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AN ACTOR'S PROCESS IN BRIDGING THE GAP BETWEEN FIRST-GENERATION  
AND MULTI-GENERATIONAL AFRICAN-AMERICAN IDENTITIES

By  
Mutiyat Ade-Salu  
B.A., University of Michigan, 2007  
M.F.A., University of Louisville, 2020

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  
in Theatre Arts

Department of Theatre Arts  
University of Louisville  
Louisville, Kentucky

May 2020

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A Thesis Approved on

April 21, 2020

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Dr. Yvonne V. Jones

## DEDICATION

For every actor in the “minority”  
who battles to be seen, heard...and understood.

# ABSTRACT

## AN ACTOR'S PROCESS IN BRIDGING THE GAP BETWEEN FIRST-GENERATION AND MULTI-GENERATIONAL AFRICAN-AMERICAN IDENTITIES

Mutiyat Ade-Salu

May 9, 2020

This thesis reflects my process assimilating into the role of Chelle in the production of *Detroit '67* at the University of Louisville. Although there have been instances of actors crossing lines of gender, nationality, race, and even sexuality, to perform roles in contemporary theatre, discussion about generational differences is almost non-existent.

Through historical research, first-hand interviews, and conventional acting methods, I explore the world of my role, searching for spirituality, authenticity, and identity.

Additionally, I explain my use of The WAY Method ®, a process I began creating in 2014 to help actors be clear with who *they* are before empathizing with their role. This thesis is also an exploration in managing the idiosyncrasies of a first-generation African-American woman while embodying the historical, psychological, and cultural traits of a multi-generational African-American character. The adaptation of a known approach to acting to create a new one proves that future actors in a similar circumstance of generational difference can successfully build a process for bridging any gaps between themselves and their roles.

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## INTRODUCTION

Along the business journey of an actor, the different agents and managers they encounter provide maps of guidance for their careers. This has certainly been the case in my own journey prior to attending graduate school. However, the actor's *educational* journey is mapped out by the opportunities they have to study with various coaches, instructors, and master teachers. No matter how specific the directions are, the actor chooses when, how, and where to turn. Such has been my journey over two decades in school, acting studios, and apprenticeships. The preparation of my thesis role as Chelle in Dominique Morisseau's play *Detroit '67* relied heavily on the lessons I have learned from undertaking this journey.<sup>1</sup>

Those lessons are part of the collection of tools I have gathered in my "actor's toolbox": a collection of learned techniques from the past to help shape and build future characters. Using my toolbox, this thesis explores a particular process of assimilation. In my observation, the issue of assimilation typically comes up in conversation as a social problem. Here, I explore it as an artistic challenge for a first-generation American with the hope that it can inform and encourage others with the same status.

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<sup>1</sup> The performative "I", a writing technique created by performance theorist Della Pollock, posits the writer as an authority over their experience. In using this practice at times in my thesis, I assert myself as an authority over the experience of being a first-generation African-American actor, claim deeper ownership of my thesis role, and remove focus from validating the theories or experiences of others (Pollock).

*Detroit '67* is a play about the battle between assimilation and segregation within an African-American family. With both parents deceased, only one elder sister, Chelle — who is widowed — and her younger brother, Lank remain. They support each other by living in the same house, but outside pressures test their bond. Chelle is tempted to assimilate into the oft-said American dream of owning a home outright and putting her son through college. Conversely, Lank segregates himself from that dream by aspiring to work for himself and own a Black bar. It is also interesting that, at times, the two switch forces within the story: Chelle supports romantic segregation while Lank assimilates his feelings towards an unexpected White female character, Caroline. Against the backdrop of the 1967 Detroit Riots, the act of assimilation is a complicated struggle. The same is true for my process as an actor.

The process of my assimilation into the worlds and personas of African-American characters is sometimes complicated by my intersectional reality. This intersectionality is composed of the usual parts of race (according to American standards) and sex, but also my socio-historic status as a first-generation African-American. While investigating the creation of the cultural stereotype called the Black matriarch, social theorist Kimberlé Crenshaw created the term “intersectionality” in her 1989 article "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex." Crenshaw points out that, considering both race and sex within the Black community, “Black men are not viewed as powerful, nor are Black women viewed as passive” (Crenshaw, 222). Hence, this is where the tradition of Black American female domination comes from. The overall condition of Black subordination led to the specific creation of the Black matriarch. In thinking of my intersectionality, at times in my career, I have felt subordinate to other actors with deeper roots in America. In the case of performing Chelle, however, I felt eager to meet the challenge. Creating an intersection of educational experience, my adaptation of known acting methods, and native spirituality informed my assimilation into the role.

The primary goal of this thesis is to develop a process for bridging the gap between different generational African-American identities so that I can assimilate more convincingly into the role of Chelle. The following chapters reveal the assimilation process of a first-generation African-American actor into a multi-generational African-American role through researched knowledge, shared experiences, native spirituality, and a personalized acting craft. More than a research paper, this thesis is a sensitive unveiling of my personal process and is sometimes written in the first-person to create a bond with future actors who may share the same circumstance.

## My Acting Trajectory

### 2000

My acting trajectory began in the year 2000 with an invitation from a high school upperclassman to join the NAACP's ACT-SO program.<sup>2</sup> I had already begun my formal vocal music studies at LaGuardia Arts High School and was told I could choose more than one discipline for the program's competition. I chose music and then acting. I had always been fascinated with how actors moved across a television screen, and when I was very young, I actually believed they lived inside the television set! When the TV was off, the actors slept. When it was turned on, they came to life. Taking the acting workshops at the chapter offices of the NAACP in New York taught me quickly that acting was not as easy as turning an inner life "on" or "off." Rather than observing life only on a television screen, I learned how much more important it was to observe my everyday surroundings. (Later on, I would also utilize my personal history in my craft.)

It was in this program that I studied with my first acting teacher, Ms. Willie Ann Gissendanner of Georgia. She was a Black woman who had firmly held beliefs about Black pride, and she never mentioned the classic acting pedagogues (i.e. Stanislavski,

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<sup>2</sup> The NAACP stands for National Advancement for the Association of Colored People and was founded in New York in 1909. ACT-SO is an acronym for Academic, Cultural, Technological and Scientific Olympics.

Meisner, Hagen, or other icons). It seems her tactic was to begin with the pedagogy of the Black soul to introduce us to the craft of acting. She selected scenes from Black plays and spent ample time explaining the history associated with Black plays. Her selection was crucial for first-generation African-American children like me who had no direct connection to African-American lineage or historical circumstances. (Later on, I also realized the importance of understanding my immigrant parents' heritage and history for growing in understanding of my craft.)

Ms. Gissendanner consistently assigned homework to teach us how to “research” a character by looking up the historical circumstances of their life. She also provided performance opportunities outside our workshops—something previous acting coaches in this program had not. My first public performance as an actor took place on the stage at the National Black Theatre in Harlem. As a 13-year-old, I had no idea of the connection between this theatre and the introduction of Yoruba methods of performance into African-American theater. In about a decade, however, I would learn about that connection while I was an undergraduate in college, and that it was made possible by NBT founder Dr. Barbara Ann Teer. In retrospect, my first stage experience as a young, Yoruba-American actor at NBT seemed destined. There, with a packed audience, my peers and I performed scene after scene from classic Black American plays, including *A Raisin in the Sun*. Because of my motherly nature, Ms. Gissendanner cast me as Lena. The response of a full-room, standing ovation was profound, and I experienced, for the first time, the impact that an actor who had thoroughly researched a character could have on an audience.

Had Ms. Gissendanner not trained us to do historical research and everyday human observation, I doubt the audience (including the chapter director of the NAACP ACT-SO program) would have requested more performances from us and funded future performances. As I approached adulthood at the beginning of the new twenty-first

century, my participation in ACT-SO was also the beginning of the awareness of my artistic purpose. At the end of the program, I won the city-wide competition and represented New York at the national championship in Baltimore. (Future television and screen actor Aldis Hodge won.)

## **2004**

In the next phase of my life as a young adult woman, I was introduced to the experience of the ethereal or “spiritual” nature of acting. Although I declared music my major at the University of Michigan, I took a keen interest in joining the African-American theatre minor directed by the late Professor Glenda Dickerson. This program provided no production practicum but delved deeply into the history of African-American theatre, script analysis on both theoretical and cultural levels, and the spiritual nature of Black acting techniques. Again, as a first-generation African-American born to African immigrant, I found this study of Black theatre to be crucial for developing my understanding of what it means to be Black in America. It provided me with the knowledge that my immigrant parents (though African) could not.

In one of the courses, Black Acting Workshop, students of the African-American theatre minor put scenes we had studied from African-American playscripts into practice. Professor Dickerson was the instructor, and *A Raisin in the Sun* was one of our primary texts. She assigned me the role of Ruth, and, in performing this role, I learned how to connect with monologues on a spiritual level by turning them into song! Because of my studies as a Vocal Music major, this was easy for me; it helped me tremendously with memorization and in making the transition from a vocalist to an actor. Professor Dickerson also used the formation of a circle as a tool for creating a spiritual energy that would carry us into the day’s work. She called this circle “temenos,” and its purpose was to create trust among every actor in the room. (I would learn later on that the word is Greek-derived and generally refers to a sanctuary for the worship of a prominent figure).

“Trust” —a term often used in the acting craft—is known as a necessity among actors who rely on each other to bring a scene to life. This trust is both physical and emotional. In everyday life, trust among human beings is not always a given due to unknown personal motives and the threat of being taken advantage of for another's gain. Within the realm of acting—although each character does have an individual objective and will employ tactics to accomplish it — actors must develop trust among each other to ensure that the performance will end safely. There is no room for selfish gain on the actor's part, in spite of what the role may call for. In carrying the exercise of “temenos” into my artistic practice, I developed a discipline of spirituality. I used it as a unique tool to take my performances beyond words and gestures, and the term “spirituality” meant to me, “what makes one feel spiritually alive.” Aside from religion, my denotation is that spirituality can mean a person's passion for their favorite sports team, their devotion to a specific vocalist, or their convictions on a particular way of thinking. From my observations, each of these situations provokes a spirited response that gives the viewer a glimpse of an individual's spirituality.

## **2010**

December of 2009 was a turning point for me in terms of my identity. As a founding member of the 1st Generation Nigerian Project in New York City, I joined five Nigerian-American actresses who were also in their 20s to hold casual conversations each week. The office we used was donated to us by the LAByrinth Theatre Company, the same company that donated performance space for our first public showcase. In these meetings, where we shared our personal experiences growing up in immigrant households and the deviations we took from the typical careers expected of us. At one meeting, I brought up the idea of naming ourselves first-generation Nigerian-American after being exposed to the concept of being a first-generation college student on the campus of the University of Michigan. (I was a second-generation college student.)

Some members, however, disagreed with the label due to their birth outside of America. Thus, when it came time to vote on an official name for our ensemble, the term “1st Generation Nigerian” was chosen. Following the success of our year-long devised theatre work, I chose to personally identify as first-generation Nigerian-American because of my birth in America. I also appreciated the connection the hyphen symbolizes between the two separate worlds of being Nigerian and American. In the following years, I would also identify as “Yoruba,” “Yoruba-American,” and “first-generation African-American.”<sup>3</sup> In my day-to-day life, I experience the circumstances that each of these labels depicts.

Between 2008 and 2017 I studied professionally in the acting studios of Alice Spivak, Petronia Paley, and Rosalyn Coleman in New York City, keeping my hyphenated identities in mind. A fellowship also enabled me to study in the Emerging Artist Program of Intiman Theatre in Seattle. Despite all my training and work, I am still exploring the craft of merging my first-generation African-American identity with what I have termed the “multi-generational African-American” identities of the roles offered in my field. It often requires an assimilation rather than a merging because of my lack of lived experience as a multi-generational African-American. I first created this term in 2016 when writing a paper on the differences in the use of spirituality between first-generation African-American playwrights and more established African-Americans in the field of Black theatre. I realized that the established playwrights had deeper roots in America and often had a familial connection to the South that spanned several generations as opposed to the first-generation playwrights, hence the term “multi-

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<sup>3</sup> Examples first-generation African-American actors in my generation are Adepero Oduye of the films *Twelve Years a Slave* and *Pariah*; Jocelyn Bioh of the Broadway show *The Curious Incident of the Dog at Night*; Daniel Okeniyi of the television show *The Hunger Games* and the film *Emperor*; Gbenga Akinnagbe of the television show *The Wire* and the Broadway show *To Kill A Mockingbird*; and Rotimi Akinosho of the television show *Power*.

generational.” This thesis is about my process of merging my life experience with that of the character Chelle, a 38-year-old widow from Detroit, Michigan, with Southern American roots. In researching the world of the late 1960s and adapting a vital method in my previous training, I created a unique process for developing my role. However, in searching for my character’s authenticity, identity, and spirituality, I also developed a novel approach to bridging the gap between an actor’s first-generation and multi-generational African-American identities.



# CHAPTER 1

## SCRIPT AND CHARACTER ANALYSIS

By opening night of *Detroit '67* in the year 2020, it had been over half a century since the Detroit Riots. Five years after 1967, scholar Donald Warren tried to understand how it happened. He notes, "Detroit was historically racially and ethnically diverse because of labor migration for employment in the auto industries, but it also was very segregated and plagued by racialized politics" (Sugrue, 353). He also connects the high concentration of Black people in Detroit's ghettos to the preference given to white ethnic minorities to advance in housing and employment opportunities elsewhere (Sugrue, 353). Thomas Sugrue states "a large African American middle class emerged by the mid-20th century. But as auto industry jobs declined and 'white flight' to the suburbs accelerated in the 1970s, Detroit became a majority African American city (83% in 2016) with only one-third of the total population of the early 1950s" (Sugrue, 353).

Regarding the rioters themselves (most of whom came from the lowest economic class), Caplan and Paige report that "39 percent of rioters and 30 percent of nonrioters had incomes under \$5,000 in Detroit [and] . . . 30 percent of the rioters reported they were unemployed, while this figure was 32 percent" (Caplan, 15). One theory they determine to be a cause for the riots, the "relative deprivation theory," is that riots take place when things are getting better but not quickly enough. For the characters in the play *Detroit '67*, there is a constant fight for ownership (the bar that Lank so desperately wants, the home that Chelle intends to pay off) despite deprivation through economic

and housing opportunities. This fight for ownership is one possibility for the spine of the play.

## Is Home a Sanctuary?

There is a lot to be said about the historical circumstances of the 1960s from political, social, and cultural standpoints. In *Detroit 67*, playwright Dominique Morisseau incorporates historical moments through the music of the most successful Black-owned record label Motown Records, the competition with the upward mobility of European immigrants, and the racial politics between Black and white bodies. Chelle is affected by all of these forces, and [the tension she feels as a result causes her to be extremely cautious with her personal and business affairs.

Chelle's character and circumstance are a product of the Great Migration. Isabel Wilkerson, author of the epic account as to why and how African-Americans migrated to the North from the southern part of the United States, details the journeys of people like Chelle's forebears. (As Chelle was born around 1929, it is significantly interesting to me that she may have been the first generation in her family to be born in the North, assuming her parents migrated to Detroit sometime between 1915 and 1929. This circumstance is similar to that of the characters Walter Lee and Beneatha in Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun*.) Wilkerson estimates that the entire period lasted from 1915 to 1970 in a series of waves. By 1970, nearly 47% of African-Americans lived outside of the South, compared to only 10% at the start of 1915 (Wilkerson, 10). Depending on the closest connecting train route, southern African-Americans migrated almost exclusively to the most industrial cities in the North, including Chicago, Cleveland, New York, and Detroit. Similar to the accounts of the Detroiters I interviewed, Wilkerson pinpoints some of the roots of those who landed in Detroit as starting from Tennessee, western Georgia, Alabama, and the Florida panhandle (178). Coleman

Young, Detroit's first Black mayor in 1974, was the child of migrants from Tuscaloosa, Alabama (529).

Nationally, the political landscape was already tense. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. had forewarned of violence as a response to white supremacy. After the 1967 riots in Detroit, he pinpointed five causes: "1) white backlash [to requests for Black equality, housing integration, etc.] 2) unemployment, 3) general discriminatory practices, 4) war, 5) features peculiar to big cities [i.e., family problems, migration]" (King). The last two issues affect Chelle especially. Tensions felt from the Vietnam War are noted when she responds to the comment her love interest, Sly makes about using her party to "leave that Vietnam blues overseas." "Don't say it that way Sylvester...Makin' it sound like we doin' more than we are...Not trying to mess up these Vets more than they already been" (Morisseau, 18).

"Family problems" are also evident when she reminisces back to a time when her family unit was still intact. "Before Willie [her late husband] died, we used to take Julius down to the park...Felt more put together...gave us something to do as a family" (Morisseau, 83-84). In Act 2, Chelle is living in the circumstance of war in her hometown with the sound of tanks rolling by at the top of some scenes, and she is turned into a sort of war nurse each time her younger brother Lank enters severely beaten. Towards the end, she is left grieving yet another loss of a Black man she loves after she is informed that the military police from one of those same tanks shot him dead while he was fleeing.

### **A Woman's Place, Cultural Imagery, and Labor**

Before her love interest, Sly, dies, Chelle finds it difficult to trust him romantically. A 2010 report on single parent widows states that women like Chelle are "vulnerable" and that they carry "stressors including an unresolved grieving process" (Gass-Stearnas, 411). Before that, a 2004 study found that contrary to previous researchers' findings,

support from friends and family “do not seem to enhance adjustment” but cause “greater distress for widows” (Miller et al., 151). In the play, Sly, her love interest, represents a future promise of security and a second chance at love. However, whenever he gets too close while dancing or verbally expresses his desire to make their romance official, Chelle withdraws. She wants to hold onto her past love, not only materially through old mementos and objects, but also emotionally. Sly’s offer of romantic support does not resolve her grieving.

Morisseau is deliberate in her characterization of Chelle. She purposely shapes Chelle against the stereotype of single, Black American women often discussed around me while growing into my own womanhood in New York City: unmarried, with multiple children, and financially dependent on the government. Rather, Chelle is widowed, has only one son, and is entrepreneurial in the management of her house parties. She is also fiscally responsible as demonstrated by her plans to use the proceeds from the parties to pay off the mortgage and her father’s inheritance money to pay for her son’s college tuition (Morisseau, 10). Chelle is so emphatic about this allocation of funds that she repeats it later on to Sly in the opening scene (17). The imagery of Chelle is a key part of the playwright’s message regarding the ‘67 riots. In making Chelle the protagonist, as opposed to her brother Lank, Morisseau draws much-needed attention to the perspective of Black women and how they were affected by the riots. She also reveals the battle Black women faced, not just against domineering white supremacy, but also at times challenging the domination of Black men over Black women during the Civil Rights era. Whereas Lank struggles to wrestle power from his older sibling, Chelle struggles to gain trust as a female leader of the household. Sociologist Dr. K. Sue Jewell supports Morisseau’s efforts to reshape the Black female image by stating, “the goal for [African-American] women, and others who seek equality for all people as well as an equitable allocation of resources, is one of societal transformation rather than

reformation. The former requires eradicating stereotypes, dispelling myths and supplanting ideologies which serve as the basis for patriarchy and other systems of domination” (Jewell, 3). Jewell also draws from sociologist Dick Hebdige findings that “disenfranchised groups” develop a habit of resisting mainstream ideologies, and Jewell notes that it is African-American women who take up the task of “redefining and reconstructing” themselves (33).

But what about the imagery of Black male resistance on the set? According to Morisseau’s stage directions, some of the basement wall decorations are to feature “proud posters of Joe Louis and Muhammad Ali” as well as a picture of Malcolm X with a “big tack through Malcolm’s forehead” (Morisseau, 7). At first analysis, I thought the tack could represent one of the gunshot wounds he suffered when he was assassinated or possibly emphasize the power of his intellectual thought on Black America. Upon reading an article by Paulette Pierce, I considered the possibility that the “big tack through Malcolm’s forehead” was a figurative shot by the playwright at his male agency. As part of a discussion on the gender of agency, Pierce’s article revealed to me the misogynistic ideals of Malcolm X for the first time. She notes that, as a whole, Black Nationalists in the 1960s believed that “[Black] women are naturally more susceptible to cultural corruption (assimilation) and co-operation than are men... [The Black] man is rendered the victim while [the Black] woman is represented as merely the object/tool of this national disgrace...” (Pierce, 222-223). These beliefs, she adds, impacted Malcolm X’s own ideology and appeared in his public speeches. In one statement from 1956, he declares “The trickiest in existence is the black woman and the white man...she will always win over you because the devil can use her to break down more of our black brothers...and holds the man back from saving himself” (223).

Here, what strikes me the most is the idea of holding the Black man back. In Act 2, Scene 2, after Chelle picks Lank up from jail, she gets into another argument with him

about the bar. She calls him a “fool” and Lank responds, “I ain’t a fool dammit! I listen to you all we ever gon’ do is be quiet and safe and never have nothin’ better than what we got” (Morisseau, 66-67). Here, Lank accuses Chelle of holding him back from his ambitions and suggests that her way of being “quiet and safe” is an attempt to assimilate into the mainstream American dream. Chelle loses the fight but not before mentioning she is about to watch her family’s inheritance be wasted. She repeatedly loses in that she is unable to convince Lank of her perspective on musical tastes, dating White women, and investment in the bar until the very last scene of the play.

As part of my character analysis, I have to ask, “What is Chelle’s agency as a woman?” We can see her agency as the eldest sibling, but as a woman, she loses fights against the male characters in the play over and over again. Both Chelle and I feel the pressure to submit to male authority as females. Interestingly, my personal family background includes Islamic heritage on both sides. My grandfather gave me my first name Mutiyat, which means “obedient”, “pious”, and “submissive” in Arabic. On top of my Islamic heritage, being Yoruba held its own cultural expectations that I behave as a “good Yoruba girl” and never question the authority of males in my family. The circumstances of my American upbringing required me to learn how to be assertive the hard way, and I learned this skill only in my late 20s. My attempts to be assertive rather than submissive still cause tension between my Yoruba relatives and me from time to time. This struggle is one more similarity I drew upon to help bridge the gap between the different African-American generational identities. In regard to reshaping the cultural image and identity of the Black woman, Morisseau is successful in defying societal stereotypes, but she does not sacrifice our view of the struggle to do that within the Black family. Through Chelle and Lank, she boldly depicts the struggle between Black men and women to claim leadership over a family unit.

Towards the end of the late 1960s, it was still common for Black women to be found more under-employed than White women. As of the late 1970s, only 51 % of Black women holding high-school diplomas were working (Jones, 305). The 1960s were a period of significant socioeconomic improvement for both Black and White Americans. Still, as sociologists, Reynolds Farley and Albert Hermalin stressed, "The changes of this decade failed to eliminate racial differences..." (Farley and Hermalin, 353). In 1967, non-White families, including African-Americans, earned slightly more than half of White families at a median income of \$5,641 (355). Just two years later, the income potential seemed to have increased exponentially for African-American families, particularly those headed by both husband and wife between the ages of 35 and 44 years-old: \$8,785. Unfortunately for African-American families headed by a single, female the standard income was much lower: \$3,951 (356). These statistics combined demonstrate the weight of financial loss suffered by Chelle and her son after the death of her husband. They also give a reason for her firm reliance on her parents' inheritance money as well as her house parties.

## In the Culture

Nonetheless, Chelle is more than a widow. She is of the culture of Detroit. Although *Detroit '67* was written by native Detroiter Dominique Morisseau, the role of Chelle was developed off of the personhood of another native Detroiter, Michelle Wilson, the actress who originated the role at the Public Theater in New York. On April 24, 2019, Ms. Wilson was gracious enough to conduct a phone interview with me about the character. As she recounted, Morisseau ran into her at an annual Stevie Wonder party in Brooklyn, NY back in 2006, dancing away and showing off her Detroit moves. Wilson's faithful love for Detroit musical legend Stevie Wonder is what gave Morisseau the idea for the role, and then for the play.

Wilson also gave me a firsthand account of what the culture in Detroit was like for her growing up and before she moved away for her career in Chicago, then New York. Ms. Wilson described the Black Detroiters as “up-South Negroes” because most Black people (as I had also witnessed during my time as a student at the University of Michigan) had retained their Southern accents even after being two to three generations removed from the South their grandparents came from. She also described Detroit as a sort of “Black utopia.” In spite of segregated communities, many Black people owned their own homes, and everybody knew everybody. The car factories of Motor City Detroit were family-oriented “like the fields,” and the community could also be cliquish. Overall, Black Detroiters were “self-determined” (Wilson).

Six months later, my interview with another Detroiters and fellow actor, Samuel R. Gates, confirmed many of the same qualities. In addition to echoing his on Black entrepreneurship, Gates pointed out that, in the 1980s, there were more Black millionaires in Detroit than anywhere else. The neighborhood he grew up in was all-Black, and the entire city might have had up to two million people. His own grandparents had come up North from Mississippi, South Carolina, Louisiana, and Alabama, giving him a Southern drawl that confuses many people when he introduces himself to as a native of Detroit. Beyond their connection to the South, Black Detroiters were profoundly important to the motor industry, and the men took pride in their cars; the women chose to take a lot of pride in their hair! With this information from both Ms. Wilson and Mr. Gates, I imagine that the character Chelle would be intensely loyal to the Black community, feeling utterly confident in serving them spiritually with her “blind pig” basement parties, while empowering herself economically with the money she earned. I also imagine that she remained connected to the South because of her own parents’ background and by allowing her son Julius to attend the famed Tuskegee Institute in Alabama.



There is no mention of Chelle's occupation in the play, but it is clear that she has an entrepreneurial spirit. The parties she regularly throws to raise funds for her housing are a part of African-American culture. In her book on social dance formations, Katrina Hazzard-Gordon explains how gatherings called "jooks" led to more lucrative, underground business ventures in African-American communities. From jooks to honky-tonks to rent shouts to pay parties, these gatherings included various activities like numbers-running, eating, dancing, drinking entertained guests while supporting the hosts financially. Furthermore, "a cooperative network of individuals assisted" with leading activities and returned favors to each other (Hazzard-Gordon, 98). These same activities and cooperation appear in *Detroit '67* through the characters' stage business and dialogue.

Although the "blind pig" is a particular name for illegal parties in Detroit, it seems as though this cultural tradition was brought to Northern cities by Southern migrants from rural areas. Hazzard-Gordon's *Jookin'* reminds us that the tradition of the urban "rent party" derived from both the rural "jook" as well as the Southern "church social" once migrants discovered their new Northern jobs did not earn them enough for house rent (96). Ironically, one Southerner explains that it was customary "to give some form of a party when money was needed to supplement the family income. The purpose for giving such a party was never stated..." (Reid, 164-65). In *Detroit '67*, Chelle puts the proceeds from her domestic form of a "blind pig" towards the house mortgage — suggesting that her occupational income is not enough to cover it — and she never publicizes the reason for her house parties to her guests. When Chelle urges her friend Bunny to start spreading the word about her parties again, she does not insist that Bunny shares the purpose for them. Instead, she mentions her investment in some new .45 records to attract the crowd (Morisseau, 11).

Of particular note to me are Hazzard-Gordon's observations of the African

retentions in African-American dance gatherings and the similarities between jook and the “blind pigs” of Detroit. She notes that the jook was "a secular institution rooted in West African traditions that intertwined religious and secularized elements." The dance movement of "scratching" could possibly be traced to the sacred dance of [Esu] Legba, a primary deity from the Yorubas in West Africa (83). She also describes jook characteristics, which I found similar to Detroit “blind pigs.” They included: advertisement through word of mouth; illegal activities such as gambling and liquor sales, small crowds under fifty; drinking liquor out of cups; late-night start times; attendance by low-wage earners; and the responsibility of the host to maintain social order (84).

The experience of being at a Detroit house party is confirmed by one of my mentors who is also a Detroit-native, theatre producer Woodie King, Jr. In one of his books on Black theatre, he reminisces on an important part of his culture growing up in Detroit:

On this east-side [of Detroit], house parties on Friday and Saturday evenings were our glory...We searched for dark corners for our slow-grinding...Our house parties and our music could not exist without each other. The house parties were in basements and the lights would always be down low. The Midnighters [a local music group] told us about ourselves. [Sometimes] we were so cool, we never said a word for the duration of the party. The mood set by the record would direct our actions (King, 52-53).

The record King refers to reflects the power of the recorded sound in house parties. The way musical groups told partygoers about themselves also demonstrates how music could be the soundtrack of African-American lives. Morisseau makes this blatant to audiences by utilizing memorable Motown songs to open or close a scene’s relevant situation. For example, Act 2 Scene 2 opens with the tune “My Baby Loves Me” as sung by Martha Reeves and the Vandellas when Chelle returns home with Lank after bailing him out of jail with some of her savings (Morisseau, 65). In this moment, the song relates to Chelle’s sacrificial love for her brother.

## Evoking Sense Memory

With the recent passing of her father after her mother had already died, Chelle's reconnection to the South through her son is one need of hers as she is grieving. For my performative process and the development of this role, it is essential to pay attention to all of Chelle's needs. *The DNA of Relationships* by Dr. Gary Smalley helps to pinpoint basic human needs and how they translate into wants and fears. According to Smalley, out of a list of many "wants," the need for "safety" comes from wanting "to feel protected and secure." That then can become a fear of "danger" (26-27). For Chelle, after the loss of both her husband and father, her need for safety means clinging to the past for some semblance of comfort while fearing the danger of new love and modern possibilities.

My process also included the production of Chelle's physicality. As a widow living in a city about to boil over in violence, Chelle could easily be seen by an actor as constrained in her movements. This constraint is a natural way to protect her need for "safety." However, with the musical backdrop of groups like the Temptations, I wondered or I considered how could I give Chelle moments of escape from the danger surrounding her? Is it possible that, even with unresolved grief, she finds some safety in dancing and music? To discover this on a spiritual level over the following three months, I planned to have weekly dance sessions with the music playlist I have compiled on Youtube with the songs mentioned in the show. Our director also played a curated list of Motown tunes that to invigorate the cast at each rehearsal warmup and rehearsal break. In both my private and rehearsal sessions, the music transported me spiritually to the 1960s; this was "sense memory" at work. One way acting teacher Uta Hagen encourages actors to employ sense memory is through the reproduction of the "physiological process of sleeping and waking" (Hagen, 45). By translating this exercise onto dance, I could reproduce the memory of dance as an escape mechanism.

Lastly, my performance process would include the acting techniques that resonate the most with me: Uta Hagen's Six Steps and Sanford Meisner's Repetition Exercise. Hagen's Six Steps cover so well the cultural and psychological development of a character, and I have developed my own acting method out of it for creating a strong sense of empathy with a role. Meisner's exercise "starts by one actor opening his complete attention to the other actor and finding something concrete about them that holds some interest for him, no matter how small" (Hagen, 66). This exercise helps me to live from moment to moment and give an authentic response to my castmates. This keeps the text fresh and feeling spontaneous in spite of months of analysis and rehearsal. With a January opening around the corner, this combination of historical, theoretical, and cultural information would be only a portion of what would feed me in order to create a moving image of the woman Chelle is.

## CHAPTER 2

### CHOSEN ACTING METHODS AND PROCESS

*“We have to stop seeing issues and people through a plate-glass window as though we were one-dimensional. Instead, we have to see that most people exist through a prism and they are a sum of many factors.” - Senator Kamala Harris<sup>4</sup>*

#### Uta Hagen’s Six Steps and The WAY Method ®

I liken the preparation of a "role" to the process of dating. The quality of the questions asked on the first date determines the quality of the relationship as it grows. Uta Hagen’s Six Steps provides a firm foundation to explore a character deeply. The quality of those questions would directly affect my character preparation. Furthermore, in asking those same questions of myself as a human being in the present moment, I improve the quality of my relationship to the role. I become what I call “married” to my character, and our two beings become one.

The actor must know who they are before they can understand another character. This has been the premise of my teaching philosophy as an acting instructor and, prior to coming to the University of Louisville, my exploration as a teaching artist. As an actor, how do you identify and then embody the struggle of another character? Most actors would say, “You must empathize.” But how do we get there? My WAY Method ®

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<sup>4</sup> Senator Harris currently serves the state of California and also ran for the 2020 Democratic nomination for the United States Presidential Election. She was born to Jamaican and Indian parents.

of acting teaches actors to empathize with ourselves first, then enables us to sympathize— and finally— empathize with another fictional human being.

Since 2014, I have developed this method of acting, inspired by Hagen's Six Steps. My method, The WAY ®, stands for "Who Are You" and exists in three parts. Part I asks actors to take Hagen's six questions and apply them first to themselves and then to the fictional character. In preparation for rehearsals, I planned to develop a deep sense of empathy for Chelle, not just in doing research on her circumstances and community but also in exploring my own (See Table 1).

Table 1

Uta Hagen's Six Steps	My Responses
<p><b>1. Who are you?</b> What is your character's present state of being? What is your character's perception of him/herself? What does your character's clothing communicate about him/her? What does your character's clothing communicate about him/her? Age? Job? Name?</p>	<p>I am a grown, artistic, entrepreneurial Yoruba and African-American female from New York City. I am a single woman struggling to earn a higher degree in a town that is not my home. I see myself as being hard-working, busy, and lonely. I am not quite Black enough, not quite Yoruba enough. I enjoy clothes that are sleek, and easy to wear. Dressy casual, comfortable, and stylish; figure-hugging on the legs and hips, loose and graceful around my stomach. Mostly name brand but on sale. I enjoy clothes that are sleek, and easy to wear. Dressy casual, comfortable, and stylish; figure-hugging on the legs and hips, loose and graceful around my stomach. Mostly name brand but on sale. I am 34 years old; an Acting Instructor; Mutiyat Adetokunbo Aderibigbe-Salu (also known as Tia).</p>
<p><b>2. What are the circumstances?</b> Year? Season? Time of day? Location? Surroundings? Immediate circumstances - what just happened, is happening, or is expected to happen?</p>	<p>I am taking a break from the workforce to study and prepare to earn a higher salary. It is 2019; Fall (given climate change); Night. I live in Louisville, Kentucky (on the border of Mason-Dixon Line in Southeast USA) in Old Louisville neighborhood with many lush trees, deep lawns, and historic mansions. I recently came home from a bar and took a shower to unwind from a day of classes, emails, deadlines, and government worries. Right now, I am typing a character analysis of myself on a computer with 25% battery charge. I expect to finish this analysis in the next ten minutes so my eyes can have a break.</p>
<p><b>3. What are my relationships?</b> Relationship information should include not only who someone is to you (your mother, your hair stylist, etc.) as well as the emotional relationship between you. (Are you close to your mother or do you drive each other crazy?)</p>	<p>I have relationships with my graduate cohorts (two are African-American from the South of the United States, one is Afro-Colombian); my professors (two who specialize in Women's Studies, one in Peace Studies, one in Hip Hop Theatre, one in Queer Theory/ Theatre for Young Audiences, and one in Classical Acting); my organizational members (Graduate Student Council and the Multicultural Association of Graduate Students); and my immediate family members (two immigrant parents from Nigeria, one sister with a Business degree and one brother with an Educational Policy degree). With my cohorts, our quality is supportive and humorous. With my professors, our quality is autonomous. With my student organizations, our quality is competitive. With my family, our quality is non-attached. We find individual ways to sustain ourselves and be happy.</p>

Table 1 (Continued)

Uta Hagen's Six Steps	My Responses
<p><b>4. What do I want?</b> What is my main objective? Explain any urgency for this objective.</p>	<p>I want to have a consistently profitable career based on my purpose and a joyful family of my own. I aim to gain in value personally and professionally. With increased monetary value of my gifts and skills, I can earn a salary that will sustain me, lower my debts, and nurture my future husband and children. Being in my mid-thirties as a female, I now have less time left to build a family and an inheritance.</p>
<p><b>5. What is my obstacle?</b> What are possible ways to overcome this obstacle?</p>	<p>The lifestyle and commitment required of graduate school temporarily impedes working for a high salary. It also leaves little room for dating towards marriage and becoming pregnant. Incorporate my future desires for salary and family in my current artistic endeavors. (i.e., write papers, plays and songs about them).</p>
<p><b>6. What do I do to get what I want?</b> How can I achieve my objective? What is my behavior? What are my actions?</p>	<p>I create independent study projects, I use technology to connect with others outside of campus and research my entrepreneurial interests. I can allow the present to feed me. I meditate when my desire for the future is too overwhelming, I trust a higher divinity, and I am in the habit of taking moments to remember how far I have come from the beginning of my graduate school journey.</p>

After answering the six questions for myself, I will then write a monologue based on some of those responses. This monologue will be directed to a figure in my life (preferably one who presents a current obstacle to getting what I want), and I will perform it in my personal practice time. Before reciting the monologue, though, I will make a complete statement in reference to the content of the monologue using the following template:



*I feel \_\_\_\_\_ when you \_\_\_\_\_ and I want you to \_\_\_\_\_.*

For example:

*I feel loved when you check up on me and I want you to feel appreciated.*

The last part of the statement will influence how I deliver the monologue (i.e. creating intention, objective, and tactics).

After completing Part I, I step into Part II by asking the same six questions of my character. Drawing from those six questions, I created and delivered a monologue for Chelle so that I can empathize with her (See Table 2). In Part III, I took what might be a gesture of hers and repeat it while moving in a circle so that the gesture became a part of my "blood memory." In a chapter on blood and dance from the *Cambridge Companion to African-American Theatre*, Nadine George-Graves discusses how African-American choreographer Jawole Willa Jo Zollar uses memory of the blood to inform her theatrical work. I believe this memory of the blood can hold both negative and positive experiences that dictate the action or reaction of the African-American performer holding them. In support of this theory, scholars Thomas DeFrantz and Anita Gonzalez, argue that "because Black performance is born through and sustained by circum-Atlantic epochs and its (dis) concordant expressivities, it follows that Black performance theory is indebted to the truth of this Africanist inheritance that constitutes the fact of Blackness" (DeFrantz and Gonzalez, 8).

Now incorporating the monologues already written by the playwright, I created and applied an "I feel" statement to each of them before reciting them as I continued moving in a circle. The significance of the circle in the Afrocentric aesthetic is that it helps movement and speech to gradually build in intensity and meaning. In their section titled "Spirituality and the circle," Drs. Tia M. Shaffer and Sharell D. Lockett describe "the circle" as "a fortress in African thought" and "a symbol of unity, inclusiveness, centering, and completion" (Shaffer and Lockett, 28).

Table 2

Uta Hagen's Six Steps	Chelle's Responses
<p><b>1. Who are you?</b> What is your character's present state of being? What is your character's perception of him/herself? What does your character's clothing communicate about him/her? What does your character's clothing communicate about him/her? Age? Job? Name?</p>	<p>I am a low-paid, but prideful African-American widow from Detroit with one college-aged son. I am hopeful of bettering my finances using my parents' inheritance and hosting house parties. I am well-put-together, of decent character, tasteful and appreciative of things with old value. I am not ready for love again and may be too old to remarry. I am practical and know how to stick to a budget. I don't wear loud colors and I dress like a married mother should. I am 38 years old; a domestic worker; Michelle Wilson (maiden name Pointdexter).</p>
<p><b>2. What are the circumstances?</b> Year? Season? Time of day? Location? Surroundings? Immediate circumstances - what just happened, is happening, or is expected to happen?</p>	<p>The men are returning home from Vietnam; my community is still waiting to see the effects of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. It is 1967; summer; afternoon (at the start of play). I am on Clairmount and 12th Street in an overpopulated Black area; my childhood home. My father has passed away; I am preparing the basement for a "blind pig" party to raise money for the mortgage payments; my brother Lank should be bringing vinyl records of my favorite Motown acts.</p>
<p><b>3. What are my relationships?</b> Relationship information should include not only who someone is to you (your mother, your hair stylist, etc.) as well as the emotional relationship between you. (Are you close to your mother or do you drive each other crazy?)</p>	<p>I have a son, one brother, one girlfriend, and one man-friend. My son is everything to me since he is my only child. I worry about his safety a lot, given the way police often seek young men to beat on in Detroit. My brother and I have a loving but competitive relationship. It is hard for me to get him to obey me as the elder sibling. He is always thinking about what is new, and I just want to stick with what is proven. My girlfriend Bunny is the woman I sometimes wish I could be: free, unapologetic, funny, and single. My man-friend Sly is handsome and charming, chivalrous, but I am not sure I can trust him since he is a hustler. As a mother, I want to be sure that my lover has a safe lifestyle.</p>

Table 2 (Continued)

Uta Hagen's Six Steps	Chelle's Responses
<p>4. <b>What do I want?</b> What is my main objective? Explain any urgency for this objective.</p>	<p>I want security since the two strongest men in my life are gone. My super-objective is to hold on. I want to hold on to my brother's life, the record player that reminds me of my father, the house that my parents left me, the way we conduct ourselves as Black people in Detroit, my taste in music (my comforter). My main objective is to earn money from rent parties. I need these funds to pay off the mortgage while I dedicate the insurance money to my son's college education.</p>
<p>5. <b>What is my obstacle?</b> What are possible ways to overcome this obstacle?</p>	<p>My main obstacle is my brother Lank. He keeps pushing into the future with his romantic relationships, taste in music, and drive to own a bar that typically White people would own. To overcome Lank and his push for new ideas, I chastise him directly and, at times, prevent others from gaining access to him.</p>
<p>6. <b>What do I do to get what I want?</b> How can I achieve my objective? What is my behavior? What are my actions?</p>	<p>To keep Lank safe, I persuade his love interest, Caroline, to leave town. To keep myself safe romantically, I reject Sly's passes. To keep the inheritance money safe, I lie to Sly about Lank's whereabouts so they will not spend it on the bar. I do all of this through control of conversation and how far my body can be touched. I use my agency as the elder sibling and as a liberated woman.</p>

Hagen also had a method for helping actors understand themselves before delving into a fictional character. In her chapter on “scoring the role,” she implores actors to “expand the understanding of your own persona” by first practicing her ten exercises (Hagen, 257). Hagen’s theory was that the average human being “changes their sense of self a hundred times a day” due to varying circumstances, and relationships, and even clothing. Because of this constant change as opposed to a false and stagnant sense of self, Hagen calls on actors to practice self-observation so that they will become more confident in portraying one role differently from another (57). Although I do believe other Hagen exercises would work well for me in my process, it is vital for me to employ my own method given my generational circumstances. This gives me more ownership of my process while continuing to master what I have already learned in my craft.

## The Magic If

Two major concerns in my “marriage” to Chelle were to do with her history before the play begins. What was the level and quality of her education? What happened to her husband? Asking these questions in addition to the six steps, helped me understand Chelle’s motivations and decisions more intimately. These questions also help to specify a character’s educational background and relationships. Among other things like class status and age, origin and relationships are crucial pieces of information to gather when trying to understand a character’s motivations and actions within the story.

Since her son is in college, it is easy to assume that Chelle herself attended college. However, the reality in 1967 was that it was difficult for Black students to have a fair chance in receiving admission to colleges in Michigan. Even after President Lyndon B. Johnson’s executive order as part of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, the state was reluctant to enforce affirmative action in its universities. Thus, in the world of play, there

is historical support for Julius attending a college in the South as opposed to his northern home state.

I also imagine she would have attended Northern High School - an actual school located not too far from 12th Street and Clairmount, the setting of the play. (My own voice coach, renowned tenor and native Detroiter George Shirley attended school there in the 1940s.) In my research, I have found that it was not was not often that Black students in the play's neighborhood were encouraged to attend college. An article in the *Detroit Free Press* commemorating the 1966 student walkout at Northern High details one student's experience. He took college-prep courses all four years, only to be told by a counselor that school administrators were not interested in preparing him for college applications. They preferred he become a city worker. Many Black students at Northern were told a similar thing and organized a walkout. They demanded a replacement of the present school administration so that future students would be given the opportunity to transition to college. I imagine that Chelle experienced similar discouragement when she attended Northern in the 1940s and had to settle for the typical professions that African-American women were resigned to in urban cities: washerwoman, cook, or cleaning woman. Furthermore, I imagine, "What if Chelle's job as a cleaning woman was a freelance job with an unpredictable schedule and paid less than the state's minimum wage?" With this in mind, I can rationalize her need to hold "blind pigs" (unlawful parties hosted by African-Americans in Detroit) to put extra money towards the mortgage.

Chelle's vocality in the play is spirited, yet she thinks with a higher sense of responsibility than the other characters. I imagine that she did very well in school as a girl and aspired to go to college and become a nurse or a secretary, two popular professions for career-minded women in the late 1960s. However, as she came into womanhood without a college degree, she was forced to settle for typical job as a cleaning woman. In her research on African-American women and low-wages, scholar,

Charlotte Rutherford revealed that America's service industry jobs were not only typically held by females, but historically by African-American women (Rutherford, 223). This part of my imagination is sparked by the fact that in 1968, Diahann Carroll became the first African-American woman to portray the role of a profession other than a maid on primetime television. She was highly interviewed and celebrated by the Black media, most notably Ebony magazine, for portraying such a rare role as a professional and a widow. This role also represented the kind of profession that would have given Black women more financial stability as they often served as family matriarchs.

The next issue is that of Chelle's husband's passing. Morisseau is intentional about describing her as a widow as opposed to a single Black mother abandoned by her husband or lover. Because the play refers to the original "blind pig" for returning Vietnam soldiers that was raided by Detroit police in the 1967 riots, I imagined that Chelle's husband was a Vietnam vet himself. For his passing, I imagine, "What if Willie (Chelle's husband) was a returned veteran who committed suicide?" As I have been taught by previous acting coaches, sometimes actors have to speculate in order to fill in missing information in the script. This can be aided by selected clues in the script. As a precaution, I personally emailed the playwright before rehearsals began to get details on how Chelle's husband died. Ms. Morisseau insisted on me determining what happened to Willie for myself.

In the play, Willie is referenced only two times, and this rarity can explain Chelle's shame and discomfort with the way he died. I made the choice of his profession and how he died based on the very fact that the script does not state it. For my character's background, I had to be as specific as possible about the people she is involved with in order to create an authentic, emotional relationship between my character and others.

In addition, there is specific research revealing the terrible social conditions of Vietnam veterans in metropolitan areas, Black men in particular. In a 1968 study, James

M. Fendrich interviewed close to two hundred Black veterans and sought to explore the conditions that might compel them to lead Black protest movements in America. With an average income of less than \$100 a week (approximately the same amount Chelle was able to make on only one house party), “better than 50 percent were concentrated in semiskilled or unskilled jobs”(Fendrich, 72). He also determined that “veteran benefits and assistance available [did] not appear to be adequate in helping veterans become upwardly mobile” (72). Such bleak outcomes would make it easy for a Black male veteran like Willie to give up hope in providing for his family while dealing with post-traumatic syndrome from combat. Thomas A. Johnson states that Black men made up 20 percent of soldiers fighting on the front lines and 14.1 percent of all fatalities in Vietnam (Johnson, 11). All of these factors could drive one to a level of depression that would result in suicide.

These details may seem minute on the surface, but they are highly useful for creating the depth and clarity of the marriage Chelle has lost. Although Willie is not physically present in the play, his absence and the impact that he left on her must be present in my performance. Vietnam was the cause of death or mental decline for many Black men who served during that time. I created this "what if" to give me a high emotional stake, especially as it relates to Chelle's discomfort with discussing the war. Moreover, the hole inside Chelle that used to be filled by her husband also fuels her motivations toward the men who remain living in the play. As examples, she feels a strong need to keep her younger brother, Lank, alive and a strong resistance to allowing her brother's friend, Sly, to take Willie's place in her heart. With this information, I was able to live truthfully under imaginary circumstances and be genuinely intimate with my character.

## CHAPTER 3

### REHEARSAL PROCESS

#### Intimate Discussions

#### In Search of Spirituality

#### September

A human being cannot get out of bed in the morning without their spirit. It is impossible to feel alive. When they are a child, their spirit is more intact than it will ever be again. A child's spirit has a high level of surety and vitality. As the child grows many obstacles, twists, turns, and attacks cut away at it. Specifically, I think of events such as molestation, rape, divorce of parents, death of close relatives, miscarriage, job discrimination, and abandonment. In January of 2019, I had the idea to focus part of my thesis on spirituality. This idea was partly in the religious sense and partly in the spirit of finding what provoked my thesis character to feel alive. By the time I won the audition for the role of Chelle, I had already interpreted that she was inspired spiritually by Motown music, especially the voice of Motown artist David Ruffin. It is the voice of David Ruffin that makes her feel alive with joy as she readies the basement for a "blind pig" party at the top of the show. The audience does not see this joy again until the very end of the show when she dances freely to The Four Tops tune "I'll Be There." However, I also wondered how she might be provoked spiritually as what I sometimes call an "African woman in America?" Because this is one of the ways I self-identify, being the child of immigrants, I saw this as an opportunity to marry parts of myself with the fictional life experience of this role. Whereas my first guiding question was, "From where does Chelle



draw her spirituality?" my next guiding question became "What are the African traits of Chelle?"

My first exploration of Yoruba spirituality and theatre was for a paper presentation at the Southeastern Theatre Conference Symposium in 2016. Coincidentally that same year, I was invited to perform a public reading in the role of the Yoruba orisa, Oya, in New York City. The show was entitled *FEAST: A Yoruba Project*, and I acquired the rights to produce it as a fully-staged showcase in 2019. The Yoruba orisas have been studied heavily by scholars worldwide, perhaps more than any other deities on the African continent due to their distinct attributes, complex connections, and devotees in multiple continents. In my graduate studies, I have sought ways to include Yoruba spirituality in my work as a theatre artist.

In this spiritual practice, there are approximately 401 orisas. Arguably, six of them are most popular: Yemoja, Oya, Osun, Sango, Ogun, and Osoosi. Multi-generational, African-American playwright Terrell Alvin McCraney has been known to characterize the orisas in his works as has the late August Wilson. (McCraney actually uses the names of the orisas in his plays, namely *The Brother/Sister Plays* trilogy.) Inspired by both of them, I searched for the orisas' attributes in *Detroit '67's* characters. Spiritually, I perceived Chelle as Yemoja due to her mothering of Lank and firm nature. Sly struck me as Esu because of his ability to deceive or persuade for the sake of a good outcome. Lank could be seen as Ogun for his fighter mentality and strong determination to own a business of his own. Bunny appears to be Osun with her love for adornment, ease of attraction, and natural intelligence. Regarding Sly as Esu, when he dies, it seems as though life is playing a mean trick on Chelle. How many more men can she lose? However, the death of Sly causes the "death" of the old Chelle and forces her to accept the future. This is the "good outcome" or necessary change the deity Esu is known for causing when he allows someone to be deceived or go through a challenging

period. Chelle must relinquish her super-objective of "preserving the past," and in the end, she must dance to make up for all the dances she previously refused Sly. When people die, oftentimes the question we ask ourselves is, "Why?" In thinking about why Chelle had to lose another loved one, the answer seems to be to end her cycle of resisting the natural flow of life. The above insights are not meant to be an analysis of the play. Instead, they demonstrate my employment of the tool of spirituality to become more intimate with my character.

## **October**

Before rehearsals began, I searched for the feel and sound of Detroit. The weekend of October 6th, I returned to Michigan not only for the alumni reunion at my alma mater but also to conduct research. I stayed in the northern Detroit neighborhood of the play's setting: Boston-Edison Historic District. After booking an Airbnb room in a typical, brick-layered Detroit home, I noticed that the surrounding houses were uniform with very solid frames. This was a major contrast to the homes I was used to seeing in my native New York City. There, most homes were made out of wood-frame construction and vinyl siding. They were also smaller and seldom had a detached garage for lack of space. In Detroit, I could see how the homes once held high value despite the many damaged ones along 12th Street. This area was where most of the rioting took place in 1967. As I walked the street and stopped by the spot where the raided "blind pig" once was, I took numerous pictures and marveled at how the damage had remained in some areas more than fifty years later. The former spot of the raided "blind pig" was now a peaceful children's park with a small monument summarizing the events of that fateful weekend. I stood there for a long time at the corner of Clairmount and 12th Street, wondering what Chelle must have felt when she stepped outside her home to see the results of the riots. I also wondered if there could be a contrast to what

she felt when she stepped outside after mourning Sly's death. Some guiding questions for me were "Did she truly feel hopeful after seeing this damage? Did she truly want to remain in Detroit and keep her home?"

I also interviewed the two native Detroiters described in Chapter 2. I could not portray Chelle authentically without hearing the voices of native Detroiters. Although they were born a little after 1967, their passionate descriptions of their memories explained the hustle mentality and Black pride evidenced in *Detroit '67*'s plot. As they each spoke, I listened to the cadence so that I could differentiate it from the New York accent I was more familiar with. Indeed I heard the Southern influence of their forebears who had migrated to Detroit in the earlier part of the 20th century. This would be a point of discussion in rehearsals later on. However, one of the guests I stayed with in the Airbnb rental was a native Detroit, and I did not feel he had a Southern accent. He firmly believed he sounded "like an average Detroit." The contrast between what we both heard caused me to question what constitutes authenticity: the prior knowledge of the observer or the declaration by the subject.

Another part of my development of authenticity was the discussion of character relationships. Because some of the cast were engaged in another production, my director decided to hold informal conversations and readings of select scenes between other available actors and me. The first began October 29, 2019, between the actor portraying my younger brother, Lank, and me. On a small couch in the director's office, we started with the final scene, Act 2, Scene 5. At this point in the play, I had determined that Chelle wanted to try something different. She did not want to lose Lank, and so she finally let him pursue his business plan for the bar that had almost torn them apart. She also wanted to lose her old self and be free of her inhibitions and fears. Perhaps, most importantly, after experiencing another death of a man she loved, she wanted her younger brother to live. In a figurative sense, this meant that by permitting

him to pursue his dream so that his spirit would not die. In a literal sense, she could still keep his physical presence in her life by not causing him to abandon her. At this moment, she must give Lank trust, permission, honor, and freedom before it is too late. It was too late to give these things to Sly when he was killed. In reading this scene aloud, I also realized that the moment Chelle sparks the idea of putting the eight-track player in the new bar, her objective is to prevent Lank from languishing in sorrow the way she had. That languishing had led to bitterness and resistance to new love. Whereas Chelle had used her responsibility as the older sister to suppress the ambitions of her brother, she was now able to use that responsibility to uplift them.

We then explored the previous moment between these two characters in Act 2, Scene 2. After voicing our characters' objectives and then reading through a monologue where I remind him that "we're stuck together by the root," my director gave me the note of not rushing through the details. There were several points to be made in the monologue, and I needed to build the case that I was the only one who could protect my brother from harm. In this conversation, I also discovered how pro-Black Chelle was in her antagonism to Lank's desire for the White character, Caroline. This was Chelle's brand of activism, even though she did not approve of the rioters and Lank's determination to fight off the police officers who tried to destroy his bar. In pining for Caroline, I felt that Lank was turning his back on his family's Black heritage and the Black fist that symbolized their solidarity on their home's wall. At the end of our session, I found it ironic, however, that Caroline would enter later on and express her love for Black music. This is something she shares not only with Lank but also with Chelle! With this commonality, is it possible that Caroline and Chelle could form authentic respect for each other despite not being of the same race? I then related this thought to myself as a first-generation African-American actor portraying what I call a multigenerational African-American role. Although my depth of being African-American is not the same as

Chelle's, how do our commonalities create the possibility of me forming an authentic portrayal of character through self?

Over the first week of rehearsal, it felt good to continue the discussion about the relationship with Lank. It was challenging to share my thoughts on Chelle. After a discussion on Wednesday, I realized that it could be dangerous for two actors to share what they think about each other's characters because it could make one actor feel less confident in their relationship to their role. To give myself a chance to play with the choices I had made, I decided not to share everything I had determined about Chelle's character background, especially how her husband died. I did not want the details of such an intimate relationship to be dulled by negotiation. Early in the rehearsal process, it is normal for an actor to have convictions about a character that are then reshaped by others' thoughts. However, I did not feel settled with the experience of sharing certain convictions, not being affirmed, and then later on hearing those same beliefs presented as someone else's idea. An acting teacher once told me, "Be careful of giving your pearls away" after I had shared some deep convictions about a character in a new work under development. This experience reminded me of that and taught me to be selective with the information I put into the rehearsal room. Not every insight needs to be shared; some should simply appear in the work.

Can the protection of creativity and the welcoming of new cultural information coexist? I felt that allowing the latter was necessary in my pursuit of authenticity. Towards the end of the week's last discussion, my director mentioned his older sisters and how Chelle reminded him of them. While I did value his cultural attachment to the role and the world of the play, at that moment, I hoped that his own family experiences would not completely replace my interpretation of Chelle. I needed to be sure that I could own my character and infuse her with my revelations, sensitivities, and personal experiences since I would be the vessel. This need was also great because of my

intimacy with the character as a Black woman who was close to her age. The cultural insight my director provided as a multi-generational African-American man from the South was important to me as a first-generation African-American actor. It was equally important for me to offer my personal, gender-specific insight of being a Black woman in her thirties.

### In Search of Identity

After two weeks, I decided to explore the identity struggle with being a first-generation African-American actor portraying a multi-generational African-American role. I knew there would be challenges in the rehearsal process while I substituted what was not in my “blood memory” as an African-American female with what I did know as an American of Yoruba descent. Based on previous conversations in my life with multi-generational African-Americans wishing to return to Africa, I believe that “blood memory” for African-Americans can be felt due to the repercussions of geographical separation from the African continent. When looked at on a familial level, Chelle also gets her protective nature for her family from her blood memory. For instance, the memory of protecting Lank from a female bully when they were younger lives in Chelle as she gets ready to verbally attack his white love interest, Caroline.

Furthermore, theatre scholar Justin Emeka stresses the importance of extracting cultural identity from Black actors' roles in his “Seeing Shakespeare through Brown Eyes,” a chapter in the book *Black Acting Methods*. In 2012, I witnessed his experimental use of Yoruba deities in a production of Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* at the Classical Theatre of Harlem. I had previously analyzed *Detroit '67's* characters as Yoruba deities, and now I wondered what Yoruba rhythms I could extract from Chelle's language. What other cultural similarities to Yoruba might I find in my characterization and relationships? For example, giving the highest respect to the eldest

sibling in a family is a strong Yoruba custom. Chelle demands this respect throughout the play until the very end when she encourages Lank to take charge of the bar in honor of Sly. Another point in Yoruba philosophy is that a person's character equals their true beauty. As an actor of Yoruba descent, how might I determine Sly's handsomeness or beauty? When Chelle discovers that Sly has used her younger brother to undermine her authority in the family to attain part ownership of the bar, it makes Chelle extremely cold toward him in Act 2, Scene 3. In my interpretation, she is resistant to Sly because of his occupation as a street hustler in his late thirties. His deceiving character distances her further until he sings "Reach Out I'll Be There." The fact that this is a Motown tune — the kind of music that brings her joy and makes her feel spiritually alive — brings him atonement.

## Table Read

### November

At our first table read with the full cast, our director challenged us to (1) punctuate our sentences and mark beats exactly as written in the script and (2) find "the crucible" to our most important character relationships. By "crucible" he meant the character functioning as a disruptor or catalyst. After rehearsal, I determined that Sly was the crucible to Chelle and Lank's relationship because he had persuaded Lank to purchase the bar with their inheritance money. I felt this was a great betrayal by Lank and made Chelle question the depth of their kinship. At the second read-through, our next challenge was to be word-perfect as we recited the dialogue and to find a pace so fast it would seem the characters were finishing each other's sentences. At this point, my guiding question became, "How can I handle this dialect by dropping the ending consonants of words and phrases while still enunciating and responding quickly?" Although the late 1960s Detroit dialect was not my own, it was my duty to make it sound natural and effortless. Prior to read-throughs, during script analysis, I had

underestimated the challenge of speaking the dialect because reading it was so familiar. Chelle's speech reminded me very much of my first acting teacher who was from the Southern state of Georgia, Ms. Willie Ann Gissendanner. who was also a multi-generational African-American woman. Because her speech was not my everyday speech, it did not live deeply in my body. It was not a part of my blood memory. To become more comfortable with speaking the dialect, I paid attention to notable celebrities from Detroit and mimicked the rhythm and inflection of their speech as well as how they treated the 'r's. YouTube was a great resource for this; I added video interviews of Della Reese, John Witherspoon, Kash Doll, and Loni Love to my *Detroit '67* playlist. Unlike New York City, the 'r' Detroiters use is hard and stands out sharply to me. For example, the word "water" is pronounced "wah-der" as opposed to "wah-duh" in New York. The rhythm of speech is percussive and made me feel as though there was a drum in my mouth. This percussiveness is a strong African trait in African-American speech and reminds me of the same trait found in Yoruba.

Learning the text and dialect are important parts of developing a character's identity. What is also important is how the tone changes from one character towards another. During our second read-through, I noticed that Chelle has a moment of code-switching when she first speaks to Caroline in Act 1, Scene 2. She is extremely anxious about having a strange white woman with no known family in her home. When Caroline enters from the bathroom, Chelle quickly switches from speaking her natural dialect towards Lank to a proper and polite English to Caroline. I saw this as an acting tactic in which Chelle can ward off any suspicion that Caroline and Lank were the ones who caused her injuries. By code-switching to proper English, Chelle presents an image of safety and decency.

At this read-through, I also became clearer about who aids Chelle's identity. Below is a list I made as to where she drew her needs (not values) from.



Table 3

Relationship Sources in <i>Detroit '67</i>	
Julius	My source of hope; my heart and soul
Record Player	My source of comfort; my heirloom
Bunny	My source of fun; my guilty pleasure
Lank	My source of frustration; my antagonist
Sly	My source of attraction
Caroline	My source of fear; a source of threat and financial profit
Policemen	My source of hatred; a source of threat
Willie	My source of safety and intimacy
Daddy	My source of duty and Black pride

## On Our Feet

Over the next two weeks, our cast moved into reading through the show on its feet, then blocking. Our director allowed us to find our own blocking naturally before adjusting it for sightlines. I made it a point to make a different choice in tone, intention, gesture, or endowment each time we ran a scene. The challenge was for me to keep making new choices without making Chelle undefinable. Her traits, values, and objectives had to remain intact. By Thanksgiving Break, we had blocked the entire show.

Over break, I focused intently on memorization. Before rehearsals had begun, I performed my usual ritual of making three copies of the script: one for practicing lines, one for marking character and script analysis, and the last for safekeeping. I used the original copy, which is about half the size of an eight and one-half by eleven sheet of paper, in rehearsals to mark blocking. The smaller size of this script made it easier to carry while maneuvering the rehearsal set and props. After creating a schedule where

each day I would tackle a different scene in the morning, afternoon, and evening, I worked with my practice script as follows:

- 1) Circle all verbs then select and underline nouns for stress.
- 2) Number each of Chelle's lines on every page starting from the number one.
- 3) On the blank side of each page, rewrite the numbers and the first word of each line.
- 4) Test my memorization and underline each missed phrase or word with a colored pencil or crayon.
- 5) On the same side, create a unique code by writing only the first letter of each word from each line.
- 6) Test my memorization again.

In memorizing Chelle's lines, I did not yet feel that I had fully grasped the "firm and steadfast" part of her identity as noted in Morisseau's character description. For me to do this, I had to be completely comfortable saying African-American colloquialisms that I had heard but not frequently used. Lines such as "What make you pick her up and bring her here?" (Morisseau, 26) and "You ain't get her to tell you nothin'?" (33) did not roll off my tongue easily. Instead, my natural instincts were to say, "What made you pick her...?" and "You didn't get her to tell you anything?" While I had grown up in urban areas in the Northeast, I was raised by parents who had learned "Queen's English" (the standard form of English taught in Nigerian boarding schools during the 1950s and 60s). Because of this background I often have to practice a form of speech like Chelle's more intentionally.

## In Search of Authenticity

### December

After returning from break, we rehearsed about six days a week and ran each act on alternating days. The goal was to feel solid with the show by December 13th. While I appreciated the opportunity to try my ideas for staging, I found the run-throughs challenging when trying to maintain the sincerity in our characters' relationships. The more we ran through the show, the more I felt the need to resist the exact memorization of movement and line delivery. Whenever an ensemble begins running through a show, the usual purpose is to solidify the show in the actors' bones and spirits. I see it as the period when exploration slows down (although not completely off), and the actors can develop the muscle memory of their relationships and the play's atmosphere. Because we were doing this much earlier in the rehearsal process, it was difficult to experiment. The positive aspect of this goal, however, was that we could leave for Winter Break feeling confident and be ready on our return for the Designer Run.

I used our two-and-a-half week Winter Break to refresh after intense memorization, run-throughs, and pursuit of my character's authentic voice. For me, this refreshment period meant rereading the entire play, studying only one scene a day, and leaving the final weekend completely free. Each Sunday, I read through the play script without any intention so that I could see Chelle's journey with new eyes. Exploring only one scene a day Monday through Friday gave my body a chance to live two-thirds of the day as Mutiyat, a return to my normal self. (During the previous break, I explored all thirds of the day as Chelle.) With each scene, I also wrote new objectives and tactics by switching my old ones with synonyms. I also employed part of my WAY Method® again by creating what I have termed "I feel\_when you\_" statements. These help me as well as the actors I have taught to clearly define their feelings in a particular scene or monologue, what provoked them, and what they want their scene partner or audience to

do. One example for Act 1, Scene 5, a scene between Chelle, Lank, and Caroline follows:

**Scene Objective:**

To guilt Lank so that he will punish himself

**WAY® Statement:**

"I feel betrayed when Lank kisses Caroline and I want him to change his heart."

In the days leading up to our return, I practiced each act on alternating days and studied my monologues in front of artwork that stimulated me visually at a museum. During this "refreshment period" I noticed the glow return to my skin and hair as my body restored itself. I drank more water than usual and slept no less than eight hours a night. When I was not practicing, I spent my time quietly taking a walk, reading a book in my personal library, or cooking a dish I normally did not have time to make since starting graduate school. After depleting a lot of energy the past two months preparing my thesis role, I felt whole.

**January**

Our cast returned earlier than the rest of the department to perform the Designer Run for designers and crew members. The day before, I had met with the actress playing Bunny to work on increasing the pace of our dialogues. Although we were not 100% word-perfect, I heard new inflections in my voice during the run. Being off-book, my castmates and I also drew new energy by looking more frequently into each others' eyes. I called our stage manager for line a few times but not for my monologues. They had been strengthened significantly using Part Three of my WAY Method® during the Winter Break.

Rehearsals picked up again on January 4th with a focus on specific scenes the cast had requested for fine-tuning. We worked on Act 1, Scene 2 and Act 2, Scene 3. For the first scene, my goal was to anticipate neither my scene partners' response nor the sight of Caroline's face. Prior to this, I had difficulty not anticipating as I walked down the imaginary stairs in our rehearsal room. Perhaps my anticipation was due to my personal drive to make the language sound as authentically fast as possible or to the compact size of the upstage area. We created the solution to mark exactly where I stopped after each line so the discovery of Caroline's bruised face would truly be a surprise.

For the next scene, my goal was to ease the discomfort of being alone with Sly. In our previous blocking, it seemed to me that both our characters were wandering about the living room. I wondered if this scene could have more purpose for Chelle and some sort of physical progression from "distrust" to "trust" at the end. I felt the discomfort was useful because of my character's background as a widow and as a woman afraid to experience loss again. As an actor, I felt that I needed to be more certain of my placement in the scene, and so these feelings conflicted with one another. As a solution, we experimented with stillness in more moments between Chelle and Sly. In these moments, both our characters could listen more intently than they had in previous scenes. It also helped Chelle to stew in resentment and distrust towards Sly and for Sly to work harder to break down her guard. Here, I found a moment to remember another part of Chelle's character description: she is hard to impress. In previous script analysis, I had determined that Chelle began to let down her guard when she said, "Go on now Sly..." because of the informality compared to previous rejections, such as "Move on, Sylvester." This time around, we moved the release to where Sly reaches out his hand for me to dance. In this way, my guard came down during an unspoken, still moment and a chance for me to truly observe his soul.

I realized that the discomfort in this scene gave room for Chelle's need to be safe. I needed the actor playing Sly to convince me that he was a safe and trustworthy man in spite of him being a hustler and persuading my brother to buy the bar. As an actor, another issue was the age difference between myself and the actor playing Sly. I was approximately ten years older than him and having trouble sensing the urgent need of a grown man losing time to get married. The actor did work more outside of rehearsal on the needs of his 38-year old character, and I describe the results of our performance in Chapter 4. An interesting point my director brought up was that Chelle had been so used to protecting Lank, her baby brother, she could not see the need to be protected by Sly. At the end of rehearsal, I set my homework assignment to become more intimate with Chelle's fears.

Over the next two weeks leading to opening night, our director drove us to speak louder and faster. This was both culturally and theatrically significant. Theatrically, the audience would be invigorated by our performance if the show were more engaging vocally. In my experience over the years, I have found that directors and acting teachers demand faster dialogue from actors as more artists use technological gadgets with faster speeds, i.e. the increased use of smartphones, tablets, higher speeds of internet, etc. To my ear, the banter of African-American speech, particularly in the American South, can also be extremely fast, almost overlapping, among individuals who are very familiar with one another. I have noticed this in the banter of my own cohorts, most of whom are from the South. (At the time of this thesis, I am the only one in the graduate program from the North.) At a rehearsal on January 6th, one note my director gave was that he wanted Chelle to sound more "country." Conversations with Detroiters from my college days as well as my Airbnb trip in October instantly came to mind. I remembered that they themselves did not believe they sounded "country" although I could indeed hear the Southern influence from their forebears who had migrated North. This presented another

challenge to me as an actor in search for authenticity: how to strike a vocal balance between being Southern-influenced and “country” without sacrificing the distinct Detroit accent.

Aside from accent, I was still challenged with paraphrasing certain lines according to my personal grammar. Whereas some African-American actors who grew up in urban areas like me might feel a challenge in learning lines with proper grammar, I felt the opposite. In spite of hearing informal grammar in New York City dialect of my teenage years, I had not absorbed it into my own speech. My immigrant parents and relatives who went to British boarding schools where they learned “Queen’s English” had passed down their dialect preference to their children. I kept what can be called my “language upbringing” even through college at the University of Michigan, a PWI (Predominantly White Institution). When we returned to running the show, our stage managers wrote “line notes” on sheets they handed out each night, and I have marked the lines I repeatedly paraphrased. The most notable lines are listed in Table 4:

Table 4

Line	Page Reference	Rehearsal Date
She tell you anything? Who she is? What done happened?	Morisseau, 33	1/7; 1/12; 1/13
You ain’t get her to tell you nothing?	Morisseau, 33	1/12; 1/13; 1/15
Go on down there for what? You better stay here and don’t go getting involved in this mess?	Morisseau, 56	1/7; 1/18

With lines like these, I had to pay extremely close attention to where the verbs were placed, when a verb was compounded, and move through each consonant slowly to understand the rhythm. Imitation was not enough. I had to analyze the structure of the

sentence in order to first understand, then speak as Chelle. This kind of close observation to speech is useful for actors to note in the formulation of a character's identity.



## CHAPTER 4

### PERFORMANCE CHALLENGES & RESULTS

In this chapter, I outline each day of performance during our two-week run in the style of a daily journal. I also incorporate some useful inspiration or lessons from the days in between those weeks. In Chapter One, I noted that one spine of the play could be “ownership.” As I found during the performance run, I not only had to fight for my character’s ownership of her house and the relationship with her brother Lank, but also to protect my hard work as an actor from certain challenges. They included multitasking with the director’s demand for faster pace, maintaining distance from other actors while remaining visible to all three sides of a thrust theater, powering through dialogue and characterization while hiding an illness, performing the memory recall of death with extreme authenticity, incorporating audience’s vocal distractions, and maintaining my body’s immunity in order to perform at an optimal level. In addition to presenting me with the unique challenge of performing a multi-generational, African-American role while being a first-generation African-American woman, this performance was rich not because of the long analytical and rehearsal preparation, but especially because of the surprising challenges I had to overcome to deliver it.

Our ensemble arrived at opening night on Thursday, January 23, 2020 — almost three months from the first meeting between my castmates and me. After twelve weeks of wrestling with my character’s development, blending it with the director’s vision, and a few technical rehearsals adjusting the blocking and costumes, it was time to “serve the meal” of the show. In developing Chelle — the mother, sister, friend, and lover — I also

developed a ritual for mothering myself and the cast. During late rehearsals, I contracted an upper respiratory infection with flu-like symptoms and asthma complications, causing me to nurture myself with a lot of teas, water, caffeine and citruses, to ban dairy products, and to get a few days of vocal rest. I had not mothered myself like that since starting graduate school in 2017, and it gave me real-life experience of behaving like an overly concerned mother and big sister onstage. During technical rehearsals, I felt a strange, hyper-awareness about everything that was happening in the theater and likened it to a mother's strong intuition when looking after her children. Among all the supplies I brought to nurture my body for the performance run, I brought extra ones out of concern for another castmate who was battling the flu.

About a year prior when I played the character Ruth in *A Raisin in the Sun* (another mother in her thirties), I had also felt a motherly connection to the two actors who portrayed my son. Like Ruth, Chelle feels a motherly instinct to invest in a home rather than in an establishment that primarily serves alcohol to risky characters. In this role, I felt that instinct much more strongly. Despite not being a mother myself, I credit my persistent motherly intuition both on and offstage to studying the traits of the motherly Yoruba orisa , Yemoja — whom my paternal grandmother and great-grandmothers had been devoted to. In addition, perhaps I was feeling a larger wave of motherly instinct than in my previous role, because I was now a year older and nearing the end of my own fertile years.

For every show, I create a pre-show ritual to help me feel as confident as possible before I enter the first scene. Lead actresses and those with heavy costume and/or make-up preparation are normally called 90 minutes before curtain to prepare. Part of my ritual for *Detroit '67* was to review the director's notes and the lines that gave me trouble or large monologues in the first half-hour, then dress in costume, make-up and hair in the second half-hour. In the final half-hour, I would listen to music from the

play's period and, in the last five to ten minutes, "circle-up" with the cast. No one had initiated the circle in tech yet, so I took it upon myself to ask the assistant stage managers and my castmates to meet in the stage left wing to connect. I led the first night, and on subsequent nights I asked others in our circle to lead, whether it was through memories from rehearsal, words of inspiration, or prayer. No matter who led, we always ended with our signature rehearsal call "This is Dominique Morisseau's *Detroit* '67" as we raised our hands together in the air. This part of the ritual was crucial in forming an energetic connection to carry to the stage. The utilization of the circle harkens back to Chapter One, when I mentioned the significance of the circle in Afrocentric theatrical traditions. After spending close to two hours in our separate spaces getting ready, this was the time for our ensemble to look each other in the eyes and remind ourselves of who we were to one another through our relationships — not just our objectives or what we wanted from each other.

#### **Thursday 1/23**

Tonight was opening night, and I brought an arsenal of things to support myself as I continued to recover from illness. I made sure to continue drinking echinacea tea for immunity, Throat Coat (made of slippery elm bark and marshmallow root) to nourish my vocal tract and prevent excessive dryness, organic honey to trap moisture, and I made use of an electric humidifier with iodized salt for steam treatments between my scenes. I also placed bottles of water on each side of the stage to sip before each scene or in a case of emergency. I refrained from speaking in Voice and Speech class earlier today so that I would not wear out my voice by the evening. I have still been coughing in the middle of the night because of the cold, dry weather, and some congestion still remains in my lungs. I feel incredibly determined to protect my performance after a year of preparation.

Around this time last year, the second-year students in my cohort were making their thesis role interests known to professors who would possibly direct the shows featuring those roles. I asked for a private meeting with my future director and declared my interest in *Detroit '67* after the 2020 season was announced. I had not yet decided on the thesis role to audition for, however. My choices within this play were Chelle (a serious, mother close to my type but a few years older than I) and Bunny (a fun, sensual bachelorette who no one would expect me to play but closer to my actual age.) I was also considering another play, *Fires in the Mirror*, although none of the 24 roles to be used in the upcoming production were clear yet. By this time, I had read through *Detroit '67* once and was attracted to the challenge of portraying a widow who was afraid to love again while being fiercely protective of her family. I was also interested in playing another lead role, given my previous experience of strengthening my responsibilities as an actor in a lead role as Hedda Gabler. Playing the lead role is about more than showcasing an actor's gifts. It is about leading an entire cast by the example of the lead actor's discipline, drive, dedication, confidence, and adaptability. In response to this leadership, everyone pays more attention to how the lead works and to how they engage with the director. The lead has to be the most reliable member of the production, and their vision of not only the role but the world of the play matters highly.

On this night I felt so proud of the cast and crew and the way we had worked to support each other through the challenges of acquiring props, the timing of entrances, the shape of our blocking, and — for the actors — developing our different character relationships. By this time I had developed a playful yet cautious attraction to Sly, a safe and trusting friendship with Bunny, an intensely concerned kinship with Lank, and an on-and-off-again feeling of threat from Caroline. Reading the play many times, I already knew the words were rich in substance, but performing the show I felt the full intensity of that richness all over my body and spirit. By the end of the show, it felt like our

production was a dish well-seasoned. Prior to tonight, I remember feeling the show was a little “over-cooked” because of the number of times we ran from beginning to end in rehearsals. My favorite moment in the show was when the actors and I “danced” around each other, multitasking our lines with multiple props and blocking changes in a very long first scene. Although it was not perfect, it felt like listening to an orchestra play rhythmic counterpoint: every word and action fell in its place and before we knew it the scene was over and the “engine” of the show was warmed up!

### **Friday 1/24**

Tonight we had an extremely large audience due to the advertisement of a post-show reception. The energy from the audience was very supportive, and I felt them listening intently to the details of our dialogue. I have found that kind of close attention makes me feel very encouraged in my work onstage. It makes me feel that my preparation and interpretation of the character is making a successful impact. My biggest fear as an actor is not that I will not get the part I have auditioned for but that, if I get the part, my interpretation will not be understood or appreciated by the director or the audience. More than a paycheck, I want to know that my physical and intellectual insights on a character are going to be useful and memorable to audience members. Ultimately, the performance of a character by an actor should leave an indelible mark and deliver the message the playwright intended.

### **Saturday, 1/25**

This was our final show before a four-day break. So far, I have had good luck managing my breath and voice after being ill, and I have not yet read the reviews or seen performance photos. Before the show started, my concern was not allowing my energy to dip, knowing that it was the end of the week. I was aware that there would be fewer audience members, about only the size of the center section. I resolved to focus completely on my cast members and not allow the energy of the audience to affect me

like it had the night before. I had also taken a double-shot of espresso beforehand just to be sure my energy would stay up!

The show turned out to be great, but I found myself speeding through lines more than usual. I felt that I had moved too quickly to the next thought and not completely lived in certain scenes moment-to-moment, namely Act 1, Scene 1 and Act 2, Scene 5. Perhaps I had tried too hard to maintain my energy and was overly anticipating the next line. After the show, I thought about this feeling of moving too quickly and wondered how it had affected my fellow actors. Did it throw them off or make them feel uncomfortably rushed? A constant concern of our director during technical rehearsals was increasing the speed of our interactions onstage, including the moments after receiving devastating news. I felt this request to speed up the pace was out of a need to keep the audience engaged and to resist the actor's temptation to languish in sorrow or reflection. Emotionally, I have wrestled with how to be true to the moment while keeping perfect timing. As always, one of the duties of an actor is to juggle inward and outward demands! A guiding question for the next week of performances will be, "How can I speed up the pace between the final two scenes while remaining in mourning?"

### **Tuesday, 1/28**

Our director called for a brush-up rehearsal today. The initial plan was to do an "Italian run." In my past experience, "Italian runs" involved actors either sitting down in a circle in a rehearsal room or in a spot they chose on stage and speaking their lines to one another as fast as they could. Tonight, he asked us to do an Italian run with movement. I asked for further clarification about movement, and he wanted to see the specific blocking. It was my first time doing an Italian run like this, and I found that the tempo slowed back down to normal pace as we progressed through the play. It was difficult to speed through lines, ignoring beats we had worked so hard to acknowledge,

and I also found it hard to listen to the lines themselves when the concern was more about moving our physical bodies quickly.

At several points in the run, we had to pause to clean up the timing of entrances and adjust the spacing of our blocking. There were moments in the play where the actors and I were on the same plane talking directly to one another. Because we were in a thrust theater instead of the traditional proscenium stage, most of us felt physically awkward in our blocking at times and agreed that positioning ourselves in triangle shapes and diagonal lines throughout the show would be best. I was particularly concerned about two moments: one in Act 2, Scene 5 in my face-off with Caroline and the other in Act 2, Scene 3 in my romantic scene with Sly. During rehearsals it was hard for us to naturally find angles to land on in the most pivotal moments of dialogue. Now that we were in the theater, it was clearer to me how important it was for each actor to be seen not only by the audience members sitting in front of the stage but also by those sitting on the sides.

One adjustment we made was for Caroline to come down center stage left to the record player towards the end of her monologue (as I had done at the top of the show) so that I could be on a diagonal with her while standing center. This made a world of difference in our volume and the energy of our interaction! It felt so much more direct even though there was a little more distance between us. Caroline also had more room to charge toward me, and I felt more grounded holding my place at center, emphasizing my ownership of the space as well as my family. In my scenes with Sly, I resolved to cross downstage right before his entrances so that his placement at center would automatically put us in a triangle. I felt more connected to him this way and more physically activated. For instance, in Act 2, Scene 3, I felt his yearning for me to be in his embrace much more than when we were standing side by side. I could also look more deeply into his eyes as we stood on a diagonal, constantly shifting points of view as my

character avoided his touch. During rehearsals I had determined that Chelle's constant shifting was fueled by the inner thought of "I'm not ready to love again." However, with the adjustment tonight, my inner thought became "What if this relationship ends too soon?" Similar to Chelle's questioning of the bar's longevity after the deal is signed, she also questions the longevity of a new relationship. It reminded me of the common psychological phenomenon called "fear of failure."

In college, I was once told by a director that distance between two characters on stage creates more tension than closeness. The actors have to work harder to accomplish their objectives, and more physicalization is pulled out of them as a reaction. Although our collective goal in performance was to make the interactions onstage as real as possible, I learned that taking the time to position myself according to the structure of the theater created more authentic moments than standing next to someone as if in real life.

### **Thursday 1/30**

I always look forward to a Friday audience. The crowd is usually the biggest it will be that weekend, and the audience is normally most responsive. This year, it was the Thursday night audience that was the biggest because of discounted "Community Night" tickets and an audience talk-back to follow. The expectation of a perfect performance feels highest on a night like this, and for that reason I was disappointed when, in the second act, I was challenged by what felt like an asthma attack.

I desperately tried to suppress my desire to cough, and I sacrificed the volume and clarity of my voice. My suppression was visible to my castmates, and one stated backstage that it "looked like my head was about to explode!" I don't know what exactly prompted that attack onstage, but I suspect the combination of the set's dust, cold air, and a large amount of hair spraying in the female dressing room took a toll on me.



Although I had felt significantly better during the past week, I was still technically recovering from the upper respiratory infection I had contracted two weeks before.

I know that it was an inconvenience for the wardrobe and hair assistants to be mindful of how much they sprayed in the air. It was also inconvenient for me to bring so many health aids into my dressing room. These inconveniences cannot always be predicted for an actor but are part of maintaining a professional life. When the challenges come, we quickly make adjustments to give the best performance possible. This is not unlike the challenges met by athletes who suffer unexpected injuries or weather conditions during game season. One of the things I have enjoyed about the profession of acting is the process of handling an obstacle. The obstacle can be in the development of a role, in the story itself, in relating to another actor or director, or in protecting an actor's own mind and body. In one way or another, they will inevitably come. As a character must face obstacles while pursuing their objective, so the actor must face obstacles while pursuing the fullest potential of their role.

The Sunday before tonight's show, I was at a coffee shop studying when I learned that the legendary basketball player Kobe Bryant had died in a helicopter crash. He died with not only his post-retirement friends but with his thirteen-year old daughter as well. The denial that I felt upon hearing the news from my neighbor, followed by the sympathetic grief I felt for Bryant's wife, who is the mother of his three other daughters, made me feel the relevance to Chelle's process of mourning in the show.

The heaviness and obsessive attention I had been paying to the story all week made me decide to use my sorrow the moment Chelle realizes that Sly is dead. When the moment came, I was still struggling to suppress my cough but somehow turned the cough into a loud howl and real tears poured out of me. I immediately remembered the feeling of learning about Bryant's death and felt it was happening again with me being Vanessa, his wife. I felt my knees buckle, and for a moment I lost the ability to speak.

The actress playing Bunny struggled to carry me off the stage, and it was as if my body refused to leave behind the spot where I first made the realization. Ironically, I realized that was the same spot where Sly and I had our final dance and he professed his vision of our future together as a couple.

When I re-entered the space for the final scene, I felt truly stoic for the first time and that I could no longer recognize my surroundings. I felt the stillness of the air in the theatre more than I ever had, and I felt the “gap” in my heart Chelle previously mentioned. I had never experienced the death of a lover and could not use that in the actor’s technique of “memory recall.” Instead, I had been using the “sense memory” of a female relative’s passing. With the death of Kobe Bryant, an athlete I had sometimes admired in my younger years, I now had a male figure I could use for that recall, along with what I perceived to be his relationship to his wife.

I was hesitant to do this prior to tonight because it seemed inappropriate to use someone else’s current pain for my own artistic gain. I once had a producer tell me to use my sorrow in my craft after the passing of my college acting professor. At the time, the comment felt offensive and somewhat sacrilegious to the professor’s memory as I had just returned from her funeral in another state. Perhaps using the memory of such pain rather than holding on to it can be part of an actor’s process of grieving.

At the post-show talk-back one audience member asked a common question: “How do you remember all those lines?” My response was not my common one though. Instead of mentioning mobile apps and voice recorders to playback lines I had previously recorded, I mentioned the art of circling verbs and underlining nouns (or vice versa). That helped me to pay attention to Chelle’s dialect and how different it was from my natural speech. In this way, I was able to memorize not only the words but also her rhythmic pattern and choice of emphasis. Memorizing words is not enough for an actor to convince an audience of a character’s authenticity. It’s also important to understand

the character's "flavoring" of words and their cultural essence. As human beings, we are more than just the words we speak; we are also the way we speak them.

Another audience member, an undergraduate visiting from another college, noted that I reminded her so much of her mother. Since my first character analysis of Chelle, I have known that Chelle has a strong motherly nature, even towards her younger brother Lank. However, that comment coupled with another from reviewer Keith Waits made me wonder if I was not showcasing the side of Chelle who is a sister. Where can I draw the line between being an overprotective sister of a mid-thirties male and a mother of a man in his late teens? How can I distinguish the two relationships between the "only two men who matter" in Chelle's life? Or is it true, perhaps, that Chelle's character was written to blur the line? It gives me greater perspective when I remember that in my own life I have been accused by family members of behaving more like a mother than a big sister to my younger siblings. Perhaps this is more an inherent flaw in an eldest sibling than a correction to be made in my interpretation of the character.

### **Friday 1/31**

Tonight my biggest concern was not my multiple wardrobe changes, but how I could remain in character when an audience member decided to shout a comment about a moment in the performance. I had been thrown off the night before when an audience member far house-left shouted a comment about what they thought was going to happen next. They had correctly given away the top of the next scene and I refluxed into laughing at the irony of it! Other audience members laughed at the comment too, so I was not alone. However, I did not want to repeat that reaction and struggle to return to the world of the play.

It is not typical of artists in Western theatre (especially the type of theatre focused on Eurocentric plays) to allow audience members to "talk back" to the stage. They may laugh, cry, or applaud at the end of a major scene, the end of the first half, or the end of

the entire show. For Black American audiences, however, the social rules are different. Talking back to the stage is often expected and sometimes encouraged. Morisseau reiterates this in one of her messages to audiences of her plays, and our director announced this message at the top of the show.

I wish that during rehearsals my castmates and I could have been reminded that this would happen culturally so that we could have been conscious of the audience's participation beforehand, but as an African-American woman I should have reminded myself. Even in modern Yoruba theatre, audience responses are expected. As early as the 1950s, the great Yoruba theatre artist Hubert Ogunde pressed audience members to respond to his actors onstage and even allowed them to suggest the next turning point in the story! A year ago in a Tools for Global Theatre course, I remembered preparing a presentation on modern Yoruba storytelling and citing a video in which audience members shouted loudly at a stage of Yoruba actors and dictated their next moves. At the time, it seemed raucous to me, and I was stunned at how composed the actors were while adapting to this performance environment that must have been so different from their rehearsal room. After the show, I wondered, "What technique could I have developed to use the audience's interjections as *fuel* (not distraction) for the scene and remain in character?"

### **Saturday 2/1**

Tonight, one of my castmates looked out for me and brought vapor cough drops to help with my chest coughing. Regrettably, I took one before the show started and it made me produce phlegm during my opening monologue. I pushed through and was determined to not allow phlegm to get in the way of the rest of my performance. That obstacle made me focus even more intensely on my character's relationships and circumstances. I felt like I was fighting to stay in the world of the play and not in the world of my illness.

A member of the organization that provided me with a scholarship this school year attended the show. She gave me a glowing review and remarked how I burst onto the stage with a specific kind of energy each time I entered a scene. I wanted to ask her to elaborate, but I reminded myself of the countless times audience members have been impressed by the performance but could not pinpoint what exactly impressed them. It seems that audiences can be so enraptured by what they witness actors doing that they cannot articulate how or why the phenomena happened!

During performances, it is important for me as an actor not to dwell too much on what an audience member thinks — good or bad. Over time, I have realized I care more about how I am impacting my castmates as we negotiate our characters' relationships and needs each performance. That is far more interesting, and the way the “battle” between characters changes each night makes for a play that remains alive and constantly growing. The blocking, costumes, lights, set, and music are set but not the moment-to-moment interaction between actors. Those are where the most fascinating aspects of performance lie, and they can never be the exact same experience.

### **Sunday 2/2**

This was our final show. I felt more rested but had still been coughing the middle of Saturday night. Because it was Sunday, I was able to make up the hours of lost sleep by sleeping again late into the morning. Before going onstage at the theater in the afternoon, I made sure to cough out any phlegm. I did not want it to interfere with my opening monologue and one of Chelle's rare comedic moments being experienced by the audience.

The audience was less responsive than we had expected for a Sunday crowd, although it was certainly our biggest crowd. The intense preparation during rehearsals, however, prepared us to maintain a high-energy show anyway. During the show, I skipped a few lines in dialogue with the actress playing Caroline. It was the pivotal scene

where I make it clear that we would not become family. I was so caught up in the moment, and each night the show felt realer to me than the one before. In my first year of graduate school, I had learned that this action was called “end-gaining.” Although end-gaining referred to moving quickly from one physical moment to the next in Alexander Technique, I felt its relevance to moving too quickly in between moments within the art of storytelling onstage.

After the show, we received a standing ovation, and my castmates and I left the stage feeling like it was well deserved. I was proud to have given my role my all, despite illness. I was proud to have protected my voice as much as I did before opening night. As I left the theater with my belongings, I realized the irony of this being around the same time last year that I began the decision about my thesis role. I felt sure that I could handle a lead role like Chelle but was curious about the new challenge of playing against my type with the role of “Bunny.” I had also considered the possibility of creating a thesis role out of the play *Fires in the Mirror* and possibly exploring the conflict of spirituality.

In a full circle moment, I was deeply grateful for following my instinct and choosing Chelle. I was also grateful that our director had approved my audition for the role the fall after we first spoke. Although I had performed a lead role before, preparing Chelle felt like second nature and a new lesson at the same time. While I settled comfortably in playing an elder sibling onstage as I had done for years in real life, I learned the consequence of preparing a role so much that I forgot to take care of my own health. The lack of putting Vitamin C consistently in my diet and getting less than eight hours of sleep some nights put my immunity at risk when my performance mattered most — at the end of the process. The multitasking that occurs onstage as an actor juggles lines, props, staging, and new impulses from their fellow actors and audience members mirrors the multitasking that occurs during the rehearsal process. In the graduate school production process that includes rehearsing lines before rehearsal

begins at 7:30 p.m., reviewing notes after rehearsal ends at 10:30 p.m., and waking up in time for an assistantship shift at 9:00 a.m. the next day. In between those demands, there is a need for carefully planning nutritious meals, getting a minimum of eight hours sleep, and taking vitamin supplements consistently. For some actors, this never happens because of the demands of a stage rehearsal or film shoot schedule.

## CONCLUSION

In analyzing the script to *Detroit '67*, I not only gathered clues about the world Chelle lived in, but also the message that the playwright wanted to deliver. The character analysis, however, was my favorite part of the pre rehearsal process. I have always been an extremely inquisitive person. Inquiring and analyzing a character's traits and motives makes me feel as though I am developing a close friendship with the individual I am portraying in a particular role. That friendship becomes sacred when I, the actor, have married my own traits and experiences with the character and transitioned into a living interpretation of the role.

In the rehearsal phase, I got the chance to try out my analysis of the character. As expected, parts of my analysis were challenged by the interpretations of my fellow actors and the vision of the director. Whereas the insights I developed prior to rehearsal were done in isolation, the insights I enveloped during rehearsal were done in the presence of an ensemble. The ensemble's natural influence required negotiation of thought on my part, but also forced me to realize what was nonnegotiable about my role. Determining the nonnegotiable aspects of a role brings about conviction, which leads to the level of confidence needed to perform the role. In my case, being a first-generation African-American actor performing a multi-generational African-American role, I needed more confidence than normal to bridge the gap between the two experiences.

Oftentimes, the challenges of embodying a role are written from the perspective of an actor physically preparing a role or becoming injured during the process. Rarely are illnesses mentioned unless they were incurred during the performance itself. The



upper respiratory infection I contracted during final rehearsals compromised the most vulnerable part of my instrument: the lungs. Without them, an actor cannot deliver the full vocal power necessary to fill a theater. For the live stage actor, any hindrance to this necessity is frightening. After months of rehearsal, with no chance of doing a second take onstage, it is devastating not to be able to deliver an optimal performance. Fortunately, this same hindrance showed me how resourceful and resilient I could be as a professional actor and the intellect that is required to save a performance at all costs. Through my experience, I discovered that the ability to rebound from an illness while immersed in a role is just as important as the ability to employ the craft of acting. All of the analytical and rehearsal work I had done on my character, gave me the strength to fight for the delivery of my performance during the run.

During this time, I was also pleased with the occurrence of displaying motherly instincts towards my castmates while preparing for performances. I deem this occurrence, in spite of my not being a mother, a phenomena. At the time of this thesis, spirituality does not often have a place for discussion in academia, much less in acting studies. The writings of multi-generational African-American playwrights Tarell McCraney and August Wilson and their specific use of Yoruba spirituality to shape their work gave me the courage to openly use my native spirituality as part of my process as a first-generation African-American actor. Spirituality is not a force that is easy to prove in the physical realm. In spite of the discomfort that discussing it in academia can bring, making this a non-negotiable factor in my process helped me to perform with confidence just as much as determining the nonnegotiable aspects of my role. It also fed the authenticity and identity of Chelle I fought to bring about.

I have mentioned the words “first-generation,” “spirituality,” “authenticity,” and “identity” multiple times throughout this thesis and with good intention. Being the first of any kind in any field asks for courage and preparing the way for others who will be in

your position. A growing segment of the United States population is composed of the children of immigrants. This is especially true of Latino and African-American communities. This thesis sought to describe the process of bridging the gap between first-generational and multi-generational identities, revealing the results within an African-American actor. Without this act, it would have been impossible to create authenticity and an identity for my role. The elements of spirituality (Yoruba Ifa) and The WAY Method ® I adapted from Uta Hagen's Six Steps forged my own unique path to making this creation. Future first-generation African-American actors may benefit from certain elements of this process and then adapt them for their own methods of bridging the gap between identities.

A few months after closing, I remembered a book given to me by one of my mentors, Woodie King, Jr., founder and producer of the New Federal Theatre in New York. In his opening chapter, "On Being a Black Actor in White America," he reminisces on the difficulties of Black actors getting a lead role in a university production between the 1960s and '80s. Issues such as having a southern dialect as opposed to a "standard white accent" made it hard for a theatre professor in his time to see the "truth" in casting a "Negro" actor in serious roles. He was only useful for "comic relief" (King, 2-3). When I think back on the opportunity to perform Chelle, I see how fortunate I was not to have been subordinated in such a way. Whereas King had to worry about *losing* his southern accent, I have often worked to *acquire* it in my craft so that I would appear Black enough.

In this same chapter, he warns actors against entering the field of acting without purpose and direction (4). As the acting industry grows increasingly cross-cultural in content, actors, and creators, the powers of spirituality, authenticity, and identity may help them *find* their artistic purpose as they bridge any necessary gaps culturally or generationally. For actors specifically, bridging the gap between ourselves and our

characters is what we do best. When I think of three of the most iconic African-American actors — Sidney Poitier, Harry Belafonte, and Cicely Tyson — I remember their status as first-generation Americans after being born to parents from the West Indies.

Somehow they managed to bridge the gap between their cultural backgrounds and the multi-generational African-American roles they portrayed. Perhaps in writing this thesis, I, too, have solidified a successful method for bridging the gap as well as birthed a new artistic purpose.

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## APPENDIX



Figure 1. A Detroit home in the northern Boston-Edison neighborhood.  
Credit: Mutiyat Ade-Salu



Figure 2. Former location of the “blind pig” police raid July 23, 1967. It is now known as Thomas Gordon Park.  
Credit: Mutiyat Ade-Salu

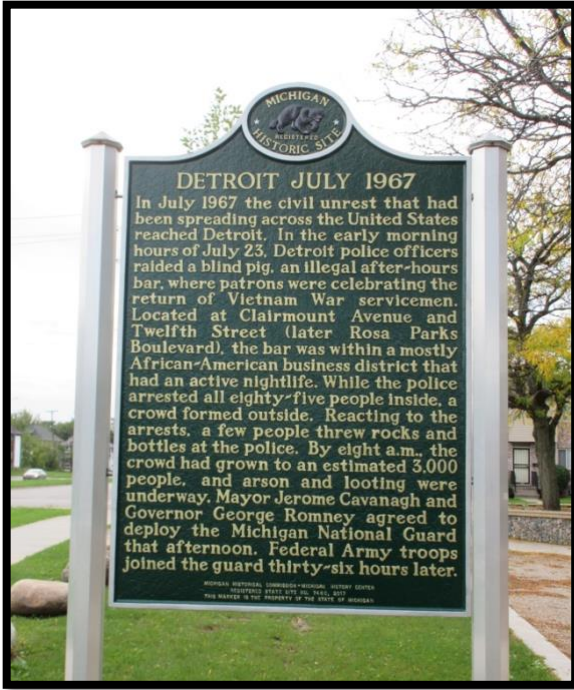


Figure 3. Marker detailing events of the Detroit Riots in 1967.  
Credit: Mutiyat Ade-Salu



Figure 4. Façade of the studio and offices of Motown Records in Detroit.  
Credit: Mutiyat Ade-Salu





Figure 5. Opening Scene with Chelle and her record player.  
Credit: Tom Fougerousse



Figure 6. Act 2 Scene 4, Chelle learns of Sly's death.  
Credit: Tom Fougerousse

# CURRICULUM VITA

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**Escola de Superior de Celia Helena,  
São Paulo, Brazil**

Produced Sao Paulo showcase of *FEAST: A Yoruba Project* and a team of 8 Afro-Brazilian artists in collaboration with theater company Carcaca de Poéticas Negras. *FEAST* originally premiered in 2013 at the Royal Court Theatre and was written by 5 playwrights from Cuba, Nigeria, Brazil, the U.S. and England.

**DREAM Center Harlem, New York, NY**

Developed New York City showcase of *FEAST: A Yoruba Project* with team of 13 artists after being selected for month-long residency.

**HERE Arts Center & MoCADA, New York, NY**

Produced production team of 13 artists for Actors' Equity showcase code production HERE Arts Center (Summer Sublet Series) and Museum of Contemporary African Diasporan Arts. Managed budget of \$10,000.

**Playwright-in-Residence**  
2017-2018

**Fehinty African Theater Ensemble, Chicago, IL**  
Premiered my debut stage play *Sunny Came Home* at Prop Thtr [sic].  
Wrote and edited several drafts for rehearsals and private readings. Panelist in post-show audience discussion about the 1st generation Nigerian-American experience.

**Teaching Artist-in-Residence**  
2016-2017

**The We.APP Studio LLC, Tacoma, WA**  
Instructed two 9th -grade level classes for 9-month residency at Summit School Olympus charter school. Taught public speaking course integrating creative writing techniques, mindfulness meditation, yoga, tongue-twisters, and theatre games to inspire students to speak with purpose.  
Guided young scholars in writing essays, speeches, and skits that address issues of bullying, peer-pressure, self-esteem, leadership, gender roles, and diversity.  
Directed culminating project at the end of the school year for parents, administrators and the general public.

**Teaching Artist**  
2014-2015

**Arts Live Theatre, Fayetteville, AR**  
Musical Director and Voice Coach for stage production of *The Bridge to Terabithia*.  
Taught Broadway musical theatre to ages 5-10 focusing on the theme of "acceptance". Created and taught "Who Are You?: Connecting Character with Self" matching students aged 7-16 with a monologue from a published play based on their traits and experience then guiding them to create their own special monologue.  
Directed culminating performance at the end of summer/ fall sessions for families/artistic producer.

**Teaching Artist**  
2013

**Legacy Initiative, LLC, Hazelton, PA**  
Trained high-school students in the areas of Character Development, Logic and Reasoning, Budgeting Basics, Career Selection and Planning, Entrepreneurship, and Goal-Mapping. Facilitated theatrical demonstrations of life situations using Sociodrama Technique" and conducted visual and PowerPoint presentations to deliver program content.

**Director**  
2020

**University of Louisville, Louisville, KY**  
African-American Theatre Program  
Annual MLK Day Celebration at The Playhouse  
Stage Reading of *Bound by Blood* by Clinnesha Sibley  
Cast of 3 actors

**Director**  
2019

**University of Louisville, Louisville, KY**  
U of L Studio Theatre at the Thrust Theatre  
Fully staged reading production of FEAST A Yoruba Project by Yunior Aguilera, Rotimi Babatunde, Marcos Barbosa, Tanya Barfield, and Gbolahan Obisesan.  
Cast of 6 actors

**Director**  
2012

**DC Black Theatre Festival, Washington, D.C.**  
Howard University  
Staged reading of *Sunny Came Home*  
Cast of 6 actors

**Red Harlem Readers, New York, NY**  
The Indian Cafe  
Staged reading of *Sunny Came Home*  
Cast of 6 actors

**Actress**  
2000-present

## SELECT THEATRE

### University Theatre

DETROIT '67  
A RAISIN IN THE SUN  
TAMING OF THE SHREW  
FABULATION

*Chelle*  
*Ruth*  
*Nicolette/ Widow*  
*Dr. Khadir/Ensemble*

Univ. of Louisville, dir. Johnny Jones  
Univ. of Louisville, dir. Baron Kelly  
Univ. of Louisville, dir. J. Ariadne Calvano  
Univ. of Louisville, dir. Jacqueline Thompson

MISS IDA B. WELLS\*  
HEDDA GABLER  
GOD OF CARNAGE  
VENUS  
VAGINA MONOLOGUES  
TRILOGY FOR THE BLACK FAMILY  
CAT ON A HOT TIN ROOF  
PIPPIN the musical

*Ida B. Wells*  
*Hedda Gabler*  
*Annette*  
*The Mother-Showman*  
*My Vagina... Village*  
*Female Ensemble*  
*Dr. Baugh*  
*Berthe*

Univ. of Louisville, dir. Dr. Nefertiti Burton  
Univ. of Arkansas, dir. Cole Wimpee  
Univ. of Arkansas, dir. Jeremiah Albers  
Univ. of Michigan (So You Say Prod.)  
Univ. of Michigan (So You Say Prod.)  
Univ. of Michigan (So You Say Prod.)  
Univ. of Michigan (So You Say Prod.)  
MUSKET Theatre; dir. David Gorshein

### Regional Theatre

A MOVIE STAR HAS TO STAR...  
THE OWL ANSWERS

*Clara*  
*Black Bastard's Mother*

Intiman Theatre, Emerging Artist Program  
Intiman Theatre, Emerging Artist Program

### New York Theatre

FEAST: A YORUBA PROJECT  
WINE IN THE WILDERNESS  
FOREIGN BODIES  
BENITO CERENO  
THE ME NOBODY KNOWS

*Oya*  
*Cynthia*  
*Bless*  
*The Virgin Mary*  
*Lillie Mae*

HERE Arts Center/ MoCADA  
JACK, dir. Courtney Harge  
Culture Project, dir. Nicole Watson  
Horizon Theater Rep; dir. Woodie King  
AMAS RLMTA Academy; dir. Chris Scott

Devised Theatre

1st GENERATION NIGERIAN PROJECT

Writer/ Performer (2010) LABYRINTH & INTAR, dir. John Rubin

Stage Readings

FEAST: A YORUBA PROJECT  
SOJOURNER (Mfoniso Udofia)  
WHITE-N-LUSCIOUS (Jocelyn Bioh)  
CRUMBS FROM THE TABLE OF JOY  
MEETINGS

Oya  
Abasiama  
Tiwa Shay-Shay  
Ernestine  
Elsa

Segal Center, dir. Awoye Timpo  
Hansberry Project, dir. Malika Oyetimein  
Hansberry Project, dir. Malika Oyetimein  
New Federal Theatre, dir. Woodie King, Jr  
New Federal Theatre, dir. Seret Scott

**FILM**

PARKER'S ANCHOR  
BEYOND THE SILENCE  
MOTHER OF GEORGE (**Sundance Winner**).  
BLUE CAPRICE  
AMADU AND SALI (Short)

Supporting.  
Supporting  
Helen/ Bridesmaid  
Featured  
Lead

Dir. Marc Hampson  
Dir. Michael Barbee  
Dir. Andrew Dosunmu  
Dir. Alexandre Moors  
Dir. Joseph Rodman

**TRAINING**

**Master of Fine Arts Degree**

Acting Curriculum:

**Acting & African American Theatre**

Meisner; Hagen; Shakespeare; Camera  
Audition Technique  
Movement (Suzuki, Grotowski)  
Alexander Technique; Dart; Accents  
Playscript Interpretation  
Afr. Am. Theatre; Performance Theory

**University of Louisville**

Dr. Baron Kelly  
Zan Sawyer Dailey  
Dr. Jennifer Ariadne Calvano  
Rachel Hillmer  
Dr. Russell Vandenbroucke  
Johnny Jones

Studio:

Emerging Artist Program  
I The Actor Studio  
New Federal Theatre  
Singers' Forum\*

Viewpoints, Characterization  
Advanced Scene Study  
Cold Reading, Monologues  
Advanced Vocal Technique

WA - Intiman Theatre  
NY - Petronia Paley  
NY - Alice Spivak  
NY - Eric Michael Gillett

Arts Education:

The Actors Fund  
Walton Arts Center

Sociodrama Technique Certification  
Arts with Education Adv. Training

NY  
AR

**Bachelor of Arts Degree**

Private Study:

**Music & African American Theatre**

Classical Voice & Speech

**University of Michigan**

George Shirley

Acting Curriculum:

Contemporary Black Theatre  
Scene Study, Stage Technique  
Black Writers & Directors  
Script Analysis  
Black Theater Workshop  
Performance Practicum

Glenda Dickerson  
Charles Oyamo Gordon  
Mbala Nkanga

Writing & Publications

**Editor & Contributing Writer**

2011-2013  
2016-2017

**Applause Africa Magazine, New York, NY  
(now known as Society for Africans in the  
Diaspora)**

2011-2013 Cultural Content Writer  
2016-2017 Editor for Entrepreneurship & Innovation  
Wrote online articles about entrepreneurial lifestyle  
and business innovation in the arts sector.

Curated editorial guest content from other industry sectors.

**Blogger**  
2010-2012

**SPEAK!**  
<http://www.mutiyatspeaks.blogspot.com>  
Curated and wrote a blog on the experience of being a first-generation African-American woman. Content included commentary from social, familial, historical, and cultural perspectives.

**Writer & Actor**  
2010

**1st Generation Nigerian Project, New York NY**  
Showcased at LAByrinth Theater Company & INTAR Theater  
Wrote, devised and performed original monologues and scenes about the experience of being 1st generation American with 5 Nigerian-American female actors.  
Original ensemble member.

Interviews Conducted

Academic Article: *Whose God?*

Jocelyn Bioh (Playwright), Mfoniso Udofia (Playwright)

Applause Africa Magazine

Angelique Kidjo (Vocalist)

Master's Thesis

Samuel R. Gates (Actor), Michelle Wilson (Actor)

Campus & Community Service

Vice-President  
2019-2020

**University of Louisville**  
Multicultural Association of Graduate Students  
Public Relations Officer, 2017-2018

Grad Student Representative  
2019-2020

**University of Louisville**  
Graduate Student Council  
Representative for Theatre Arts Department

Volunteer  
2018

**Americana Community Center**  
Fiberworks & After-School Programs

Co-President  
2006-2007

**University of Michigan - Ann Arbor**  
**So You Say Productions**

Intergroup Liaison, 2005-2006  
Ensemble Actor, 2005-2007

Historian  
2005-2006

**University of Michigan - Ann Arbor**  
**Black Arts Council**  
Secretary, 2004-2005

#### Awards & Certificates

Bridging the Gap Scholarship  
2020

**University of Louisville**  
Winner - Graduate Level  
Black Faculty and Staff Association

Dean's Recognition Award  
2019

**University of Louisville**  
Completion of Graduate Teaching Academy  
Advanced Concepts  
Executive Board Membership of Multicultural  
Association of Graduate Students

PCE Grant Recipient  
2019

**Philanthropic Educational Organization**  
Louisville, KY Chapter

Grant Recipient  
2018

**Race for Education**  
Louisville, KY Chapter

2nd Runner Up  
Miss Black America Coed  
2017 (Year 2018)

**Miss Black America Coed, Inc.**  
Talent Division Winner  
Interview Division Winner

Miss Black New York Coed  
2016

**Miss Black America Coed, Inc.**

Audie Award  
2014

**American Audio Publishers Association**  
Best Narration of Children's Books Up to Age 8

Grammy Award  
2005

**The Recording Academy**  
Best Choral Performance - The University of  
Michigan Choir  
William Bolcoln's *Songs of Innocence and  
Experience*



Gold Medal  
2003

**National Association for the Advancement of Colored People**  
Academic, Scientific, Technological & Cultural Olympics (ACT-SO) New York City Division - Contemporary Vocal Music

Gold Medal  
2000

**National Association for the Advancement of Colored People**  
Academic, Scientific, Technological & Cultural Olympics (ACT-SO) New York City Division - Dramatics

Professional Affiliations & Conferences

**Attendee (Member)**  
2019

**Association for the Study of Worldwide African Diaspora (ASWAD)**  
10th Biennial Conference, College of William & Mary Williamsburg, VA , November 5-9, 2019  
*Remembrance, Renaissance, Revolution: The Meaning of Freedom in the African World Over Time and Space*

**Black Theatre Network (BTN)**  
33rd Annual Conference  
Winston-Salem, NC, July 25-29, 2019  
*Black Theatre: Unapologetically Black*

**Actor**  
2011 & 2019

**National Black Theatre Festival (NBTF)**  
Winston-Salem, NC,  
August 1-6, 2011  
July 29-August 3, 2019  
*Readers Theatre of New Works*

2018

**Kennedy Center American College Theatre Festival (KCACTF) Region 4**  
*Miss Ida B. Wells*, Americus, GA,  
February 6-10, 2018

**Presenter**  
2018

**Graduate Student Regional Research Conference (GSRRC)**  
University of Louisville, Louisville, KY,  
March 2-3, 2018  
*Thriving in and Beyond Graduate School*  
"Whose God?: Differences in the Use of Spirituality Between First-Generation and Multi-Generational African-American Playwrights"

- 2016
- Southeastern Theatre Conference (SETC)**  
 SETC Theatre Symposium Volume 25  
 Agnes Scott College, Decatur, Georgia,  
 April 22-24, 2016  
*Cross-Cultural Dialogue on the Global Stage*  
 “Whose God?: Differences in the Use of Spirituality  
 Between First-Generation and Multi-Generational  
 African-American Playwrights”
- Member**  
 2017-present
- University of Michigan Black Alumni Association  
 (UMBA)**  
 New York & Houston Chapters
- 2017-present
- Nigerian American Professionals Association  
 (NAPA)**  
 Chicago Chapter
- 2009-2019
- Actors’ Equity Association  
 (AEA)**  
 Eastern & Central Regions