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GIT (GENDER-INFORMED TRAUMA) IN *BLACK N BLUE BOYS / BROKEN
MEN*: HOW CONCEPTS OF GENDER RESTRICT THE BLACK MALE
ACTOR'S CREATIVE PROCESS AND THE METHODS
HE CAN USE FOR CREATIVE FREEDOM

by
Tyler Tate

A Thesis
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Department of Theatre Arts
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GIT (GENDER-INFORMED TRAUMA) IN BLACK N BLUE BOYS/BROKEN
MEN: HOW CONCEPTS OF GENDER RESTRICT THE BLACK MALE
ACTOR'S CREATIVE PROCESS

By

Tyler Tate

A Thesis Approved on

July 8, 2021

By the following Thesis Committee

Dr. Janna Segal, Thesis Chair

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DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to my Grandparents, Sidney and Dessie Nettles,
whose contributions to their students inspire me daily;
to my Mother, Valerie, who laid a perfect foundation for me to
reach this point in my educational journey;
to my Father, Tyrone, from whom I get my creative spirit;
and to my sister, Tyra, who has made my life so happy.

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ABSTRACT

GIT (GENDER-INFORMED TRAUMA) IN *BLACK N BLUE BOYS / BROKEN MEN*: HOW CONCEPTS OF GENDER RESTRICT THE BLACK MALE ACTOR'S CREATIVE PROCESS AND THE METHODS HE CAN USE FOR CREATIVE FREEDOM

Tyler Tate

July 8, 2021

This study examines how the black male actor's creative process can be affected by historical and cultural constructions of masculinity connected to race, sexuality, and physical movement. My research on black men's experience with gender identity finds that social and cultural forces lead black men to reproduce behaviors that mirror a prescribed masculine ideal through physical movement. This prescribed masculine behavior is typically coded in terms of stiffness or lack of expression. This study explores how self-imposed restrictions reiterated by social standards of masculine behavior limit the creative freedom in the black male actor's creative process. Specifically, black male actors' use of their bodies during the creative process while adhering to socially-prescribed gender norms can cause physical blockages in their acting work. These blockages result from the traumatic experiences of how the black community reinscribes social conceptions of masculinity. This study incorporates my personal experiences and other black men's testimonies as evidence of such trauma and focuses on the creative limitations faced by black male actors due to limited movement styles available under

traditional or heteronormative prescriptions of masculinity. This study offers methods I developed from class readings to map how I moved through these limitations in my rehearsal process for the University of Louisville's Department of Theatre Arts' Fall 2020 production of Deal Orlandersmith's *Black N Blue / Boys Broken Men*. My acting journal entries and the testimonies of black men support how and why "gender-informed trauma" hinders the black male actor's ability to fully explore his physical range for character development. From this, my thesis develops methods that helped me to overcome the effects of gender-informed trauma, to expand my physical range, and develop unique, fully-embodied characters.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

DEDICATION.....	iii
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS.....	iv
ABSTRACT.....	v
INTRODUCTION.....	1
CHAPTER I GIT IN MY EXPERIENCE.....	24
CHAPTER II THE FOUR PRINCIPLES.....	36
CHAPTER III GIT IN CHARACTER.....	48
CHAPTER IV GIT IN MOTION	64
CONCLUSION.....	74
REFERENCES.....	78
CURRICULUM VITAE.....	81

INTRODUCTION

As a child, I observed that those in my immediate environment deemed “real men” did not move their bodies much. They were rarely expressive or gentle in their physicality. To be expressive and gentle was to be—among other things—a sissy. “Sissy” described men with effeminate or soft physical qualities, identifiable by the ways they moved their bodies. To avoid this label, black males in my family and at my school moved their bodies stiffly, weighted and restricted in movement. I watched as my black male peers also strived to achieve this physicality. It allowed them to blend in with popular black male crowds by embodying the physicality of what we were told was that of “a real man.” Acceptance into these crowds marked their heterosexuality as visible and protected them from “sissy” accusations. I, too, attempted this style of movement to avoid such accusations and to garner friendships with the black boys in my school. I used this style of movement, in fear that my natural physicality might not be acceptable to society. As a same-gender loving man whose parents’ suspicions of my sexuality were voiced early on in my life, childhood-me was often passively reminded of the “proper” heterosexualized ways to move my body—how to walk, sit, and stand like a man. As I neared adulthood, I learned that this unnaturally rigid movement was what those

considered real men performed to be seen as heterosexual and masculine. I term the long-term effects that this had on my body “gender-informed trauma,” or GIT.

GIT INFORMANTION

The Spirit of A Man by Iyanla Vanzant demonstrates that my experience with masculinity is not unique. Vanzant recounts her father’s demands that her brother enact properly masculine behaviors:

My brother was taught to do. He was taught to compete. He had to walk tall, run fast, throw far to outdo his competitors. My father taught him about doing. Yet as far as he was concerned, my brother could never *do* enough. My grandmother would say, 'Let the boy be!' My father's retort was, 'If you had your way, he'd be a sissy!' Black men must *do* whatever is necessary to not *be* a sissy. Sissy, as it relates to men, is one who is quiet, meek, noncompetitive, nonaggressive; one whose masculinity is questionable and up for grabs. (7)

Vanzant’s memories of her father’s use of “sissy” resonate with my experiences. She says her father taught her brother “to do” a series of actions to show his masculinity: “to walk tall, run fast, throw far, and outdo his competitors.” These are examples of the rigor with which Vanzant says men navigate a socially-prescribed need to never be seen as a sissy. For this reason, some black men—like Vanzant’s father—behave in a way that reinscribes heteronormativity.

The GIT-related social expectations among black men to embody masculine ideals begin with their need to assert dominance and parade heterosexuality. As Vanzant states, this emerges from a fixation on avoiding being called a sissy. In *Masquerade and Identities: Essays on Gender, Sexuality, and Marginality*, Efrat Tseëlon indexes qualities of the sissy rooted in erotic male submission. She observes that in the realm of fetish and kink, sissy is a male engagement of a “forbidden femininity” (78). In *Black Sissy*

Masculinity and the Politics of Dis-respectability, Kortney Ziegler names “a limp wrist, feet together, stooping instead of bending, and sitting with legs crossed at the knees” as sissy-like physical embodiment (200). Because sissy embodiment is deemed as “forbidden femininity” for men, it is implied that these physicalities, in some contexts, are socially expected of female-identifying individuals. As such, they are opposite to what Vanzant’s father demanded from her brother. To put it another way, sissy translates to softness, which in the context of my childhood experiences, is synonymous with gentle. A gentle demeanor was too similar to a feminine or weak one. Thus, a male had to avoid appearing as such at all costs. Vanzant’s father’s demands were the masculine counteraction to her brother’s potential feminine or weak appearance. This suggests a presumption in black masculinity that despite a man’s heterosexual status, he can only maintain his heterosexualness in the eyes of society through a constant vigilance against any and all embodiments of sissy movements. This underlying homophobic outlook drives black men to resist physicalities deemed non-heterosexual-presenting by societal standards. This convinces black men that they need at all times and at all costs to appear and be treated like they are strong and straight. If they are not, they understand, as Vanzant suggests, that their masculinity will be up for grabs (7).

These concepts of gendered physicality can also cause heightened levels of distress through producing what I call gender-informed trauma [GIT]. GIT is defined as any experience or sensation of distress resulting from social prescriptions of gender. Counselor and activist Yolo Akili Robinson conducted a 2016 seminar, *Black Masculinity in America*, wherein he discussed experiences that indicate the presence of GIT in Black men. The *YouTube* video recording of the seminar depicts Robinson’s

account of anonymous stories of black boys and men he counseled. Robinson's video further demonstrates the traumatic nature of GIT-related experiences. His black male patients have opened up to him about how generational re-inscriptions of heterosexualized masculine physicality negatively affected their lives. One of Robinson's stories involved a client who recounted how he had seen his son in the kitchen in conversation with his mother, effeminately postured, with a hand on his hip and a limp wrist (35:34), similar to Ziegler's definition of sissy physicality. He told Robinson that after he saw his son he blacked out. When he regained consciousness, he had no memory of what had happened moments before. However, he saw his son on the floor, distraught. His wife later told him that he walked into the kitchen and slapped his son to the ground. Upon reflection, the father knew he had done this as punishment for his son's posture but was shocked by the violent tone of his reaction.

Responding to Robinson's queries of why he reacted this way, the man then remembered how his father and uncles used to hit him when they saw him postured effeminately or in a way they deemed inappropriate for his gender when he was a child. Deeply suppressed, his own trauma triggered an involuntary and violent response, similar to the impact of the initial traumatic experience. From this, Robinson concluded the following:

And you know what he [the father as a young boy] learned? He learned how to be really stiff in his stature. He learned to make sure that wrist was never limp. He learned to make sure how he walked was like this all the time. And it actually was really present in his current kind of expression. (37:49)

These remarks on the man's "stiff" stature connect to my own childhood hyper-awareness of my limbs and the ways they moved. This was a result of the persistent messages communicated from adults during my childhood on how to walk or move my

body differently to acquire a more heterosexual, and thereby presumably masculine, appearance. My experience and Robinson's client's story demonstrate the array of experiences of black boys where GIT inscribes sexuality and physicality, ranging from learned masculinity by way of social observation to forced behaviors through means of abuse.

Though ostensibly mild in comparison to abuse, learning masculine behavior through observation still renders the same GIT-induced result: physical habits rooted in bodily restriction. The more serious implications of GIT indicate the need for awareness to prevent it and the need for methods for those affected to overcome or move through it. The absence of such methods can cause failings in our approach to gender and its effect on our daily lives. To discuss GIT in the lives of heterosexual men, as Robinson did in his seminar, is to point out that GIT as forced hypermasculine physicalities among black men is not an exclusively queer problem. The black male attachment to hypermasculine presentation begins with an attachment to heterosexuality but it does not always appear as homosexual-male assimilation. The father's encounter with his son had nothing to do with his son's sexuality, yet the father had a drastic and violent reaction. His reaction, as he told it, was strictly based on his son's physicality, a behavior that signified connotations of a sissy. This demonstrates the determination with which men resist sissy behavior. They conform to heterosexual norms to not only enforce heterosexual values but to also regulate behaviors that might signify non-heterosexuality.

Gender-informed trauma takes place on the premise that gender is enacted through the expression of the body and is informed by culture and history. Judith Butler's *Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist*

Theory proposes that gender is not innate; rather it is performed and expressive of physical behaviors influenced by history and culture. She offers the following details to prove this point:

To describe the gendered body, a phenomenological theory of constitution requires an expansion of the conventional view of acts to mean both that which constitutes meaning and that through which meaning is performed or enacted. In other words, the acts by which gender is constituted bear similarities to performative acts within theatrical contexts. My task, then, is to examine in what ways gender is constructed through specific corporeal acts, and what possibilities exist for the cultural transformation of gender through such acts. (520)

Butler's analysis posits that gender is enacted. By highlighting similarities between gender and "performative acts within theatrical contexts," she suggests gender is a performance that is "constituted" through "corporeal acts" that, like a performance, are received by viewer(s). Butler's findings are not exclusively applicable to the male gender. She speaks to all gender identities, as cis-gendered men are not the only people who participate in gender performance. This "performance," which is enacted through "corporeal acts," can be put on and taken off. A masculine performance, as explained by Vanzant, can include corporeal acts such as "walking tall, running fast, and throwing far" (7). This performance also aligns with Robinson's client, who performed stiffness in his body posture to avoid being chastised by male elders. Ziegler's "forbidden femininity" is the opposite of the expectations of masculine performance expressed by Vanzant's father and Robinson's client.

The type of prescribed heterosexualized masculinity explained by Vanzant focuses on the exhibition of strength and dominance. It prioritizes particularly macho, assertive, aggressive, and sometimes violent qualities. Plainly, this is what men like Vanzant's father and Robinson's client view as heterosexual male qualities. I am arguing

that when employed over time, these qualities can cause blockages in physical expression as demonstrated by Robinson's client. If gender is "constructed through specific corporeal acts," as noted by Butler (520), and the corporeal acts associated with masculinity demonstrate lack of physical expression, it is possible that black male actors who have employed heterosexualized masculine physicalities throughout their lives are limited in their expression when portraying male characters. Blockages, such as those examined by Robinson on his client's stiff stature, can affect the black male actor's physical freedom during their acting process. This is an effect of GIT; if one is not aware of these blockages, the possible effects on one's artistic process go unchecked. As a result, one may both consciously and unconsciously resort to only engaging character choices—which are physical options for the actor's performance—that mirror heterosexually masculine movement. This is a form of physical restriction not conducive to developing physical range in one's acting practice.

The type of masculinity enacted by black men in America that causes GIT, centering on strength and dominance, manifest in a historical context of slavery. In *The Agony of Masculinity*, Pierre W. Orelus examines the direct impact American slavery has had on black men throughout history to today. He uses the history of slavery and colonialism to articulate the evolution of black masculinity through the scope of black male subordination:

One of the things that happened during colonialism is that it permitted the emergence of white male supremacy. By that, I mean that white colonials from Europe, even if they were from a lower class, had colonial status over colonized people. This put black males in a subordinate position. Concerning white male masculinity, it weakens black males through an act of subordination, setting them up as sex objects either for white men or for white women. In either case, the slaves could not be their own men; they were somebody else's men. (65)

Orelus summarizes the white influence on black masculinity. He infers the all-encompassing violent nature of white male supremacy during the era of slavery set black men up as “sex objects either for white men or for white women.” This objectification of black men into sex objects positioned them in a “subordinate position” within American society. I argue that this is why black masculinity centers strength and dominance. Strength and dominance are enacted in black masculinity to counteract black men’s “not being their own men.” The comments made by Vanzant’s father and Robinson’s client suggest that those men want to assert and, as a result, enact strength and dominance. Enactments are the “corporeal acts” Butler uses to explain the performance of gender. It is possible these enactments are carried out by black men to undo or subvert the historical subordination referenced by Orelus. Butler stresses that culture, history, and corporeal acts consolidate gender. Placed in conversation with each other, Butler and Orelus support the logical connection between slavery and black male movement, as it specifically pertains to gender expression.

Furthermore, Orelus concludes black men have rewritten aspects of their gender expression to match those of white male supremacy in an attempt to adopt the American heterosexualized standard of masculinity. He concludes that through white supremacy, “straight white males have established the norm and standard of masculinity from slavery on” (70). Based on interviews conducted by Orelus, he came to the following conclusions about the expressions of standard white masculinity exhibited by slave owners:

Performance of masculinity by these slave masters included acts of physical and psychological violence such as raping young women; hanging slaves who were caught trying to run away; torturing and killing slaves who were caught inciting other slaves to revolt; humiliating male slaves by making them take off their clothes in public while beating them; and separating families from their children and other relatives (69).

This quote captures the heinous conditions under which white slave masters asserted dominance, including psychological violence, rape, and forms of punishment enacted by white slave-owners to humiliate and threaten the lives of enslaved Africans. If gender is only conceived to the extent it is performed, the masculinity enacted by white male slave owners that is addressed by Orelus, relies upon the enactment of violence toward enslaved Africans. The forms of punishment Orelus lists are a precursor of the knee-jerk response of Robinson's client who knocked his son to the ground. His urge to reinscribe heteronormative, masculine traits within his son invoked a punishment that was violent and involuntary. The violence was so deeply ingrained that it overcame his faculties. This violence sets the tone for black men's encounters with white masculinity throughout history and articulates the black male concern with heteronormative behavior. This observation also provides context for why this heteronormative preoccupation sometimes manifests violence. In this sense, the violence and the need to reject anything that signifies sissy behavior are incarnations of violent white masculinity. Brutality born through slavery is the link between white masculinity and black masculinity.

Expanding on Orelus' astute analysis, I find that to assimilate, black men have used forms of aggression and dominance to recapture the fullness of what was diluted by the violence of white masculinity. The need for a constant display of strength and aggression in black, American, heterosexualized masculinity is a counteraction to their historical subordination. This helps explain Robinson's story and Vanzant's mention of her father's avoidance of sissy behavior. If sissy behavior is deemed by men, such as Vanzant's father, as the opposite of strength, it then becomes synonymous with subordination; hence, black men's commitment to counteract it. This could further

explain the actions of Robinson's client who hit his son for being "effeminately postured" (35:34). He did this to correct his son's posture so it appeared appropriate for his gender, as the father's male family members had done to him when he was a child (37:00). Robinson's client is a possible example of a black man who unwittingly reiterated the ways white violence has informed black masculinity. Black masculinity is greatly influenced by white male violence, as it unconsciously responds to the histories of white male violence. Because it is unconscious, the histories of white male violence continue to affect black life through conceptions of black heteronormative masculinity.

The above information indicates GIT's influence on the history and culture of black masculinity. Because this thesis references my personal experiences, I mainly examine recent American expressions of black male physicality. Richard Majors' *Cool Pose* (1992) offers a more recent depiction of black masculinity through "coolness." He offers that coolness is an aspect of black masculinity that demonstrates an ability to withstand the impact of harsh conditions, and therefore demonstrate strength (4). He suggests that for black men, keeping it cool is a key component solidifying one's masculine identity. His analysis includes language that more keenly depicts black male physicality when the cool pose is in use. This cool pose physicality includes a slower walk, shoulders crouched lower, head tilted toward the shoulder, a forwardly protruded chin, hands lightly cupped around the crotch, all with a confrontational appearance (74). When in action, these physicalities simultaneously display an attitude of being unbothered and ready for confrontation. Based on Majors' findings, there is something about coolness within modern black male culture that pronounces heterosexualized masculinity. As with the physicalities discussed by Vanzant and Robinson, behaviors

associated with the cool pose reinforce a heterosexual norm, as it counterposes the sissy movements defined by Ziegler, which are comprised of crossed legs, and the tendency to stoop rather than bend (200). “Cool pose” is another counterpoint to sissy movement performed to enhance one's masculine appearance.

Cool pose also speaks to the tendency among black men to reclaim manhood through physical movement. Majors asserts that cool pose is a ritualized masculinity that involves behaviors, ways to speak, physical postures, impression management, and “carefully crafted performances that deliver a single critical message: pride, strength, and control” (4). Here, Majors positions cool pose as a toolkit with which black men construct their masculinity in oppressive environments as a form of resistance toward white male domination. Majors expands on his argument with the following point:

The black male is socialized to view every white man as a potential enemy, every symbol of the dominant system as a potential threat. As a result, he is reluctant to expose his innermost feelings. Playing it cool becomes the mask of choice. Cool pose is a well-developed and creative art; it also exacts a stiff price in repressed feelings and suppressed energy. (27)

The perception of "every white man as a potential enemy" to black men is informed by the "dominant system," which aligns with Orelus' points on white male domination in America. It connects black masculinity to American slavery and indicates that the “dominant system” was founded, in part, by slavery. Majors also points out that cool pose is enacted to counteract the white male threat. He affirms that cool pose is used to conceal inner feelings by "playing it cool" to appear proud, strong, and in control. It serves to emphasize the appearance of strength and endurance as a means to subvert a system of racial hierarchy that has historically positioned black men in a role subordinate to white men.

The self-restriction GIT causes can also be understood in terms of the preoccupation with heterosexuality among black men. *Queering Masculinity: Black Gay Men in College* by Terrell L. Strayhorn and Derrick L. Tillman-Kelly uses studies conducted by Larry D. Icard, Paula S. Nurius, and Strayhorn that examine conditions of gay men to explain this concern. Icard's and Nurius's 1996 study confirmed black gay men can be traumatized if they are open about their sexual orientation, especially black men who are rejected by other black people (87). A similar study conducted in 2012 by Strayhorn and Travis G. Mullins, analyzed the experiences of black gay men in universities and found that most of the black gay men they spoke with reported disownment by their parents (87). These studies point out the disapproval faced by many black men who identify as non-heterosexual in the black community. Given the essential needs often met by immediate family members, the secrecy of non-heterosexual identities potentially becomes a means for survival. I conclude black men's tendencies to emphasize traditionally heterosexual, masculine norms in their daily self-presentation may also be rooted in their awareness and fear of disownment. It may serve as an act of prevention against the potential loss of mainstream black acceptance. Strayhorn and Tillman-Kelly also reference a study conducted by E. Brown of a focus group of 110 black men who engaged in same-sex intercourse. Only 7% of the participants identified as homosexual and 9% as bisexual. This study concluded, "Black gay men cannot accept a gay identity for reasons ranging from homophobia to traditional notions of black masculinity" (87). The remaining 84% of the focus-group members insisted on a heterosexual identity in the public eye, despite their homo/bisexual attraction. This suggests a resistance toward non-heterosexual orientations and behaviors, even in the

presence of non-heterosexual activity. It also shows that physical heteronormative masculine presentation cannot objectively define, predict, or predetermine a black man's sexual identity.

However, these behaviors still serve as signifiers of not only heterosexuality among heterosexual men but also sexual proclivity among homosexual men. In *Rationalized Masculinities in the Sexual Field*, Okoduwa Aboiralor finds that "thuggishness" is deemed a sexual fantasy by many white homosexual and bisexual men (22). Aboiralor posits that among white homosexual and bisexual men, thuggishness is associated with the Mandingo Man trope: a racist assumption of black male hypersexuality (22). Today, "thug" is commonly used to describe a violent person or criminal. It is also important to note that because of its association to criminal and street-gang activity, "thuggishness" falls under the category of "cool pose" and can therefore be acknowledged as a heterosexual disposition. Majors indicates in *Cool Pose* that for black men, coolness as a mask may result in criminal and street-gang activity (Preface, para. 2). This means that when cool pose is examined through the white homosexual lens, it can serve sexual fantasy. Aboiralor quotes an interviewee who recalls white homosexual men who expressed their attraction for him as a result of their "Mandingo-ghetto fantasy" (22). The interviewee says that he enjoys playing into the fantasy, as he enjoys feeling dangerous (22). Equally important, Aboiralor specifies that among white heterosexual men, it is common for dominant black men to be feared (23). The theme here is danger. I argue that for both hetero- and homosexual black men, physical embodiments of black masculinity such as cool pose can indicate particular forms of dominance over white men. For heterosexual white men, it is fear of black male dominance, which in and of

itself establishes dominance. For homosexual white men, it is a kink-inspired association of danger with black masculine demeanors such as cool pose that also asserts dominance. It is meaningful to point out that black masculinity is identified as dangerous across the white male sexual spectrum. If black masculine demeanors such as cool pose can elicit assumptions of danger from the white male gaze and white men belong to the “dominant system,” as specified by Orelus (27), then there is something to be said about the possible effects that that gaze has on black life across the sexual spectrum.

I have already covered the historical components of slavery that inform black male masculinity’s connection to GIT. Also important are the current social ills that affect black male life. For example, when Aboiralor's interviewee used the word "thuggishness," he simultaneously called upon the long history of racist dog-whistling enacted by white American men. The secondary, racist meaning of “thug” specifically denotes a dangerous black man. In “From ‘Brute’ to ‘Thug’: The Demonization and Criminalization of Unarmed Black Males in America,” Calvin John Smiley and David Fakunle declare that "Over the last several years, the term ‘thug’ has become a way to describe black males who do not rise to the standard of white America" (Introduction, para. 2). This sentence precisely analyzes the evolution of the word "thug" and its designation to black men through the white gaze. Smiley and Fakunle emphasize that recent killings of unarmed black men by police have initiated discussions and discourse on the word “thug” (Introduction, para. 2). These findings indicate a tendency, directly and indirectly, to villainize black men in its use. The above components display the intersection of GIT with white supremacist conceptions of black men.

This relates to GIT via an intersection of race, gender, sex, and danger. It begins with Richard Majors' conclusions on forms of black masculinity that potentially lead to criminal or street gang activity. As evidenced by the use of the word "thug," GIT is not exclusively initiated by black social circles. Gender prescriptions involving the assumption of danger, even in the absence of violent activity, are also current perpetrators of GIT, as they have literally resulted in death, such as the unjustified killings of unarmed black men by police. Where race and gender intersect, the association of danger with black men literally puts black men in danger. On May 3rd, 2021, The Statista Research Department released a statement declaring a trend of police shootings in America that occur more frequently against black Americans than any other ethnic group. I argue that the assumed danger associated with black male existence, as mentioned in Aboirlor's study, causes such fatalities. This suggests that in addition to the aforementioned traumas related to masculine identity discussed by Vanzant, Robinson, Orelus, Strayhorn, Tillman-Kelly, and Aboiralor, there are more grave implications affecting black male life. Radiating in the background of GIT-related matters, these implications are sometimes a matter of life or death. This, too, indicates a need for broad-sweeping, critical discussions on the ways gender, race, and sexuality inform trauma.

The purpose of this thesis is to offer insight for black male actors who feel affected by their experiences with prescribed heteronormative masculinity. If those actors wish to access the full range of their physical expression—which is the means whereby they overcome such habits and begin to create fully embodied, unique characters—they must engage a specific acting practice to do so. This will allow them to rediscover a wider range of physical expression and more readily commit to new physical choices.

Majors's emphasis on black men's tendency to "mask" emotions and "suppress [...] energy" (27) and Robinson's comments on his client's "stiff stature [...]" (37:49) support my claim that one effect of heterosexualized masculinity is physical restriction. In the context of cool pose, self-restriction helps one reclaim and assert a heterosexualized form of masculinity. My experiences with masculinity mostly involve forms of self-imposed physical restriction on the body. Therefore, this thesis will specifically address such physical effects caused by GIT and propose solutions for them.

In my academic theatre training I have not encountered works that specifically address the ways gender-informed trauma can restrict the body and therefore restrict the acting process. The lack of attention given to gender expression, race (particularly the black experience), and sexuality in many acting textbooks has caused a blind spot in the way black male actors address trauma within our field. This blind spot can be improved with the analysis and methods provided by this thesis. It could give us a keener vocabulary for talking about our experiences and potentially help us rediscover the grace and expressiveness we suppressed in our childhoods. This has become the aim of my work in my final year in the MFA program.

Insight the effects GIT has on black male life will have significant implications in the realm of black acting as well as in performance theory. *Black Acting Methods* by Sharrell D. Luckett and Tia M. Shaffer affirms that the method this study promotes is a black acting method. Luckett and Shaffer explain, "Black acting methods are defined as rituals, processes, and techniques rooted in an Afrocentric centripetal paradigm where black theory and black modes of expression are the nucleus which informs how one interacts with various texts, literary and embodied, and how one interprets and represents

imaginary circumstances" (2). Luckett and Shaffer list "black modes of expression" as key to black acting methods. A mode of expression is established by the type of expression a person engages. My incorporation of the works of Vanzant, Robinson, and Majors outlines certain black masculine heteronormative modes of expression by specifying notions of black masculine heteronormative physicalities. I have explained the ways my physical expressiveness has been affected by them above. Also, my incorporation of critical race theory explains the ways heteronormative, hypermasculine expressions particularly hinder the black male actor's process. My engagement with Majors, Orelus, Strayhorn, and Tillman-Kelly also makes evident my use of black theory.

The method I propose in this thesis is a black acting method because it centers black experiences. In *Black Acting Methods*, Luckett and Shaffer describe Molefi Kete Asante, the author of the books forward, as the "Father of Afrocentricity" (3). Luckett and Shaffer state, "Asante defines Afrocentricity as a paradigmatic intellectual perspective that privileges African agency within the context of African history and culture transcontinentally and transgenerationally" (3). This means for a thing to be considered Afrocentric, it must "privilege [...]" experiences of black people globally and historically. To clarify the basis of GIT in this document, I incorporated its historical elements connected to African people who endured the violence of the transatlantic slave trade. This highlights the fact that I privileged African agency in my method in a way that pertains to the definition of Afrocentricity. Moreover, my method privileges the narratives and needs of black men that relate to a particular black male paradigm. I problematized patterns inherent in GIT among black men, how it affects the ways they

use their bodies, and will offer a method to help them overcome such effects in a productive way. Therefore, my method is inspired by the needs of black men.

Luckett and Shaffer name “highlighting performance practitioners’ labor in social justice issues and activism” (2) as one of the primary goals that *Black Acting Methods* aims to fulfill. The work I have done with GIT has initiated a journey of activism that centers on gender and critical race theory. I researched, wrote, and recorded a video on *YouTube* entitled *Investigating Black Masculinity* that investigates the trauma that occurs among black men in their adherence to "standard" black American masculine expectations. It unpacks how historically black males' masculinity is gauged by their ability to survive oppression and details the unfair repercussions they experience as a result. This video was prompted by this thesis and has led to speaking opportunities on virtual panels to educate black audiences on GIT. To further educate the public on such issues, I have taken this work to platforms beyond UofL to inspire black men to think critically about the ways they engage with the concept of masculinity and each other. This correlation of education-as-activism and my work at UofL with GIT is another parallel to the motives of *Black Acting Methods*. My discoveries about overcoming GIT do not start and stop on the pages of this document; rather, they have carried over to a virtual platform and encouraged conversations about what this document addresses.

I made these connections to contextualize black acting methodologies and principles established before my work with GIT to integrate black acting theory with my personal process in a way that gender theory alone does not. My intention is not to imply all black men are affected by GIT, as it is up to the individual to determine that. Moreover, my method is a black acting method that should interest those that seek to

engage black praxis. This method is particularly outlined for black men who feel they have been affected by GIT. Beyond the scope of acting, this thesis should speak to anyone who cares about the larger issue of gender-as-physical restriction and its effect on the creative process.

GIT IN MY THESIS SHOW

To demonstrate GIT's effects on the black male actor, there must be a performance or show on which to base the study. In the University of Louisville Department of Theatre Arts (UofL), the third-year MFA students' final show is their thesis show. The thesis show is the basis of the study and its rehearsal process is the site on which the students' acting explorations, research, and methods are applied.

Throughout this thesis, I will refer to physical, creative engagement with text-based materials in class and rehearsals as "explorations." My thesis show was Dael Orlandersmith's *Black N Blue Boys / Broken Men*, directed by Professor Robert Barry Fleming. Professor Fleming is currently the artistic director at Actor's Theatre of Louisville and served as the professor of my Fall 2020 MFA Acting IV class.

The Fall 2020 production of *Black N Blue Boys / Broken Men* was different from previous productions in which I have worked. It was rehearsed virtually on ZOOM as a Covid precaution, with me at home with the virtual direction of Professor Fleming in his home. This was the first time I had engaged with such a process. A typical UofL Theatre Arts production would hold rehearsals in a rehearsal hall with the set "taped off," which means the dimensions of the set have been indicated with floor tape. The tape markings indicate portions of the stage and provide spatial awareness for the actor regarding where

they are to walk, sit, and stand on stage during their performance. For my thesis show, I was not able to utilize a taped-off rehearsal space and was instead provided with an image of the set design to map out where I would walk, sit, and stand while in my room. When it was time for me to rehearse onstage, I had three days to transfer everything I rehearsed in my bedroom onto the stage.

Cultural transformation informs gender. Butler asserts this in her analysis of gender as a performance (520). Because *Black N Blue Boys / Broken Men* is a one-person show, with six all-male characters of varying racial and cultural backgrounds, Butler's assertion is active in my analysis of the characters I portrayed in the show. The play centers on the traumatic experiences of Mike, Flaco, Ian, Larry, Timmy, and Tenny. Mike is Black-American and thirty years old. Flaco is Nuyorican and fifteen years old. Larry is white and in his sixties. Ian is white, English, and in his late thirties. Timmy is black and eleven years old. Tenny is white and in his early sixties. Each of their stories touch on the ways childhood trauma disrupts boys' psychological development. Throughout this thesis, its title will be frequently shortened to "*Black N Blue Boys*." The show was scripted and originally performed by a female-identifying playwright. It must be noted that the exploration of this play is different when performed by a male-identifying performer. The experiences of the male characters may align with the personal experiences of the male performer. There are moments in the play that caused me to further engage with personal experiences, and I will highlight them in this thesis when relevant.

This study will focus on my experiences with prescribed masculinity and its effect on my portrayal of male characters. Because *Black N Blue Boys* is a one-person show

with multiple male characters, it offers much room for exploration of physical choice. Additionally, I performed an excerpt of *Black N Blue Boys* in the first year of my MFA training at the UofL. Because I performed it in two different phases of my MFA training experience, I can pull from each process, draw comparisons and pinpoint growth.

Chapter One will explain how I discovered the issue of GIT in my own experience. It connects the information given in this introduction to my experiences with GIT. It will highlight similarities between my experience and those of other black men cited in this Introduction. I will reference my undergraduate experiences at the Alabama State University Department of Theatre Arts (ASU) to show examples of GIT in my acting experience, prior to my enrollment in the UofL MFA Acting program. To illustrate where I became more critical of GIT, I will include my experiences from the UofL Fall 2018 performance project, which was an excerpt of *Black N Blue Boys*. Chapter One will further address the issue of GIT and posit that it can be a serious obstacle in one's actor's process. To strengthen this argument, I will draw from scholarly works that discuss trauma and align them with the aforementioned personal acting experiences. This chapter will then introduce how I came to develop my own method to move through GIT. I will use the term "move through" as a way to describe actively engaging with GIT as means to minimize its effects. *The Actor's Secret* by Betsy Polatin is the course reading which I found most helpful in my Voice II class, taught by Professor Rachel Carter, and it served as one of the main inspirations for the method I developed. Its teachings focus on the Alexander Technique, which is an alternative healing method for poor posture.

The remainder of my thesis will detail my proposed method with illustrative examples. Chapter Two addresses the four fundamental principles of the method I

developed, which supported me as I moved through GIT: tracking; Actor's Jiu-Jitsu; being gentle; and breathing. This chapter delineates practical steps to engage the four principles, and touches on brief examples of where I applied them in my work. Chapter Three breaks down my method as applied to my character development of Larry and Timmy from UofL's Fall 2020 production of *Black N Blue Boys*. This chapter provides concrete examples of the four principles in action and details my approach to character analysis by showing how I utilized facts from the script, *YouTube* videos, and Betsy Polatin's method of "actor's neutral." I will use my research and acting discoveries from my character development process as evidence to prove that my method can help black men to broaden the range of their physical expression beyond the limitations of GIT. Chapter Four addresses GIT-related obstacles via the development of two other characters from Orlandersmith's play, Ian and Tenny. The points I will include in this chapter about this aspect of my process speak to mental resistance caused by GIT that led to physical limitation in my process with Ian's character and resistance to Tenny's character. To prove my method's ability to alleviate such limitations, I will highlight these obstacles in Ian's and Tenny's scenes and explain where I applied my method. The Conclusion will explain the stresses that emerged from the new protective measures employed for Covid-conscious theatre. This suggests that the four principles can also be applied for moving through other forms of stress beyond the domain of GIT.

The method you will find in this document does not offer a solution for proclivities toward heteronormative masculine presentation or GIT in theatrical storytelling or the acting industry. It instead offers ways for black male actors to cope with or move through experiences with GIT so they can adequately develop and portray

unique male characteristics for the stage and not feel compelled to mimic the heteronormative masculine tropes they engage in daily life. Although my method offers a way “through” gender-informed trauma, people who experience the lasting effects of traumatic encounters should seek a licensed life counselor. This document should not be used as a document of healing. However, it can be used as a tool for actors to understand what gender-informed trauma is and how acting methods can help them overcome the creative blocks it sometimes causes.

CHAPTER I

GIT IN MY EXPERIENCE

Although to some, the GIT experiences from my childhood recounted in the Introduction may seem insignificant, they are crucial in terms of my physicality. They affect physical and emotional aspects of my acting work. I was baffled that the intersection of race, gender identity, and acting praxis had not yet been discussed in any of my artistic or social circles. The Introduction suggests that the intersection of race, gender, and physical body awareness is an important factor of acting praxis. If a black male actor feels that he has been affected by GIT, then the critical connection between gender theory and acting process is non-negotiable. Therefore, this chapter will explain how concepts of gender directly affect acting. In this way, my study adds to the aforementioned sources that focus on gender and critical race theory, while privileging black male agency within the field of acting.

This chapter will take the Introduction's historical, cultural, and theoretical elements on race and gender and more rigorously apply them to GIT and connect them to acting. The purpose of this focus is to connect GIT to the specific ways it affected my physicality in my acting process. specifically in my experiences with ASU's production

of *The Piano Lesson* and UofL's Fall 2018 performance project of *Black N' Blue Boys*. To tie in acting praxis, I will connect GIT to the teachings in Betsy Polatin's *The Actor's Secret* that specifically address trauma as something that can affect an actor's process. Because GIT is a new term that I have created, I will provide more context and background for GIT with scholarly works such as *The Body Keeps the Score* by Bessel van der Kolk and *An Introduction to Trauma and Health* by Megan R. Gerber and Emily B. Gerber. The assertions in this chapter are to substantiate my claim that gender can inform trauma and provide concrete examples of how it can influence a black male actor's acting work.

GIT RIGHT

Though this evidence is anecdotal, all the black male actors in my social circle indicate they feel pressure on and off stage to exhibit traditional heteronormative, masculine characteristics. I remember conversations with my black male peers in my undergraduate program at ASU's Department of Theatre Arts wherein they expressed resistance toward portraying homosexual characters in productions for whatever—possibly untrue—reason they could conjure that day. As our conversations progressed, I noticed their reasons gradually boil down to their resistance toward an effeminate appearance on stage in front of their families and friends. Effeminate or what were considered “soft” characteristics within the men in our program were passively criticized but strictly prohibited for performances. Male actors were often told by professors who served as directors to “man up.”

Telling an actor to “man up” can cause adverse effects in the creative process. During the rehearsal process for the 2014 ASU production of *The Piano Lesson* for which I played Wining Boy, the director told me to “man up.” I could feel stiffness creep up through my knees and elbows, with an overall feeling of awkwardness. I believed the character I played needed to possess a significantly masculine presence. This meant my portrayal of the character of Wining Boy needed to exhibit prominent, socially accepted, traditionally heterosexual, hypermasculine behaviors. Consequently, I wondered about how I knew that and what it meant. The beauty of August Wilson's ten-play cycle is its commitment to the raw essence of black Americans. It covers the history of black Americans in the 20th century. However, it does not feature any non-heterosexual male characters. For this reason, in the rehearsal process for *The Piano Lesson*, I knew the nuances Wilson incorporated into the script derived from the narratives of heterosexual black men like my father, uncles, and grandfathers. This is what inspires the need for actors portraying Wilson’s characters to “man up.” Manning up helps actors to match the heterosexualized masculine narratives gleaned from Wilson’s research.

The Piano Lesson exhibits Butler’s “cultural transformations” of gender (520), as its depictions of black men are informed by black American history and elements of black culture. The play tells the story of a sharecropper in 1936, who comes to Pittsburgh with the intent to sell his family’s piano. This is the historical foundation of the story. The piano is engraved with images of his African ancestors, hence, his family’s appreciation for it. This establishes cultural relevance for the characters. Sharecropping was a post-slavery legal work and residency agreement between white landowners and black workers. It derived from slavery, after slavery’s abolishment, so that the formerly

enslaved could have somewhere to live, and former slave owners could legally continue to receive free labor. It is therefore connected to the heterosexualized depictions of masculinity that derive from white slave owner's violence, as mentioned in the Introduction. This means the black male characters in this play, less than 80 years removed from the violence of white American slave-owners, may be influenced by the legacy of such violence. This indicates that the trauma Wilson researched to write the play was a fact of the lives of men in my family who also experienced the reality of white male dominance in the 1930s, 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s. Although abolished, slavery, in this context of *The Piano Lesson*, had been repackaged as sharecropping, but not repurposed. This demonstrates a preservation of the legacy of American slavery and its harsh conditions. The negative impact of violent white masculinity in 1936 was just as present but was held somewhat in check by slavery abolishment laws during that time.

Adjusting one's body to a particular mode of masculine physicality can feel limiting in a creative process. For me, it felt too close to the rigid movement I practiced as a child when I attempted to follow my grandfather's instructions on masculine behavior. Black masculinity's connection to physical and social restrictions supports the argument that black men who enact these particular forms of masculinity are physically restricted. I did not feel like I had artistic freedom in my process after I was told to "man up." I moved forward with the assumption that I could only develop my character's physicality to a certain point and go no further. I was convinced it was impossible for me to authentically express myself through white-assimilated, macho gusto—as some of my castmates had done—and thrive in my performances. This caused me to be incredibly self-conscious. It made me shrink my performance. As a young actor, this instilled within

me more fear toward how I appeared on stage. Plainly, this is the overall aftermath of GIT—fear and self-consciousness. This made it incredibly difficult to focus when I performed.

Emotional restriction can hinder an actor's performance as much as physical restriction. I have touched on emotional suppression as masculinity with Majors' cool pose in the Introduction. *The Will to Change* by bell hooks adds to this argument when she expounds on patriarchy, a social system wherein men hold primary power, and examines the ways this negatively affects the emotional lives of men. She writes, "To indoctrinate boys into the rules of patriarchy, we force them to feel pain and to deny their feelings" (22). She examines how boys are taught to hide their emotions and how their ability to do so becomes the measure of their manhood. For this reason, emotional stoicism in boys may become an honorable trait, as it displays strength. This quote explains my inability to emotionally connect to characters. After all, I spent a significant portion of my life with the belief that the only way I could live comfortably in this world was if I physically and emotionally presented myself in a way that felt unnatural to me. I did this, and in most cases, was successful. As a result, I remained in good social standing with the men in my environment and society at large. However, as my discomfort with self-restriction amplified, so too did my insecurities. For example, it was frowned upon when men moved their hips too much when they walked. In black spaces, it was called "switching" or "twisting." Therefore, I knew to limit the movement in my hips. In action, this felt extremely awkward. My grandfather once explained to me that men are not supposed to swing their arms much when they walk. I then lessened the swing in my arms. This felt awkward and made me feel ashamed of the natural movement of my body.

Although I felt awkward and ashamed, the socially acceptable and masculine way for me to deal with these emotional reactions—as noted by both hooks and Majors—was to pretend they did not exist. In other words, I practiced perpetual inauthenticity. When I was sad and felt like I could never be the kind of boy that would make my parents proud, I hid it. When I was uncomfortable with the ways adults policed my and other black boy's movement, I did not dare speak it. This influenced both my emotional and physical bodies; my self-imposed restriction of them did not allow freedom of expression. My conclusion, then, is this lifelong repetition of emotional/physical restriction, planned postures, gestures, styles of movement, and thought patterns suppressed my physical expression and therefore hindered my stage performances.

The effects of GIT can be most notable in a performance process. In the MFA in Performance program at UofL, I noted specific instances where physical manifestations of GIT showed up. Among them was one in rehearsal for the Fall performance project directed by then third-year MFA student, LaShondra Hood. During that time, she was preparing her thesis, *Actors Rhythm, Internal Beat*, which too focuses on physical movement LaShondra declares in her thesis that the mind and body should not be perceived as separate from each other, rather they are constantly working together (11). This is related to my thesis because I am proving that gender-informed traumas have long-term physical consequences. She confirms music's effect on the body by articulating its effect on the mind, as researched and reported by neurologist, Oliver Sacks. I provided in the Introduction examples of trauma's effect on the body through quotes from Yolo Akili Robinson's client, and my personal experiences with GIT in my childhood that continued to affect me in adulthood.

GIT causes effects that can persist from one creative process to another. The challenges I faced in *The Piano Lesson* carried over into the 2018 performance project. Since it is a one-person show, LaShondra posed a question about my plans to differentiate movement qualities between the two characters I played, Mike and Flaco. I could not produce a reasonable answer as this was the first time I would embody two characters in one show. For this reason, the usual, habitual, masculine caricature choices I used in *The Piano Lesson* would not suffice. As with *The Piano Lesson*, my interpretation at that time was that men did not have much physical variety. I wrote LaShondra's question down and thought about it in my personal practice. My only approach to address the question was to do what I had previously done in real life and on stage: pre-plan and pre-rehearse specific qualities of movement, gestures, and postures. For example, based on the fact that Mike in Orlandersmith's script was a 32-year-old black male who had experienced domestic violence consistently throughout his childhood, I concluded he would not embody a wide variety of physical movement (5). This thought process was informed by my then comprehension of black male movement. For example, perhaps Mike will not have much movement in his arms or shoulders as he walks. It may also appear that he rarely uses his hands to gesture when he talks. Such perceptions of masculinity also impacted my process of character development for 15-year-old Flaco. I relied on the assumption that his violent behavior was an indicator of his physical expression, which at that time I associated with the types of masculine dominance I highlight in the Introduction. Upon his entrance into his scene, he teases, "You gotta up my rep, make me look good, not tell people about me being violent cause you gotta place me, verdad?" (12). At this moment Flaco speaks to a social worker, whom he believes is

exhausted with his case. When Flaco is not satisfied by the counselor's response, he scoldingly adds, "I was stupid for believing adults in general because ALL OF YOU LIE" (13). Here, Flaco expresses anger toward inconsistencies from counselors affiliated with his group homes. He believes they are the reason he has been moved eleven times from one group home to the next. Flaco finishes his tirade with, "All o you are a buncha bitches, man and I don't care if you don't like me calling you that, man" (13). Here, again, Flaco makes clear his disdain for the social workers. My approach to this moment was influenced by my belief that he treated the social worker in the scene with masculine aggression and therefore restricted his physical expression. For this reason, I prescribed similar choices to Flaco as I had to Mike.

Although some readers may feel these choices are harmless, I maintain that the assumption of physical restriction was a response to my cognizance of masculine movement, heavily informed by GIT. I set up limitations for myself before exploring my range of expression that could benefit the characters I portrayed. Accordingly, my engagement with both Mike and Flaco caused feelings of self-consciousness. My deliberate physical stiffness triggered memories of my childhood experiences with GIT. I remembered the discomfort I felt when I was told how to walk like a man by my grandfather and how awkward I became when I heard men patronized someone they observed as "less masculine," experiences that still resonated with me. Although LaShondra indicated I had addressed the cosmetic essence of her note, it did not spark internal blossoming from the personal obstacle that caused it. This premeditated physical movement activated the various components of restriction, such as restricting movement

in my arms and shoulders. This then manifested a limited creative experience. Even more important, at that time I lacked an effective process to move through it.

I do not intend to assert that stiffness should never exist for male characters. Because I cannot be with each reader to physically demonstrate these forms of movement, this study uses terms such as stiffness, stifling, and restriction to provide clearer imagery. My use of those terms throughout this study is not to problematize stifled movement overall, but to be specific about the types of movement I am referring to. I do, however, wish to prove stifled movement that has stemmed from GIT can potentially stifle creative expression, as demonstrated by my experiences with *The Piano Lesson* and the *Black N Blue Boys* performance project referenced in this chapter. Now that we are aware of the cultural and historical implications of masculine movement regarding slavery, it is not my goal to erase that history and its influence, as that would also be an erasure of truth. Rather, for the sake of expanding physical expressiveness, it is more forward-moving to explore movement choices beyond histories of restriction and start to base our creative processes on notions of freedom.

GIT STUCK

Trauma can be used to define experiences other than overt forms of physical or emotional pain. Betsy Polatin, an acting specialist whose methods are inspired by the Alexander Technique, defines trauma as “any situation that is overwhelming or difficult” (79). The tension I felt when I attempted to physically embody masculinity felt “overwhelming and difficult.” Polatin also specifies, “Trauma is a word that means different things to different people. An event that may be overwhelming to one person

may not bother somebody else” (79). This means everyone’s experience with trauma is completely different. The ways we translate the impact of an experience varies from person to person. Before engaging with the Alexander Technique, my conception of the word “trauma” was primarily related to more extreme experiences. However, this particular chapter in Polatin’s *The Actor’s Secret* sparked the realization that experiences relative to my gender identity had indeed traumatized me and that my work as an actor sparked the memory.

For me, GIT caused long-term traumatic effects, but because they were not always visible, they were hard to address. In *The Body Keeps the Score*, Bessel van der Kolk states, “Long after a traumatic experience is over, it may be reactivated at the slightest hint of danger and mobilize disturbed brain circuits and secrete massive amounts of stress hormones” (2). The “danger” I felt during my childhood came from my fear of ridicule of my non-masculine behaviors. This was “reactivated” in my adulthood as stress when the phrase “man up” triggered my childhood memories of being ridiculed for my physicality. This concept makes what Megan R. Gerber and Emily B. Gerber postulate in *An Introduction to Trauma and Health* worth considering. They write, “A traumatic event or series of events result in psychologic, complex adaptations, and pathways that are linked to adverse health impacts” (5). This statement suggests that psychological “adaptations” can be “complex.” It therefore implies that adaptations have the potential to surpass the context of commonly known adaptations, such as those stemming from violent forms of physical or verbal abuse. Again, my previous insight on trauma went no further than its overt and physical forms. For this reason, I was unaware that such a thing as GIT could exist or affect my creative process.

The Actor's Secret speaks to my GIT creative block. Polatin writes, “When you are unable to progress for one reason or another, you are stuck. You can be stuck in yourself or stuck in the role you are playing. Stuck may be a habitual pattern for you that prevents your innate talent from blossoming” (79). The prevention of “innate talent from blossoming” speaks directly to my use of the word “obstacle” in connection to my work as an actor. My inability to create and commit to character choices and not feel the pressure to assume a heterosexually masculine presentation was my “stuckness” (Polatin, 79). I believed blossoming meant to grow beyond the impact of such pressure.

GIT is pervasive because it is informed by culture. This is why there are so many daily reminders of what masculinity should look like in society. The daily reminders solidify the widely accepted forms of masculinity. What is widely accepted sets guidelines for what appropriate masculinity is and what it is not. Given the examples I have incorporated into the Introduction that demonstrate resistance toward men embodying soft or feminine traits, such as Iyanlah Vanzant's story of her father, the Strayhorn and Tillman-Kelly study, and Robinson's seminar, there is a visible trend of black men striving to attain an ideal masculine image. If there are stresses that come along with matching these standards—as demonstrated in the Vanzant and Robinson examples—black men enacting different expressions of masculinity are susceptible. In addition, there are associations of danger that come with embodying dominant conceptions of masculinity. As a result, black men are vulnerable to police violence. When one looks closely at the relationship between black American men and masculinity, at every turn there is something at stake for black men. We must initiate processes for moving through.

In this chapter, I have applied the concept of gender identity to some of my acting experiences. Their connection to the Introduction demonstrates the influence of history and culture with the concept of gender as acting. This displays GIT's potential effects on black male actors' work. It caused me, for example, to rely on a limited-scope assumption of male physical expression to develop my characters. This limited scope limited my physical choice possibilities. As shown in this chapter, these limitations can be linked to my traumatic experiences with gender identity. This demonstrates even greater need for methods to move through the effects of GIT. Moving through GIT can disrupt cultural transformations of the past in order help on operate squarely in the present.

CHAPTER II

THE FOUR PRINCIPLES

Throughout my process of character development with *Black N Blue Boys*, I referred to and activated four principles when I was impeded GIT. I found that to move through unwanted visceral sensations, it was beneficial to include them in my explorations. The four principles provide an organized method to healthily notice, name, and engage in a critical way the sensations that stem from GIT. To black men, particularly actors, who see GIT in their experience, I offer these principles as a method to achieve creative freedom. These principles prompted my awareness of my physical restriction. Awareness and engagement were my first steps to release physical restriction and begin to access a wider range of physical expression. These four principles of my method are: "Actors' Jiu-Jitsu;" tracking; being gentle; and breathing. To reveal the importance of these principles in this chapter, I will define each principle, note exactly the element of GIT they address, and provide brief examples of where I applied them.

ACTORS' JIU-JITSU

GIT can make authenticity difficult. "Actors' Jiu-Jitsu" is a mental martial art that helped me move through that difficulty. I developed it to change my perspective on GIT.

I used it to be productive with difficult experiences, in order to get closer to truth. It is understandable if one is apprehensive about addressing difficult experiences in one's personal practice. However, engaging with GIT can help one overcome these difficulties. As shown through Orelus' quotes in the Introduction, there are centuries worth of uncomfortable slavery-related histories that inform our views of gender (37). In the Introduction, I also included Butler's assertion that gender constructions are habitually enacted (520). Such long-term forces can seem unworkable. Therefore, I offer Actors' Jiu-Jitsu as a step to prepare oneself to effectively work and move through the GIT caused by those forces.

Relative to GIT, I do not associate Jiu-Jitsu with its traditional meaning. When I took karate as a child, the instructor sometimes referred to certain maneuvers as "Jiu-Jitsu." This was not an attempt to merge Jiu-Jitsu and karate, but rather to point out that certain karate moves used the weight of the opponent against them, a basic component of Jiu-Jitsu. This meant that one did not have to be bigger or stronger than one's opponent, but simply skilled in the particular maneuver. Since then, my surface-level understanding of Jiu-Jitsu has been that it can sometimes be used to overpower a seemingly stronger or larger opponent. Opponents, in the context of this study, are the seemingly unworkable forces of the history of slavery and habitual enactments of gender. When I think about the feeling of apprehension I had toward addressing GIT, I remember feeling like I was attempting to change GIT-related physical defaults that were stronger than my ability to change them. However, I knew turning away from GIT would not help me move through it. This awareness—that somehow addressing the uncomfortable would yield something

productive—is what I mean by “Actors’ Jiu-Jitsu.” It is acknowledging the weight of a negative experience and somehow using that gravity to overcome it.

To overcome something, we sometimes must embrace it. For me, to embrace GIT’s effect on my body was a tall request. Actors’ Jiu-Jitsu helped me steer my thoughts to see closeness to the uncomfortable as a good thing. For example, I paralleled closeness with the phrase “lean in,” which is sometimes used in the realm of acting to encourage someone to engage something more critically. I am not suggesting that the actor use this term to completely let down their emotional guards and embrace all that troubles them with full force. I am, however, suggesting that when given the opportunity to turn in the direction of something as uncomfortable as GIT, something as simple as gaining awareness of its effects can be a small but significant first step. To use exercises to engage with that awareness is a possible next step. In my process, to move through GIT I first had to know it was okay to move toward it. To move toward it, I had to become aware of the ways it affected my acting process. The closer I moved, the easier it was to find a strategy to navigate the negative effects of GIT with greater simplicity.

Although the negative emotions resulting from GIT felt like weight or force in my life, it was not productive to meet them with more force. Force is the means whereby GIT was instilled. To assert force where force was already present—as I had in my childhood when I forced my body to match heteronormative movement—only increased energy exertion and did not make force go away. This concept speaks to the point made by Polatin regarding “allowing yourself to be with what is going on and to initiate a relationship toward it” (90). For my method, I found her emphasis on allowing one’s body to gradually adjust, rather than urging the body to rise to an occasion, to be a more

optimum use of my body. I had to “initiate a relationship” toward the stiffness in my movement, rather than force myself not to engage it. I sometimes wonder if the forceful effort and stiff physicalities I often see black male actors enact on stage when emphasizing or exaggerating heterosexually masculine qualities are optimum uses of the body. If, in this case, “optimum” means “most conducive use,” is forceful exertion of effort and stiffness generating optimum? The purpose of this question is not to dissuade black male actors from engaging in high levels of effort on stage, as some moments onstage will require it. I also do not intend to make negative associations with stiff physicalities, as they exist in life and will therefore inevitably exist for certain characters and moments on stage. To dissuade and make negative associations would be counteractive to Actors’ Jiu-Jitsu. My purpose is to present the possibility of exploring range with force and stiffness in intense theatrical moments. High-intensity moments—like any other onstage moments—can be experienced with variety and not merely on one note.

To embrace and explore one’s subconscious physical defaults is Actors’ Jiu-Jitsu. It helps one first be aware of physical habits and then have a readiness to engage with them. In so doing, one can further enhance awareness of one’s subconscious physical defaults, such as those I include from Butler in the Introduction regarding gender constructions (520). Gaining awareness of such subconscious defaults can feel forward-moving. This may introduce the actor to the possibility that physical choices can extend beyond any current subconscious physicality and may inspire more physical variety. Any method that encourages the actor to lean strategically into the uncomfortable for such discoveries is Actors’ Jiu-Jitsu.

TRACKING

To build a connection between the mind and body—which is the first step to release physical restriction—black male actors must track. Polatin writes that “[t]racking engages the felt sense, or the ability to feel sensations inside your body” (81). What Polatin describes as “the felt sense” is the ability to inwardly observe. To track is to listen to what the body says, via physical and visceral sensations. Polatin’s notes on “engaging the felt sense and sensations” (80) inside [one’s] body is what inspired my realizations upon being told to “man up.” Much of the work in my personal practice cannot be done without tracking. It is the foundation for this work because the body is the instrument through which acting is expressed. With that in mind, attention to bodily sensations has become a key focus.

When tracking, no sensation is too small to be considered. Polatin mentions that when you practice tracking you may begin to notice small things such as temperature changes, contractions, trembling, and other small movements (81). This speaks to the sensations I felt in my portrayal of characters that required a heteronormative masculine physicality. This ties into my experience with *The Piano Lesson* when I felt tense “small movements” in my body after being told to “man up.” However, in that case, I experienced it and did not observe it. Observation of this sensation only took place in retrospect as I developed this thesis. Not observing the sensation made it impossible to work with. Tracking has helped me to mentally separate myself from sensations and be critical about them. For me, to track is to take a step back and watch. This generally feels better than simply allowing the negative sensation to go unchecked.

You can sometimes minimize the impact of a sensation you perceive as negative by simply observing and acknowledging it. The professor of my Movement II class, Dr. J. Ariadne Calvano, used to say that all sensations are valuable content for class exploration, and they insisted that this is true whether we perceive the sensation as good or bad. They reminded us that there is always something to be learned from all sensations. As a result, when I observed a sensation I perceived as negative, such as GIT, its “weight” then felt lighter. Much like tracking, stepping back and observing my experience rather than participating in it reduced its impact. I track to become aware of obstacles in my personal practice and analyze my class progress of moving through the obstacles. I noted how I felt when I entered rehearsals and classes and how I felt as I prepared to leave. I sometimes referred to tracking as a “self-check-in,” wherein I asked myself, “How are you feeling?” I would then describe the sensation without terms that denote “good” or “bad:” but more descriptive terms like hot, buzzy, grey, or nostalgic.

Tracking with Actors’ Jiu- Jitsu can strengthen one’s awareness of sensations and one’s ability to engage with them. I noted in my acting journal during the rehearsal process of the Fall 2020 production of *Black N’ Blue Boys* that the force or push I felt in my portrayal of the character Ian felt like an attempt to move quickly while underwater. I also noted stiffness in my upper back that affected mobility in my neck. One of the most prominent sensations was the overall, looming resistance I felt toward traveling or moving between designated points on stage. The script indicates that Ian is a heterosexual male and the aforementioned sensations stemmed from my belief that heterosexual men have stifled or limited physicalities (48). This is a result of me being taught how to “walk

like a man” and mirror those physicalities in my childhood, an example of GIT actively showing up during my character development process with Ian. However, when I made this observation, applying Actors’ Jiu-Jitsu with tracking allowed me to still honor and acknowledge my physical responses to the character of Ian as real aspects of my current creative process, which was the first step to overcoming them. Moving forward from that acknowledgment, I was able to track those physical responses and others like them throughout my character development process.

BE GENTLE

Being gentle sets the tone for one’s process of moving through GIT. In her Voice II class, Professor Rachel Carter was particular about word use. She believed that it could affect one’s process. I noted in a journal entry that when she discussed physical choices, she used the word “allow.” Rather than create a new choice or make yourself do something different, she advised that we be present with her guided exercises and then allow new choices to emerge. In an exercise from *The Actor’s Secret* for "being stuck," Polatin notes, "This practice is not a way to get rid of anything, change anything, or have your experience be different. It's merely a way to allow yourself to be with what is going on and to initiate a relationship toward it" (90). Polatin affirms that one does not need to make one’s "experience be different" and therefore one should not work to change it. Rather, she says one should "be with" the experience and develop a relationship toward it. This aligns with Professor Calvano's comments on being able to learn from one's discoveries, even if one first perceives them as bad. While discovering new physical

choices, allowing something new to emerge from something seemingly negative engaged my natural physicality instead of forcing it to change.

GIT should not be addressed with aggression. Aggression in this context refers to Polatin's remarks on the actor's desire to "get rid of [...]" and change things (90). As demonstrated by the violent reaction of Robinson's client and Vanzant's father's demands in the Introduction, GIT is produced through aggression, in those cases stemming from the desire to forcibly change a person's physicality, which I have already labeled as counterproductive to the process of moving through GIT. For this reason, aggression will not bring about a solution to GIT, as it reiterates the conditions under which GIT is caused. Being gentle is an alternative approach to aggression. Addressing GIT with gentleness will generate a corresponding set of conditions allowing one to move through GIT. For example, if ridicule of my physicality caused stress, then perhaps if I embrace my physicality in movement exercises and "allow" new physicalities to emerge through them, I may overcome the long-term physical effects of the ridicule. In this way, being gentle can determine if and how a black male actor moves through GIT.

Engaging heteronormative masculine physicalities over time can make them habitual. Throughout my life, habits were most commonly associated with things people needed to work on, such as nail-biting and the use of profanity. Consequentially, I used to feel the need to literally undo or restrict my habits. Polatin's approach suggested I be present with habits, explore them, and then observe what emerges as a result. I believe the encouraging and gentle tone of Polatin's words within *The Actor's Secret* emphasizes a need to be gentle, which I am convinced relieves the pressure to do and invites the reader to allow. The same is also true for Professor Carter's method of communication

with us during class exercises. In this class, and in others, I felt I could truly blossom when the manner of communication approach was gentle.

BREATHING

The effects of GIT are physical and the breath affects physical movement. The yoga exercises conducted by Dr. Calvano in my Movement II class helped me re-imagine the breath as a vital component of life and therefore art. The physical reaction one will have to the buildup of carbon dioxide in the body if one holds one's breath is proof of this. As Polatin examines in *The Actor's Secret*, "Your breath inspires you with creativity, life force, and oxygen" (57). Polatin basically says nothing in life can be done without the breath. Actors' Jiu-Jitsu, tracking, and being gentle may not successfully be engaged at their fullest potential without a steady flow of breath. If there is not a steady flow of breath during those methods, then the breath, an inspiration to "creativity, life force, and oxygen," will subvert the original purpose of the four principles. In this regard, it is important to note again that the physical faculties of the body are highly affected by the breath. Therefore, in the spirit of being gentle with the body, I must include a segment of the work addressing the ways the breath stimulates physical activity.

Yoga centralizes the use of the breath and therefore can affect any activity engaged to move through GIT. In Movement II, Dr. Calvano assigned *The Heart of Yoga* by T.K.V. Desikachar. Chapter Three of this class reading focuses mostly on the breath. Desikachar asserts it is a vital component that connects our inner and outer bodies. This connects to Polatin's report that breath inspires, "creativity and life force" (57). Desikachar concludes, "The quality of our breath is extremely important because it

expresses our inner feelings. If we are in pain, it shows in our breathing. If we are distracted, we lose control of our breathing. The breath is the link between the inner and outer body. It is only by bringing body, breath, and mind into unison that we realize the true quality of asana" (18). Desikachar says the breath reveals the truth of our visceral experiences, and this is true because inner and outer changes can affect the breath. In connection to my previous point that the breath, if not steady, will subvert the purpose of acting exercises, the breath is an element of human survival, and as such, is easily affected by physical conditions. Also, if the breath "expresses our inner feelings," then the feelings I suppressed as a child when I experienced GIT are connected to my breathing. When feelings of awkwardness or self-consciousness arise, they can be influenced by my breathing. This suggests that a tool for emotional expression could be breath awareness. Desikachar suggests this is true when he writes, "the breath can affect inner and outer changes" (57). This further emphasizes the connection among the physical body, emotions, and the breath. Because of this, we must consider that focused breath can initiate a focused mind and a focused body.

To successfully track, one can also check in with the breath. When I focused on my breath while experiencing physical stiffness in character as Ian in *Black N' Blue Boys*, it helped me to turn my attention toward my lungs and chest rather than toward the need to change the physical circumstance. In connection to *The Actor's Secret*, perhaps an alternative for "changing" one's circumstances (90) would be to breathe through them. If the physical stiffness I experienced as Ian was a result of GIT-related stifled movement, then my gentle approach could be to first breathe when I track the stiffness. If I sense an urge to "change" the stiffness, my attention to my breath can shift my focus and inhibit

that urge. This would help me to “develop a relationship” toward the stiffness instead of forcing it to change.

The connection of breath, mind, and body can strengthen one’s ability to move through GIT. Desikachar calls the connection of the breath, mind, and body, “asana.” Asana translates to “posture” and derives from the Sanskrit root meaning “to be” or “to sit” (18). This is a fundamental element of yoga practice. I trace this back to Polatin's proposal to “be with what is going on” (90). In the context of this method, asana can also be the intent to simply engage and be present with yourself in the current moment. It is also another emphasis on the condition, or in this case the position, of the human body. While one activates this principle, it can also be useful to track what sensations emerge while one breathes. Are you hot, buzzy, grey, or nostalgic? As previously suggested with “just be,” there is no need to adjust oneself here—just breathe and just be. Tracking and breathing in this way connects the breath, mind, and body. This connection can cause a deeper sense of self-awareness while moving through GIT.

These four principles are the method. I used them to move through GIT in my acting process with *Black N Blue Boys*. They taught me I must provide myself with an experience that felt opposite to GIT. Essentially, GIT is judgment cast from others and from self. When I receive judgment, such as that noted in Chapter Two when I was told to “man up,” my reaction to it manifests physically in the form of tension. In this chapter, I have prioritized awareness and engagement of GIT as the objective for each of the four principles. To be aware and to engage are base-level first steps to discover GIT’s effects on one’s body. Actors’ Jiu-Jitsu serves as a preliminary frame of mind to invite the actor to engage with those effects. I have also established that tracking a sensation helps one

gain a relationship with it. To be aware of one's progress or movement through GIT, one must track. To ensure optimum use of each principle I have suggested that actors be gentle with themselves. Aggression in these methods, as previously noted, will yield opposite or adverse results. Lastly, and connected to being gentle, is the use of the breath. Conscious breathing can be engaged throughout each of the four principles because breathing affects the body as much as the body affects breathing.

CHAPTER III

GIT IN CHARACTER

The difficulty I experienced with male character physicalities in the 2018 performance project of *Black N Blue Boys* and my experience with Ian from *Black N Blue Boys* in my thesis show, is a result of GIT. GIT caused me to think that overall, male physicality mainly involved physical restriction. This carried over into my portrayal of male characters in my acting processes. My method aims to alleviate physical restriction in the black male actor's mind and body before the rehearsal process.

This chapter will explain my application of the four principles in 2020 UofL production of Orlandersmith's play to develop character choices through imagination and the script. This technique prompted a sense of mental and physical freedom to navigate character development. I encourage black male actors to use this technique along with the four principles when developing characters, as they can prime their minds and bodies for more optimal use. Indeed, the approach to character-based work here described was the final step in my process with *Black N' Blue Boys* to overcome habits formed from GIT. This final step helped me discover and fully commit to new physical choices.

Character development engages a character from a script (Polatin 148) and is essential to the overall physical portrayal of the character. It informs the actor's choices. The purpose of character development in my process is to find choices and broaden the

range of how they can be executed. While I developed the method to overcome GIT, the concept of range is what prompted more physical freedom. Range refers to my ability to comfortably suspend or adjust my own habitual movements, gestures, posture, etc. to embody the physicality of a person other than myself. The ability to access range relies on my sense of physical freedom.

In the recent past, the UofL's Theatre Arts Department typically produced plays that required a minimum of two actors. Due to regulations from the Covid-19 outbreak in March 2020, the typical was no longer practical. During this phase of the outbreak, only eight people maintaining six feet of physical distance were allowed to be on the Playhouse Theatre stage, which was my thesis show performance space. Professor Sidney Monroe Williams advised I consider a one-person show, as it would alleviate some complications with room capacity and social distance. I decided to revisit Orlandersmith's *Black N' Blue Boys*, the one-person show I worked on in my first semester in the MFA program. As the only actor in the show, I portrayed twelve characters from five monologues, each named after the lead character who delivers the monologue: Larry, the dad, and the mom in "Larry"; Ian, Ian's mom, Ian's dad, and Ian's girlfriend in "Ian"; Timmy, Timmy's sister, and Timmy's mom in "Timmy"; and Tenny, and Tenny's nephew, Sean in "Tenny." Character choices were especially vital, as they and costume changes were the viewers' only indication of difference between characters. In this production there were cases where I portrayed several characters in one costume, which demanded even more range and distinction of physical choices. Thus, *Black N' Blue Boys* provided much room to explore choices based on the characters' circumstances.

The character development process is essential to inhibiting GIT-related physical habits. The approach to building a character provided here involves using the character's given circumstances, one's imagination to expand discoveries, internet sources such as *YouTube* videos that relate to facts from the script, and assigned class readings. The goal is to use imagery and textual discoveries to prompt choices. Because the effects of GIT can result in practiced physical restriction, physical choice possibilities for the black male actor in his character development process may seem limited. Experience with this sense of limitation had convinced me my only available choices were those that reflected my limited conception of male physicality. To explain how I got over this limitation, I will begin with how I optimized my character analysis process by focusing on basic information from the character as provided by the script. I will then outline how I used facts and *YouTube* videos as a research tool to create "containers" for physicality to further inform my physical choices for Timmy. I will then specify how I applied my research discoveries as choices for the character of Larry. Lastly, I will incorporate how I used the concept of actor's neutral to expand my exploration and my physical range while developing the character of Timmy. With Timmy's character, I will also explain how "pleading the case of the character" can motivate real-time stimuli for movement that does not involve GIT-related habits. This is evidence that the method I propose in this thesis can help black men broaden the range of their physical expression and optimize their process of engaging new physical choices.

GIT THE FACTS

Efficient research on the play's characters can help the black male actor let go of physicalities informed by GIT. His physical choices can instead be informed by facts provided by the script. When I research my characters, I first point out the particulars of a character, such as place of birth, age, occupation, and life experiences. In my first meeting with Professor Fleming, we discussed these facts for each character. I began with some observations on the first character, Larry. I remarked he was an older man, from New York, who is sweeping leaves in Central Park. Hearing these observations, Professor Fleming noted my remarks were too vague, given the details provided in the script by the playwright. He requested I go to the first page of Larry's scene and read what the playwright had written in the stage directions. It said, "Larry/ who's white/ early sixties/ he's originally from Brooklyn/ he's sweeping leaves in Central Park/ as he works, he's also watching a group of men and their sons play touch football/ there's sound of people playing in the park" (19). This breakdown of information provides specific details on Larry. As the reader, I now know Larry's race, age and occupation. Facts, such as his age, can indicate his physicality. For example, if the script said, "in his teens," it would then suggest a different concept for Larry's physicality. Also, because he is "originally from Brooklyn," he may have a dialect. Lastly, it is written that Larry is "sweeping leaves in Central Park." This possibly informs Larry's occupation, as the above description refers to his sweeping as "work."

Vague information renders vague performances and can cause the actor to rely on his GIT-induced habits. The information I initially provided was in fact vague and did not include the particulars provided by Orlandersmith about Larry's life. Although basic at

first glance, this type of information is essential for how one can build a character. Clear information strengthens the foundation. I realized that the information provided by the playwright can relieve the actor of the need to conjure choices. If gathered and critically engaged with, the script's facts can provide choices. As such, Professor Fleming then specified the need to pay close attention to the text during the character development phase. He mentioned actors' tendencies to get carried away with their imaginations rather than be eager to bring life to what is written in the script. I have often felt the urge to incorporate personal creative choices before establishing bare-bones facts of the script. In the case of my thesis show, these creative choices likely would have been informed by GIT. This emphasizes a need for my choices to be informed by something that can be supported by the script.

Specificity of "facts" minimizes vagueness. As Professor Fleming talked more about how the research and character development phase is not a time to be general, I considered what I would expect of an actor who would portray the character of me in a play. I imagined that in order to get as accurate a depiction as possible, they would need to focus on facts, such as what phase of my life they are portraying and my background. If they are general with this information, then their performance will lack specificity. They would need to know the character's exact age, birthplace, occupation, life background, given circumstances, and if possible, view footage of me. "Just the facts, ma'am" Professor Fleming squawked, as he imitated Dan Aykroyd in the 1987 remake of *Dragnet*. Dr. Fleming reiterated that this fact-driven aspect of my process deserved more attention. "Just the facts, ma'am" became a phrase I would say to myself while I

conducted research for characters throughout the script. It served as a reminder to eliminate vagueness as much as possible, using the facts provided by the playwright.

When physical choices are informed by script-based facts, they can provide clearer details on who the character is. This concept inspired me to explore the traumatic physical effects Larry's occupation had on his body. I made notes in my acting journal about my exploration of tension that might show up in the body of a person who sweeps every day for some years. I noted as I swept, my shoulders caved forward. I exerted various amounts of pressure into the broom as I swept, which is an example of exploring range within tension. My motive in this exercise was to find actual fragments of dust on the floor and sweep them into a pile. Some fragments would move easily, while others took more effort. Through tracking, I noted that fragments that took more effort, caused my shoulders to tighten. From this discovery, I chose to implement a slight slouch in Larry's posture but also decided that throughout the scene he would attempt to straighten up or stretch his back. This offered a moment of relief for me to restore, check in, and be sure my slouch was not so drastic that it hindered my breathing. The very act of slouching eventually became a way for me to get accustomed to the physicality of Larry's character, as it felt to me like the most distinct quality of his movement.

It can be easier to commit to choices that derive from facts. However, in the context of character development, facts need not replace the imagination, but only serve as a guide for it. Evidence of this shows in the accuracy with which I was able to explore choices in my process of character development for *Black N Blue Boys*. The activation of facts brought me closer to accuracy, but, more importantly, to honesty. My previous view of male movement was rooted in physical restriction, as I was socially conditioned to

believe it was a counteraction for femininity or softness. As I previously assessed in considering my childhood experiences with GIT, I developed a habit of physical restriction from my unfounded belief that men are supposed to move less than women. This belief is not a fact and is reductive toward all fact-based work in acting practice. It perpetuated a notion of preliminary lack—a lack of full expression, lack of possibilities, and lack of one's own individual connection with masculine expression. This process strengthened my confidence in character exploration because it relieved me of the pressure to feel like I needed to adhere to forms of expression that perpetuate oppressive conceptions of gender and sexuality. I trusted my ability to discover physical movement through fact-based information. The facts were a foundation for discovery and prompted a sense of freedom.

GIT ON THE WEB

The more script-based inspiration black male actors provide for themselves in the character development process, the less they will need to rely on prescribed heteronormative physical defaults to develop character choices. This suggests that script analysis can prompt one's imagination when developing physical choice options, which lessens the need for preplanned movements and gestures which may be rooted in ones heterosexualized perception of male physicality. One example of my use of script analysis, research, and imagination is my process of character development with Timmy. He is an eleven-year-old black boy, born in the south Bronx (29). The script indicates Timmy delivers his monologue during the 1980s. In Dr. Calvano's Period Movement class, I learned that throughout history people move differently based on their

environment and societal norms. Butler supports this concept in her assertion that gender is enacted and informed by culture. I was not alive in the 1980s and I have never lived in the Bronx. I started my research for Timmy's movement by going to *YouTube* to see if there was any candid or quotidian 1980s footage of black men or young boys in the Bronx. One video titled *The Bronx in the 80's* depicted various clips of black men and boys walking in an urban area. I made notes on patterns in their physicality. In this video, many of the black men and boys walked with their heads jugged forward. The movement of their walks was bouncy and dance-like. They engaged in limited movement in their backs but allowed their arms to sway freely with a slight restriction. The physicalities portrayed in the videos gave me a "container," which is a set of physical criteria, for how I would explore Timmy's movement and solidify choices. I still had the freedom to choose exactly what choices I would solidify for Timmy, but the video provided standards for how those choices could be shaped.

A "container" is not to be confused with limitation or restriction, which GIT causes. A container's boundaries can be expanded or narrowed down based on the needs of the character. In my experiences with GIT, physical habits limited physical range, whereas the concept of a container prompted physical range within strategically placed boundaries, informed by facts. From that perspective, black male actors can be more imaginative with their physical choices while keeping them contained and guided by facts. I did this for myself when I found footage of physical choices that actually existed in correspondence with facts from the script. In my process with character development in *Black N Blue Boys*, this method freed me from the strain of GIT, as my choices, established by practical boundaries, were founded in facts and evidence. This is opposite

to the activation of planned movements irrelevant to the script which derive from observation of heteronormative masculine posturing.

Naming *YouTube* as a component of this method presents potential issues of accessibility. Access to the internet and technology are privileges not availed to every individual. However, I want to stress that explorations inspired by facts from the script, such as what I highlight in my development of Larry's posture, are the foundation. The internet is merely a tool that can potentially add to that foundation. It is not a necessity. Physical exploration can be successfully executed without it. For example, if I did not have access to *YouTube* videos of people walking on the street, I could track my natural walk and play up certain qualities based on information from the script. If I note that I have a rather wide walk, but the script indicates that Timmy is eleven years old and "smallish for his age" (29), I may want to explore what it would be to take smaller steps. I could do this or explore the thought of being a child with small legs who wants to take bigger steps. Both options are informed by the script and offer an ungendered way of exploring movement quality.

It must be said that an actor who makes character choices based on footage of men moving in a certain era, is directly pulling inspiration from movement informed by the gender prescriptions of that era. Although presumably unaware of it, the men in the video I selected are expressing physicalities that reiterate 1980s social prescriptions of maleness. For this reason, I must emphasize that the point of my method is not to eliminate the portrayal of society's influence on gender identity. To do that would be to eliminate the histories of gender expression. The point for the black male actor is to instead become aware of the ways prescriptions of gender influence physicality; this

awareness can then foster their ability to actively choose when and how to reiterate such influences in their performances. The point is to have the awareness and therefore the power to choose. Choosing can give one physical freedom from the habits that prescriptions of gender sometimes cause. By choosing, the actor is then influencing the gender prescription, as opposed to being influenced by it. Engaging styles of movement from a video is an opportunity to deliberately put on and influence physicalities that are informed by gender prescriptions. When this is done, Butler's assertion on the performative quality of gender is engaged. It speaks to her note that gender is "performed or enacted" and has "similarities to performative acts within theatrical contexts" (520). When I used the 1980s Bronx footage, I deliberately "put on" male movement as a performance. Putting it on allowed me to adjust it to the needs of *Black N' Blue Boys*. After rehearsals and shows, I was able to take it off. This is an active demonstration of performed gender and further proves that black male actors do not have to abide by prescribed notions of gender. Because it is performative, one has the power to choose whether or not they will enact it.

A "neutral stance" can be used to inhibit the physical effects of GIT. Polatin defines neutral stance as an element of "primary control," which is the attention to the body's natural response to gravity:

For most people, activating the primary control means finding our most natural and graceful state of being. For an actor, primary control is an actor's touchstone-or base point—for character transformation. It is from this primary place of organization that we can transform into another character. The primary control is a neutral starting point, sometimes called a "neutral stance." (26)

Polatin says this stance is a "base point," which I associate with the beginning of my explorations. Neutral, however, is not to be confused with "relaxing" or "disengaging the

body;” rather it is a soft activation and awareness of the body’s natural state. In my process of moving through GIT, as Polatin says, a neutral stance is the “touchstone.” If I know what my neutral stance is, I also know what it is not. This suggests that a neutral stance is a productive way to disengage any effects of GIT lingering in the body before an exploration.

Neutral stance can help the black male actor differentiate his habits from the character’s. For me, it helped in establishing a visceral difference between the sensation of my physicality and Timmy’s physicality. For example, I know my arms and back do not naturally move the way I caused them to in the Timmy exploration. I engaged wide gestures with tightness in my arms and shoulders for certain parts of Timmy’s monologues. There were also moments for Timmy where I slightly jutted my head forward. These physicalities are unnatural to my everyday movement styles. I became aware of the differences in physical movement between me and Timmy. As a result, I was able to establish muscle memory for Timmy’s character with more ease. Black male actors will find it easier to rely on muscle memory founded in facts and exploration rather than on habitual physicalities attached to social expectations of masculinity. To do this, it is helpful to feel the difference between their everyday physicality, and the physicality they have chosen for the characters they portray.

The more I became aware of the differences between my physicality and the character’s, the easier it became to return to the character’s physicality each night for performances. Additionally, exploring in this way can lessen the black male actor’s need to create choices. He can instead use facts to inspire a response, which can then be adjusted into a choice. The application of this element inspires the use of a wider range of

physical expression, as the actor does not have to rely on a physical vocabulary limited by gender prescriptions. More importantly, he will not need to employ habits possibly formed by the effects of GIT.

I have described my incorporation of a video only accessible on the Internet as a tool to inspire choices. Again, this aspect of my method is optional. In this same section, I have described my use of “actor’s neutral” as a home base for physical explorations. An actor who starts exploring from actor’s neutral can have a keener awareness of which movements are habitual and which are character choices. This will also help track GIT’s physical effects on the body during performances. The purpose of the methods provided here is to increase the range of physical options by using facts, in a way that does not rely solely on prescribed gendered norms.

GIT CONNECTED TO MOVEMENT

Movement that is not motivated by the script can be affected by physical habits developed by GIT. To further inhibit my GIT-related habits and inform my characters’ physicality using the script, I recited lines from *Black N Blue Boys* and carried out random movements and postures in an open space, using portions of text from the script where the characters needed something and seeking ways physical movement could clarify or fulfill those needs. For the character of Timmy, I recited lines from his monologue where he discusses how his life changed when his mother’s drug addiction worsened (31). At a certain point, to only recite the lines in a neutral stance became impossible. Physical movement felt like a necessary component to portray Timmy’s thought process clearly. For example, in his monologue, Timmy says, “They would go

into the bathroom and come out real sleepy” (30). Here, I felt the need to pull my head back, as if to be repulsed by something. At this phase, the script began to inform my physicality. The motivation behind the words inspired the need to move in order to accurately and actively engage with Timmy’s facts.

“Arguing the case of the character” can strengthen one’s sense of movement motivated by text and diminish their reliance on GIT-informed physical habits. In the Acting IV class, Professor Fleming instructed us to think of the words of the character as his or her argument in a court case. He posited that when you consider stakes within a story, the need to be understood is a far more urgent matter than reciting lines. I added in my notes that as in court, in plays there will also be judgment, both from other characters in the play and people in the audience. There will be a verdict based on how those people react, or from the consequences of the character’s actions as written. This concept heightened my urgency to “plead the case” of the character rather than to perform. This urgency forged an overwhelming need for me to explain myself, as the character. This put an emphasis on need as informed by the character’s speech. It relieved me of the need to conjure physicality and instead prompted movement to emerge from a genuine place of need and communication.

Strategically focusing on an in-the-moment experience can stimulate physical movement that is not connected to GIT. In *Radical Wholeness*, a book on the philosophy of body/mind connection, Philip Shepherd charges his readers to “Deliver nothing and experience everything” (49). Shepherd is saying that instead of focusing on expelling energy to a receiver, focus on what you experience while in the presence of a receiver. The urgency to plead a case to an audience and the rush of satisfaction I felt while doing

so felt more like an experience than a delivery. Focusing on this urgency and this rush neutralized the habitual effects of GIT. Because most of my GIT stems from my need to deliver a specific message about my gender identity, focusing inward made it easier to “experience everything” rather than deliver. I could experience an in-the-moment emotional response inspired by the script without concern for how I appeared to the audience.

“Pleading the case” can tie into physical exploration and reduce one’s need to rely on GIT-based restrictive habits when they portray male characters. As a result, I moved forward with the development of Timmy’s movement, inspired by the *YouTube* video container. With the videos in mind and the application of a neutral stance, I discovered when Timmy feels like he needs to use his arms to depict how serious something is, he too would have that same loose control which I observed in the *YouTube* video of the 1980s Bronx men. An example of this is when Timmy explains how when he lived in a group home, he once threatened to kill himself by jumping out of a moving swing (33). When he talked about the movement of the swing, I would sway my arms back, forth, and side to side to mimic a swing’s movement. I also decided he would have a slightly stiff back which got stiffer and more restricted when he got uncomfortable. This emerged at the moment he mentions his mother's attempt to fix their relationship, which had been affected by her drug addiction (32). In this case, stiffness is deliberate and not a hindrance. As a fact-based choice, it can be dialed up or down, while un-tracked stiffness resulting from GIT cannot be properly engaged or controlled. Additionally, I decided to include the forward placement of the head in my portrayal of Timmy when he would have reactions of cavalier disgust. This mostly showed up in the moments where Timmy

recalls his mother's drug use and her attempt to apologize to Timmy (31). I have noted in my journal that jutting my head forward is a habit that sometimes shows up for me when I yell on stage. Here is an example of knowing the difference between my personal habit and something I am choosing to engage in my portrayal of a character.

Visuals as inspiration are not tools to copy. Initiation is not imitation. For me, visuals serves as a starting-point for movements that evolve as the exploration progresses. My physical habits from GIT were learned for the sake of masculine appearance. If one can simply examine the shapes and qualities of male movement, as I did for the character of Timmy, and make use of them without concern for masculine appearance, then one can begin to disengage from GIT-related habits in character work. The use of videos to initiate choices in this way can lead to clearer mental images of a character. When I am vastly unfamiliar with a character's movement, this method is sometimes my only entry to developing an accurate portrayal. Initiation is sometimes the first step of my exploration of characters' physicalities, which over time, through more exploration, become my own unique choices. As with any method or exploration process, you may not find movement to which you are entirely connected each time. This method specifically provides a list of action steps one can take to explore movement possibilities, perhaps not readily available in one's current physical range. I use the word "possibilities" to emphasize that it can be up to an actor to choose which physicalities from their exploration feel most authentic.

By expanding on my character development process for Larry and Timmy, I have highlighted the use of facts from the script as a foundation for movement exploration. I made this connection to demonstrate the importance of allowing choices to emerge

through script-based facts. By doing this, I no longer needed to pull from my learned physical habits for inspiration but was able to discover physical movement through text in the script. I have noted how I treat facts as a throughline for my character development process, even in my use of my imagination to inform choices. This too expands the reach of inspiration beyond the self and into a deeper engagement with the script for physical choices. I have also mentioned my use of a *YouTube* video to research movement and inspire character choices in this process. From my character research, I begin explorations in actors' neutral to form a container for physicality based on that research. Again, these physicalities are inspired by the facts as long as they remain in the previously established container. From this point, I rehearse the character with the understanding that they must plead a case through their lines and with this in mind get a stronger sense of urgency to employ the range of movement from my explorations and tell a more specific physical story. The urgency then becomes the drive for movements discovered in explorations. Script-based movement discoveries paired with urgency can replace an urge to appear masculine on stage and therefore replace habits formed by GIT with physicalities based on facts from the script. It is in this aspect of my process that I capitalize on choices informed by given circumstances of the character and apply them committedly throughout my performance.

CHAPTER IV

GIT IN MOTION

In this chapter on my performance of two main characters from *Black N Blue Boys*: Tenny and Ian I will use examples from my discoveries on physical restriction and freedom gleaned from notes given by Professor Fleming. The points I included about my process with these two characters speak to the mental resistance GIT causes in my creativity. In some cases, this resistance manifested physically. To represent my method's ability to alleviate such resistance, I will highlight specific GIT-related obstacles I encountered in Ian's and Tenny's scenes. I will call these obstacles "men don't move much" and "regulation of behavior." "Men don't move much" is a gender prescription I will explain concerning my childhood experiences witnessing men's perpetual physical stiffness. I will concentrate on the ways this view initially pinched off creative and physical freedom in my process of developing the character of Ian. For "Regulation of Behavior," I will clarify the ways GIT affected my approach to the character of Tenny, who is a child molester. These points will speak to the tendency for black men in my family and school environments to equate homosexuality to sexual crime. This was a tactic the men in those environments used to villainize non-heterosexual identities. I will provide specifics on the ways those conversations stuck with me throughout my life and affected my work in *Black N Blue Boys*, then describe how Actors' Jiu-Jitsu, being gentle, and breathing helped me to move through the effects of GIT in my performance.

GIT TO MOVING

The concept that “men don’t move much” limits creative progress. Before starting the rehearsal process with Professor Fleming I assumed Ian would be one of those men who do not move much. This is a concept I bought into about heterosexual masculine physicality. I interpreted his dialogue as very punchy, aggressive, and straightforward. His first line—ironically—is: “Nothing can hold you back. Nothing can get in your way except for you” (22). This quote demonstrates Ian's assertive tone. Here, Ian makes assertive statements to the listener as if the statements are objectively true. He does not indicate that “nothing can hold him back” but directs the statement to “you,” the listener. In these statements, he does not show an interest in others’ opinions or personal experiences with being “held back [...]” This is partly what fed my assumption of an aggressive and therefore physically restrained, heterosexual masculine appearance. In this quote, Ian encapsulates his entire story of suffering, mistakes, and redemption into two sentences. Ian runs away from home and an abusive father, then falls in love with a woman for whom he hopes to provide the security he did not receive from his father. I translated these findings to mean that Ian would have a restricted physicality based on my conception of the way aggressive or masculine men used their bodies.

Like the physical effects of GIT, assumptions of limited physicality can stick with the black male actor throughout his creative process. I carried my assumption of Ian’s restricted movement into my first rehearsal with Professor Fleming, whereupon he challenged it. Professor Fleming brought it to my attention that the text implies Ian is a character who will take up a lot of space. Not only does Ian literally take up enough space

in the script to need to be split into two parts: *Ian* and *Ian 2*—but when we examined the details of his speech, we noted a great deal of expressiveness in the ways Ian discusses his suffering and mistakes. When Ian talks about the actions of his father, the script indicates Ian “does” his father, in the sense of impersonating or becoming him (22). When such moments end, the script indicates Ian is “(*Back to being self*)” (22). Professor Fleming indicated Ian commands the space and has no qualms with the volume of his voice or vividness of movement. This of course contradicted my initial assumption and further exposed it. Because of this assumption, I had limited my physical possibilities before I had even started my character development process. This point brings me back to Chapter Three’s mention of “deliberate” tension. There is nothing inherently wrong with the exploration of the ways traumatic experiences may cause restriction in movement—that is what a portion of this thesis aims to prove true. At the same time, however, I did not know that I would limit my physical choice options when I premeditated standards of movement rooted in heterosexual norms. I referenced this in the Introduction when I expounded on my grandfather’s mention of the way men are supposed to walk. Yolo Akili Robinson’s story touches on this as his client wanted his son to hold his body in accordance with conceptions of heterosexualized masculinity. Each of these examples shows how heteronormative masculine standards of movement involve stifling or holding one’s body.

The method I used for the development of Timmy’s physicality, which relieved the need to use old GIT-informed physical habits, can be applied to any character. I used Ian’s lines to inspire physical choices. Ian references several locations throughout his monologues, so I took a literal approach and “traveled” on stage. I walked to various

areas on the stage for Ian's character. Each time he referenced a new location, I would conjure up mental images of it and place it somewhere in the performance space. I would then walk closer to the mental image to get a better look. Thinking back to Professor Fleming's note on Ian taking up space, this felt like a stride in the right direction, perhaps made easier when I released the idea that Ian would not move much. This is an example of how deliberate bodily movement can sometimes undo the effects of stifled bodily movement. In this case, I stifled myself with the assumption that a character would stand still, but through metaphoric exploration of his traveling, I made a choice to take up more space through intentional staging.

GIT IT STRAIGHT

GIT can extend beyond concepts of gender and be influenced by heteronormative prescriptions of sexuality. In religious spaces in my youth, homosexuality was often equated to pedophilia. Within the religious spaces I attended, despite there being no data to prove it, all LGBTQ+ identities had in some way been equated to child molestation. As a child, hearing these comparisons was extremely traumatic. For that reason, at the start of my thesis show process, I did not want to play Tenny, who is a child sexual molester in *Black N Blue Boys*. My resistance was a direct result of the trauma I endured as a non-heterosexual child who constantly heard LGBTQ+ life equated to sexual crimes.

GIT affected my willingness to perform Orlandersmith's work. In Tenny's monologues, he tells a story of his nephew Sean that begins with Sean's swimming ability and ends with his clinical description of the ways he molested him in a deserted field. Due to my hesitancy toward this character, I asked Professor Fleming if we could

cut the scene from the show. He promptly responded, “No.” Upon the decline of my proposal to cut *Tenny*, Professor Fleming further explained that an actor’s responsibility as a performer does not include censoring material they have not written, solely based on their discomfort with it. This helped me realize that if the playwright has included Tenny in their script, then Tenny is there to serve a specific role in the story.

The assertion that LGBTQ+ identifying individuals are more likely to commit sexual crimes simply does not fit the facts. A 1978 study conducted by Nicholas Groth and Jean Birnbaum on the sexual orientation of adult males convicted of sexual assault against children showed men who commit such crimes do not really have exclusive adult sexual orientations, as their attraction is based on age and is often the result of “arrestment of psychological maturation resulting from unresolved formative issues” (Herek, para. 5). In the study, they referred to this condition as a “fixation,” which denotes a hindrance in mental development causing adverse behavioral tendencies. Of the 175 adult males in this study, 83 of them were classified as fixated. 70 of them were classified as “regressed” adult-attracted heterosexuals, which meant they were heterosexual adult attracted males who had regressed to fixation. The remaining 22 were classified as regressed adult bisexuals. The results of this study strongly contradict the theory that sexual assault against children is a proclivity of LGBTQ+ identifying individuals, exclusively. Fred Rachman reported for *Health Professionals Advancing LGBTQ Equality* that the American Psychological Association, the National Association of Social Workers, The American Academy of Child Psychiatric, and The Child Welfare League of America each have policy statements affirming that there is no credible evidence that suggests gay men are more likely to commit child sexual abuse acts (para.

2). Although patently false, I heard several men in barbershops and religious spaces use the homosexual/child predator theory as a tactic to declare heterosexual norms as the optimum way of male life and moral standard. It must also be said that this tactic falls into the category of how men mark their heterosexuality as visible. Perhaps the men who made these statements learned them from the men in their environments. It is therefore another example of the passive yet violent tactics enacted to reiterate heterosexual norms. Although this tactic does not reflect reality, its use demonstrates types of GIT-inducing physical and verbal violence. In my case the violence was not physical but verbal, as the use of such an inaccurate and unfounded theory convinced the childhood me that heterosexuality was the only moral—and therefore acceptable—sexual identity.

GIT has as much to do with sexual identity as it does gender. When I grappled with whether to play Tenny, I had not dealt with these traumas. Here is where I began to note that GIT has as much to do with sexual identity as with gender. I became present to the fact that I, as a same-sex-attracted male, had been traumatized by cruel and untrue stereotypes used in my environment to regulate my behavior. I realized, unfortunately, the tactics had worked. I felt comfortable in my sexual identity and knew those stereotypes were untrue, yet I did not want to revisit memories of them and tried to distance myself as much as possible from a character such as Tenny. I believe most average humans would want to distance themselves from anything to do with molestation. However, I knew my resistance ran deeper than common disturbance and could also be explained as GIT. When I think about the type of artist I wanted to be—one who tells whole stories, one who tells the truth—I quickly decided the trauma I

experienced via lies was not a strong enough justification not to tell the story of Sean, the child victim of the sexual assault in Tenny's scene.

Actors' Jiu-Jitsu can help the black male actor overcome GIT-induced resistance toward certain materials. To activate Actors' Jiu-Jitsu, I positioned Sean as my motivation to perform as Tenny. Of the characters in Tenny's scene, due to the love and trust he had for Tenny before the assault, Sean is arguably the most "black, blue, broken" and in need of a way to move through his trauma. At the top of the scene, Tenny describes Sean's mother's disapproval for the way Sean shows his excellent swimming abilities. Tenny quotes Sean as saying, "I'm not showing off uncle Tenny. I just feel good in water and I feel good when the water touches my skin. What's the matter with feeling good?" (42). Tenny then adds "I'd say to him 'There's nothing wrong Sean. NOTHING. Don't listen to ANYONE that puts you down.' And he grabbed me and hugged me and said (*Does him*) Thanks Uncle Tenny" (42). In this scene, Tenny is heard encouraging Sean to remain confident in the face of disapproval. Tenny assures Sean that there is nothing wrong with him showing his skills in swimming. Sean embraces Tenny with a hug and thanks him. At this moment, Orlandersmith establishes a seemingly healthy family dynamic between an uncle and his nephew. Later in the scene, after the assault, Tenny admits, "I get off of Sean. There is blood. I try to wipe away the blood. He pushes me away. I say (*As if to him.*) 'Do you want to go back to Dairy Queen?' He looks at, me and says (*Does him*) 'Take me home.' I drive him home. He sits in the passenger seat rocking back and forth" (44). The vivid detail of the aftermath of the assault left no room for doubt that the ostensibly healthy relationship had been defiled to the highest possible degree. It is indicated that Sean has been seriously injured by the assault when Tenny

says Sean is bleeding. Sean also pushes Tenny away and refuses a chance to get ice cream. Tenny then sees Sean “rocking back and forth” as he drives him home. The provided quotes demonstrate a moment in Tenny’s scene where Tenny’s assault has a profound impact on Sean. This led me to prioritize Sean's story within Tenny’s monologue. I see this as activation of Actors’ Jiu-Jitsu, where I repositioned my thinking so I could achieve a more forward-moving attitude toward the process.

Actors’ Jiu-Jitsu, being gentle, and breathing can help one to move through any GIT- related resistance one may feel toward performance material. To effectively perform the role of Tenny, I decided to tell Sean’s story from Tenny’s perspective. I used the “be gentle” principle of my method the most in this phase. I had to be gentle and patient with my initial reactions to Tenny’s comfort with his crime. I sometimes had to take time and sit with the nausea I would feel when I rehearsed the lines out loud and heard them in my own voice. I would usually pause, and track to see if and where tension or physical discomfort showed up. In the beginning phases of my personal practice with this show, when I rehearsed lines from Tenny’s monologue such as “I kiss his nipples/ his boy girl voice moaning ‘Uncle tenny/ uncle tenny,’”(43) I would sometimes interrupt myself with an occasional breath and a voiced “wow” or “okay,” just to gently bring myself into a mental space of complete acceptance of the character. This served as a reminder that this is who Tenny is. These are the words that are in the script. This is the story. Tell it. I see this as another form of Actors’ Jiu-Jitsu, where I leaned into my initial responses to the character's actions to become more comfortable with performing them. Through my work with Tenny, his scene became the one I was able to perform with the

most comfort. By simply allowing myself to feel discomfort with no judgment, I was able to move completely through the GIT Tenny's character provoked.

I have provided examples of how GIT caused physical restrictions in my body. It mostly stemmed from my unchecked notions of male physicality, inspired by the actions of men in my family environment and religious spaces in my childhood. I have also specifically noted one form of restriction as "regulation of behavior." This usually showed up in the form of equating queerness to pedophilia. It was a method used by men in my environment to condemn and dissuade people from homosexuality. I have examined its effect on my current creative process, as demonstrated by my hesitancy to move on stage as Ian and to portray the character of Tenny. Through Actors' Jiu-Jitsu, I was able to find physical choices for Ian that strayed away from my habits and comfortably move through a process of developing the character of Tenny. I also further acclimated myself to performing Tenny's character by breathing through my response to him. I was not aware at the start of my thesis show process that to engage with the work in a growth-prompting and honest way I would have to work through such a range of personal obstacles. To function at its highest potential, the use of my method must be flexible and not stagnant. I hope that black male actors who read this work will feel empowered to take what I offer and adjust it, as I did, to fit their individual needs.

CONCLUSION

GIT NEAR COVID

My method for moving through GIT can help ease the stress that comes with a virtual rehearsal process. This is important because as a result of the 2020 Coronavirus pandemic, large indoor gatherings were banned in the state of Kentucky. To continue producing theatrical projects, traditional procedures had to change in response to state mandates. Large indoor gatherings were banned in Kentucky during the outbreak. It was therefore decided that my thesis show would be recorded. The only audience members were those who entered the performance space to work on the show. For me, this initiated unfamiliar performance stresses. For example, during the first in-person onstage rehearsal for the Fall 2020 production of *Black N Blue Boys*, I noted through tracking that I felt added stress in the presence of cameras. This stress showed up in the form of tension in my back and tightness in my breathing. There were cameras approximately fifteen feet from the stage, one aligned in the center of the stage and one on either side. The left and right cameras were close-up cameras and the middle, for wide shots. I decided that in response to my camera stress I would begin rehearsals by being with the sensations that emerged, acknowledging the cause of them, and consciously breathing. At the beginning of the first in-person rehearsal, I checked in with my physical state while I was backstage

before I entered the main stage. I discovered my stress level was different for each location, but significantly more intense when in front of the cameras. A few gentle moments to breathe and accept my nervous response as a natural response helped me move through the stress. I also noticed this form of nervousness gave me a slight burst of energy. I decided I would channel that energy in a way that could physically activate the first few moments of Larry's scene, the first scene of the play. Dealing with nervousness in this way is another example of "Actor's Jiu-Jitsu" as I used the impact of my nervousness as a springboard for energy in the work.

GIT THROUGH

I trust my thesis will help black male actors with GIT-related experiences. This resonates in me constantly as I continue to merge gender and critical race theory with acting in my personal practice. Inspired by my and other black men's experiences, my method has helped me grow as an actor. It sheds light on obstacles I was unaware of before I wrote this thesis. Black male actors who share my experiences can therefore benefit from this thesis if they have not yet considered the effects race, gender, and sexuality can have on their acting processes.

In some ways, my motives behind writing this thesis align with those of the new "We See You" Movement launched in 2020. This movement reports on steps taken by White American Theatre in response to BIPOC (Black and Indigenous People of Color) demands for White American Theatre and their proposed, actionable plans to explicitly foster anti-racism. "We See You" began at the onset of the Coronavirus pandemic to address the racial inequities in the theatre industry and identifies the lack of cultural

competency in American theatre as one cause of these inequities. Although written exclusively for black male actors, this thesis prioritizes a sector of the BIPOC community and introduces an initiative for the prioritization of Afrocentric curriculum. This could benefit black male acting students in those spaces who feel they have been affected by GIT. The proposed actionable plans for addressing GIT are outlined in Chapter Two: The Four Principles. These principles are practical steps toward recognizing the ways GIT may affect the acting process and moving through, and beyond, these traumas. My approach would increase cultural competence in academic acting spaces, particularly in dealing with the intersection of race, gender, and acting, and start stronger dialogues about solutions to GIT's effects on black male actors.

Historically in America, black people have had to fit into white spaces to achieve success. Based on that premise, black male acting students have consistently been expected to thrive creatively through established European practices. The realm of American educational theatre is no different. Although black male theatre students have managed and even excelled with what we were given, in this age of re-thinking and re-shaping the ways we do theatre, we must also revisit the ways we teach it. This includes merging traditional acting practices with issues commonly faced by those who contribute to the success of the theatre industry. If theatre schools and theatre companies are to continue to profit from black energy, then black experiences must be foregrounded with the same rigor as white European standards and ideals. The general neglect of non-European traditions in the world of theatre must be corrected.

Therefore, the next steps for this thesis are to uphold its message in other spaces and mediums. This includes, but will not be limited to, the *YouTube* video investigation I

produced and the online panels I have participated in. I will continue to create such projects on virtual platforms as well as in-person and through texts. I will also apply my method to my professional performance jobs, such as Kentucky Shakespeare's 2021 Summer season. I have been cast as Ned Alleyn in Lee Hall's *Shakespeare in Love* and The Duke of Exeter in William Shakespeare's *Henry V*. Both productions are my first full-scale shows since *Black N' Blue Boys* and I can feel the difference in my process since the implementation of my method. For example, my character development process for both characters included using online materials that relate to facts in the script to inform physical choices. From this, I did not need to rely on GIT-related habits to discover the characters' physicalities. As a result, I have felt an ongoing sense of play and freedom in my acting process that allows me to engage choices, not bound by notions of prescribed heterosexualized masculine norms.

There is still work ahead for the prioritization of diversity in white American theatre spaces. Although Kentucky Shakespeare is actively working to foster an anti-racist environment by meeting several demands from the We See You movement, this summer's production repertoire still only consists of European playwrights, whose plays center European life. I point this not to criticize the company's play selection, but to emphasize that even while actively meeting We See You demands, Kentucky Shakespeare still operates under a larger social/cultural system of expectations that primarily values European work. This further highlights a need for documents such as this one that outline the pervasiveness of restrictive systems and the ways those systems can stifle creative spaces. It is only in the awareness that we are being stifled that we can we start a process to move through it.

At the beginning of our very first post-covid virtual meeting, my primary thesis advisor, Dr. Janna Segal offered words of encouragement she stumbled upon during the 2020 Covid-19 quarantine. She declared, “Theatre is medicinal” and “The best reward in art comes when we are honest.” I felt moved by those two phrases; I wrote them down on a neon green sticky note and stuck them to my mirror. I look at them every day. To include them in my thesis, I had to go to my mirror and take another look at them and myself. Reflected was a person who had pursued the best reward in art: a potential path toward healing. My hope is that the black male actors who read this thesis, and those with whom I engage in conversation about it, can take my method and begin to free themselves of the obstacles of GIT in their creative process. It is high time we collectively move through so that we can move on.

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