Blackness brings an ancestral line to the production that makes a variety of traditional African religions part of Prospera's spiritual lineage. My Blackness and gender also imbue Prospera with a cultural and ancestral world view that presents dynamic possibilities for interpretation of the character. These opportunities for diversity shaped the magic, redemption of and the spiritual practices of the Prospera I performed. My spiritual practices have influenced and been influenced by my journey as a theatre artist. The magic of theatre, the craft of acting and the pursuit of its mastery has broadened my knowledge and understanding of my spiritual lineage.

This thesis will examine the ideas presented in the previous statement in the framework of theatre as a spiritual practice and its potential as a healing art. In Chapters 1 and 2 of this thesis I will chronicle my discovery of and development in this medium before I entered the MFA in Theatre Performance and Graduate Certificate in African American Theatre programs at the University of Louisville. In Chapter 3 I will chronicle how my classroom experiences aided in my spiritual and artistic growth. In Chapter 4 I will explore how the practice of Tai Chi and Qi Gong influenced my artistic and spiritual development. In Chapter 5, I will discuss my spiritual and artistic experiences of selected rehearsal and production processes I participated in while a student in the program. In Chapter 6, I will explore the spiritual lineage and practice I imagined for Prospera with emphasis on the questions I have raised in the introductory statement. In Chapter 7, I will discuss the preparation, rehearsal and performance processes of my thesis role as Prospera in *The Tempest*. Finally, in Chapter 8, I will present my conclusions regarding the questions stated in the above introduction.

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CHAPTER I- IN DEFIANCE OF SIBLING RIVALRY

Train up a child in the way he should go, and when he is old, he will not depart from it.
(Thomas Nelson Publishers. 751)

I come from a family of artists. My mother is an opera singer turned civil rights activist and my father was a poet and novelist turned politician and later scholar. Our family time consisted of many evenings gathered around the piano singing tunes like “*Ave Maria*,” “*He That Keepeth Israel*,” and a barrage of gospel melodies. Sometimes, if we were really good or if I was particularly frightened, my father would read his poetry or tell in his animated way, a story from his native Haiti. These evenings were absolute magic to me and are the foundational memories of my life as an artist.

My father and mother happily took on the role of griot. Both were avid storytellers and would frequently recount stories of their lives and the lives of our ancestors. My father’s storytelling included his novels and poetry. My mother’s included stories of her childhood and her work for human rights. Both of my parents extended their artistry into working as scholars, teachers and activists. I was raised during this extension and am grateful to have witnessed their work in these fields.

My mother was adamant that I sing, and it was her instruction and encouragement that led me to begin singing in public at around five years old. This was no easy feat due to my shy nature. She always coaxed me through the moments before I would sing in front of the church. I still use her deep breathing, prayer and visualization methods

today. I have to admit that though singing was something I did well as a youth, I had built up a firm resistance to acting. That was my brother's thing.

I was a nuisance to my brother and he was a nuisance to me. He made good grades, ushered at church, sang in the choir, played soccer at an Olympic level and was well liked. My grades were not as good, I asked too many questions in Sunday school and had little hand-eye coordination. He was eight years older and older-brother mean to me and so I made it a point to disavow any similarities until well into adulthood. Even when I discovered the soul-freeing catharsis of singing onstage as Mary Poppins in the seventh grade or the thrill of putting on play after play with my friends in our basement, I downright refused the generations' long call to artistry and performance.

Ironically my brother is entirely responsible for my introduction to film and stage work. It was he who insisted I accompany him to what would be the first of many auditions. The year was 1987, I was 11, he 20 and the only reason I went was to get a break from my science homework. My brother was in college and though he was majoring in Biology, performed in many of the University of Louisville's plays. I was constantly in awe of his talent and shrugged off his suggestions that acting was something I would be good at or even enjoy. On the evening he invited me to audition for a university production I was nervous and, despite my complaints, thrilled to be going somewhere with my big brother. We arrived at the school and I remember seeing the signs pointing to a classroom where the auditions were being held. I was handed a monologue to review and in reviewing it I discovered the fun of playing a character.

The monologue consisted of a barrage of cut downs aimed at another little girl in town. I remember that there were lines to the effect of: *“that cross-eyed buck-toothed so and so. Every time I talk to her I don’t know if she’s looking at me or some hole in the ground.”* Well I thought this was delightful and a bit of a coup. Calling names was a sin, but in theatre it seemed one could do so and not worry about forgiveness or apology. The opportunity to call names without getting into trouble or hurt anyone’s feelings turned my refusal to do anything remotely like my big brother into a passion for getting the role. From this time on theatre became the bridge that would transform my relationship with my brother from sibling rivalry to one of mutual support and encouragement. In the end I did not get the role but my desire to act publically had been born.

I say publically because throughout my childhood my neighborhood playmates and I had enjoyed many basement productions. I didn’t know it then but I suppose I began directing at the age of six or seven. A conflict would come up in our group and I would insist that the angry parties replay the incident to discover the truth of the situation; often with side-coaching from me dictating how I thought it should have turned out. Eventually this developed into small plays with themes taken from popular stories such as *The Wizard of Oz*, *Little Red Riding Hood*, *Gremlins* and *Space Camp*.

I was bossy, or rather, as Ethel Waters put it, “I’ve always been a person to know her own mind” (Waters 8). I would insist on telling each friend what their role was and then would jump in to perform my part. I realize in hindsight that I was developing my aesthetic and listening to some muse because I just had a strong sense of how it needed to go.

I did not begin developing my own ability for characterization until the seventh grade. My school was putting on *Mary Poppins* and it was one of my favorite movies. I desperately wanted to play Bert. I was charmed by the character's freedom in moving from artist, to chimney sweep; it seemed he could be whatever he wanted and I wanted to act that out. It did not occur to me to audition for that role. I instead decided that I desperately wanted to be one of his chimney-sweeping cronies. I was one of the few African Americans in the auditioning pool and was well aware of the racism rampant in the environment. I thought that the only way I would even be considered for a secondary role would be to audition for the role of Mary Poppins. That way Mrs. Nellis, the choral and play director, would at least cast me as one of the coveted chimney sweeps. To my utter surprise she cast me as Mary Poppins.

This casting marked the beginning of what would be one of the most important teacher-student relationships of my life. I read the cast list over and over and ran to Mrs. Nellis saying "there's a mistake on the cast list. I can't play Mary Poppins." Mrs. Nellis looked troubled, smiled at me and said "Kristi, you are the best person for the role. You earned it and you WILL play Mary Poppins." And that was that. I signed the cast list.

The following weeks were intense. It seemed Fern Creek Kentucky was not completely ready for an African American Mary Poppins. Mrs. Nellis sat me down the day after I had signed the cast list. She told me that some of the white parents were angry that she had cast me in the role. She went on to tell me I was not to quit no matter how difficult the situation became. She warned me that I would likely hear the other students saying nasty things about a black girl playing Mary Poppins. She told me not to react but to tell her or the principal. Perhaps the most important things she said to me that day was

that I earned the role, that I was one of the first African American students to get the role they'd earned and that racism was a sickness that I could not let infect me. I left her classroom determined to be the best Mary Poppins they'd ever seen. My heart had broken a little, but my eyes were wide open.

Mrs. Nellis was right. The early rehearsal process was fraught with many derogatory comments from a few students and parents. I even lost a fist fight after someone remarked that Mary Poppins couldn't have short hair. Soon enough the negativity around the production settled down and in the end it was a very good 7th grade acting premiere. The next year I played the Tin Man in *The Wizard of Oz*.

Before I began acting, I thought that it was deceitful and asked my parents many questions about the matter. I didn't understand how the actors could intentionally convince an audience that they were someone else without facing a horrible punishment from God. "You shall destroy those who speak falsehood; the Lord abhors the bloodthirsty and deceitful man." (Thomas Nelson Publishers. 611) My parents explained to me that actors were telling a story and that because the audience knew they were not really the character they were not being deceitful. This concern had to do with my spiritual upbringing as a Southern Baptist. The Christian and Jewish "Ten Commandments" formed a large part of the moral rules for our household.

My family was moderately Christian. Instead of accepting the dogma that married Christians must be of the same denomination, my parents had retained the religious practices of their upbringings. My father was Catholic and my mother was Southern Baptist. My family was also progressively feminist, and I was encouraged to

experience my girlhood and race as strengths rather than accepted oppressions. My brother and I were baptized and to a great extent raised to be religiously Baptist.

Attendance of Catholic and Baptist services encouraged me to question dogmatic approaches to denominational Christianity. I noticed several conflicting viewpoints between the practices. Among them were the Baptist prohibition of alcohol and the Catholic practice of serving communion wine at each service; the Catholic sacrament of confession to a priest and the Baptist belief that Christ's sacrifice placed him in an intercessory position; and the quiet and orchestrated style of Catholic worship services in contrast to the spontaneous and loud style of the Baptist worship. I loved and respected both of my parents deeply and could see the value and truth in both practices.

My constant questioning of Sunday school teacher after Sunday school teacher would eventually land me in the pastor's office at ten. The question of the day was, "If God created everything, who created God?" It's taken me twenty-seven years to accept his answer, "God always was." I sought to live in the overlap between my parent's faiths and make sense of my deep feeling that the doctrine of Christ, as I was being taught, was one part of a much larger spiritual mystery throughout my youth. I did not question that Jesus was real, born of a virgin, died for our sins or ascended into heaven. I questioned the idea that monks under the direction of power hungry Kings had accurately and objectively recorded all that had taken place since the dawn of time. I viscerally rejected the notion that though a person might be good and morally upright according to their custom, community and spiritual path, unless they adopted the religion of Western slavery and conquest, they would be condemned in the afterlife. The fact that Christianity (albeit woefully falsified and misused) had been used as a tool to enslave and

oppress my ancestors became a major sticking point for me during dinner time family discussions about religion. I often found myself vocalizing questions about the totality of our family's religious beliefs and practices. "Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding: In all thy ways acknowledge Him and He shall direct your paths." (Thomas Nelson Publishers. 724) This verse in the bible led me to remain open-minded about many of the interpretations my church and family had of the bible and practice of Christianity.

If God was all and always was how could we possibly know all or how could anyone person have captured it in one book? It didn't make sense to me. My mind often drifted back to the story of the Tower of Babel when the world was tossed into linguistic confusion and scattered around the earth after trying to reach God. I had trouble with the notion that there was any one way to worship or believe and found evidence to the contrary in my own household.

This individual searching, among other childhood trials, infrequently led to the need for solitude, which consisted of climbing my favorite tree, diary in tow, ignoring all calls to "get in here now," in favor of posing my questions to God directly and writing stories and secrets in my diary for hours on end. It occurs to me just now that my parents or brother could easily have used a ladder or in my brother's case, climbed to the recliner-like branch that was my perch and forcibly remove me. They did not and I am thankful they gave me that space.

Something else happened in all those hours in that tree. It became my hallowed place and my sanctuary. As Hermann Hesse wrote:

Trees are sanctuaries. Whoever knows how to speak to them, whoever knows how to listen to them, can learn the truth. They do not preach learning and precepts, they preach, undeterred by particulars, the ancient law of life. (58)

I would settle into the crook of the tree's branches and feel the gentle movement of the earth and the soft caress of the wind. I spent hours listening to the "tat-a-tat-tat" and "swish-saah" of her leaves and imagined them her children. I wondered at the design of her being and studied each line of her trunk and branch. I watched with diligence the ants and birds that also found rest, sustenance and surrender there. I was in awe of God's creation and this aspect of nature was something that I didn't question. It was a saving grace, though not covered in Sunday school or mass. I found comfort and appreciated the tree's song, strength and safety.

When I was seven I accepted Jesus as my savior and was baptized. When I was five I began to have dreams of women sitting in a circle dressed in white. These women seemed to me to be relatives, ancestors, people I knew but had never met. The dreams were always comforting and though they faded as I got older, their image remains a comforting and motivating memory.

My Haitian father's practice of Catholicism did not include the practice of Vodun, but our ancestry and some of our living relatives find truth, sustenance and salvation in the practice. As I matured I found it necessary to learn more about Haiti and the religion of my ancestors in addition to my continued practice of Christianity. I discuss in chapter 5 how theatre and my graduate school experience provided opportunities to do affirming research and artistic work about Vodun and Haitian culture.

My mother's voice and my father's pen extended beyond the artistry of the performing and fine arts to include social activism and scholarship. The creation of art with a message of racial, ethnic and gender equality was so central to the lives of my parents that their free time was spent sharing these skills and values with my brother and me. My mother and father instilled a set of Christian values in me that taught me to always discern and trust and honor the divinity in myself and others. Their non-dogmatic approach to these teachings allowed me to experience God in many manifestations and to search for my own spiritual truths and path. I learned to question unjust systems of secular, institutionalized and religious oppression and to embrace this questioning as part of my spiritual practice from them. My brother and I shared this value system and became the artists for social change my parents had nurtured.

CHAPTER II- HAVING ACCEPTED THE CALL

A man's heart plans his way, but the Lord directs his steps.(Thomas Nelson Publishers. 741)

By the time I was in high school my brother had begun acting in industrials and commercials with a local production company. My brother introduced me to the president and casting directors of that production company. My teenage years were filled with many industrials and a few local commercials because of this introduction. I had little confidence in my ability to act as a teenager, and would not have pursued the craft if he had not made this introduction. I am grateful for his encouragement and networking on my behalf. The bulk of my commercial and industrial work was for Papa John's Pizza. I played Krissy, the friendly customer service representative for many years.

I know that the facility with which I was able to adapt to film work was a blessing and this grace was in part extended to me through my mother's prayers. My mother, seeing how nervous I would get before the early shoots, would always say a little prayer with me before I got out of the car. As I matured, I began to say the little prayers by myself.

My time in the make-up chair would leave my mind time to race with thoughts of failure combatted by self-assurances that I could do it, that I did know my lines and that the Creator had already given me the victory. It was as if as soon as I stepped onto the set the Creator's grace surrounded me with such force that there was nothing but the task at hand. I was free to create. Initially it was an odd, almost terrifying experience.

This experience of God's grace in performance is difficult to articulate, though I know it is an experience most artists know well and call by many different names. For me it is as if I am filled with something greater than myself yet wholly present. There is no fear and a great knowing that I am exactly where I am meant to be in space and time. Everything is in sharp focus. My senses are heightened. There is a current of communication with my cast mates and with the audience that creates a kind of communion wherein we share a story. During this time, on a good night, I am completely surrendered to the character and my prayer is that I am used as a vessel to reach whoever with whatever they need from that show.

The early experience of this grace was not enough to convince me to dedicate my life to the stage at the time. I was in college before I considered acting onstage again. Live performance in high school had been limited to the debate team. This was because I thought that acting as a career choice would be non-lucrative and I was adamant that I participate in creating a more just society. I had decided to become a lawyer.

I entered my freshman year of college as a criminal justice major. Serendipity quickly changed it to Theatre Arts. I got married the summer between my freshman and sophomore years and was expecting my daughter by November of my sophomore year. My plan had been to take volleyball as my physical education requirement in the spring semester. However, my pregnancy ruled that out and so I took Acting & Directing the Black Experience.

The University of Louisville had recently begun the first African American Theatre program in the United States. This program offered courses that proved invaluable to my development as a theatre professional. This class (Acting & Directing

the Black Experience) offered the balance of activism and creativity that I needed. Here were characters whose experiences through the eyes of an audience would change the perception of African Americans as inferior and deserving of oppression to, I hoped, equal human beings with rights therein. Taking on these characters helped me to validate my own experiences as an Afro-Haitian American and understand the context and history of the African American condition. By the end of the school term, I realized that theatre and acting were my calling. I didn't look back.

It strikes me as ironic that my decision to formally study the creative art of theatre was catalyzed by the beginning of my daughter's life. I transitioned into motherhood just as I would begin to enter and "give birth" to one creative process after another. I knew the pain of growing up with very few reflections of African American (never mind Haitian) life on television or in theatre. My daughter's laughter, cries and precocious personality motivated me to do work that would provide her with positive images of African Americans and provide lessons, stories and reflections that would prepare her for life as an African American woman.

I had the opportunity to perform roles such as Dussy Mae in *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*, The Wizard in *The Wiz* and Dean Gilmore in *Twilight Los Angeles* as a student in the African American Theatre program. During these creative processes the characteristics of African American theatre (ritual, spectacle, hero as comedic, rhythm, character, spirituality, and symbolism) became clearer to me. It was an important time of giving voice to the deep expressions I felt in my soul but had until that time not been able to affirm or validate. I was able to discover and artistically demonstrate my connection to the African American experience.

W.E.B Dubois' edict that Black theatre should be "For us, by us, near us and about us" became the inspiring statement to my co-founding of Juneteenth Legacy Theatre in 1999. A number of factors had made it necessary for me to choose between continuing my education (I was a junior that year) and finding full time work. I chose to leave school, work full time in arts administration and dedicate my free time to the development of JLT. Some years, acting in Juneteenth's summer Jamboree became my one annual acting experience.

Juneteenth would be Kentucky's only professional African American Theatre company for the duration of its operations in Louisville from 1999-2010. We produced 137 new works about the African American experience as staged readings and/or fully staged productions during that time. I acted in or directed many of our productions in addition to functioning as a producer and theatre educator for the company.

The freedom to create theatre for African American audiences for so long was wonderful. Each summer we would hold the Juneteenth Jamboree of New Plays at Actors Theatre of Louisville. During this time we would stage up to 13 plays. They began as classical staged readings with the traditional "sticks and stools" (music stands and bar stools). Over time, the readings evolved into staged productions with scripts in hand. Our rehearsal period for each piece was usually about 15 hours. It was during these brief rehearsal periods that my development as an actor and director accelerated. It was absolutely necessary. Our audiences were not interested in excuses about limited rehearsal time.

I found a new method for character development. First I would allow the rhythm of the character's speech to inform their emotional state, goals and obstacles. Then I

would allow the text and rhythm of the other characters' speeches to inform the pitch with which my tactics would be employed. These would be ideas with which I approached the first reading. Before the first reading of the script the playwright would speak with us about their vision for the work.

As soon as the first reading was finished we were usually on our feet blocking the show. The talk from the playwright and reading would have been full of discoveries for me. I learned to surrender to the voice of the playwright and character in order to incorporate these discoveries and keep my character development on pace with the overall production schedule. The work required being in a state of fluid, focused, creative relaxation that relies heavily on the tenets of African American theatre. The playwright usually attended each rehearsal and would give notes with the director. Each performance was an extraordinary continuum of discovery in part because it had not been rehearsed for weeks. As Anne Bogart recommends in her *And Then You Act*, the dynamics insisted that I "Hold on tightly, and let go lightly" (55), dumping any preconceived notions about my character's goals in favor for the truth of any given moment. This sense of a continuum of discovery increases the actor's "presence" onstage and is an ongoing influence in my work.

I enjoyed many other stages both community and professional before entering the MFA program at the University of Louisville and earned membership in Actors Equity Association. They include; Stage One: The Louisville Children's Theatre, Kentucky Repertory Theatre, The Blue Apple Players, Looking for Lilith Theatre Company, Pandora Productions and Pleiades Theatre for Women.

Two experiences were paramount in my decision to seek an MFA in Theatre Performance. The first was during the ninth year of Juneteenth Legacy Theatre's Annual Juneteenth Jamboree of New Works. A guest director who was one of the first women to direct a Broadway show and who was a Tony Award voter was assigned to direct me in a full-length one woman show about Diana Sands. Toward the end of the first rehearsal she asked me to tell her what kind of actor I was. She asked, "Are you a Method actor, and are you Stanislavsky trained, Viewpoints, Adler?" I had little idea what she meant and said as much.

It had been years since I had been a student in an acting classroom. I stared blankly at her. "I need to know how to talk to you. What is your vocabulary?" she pressed. I mumbled something I'd heard someone remark about another actor. "I'm an organic actor," I said. She looked incredulous, further questioned me about my undergraduate training and suggested I spend the evening reviewing Cohen's *Acting One*.

This review let me know that somewhere along the way I had ceased to take myself seriously as an artist. It had become a hobby I enjoyed once or twice a year. I was coasting. In rehearsal I was proving that I could read well, project, slightly affect a character and stand up straight. That was it. I'd moved into presentation versus embodiment and I was not happy about it.

The presentation versus embodiment I was doing onstage was in many ways a reflection of how I was living my life at the time. My days were spent crunching numbers, planning production calendars and writing contracts to facilitate the work of other artists. I would occasionally have the opportunity to write a lesson plan for other theatre educators but rarely made the time to share them with students in person. Outside

of my work for Juneteenth, and the occasional call to fill in for an errant actor, I had no direct contact with theatre as an artist.

My spiritual life was suffering as well. I'd stopped talking to, much less listening to God, and my light was slowly going out. I became physically ill. My spiritual disregard for things not material had manifested in my body.

I found myself unduly fatigued. In my early youth, I had been nimble and athletic. In my mid-twenties I settled into the sedentariness of spending my days either at my desk or in front of the television. I put on a lot of weight. It became impossible to climb the stairs to my office without needing to stop between flights to catch my breath. I began to have intense migraines and my thoughts and speech went from sharp and articulate to fuzzy and halting. My legs became weak and one morning after a few hours of a by then rare afternoon of playing volleyball with friends, I tried to stand and fell to my bedroom floor. It was as if my legs below my thighs were no longer receiving movement signals from my brain.

The injury was an anomaly and puzzled my doctor to no end. I had strained one of my Achilles tendons, aggravated shin splint scars from high school track and separated the calf muscles in both of my legs from the bones. I underwent many neurologic tests because the injuries were not consistent with the length of time I'd played volleyball. I spent one week crawling at home and in a wheelchair at work. In reflection I realize that this forced lowered position was likely an opportunity to return to prayer, but at the time I was too afraid, angry and ashamed to engage in serious dialogue with God.

It was not until a year or so later, some months after having been diagnosed with a nervous system disorder, that I swallowed my pride and recalled how to pray. I was

desperate. I'd gone to visit my mother and though I had not shared the diagnosis with her, she knew I was in trouble. She placed her hand on my forehead and pled the blood of Jesus over my life. I had never experienced this before.

In Christianity, this act spiritually covers an individual in the blood that Jesus shed on the cross. It marks them with the sacrifice of His life, reminding the principalities that the person's sins are forgiven and that the person is through Christ's intercession and sacrifice, a brother or sister of Christ and child of God. It stops and protects the individual, their family, home and life from demonic or malevolent attacks.

When my mother did this for me my life changed. Within months my faith was restored, I began to attend services again; and found that the more I praised God, the better I felt. A peace I had never known, like a deep knowing that "all things work together for the glory of God" took the place of the worry, anxiety and anger I had known before. As time went on I no longer depended on the promises or behavior of people to feel secure, and instead learned to depend on the promises and love of God. Finally I prayed for healing and the removal of the lesions that were on my brain. I received it and that brush with physical, spiritual and emotional debilitation turned my life around.

I was laid off from the job that was so unfulfilling and began to teach acting at a performing arts school. I went back to school and finished my undergraduate degree, changing my major to humanities to expedite the process. My health steadily improved.

I taught acting for several years and sought out opportunities to work as an actor. During this time I was blessed with the opportunity to work at Kentucky Repertory Theatre and earn membership in Actors Equity Association. I did three shows with them and during these runs I returned to that guest director's questions, "What kind of actor are

you? What is your vocabulary?” I was teaching Stanislavsky but knew that my vocabulary for acting and directing was not contained solely by that method. I’d encountered Augusto Boal’s Theatre of the Oppressed and started a Boal playgroup with a friend. This work did much to satisfy my need to work expressively in a medium that was both theatre and social justice. However I continued to search for more tools for my students and for myself.

The second experience that led me to seek an MFA in theatre performance came while I was teaching at the performing arts school. My search for a more personally accurate vocabulary, aesthetic and the need to work in ensemble led me to New York. I attended SITI Company’s Viewpoints and Suzuki five week winter intensive.

I had long been fascinated by the presence and picturesque honesty of SITI Company’s work and was humbled by the opportunity to train with SITI. The training was both invigorating and intimidating. The physical demands of the Suzuki work often made my legs -and those of my classmates- tremble uncontrollably. Barney O’Hanlan, one of the company’s lead actors and trainers would say, “You are not going to die. Do not be ashamed. Tremble.” Many of the exercises left us gasping for breath. The instructors would coach us through, “There is no need to gasp. Slow yourself down. You are not going to die. Control your breath.” Two things were happening in these moments. I was beginning to learn how to be unashamedly vulnerable about and accepting of my limitations and weaknesses and how to connect with my body and calm it intentionally.

I had brunch with the guest director while I was in New York. She requested that I bring my resume for her to review. After a few pleasantries, she said, “Well I’m glad

you've finally decided to answer your call. You've come all the way here for this training. You must want it very badly. I will help you. When can you move?" I trembled. I thought of my daughter, then thirteen. New York was not a place I imagined raising her. I thought of the comfort of having lived in the same place. I thought of the insecurity of audition after audition, the normalcy of being one of hundreds if not thousands of actresses in that city. I explained as much to her and she talked at length about other options I could explore. One of those was to go to graduate school.

When I returned to Louisville I found that my vocabulary for acting, teaching and directing more fully embodied my aesthetic. Though Suzuki was not something I used with my students, the understanding of how to resonate with the whole body, improved my vocal coaching tremendously. The Suzuki training also led to a greater understanding and addressing of stage-fright and blockages. The viewpoints training when paired with Stanislavski techniques allowed me to work with students from a naturalistic place that presented acting as a physical, spiritual and emotional experience rather than a purely intellectual one. I was reinvigorated and eventually combined Theatre of the Oppressed with Viewpoints and Improv work in social justice summer camps for middle school students.

The different ways that people can be aware of space to try to create spectral realms and spatial sculptures by means of bodily movements and gestures are almost infinite. [...] To the individual in action, space is primarily a kinesthetic feeling- a feeling that reaches well beyond the body. To the spectator, space is a kinesthetic feeling to the extent that he is able to identify with the performer. But to the spectator, space is also a visual pattern "out there"- a pattern woven by the

performing figure. Where several figures appear, their positions and motions define space. Again compared with performers, spectators are more fully conscious of the overall visual pattern of space: the space of spectators-even while it visibly changes before their eyes- is less packed with tingling energy than the space experienced by the performers. (Counsell and Wolf 159-60)

The above statement by Yi-Fu Tuan articulates the delicate dance that actors perform onstage and that training in Viewpoints invites the actor to join. I have found that exploring Viewpoints tremendously affected my work as an actor. Of particular impact is my aesthetic of spatial relationships and their use in telling a story. Before I received training in Viewpoints, I received a lot of direction about where to stand in relationship to other characters. After the training and indeed many hours in it, watching my classmates compose wonderful movements my understanding deepened and I began to make more active spatial choices.

It continues to be part of my aesthetic. I find that teaching Viewpoints in my acting classes brings the student to more spatially aware and dynamic choices in scene work. Onstage it becomes a tool for tactic, goal and expectation. Most importantly it taught me the value of articulating the comfort of being observed. There is a spiritual aspect to this comfort and in the experience of Viewpoint composition that at once embraces the fragility of human interaction and celebrates the strength and beauty of community and solitude.

Tadashi Suzuki's method has the following purpose: "To uncover and bring to the surface the physically perceptive sensibility which actors had originally, before the theatre acquired its various codified performing styles, and to heighten their innate expressive abilities." (Zarrilli 163)

The training teaches the actor to resonate with the whole body. Suzuki training greatly affected my aesthetic. After the training I found a greater connection to my feet and became a more grounded actor. The Suzuki Method observes the traditional Japanese belief that stomping on the earth tamps down malevolent spirits. My African ancestry allowed my connection to the stomping of the Suzuki practice to represent honoring and calling on the strength and guidance of my ancestors.

My father had transitioned two years before I attended the training and my maternal grandmother had made her transition one year before the training. Their spirits were sources of inspiration to me whenever my body or will threatened to fail during the training. I remember the third week of the training was particularly difficult. Each stomp sent waves of pain through my worn feet and sore body. The Creator made sure that every evening I went home to a source of inspiration.

I was staying with my paternal cousin who is also my best friend. Each night she would laugh as I rubbed one ointment or another onto my feet and legs: “You came all the way here to be put through so much pain? Boy, you are a Papailler for sure. Mon Dieu. Why don’t you walk to Port-au-Prince? At least then you’d see something new.” And then she would launch into stories about how our grandfather was infamous for his two and three day treks through his coffee fields, to the sea and once, even into Port-au-Prince from Gonaives-barefoot. Her stories made me think about my father who walked three miles a day well into his 80’s in dress shoes that he had worn for fifty years. These shoes had stamped Haitian, American and so many other soils. Then I would start thinking about my mother’s family and remember my grandmother Iva. I remembered her stories of working Fleming county Kentucky tobacco fields-barefoot: “Oh, Lord Ivy

(her nickname for me, her namesake), I must've walked a year's worth of days. But I was a girl and in them days we had ta work from a little child. Your grandfather Wilks worked so hard he had an aneurism right in those fields. They carried him home and he died. You remember that Ivy. It's been a lot gone on for you to be here." My cousin's stories reminded me of the blood that ran through my aching body and the miles that my genes had traveled. She reminded me to carry on. I called on my loved ones on the other side to help me and they did. I rubbed those memories into my feet and begged them to quiet their relatively little aches.

I'd go into the remaining weeks of the training thinking of the shoulders on which I stood. I missed my father terribly and imagined greeting him on the horizon that is the focal point for actors in Suzuki training. I visualized being supported by my maternal grandmother and grandfather instead of focusing on the floor beneath me. I knew that I was not stomping alone. And I forgot about the pain. It would pass. I remembered to be grateful.

I could not let the lessons in grounding, resonance, presence and "imaging the other" that Suzuki training uniquely afforded me to pass. Most importantly, I could not allow the sacrifices that my ancestors had made to ensure a better life for me to be in vain. These lessons in determination continue to drive me forward.

When I returned from New York, I did not forget my healing and did my best to stay connected to my source. And that source kept reminding me to perform as well as teach. I found that when I went long periods of time without being in a show, my teaching suffered. I also realized that at my age, it would be wise to consider getting a

terminal degree in acting. This would allow me the freedom to teach at many levels and sharpen my skills as an actor, teacher and director.

Accepting the call to acting and theatre education was a very long journey. I am grateful that my experiences and walk with God have helped me to appreciate the art more deeply, and that the Creator has allowed me to live long enough to answer my calling.

CHAPTER III- THE POTTER'S HOUSE

Then I went down to the house, and there he was, making something at the wheel. And the vessel that he made of clay was marred in the hand of the potter; so he made it again into another vessel, as it seemed good to the potter to make. O house of Israel, "can I not do with you as this potter?" says the Lord. Look, as the clay is in the potter's hand, so are you in My hand, O house of Israel! (Thomas Nelson Publishers. 897)

The MFA in Theatre Performance and Graduate Certificate in African American Theatre programs at the University of Louisville offer a rigorous course of study. The MFA in Theatre Performance requires two years of voice and movement courses, three years of studio acting courses, a teaching pedagogy and four theory courses. Students are also required to complete six performance projects over the course of the three-year program by acting in one main stage or studio theatre production each semester. Most graduate students in the department are awarded graduate assistantships and are required to teach up to three undergraduate courses a semester in addition to their studies and performance duties. The Graduate Certificate in African American Theatre requires performance in productions of The African American Theatre program. Students receiving the graduate certificate must also complete a course or courses focused on the African American aesthetic in the following areas; acting, directing, playwriting, design or other related areas of study. The Graduate Certificate in African American Theatre also requires the successful completion of several African American Theatre history and theory courses. This rigorous course of study and work means many fourteen-hour work

days for the average graduate student. Successful completion of the program requires fortitude, flexibility, intellect and talent.

The voice training was based on the Linklater method. I found the training to be beneficial in identifying points of tension and blockage in my resonators. Identifying and working to release the tension points was at times a very emotional process. This was especially true during my first year and when dealing with the harassment I mentioned in the previous chapter. I was very afraid of expressing sadness, disappointment or anger. I did not want my suffering to be used against me. This repression of emotion was anathema to my goal of refining my skills. I employed my faith and the grounding practices I knew in order to relax into the experience.

The instructor, Dr. Rinda Frye, was masterful and readily identified places of tension in performer's bodies while they were delivering a speech or monologue. She would listen for a while and then begin to place her hands on areas where the breath was not being fully utilized. She would also pat, thump and press emotional centers in the body to break down what Kristen Linklater calls emotional armor. Dr. Frye's method of teaching the identification and release of tension points in the body improved my vocal quality and range significantly. This method of accessing the voice and its emotive capabilities has become a resource that I use when working with students to access their voice.

The voice classes included dialect work. I have added Received Pronunciation British, Cockney, French, Yoruba and Savannah, Georgia dialects to my repertoire as a result of this work. The dialect work was accompanied by intensive studies of the

International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA). IPA was something that I had little experience with before entering the program and find it to be a valuable tool.

I discovered that there were very few archived samples of the Affrilachain dialect while working on a project focused on personal regionalism for Dr. Frye. This discovery and Dr. Frye's encouragement inspired me to become an Associate Editor with the International Dialects of English Accents (IDEA) archive. My work for IDEA has included the collection of dialect samples from family members who live in Appalachia. I also had the opportunity to apprentice with Dr. Frye as she coached the Haitian dialect for the world premiere of *Cry Old Kingdom* by Jeff Augustin at the 2013 Humana Festival of New American Plays at Actors Theatre of Louisville.

The early movement and acting classes were taught by an instructor whose behavior was biased and harassing. I discuss the spiritual and intellectual blessings this experience of discrimination provided in Chapter 4. Despite his poor behavior I was able to gain skills from these classes that have refined my aesthetic. Among these are a shaper sense of Stanislavsky's Goal, Obstacle, Tactic and Expectation, spinal alignment, object placement and permanence, mime and the embodiment of color.

The other acting classes were focused on acting in "*Our Lady of 121st Street*" by Stephen Adly Guirgus, "*Cosi*" by Louis Norwa, "*Macbeth*" by William Shakespeare and "*The Seagull*" by Anton Chekov. These classes helped me to refine my approach to contemporary and classical texts. They also provided the opportunity to work in ensemble with classmates who were not involved in the main stage productions I was cast in. I also took an acting workshop with Zan Sawyer-Daily that focused on monologue

work. This course was extraordinarily beneficial in improving my audition and monologue technique in addition to the benefits of learning from a master acting teacher.

Yet the emphasis on Eurocentric training methodologies and the general exclusion of African American or Afrocentric instructors, texts, training methods and modalities in the required studio courses for the MFA program reminded me of the words of Carter G. Woodson in his 1933 *The Mis-Education of the Negro*:

The same educational process which inspires and stimulates the oppressor with the thought that he is everything and has accomplished everything worthwhile, depresses and crushes at the same time the spark of genius in the Negro by making him feel that his race does not amount to much and never will measure up to the standards of other peoples. The Negro thus educated is a hopeless liability of the race. (Woodson xvii)

I remain perplexed by the omission of any non-Eurocentric instructors, texts, training methods or modalities in the graduate level studio courses required for completion of the MFA in Theatre Performance degree. The graduate program attracts students from diverse racial backgrounds, yet requires studio training based only on entertaining Eurocentric audiences through the embodiment of Eurocentric characters and movement methods. My perplexity about this omission extends to all MFA in Theatre Performance programs that rely on this outdated philosophy of course design to educate a diverse student constituency and that intend to prepare white students to enter an increasingly diverse field of professional theatre.

The African American Theatre Program and Graduate Certificate in African American Theatre provide, among other things, an area of diversity for non-African American students. For African American graduate students the course of study provides an opportunity to receive training in the genre in which they are likely to find professional work in addition to work in Eurocentric theatre. The rehearsal and performance processes provide studio and performance level training in the unique aspects of Afrocentric and African American theatre. These courses provide the vital and affirming opportunities for expression I discussed in Chapter 2. I will discuss my experiences with the rehearsal and performance processes of The African American Theatre Program productions I participated in in Chapter 5.

The theory classes were extremely invigorating. They were Tools for a Global Theatre, and Performance Theory, taught by Dr. Amy Steiger, and Approaching African American Theatre taught by Dr. Lundeana Thomas. Dr. Thomas' class expanded my knowledge and appreciation of African American theatre and re-affirmed my dedication to and passion for the genre as an artist and scholar. Dr. Steiger's classes allowed me to gain a greater understanding of the nature of theatre world-wide and provided me with more tools for analyzing performance and identifying my aesthetic. Dr. Thomas' and Dr. Steiger's courses required numerous readings, an incredible amount of research and many carefully thought out writing assignments. They were and will continue to be part of the foundation of my life as a theatre scholar.

I took a pedagogy in Acting the Black Experience with Professor Nefertiti Burton. The pedagogy allowed me to observe a master teacher at work and prepared me to teach the course as a graduate teaching assistant the following year. The pedagogy would

prove to be a life changing experience. The class explored West African Storytelling, Jazz Dance, Harlem Renaissance Poetry and something I was changed greatly by – Yoruba *oriki*, which is a genre of praise poetry.

The class was given the assignment to create an original *oriki* about a deceased member of their family. Each of the students had the opportunity to explore vital parts of their own histories in ways that many had never done. The experience of listening to them perform their *orikis* was transformative for me as a listener and for them. They glowed with pride, grief and discovery as they called out the names of their ancestors and talked about the people they were descended from. The energy of the room brightened and you could almost sense the ancestors gathered to encourage them. I participated and created an *oriki* about my father. It had been a long time since I had talked with anyone about my father's life. So much of it was extraordinary to me (he had been a Haitian ambassador to Uruguay after having served as the Haitian Minister of Education during the 1950s and early 60s) that I always feared people would think I was lying.

I researched his life. I found books he had written and one book about the history of Haiti in which he was mentioned. I found articles about him where he talked about his life. I reconnected with family members who were happy to hear from me and to share stories about him. I did not realize how much I was still mourning his loss but God allowed the assignment to help me work through and make peace with his passing. It also helped me to realize that he and all my ancestors are always near. Writing and reciting the *oriki* also served as a strong reminder that I am descended from a long line of peaceful warriors for justice, equality and liberty.

The multifaceted course design of the MFA in Theatre Performance program and the requirements for the Graduate Certificate in African American theatre at the University of Louisville significantly addressed the learning goals I set before entering the program. The demands of coursework, performance and teaching were met only through prayer, determination, the application of skill, a passion for theatre and the support of my mentors and friends. I completed the program with high marks and know that the Creator carried me through.

The most impactful course of study that I undertook while a graduate student at the University of Louisville was an elective one. I will discuss my five-semester study of tai chi and qi gong for actors and the impact it has made in my artistic and spiritual life in the next chapter.

CHAPTER IV- AN AFRO-ASIAN BALM IN GILEAD: TAI CHI & QI GONG
FOR ACTORS & HOLISTIC HEALTH

For who is God, except the Lord? And who is a rock, except our God? It is God who arms me with strength, and makes my way perfect. He makes my feet like the feet of deer, and sets me on my high places. He teaches my hands to make war, so that my arms can bend a bow of bronze. You have also given me the shield of salvation; your right hand has held me up, your gentleness has made me great. You enlarged my path under me, so my feet did not slip.(Thomas Nelson Publishers. 619)

The introduction of tai chi and qi gong for Actors at the University of Louisville is perhaps the most important theatre innovation and training method to be introduced in the department of theatre arts since the founding of the African American Theatre Program. My studies of tai chi and qi gong at the University were artistically and personally invigorating, vital and transformative. The studies and practices were a vital aspect of my artistic, personal and spiritual development. As Richard Nichols has said:

The theatre artist and the Zen monk never met, but they shared a vision of human behavior. For both, the apex of their respective arts is attainable only when the artist is free from distractions, possesses deeply ingrained technical skills, and behaves with purity of action.(43)

The words tai chi and qi gong have many different orthographies. This is because of differences in Chinese and English pronunciations and transliteration systems. The

most common of these systems are pinyin, Wades-Giles and the Yale system.

“According to these systems, *tai chi chuan* is correctly spelled either as *tai ji quan* of *taijiquan* (pinyin), *tai ji chuan* (Yale), of *t'ai chi ch'uan* (Wade-Giles)” (Frantzis 4). This thesis will use *tai chi* because it is the version most commonly found in print and is familiar to Western eyes.

Tai chi was developed in ancient Egypt where it was known as Kuta or Kun-tao. Historians have surmised that Kuta or Kun-tao was introduced in China circa 3000 B.C.E., later becoming tai chi as we now know it. Tai chi is by no means a unique African influence on Chinese culture and innovation. As Wayne B. Chandler and Sterling Means have codified:

The inhabitants of China are [...] no doubt built upon a black foundation. The ethnologist found there the evidence of a remote Negroid population. These Blacks were instrumental in the development of China's earliest civilizations. (Frost xii)

Tai chi is a beneficial tool in actor training. It elevates the actor's awareness and appreciation of her or his body as their instrument. Its holistic approach encourages actors to embrace themselves as energetic spiritual beings. As Richard Nichols has codified in his article, “A ‘Way’ for Actors: Asian Martial Arts,” the use of tai chi in actor training is effective in at least following areas:

Development of focus, staying in the moment..., placement of images, focus of energy and economy in action/gesture, playing one action at a time, expanding the horizons of self-image, development of a flexible, controlled and balanced body,

unification of mind and body [and] appreciation and development of discipline.
(44)

A strong nudging in my spirit led me to take Tai Chi for Actors with Professor Nefertiti Burton in the spring of my first year. When I began the class I knew nothing of martial arts and had little dance experience. These factors, paired with the lingering physical effects of my earlier illness, created an exciting and engaging challenge for me. The meditative and patient virtues of tai chi combined to create a personal practice that allowed, and continues to allow, me to face those challenges with a joyful, curious and grateful spirit.

Professor Burton created a classroom environment that was affirming, healing, focused and universally respectful. Her style and mastery in teaching exemplified the sacredness of each person, of the creative arts and the importance of working with compassion for the self and for others. Through group and independent study with her I worked on the 13, 16, 24, 37 and 103 posture forms in Yang style Tai Chi Chuan and the fan, sword and short staff weapon forms. Our teacher is Mfundishi Baba Serikali of Nu Chapter Tai Chi and Qi Gong.

The practices (tai chi and qi gong) impacted my work as an actor in many ways, most notably: my body is more relaxed, flexible and alive with greater connection to expressive energy centers in the body; I'm able to perform from "the box" and slow my perspective to problem solve more effectively onstage- this slowing also works to conserve energy and sharpen my focus; my stamina has significantly increased and I am more grounded physically. The practice has also helped to correct the most significant

postural difficulty I had when I entered the program. This difficulty was a rounding and stooping of my shoulders. This misalignment was corrected within my first semester of practicing tai chi.

The practice of tai chi has also had a significant impact on my mental and emotional life before and during performance. I am able to approach performances with a more calm and focused energy. This is in part a result of an increased prayer life through the meditative aspects of the practice and the physical experience of connecting to heavenly and earthly sources of energy through tai chi's grounding practices. When I find myself losing focus onstage I am reminded to stay grounded and in the moment and can more efficiently make the connection needed to re-focus. I do this by adjusting my breath and visualizing roots coming from my feet and into the earth. I then visualize a bright, pure white light coming from the heavens and pulling me up from the crown of my head. This reaffirms my position as part of the universe and instantly realigns my relationship to what is taking place onstage.

Tai chi and qi gong also enhanced my classroom and daily experiences. I became more confident and determined to succeed and to succeed with compassion and integrity. The emotional self-defense lessons of tai chi helped me to be less affected by negative energies of other people and to recognize and deal with my own negative energies more effectively. Something began to become clearer to me: theatre is about the giving and receiving of energy and as artists we must cultivate and have control over the types of energies we give and receive. That is not a new concept and certainly one that I thought I had grasped before beginning tai chi. The practice transformed my understanding of the concept, myself and others. It motivated me to become a better person. I am hopeful that

my understanding of this and other energetic concepts will continue to grow. Advanced levels of the practice teach practitioners to recognize, conserve and shift chi for health, peace, healing and self-defense.

“Mind the body and the breath and then clear the mind to distill the Heavenly elixir within.”(Jahnke 32) This Chinese saying refers to the healing potential of qi gong (loosely translated to mean “to work the energy”). Qi gong presents a philosophy of self-healing and universal connectedness through a variety of internal and external postures and exercises. My history with illness and desire to find healing for myself and others through holistic and accessible traditions made beginning the practice of qi gong a destined and affirming experience.

I was concerned with several problems that actors like myself often face; our schedules and economic circumstances can make visits to and treatment from traditional practitioners of Western Medicine for minor illnesses difficult if not impossible; drugs prescribed for common actor ailments (including respiratory and vocal illness, muscular injuries, nervousness, stomach disturbances etc.) have side effects that can inhibit the concentration, alertness and focus needed to perform; a lack of awareness about the body’s (the actor’s instrument) physical and energetic structures inhibits understanding of studio exercises, performance and overall health; and the need to continuously engage, cultivate and conserve creative energies. Thankfully, I was able to begin exploring qi gong and other forms of holistic health in the group and independent courses in tai chi and qi gong.

I practiced several forms and received a multitude of benefits from the practice of qi gong under the patient guidance of Professor Burton. Qi gong has enhanced my capability to conserve, direct and shift energy in performance and provided me with more efficient vocal and physical warm-ups. The exercise of the “Six Healing Sounds” in which specific phonations are made to add health to organ and emotional centers in the body, not only warms the vocal and breath columns in a stress free manner, but also creates an awareness of the body’s creative and emotional resources. I also enjoyed greater physical health, spiritual tranquility and mental acuity.

Every significant life change brings with it the opportunity to find at least one life-enhancing lesson, lifestyle change, blessing or gift. Tai Chi and Qi Gong for Actors has been a wonderful lifestyle change, blessing and gift in my personal, spiritual and professional life. “T’ai Chi, like the Yin-Yang sign, encourages unity and wholeness of the person. In addition to balance and centering T’ai Chi teaches us to accept constant change.” (Conaway 54)

The graduate program offered and demanded, as any graduate program should, a plethora of constant change, stimulation, creativity, spontaneity and challenges. Some of the challenges were expected and appropriate within the scope of graduate theatre performance education. My studies of tai chi and qi gong more than supplemented my ability to successfully meet those challenges.

Some of the challenges were unexpected. I had the privilege of working with many people of diverse backgrounds in the years between being an undergraduate student in the theatre arts department at the University of Louisville and being a graduate student

at the same institution. Paramount to my world-view were my experiences working in activist communities and in some work-places that were committed to diversity and anti-racism.

I experienced some degree of culture shock upon encountering an instructor in the department who regularly made racist and sexually harassing comments. The instructor also created a hostile learning environment through his language and through his biased treatment of white students over students of African descent. He had been at the university for three decades and his behavior had gone unchecked by his colleagues of poor consciousness.

My position as a student and one of the victims of these injustices meant that I felt particularly vulnerable to the consequences of his racism and sexism, and the racism and sexism by enablement of the aforementioned colleagues. I worried that if I spoke up against the injustice that was taking place in his classroom I would face retaliation from him and from others in the department who were not in favor of equality in the classroom. I imagined that so long as my GPA was intact I could smile, nod and deal with the harassment until I had completed the program. I began to pay more attention. I was not the only student of African descent suffering, and our collective suffering was unfair and unhealthy. According to the American Psychology Association, Black Americans' psychological responses to racism are very similar to common responses to trauma, such as interpersonal sensitivity, anxiety and somatization, which is psychological distress expressed as physical pain.

The constant preparation for and guessing about a given day's level of racial or sexual harassment was a major source of anxiety. The harassment presented a challenge to my artistic expression, to my right to learn free of such harassment and bias. It began to erode my self-perception of being equally entitled to participate in classroom discussions and scenes. My silence did not bring my classmates or me peace.

There is a principle in tai chi that says that you step out of the way of an oncoming attack. You continue to dodge the attacks until they begin to threaten your health and safety. Then you take self-defense measures to protect yourself and discourage the attacker from perpetuating that type of attack in the future. There is also a parable in the bible that tells of Jesus Christ, whom many categorize as primarily instructing his followers to "turn the other cheek" when attacked physically or spiritually. This parable tells of Jesus Christ entering a temple meant only for prayer and worship and finding that it had been turned into a marketplace and was full of activities that defiled the sacredness of the temple. The parable tells of Jesus turning over the merchandise tables and driving the merchants out of the temple. The principles of tai chi and the story of Christ in the temple reminded me to take action in favor of racial justice in the theatre department at the University of Louisville.

The two other students of African descent in my class and I filed a harassment complaint against the instructor during the second year of my tenure as a graduate student. The instructor denied that his actions were racist, while admitting that the incidents had occurred. He did not return to the classroom after the complaint was filed and subsequently took an early retirement from the university. It was a difficult and necessary action. As Psalm 27:13 says, "*I would have lost heart, unless I had believed*

that I would see the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living.” (Thomas Nelson Publishers. 627)

The experience of racial harassment during my studies inspired me to search for a way to process and alchemize the negative energy into something positive and affirming. One day, a colleague and I were discussing another incident of racist behavior beyond the confines of the department. The question of continuous vigilance against racism came up. We began to discuss the possibility and health consequences of this vigilance for African American people. *Healing Heart qigong and warm-up for African American Actors* was born from this conversation.

Healing Heart qi gong and warm-up for African American Actors’ initial series of postures was developed over the course of one semester of independent study in tai chi and qi gong with Professor Burton. She and Dr. Robert Woodbine, N.D, M.Ac. O.M. provided resources and guidance in my development of the seven posture qigong. My research focused on identifying the physical and emotional effects of real and perceived racism on African Americans. I then researched traditional qigong postures that promoted health in the affected areas. I also researched African dances that centered movement in areas that were affected by the trauma of racism. I included African dance because of its connective potential for African American actors. A vast amount of traditional African dances are performed for ritual and healing purposes. “Rituals involving dance play an essential role in relieving and treating symptoms of psychological distress, as well as neutralize psychological trauma.”(Monteiro 235) The movements of traditional African dance also move and direct qi throughout the body clearing energetic blockages and improving and maintaining the health of dancers. I also

looked at the elements of a good vocal and physical acting warm-up. I combined these elements into Healing Heart qigong. The practice is designed to give actors of color a tool for rejuvenation, healing, affirmation and performance preparation.

This qi gong has been an effective physical and vocal warm-up for the students in the acting courses I've taught and for me in preparation for performances. It specifically addresses the physiological traumas real and perceived racism inflicts upon actors of color and is beneficial in preparing the body and voice to perform regardless of race or ethnicity. My classroom experience with tai chi and qi gong for actors, also included very preliminary study of other facets of traditional Chinese medicine and holistic health. I look forward to continuing to learn about Traditional Chinese Medicine and holistic health. These healing modalities have been useful, invigorating and inspiring.

Tai chi for actors helped me to meet the challenges of graduate school and presented me with a skill set that enhanced my graduate experience. The meditative practices of Tai Chi and Qi Gong strengthened my artistic skill and enhanced my performance and studio work. My work in rehearsal and performance became more grounded, focused, effective and conscious of the energetic exchange between the characters, actors and audience. My warm-up shifted from a series of stretches and the Linklater progression to a series of qi gongs (later adding Healing Heart) accompanied by a Tai Chi form. I found that the rhythmic breathing of tai chi and qi gong freed my breath column significantly and was able to shorten the thirty minute Linklater progression to the vibratory section. These practices have led me into a moving and meditative relationship with the Creator and have become a resource for strength, faith

and determination. I am grateful for the teachers who shared this art with me. Their demonstration of excellence, integrity, compassion, strength and brilliance is inspiring.

CHAPTER V- THE PROVING GROUND

The heart of the prudent acquires knowledge, and the ear of the wise seeks knowledge. A man's gift makes room for him, and brings him before great men. (Thomas Nelson Publishers. 745)

I performed roles in four University of Louisville African American Theatre Program productions before performing in my thesis role as Prospera in *The Tempest*. These productions were, or held elements of, Afrocentricity in their presentation. These rehearsal and performance experiences, along with *The Tempest's* process, were affirming and offered the vital training and artistic sustenance that I sought when entering the program.

Afrocentricity is a theory developed by Molefi Kete Asante:

Afrocentricity is a mode of thought and action in which the centrality of African interests, values, and perspectives predominate. In regards to theory, it is the placing of African people in the center or any analysis of African phenomena. Thus, it is possible for anyone to master the discipline of seeking the location of Africans in a given phenomenon. In terms of action and behavior, it is a devotion to the idea that what is in the best interest of African consciousness is at the heart of ethical behavior. Finally, Afrocentricity seeks to enshrine the idea that blackness itself is a troupe of ethics. Thus, to be black is to be against all forms of

oppression, racism, classism, homophobia, patriarchy, child abuse, pedophilia, and white racial domination. (2)

Afrocentric theatre comes in many different forms and is based in Asante's definition of Afrocentricity and his assertions about the Afrocentric worldview:

The Afrocentric viewpoint holds that all modalities and realities are united and move in one grand manner. There can be no separation between material and spiritual, profane and sacred, form and substance... The human being acting with personal power, can animate, activate, and galvanize the material or the spiritual. The continuity from material to spiritual is the reality of the Afrocentric viewpoint.

According to Barbara and Carlton Molette:

Afrocentric theatre places a higher value on a presentation's ability to evoke emotions and lesser value on provoking rational responses... Afrocentric presentations can include rituals, ceremonies, legends, myths, sermons, spontaneous responses, poems, and even the scripted imitations of actions regularly seen in Eurocentric realistic well-made plays. Afrocentric performers are dancers, storytellers, singers, instrumentalists, preachers, orators, actors performing imitations of actions or all of the above. (Molette and Molette 201)

The productions leading up to my thesis role were: Ensemble in *Mad at Miles: a Black Woman's Guide to Truth* by Pearl Cleage, directed by Dr. Lundeana Thomas, *Blues for an Alabama Sky* by Pearl Cleage, directed by Professor Nefertiti Burton, Aunt Mae in *Shakin' the Mess Outta Misery* by Shay Youngblood, directed by Dr. Lundeana Thomas

and Erzulie in *Once on This Island*, directed by Professor Nefertiti Burton, respectively. Each production held many artistic lessons and spiritual lessons.

The view of Afrocentric theatre that presents playwright and actor as potential mediums is one that I embrace and have experienced in my work. When characters are very different from me (and at times when I think they are very similar) my performance of and preparation for the roles includes what is known in and African American Theatre and religion as a “giving way to the Spirit.” In this way the text is a detailed blueprint of the performance the audience will see. Actors like myself who work in this medium and the audiences who are entertained by our work must make room for the spontaneity of the spirit to affect and flow through them. The belief is that Afrocentric and African American theatre, like most other genres of the art, provides reflection, education and catharsis for its audiences. It is my hope that when I am performing and if God chooses, I will be used to carry a message to the audience. Sometimes the nature of the play or the character I am playing holds healing for me.

My work as an Ensemble member in *Mad at Miles: a Black Woman’s Guide to Truth*, provided this kind of healing. *Mad at Miles: a Black Woman’s Guide to Truth* is written as a series of essays about domestic violence against women. We worked as an ensemble to create a script from the essays. Dr. Thomas’ concept was that the ensemble was ancestral spirits of women who had in at least one incarnation, died from domestic violence. The play was set in a spiritual realm that was revealed to the material world so that these ancestors could deliver their messages to the audience.

Christ had led me to the valley of the shadow of death. It was a place I had barely escaped and did not want to revisit. I am a survivor of domestic violence, and *Mad at Miles* offered an unsettling test of my ability to use my experience to bring a message to others. I worried that exploring those issues would bring up unpleasant memories. I worried most of all that something in my portrayal of the characters would give away my secret. I was still holding on to an unhealthy sense of shame about my experience. I talked somewhat openly about it in the sharing sessions during rehearsal and found community with the other actresses in the production.

My fears were relieved when I saw the costume designs. Each of us were dressed entirely white full length dance skirts, head wraps and leotards with red slashes in varied parts of the costume. When standing in a certain formation our slashes formed a body representing the blood shed by women who had died from domestic violence. The costumes reminded me of the long missed women in white from my childhood dreams and their ancestral reminder that everything would be all right. The memory of my ancestors was particularly helpful in creating a moment onstage when I was portraying a mambo kneeling over a cauldron, breaking Miles Davis records. Each time I got to that point in the play, I recalled the women from my dreams and was encouraged to continue telling the story of my people.

The rehearsal and performance process of *Mad at Miles* helped me to develop ensemble techniques that include choral timing, group movement and group lifts. I played seven different characters throughout the piece and discovered new methods for changing characters without the use of a full costume change. The character changes happened in front of the audience and went with beat shifts so that they needed to be

instantaneous. Adapting to and making these changes was the most challenging aspect of the production for me and became one of the facets of the production that I looked forward to. I had worked with Dr. Thomas on numerous productions throughout my undergraduate career, and have learned an invaluable amount of information about the craft of acting over the years from her. Dr. Thomas gave me direction that matched my creative pace and her encouragement went a long way to foster my determination to succeed in the program.

The ancestors showed up again in *Blues for an Alabama Sky*. I had some difficulty making strong choices and with dialect throughout the rehearsal process. I often found myself wanting to perfect Delia so much that I would get stuck in my thoughts. Professor Burton's excellent, patient and clear direction helped me to grow tremendously through the process. I learned to be in character without losing my focus and presence as an actor. I also learned how to access my upper vocal ranges and to trust a character's naiveté and vulnerability during this process.

Professor Burton asked me to provide pictures of my ancestors to hang on the walls of the portion of the set that was my apartment. I hadn't thought much about ancestor reverence up until that time. Once, years before, I had felt the need to make an altar on which I kept pictures of living and deceased relatives. I'd moved several times since then and had never taken the time to arrange a similar space.

Experiencing performance with my Haitian and Appalachian ancestors at my back helped me to imagine who Delia's family might have been and what her relationships with them were. It also reminded me of an important spiritual practice that I had

forgotten. I had made no one sacred space or altar in my home. Within a few months I began to set aside a space and time to reflect and pray beyond the nightly bedtime prayer that had been my custom.

The research for Erzulie in *Once on This Island* provided an excellent and exciting opportunity to learn more about Vodun, and other traditional African religions. The personal connection made the research as much about self-discovery as a project for the production. I had been met with basic condemnation anytime I had discussed Vodun or my interest in any non-Christian religion with my family. Now it was part of my scholarship and though the discussions were brief, I was able to dispel some myths. Most importantly the research allowed me to correct some of my own misconceptions about the religions my ancestors and some living Haitian family relied upon and found peace through. It helped me to understand parts of my own spiritual practice, sensibilities and beliefs that I thought were unique to me.

Erzulie is one of the most challenging and loved characters I have ever performed. Before getting the role, *The Wizard of Oz* had been the last time I had performed a solo in a musical. I worried that my lack of dance experience and singing inexperience would mean that I would fail miserably. Tai Chi had given me the skills to approach this challenge. I approached the choreography in a similar fashion to the way I approached Tai Chi's forms. I took my time and though I was methodically slow in picking up the movements I eventually got them and enjoyed the dancing very much. I also had to surrender and rely quite a bit on the spirit to move me. Many nights in rehearsal I am sure I sensed the presence of the Loa singing and dancing right along with us.

My pitch problems continued throughout the run. However, I learned to improve it significantly and to accept the limitations of my voice with confidence. One night, just as Ti Moune was turned away from the gate, it occurred to me that one of my ancestors could have experienced a similar heartbreak. Immediately I felt a strong presence surrounding me. It was as if I was meeting my paternal grandmother for the first time.

Navigation of these roles was possible only through God's blessings, provision and generous, masterful and patient directors. It was necessary to remain focused, determined and confident in God and in his blessings for me. The practice of tai chi enhanced my work, indeed my formerly stiff and awkward gestures took on a much softer and more graceful fluidity.

The experience of acting as a spiritual practice gratefully expanded while in rehearsal and performance for productions leading up to my thesis role in *The Tempest*. The research that I did for the character of Erzulie in *Once on This Island* marked the first time that I delved into the spirituality of a given character. Prospera and her practice of magic would require similar research. I will discuss the process of researching, rehearsing and performing the role of Prospera in the Chapters 6 and 7.

CHAPTER VI- THE IDEATION OF AN AFRICAN SPIRITUAL LINEAGE

I am dark, but lovely, O daughters of Jerusalem, like the tents of Kedar, like the curtains of Solomon. (Thomas Nelson Publishers. 778)

The Tempest marked the second play by William Shakespeare that I had performed in. The first was as Boy in the University of Louisville's late 90s production of *Much Ado About Nothing*, directed by Dr. Rinda Frye during my undergraduate career. When I learned that Dr. Frye was directing *The Tempest* during my thesis year, I knew that I wanted the opportunity to work with her in the role of Prospera.

I wanted to do this role for several reasons: The majesty of the role was something I wanted to examine, I related to Prospera's position as a single parent, I was captivated by the exploration of her isolation, I was intimidated by my lack of experience with Shakespeare, and I desperately wanted to put my Black female body in a role and production that once would have been reserved for a male actor with an all-white cast.

I was not immediately concerned with how race and gender would impact the audience's perception of Prospera. Nor was I immediately concerned with how race and gender would impact my portrayal of the role. I had not been personally impacted by the ethical questions of color-blind casting throughout my graduate career. I started to think about those questions a few weeks after being cast. As August Wilson made clear in his 1996 address to Theatre Communications Group, "*The Ground on Which I stand,*"

For a black actor to stand on the stage as part of a social milieu that has denied him his gods, his culture, his humanity, his mores, his ideas of himself and the world he lives in, is to be in league with a thousand naysayers who wish to corrupt the vigor and spirit of his heart. (30)

I began to think more critically about the impact my race and gender would have on the role. I thought about my early experience as Mary Poppins. I thought about imperialist traditions that had excluded people of African descent (indeed most non-European races) and women from positive and empowered representations onstage and in mainstream entertainment for centuries. I knew that these representations were not true reflections of people of African descent or of women.

The artistic question became how to perform the text of *The Tempest* as if a Black female Prospera was as credible as a White male Prospero. This was important because I was not interested in mimicking the white male Prospero audiences traditionally expected. Nor was I interested in anyone forgetting that the Prospera they were seeing was Black. I wanted Prospera to be seen without excuse (“Oh, I didn’t notice you were Black”) or accommodation (“Oh, I didn’t mind that Prospera was Black”).

Othello, and his racism-borne demise, remains William Shakespeare’s lone intended hero of African descent. However, history has provided thousands of named and unnamed, remembered and forgotten, heroes whose ancestry is African. In fact, all of human civilization can, through DNA analysis, be traced to Eastern Africa, but that is not the focus of this thesis. The Western tradition that excludes African history, culture and spirituality is the result of centuries of cultural imperialism. My studies in African

American Theatre, African history and my personal life experiences led me to reject the quiet acceptance of white cultural imperialism in my portrayal of and preparation for the role of Prospera.

It had not been within William Shakespeare's capacity and perhaps duty to explore and include a number of heroes of African descent. The duty had, in this instance, been left to me. African peoples have determined their own heroes and have passed the stories of their triumphs on to succeeding generations through oral and written histories throughout history. I set out to create a backstory for Prospera that was grounded in a history of an African people and included a spiritual lineage that was reflective of the sensibilities imperialism had falsely maligned.

I was initially overwhelmed by my task. The continent of Africa, its people and the history of international exploration by Africans is vast. I realized that I needed to narrow down my field of research after I began reading about African trade with Western civilizations. Africans have been everywhere. From the founding of traditional Chinese medical thought through the Congolese descended Yellow Emperor to the African Emperors of ancient Rome, every corner of the earth has enjoyed the significant impact of African peoples and ideology.

I had to make decisions about the perspective from which I wanted to explore Prospera's African ancestry. Many schools' acting methods contend that an actor is best served by exploring a character's history and motivations through similarities to their own history and motivations. Constantin Stanislavsky termed this practice, the magic "what if?" I had used this method in the exploration of other characters but had not

applied the theory of “what if” to a character’s spiritual lineage and practice. My non-traditional casting as Prospera made the application of this theory instrumental in developing a character that the audience and I could believe in. I wanted to explore Prospera’s lineage and spiritual practice from the perspective of an Afro-Haitian American actress.

Conversations with the director before rehearsal began and during the rehearsal process let me know several things; that the production would not be Afrocentric; that the roles of Miranda and Antonio would be played by white actors; that the play would be set in an unfixed time with contemporary and period elements in set, prop and costume designs and; that the text would be modified to reflect the change in gender.

I went on a study abroad of Afro-Cuban Culture and Performance soon after I had started to think about Prospera’s African heritage. I decided to investigate the questions regarding race, ethnicity and spiritual heritage that are the focus of this thesis after a few days surrounded by the beauty of the island’s people, rumbas and tours of Yoruba museums. I was greatly impacted by my experiences in Cuba and the demonstrations of Santeria and its manifestations in and of nature. I was reminded of my childhood experiences with the tree of my sanctuary. My spirit began to recall and affirm my childhood sensibilities about the spirituality of nature. A few more pieces of the puzzle that is my own spirituality fell into place.

I wanted to learn as much as possible about Santeria, Yoruba and the other African based spiritualities practiced in Cuba. I attended several rumbas and at them I studied the different ways each dancer portrayed the Orishas and the *patikis* associated

with them. I noted the colors that were used to represent and honor the Orishas. I was fascinated with the Orisha's presence in and control of nature. I began to think that an extended period of time on the deserted island compounded with her esoteric sensibilities would make it reasonable for Prospera to have some connection to an African religion similar to Santeria or Yoruba.

I began exploring many texts in this regard and formed an introductory knowledge base about the religions. The idea of tying Prospera's spiritual lineage with my own became a recurring thought and so I began to do the research about Vodun that led to the determinations about her lineage that I discuss later in this chapter. The research about Vodun became a continuation of the research I had done for *Once on this Island*.

I spent three weeks at the ocean in Florida shortly after returning from the study abroad in Cuba. Like the study abroad, this trip was a divine provision. Normal circumstances would not have allowed me to participate in the study abroad or to take my daughter on any sort of vacation, and certainly not one of such length and proximity to the ocean. I am grateful for these blessings. I spent as much time in the ocean as possible. I thought about the Orisha Yemoja and Orisha Oya and carried with me a new sense of the spirituality and power of the water and tempests.

I began to learn my lines in Florida. I sat on the beach with my script in hand and recited lines on many evenings. One evening in particular sticks out to me. I had gone to the beach by myself that night, and after an hour, was feeling intimidated by the volume of lines I had to memorize. I decided to give up for that evening and sat my arm, script in

hand, down hard on the arm of the chair. Immediately my elbow screamed in pain. I had squashed a bee between my arm and the chair and had gotten stung. The poor bee was dying and its stinger was in my arm. Throughout the rehearsal process this experience served as a reminder to always consider the community I was in, their dependence on a strong lead, my own fortitude and spiritual connection, before ever giving up or giving less than my best. I began to formulate my process for approaching Prospera with this in mind.

My initial understanding of the magic that Prospero practiced in *The Tempest* indicated that the character's control of the elements and spirits could be based in Vodun or Yoruba and furthered my research in those areas. I discovered that Vodun and Yoruba are based in servitude to higher powers and that Prospera could not have been practicing either religion.

The magic Prospero/a performed produced the control of spirits, perception of nature's forces and relied on a series of written texts. Numerous texts have submitted, and I have come to agree, that Shakespeare designed Prospero as a Hermetic magician. Our production would not be modified to support a Prospera who was practicing Vodun or Yoruba, so I decided to create a backstory for Prospera which included Vodun in her spiritual lineage and had Hermetic magic as her spiritual practice. The lineage and backstory I created for Prospera follows.

Prospera was a descendant of Ganye Hesseu who was a 16th century king of Dahomey (now The Republic of Benin). Her ancestors had defeated Pedro Enriquez de

Acevedo, Count of Fuentes in 1610 in his attempt to invade Dahomey. The defeating army was led by the Dahomean Amazons and was therefore primarily female.

Ganye Hesse had adhered to his duty to “make Dahomey larger”(Bay 40) by commanding an army of Dahomean men and women to invade and take over Pedro Enriquez de Acevedo’s Milan. The invasion was successful and the kingdom of Milan came under new African leadership. King Hesse assigned the rule of Milan to Prospera’s great grandparents.

Prospera’s Afro-Milanese ancestors continued to practice Vodoun exclusively until her father married a Catholic woman of Dahomean and Italian descent. The marriage united the practices of Vodun and Christianity in the Hesse lineage. Her father found sustenance and truth in the practice of Catholicism and chose to follow it exclusively. Prospera’s mother also practiced Catholicism and this was the religious tradition in which Prospera was raised.

Prospera was provided with the best Catholic education available within the kingdom of Milan. Though Catholic, her father raised her with some of the expectations and influences of Dahomean princesses. Her father bestowed the rights and responsibilities of “na daho”, a title given to the most senior royal daughter in some Dahomean traditions because of her high intelligence and biological position of the eldest child. Her father also trained her in African and Asian martial arts: her favorite weapon became the staff.

I borrowed cultural views from the Alladahonu who were founders of The Kingdom of Dahomey, to complete the societal framework and world- view within which Prospera was raised. In this [Alladahonu] society and in Prospera's upbringing:

A princess was socially male, a person in control of her own sexuality, parent to children who were members of her own lineage, and head of an entourage that was effectively an independent household under her control (Bay 52).

As a teen, Prospera became disenchanted with the patriarchy and crimes of the Catholic Church and began to study Hermetic magic as a path to spiritual transcendence. Her paternal grandfather became concerned that she was spending too much time studying Hermetic magic. When she was sixteen, he took her to Dahomey, hoping that the three-month long visit would affirm a strong connection to her spiritual roots.

Prospera was unmoved by the visit and continued to work at mastery of Hermetic magic. She had become incensed by the oppression of women beyond her kingdom and was convinced that in order to transcend this oppression as a duchess, she would need the powers of a magus.

Her parents died when she was nineteen years old and she became the Duchess of Milan. Her court insisted that she marry a White Milanese who was the son of one of her father's friends of influence. They were married for five years before Miranda was born. The text of *The Tempest* does not supply any information about Miranda's other parent other than to say that: "Thy mother was a piece of virtue and she said thou wast my daughter." (Shakespeare and Langbaum 8). I decided that Miranda's father had died in a storm while at sea shortly after Miranda's birth.

Prospera spent the next three years so obsessed with her study of magic that she neglected many of her duties. I reasoned that this self-isolation was in part a grief reaction to her partner's death. "I, thus neglecting all worldly ends, all dedicated to closeness and the bettering of my mind..." (Shakespeare and Langbaum 10). Her studies and the magic they produced began to take over her personality and ability to function in society and so she asked Antonio to govern Milan for her. "...the government I cast upon my brother, and to my state grew stranger, being transported and rapt in secret studies" (Shakespeare and Langbaum 9). I ended my backstory here.

The ideation of an African spiritual lineage was a necessary process in preparation for the role of Prospera. This backstory acknowledged my gender and race and provided a foundation for avoiding mimicry of the traditional white male interpretations of the role. It served to ground my performance of the character in an existence that was both credible and affirming of the world-view and religious practices my blackness demanded. It allowed my Prospera to embrace the vigor and spirit of her African heart.

CHAPTER VII- MASTER, THE TEMPEST IS RAGING

And a great wind-storm arose, and the waves beat into the boat, so that it was already filling. But He was in the stern, asleep on a pillow. And they awoke Him and said to Him, 'Teacher, do You not care that we are perishing?' Then He arose and rebuked the wind, and said to the sea, 'Peace, be still!' And the wind ceased and there was a great calm. But He said to them, 'Why are you so fearful? How is it that you have no faith?'(Thomas Nelson Publishers. 1202)

I applied the determinations of Prospera's ancestry, spiritual lineage and religious practice to my work in rehearsal and performance. I began by approaching the character's walk. The costume designer had determined that Prospera and most of the cast would have the option of being barefoot or wearing dance paws. I chose to work barefoot so that I would be in full contact with the ground.

This contact with the earth was foundational in my discovery and interpretation of the character. I found that Prospera's way of contacting the ground was subtly different from my normal way of moving when barefoot. The way that my feet met the earth was much more sensual and deliberate when playing Prospera. I imagined walking through a quickly changing landscape where the ground was alternately sand, grass, weeds, bogs, etc. This ground was uneven and unpredictable. Dangerous and benign insects and other small creatures were abundantly present and always underfoot. I would place the heel of the advancing foot onto the place where I was stepping with no weight behind it. My heel would test the ground for security and safety. The concept of stepping without

putting weight onto the foot until being sure that the ground was safe to step into came from one of tai chi's essential movement teachings of the same philosophy. Then I would roll completely through the foot, feeling the texture of the ground beneath it, centering and engaging my toes in the contact. I found that the character enjoyed this contact with the "earth" and each step was both an investigation of safety and an embrace of the earth as a living and feeling being. My toes would curl toward the earth after each step connecting with mother earth. This experience allowed my characterization of Prospera to be rooted in her spiritual goal of the Hermetic desire for unity with the God, the earth and the universe.

I found that this rootedness and awareness of the earth and her textures created a low center of gravity. My Prospera was tree-like in her physicality and energetic connection to the earth. My legs were firm foundations for my body and their muscles were much more engaged as Prospera than in my everyday life. Physical power as Prospera lived in my pelvis. My torso and chest were relaxed and free. My arms and hands were fluid and directed energy and magic at will.

I found that the character's thoughts and speech were informed by her connection to the earth and heavens. Prospera was always listening for the whisper of spirit for guidance and relied as heavily on her prescience and astrology as on her books in decision-making.

"By my prescience I find that my zenith doth depend on a most auspicious star,
whose influence, if now I court not, but omit, my fortunes will ever after droop."
(Shakespeare and Langbaum 13).

This discovery informed me to choose moments to consult and refer to the heavens with my gaze. It also informed the pace of my line delivery. In moments when information was being revealed to her, such as her epiphany of forgiveness during the play's final scene, I delivered my lines at a more deliberate pace in moments when information was being revealed to her from these sources. Examples for these moments are when in Act V, she realizes that she must release and forgive her enemies, the moment after the masque when she understands the temporal nature of human existence and when she speaks understanding and forgiveness to her spell-bound enemies.

The foundation of an African lineage and choice to embrace Prospera as a woman of Dahomean descent led to these and many other discoveries throughout the rehearsal period. I was supported in these interpretations by Dr. Frye, and she was an excellent and encouraging motivator as I embraced the role. I applied these discoveries to performance of the role and have detailed the choices and the rationale behind them, along with the influence of race and gender below.

The intersections of Prospera's gender, race and lineage provided a host of non-traditional choices in the role. Her African-ness created the dynamic of race playing a role in Prospera's exile. The actors playing Alonso, Antonio and Sebastian were clearly of European descent. I decided that Antonio had used light-skin privilege in getting Alonso's agreement to make him the ruler of Milan. I also determined that part of the reason Alonso agreed to Antonio's request was because Alonso preferred a white-in appearance and male ruler of Milan. Evidence of racism influencing Alonso, Sebastian and Antonio is found in Act II, Scene 1, when Sebastian suggests that their demise is a result of Alonso having married his daughter to an African. "Sir, you may thank yourself

for this great loss, that would not bless our Europe with your daughter, but rather loose her to an African...” (Shakespeare and Langbaum 32)

This circumstance meant that my Prospera felt an additional betrayal from Antonio. He had betrayed their shared African heritage and through his identification with the oppressor, exposed their African lineage to extinction. My Prospera experienced Alonso’s hatred as, in part, hatred of a black woman ruling Milan. To her Alonso, Antonio and Sebastian were similar to Pedro Enriquez de Acevedo, Count of Fuentes, who had attempted to conquer her ancestral Dahomey.

Race and the ancestral experience of attempted colonization influenced my Prospera’s relationship with Caliban. Caliban was played by a white actor with mated, blonde dreads and makeup that gave the appearance of a dirty sunburned face. I discovered that Prospera experienced Caliban’s attempted rape of Miranda as ancestral behavior. She saw that “devil” that had fathered Caliban as a white slave trader and colonialist who had raped Sycorax before her banishment. Prospera was not sympathetic to the dark magic Sycorax practiced or to Caliban’s violent behavior, but she was sympathetic to the conditions under which Caliban had been conceived and left to provide for his own survival. All of this provided the motivation to get Caliban to change his nature each time I addressed him. The investment was in the safety of all women with a desire for justice for women of African descent.

These dynamics motivated me to perform discussion of Sycorax with a mix of compassion and contempt. I chose to deliver the lines describing Caliban’s lineage with the dual goal of frightening the pair by telling them about Sycorax’s power and

empowering Caliban by reminding him of his heritage in Act V, when Antonio and Sebastian made remarks about taking Caliban to Italy. There was also a heightened awareness of keeping Caliban in servitude. Prospera's journey with Caliban ended with an understanding of the necessity for Caliban to rule the island independently. In their last moments together, I chose to kneel in front of Caliban, hold his face in my hands and deliver "Go to, away" (Shakespeare and Langbaum 86) as a warning and a relinquishment of my power over him.

Ideas of freedom and the ancestral belief that spirits are not supposed to be unduly controlled influenced my Prospera's relationship with Ariel. I found that Prospera experienced Ariel as counter-part to her own spirit and recognized Ariel's desire for freedom. Her relationship with Ariel was somewhat maternal and part of Prospera's change of character was realizing that Ariel and the lesser spirits should not be controlled.

The role of Miranda was played by a white actress. This casting paired with the betrayal of the light-skinned Antonio increased my character's need to instill a sense of justice and morality in Miranda. For example, my delivery of the line "mark his condition, and th' event, then tell me if this might be a brother." (Shakespeare and Langbaum 11) had the goals of teaching discernment to and ensuring loyalty from Miranda.

Since Prospera was aware of her heritage and had been raised as na-daho, she was committed to passing knowledge and power to Miranda. As Prospera, my super-objective with Miranda was to prepare her to successfully rule Milan and Naples with

knowledge, wisdom and power that surpassed mine. This determination informed my choice to make my speeches to her motivated by the goal of empowerment. It was paramount to Prospera that Miranda understand and have the tools to overcome the perils of being a woman in power.

These tools included the power to observe and interpret male behavior, “Let the fringed curtain of thine eye advance and say what thou seest yond.... He hath lost his fellows and strays about to find them” (Shakespeare and Langbaum 23). I continually made the choice to make eye contact with Miranda when delivering instruction to Ferdinand and Caliban to get Miranda to pay attention, remember what was taking place and to emulate Prospera’s power and independence in her own journey.

Prospera’s lineage and race also influenced my choice to use her magical staff martially. Staffs, spears and guns were among the weapons mastered by the Dahomean Amazons from which Prospera was descended. I began to learn Tai Chi Short Staff from Professor Burton early in the rehearsal process and applied some postures from this form to my handling of Prospera’s staff. When the character was threatened I held the staff in a defensive position covering my center. I held the staff vertically behind or in front of my left shoulder when at rest. I used two offensive postures from the form when threatening Caliban during Act I, Scene 2 of the production.

I found that the ideation of an African spiritual lineage added depth to my performance of Prospera. I decided that the Vodun were always present with the character and that Prospera’s skill in Hermetic magic came from her ancestral connections. The character’s internal conflict regarding Hermetic magic and her

ancestral Vodun was the spiritual pull that led her to give up the rough Hermetic magic. I substituted my own spiritual journey and interpreted Prospera's final lines to indicate that she had recognized that she had entered into a time of spiritual growth and discovery that could only be successfully navigated through change, humility, repentance, faith and prayer.

These choices helped me to connect with the esoteric aspects of the play. I used substitution and thought of the little I knew of Orisha Oya's power when creating, ending and discussing the tempest as Prospera. I thought of Jesus Christ's calming of the seas as Prospera, Miranda, and all those on the island were calmed in the arc of the play. I thought of the Vodun and the Orisha of the sea when discussing the "sea-sorrow" Miranda and Prospera endured on their journey to the island.

My performance of Prospera was grounded in my limited understanding of an African spiritual lineage. It was shaped by my experiences and understanding of black woman-hood. Traditional notions of Prospero and the dynamics at play in William Shakespeare's *The Tempest* were challenged because of these factors. I am grateful to have had the opportunity to explore and perform the character. Research for and performance of the role coincided with a time when I had begun to learn more about Vodun and Yoruba. I am not sure where these discoveries will lead me but I am grateful and prayerful that my path will continue to be full of grace, mercy and loving kindness from the Creator and all of the Creator's emissaries, including Christ and the Orisha.

CHAPTER VIII- SANKOFA

My work in productions as an MFA student at the University of Louisville were artistically fulfilling and grounded in my experience of theatre as a spiritual practice with the potential of serving as a healing art. Performance in the productions of the African American Theatre program were spiritually and artistically affirming communal experiences that provided opportunity for artistic growth. *The Tempest* was also a positive experience, and was richer for the lessons that participation in the African American Theatre Program had taught me. I am sure that without having experienced the life affirming reflections of the AATP, my portrayal of Prospera would have suffered from an attempt at white male mimicry.

The performance of African American theatre gives its actors and audiences the opportunity to momentarily experience an aspect of African community in traces of Africa's storytelling traditions. These traces are evidenced in the call and response, entertaining nature, spirituality, moral instruction, humor, reverence to ancestors, rhythm, music and spectacle of African American theatre. Performances of African American theatre give voice to Black characters whose type, history and struggles mirror that of many African Americans and our ancestors. These stories are too often excluded from mainstream media and theatre. African American theatre then, serves several purposes among which are to entertain, to educate and to pass on the legacy of our experience.

These purposes imbue the Black actor with the unique opportunity of reflecting otherwise buried images of self, family and "other" to its audiences. The metaphysical

nature of African spiritualities wherein the ancestors, the unborn and the living are existing in tandem, normalize the concept of playwright and actor as mediums telling the stories of ancestors whose voices were silenced through oppression and circumstance.

Barbara and Carlton Molette state that:

Afrocentric Theatre, like most other successful theatrical genres, is intended for a relatively homogeneous audience. Therefore, the communication of messages that might be necessary for a White audience could prove trite and boring to the intended African-American audience. Afrocentric American playwrights seek to spare their intended audience the ordeal of sitting through expository messages that are descriptive of experiences that are generally well known. (201)

These well-known experiences (the African American cultural experience), include a historical survival skill of expressing true opinion and emotional reaction only when out of the purview of Whites (and at times other African Americans) of poor conscience. This behavior is a reaction to the oppressiveness of slavery, the terrorism of the Klu Klux Klan, Jim Crow laws, racial bias in the judicial system and institutional racism. A common African American cultural experience is that true opinion and emotional reaction are expressed only when in the safety of one's family and community. One of the misunderstandings those that are not African American may have when viewing African American and Afrocentric Theatre is the fervor with which opinion and emotion is expressed by the actors.

The successful African American and/or Afrocentric actor embodies this repression and release, moves and speaks rhythmically, acts with spontaneity, holds a

connection to the ancestors and among other things: has some understanding of African American and Afrocentric spirituality and religious practices. Eurocentric acting methods can provide foundational approaches to the stage for African American actors but their purpose is to train actors to successfully navigate Eurocentric plays and to satisfy Eurocentric audiences. African American and Afrocentric theatre demands a process that may include Eurocentric methods and must include African American and Afrocentric methods derived from cultural values, experience and expression. My graduate experience at the University of Louisville and my experiences before entering the program support these assertions.

I believe that it is paramount for performers to embrace the signs and cultural experiences of their race, gender and ethnicity, especially when performing characters that have traditionally been played by actors for whom those identifiers differ. This acknowledgement and embracing of culture pushes audiences and the theatre community toward a more equitable and universal experience of culture, truth and communal experience. I also believe that this practice should be carried out with a sense of cultural equality and respect rather than ideas of cultural supremacy.

I am hopeful that my artistic and spiritual journeys will continue for years to come. I plan to teach at the University level, act professionally and continue to find creative and holistic approaches for positive social change in theatre. My research interests include a methodology for Afrocentric actor training, theatre of the African Diaspora and applications for qi gong, tai chi and African dance in actor training and performance. I am grateful.

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- Woodson, Carter Godwin. *The Mis-Education of the Negro*. 1st ed. Chicago, Ill.: African-American Images, 2000. Print.
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CURRICULUM VITAE

Iva-Kristi M. Papailer
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Education

MFA Theatre Performance and Graduate Certificate in African American Theatre, May 2014, **The University of Louisville- Louisville KY**

The University of Louisville- Louisville, Kentucky
B.A. Humanities in the disciplinary studies of Theatre and Literature
Extensive study of African American Theatre

Teaching Experience

Part-Time Lecturer

University of Louisville, Theatre Arts Department- Louisville, Kentucky- 2014- Present

- Black Dramatic Literature- An in depth study of selected dramatic literature by African Americans- WR and CD online course
- African American Women in Theatre- An in depth exploration of the full range of African American women in theatre- WR and CD online course

Graduate Teaching Assistant

University of Louisville, Theatre Arts Department- Louisville, Kentucky-2011- Present

- History of African American Theatre- An in depth study of the History of African American Theatre-WR and CD online course
- Acting the Black Experience- Studio study of Afro-centric performance styles and their origins.- CD course
- Enjoyment of Theatre- Survey of theatre practices and history
- Acting I- Stanislavsky and Viewpoint methods.
- Acting for Non-Majors- Introduction to acting and development of communication skills

Faculty Instructor

The Cling Vaught Young Actor's Institute, Jefferson County Youth Performing Arts School- Louisville, Kentucky- 2012- Present

- Beginning Characterization and Scene Study- Grades 6-12
- Intermediate Characterization and Scene Study- Grades 6-12
- Advanced Characterization and Scene Study- Grades 6-12

Educational Clinic Teacher

The Lincoln Foundation, Whitney M. Young Scholars- Louisville, Kentucky- 2010-2012

- Level 10 Shakespeare Clinic- Year long intensive study of the works of William Shakespeare and the genre of classical theatre for 10th grade students of high academic performance including analysis, acting method and historical context

Chairperson, Drama Faculty

Sacred Heart School for the Arts- Louisville, Kentucky- 2009-2011

- Beginning Drama- Introduction to acting grades K-2
- Intermediate Drama- Basic Acting techniques and staging grades 3-5
- Youth Drama- Advanced young actor training grades 6-8
- Drama- Sacred Heart Model School grades K-3 and 7-8
- Nativity Academy at St. Boniface-Louisville, Kentucky- Acting I grades 6-9
- Direct 4 productions per season for ages 4-14
- Assistant Direction of 4 productions per season for ages 4-14

Acting Instructor

Sacred Heart School for the Arts- Louisville, Kentucky-2008-2009

- Sacred Heart Model School-Level 8- Intensive study of Beowulf and stage direction for *Beowulf: The User Friendly Version*
- Beginning Drama- Introduction to acting grades K-2
- Assistant Teacher-Intermediate Drama- Basic Acting techniques and staging grades 3-5
- Assistant Teacher-Youth Drama- Advanced young actor training grades 6-8
- Stage direction of 3 productions per season for students in grades K-8

Guest Theatre Artist

ArtsReach-The Kentucky Center for the Arts-Louisville, Kentucky-2009-2012

- Maryhurst, Inc.- Theatre of the Oppressed residency
- Portland Promise Center- Improv residency
- Brooklawn Child & Family Services- Theatre of the Oppressed Residency

Teaching Artist

The Kentucky Shakespeare Festival-Louisville, Kentucky-2008-2012

- Instructor- Whitney Young Scholars, The Lincoln Foundation- *Conflict Resolution and Shakespeare*

- Manager- SYA Revels Summer Camp- 3 week acting intensive focused on *The Tempest* for middle school students
- *Twelfth Night* Residency- Dixie Magnet Elementary School-Lexington, Kentucky-grade 3
- African Americans in Shakespeare Workshop- Lincoln Foundation- Louisville, Kentucky- grades 9-12
- Monologue Residency- Shawnee High School- Louisville, Kentucky- grade 10
- Playwriting Residency- Cochrane Elementary- Louisville, Kentucky- grade 5
- Shakespeare Professional Development- Allen Central High School- Eastern, Kentucky- Teaching faculty

Teaching Artist (in addition to serving as Associate Artistic Director of Administration for the Stage One)

Stage One: The Louisville Children's Theatre-Louisville, Kentucky-2006-2008

- Eco-Drama-27 Jefferson County Schools- Louisville, Kentucky- week long workshops engaging students in acting as they learned the value of conservation-grade 3
- Knights and Princesses summer camp- Louisville, Kentucky- week long camp for pre-school students
- Comic Book Adventures- Louisville, Kentucky- week long camp for elementary students

Teaching Artist

Actors Theatre of Louisville- Louisville, Kentucky- 2002

- *Jitney* residencies- 12 Jefferson County Schools- Louisville, Kentucky-grades 9-12

Acting Teacher

Encore School of the Performing Arts (now, The Southern Indiana School for the Arts) - Clarksville, Indiana- 2000-2001

- Level 1- Beginning Acting grades K-2
- Level 2- Intermediate Acting grades 3-7

Administrative Experience:

Graduate Assistant, African American Theatre Program

University of Louisville, Department of Theatre Arts- Louisville, Kentucky 2012-Present

- Assist program director and program assistant with daily activities of program, including communication, scheduling and program events

Graduate Advisor, Studio Theatre

University of Louisville, Department of Theatre Arts- Louisville, Kentucky
Spring 2014

- Coordinate three graduate and undergraduate studio theatre productions per semester

- Serve as production advisor to undergraduate studio coordinators

Graduate Assistant to the Chair

University of Louisville, Department of Theatre Arts- Louisville, Kentucky

Spring 2013

- Assist with marketing of productions and coordination of department events.
- Co-facilitate dialect workshop in Arabic for the Southeastern Theatre Conference

Assistant Planner, Joseph H. McMillan Black Family Conference,

University of Louisville, Office of the Provost-Louisville, Kentucky 2011-2012

- Assist conference chair with all aspects of conference planning and management
- Coordinate, create and distribute selected PR/Marketing materials
- Coordinate all aspects of communication and planning for leadership committee
- Manage conference web and manual registration for 200+ registrants
- Manage conference website
- Coordinate and assist with the management of conference budget

Chairperson, Drama Faculty

Sacred Heart School for the Arts- Louisville, Kentucky 2009-2011

- Organize departmental meetings
- Research and manage season selection
- Create rehearsal schedules
- Serve as a department liaison with Executive Director and district team members for district accreditation process
- Assign classes and directing positions
- Develop and implement age appropriate curriculum

Co-Founding Producer

Juneteenth Legacy Theatre- Louisville, Kentucky/New York, New York 1999-2010

- Manage all aspects of theatre production, including planning, staffing, casting and coordination of annual 12-play new works festival
- Assist in writing and managing local and national grants
- Individual and foundation development
- Design, market and present workshops about empowerment grades 9-12

Associate Artistic Director of Administration- Stage One: The Louisville Children's Theatre- The Kentucky Center for the Arts- Louisville, Kentucky 2004-2008

- Served as organizational liaison with Actors Equity Association, including contract negotiation and weekly reports
- Management of \$1.3 million budget in assistance to Artistic Director
- Served as executive assistant to Artistic Director and managed company of actors, directors and production staff, including payroll requests
- Coordinated 200+ performance calendar on online database

Director of Volunteer and Audience Relations

Actors Theatre of Louisville- Louisville, Kentucky 2000-2002

- Supervised and developed customer service policy for House Management and Coat Check staff
- Improved facility ADA compliance as Organizational Accessibility Manager
- Managed communication, scheduling and training of over 800 volunteers for 100+ performance season in LORT B, C, and D houses
- Develop and manage departmental budget annually
- Hire, manage and motivate coat check and house management staff

Acting Experience (Selected Roles)

Professional:

Kentucky Repertory Theatre- Horse Cave, Kentucky- 2007-2008, 2009-2010

Directors; Robert Brock, Evelyn Blythe

- *Christmas Belles-* Rhonda Lyn
- *Dracula-* Lucy
- *To Kill a Mockingbird-* Calpurnia

Juneteenth Legacy Theatre- Louisville, Kentucky and New York City, New York 1999-2010 (selected roles)

Directors; Sue Lawless, Lorna Littleway, Jeff Rodgers, Imani

- *How Long Have I Been Dead, Anyway-* Celia
- *The Diva Daughters Dupree-* Abby
- *Diana Sands-* Diana Sands
- *Snow-* Eddie Lee
- *A Lady and A Woman-* Biddie
- *The Blue Vein Society-* Molly
- *Passing Ceremonies-* Rafael

Stage One: The Louisville Children's Theatre- Louisville, Kentucky-2006

Director: J. Daniel Herring

- *The Best Christmas Pageant Ever-* Irma Slocum

Commercial/Industrial (Selected Roles):

Videobred Incorporated- Louisville, Kentucky

- Counting the Costs- Executive Assistant
- Papa John's Pizza- Krissy- multiple
- Papa John's Pizza- Director * (National)
- Safe Place Services- Fran
- Darwin Networks- Spokesperson
- Family and Children's Counseling Services- Client
- Predatory Lending Alert- Janet

Voice Over:

Downtown Recording- Louisville, Kentucky

Director: Nick Stevens

- Smithsonian Museum
- McDonalds
- Kentucky Lottery
- Kentucky Adult Education
- Iowa Standardized Testing

Community Acting (Selected Roles):

Pandora Productions- Louisville, Kentucky- 2008-2011

Director: Michael Drury

- *Stop Kiss-* Callie
- *Last Summer at Bluefish Cove-* Annie

Student Acting:

The University of Louisville- Louisville, Kentucky 1996-1999, 2011-2012, 2012-2013

Directors: Prof. Nefertiti Burton, Clinton Turner Davis, Dr. Lundeana Thomas, Dr. Rinda Frye, Prof. Lorna Littleway

- *Gem of the Ocean-* Black Mary (directed by Clinton Turner Davis)
- *The Tempest-* Prospera*
- *Once on this Island-* Erzulie
- *Shakin the Mess Outta Misery-* Aunt Mae
- *Blues for an Alabama Sky-* Delia Patterson
- *Mad At Miles-*Ensemble
- *The Wiz-* The Wizard
- *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom-* Dussie Mae
- *Twilight Los Angeles-* Elvira, Dr.
- *Much Ado About Nothing-* Boy

*Thesis Role

Directing Experience (Selected titles):

Sacred Heart School for the Arts- Louisville, Kentucky 2008-2011

- *The Best Christmas Pageant Ever*
- *Willy Wonka Jr.*
- *Who Pushed Humpty?*
- *The Brothers Grimm; Out of Order*
- *Dracula*
- *Stone Soup and The Three Billy Goats Gruff: A Rock Opera*
- *Beowulf: The User Friendly Version*
- *A Midsummer Night's Dream*
- *Globetrotting: Fables From Around the World*

Juneteenth Legacy Theatre- operating in Louisville, Kentucky and New York, New York 1999-2010

- *Sweetwater*
- *August Wilson's Women*
- *Juneteenth Blues Cabaret*
- *Kindler Genter Nation*
- *Serving Two Masters*
- *The Last Dust Track*
- *Mother of Civil Rights*
- *A Sunbeam*
- *The Carelessness of Love*

University of Louisville, Department of Theatre Arts, Studio Theatre- Louisville, Kentucky 2013

- *Where Do We Go From Here?*

Accomplishments/Awards:

Grants/Scholarships

- University of Louisville, Department of Theatre Arts, Warren Oates Award for Research and Presentation, 2014- \$1,691
- University of Louisville Teaching Assistantship and Ethnic Minority Fellowship, 2012-2013- \$30,000
- University of Louisville, Department of Theatre Arts, Graduate Teaching Assistantship- 2013-2014- \$30,000
- We Shall Overcome Fund- To support the 3rd Annual Drama Change Exchange, a social justice camp for middle school students with Sacred Heart School for the Arts and Nativity Academy at St. Boniface- Highlander Research and Education Center, 2010- \$2,500
- Arts Builds Communities Grant-To support Drama Change Exchange, a social justice camp for middle school students with Juneteenth Legacy Theatre and Sacred Heart School for the Arts- The Kentucky Arts Council- 2009- \$1,800
- Individual Artist Grant- Kentucky Foundation for Women- 2002- \$1,400
- Production shop assistantship scholarship- The University of Louisville- 1997

Awards

- University of Louisville, School of Interdisciplinary and Graduate Studies, Graduate Dean's Citation- 2014
- The Lincoln Foundation, Whitney M. Young Scholars- Outstanding Service- 2010-2011, 2011-2012
- Kentucky Alliance Against Racist and Political Oppression, Louisville, Kentucky- Solid 17 Award- 2003

Presentations/Panels

- Healing Heart Qi Gong and warm-up for African American Actors- The Black Theatre Network Conference- August 2014
- Drama Change Exchange: Using Viewpoints, Improv and Theatre of the Oppressed Techniques to facilitate forum and invisible theatre with youth for social justice- The Annual Pedagogy and Theatre of the Oppressed Conference- June 2014
- Performing Arabic Dialect- Southeastern Theatre Conference- 2013, with Dr. Rinda Frye
- Five Kentucky Women discuss little known works by Kentucky women writers- Southeastern Theatre Conference- 2010
- African American Theatre in Louisville- Black Theatre Network annual conference- 2007

Research/Scholarship/Innovations

- Healing Heart Qi Gong for Actors and Actors of Color-University of Louisville
- Drama Change Exchange: Using Viewpoints, Improv and Theatre of the Oppressed Techniques to facilitate activist theatre with youth- Sacred Heart School for the Arts, University of Louisville

Languages

- English-Native speaker
- French- Novice speaker

Affiliations/Memberships

- International Dialects of English Archive- Associate Editor
- Actors Equity Association- 2009-2012 (Currently eligible for renewal, graduate school hiatus)
- Southeastern Theatre Conference
- Black Theatre Network
- Accessibility Managers in the Arts- 2000-2004 (Now LEAD)

Additional Training

- Viewpoints and Suzuki - Siti Company- New York, New York
- Directing- Sue Lawless, Lorna Littleway, Dr. Lundeana Thomas
- Tai Chi and Qi Gong for Actors- Prof. Nefertiti Burton
- Linklater- Dr. Rinda Frye

Teaching Interests

- African American Theatre History
- Acting for African American Theatre
- Theatre of the African Diaspora
- Acting
- Voice
- Movement
- Script Analysis
- Theatre for Young Audiences
- African Theatre of the Americas and Caribbean
- Theatre of the Oppressed
- Shakespeare and Classical theatre

Stage Management experience available upon request.