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BLACK WOMAN BURDENING: THE PROCESS OF “UNBURDENING” REALISM
IN DENNIS MCINTYRE’S *SPLIT SECOND*

By
Brandi L. Threatt
B.F.A, Claflin University, 2017
M.F.A, University of Louisville, 2022

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in Theatre Arts

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A Thesis Approved on

April 29, 2022

By the following Thesis Committee:

Janna Segal, Ph.D.

Nefertiti Burton, M.F.A

Shantel D. Crosby, Ph.D.

ABSTRACT

BLACK WOMAN BURDENING: THE PROCESS OF “UNBURDENING” REALISM IN DENNIS MCINTYRE’S *SPLIT SECOND*

Brandi L. Threatt

April 29, 2022

Black women who dramatize reality can experience a transference of burdens if realistic plays reflect their lived experiences. Burdens affect truthful character development and impact the mental, emotional, physical, social and spiritual well-being of Black actresses. This thesis will use the Fall 2021 University of Louisville production of Dennis McIntyre’s *Split Second* as a case study. Gender and Race studies along with an auto-ethnographic research approach will be used to examine how my portrayal of Alea in *Split Second* contributed to Black Woman Burdening, a phrase I created to examine how Black fatigue can negatively and specifically affect Black women who perform realistic theatre. This thesis offers a process for the actor to “unburden” by merging realism with the therapeutic benefits of mind, body, emotional, social, and spiritual awareness

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INTRODUCTION

During Spring 2020, I discovered I was a victim of what I call “Black Woman Burdening.” Black Woman Burdening is a condition which Black women internalize external obstacles as their own. The internalized obstacles associated with Black Woman Burdening are connected to social disparities that can manifest in a creative process in the form of fatigue, weight, and burdening. The cause stemmed from over empathizing with national turmoil, overt racism, an overwhelming fear for my health and safety, limited social interaction due to Covid-19, online education, financial instability, and death! At the start of the pandemic, in-person theatre ended. As a response to these unprecedented times, devised theatre made space for artists and communities to self-reflect, exchange ideas, and activate their physical bodies for a collective release of trauma. Creating and sharing my own works of art helped with identifying and resisting oppression for myself as an American citizen, not just as an actor. I learned that devising served as a release from the already existing burden of being a Black woman in America.

In Fall 2021, live theatre performance returned. I was cast as Alea Johnson in the University of Louisville Department of Theatre Arts’ production of Dennis McIntyre’s *Split Second*. This play is centered on a respected Black police officer, Val Johnson, and his split-second decision to end the life of a white car thief, William H. Willis. I considered the play a great way for audiences and actors to engage as a community while gaining insight on biases that contribute to their morals, values and lived experiences. I had hope that my performance of Alea Johnson, Val’s wife, would also serve as an opportunity to release tension similar to that which I experienced in 2020. However,

during the *Split Second* rehearsal process I realized that this show fell in the category of realism, a style that emulates real life by including everyday speech and events (Hagen). Realism is a genre of theatre practiced and taught by acting practitioner Uta Hagen. Hagen's *A Challenge for the Actor* states, "Presentational acting, which I call realism, in which the actor puts his own psyche to use to find identification with the role, allowing the behavior to develop out of the playwright's given circumstances" (42). In other words, human struggles influence the emotional, physical, and mental response actors experience to portray their character. However, realism may not always include the collective release of tension that I had mistakenly anticipated.

After having a wonderful experience with devised theatre in 2020, I returned to realism with a different perspective. From my previous performance experiences, the genre of realism was not associated with a healthy release from the character or the content. Because of my new perspective from devising and gaining better awareness of my well-being during Covid, my approach was not only about performing realism truthfully but discovering how to release the burdens which this style of theatre may trigger in me. How do I embody a burdened Black woman without becoming burdened as the actor? My commitment and personal connection to uncovering the therapeutic benefits of performing realism led to the argument posed in this research.

TRIGGERS AND BURDENING

The burden Black women carry to exist within a social body may hinder Black actresses from embodying their character truthfully. This hindrance is the condition in which Black actresses experience emotional, physical, social or mental blockages due to being in a state of fatigue during the creative process. I argue that because realism emulates everyday life, a Black actress playing a Black woman in a realistic play may experience an additional layer of burdening. I conclude that all performance spaces should introduce concepts from other forms of theatre to provide Black women with tools to effectively unburden themselves from society and from the script.

The Black actress's proximity to oppression, weight and burdening is directly connected to generational and societal triggers, such as racism, sexism, classism, lower pay wages, violence, police brutality, unfair housing, health disparities and more. If personal connections to these disparities are not carefully addressed before, during, and after a performance process, said feelings can be suppressed in the subconscious mind and stored in the body as trauma. Voice and movement teacher Betsy Polatin addresses trauma and its effect on the actor in *The Actor's Secret*. Polatin states, "in our society we tend to put overwhelming and traumatic experiences away and forget about them. But they do not actually go away: The body remembers them. An actor on stage or screen has two choices: use what is already happening habitually in the body or become aware and make a change" (80). I contend that the habit of putting "overwhelming and traumatic experiences away and forgetting about them" can manifest into an unhealthy approach for

character development. The “unburdening” practices offered in this research are a healthy “choice” for Black actresses to “become aware and make a change”.

I noticed that when it comes to performing pieces of work that deal with American social disparities, Black actors may be asked to dramatize circumstances that mirror tensions closely related to their reality. Tensions can manifest in an artistic process by having unacknowledged thoughts and feelings about the creative content, theme, lines, stage directions, intimacy, historical relevance, lived experiences and so on. Therefore, my interest in investigating Black Woman Burdening is a result of me becoming aware of tensions associated with oppression which are stored in my body. This awareness was matched with eagerness to implement some type of change for myself as the performer in this process. I learned that becoming aware of my habitual patterns was a necessary first step to incorporating healthy coping and release practices.

Before I go any further, as I have identified my relationship to systems of oppression, it is equally important to mention my proximity to privilege based on some elements of my full identity. I am a cisgender, heterosexual, single Black woman. I am able-bodied. I have no connection to substance abuse. I was raised in a two-parent, middle class household, born and raised in the American South. I have successfully obtained a bachelor’s degree and a full scholarship to obtain a master’s degree. It is important to mention characteristics such as my gender, sex, race, upbringing, education, and physical ability because they do serve as privilege. Although I am an oppressed identity in the broader spectrum of American society, I do recognize that my perspective

may still stem from a privileged place within a minority group. In this auto-ethnographic research approach, my background does inform my perspective and the specificity of this argument.

Black Women Burdening is a term I developed to inform this argument. This term was influenced by Mary-Frances Winters, author, activist, and certified administrator for the Intercultural Development Inventory. In *Black Fatigue: How Racism Erodes the Mind, Body, and Spirit*, Winters defines “Black Fatigue” as “repeated variation of stress that results in extreme exhaustion that is passed down from generation to generation” (3). Because Black Fatigue is “passed down from generation to generation,” this “repeated variation of stress” can take on many different forms. I connect Black Fatigue to tension, trauma, overload, burdening, and weight. This idea of weight and burdening comes from a variety of social roles and expectations placed on Black women which can manifest as generational traumas, rage, poor health and, as in the case of Alea in *Split Second*, dishonest storytelling.

As Winters argues, the causes and effects of Black fatigue are ongoing and caused by external forces, which are then internalized by Black communities. Black Woman Burdening is a specific by-product of Black Fatigue. Black Woman Burdening is an exacerbated form of Black Fatigue based on the social roles Black women fulfill in America. The causes of Black Woman Burdening are complex and multi-layered and depends on one’s proximity to oppression and privilege. Proximity to privilege is dependent upon race, gender, complexion, sex, class, religion, abilities, citizenship,

geographic location, age, and the like. A woman's proximity to oppression changes when you include disparities such as childbearing, lower wages, housing, motherhood, hunger, domestic violence, colorism, reproductive rights, police brutality and the over fetishization of the Black woman's body.

One may argue that my definition of Black Woman Burdening is not specific to Black-identifying women and suggest that other identities may experience the same feeling. However, it is exhausting for women to risk mental and emotional instability due to the overburdening of external obstacles based on physical identity. The research conducted by the Winter's Group Inc., founded by Mary-Frances Winters and featured in *Black Fatigue*, proves that Black women consciously and unconsciously fulfill roles with less resources for survival and coping. The Winters Groups Inc. is a global diversity, equity, inclusion, and justice consulting firm led by CEO Mary-Frances Winters. The statistics provided by the Winters Group reveal the following disparities: A Black woman's net worth without a bachelor's degree is \$500 and with a bachelor's degree is \$5,000, while a single white woman has a net worth of \$8,000 without a degree and \$35,000 with a degree (The Winters Group Federal Reserve for Consumer Finances 2017). Due to stress and generational health disparities caused by trauma, Black women are 52% likely to die from cancers. Black women are 243% more likely to die from pregnancy or child-birth related causes. Black women are 60% more likely to be diagnosed with high blood pressure. Black women have a life expectancy of 78.5 years while white women have a life expectancy of 81.2 years (The Winters Group USA Life

Expectancy & Health Rankings, 2017). These troubling statistics' reveal the layered forms of inequality based on being a Black woman in America. This inequality is a proven disadvantage for Black women.

Winters examines Black Fatigue on behalf of the Black community. She does so by unpacking white privilege, social injustice, preexisting mental and physical conditions, abuse, sexual violence, police brutality, mass incarceration, the economic gap between white and black identities and its cyclical effect on the younger generation. Winters explains how these disparities are a part of the overall institution of racism in America; however, she does not examine how Black bodies carry the weight of these disparities from one location to another. My research on Black Woman Burdening specifically addresses how Black women may carry these disparities in their bodies and manifest their effects in different spaces. In this case study, that space is the rehearsal space.

Black Woman Burdening is an exacerbated form of Black fatigue based on prescribed social roles. Black fatigue is exacerbated by race and gender roles. Feminist theorist Kimberlé Crenshaw defines intersectionality as the “intersections of race and gender” (1245). Crenshaw also states, “I consider how the experiences of women of color are frequently the product of intersecting patterns of racism and sexism, and how these experiences tend not to be represented within the discourses of either feminism or antiracism. Because of their intersectional identity as both women and of color within discourses that are shaped to respond to one or the other, women of color are marginalized within both” (1244). I contend that “[be]cause of my intersectional identity

as both [a woman] and of color,” there are social constructions that inform how I might experience and carry the weight, fatigue, or burden of being a Black woman. The Black woman’s relationship to stress and tension is disempowering and burdensome.

Identifying the burdens of being a Black woman in society can help navigate the burdens not only in a rehearsal space but in the style of realistic theatre.

METHODOLOGY: REPRESSIVE TO EXPRESSIVE

As previously established, the damage that can contribute to Black Woman Burdening is not always met with a healthy release. Without a means to “unburden,” the Black woman is at risk of harnessing rage, suppressing her emotions, or experiencing physical and mental health disparities. When tension is released or expressed in unhealthy ways, the Black woman then falls into the stereotypical categories of “animal or the angry Black woman.” bell hooks’s *Killing Rage: Ending Racism* states, a Black Women’s rage is expected to be “repressed, contained, trapped in the realm of the unspeakable” (5). I described my emotional shift when experiencing Black Woman Burdening as feeling “repressed, contained and trapped.” This led to incorporating healthier methods of release as a Black actress performing in realistic theatre.

In Chapter One I will further unpack the research in Mary-Frances Winters *Black Fatigue*. Further investigation of Black Fatigue will address its impact on the overall well-being of Black individuals in America. I will narrow the scope of Black Fatigue to the specific disparities related to being a Black woman in America. I will incorporate the

findings in Kimberlé Crenshaw's "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex" to discuss how sex and race can lead to a wide range of discrimination. A key resource for unpacking the unhealthy effects of "intersectionality" is found in Charisse Jones and Kumea Shorter-Gooden's, *Shifting: The Double Lives of Black Women in America*. Jones and Shorter-Gooden reveal the negative psychological and health outcomes Black women disproportionately experience. Chapter One also applies Liz Lerman's *Critical Response Process* to create the phrase Black Woman Burdening and determine its significance to theatre arts. These resources support the claim that Black Woman Burdening is a condition directly connected to Black women's experience with systemic oppression in America.

In Chapter Two I argue that it is possible for Black women in performance to experience an additional burden in their creative process based on the lens in which Black female-identifying characters are created. I insist that the lens of the writer and the realistic style of *Split Second* contribute to the condition of Black Woman Burdening. I critically engage with Dennis McIntyre's *Split Second* to further unpack the lens in which my character, Alea Johnson, was created. This chapter will feature a brief explanation of the Eurocentric acting methods found in Konstantin Stanislavski's *The Actor Prepares*, Uta Hagen's *Respect for Acting* and Stella Adler's *The Art of Acting*. These text are important to defining realism, which is the genre of theatre for this case study. The dramatic genre and acting method associated with realism will be used interchangeably as realistic theatre. Patricia Hill Collins's *Black Feminist Thought* and Melisa V. Hill

Perry's *Sister Citizen* will also be introduced to support my claims that playwright's perspective contributes to stereotypical images of Alea in McIntyre's *Split Second*.

My examination in Chapter Three of personal journal entries will prove that burdens associated with the style of a realistic play and in a content in the script can transfer onto the actor, hinder the character development process, and contribute to Black Woman Burdening. The use of personal journal entries was inspired by Carolyn Ellis's "Telling Secrets, Revealing Lives." I used an auto-ethnographic research approach which is defined by Ellis as "An approach to research and writing that seeks to describe and analyze personal experience in order to understand cultural experience. Auto-Ethnography acknowledges and allows introspective knowledge" (4). My primary source is myself and my creative experiences. To support the findings in my journal entries, I will engage with the aforementioned Black feminist research scholars, I will site J. Camille Hall's "Everyday Conflict and Daily Stressors: Coping Responses of Black Women" to further examine the statistics associated with coping as a Black woman.

Chapter Four claims that the therapeutic release techniques found in Judith Laster's *Living Your Yoga*, Betsy Polatin's *The Actor's Secret*, Augusto Boal's *The Rainbow of Desire*, and Cristal Chanelle Truscott's "SoulWork" serve as healthy coping strategies to "unburden." Boal's *The Rainbow Desire*, argues that theatre is associated with therapeutic benefits. Boal states, "Theatre is the process of observing oneself in action" (20). Although realism is the practice of observing real life and the daily impacts of oppressive structures, its reflection may not serve as process of release. I offer creative practice I adapted in order

to create space, not only for the audience to observe themselves but for the actor to observe herself as the first step to “unburdening.”

AIM FOR RESEARCH

This thesis aims to investigate contributing factors of Black Woman Burdening in realistic theatre and the therapeutic acts that served as my release from Black Woman Burdening. My call to action is to cultivate a rehearsal and performance process that is a safe therapeutic playground for Black women to reflect on their disparities. This will assure that there is a system in place to encourage a full resolution for the actor. At this moment, I do not have any newly developed acting methods specific to “unburdening” Black women. However, I aim to assemble mindful performance practices for Black women and their “unburdening” needs during their experiences in realistic theatre.

CHAPTER ONE

BLACK FATIGUE TRANSFORMED INTO BLACK WOMAN BURDENING

Mary-Frances Winters's *Black Fatigue* supports the conscious and subconscious manifestation of Black Woman Burdening and its relationship to Black actresses who perform realism. I find *Black Fatigue* to be transformative research because it identifies the experiences of Black communities that face external obstacles that are not caused by any action of their own. Said external obstacles can be identified as racism, sexism, police brutality, discriminatory employment, unemployment, and lower pay-wages. In addition to, discriminatory housing, lack of medical care, mental health disparities, violence, disproportionate incarceration rates, poor education, food deprivation, lack of clean water and so on. Some of the external obstacles listed are unavoidable simply because one's physical identity. To carry this fear of "This can happen to me" is an uneasy condition systematically imposed on the physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual wellbeing of Black Americans. It is important for me to use Winters's research to affirm Black people in America did not actively cultivate this condition for themselves. Black communities in America should not make the mistake I made by blaming oneself for experiencing this hindrance, condition, or illness. Black communities have every reason imaginable to be tired.

Black Fatigue is helpful for developing language to express the overwhelming sensations of being Black in America; however, my research is focused on the

experiences specific to myself as a Black woman. Although a focus on Black women was not the motivation behind Winters research, I do not want to make the mistake of generalizing the oppressive experiences of Black women. It is possible that Black women experience a different type of fatigue based on the disparities associated with being Black and being a woman. The disparities of caregiver, single parenting, rape, abuse, lower wages and reproductive rights while fulfilling roles domestically and in the workforce, can be directly associated with how Black women experience or even suppress the weight of their fatigue.

This argument is relevant to theatre, specifically realism, because some plays will require Black actresses to exhaust themselves with this reality by dramatizing said disparities, without having a proper release from those disparities. Black women may find it hard or even develop unhealthy practices for performing realistic plays. This proves that a Black woman's fatigue can manifest in different environments. For now, I argue that there are contributing factors that can make Black women experience Black fatigue differently. This chapter will further unpack how extreme exhaustion specific to Black women in theatre is transformed into and defined as Black Woman Burdening.

To further unpack my argument, I will introduce what inspired the development of Winters research on *Black Fatigue*. Further explanation will discuss how Black fatigue is a contribution to Black communities' awareness of their overall wellbeing. To add, I will unpack the effects of generational trauma, systemic oppression, and its impact on the well-being of millennials and generation Z. Next, I will focus on Kimberlé Crenshaw's

examination of intersectionality, which she recognizes as groups of identities which overlap to create multiple forms of oppression or privilege (139). An analysis on Crenshaw's research, along with other feminist theorists will hone in the ways which the Black woman's identity can reshape her lived experiences. I will prove that bias based on sex and race may lead to physical, emotional, and mental disparities. If said disparities and experiences are not released from the Black women's body, it can cause Black Woman Burdening. With further discussion, I will identify which components of the aforementioned research I combined with Liz Lerman's, *Critical Response Process*. Lerman created a multi-step system that is used to guide artists on how to acknowledge their feelings, while receiving feedback during their creative process. It is relevant to Black Woman Burdening because Lerman's creative feedback process influenced the creation and the definition of the phrase Black Woman Burdening and its relationship to realistic theatre.

BLACK FATIGUE: CONVERSATIONS AROUND BLACK WELL-BEING

The current dialogue centered around the well-being of Black Americans is openly embraced by public figures, activists, artists, influencers and so on. Personally, I have noticed that conversations centered around my mental, emotional, physical, and spiritual wellness helped me with isolation, reduce the stigma of being unwell and even helped me identify the causes of any uneasiness I may encounter. Having an awareness of my overall well-being even helped me develop healthy practices when I found myself coping with the unrepresented nature of Covid-19. I consider *Black Fatigue* cutting edge research

and a viable contribution to Black mental health and wellness because it identifies what this experience of being Black in America *feels* like.

Feelings associated with being Black in America can be directly connected to American slavery and the oppression of Black bodies every generation since. Due to the long-lasting effects of racism, Mary-Frances Winters developed her research on *Black Fatigue* by acknowledging how systemic oppression began affecting activists half her age, i.e., Millennials and Generation Z. “I kept wondering, why is this generation exhausted? They have not been fighting nearly as long as we have,” asked Winters in her lecture presentation with the *Boston Globe*. Francis-Winters adds that this question was the inspiration for her text:

I never considered myself fatigued in my work, because my generation (baby boomers) never thought in that way. What I am learning from my younger brothers and sisters is that we are fatigued, and we have to take care of ourselves. Our wellbeing is so important, and I also learned that many of us could not correlate things we were feeling stress and depression. That is the unique and beautiful contribution of our younger activists- this notion that we are fatigued and the willingness to say it and the willingness to recognize the need to address it. (7:10)

Winters’s point is well taken. Like her, I contend that it is not only important to press upon social issues as young activist, but also acknowledge how it “correlate[s]” to

feelings we may have because of it. It is important to have the “willingness” to address how external circumstances impact one's well-being.

This research was cultivated by Winters’s engagement with the younger generation; however, it is still a condition that is passed down from generation to generation. The contributing factors of Black Fatigue may even appear as “normal” or “to be expected” in some Black communities. Winters further explains that “The unrelenting causes and effects of Black Fatigue is directly connected to generations of oppressively inequitable life experiences, unmitigated systemic racism, intergenerational stress and trauma and inherited racist disparities in health” (5). The cycle of “oppressively inequitable life experiences, unmitigated systemic racism, intergenerational stress and trauma and inherited disparities in health” will harm the well-being of Black people in America, so much so, Black people can become desensitized to its cyclical effects. This information is important to my research, because it proves that Black communities are not responsible for the circumstances they find themselves in, whether it be within themselves or in society.

NARROWING THE SCOPE: THE BLACK WOMAN’S FATIGUE

It is important that I acknowledge that other marginalized communities do in fact live with an extreme amount of stress and fatigue due to oppression. I hope that this research serves as a foundation to unpack the performance practices for other oppressed identities in theatre. My performance praxis as a theatre performer and artist educator is

based on engaging with the social body, healthy co-existence, self-reflection, cultural awareness, and inner healing. Therefore, adapting this research for the wellbeing of a specific cultural identity is strongly encouraged. However, for the purpose of this research and its connection to my personal identity and experiences, I will solely focus on Black women - later specified, Black women who perform realism.

To add to the research of Winters, I define Black Woman Burdening as an exacerbated form of Black fatigue. Black Woman Burdening was created to narrow the scope of how chronic stress impacts marginalized identities. Research focused on race, woman's, and gender studies, by critical race theorist, Kimberlé Crenshaw, influenced my focus on how Black Fatigue can manifest into Black Woman Burdening. Crenshaw's *Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex* states, "Intersectionality recognizes that group identities, such as race, gender, sexuality, class and so on, overlap and intersect in dynamic ways that shape and continually reshape an individual's experience. There are multiple forms of privilege and oppression based on the various combinations" (139). Intersecting identities will "continually reshape" one's lived experiences, which can appear to be a form of privilege or oppression. This study speaks more specifically to how the Black female identity can influence Black women's experiences with oppression.

Black Fatigue may appear to be a normal experience, simply due to the repetitive nature of dealing with it. Repetitiveness can make exhaustion appear normal and undetectable. This sense of "normal" is related to Crenshaw's "intersectionality" and Black Woman Burdening. Yankick St. Jean and Joe R. Feagin research is based on focus

groups and interviews of two hundred Black women in America. They conclude that “cultural logic includes a wide range of everyday discrimination sometimes termed “gendered racism”” (15). I further argue that “everyday discrimination” and ‘gendered racism’ can be considered a “dynamic intersection” between existing as a Black woman and experiencing the oppression that comes with it. St. Jean and Feagin’s *Double Burden: Black Women and Everyday Racism* further argues “In the everyday lives of Black women there are distinctive combinations of racial and gender factors. They face not only the “double-jeopardy” condition of having to deal with both racism and sexism but also the commonplace condition of unique combinations of the two” (16). Crenshaw and St. Jean and Feagin capture the realities of “double jeopardy.” Because of racism and sexism, being a Black woman in America places emphasis on how racism and sexism can produce challenging situations. Black women are impacted by the “double burden” of racism and sexism. “Intersectionality” and “double jeopardy” can be a consequence of racial and gender inequality.

SOCIAL INEQUITY AS EMOTIONAL, MENTAL AND PHYSICAL DISPARITY

The way social disparities negatively affect Black women emotionally, mentally, and physically is relevant to my thesis. Charisse Jones and Kumea Shorter-Gooden conducted a series of interviews with five-hundred twenty Black individuals. Out of the five-hundred and twenty, two-hundred and seventy-seven were women. These interviews relied on previous statistics provided by “Hope Landrine of the Public Health Foundation in Los Angeles County and Elizabeth Klonoff of California State University, San

Bernardino” (27). Jones and Shorter -Gooden, argues that racism and sexism do lead to Black women experiencing more symptoms of physical, emotional, and psychological (mental) difficulties. I find that these difficulties have silently burdened Black women for too long causing the well-being of Black women to be challenging to maintain. Jones and Shorter-Gooden’s research on mental health among Black women in *Shifting: The Double Lives of Black women in America* supports my claim:

People who reported experiencing more racism were more likely to be beset with psychiatric symptoms such as depression and anxiety. Moreover, Blacks who are most likely to fall prey to psychiatric symptoms are women who are experiencing numerous stressful life events and who are dealing with greater racial discrimination. Women who reported more experiences of sexism also reported more psychological difficulties, leaving the individual susceptible to feelings of low self-esteem, depression, substance abuse, and a plethora of other mental and physical ailments. (65)

“Numerous stressful life events” are the external obstacles Black women bear the burden of, yet they were not caused by any direct action of their own. The feelings associated with being a Black woman in America are “feelings of low self-esteem, feeling depressed or feeling stressed.” Jones and Shorter-Gooden proves that “intentionality,” and “double jeopardy” is not only a social inequity, but a mental and emotional disparity directly connected to being Black and being a woman.

Chronic stress and fatigue not only expose women to the mental and emotional burdens, but it can also promote physical health disparities and illnesses. Tyson H. Brown, and Taylor W. Hargrove's "Multidimensional Approaches to Examining Gender and Racial/ Ethnic Stratification in Health" argues, "Research has long shown that, while women live longer than men, they are more likely than men to suffer from chronic health problems. Women's increased exposure to various stressors and subsequent health conditions are, in part, a consequence of the gap between men's and women's socioeconomic resources" (183). The research previously mentioned in the introduction conducted by The Winters Group evinces the drastically lower wages women receive in the workforce. The lack of socioeconomic resources or a lack of decent medical care can in fact lead to chronic health problems. However, I would like to further elaborate that poor health can be caused by Black women constantly being exposed to emotional, mental, social, and economic stressors.

OPPRESSION. EXPRESSION. SUPPRESSION

Black women who experience and may even recognize this distress for themselves so often bear the burden of this extreme pressure while being unaware of how to express or release it from the body. I further argue that the physical, mental, and emotional well-being of Black women is a risk due to the overload and impact of challenges associated with intersectionality and double jeopardy. Chanequa Walker – Barnes's *Too Heavy a Yoke: Black Women and the Burden of Strength*, states:

Repression and suppression can be an effective means to cope with stressful situations, temporarily. Long term reliance upon this is a guaranteed recipe for emotional and physical overload. Failure to acknowledge and cope with negative emotions does not limit their impact. Instead, that impact becomes redirected, often taking its toll upon their physical health, predisposing them to stress - related problems such as hypertension, ulcers, migraines and chronic pain, sleep and appetite disturbance and obesity. (23)

Biases will damage the overall well-being of a Black woman. Intersectionality and double jeopardy are proven to be external obstacles that are internalized, mentally and emotionally, by Black women in America. These challenges are not caused by the individual, yet it takes an extraordinary toll on the physical bodies of Black women. Black women are not superhuman, therefore negative emotions and mental distress needs to be “redirected” and released from the body. While focusing on the existence of Black women as an intersectional identity, I understand that oppressive American practices can further exacerbate the Black Fatigue specifically related to Black women.

Black Fatigue addresses the domino effect of suppressed feelings towards racism. While determining the phrase, Black Woman Burdening, I reflected on the cycle of feelings associated with fatigue which was listed as depression. Hopelessness. Guilt. Low energy. Ineffectiveness. Increased Stress & Anxiety (Winters). As a reminder Winter’s research explains the complex feelings associated with *Black Fatigue*. The feeling of being a fatigued Black woman that performs realism reminds me of the techniques that

are designed to unpack the feelings of performers, while engaging with theatre or theatrical exercises. Liz Lerman, *Critical Response Process* is a tool for actors to process emotions and experiences. Lerman states, “Passion and emotion definitely influence the reactions people have to the Process. Many people tie their measurement of honesty in direct proportion to how emotional they are in the moment” (38). Based on my experience, articulating how emotional I am in the moment, can be provoked by answering questions offered by Lerman such as, “What was stimulating or meaningful for you?” (19). Also useful are, “What emotion did that evoke for you?”, or the most common in my performance experience, “how did that make you feel?”

Black Fatigue identifies what this experience *feels* like. I am inspired to create language for Black actresses to identify what their creative process may *feel* like. Winters examined the psychology of generational Black trauma to help black people label the *feeling* of their existence. It *feels* exhausting. It *feels* like fatigue. Black Woman Burdening is a phrase which was generated solely from a place of processing and *feeling* my emotions. Processing and self-reflecting on my state of being is a frequent practice for me as a theatre artist. The question at hand before during my rehearsal and performance process as Alea in *Split Second* was, “What do I *feel* like?” My answer: I *feel* heavy. I *feel* weight. I *feel* a burden.

WHY “BURDEN”?

I chose the term “Burdening” because I am *feeling* and interpreting this form of *Black Fatigue* in terms of “weight.” Weight is also an analogy I use in theatrical context. I am trained as a performer to “put-on” and “take-off” character habits, which requires some form of grounding, i.e., additional ‘weight.’ In my character development process, I am also encouraged to scale my interpretation of ‘weight’ to explore how much of this character is myself, in comparison to how my character is influenced by the world which is cultivated in space. As a Black woman who has performed realism in the past, I noticed that I was never afforded the option to release the weight I live with every day, let alone in the rehearsal process. When social disparities are dramatized as they tend to be in realistic drama, my performance practice will damage my well-being, if it is not met with a means of healthy coping methods, specific to addressing Black Woman Burdening. The recurring *feeling* that informs Black Woman Burdening is “weight.” Black women who perform realism are faced with the conscious and unconscious barrier of who we are, versus who we present ourselves to be, on top of who we are presenting a character to be.

CONCLUSION: PRESERVING WELLBEING

At first glance, discrimination and inequity might be an issue that adds adversity to the lived experiences of many Americans. But on closer inspection, racism and sexism can cause external obstacles that are unavoidable for Black women. These same external obstacles are burdens carried by Black women who perform realistic theatre. These disparities can manifest in different spaces, causing the experience of burdening to be a

never-ending cycle for Black women in society, in their personal lives and if they are theatre artists, in theatre.

My thesis is not to suggest how to avoid these issues, but rather how Black women can find healthy ways of coping with these issues in order to preserve their mental, emotional and physical well-being. Jones and Shorter-Gooden's *Shifting: The Double Lives of Black Women in America* mentions some of the unhealthy, cognitive coping strategies of Black women:

Common examples of cognitive coping strategies include denying a problem, minimizing, or distancing yourself from the problem, or wrestling a positive meaning from a negative event. They know that the problem exists, but they make it smaller in their minds or think about it selectively. A Black woman may deny the presence of racial discrimination in her life, minimize it as a primary concern, or derive meaning from the experience. (65)

The case study for this research, Dennis McIntyre's, *Split Second*, and my portrayal of Alea in the UofL Fall 2021 production of the play, serves as an analytical opportunity to reflect on my coping strategies after noticing myself "denying a problem, distancing [myself] from the problem, [and] wrestling with having a positive meaning from a negative event."

Unhealthy coping may also be a strategy for Black women who perform realism. Therefore, Black Woman Burdening was created to help Black actresses move away

from said unhealthy practices. Black Woman Burdening is the phrase that I developed to label the *feeling* of Black woman who experience the overwhelming effects of dramatizing reality. Labeling the feeling is the first step of activating personal awareness. When I first encountered Winters's research, the label of Black Fatigue relieved the pressure and blame that I placed on myself for experiencing unstable emotions, physical changes, and mental instability. It is my hope that by identifying Black Woman Burdening for Black actresses who perform realism, other Black female performers may realize that any negative emotions, physical tension and mental instability that occurs during their creative process is not by any fault of their own.

There are ways of addressing burdens and releasing them from the body. There are practices that can serve as a therapeutic release for Black women who perform realistic theatre. Before I mention the coping methods that benefited me during the *Split Second* performance, I will chronicle the events of my rehearsal process that will prove to be contributing factors to the burdening I experienced and later released. Chapter Two, I describe how the realistic style of the play and the lens of the playwright serve as contributing factors to Black Woman Burdening. I will further examine how the style of the play and the lens of the playwright served as a transference of the burdens, from the character and the script onto the actor.

CHAPTER TWO

SPLIT SECOND: CONTEXTUAL CONTRIBUTIONS OF BWB

Offstage realities often serve as source material for playwrights and producers of live theatre. It is also exciting to see artistic representations of my ethnic background when relatable stories are performed. The realistic appearance on stage of what is true to life can also create an exciting experience as an actress and audience member. However, the attempt to produce stories that represent a variety of cultures and true lived experiences may still have a negative impact on the performers themselves. I argue that because *Split Second* offers an inaccurate depiction of how Black women respond to social situations then the realistic style of the play is an additional burden for the performer. The inaccuracy of dramatizations of lived experiences in plays like *Split Second* can affect the actor's creative process by burdening the mental, emotional, physical, social, and spiritual wellbeing of the performer.

Realistic performance theories often encourage performers to use their imaginations while acting on stage, which can often personalize the actresses' connection to the character I agree that the imagination is a useful tool for discovering new and interesting things about your character; however, I argue that this technique is not completely applicable to me as a Black woman in performance. Russian realistic performance theorist Konstantin Stanislavski says that the most useful tool for the actor is the "magic if," stating, "There is no such thing as actuality on the stage. Art is a product

of the imagination. The aim of the actor should be to use this technique to turn the play into a theatrical reality. In this process imagination plays by far the greatest part” (54). Due to the social climate, racial history of America, disparities directly connected to being Black and negative stereotypes, playing a character based on the “magic if,” may be an ineffective practice. For example, Black women in performance do not have to imagine the responsibility or fear of “staying alive” (McIntyre 75). Instead, they need only to reflect on moments in which they activate survival mechanisms every day. Although approaching a character based on lived experiences may not be an intentional choice made by the performer, and content of a realistic play may indirectly encourage Black women to rely on their lived experiences rather than the imaginary circumstances of the play.

The craft of conveying stories that reflect an oppressed social body is a burden to Black women in performance. Black women in performance may experience additional burdening while in the creative process based on what is written in the script and how it is written. The content in realism adds to the issue of burdening because it purports to be a truthful depiction of real life. Some may argue that the actor controls their own burdens, suggesting that acting is an independent job or actors are responsible for themselves. This may be the case to a certain degree; however, the idea of individual accountability may then turn into a stereotypical expectation when it is directed towards Black women. Realism is also an additional burden placed on Black actresses due to dramatizing and normalizing false social constructions of Black femininity as true. I have experienced this

as the “Strong Black Woman” stereotype. Although no one may ask the actor to be a Strong Black Woman, sometimes representations of Black women in realism, which is the dominant style of American theatre, can cause Black actresses to feed into stereotypical tropes or social constructs that are not true. I argue that if the content of the play is not a truthful depiction of how Black women act and react, then a realistic play can create an additional burden for the performer. I further argue that the perspective of the playwright may hinder the performer from exploring Stanislavski’s, “magic if.”

In the case of Alea in Dennis McIntyre’s *Split Second*, her character was written to be strong, submissive, suppress emotions and to lead from behind. Unfortunately, this is a burdensome social construct for many Black women in America. McIntyre’s reiteration of this social construction in *Split Second* frames as a truthful depiction of how Black women deal with situations. This depiction is problematic because it is not true to me as the actor or as a Black woman. What I find to be a major contributing factor to the false representation of Black womanhood in this play is Alea’s inability to truly process overwhelming information. McIntyre’s realistic representation of Black womanhood, which features neither a truthful moment of processing and release for the character or the actor, is how the content in the script contributes to Black Woman Burdening. To unpack my argument, I will introduce the play, the playwright and the role of Alea Johnson. I will point out some of the social expectations which the writer placed on Alea as a truthful portrayal of the only female in the play. Said expectations include fulfilling the domestic responsibilities inside the home; catering to the men in the story; and only

being in the home. An analysis of the script will highlight the play's burdensome, realistic representation of Black women. Lastly, I will examine Alea's burdensome emotional labor, or what Bickerstaff calls "emotion work." Black women in the theatre should have space to "unburden" themselves to develop a truthful character. This process of "unburdening" is not only for the actor, but it can also serve as a socially beneficial practice for the ensemble.

SPLIT SECOND: CONTROVERSY IN STYLE

A brief reminder of the plot summary establishes that Alea is imagined in Dennis McIntyre's *Split Second* as a supporting character. Set in Manhattan over the 4th of July weekend in 1980, the play is about a respected Black policeman, Val Johnson, who makes the split-second decision to end the life of a white car thief, William H. Willis. The shooting is provoked by Willis's harassment and racial slurs. Val stages the scene to look like self-defense. Throughout the play Val debates whether to tell the truth or keep up the lie. Val maintains the lie that allowed him to walk away from the murder bearing no consequences.

It is not an uncommon practice for playwrights with different identities and ethnic backgrounds to dramatize the realities of Black women. However, Dennis McIntyre's white American male identity is one of the contributing factors that led to the misrepresentation of real life for Black women in *Split Second*. The portrayal of Val's moral compass sparked a lot of controversy when the play was first produced in 1986

(Stevens). The plot is deeply rooted in revenge mentality, power, police brutality, violence, dominance, oppression, ego, and race. The playwright's qualification to write a realistic play on racism is questionable given his occupation of a privileged identity that often supports the cycle of racial barriers, violence, revenge mentality, oppression, racism, and so on. Lianne Stevens's 1986 theatre review in the *Los Angeles Times* states, "'Split Second' is not disturbing for its profanity or its exposure of a sensitive community issue about cops and citizens. It sounds a troubling warning about the explosives that may be harbored in our own minds" (Stevens). *Split Second* is a "troubling warning about the explosives" in our own minds, including the mind of McIntyre, which may have consciously or unconsciously informed and supported the creation of this play and the burdens that are associated with performing it.

ALEA: STRUCTURAL CONTRIBUTIONS TO BURDENING

In the Fall 2021 UofL production of *Split Second* directed by Professor Sidney Edwards, I was cast as Alea Johnson, the wife to protagonist Val Johnson. Alea works full time as a New York public school educator (34). Alea does not have any kids (6). Dramaturgical evidence supported Alea's age to be in her lower thirties (25). A list of her privileges includes being able bodied; cisgender; young; college educated; middle class; married and well-traveled (38). There is no contextual connection to drugs, alcohol, or abuse (33). She is an American citizen, who resides in the City of New York (35).

The image of Alea ‘as strong’ yet less dominant is a stereotypical trope. (5) A different representation of Alea in a realistic play could have made an intervention in this stereotypical view of Black women. However, McIntyre’s perspective depiction of Alea is within this stereotypical trope. Some of the roles or images that Alea is expected to fulfill are simply due to social constructions associated with her race and gender. Patricia Hill Collins’s “The Social Construction of Black Feminist Thought” explains that validating oppressive social implications can determine how the dominate culture (in this case, a white man) “use their authority to help legitimize a system that devalues and excludes the majority of Black women” (753). This idea of legitimized oppression is supported by McIntyre’s stereotypical images of Black women as an image that is true. This “devalues and excludes” other possibilities for how Black women can be written and performed in plays. Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*, describes how those in “privileged groups,” as is McIntyre as a white male, can naturalize racial and gender stereotypes:

Because the authority to define societal values is a major instrument of power, elite groups, in exercising power, manipulate ideas about Black womanhood. They do so by exploiting already existing symbols. . . These controlling images are designed to make racism, sexism, poverty, and other forms of social injustice appear to be natural, normal, and inevitable parts of everyday life. (68)

Maintaining the effects of oppression, starts from who is “controlling” or normalizing the “images” of Black women. In the case of *Split Second*, McIntyre and the play’s aesthetic

controlled and normalized the domestic image of Black womanhood in his portrayal of Alea. The idea of appearing strong and capable of massive problem solving was written as a “natural” instinct for Alea, although her proximity to privilege and occupational status could have reflected otherwise.

The style of realism is also instrumental in framing what gender roles are deemed normal or acceptable. Realism is defined by Uta Hagen as “applying the psychology of human struggles to drive natural responses” (46). Based on this definition, the play could have applied “the psychology of human struggles” to capture Alea’s response in a truthful manner. The play relies on tropes to characterize Alea, rather than a “natural response.” Hagen also claims, “We must take from life to create the reality of our new life on stage. What it is that we take, is a reflection of our version, our point of view” (50). The “new life” of Alea was a “reflection” and “version” of this realistic play’s “point of view.” However, the dramatized reality of Alea is unacceptable and burdensome because it accepts and perpetuates patriarchal views of Black women, rather than challenging said norms. In doing this, McIntyre’s play reiterates images, tactics, response, and power dynamics that “legitimize” gender roles and the disparities of Black women.

The first scene in which the audience meets Alea through dialogue features her catering to Val once he has returned home from work. Alea is initially viewed in a domestic setting, as is typical in a realistic play. Limiting Alea’s setting and responsibilities to just duties in the home is based on gender roles. The style in which

Alea is written has “normalized” and “legitimized” systems that are biased against gender and race. This is a problematic image which is associated not only with McIntyre’s play but the style of realism. Tricia Ruiz’s, “Feminist Theory and International Relations: The Feminist Challenge to Realism and Liberalism” mentions that “socially constructed worldviews continue to guide much thought about world politics” (Ruiz). If realism is designed to fully acknowledge truth, then there can be a dramatized “socially constructed worldview” of Black women which is rooted in implicit bias and stereotypes. I further argue that McIntyre’s social identity and proximity to privilege limited his understanding of Alea’s potential to navigate this situation in a different way.

My character analysis is supported in the script by Alea’s lines while in conversation with Val. Once he returns home at four in the morning, Val ambiguously addresses Alea’s concerns for his late arrival and momentarily controls the conversation. Alea is then written to objectively cater to her husband. Alea asks Val, “Do you want anything to eat? Some tea? Val? (35). The audience will also discover she is also responsible for entertaining her father-in-law, Rusty, when Val is away from home. Alea mentions to Val, “I dropped Rusty off - what ten -thirty? I brought him a beer. He liked the fireworks” (31). Alea’s domestic duties follow a stereotypical formula for dramatizing Black women in theatre. Alea is willing to feed Val something to eat and serve tea, even after dropping off her father in-law and buying him his beer. These acts of service towards men may appear kind or caring; however, the play’s portrayal of this act still contributes to normalizing or “legitimizing” the oppressive and devalued condition

of Black women. The genre of realism reaffirms to the audience that these acts of service are true, even though they are based on social constructions and gender roles. The contextual clues for character development may also create an unavoidable trap of activating stereotypical physical activity on the stage, such as cleaning the home and serving beverages, or even anxious behaviors and habitual restlessness. This contributes to not only the burden of Black women but the burden of portraying Alea in this moment

What McIntyre's play frames as normal behavior or a positive image of a Black woman, still reiterated an image that speaks to the burden of limiting the self-expression and fullness of a Black female identity. This image of Alea leans more toward respectability politics. Melissa V. Harris – Perry writes in *Sister Citizen* "They [Black women] are aware the others see them through a distorted lens. 'The strong Black Woman' is the most pervasive and widely accepted of these self-constructions. Whereas the negative iconography of Black women as lewd, angry, or unnaturally devoted is reproduced by the state and in mainstream popular culture" (184). McIntyre's script portrays Alea as "unnaturally devoted" to Val, even after telling the truth about his actions. Alea states, "You are not perfect. You altered the setting, that's all you did. You can live with that. So can I" (55). "You can live that. So can I" may appear as a normal act of loyalty; however, that image of steadfast devotion "legitimizes" the social construction of Black women as self-sacrificing, serving others and being strong. Chanequa Walker-Barnes speaks to the issues of stereotypes and imagery. She states that representations of Black women "function as the status quo "by "masking oppression"

(89). This further elaborates the issue of stereotypical images appearing as “normal” rather than the “masked oppression” they really are. This is representative of the burdens Black women carry to exist in American society.

I contend that playing a role that requires a character fulfilling domestic responsibilities was an unspoken burden during my creative process. Black Woman Burdening is an exacerbated form of Black fatigue based on roles fulfilled in society. The recurring feeling that informs Black Woman Burdening is ‘weight’ - the work of putting on or internalizing external challenges or expectations. Being Black, being a woman, being strong and being unnaturally loyal is a burdensome stereotypical trope. The enhancement of these labels is not only expected from Black women in society but during the creative process for productions of realistic plays like *Split Second*.

THE BURDEN OF SELF-SACRIFICE

The notion of self-sacrifice is written in the identity of Alea. In my life experience I noticed that I would engage in self-sacrifice when I felt very hopeful or over-empathized with others. I even find myself self-sacrificing when my inner dialogue assumes that “this burden is temporary” and will soon be corrected. These are some of the lived experiences that I reflected on to understand self-sacrifice as a processing tactic for Alea. However, in my experience I have found that the burden of self-sacrifice is a condition that is reflective of suppressing individual well-being for the well-being of the other. I have found the act of processing thoughts and feelings can lead to a truthful and healthy

expression of self that may not serve the other in that moment. This is another exhausting expectation placed on Alea, which McIntyre's play's style made appear as a "normal" behavioral response in *Split Second*.

In the play, Alea takes in a lot of information about Val's shooting in a short amount of time. Yet her responses were often well calculated and contained. It may appear as a logical response in a time of crisis; however, the argument of self-sacrifice is prevalent because there are no other characters that plainly ask Alea, "How are you feeling? What do you think is the right thing to do?" In my investigation of this script, the lack of expression is directly connected to the expectation of suppression. I will refer to *Split Second* to further evaluate how the writing influences BWB. Val returns home to Alea from a routine debriefing at the precinct, following his murder of William H. Willis. The burden of Alea internalizing external obstacles begins to take place. As this is happening, Alea starts the scene with a natural response, that is not stereotypical in nature. Her initial in-text perspective is concerned: "What happened. He really scared you, didn't he? How serious was it" (35). It then shifts to frustration: "Then what am I supposed to think about while you're here? You don't want me to know anything about your work except one night's dangerous, one night's not" (37). However, Val tells the truth, stating, "The fourth of July. A big night in my life. I offed a white dude Twenty-Eighth and Eleventh. I put him out of commission for good. One shot. Right through the heart" (39). Alea follows-up this information with a shift in her emotional expression.

The following lines represent how Alea responds to Val after he admits to her that he killed someone and fixed the crime scene to appear as a justifiable homicide.

ALEA. It was self-defense! What about the handcuffs?

VAL: I had time. I took them off.

ALEA: What about the knife?

VAL: I wiped off the prints. I stuck it in his hand.

ALEA: Then there's nothing to worry about, is there? (40 -41).

Alea's concern over what "scared" her husband, followed by growing frustration with what Val "Don't want" her "to know," is a burdensome weight that forces Alea to suppress her thoughts and become complicit in Val's actions. Alea's reassurance of, "there is nothing to worry about, is there?" proves that she is taking on the weight of suppressing the truth of how she is feeling. Patricia Hill Collins's, *Black Feminist Thought* proves this is a very stereotypical representation of relationships between men and women. She states, "ideologies often reflect white masculinity and white femininity models" (53). The recreation of what Black femininity should look like in this scene is representative of white "ideologies." Due to white ideologies dominating the plays representation of Black women, Alea's emotional shift is a stereotypical and a burdensome reflection of McIntyre's play's and of realism's white male patriarchal social constructions.

The aesthetic of realism's naturalization of Alea in *Split Second* is a contribution to Black Woman Burdening. Just to be clear, this argument is not to suggest that Alea appears to be weak or overly submissive; however, what stands out is the idea of what a normal reaction to this information should look like. Although the circumstance of murder is not normal, based on supporting research on social constructs placed on Black women. Dr. Jean Wyatt, author, and specialist in African and Native American feminism, examines the work of Patricia Hill Collins's "Black Sexual Politics." In Wyatt's "Black sexual Politics and the Genealogy of the Strong Black Woman," she explores what is considered "normal" based on Black stereotypes. Wyatt states: "Gender stereotypes exert power by appearing to be 'normal and natural' truths about men and women that explain current gender arrangements; what sustain them as "normal" is their decontextualization - their separation from the historical matrix in which they function - while at the same time masking the actuality of power relations" (54). "Masking the actuality of power relations" is also "masking the actuality" of Val taking full responsibility for his wrongdoing. The style of realism, which was created by white men can serve as a platform for "sustaining" gender stereotypes as "normal." The playwright's realistic style of *Split Second* is perpetuating stereotypes and implicit bias. Gender stereotypes not only exert power over the characters, but it also exerts power over the actor. I argue that it is a burden to put on, not only the weight of one character, but two. Black women who perform in realistic theatre will never "unburden" themselves if stereotypes and domestic responsibilities are constantly associated with their roles. Furthermore, theatres that

produce this work without safe performance methods for “unburdening” will yield itself to perpetuating the cycle of Black Woman Burdening and its manifestation in the rehearsal space.

THE BURDEN OF EMOTIONAL WORK

Some couples may argue that emotional support is necessary to maintain a healthy relationship. In partnerships the concept of emotional support is based on having a mutual understanding or empathy for the other. As I continue to unpack the evidence from the script, I will examine the labor of managing, expressing, or suppressing emotions, specifically in the case of Val and Alea. Before I further examine the burden of emotional support, I would like to state that I am an advocate of emotional support as a necessary element for human connection, additionally, emotional support is a naturally understandable response for Alea in this play. Nonetheless, emotional support is a type of labor that can manifest into an unhealthy outcome, such as tension, rage, mental and emotional instability if not properly released from the body.

The plot of *Split Second* comes with a lot of conflicting feelings that can happen at one time. When considering how external obstacles are internalized, I wondered, how often do Black women find themselves sacrificing their emotional well-being for the sake of their relationships? This question connects to research on “emotion work” in Black relationships. Dr. Jovonne Juanita Bickerstaff, a specialist in Philosophy, conducts a series of interviews with 21 Black heterosexual couples (42 individuals) in the regions of

New York, Chicago and Cleveland. Her study, “Together, Close, Resilient: Essays on Emotion Work Among Black Couples,” was based on how Black couples understand their emotional labor in intimate relationships. Bickerstaff’s research supports my observation of Alea’s response in doing “emotion work”: “A second central theme in much of the existing research is that women tend to bear the brunt of responsibility for relationship maintenance. The assessment that women maintain the relationship was echoed by husbands and wives alike” (61). Using the script as evidence in comparison to being emotionally overloaded in my own lived experiences, I have no doubt that Alea is bearing the “brunt of responsibility” for “maintaining the relationship.” This “relationship maintenance” can be an emotional burden that she is bearing for herself and Val.

Engaging heavily in “emotion work” can lead to unhealthy coping strategies, previously mentioned in Chapter One as a common response to being overwhelmed with conflict. Bickerstaff explains, “The willingness to overlook how each rubbed the other the wrong way was hailed as a strength of the relationship - evidence of respect and care. To uphold this agreement (respect), couples described how they used avoidance tactics to dodge situations where unsolvable problems might arise” (76). Although Alea does appear to be a strong problem solver and capable of handling this situation rationally, it is based on her “willingness to overlook” the “unsolvable problem” that arises. In the first scene, Alea contains her surge of emotions. (9) Alea is initially frustrated with Val for other reasons, such as coming home late, poor communication and through sub text, other relational issues that she may have experienced. Alea argues: - “Then what do you need

me around for?! You come home three hours late. You don't call. But I'm not supposed to say anything. I'm not supposed to ask questions, because, no, we don't talk about your work." (38). As Val, unravels' in this scene, he shares what really happened that evening. Alea then states, "Why – Why'd you shoot him? Val? (40). Signs of "avoidance tactics" are noticeable when she decides to do the "emotion work" of suppressing her natural responses to "overlook" this information for what it really is. Alea reframes the narrative only two lines following the aforementioned lines, stating, "It was self-defense!" (40). This can initially be considered as a realistic response for processing information quickly; however, I argue that Alea uses avoidance as a tactic to minimize the severity of the situation.

Alea's "avoidance tactics" are indeed out of "respect" and being faced with an "unsolvable problem." In my character development process, I saw this as a way for Alea to remain calm in hopes that their marriage would remain "normal" based on their standards. The following lines demonstrate her avoidance and denial tactics as "emotion work":

ALEA. It was an accident, that's all it was.

VAL: It couldn't have been an accident. I had him handcuffed.

ALEA: It was an accident. Accept it.

VAL: It was right through the heart. I didn't aim.

ALEA: It happened to be right through the heart. You didn't aim (59).

The previously stated lines are repetitive in nature signifying that she is willing to overlook and even minimize the situation with terms like “accident or happened to be.” Denial is a dangerous outcome of emotional suppression and directly connected to the overexertion of ‘weight,’ which is often placed on Black women in America, Black women in relationships, Black women characters in realism and the Black actress performing in this play.

Alea's denial is connected to Bickerstaff's investigation of “emotion work”. Through her series of interviews, Bickerstaff concludes, “‘Emotion work’ has been largely limited to the ways that *women* alter their emotions to sustain the relationship. For instance, wives draw on strategies like belittling their own input, reducing their husbands' obligations to tiny symbolic tasks, and suppressing negative feelings to present a happy portrait of coupledness” (97). Altering emotional responses is not new for Black women in America. Alea “suppresses” her “negative feelings” and presents a “portrait of coupledness,” when Rusty, Val's father, questions her decision to support Val after knowing the truth. Alea responds to his line of questioning with “I believed him. The whole story. And I knew it wasn't true. Why'd you have to ask! Rusty? It could have been an accident. Why didn't you just leave it at that?” (72). Although this scene with Rusty and Alea may appear to be a tactic for defending her husband, Alea, is provoked to reveal her avoidance and “willingness to overlook” Val's careless decision making. In the case of Alea “suppressing negative feelings to present a happy portrait of coupledness,” it

is not an act to protect Val; instead, it is a stereotypical trope that Black women may feed into to appear less problematic. “Suppressing negative feelings” goes back to the dominant patriarchal act of *oppressing* the authentic expression of Black women on and off the stage. This issue is further problematized when realism enhances the “normalization” of the Black woman’s ability to handle overwhelming issues with some form of superhuman strength. Altering emotional responses is not new for Black women in America. This habit can also manifest as Black Woman Burdening due to the negative effects associated with Black actresses altering and suppressing their emotions while performing in a realistic play.

“Emotion work” can impact one’s emotional, mental, physical, and in the case of married Black couples, relational well-being. Gender roles further exacerbate the “weight” or burden of “emotion work.” Race and gender are connected to the concept of women “bearing the brunt” of personal emotional accountability while serving as emotional support for the other. I mistakenly viewed Alea as a loyal wife, with agency in and outside the household. To add to that narrow perspective, I viewed tolerance, acceptance, and sacrifice as necessary components for a functional relationship. One may even mistakenly assume, if Alea doesn’t step up, then who will? However, the amount of energy that goes into denying herself true expression in addition to the script’s lack of narrating a resolution for her proves that McIntyre’s perspective and the style of realism contributes to the stereotypical trope of Alea being an emotionally strong Black woman.

WHO IS TELLING WHOSE STORY?

I insist that the social identity of the writer, the content in the script and the emotional labor associated with said content are examples of how realism can contribute to the cycle of Black Woman Burdening. I further acknowledge that realism is the appearance of truth on stage; however, the biased stereotypical tropes associated with Alea do not represent her as true but as culturally acceptable. Black narratives have been through decades of misrepresentation in the public eye. African American theatre scholar Harvey Young speaks on behalf of this issue in “Sustaining Black Theater”:

DuBois understood that representations of African Americans often were staged by white negro delineators and performed before primarily white audiences. Although putatively “about ” African Americans, these works imagined an unrealistic, stereotypical picture of black life that was not consonant with the lived realities and daily experiences of actual black people. If black artists created theatre about black folk and shared them with black audiences in their own communities, then those performances could be understood as political acts that worked to revise the social standing of African Americans in public life. (38)

I find that character traits that misrepresent Alea as a Black woman can be due to McIntyre’s white, male identity. Because the play was written for “primarily white audiences” is “putatively ‘about’ African Americans,” and is a realistic play, the realistic style would also require Black actors to incorporate a white European acting method.

Realism in this case is a dramatization of stereotypical Black life that can hinder the actor from experiencing healthy expression and the therapeutic benefits of performing in theatre.

Modern realism is influenced by Russian playwright Anton Chekhov. Chekhov plays are based on his observation of human cognitive and behavioral patterns. Andrey Shcherbenok's "Killing realism': Insight and meaning in Anton Chekhov" names one of Chekhov's contributions to modern realism. Shcherbenok states, "It has long become commonplace to observe that Chekhov's characters do perceive the world, themselves, and each other inaccurately" (299). That "inaccurate" perception of the world simply means, everyone lies, including to themselves. I agree that it is human nature to "perceive the world, themselves, and each other inaccurately." This is what Alea does. However, the extent of the lie for Alea is concerning and even unhealthy when there is no resolution to acknowledge the truth in the given circumstances of the play or within herself. This can be avoided by building in moments of processing for Black female characters to make realism a less burdensome task for Black actresses. Shcherbenok further explains Chekhov's contributions to realism: "A given Chekhovian character fails to achieve genuine liberation" (299). The problem with how Chekhov influenced realism is that a happy "liberated" ending is not always guaranteed. Characters may remain in an oppressive state of being, especially those characters who begin the play with limited agency. Although real life does not always have a hopeful or "liberated" ending, realism frame of truthfulness can normalize the outcome of oppressive conditions which African

Americans experience in society. This further reiterates the stereotype of what society institutes as a normal outcome for Black characters, especially Black women.

Portraying real life on stage is hard enough for Black women, but the “weight” of portraying stereotypical images will lead to Black women in performance leaving the stage with a heavier burden than they started with. The social identity of the playwright and the naturalizing effects of realism can contribute to Black Woman Burdening. Black women in theatre need a system of emotional support when performing. That is a proactive way to bring awareness to the actor and ensemble, while encouraging a practice of “unburdening”.

In the case of Alea Johnson in *Split Second*, playwright’s white, male identity limited the accuracy of the play’s content, which is problematic for the actor and the institution of theatre. Editor and film-maker Lisa Valencia-Svensson’s, “Who is Telling Whose Story, To Whom, and Why?” states, “Although we may be telling stories about injustice and oppression, and about people resisting and fighting back, the core issues in the world still will not be properly addressed, because the stories we are telling will not have been framed from the point of view of those experiencing the injustice. Instead, our storytelling will serve to maintain the ‘status quo’” (Valencia-Svensson). *Split Second* did not serve the community because it reflected the “status quo,” especially for Black women. McIntyre’s white male subject position and the play’s style “framed” the characters not from “the point of view of those experiencing injustice,” but from a point

that is harmful to the oppressed bodies that often must navigate similar injustices, stereotypes, and social expectations.

Dominique Morisseau, a Black female playwright, challenges the implicit biases of realism in *Detroit '67*. This play is about a Black family who turns their basement into an afterhours joint to make some extra money. As their success is just getting started the family finds themselves in middle of the Detroit riots, with a mysterious white woman in their home. *Detroit '67* is a notable example of a realistic play that features two Black women who experience a full resolution through processing their thoughts and emotions while navigating a healthy release from their circumstances through music and social support. These two characters go against the social constructions of Black women and the inaccuracies of realism. The play ends with a feeling of hope, rather than oppression and tragedy. Morisseau's work proves that a broader representation of Black women by a Black woman and the outcome of Black stories can make realism a less burdensome style of theatre for Black actresses.

Conversations around *Split Second*, the police force in general, morals and ethics, and the emotional labor of being a married Black couple are all important topics, however; my thesis contends the burdensome execution of this work should not be at the expense of the Black woman. Indeed, representation of all identities on the stage are especially important. As a requirement of my personal performance theory, I use theatre performance as a tool for reflection, self-awareness, inner healing, and healthy co-existence. Being that these narratives do exist and are dramatized, I contend that plays

can be written and performed without contributing the burden of being Black and being a woman. Chapter Four will offer suggestions to this end. Moreover, in my next chapter I will prove how the “weight” of BWB found in *Split Second*, manifests itself on the actor personally. I will argue that BWB in realism is a transferable emotion that will further complicate the existing “burden” of being a Black woman in America.

CHAPTER THREE

I AM BURDENING: THE TRANSFERENCE OF BWB ONTO THE ACTOR

The purpose of this thesis is to argue that realistic theatre is a contributing factor to Black Women Burdening. While taking on the burdens of characters that are being embodied, Black women in performance may experience additional burdening based on how the role is written for the performer and the social disparities that are dramatized. During the Fall 2021 University of Louisville production of *Split Second*, I had to go through a process of acknowledging the contributing factors of those burdens for the character and for myself. This process of awareness is a beneficial part of developing and sustaining healthy performance practices and truthfully portraying circumstances of the character, Alea Johnson. Though Black women who perform realism may experience burdening the same way, it is still possible for the actor to find themselves carrying additional ‘weight’ in the process. In Chapter Two, I argued that it is possible for Black women in performance to experience additional burdening in their creative process based on stereotypical images resulting from the playwright’s social identity and the realistic style of the play. In the previous chapter, I also examined my character, Alea Johnson, who took on additional ‘weight’ based on her role as a Black woman. In this chapter I argue that Black actresses in realism, who relate closely to the burdens of the script may internalize those external burdens as their own. I further argue that the transference of these burdens is the condition I label Black Woman Burdening, which can hinder the actor from exploring their character with healthy strategies to release.

When it comes to understanding the transference of Black Woman Burdening, it is important to notice that unhealthy coping strategies are a contributing factor to how the actor may manage the burdens they carry. Ineffective coping methods often include avoidance, negative inner dialogue, and isolation. This chapter will focus on self-reflection as it relates to the methods used to identify burdens for myself as the actor. As a reminder, I will be using an auto-ethnographic research approach, such as journal entries, to further deepen the understanding of how the actor internalizes external burdens. I will use those entries to track the stages of carrying the added ‘weight’ of putting on the character as well as the added ‘weight’ that transferred onto me as the actor, playing, Alea. I will identify triggers in the script and examine how I mismanaged opportunities for unburdening in the beginning stages of rehearsal. I will unpack avoidance as an unconscious internal response towards the triggering content in the play. I will then examine the transference of burdening I experience as the performer due to identifying with race before identifying as a woman. This section will capture the harnessed rage and emotions I experience as the actor by engaging and even agreeing with power dynamics and excessive force within the script and as my character. Lastly, I will address the burden I experienced due to self-isolation. The dynamic of being the only female in the cast seems to have contributed to ‘weight’ I carried as the actor. The significance of this chapter is to prevent the Black actresses from experiencing extreme fatigue during their rehearsal and performance process. My goal is to normalize the awareness visceral responses towards triggering content in realistic plays. The

burdensome effects of social disparities and its dramatization in realism can hinder the actors' emotional, mental, physical, and spiritual wellbeing. No actor should find themselves compromising their wellbeing based on the dominant belief systems expressed in society, in the play or in the space.

AVOIDANCE: PERSONAL BURDENS FROM READING THE SCRIPT

As a performer, being aware of my personal emotions is a vital step for character development. While studying the script to prepare for the start of rehearsal in August 2021, avoidance was the first burdensome emotion I became aware of. In “Everyday Conflict and Daily Stressors: Coping Responses of Black Women,” Camille J. Hall identifies coping mechanisms for Black women in response to stressors. Hall explains that “Stressors are conceptualized as the problems, hardships, or threats that challenge the adaptive capacities of people. Individuals are not passive targets of life’s stressors; rather, they actively seek to avoid them, minimize their harmful effect, or ameliorate the pain that the stressors cause” (31). While in process, I “minimized” the harmful effects of how realistic theatre reintroduced stressors from my lived experiences. I found these stressors to be a strong unexpected sensation. Rather than acknowledging it, I “avoided them,” doing so to “ameliorate the pain” I noticed in the moment. This is unacknowledged “weight” is Black Woman Burdening. There are many social stressors in *Split Second* such as racism, racial slurs, power dynamics, police brutality, marriage, and murder. The lack of emotional awareness was met with the coping strategy of avoidance. Dr. Naomi M. Drakeford’s, *Strong Black Woman: An Exploration of Coping, Suppression and*

Physiological Distress supports this claim when it states, “Avoidance has been explored as a potential moderator or mediator between various stressors and mental health outcomes. Scholars have suggested that the SBW [Strong Black Woman] stereotype may be a liability for Black women because of possible negative mental health consequences associated with trying to be strong regardless of the circumstances or one’s internal experience” (21). My thesis addresses the idea of internalizing external challenges and expectations. I believe that my choice to avoid the emotional effects of triggering content is a “possible negative mental health and to add, emotional health consequence of “trying to be strong regardless of the circumstances or one’s internal experience.” Avoiding my true feelings was an unintentional attempt at being a “strong” member of the *Split Second* ensemble.

The opening scene included police brutality in many forms, such as aggressive language, ineffective communication, physical dominance, and violence. This behavior for Val was triggering for me. I did not notice until we were several days into the rehearsal process that I was avoiding that first scene. I only read it once and when it was read in the rehearsal space, I blocked it out. Until my awareness of avoidance, I did not recall details from the scene or ensemble discussions about it. I avoided Val’s following lines from the first scene: “Freeze, motherfucker! Freeze it!” (VAL stands up-stage breathing hard, his service revolver drawn, holding it with both hands, pointing it at WILLIS). I said freeze, fucker. If you ever want to blink again” (7-8). The scene continues with Val aggressively addressing Willis, the antagonist of the opening scene.

To dramatize this scene, Val must exert his power by using foul language, raising his voice, drawing his service weapon, and physically dominating the character with whom he is engaging. Val abuses his power until William H. Willis is shot and killed.

Black women constantly face social bias that can affect the flow and exchange of power. This can sometimes lead to groups of people oppressing the mental, emotional, physical and in this case, creative expression of Black women. Kimberlé Crenshaw's research on intersectionality informs this argument with a specific lens on intersectional subordination. Crenshaw defines this term in, "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality Identity Politics and Violence against Women of Color" as follows: "Intersectional subordination is frequently the consequence of the imposition of one burden that interacts with preexisting vulnerabilities to create yet another dimension[s] of disempowerment" (1249). The "dimensions of disempowerment" may lead to negative coping habits, that of which may be a contributing factor of the manifestation of BWB in realistic theatre.

Crenshaw's research on how this burdens Black women explains the internal conflict I experienced with the scene of Val drawing his gun on Willis. Here is the timeline of emotional avoidance. Before the script was activated in rehearsals, I read the first scene only one time. Next, while studying *Split Second* after initially reading the script I noticed I would skip to scene two as a starting point. On the first day of rehearsal, I heard the opening scene aloud. I retreated into a ball of tension, and I initially could not understand why I could not tolerate the content in the opening scene. The following is a post-rehearsal journal entry to unpack this claim:

Why dislike Val... AND WHY IS HE YELLING AT WILLIS LIKE THAT!!! If someone yelled “Freeze it motherfucker” to me, It's on. I'm defensive and scared. When I experienced this with police officers two years ago, I didn't back down. I poked and heckled, just like Willis, until it was insanely impossible to keep doing so. I relate to Willis. It is not jarring to hear racial slurs from him. The gun is not jarring either. Val is the one that is jarring. I do not see him as a Black man in this scene or even as Alea's man. I see him as the oppressor. Problematic. What makes you think you must overexert your power over me in that way? What makes me more of a threat than you are and less worthy of respect? Ego. Position. Status. Manhood. I would not have been so understanding of my husband if this were real.

#Annoyed. (Threatt)

This journal entry was my process of unburdening at the time. However, its connection to Black Woman Burdening stems from the lack of coping methods to unburden in the space with the ensemble. Avoidance is how I initially coped with the opening scene. It was a way in which I mismanaged my emotional awareness which can negatively impact truthful character development.

Because Black women in realistic theatre have a unique experience in society overall, the character development process can be skewed, by the “weight” of the aforementioned burden of avoidance and anger, and insecurity and denial. An example of carrying this type of burden as a Black female performer in realism is Kala Ross's thesis performance as Tonya in the University of Louisville 2019 production of August

Wilson's, *King Hedley II*, directed by Baron Kelly. Set in Pittsburgh in the 1980s, the plot of *King Hedley II* features an ex-con who had returned home to his girlfriend, Tonya. Tonya finds out she is pregnant and desires an abortion because of her fear of bringing a child into this corrupt society. Ross's "Good Grief: An Analysis of the Character Development of Tonya in August Wilson's *King Hedley II* Through the Lens of 'The Five Stages of Grief'" explains how the actor experienced the transference of emotional burdens while portraying Tonya. In doing so, her transference burdens manifested into what she labeled as "denial." The transference of burdens from the character to the actor in realism, is the condition of Black Woman Burdening that also affected her character development. Ross states, "According to Elisabeth Kubler-Ross, denial is 'usually a temporary defense' (Kubler-Ross 35). When receiving terrible news, denial is the first line of defense because it is difficult to come to terms with the truth" (42). Ross's denial in the rehearsal process was her 'temporary line of defense'" for approaching this realistic play. I connect Ross's "denial" to the "avoidance" I experienced in the rehearsal process. I observe both experiences as an unhealthy coping method for addressing the burdens that were transferred from a realistic script to the actor.

Ross's experience with grappling with her character's denial and then her own denial, is the condition of Black Woman Burdening. I avoided triggering material from the script because it was "a temporary defense" against facing my truth in connection to the Alea and the content in the script. Ross further explains her experience with denial:

During the rehearsal process, I also wrestled with denial. I was told that my choices did not support the character. He [the director] often reminded me that Tonya was nothing like me, and that I should allow the director to act as a guide to assess if my anger or frustration is more than what is supported in the text. By confronting the demon of denial so early in the process, I can make room for the confidence that I need to truthfully tell Tonya's story. (43)

During the rehearsal process of *Split Second*, I “wrestled” with avoidance - due to putting on the character Alea and due to my own “anger and frustration” that was a result of the text. I brought awareness to the “demon” of avoidance early in my process. In light of Ross's thesis, I contend that Black women who perform realism may not experience Black Woman Burdening in the same ways; however, carrying feeling of weight is possible when Black actresses are triggered from the content in the script. I further acknowledge that creating the space for processing is a key first step toward “unburdening” Black actresses who perform realism.

RACE VS. SEX: BURDENS FROM THE DOMINANT PERSPECTIVE

The previous section focused on the additional burdening I experienced based on how the script captured police brutality and power dynamics. This section will focus on the additional burdens I experienced as the performer based on identifying with race before identifying as a woman. This puzzling dynamic is also fueled by the opening scene. Although I mentioned in my journal entry that I can relate to William H. Willis'

responses to Val's aggressive behavior, as an actor that is black and woman, I do not find the characterization of the white male, Willis, free of contributing to the additional burdening I experienced in this process. I have no reason to approve of Willis's racial response towards Val once he is in Val's custody.

Black women do live in the shadow of their oppressor. Due to their race and sex, Black women can be triggered by more than William H. Willis's racial slurs. Willis states, "Fucking nigger cops! They ought to take all you nigger cops and ship you back to Africa. Let you direct traffic in the jungle. Because that's where you belong nigger." (15). Willis antagonizes Val while he is in handcuffs. He does so with relentless racial vulgarity. The previously stated quote is said to Val as a tactic to counter Val's aggressive attempt at arresting Willis. The 'weight' of witnessing two different oppressors, both a white man and Black man began to impact my approach to the second phase of the rehearsal process, which was activating the script.

I experience the "double jeopardy" of engaging with the 'weight' of power dynamics, excessive police force and now race. Catherine E. Harnois, author, professor, and researcher, studied Patricia Hill Collins's, "Black Feminist Thought". In Harnois's "Race, Gender, and the Black Women's Standpoint," she mentions that Black women are expected to have a 'racially neutral' standpoint due to their shared history of oppression with both Black men and white women (70). Harnois unpacks Hill Collins research when she states the following:

For Hill Collins, one of the key distinguishing features of the Black women's standpoint is an intersectional understanding of oppression. Whereas the dominant "narratives of gender are based on the experience of white, middle-class women, and the [dominant] narratives of race are based on the experience of Black men" (Crenshaw, 1991:1298), Black women's subordinate racial and gender statuses facilitate their seeing the relationships among systems of oppression. As Hill Collins (2000:269) writes: "Race and gender may be analytically distinct, but in Black women's everyday lives, they work together." (71)

The phenomena of race, gender and even class is what made my experience an "intersectional understanding of oppression." I insist that my relationship to being black and being woman brings forth a perspective that is uniquely centered around the intersectionality of being a Black woman in America. In the case of confronting triggering content in *Split Second*, I did not initially agree with the viewpoint of the Black male, nor did I completely disagree with the reaction of the white male. My proximity to oppression and lived experiences expanded the narrow lens of examining this script solely from the perspective of race.

Black Woman Burdening occurred for me when I noticed that the dominant perspective in the creative space differed from my own. My perspective as the only Black female performer did not solely relate to the racial tension in the script. I noticed that I would refrain from race-based discussions during the process. I also noticed that when it was time to activate scenes between Alea and Val, my personal anger would transfer onto

the character, causing her emotional perspective to appear as ‘the angry Black woman.’ Although the character was not written to be angry or distant from her husband, I as the actor had every reason to be ‘angry’ during this time. I had no space to truly unpack or release the triggers that were unique to me. The outcome of avoidance and taking on the ‘weight’ of understanding the Black man’s experience was an unhealthy transference of burdens onto the actor. This led to acting choices that slowed down the character development process for Alea. Instead, I found myself “unburdening” my personal anger as Alea rather than bringing awareness to these emotions in process. The following is a post-rehearsal journal entry to support this claim:

Today was the first time I talked about the opening scene and how it made me feel. It was only brought up because of intimacy work today. It is interesting to see that after being in rehearsal for a week, nobody ever asked how I felt about Val. I guess they assumed. Hell, I assumed too... that being Alea was going to be easy because who would not want to go hard for their man. But nah, I was wrong. This reminds me of this social idea I remember learning about from the Black Arts movement. . . how Black Women slid in where they could fit in. Mostly in the shadows of the Black man’s oppressive experience because the movement was DOMINATED by masculine narratives. This idea of siding with my race before having a choice to even choose a different side or share my genuine perspective... (What is this called) I guess in this play, Skin Folk are Kinfolk, regardless of morals and values. Right or wrong. #disappointed #sad #iseeyoublackgirl (Threatt).

The idea of perspective and experiences will influence what the actor can bring to the character development process. Harinos claims, “The particular experiences that accrue to living as a Black woman in the United States can stimulate a distinctive consciousness concerning our own experience and society overall” (71). The “distinctive consciousness” I experienced for myself created two opposing concepts that added additional ‘weight’ to my process. The inability to work through my two opposing perspectives contributed to the transference of Black Woman Burdening.

THE ONLY BLACK FEMALE: BURDENS DURING THE PERFORMANCE

As often as I tried to remain present and truthful to the script and to Alea, I often would encounter physical discomfort, isolation, and anxiety. The first two sections in this chapter unpacked my Black Woman Burdening as the performer from experiencing contributing factors from the script and rehearsal. Lastly, I will discuss an element of BWB that was not discovered until the opening performance. The coping strategy of avoidance in addition to harnessing raging thoughts regarding my connection to multiple perspectives did affect how I approached the character development of Alea and my interaction with others in the space. My director, Sidney Edwards, also confirmed this when she mentioned that she had observed “mood swings” while I was in the rehearsal process. There were even moments where I gave up on myself as a performer because I could not figure out how to “fix” my mood or explore other possibilities. I could not pinpoint the uneasiness that inconsistently ‘weighted’ on me. However, one element that contributed to the development of Black Woman Burdening is my desire to remain open

to new discoveries, even once the live performance began. Playwright, actress, and theatre scholar Anna Deavere Smith refers to this feeling as “chains” or obstacles of expression. In *Letters to a Young Artist*, she insists, “To be an artist one must have a wide expressive range and a profound desire to communicate. That desire to communicate must be larger than the chains that bind. There are so many chains to break out of, chains that come from our inhibitions about a multitude of things. Your passion must be greater than your chains or you cannot create art” (157-58). My “passion” for truthfully telling the story of Alea was greater than the “multitude” of burdens I was experiencing. The willingness to break out of the “chains” of Black Woman Burdening,” in addition to remaining passionate, allowed me to remain in a state of discovery and awareness. While remaining open during the final hours leading up to the first performance, I discovered a different burden that was suppressed inside of me. The ‘weight’ of being alone. The ‘weight’ of performing as the only female in the cast.

Theatre often requires artists to exchange energy as a social body. That exchange is very common with the cast and scene partners, who are sometimes referred to as an ensemble. Ensemble is defined in the Merriam-Webster online dictionary as, “a group of supporting players, singers and dancers - emphasizing the role of performers as a whole” (“Ensemble”). A strong ensemble can also serve as a creative support system. J. Camille Hall’s “Everyday Conflict and Daily Stressors: Coping Responses of Black Women,” mentions additional coping methods that are commonly practiced by Black women. Hall’s section on social support states that these are “essential” for Black women:

Building and maintaining social support networks are essential mediating factors for African Americans. External support systems in the neighborhood, school, church, or community reinforce self-esteem and self-efficacy and provide a positive set of values to follow. A woman's support network provides protective barriers against the negative dynamics of racism and the structure required for the transmission of culture. Perceived helpfulness as sources of support has a positive main effect on emotional and spiritual health and a buffering effect on depression.

(37)

Utilizing the "social support network" of an ensemble does contribute to healthy relationships on and off the stage. It also serves as "external support" when it comes to approaching realism. Engaging with the ensemble can be a "protective barrier against the negative dynamics of racism." In the creative process, the burden of avoidance transferred from the character, onto the actor, which impacted how I engaged with the social support by which I was surrounded. The inability to "unburden" in the sense of comradery resulted in a negative effect on my emotional, mental, and spiritual well-being.

I discovered that the burden or "chain" that I previously described came from the absence of social support. The following is evidence to support this claim:

Why is this play so male heavy? I feel like if Val has someone to talk to, then Alea should too. That would give her a real chance to express how she feels. I

know she must be hurt, confused, disappointed, mad, scared of the situation and scared of Val being a monster, not towards her, but out here in these streets. There is nothing that will not guarantee that murdering someone will not happen again. Why didn't this man [McIntyre] write in a scene with her mom, best friend, the annoying neighbor that stops by somebody with which she could identify!? I noticed this today, in the dressing room and I thought about being backstage in between scenes. I am in that space alone. There is always some type of comfort and fun when there is somebody in the cast I relate to. Unless I want to do what the boys are doing, (which I don't) isolation is the name of the game - this might be why I get so annoyed. #roleseyes. (Threatt)

I never considered myself in need of a creative environment that is sensitive to my needs as a Black woman in theatre. It was not until I became a 'weighted' down version of myself that made me notice that there are specific needs I have as an artist, simply because of my identity and the ways in which my identity exists. Isolation within my own ethnic group while engaging with realism is a contributing factor of how Black Woman Burdening is manifested and taken on by the actor.

CONTRIBUTING TO MY OWN BURDENS

It would be remiss of me not to acknowledge my own contribution to Black Woman Burdening. Former UofL Graduate Acting V professor, Robert Berry Fleming, encouraged actors to reflect on social obstacles, character obstacles and obstacles that

occurred from within the self or were produced by the self. This reflection included the guiding question: “How am I contributing to my own oppression?” Answering this question in our acting process weakened me due to its vulnerable nature and the power dynamics established in our acting space. The thought of connecting my identity with the term oppressor was challenging. Moreover, the guiding question was slightly problematic. The question required Black women and other marginalized identities to openly address challenges. This question also implied that the self was in part the cause of said obstacles; yet, there are disproportionate disparities that can contribute to the same issues I was asked to address. However, the deep, self-reflection required of this question did prompt me to ask tough questions about my circumstances, understanding why, and noticing their unproductive effect on my creative process. Reintroducing this guiding question did allow to me adjust my lens to examine the cyclical effects of my habitual patterns of isolation, in addition to my implicit bias and my perpetuation of stereotypical tropes.

Before I was able to rebuild my social support I had to acknowledge that I was subconsciously avoiding my weaknesses and emotions while with the ensemble. I contributed to my own oppression and burdening by reinforcing the stereotype of being a Strong Black Woman which led me to rationalize obstacles in isolation. Shardé M. Davis’s “The ‘Strong Black Woman Collective’: A Developing Theoretical Framework for Understanding Collective Communication Practices of Black Women,” states the following:

Black American women in the study placed a significantly lower value than White women did on affectively oriented skills such as expressing feelings in a manner that is accessible to others. Samter and Burleson (2005) concluded that many Black American women do not value communication skills that enable friends to work through their emotional states to the same extent as White women but instead attach more importance to a friend's ability to get others to modify their thoughts and behaviors. (31)

I placed a “significantly lower value” on having an open and consistent communication with my ensemble. I did not “value the skills that enabled” the ensemble along with myself to work through my emotional needs associated with being a Black actress and portraying Alea. Social support in this instance is extremely important for coping with burdensome content and noticing how Black Woman Burdening can manifest from within. I also acknowledge that taking time to identify with other Black women during this process was an underutilized resource for coping at my disposal, through director Sidney Edwards and assistant director Candace Spenser. The burden of isolation and to add, self-isolation, was a major contribution for unhealthy coping strategies during this process. I allowed my perspective and identity to manifest into an unhealthy practice of “defending my weaknesses” and coping alone. Reasons for experiencing isolation were caused by the script, the dominant perspective in the space and my choice to “manage” my emotions alone.

CONCLUSION: MY EXPRESSION VS. ALEA'S EXPRESSION

This chapter argues that burdens from society and the burdens of a character are contributing factors to how burdening is also transferred onto the actor. The avoidance, multiple perspectives on race and gender, in addition to experiencing isolation from the social support of the ensemble required a lot of mental, emotional, and spiritual labor to address and later “unburden”. Some of that labor for avoidance included intimacy workshop and developing a space for emotional awareness. Awareness helped me acknowledge race dynamics over gender dynamics in the rehearsal space; however, I did not publicly address for fear of going against the dominant perspective. For this reason, the personal journey of acknowledging this dynamic in the rehearsal space allowed me to be more aware of my habitual patterns of expression versus Alea’s patterns of expression. Lastly, becoming aware of the lack of social support required avoiding alienation and having the courage to break the barriers between myself and others during the remaining performances. Chapter Four will explain my journey towards healing as the performer and as Alea. In Chapter Four I will describe the methodology I used to mentally, emotionally, physically, socially and spiritually “unburden.”

CHAPTER FOUR

“UNBURDENING”: PRACTICES FOR RELEASING WEIGHT IN REALISM

There are several negative effects that can impact Black women who perform in realistic theatre. Some things that contribute to the burdening of Black women include fatigue; (Chapter One); stereotypical expectations in realism (Chapter Two); and ineffective coping techniques and skewed character development (Chapter Three). As a result, realistic theatre is a contributing factor of Black woman burdening. Because realistic theatre is focused on reflecting “ordinary life” there is a demand for truthfulness placed on the actor that can negatively affect the mental, physical, emotional, spiritual, and social wellness of Black actresses. The demand comes from Eurocentric acting methodologies, developed by theatre practitioners, such as Konstantin Stanislavski, Stella Adler and Uta Hagen. All methodological approaches include the imagination to create truthful actions for a character.

Stanislavski’s technique requires “emotion memory,” the practice of invoking feelings or memories from the past to create a truthful emotion in the present (177). Emotion memory requires the actor to be sensitive to their responses and lived experiences. Hagen states that the actor should suspend their disbelief and make associations that link feelings in the present to similar ones in their past (85). Hagen’s technique also requires the actor to be hypersensitive to how the “imagination” produces physical sensations (79). These can be triggering approaches to acting, especially when

this process is expected of actors with non-white cultural identities and lived experiences. The cultural identity of being Black and being female in America can lead the actor to endure burdensome practices rather than explore all creative possibilities. Black women who do encounter this approach may need a release from practicing Eurocentric realistic acting methodologies.

There are theatrical practices for performing that are proven to serve as a healthy coping mechanism for marginalized groups who work in theatre. Just to be clear, I am not arguing that realistic methods should not be used; however, that there may not be enough release techniques associated with realism. The mental state of the performer, physical habits, social interactions, and inner perspective are still full of tensions and traumas based on our lived experiences. Those cultural backgrounds can be obstacles for Black women who try to imagine or be hypersensitive to triggering content. This can cause Black Woman Burdening. This chapter proves that there are healthy mental, physical, emotional, and ritualistic practices that can be used while performing realism. These were discovered during my process of “unburdening,” while performing as Alea in *Split Second*. The practices I will mention in this chapter are not solely for the well-being of Black women in performance. I acknowledge that other marginalized communities do in fact live with an extreme amount of stress and fatigue due to oppression and oppressive practices in theatre. I hope that this research serves as a foundation to unpack the performance practices for multiple oppressed identities in theatre. Therefore others are encouraged to further explore these findings to discover more release strategies.

The process of “unburdening” will be discussed as practices that were blended together to bring awareness to my mental, physical, and spiritual/inner bodies. The described practices are three steps that allowed me to focus on releasing tension before, during, and after my performance in *Split Second*. First, I will briefly describe the process of mentally “unburdening,” ending with the performance techniques that were activated as a healthy release. The practices that I discovered for mental “unburdening” were adapted from Judith Lasader’s *Living Your Yoga*. Lasader’s mindfulness practice helped with shifting my perspective. A change of perspective is what I considered the first step for activating my imagination for truthful character development.

Every actor has to activate their physical body while in performance. The body is the tool that will always share energy and presence with those who are watching. For this reason, the process of physical “unburdening” was an important part of my process. I will discuss elements that contributed to an effective practice of freeing my body of additional weight that did not serve me or Alea in the moment. I will reference Betsy Polatin’s, *The Actor’s Secret*. Polatin’s work is primarily focused on actors incorporating Alexander Technique. Alexander Technique is a practice used by actors that can release excess tension from the body. In Polatin’s approach, Alexander is used to develop physical awareness and improve the physical and vocal quality of the actor. I will unpack Polatin’s practice of “Seated Monkey,” and how Alexander’s exercises, merged with Dance practitioner Bonnie Bainbridge Cohen’s developmental movement warm-ups, served as a healthy means of physical “unburdening.” Physical and mental “unburdening” was also

inspired by Augusto Boal's, "interior monologue practice". This allowed me to release thoughts and emotions as my character and return back to myself as the actor.

Lastly, I will follow-up with the incorporation of ritualistic practice as a means of utilizing social support with checking-in with cast mates and grounding practices. The incorporation of ritualistic practice is also rooted in my cultural identity as a Christian. Recognizing the need for developing an inner ritualistic release, is what I refer to as taking the extra step in setting my intentions on something larger than myself. It is vital to the "unburdening" of energy that is connected to having a deeper encounter with myself. I was reminded of incorporating my spirituality by Barbra Ann Teer's work around preserving the spirituality of Blackness. This section will reference the activation of SoulWork from Cristal Chanelle Truscott's essay in *Black Acting Methods*. This work will further demonstrate that realistic theatre should have therapeutic interventions for Black women who are burdened in realistic theatre.

MENTAL "UNBURDENING"

Mindfulness for the actor is a game changing practice. The term mindfulness in performance is often used interchangeably as "enlightenment, awareness, consciousness or perspective." These terms speak to the mental state of the performer. Bringing awareness to my mental state and how I thought about the burdens I experienced while performing in *Split Second* was the first step in recognizing my inner dialogue and thought process, in addition to its impact on my performance approach. Mindfulness is

defined in Sam Haft's "Mindfulness for Actors" as an awareness of the present moment—of being in the now and existing within it (Half). To be present in the now and with all that exists in the now is a tool for accepting things that the actor cannot change. Mindfulness unblocked my perspective and freed my imagination. This was a process of being open to new possibilities.

Mindfulness practice starts with bringing ease to the mind and slowing down thoughts. This was necessary before and after each performance. I was first introduced to the practice of mindfulness in my Fall 2019 Movement I course with Dr. Ariadne Calvano. The practice of yoga was incorporated into the class as a device to deepen inner awareness. Judith H. Lasater's, *Living Your Yoga*, served as a resource guide to make the practice of yoga a useful routine. The inability to shift personal perspectives and explore other options hindered my ability to gain mental clarity. Lasater states that a lack of perspective can stop you from completely experiencing what is happening – right here, right now (100). Lasater states, "When we cling to one point of view, we limit our ability to see what is before us. Enlightenment, in fact, is nothing more and nothing less than a radical change of perspective" (100). The challenges that Black women face in realistic performance may be eradicated with "a radical change in perspective." The lack of self-care during the *Split Second* process encouraged me to return to Lasater's work. I started practicing mindfulness to release the inner dialogue that did not serve me at the moment.

There were three techniques that I took from Lasater and my yoga practice, the first of which required writing. I did this only once in the *Split Second* process. However,

after noticing that my journal entries were sad and negative reflections, I used Lasater's writing prompt to make new discoveries in my reflections. Lasater's instructions are to make two-columns. In column one, I wrote one phrase for any difficult experience. In the second column, I wrote down a way of thinking about the experience that was different, rather than my habitual response. For example, when reflecting on a difficult experience in the rehearsal process, I might state, "Today, I struggled with Alea's objectives." A response to that experience in the second column might be, "It's Okay. No one knows what they want every day." That counter response allowed me to take the 'weight' off of any negative dialogue that I could potentially have about the script, my scene partners or myself.

Incorporating meditation as grounded stillness was helpful in developing a mindfulness practice. Meditation is the second practice that I incorporated for "unburdening." In meditation the third practice was layered on, which was speaking a mantra to myself. In yoga meditation helps restore personal balance and transform self over time. Lasater states, "By becoming aware of our emotions and thoughts about pain, their hold on us can be lessened. The avenue to this awareness is through constant attention. Each moment holds the potential for self-transformation" (51). "Constant attention" to my thoughts led to a transformed way to self-reflection and character embodiment. I define my meditation practice as grounded stillness. I would do this practice quietly, alone, with eyes closed, in a yogi pose of my choice. After meditating, I would say a kind mantra to my creative self. An example of this reminder is: "I choose to

be a vessel for this story. I am not this story.” Mindfulness turned into a therapeutic discipline that raised my consciousness and improved my inner dialogue. Witnessing my thoughts in this way helps with detaching from what did not serve me in this moment.

PHYSICAL “UNBURDENING”

The physical body is a valuable tool for the performer. There are patterns of physical use that are natural to the performer. There are also physical patterns that the performer may develop as the character. The physical practice of “unburdening” stemmed from spending several years exploring *The Actor’s Secret* by Betsy Polatin. Polatin’s study provides techniques for transforming habitual patterns and improving performance. Polatin uses a releasing technique called the Alexander Technique. Voice and speech professor Rachel Carter introduced me to Alexander Technique in my Spring 2020 Voice II class. Carter focused on actors developing an awareness of their ‘whole self’ while gaining control over muscular frameworks which are connected to body and the voice.

Polatin acknowledges that Alexander Technique is a useful tool for that actor. The practice was developed in the early 1900’s by Frederick Matthias Alexander. Polatin’s introduction to *The Actor’s Secret* states, “Alexander is a practice for self-improvement and neuromuscular reeducation. Alexander is coupled with breathing coordination as a method for increasing breathing capacity and Somatic Experiencing as a way of working through traumas, big and small, by tracking bodily sensations to restore wellbeing and

healthy functioning” (XII). Alexander Technique directly connects to “restore wellbeing and healthy functioning” for the actor who is “unburdening” while performing in realism. To become aware of the physical body and create a habit of healthy bodily functioning the actor must learn to inhabit their natural pattern of reactions. Awareness was the first step I took for “unburdening” which also led to “self-improvement” and “restor[ing] wellbeing.” Polatin states, “By inhibition he [Alexander] meant delaying the instantaneous response to a stimulus; withholding consent to automatic reaction to allow a response that maintains the cohesive action of the whole organism” (10). An “automatic reaction” is sometimes necessary in life and often serves as a means of initiating “cohesive action” of the actor’s tool or instrument. However, when the actor is not aware of how they are automatically responding in a scene it can contribute to performances that will not truthfully serve the play.

To build upon the mental awareness that I practiced from *Living Your Yoga*, I also completed a set of yoga poses as a simple movement exercise for my body and mind. The question then became, how will this mindset and physical movement help me develop my character. I returned to Alexander Technique as a response to the previous question. While working on my yoga practice pre-performance, I noticed that I did not feel complete. The feeling of being incomplete was a result of my whole body not going through a state of intentional awareness. Through my mindfulness practice and now incorporating physical awareness, I discovered that mental “unburdening” will not release the burdens placed on the body. My physical being required a different approach.

The experience of overwhelming stressors or events can be stored in the body. These experiences can make it hard to find “grounded stillness” or to change one's perspective. This connects to the term trauma, which has different meanings for different people. Winters, *Black Fatigue*, refers to trauma as a generational condition that chronicles a wide range of fear, frustration, anguish, and rage (ix). Polatin defines trauma as “an event or accident that may overwhelm the nervous system” (79). I find trauma and burden closely related to one another as they are similar in how it will negatively impact the body. Considering both definitions for the specific condition of Black Woman Burdening, I note that trauma is a neurological response to overwhelming events, environments and stressors that can be a burden on the body and later contribute to one's genetic wellbeing.

Like burdens, trauma is an additional weight placed on the body, which does not naturally occur from the self. Traumas and burdens can disturb the actor's authentic flow of expression and exploration. Polatin discusses trauma in her text, stating, “We tend to think overwhelming and traumatic experiences go away once we forget about them: the body remembers them. Traumatic experiences stored in the body affect how you use yourself” (79). The burdens placed on the body can also be “stored in the body” based on the actor's identity and lived experiences. However, the key difference between trauma and burden, based on previously established research, is that trauma is a new event that the body experiences and unconsciously stores, while burdening is the process of reliving, putting on or suppressing the sensations of an event. Although the lived

experiences that were triggered for me while rehearsing and performing in *Split Second* were traumatic, the process of re-experiencing without release contributed to the concept of burdening.

I recognized that it requires additional practice to “unburden” from not only realistic theatre but also its negative impact on the body. I did not initially categorize my experience as a cast member in *Split Second* as traumatic; however, I was overwhelmed and found my ability to express myself exceedingly difficult at times. Based on further exploration made by Polatin, many actors may have this same experience. Polatin mentions, “There are traumatic events that we may not consciously think of. Oftentimes, an unusual image or pattern of tension will emerge. If you live with your awareness mostly in your head, you may not notice the trivial things that are happening in your body” (80 - 81). Mindfulness gave me an awareness of my trauma. Trauma is a burden to the actor's body “If you live with your awareness mostly in your head.” I had to be present with the overwhelming sensations that were a part of my mental and physical self to allow ‘weight’ and tension to subside, eventually making room for new discoveries as the performer.

Prior to returning to *The Actor's Secret*, I discovered that physical “unburdening” needed to take place after I brought awareness to my mental state of being and stretched my physical body. Alexander Technique allowed me to activate and manipulate the activities that were beneficial to my mental being in order to “unburden” my physical being, wellbeing, and creative being. As a reminder, breaking my habitual patterns started

with mental awareness. I did not have total and effective use of my “instrument” until I began naming my trauma and incorporating a physical release. This shift in dynamics can start from asking oneself a set of questions, offered by Polatin: “How is this feeling familiar? How can I connect this feeling to something I experienced in the past? Are there words that go with it? Is there any movement that it makes?” (91). Some of my responses would be, “I notice tension in my lower back. I feel hot. I am nervous. I have butterflies in my stomach.”

Exercises borrowed from Polatin are useful strategies for “unburdening” the actor. The Polatin exercise that resonated mostly with me was “Hands on the back of the Chair” (171). This work helped me free my arms, joints connected to my upper body and my breath. My first “unburdening exercises” started with me sitting on one chair with another chair in front of me. My arms would pivot forward with my hand on the back of the chair, allowing my head and neck to be free and undisturbed. I would sit here for a few breaths. Sometimes I would remove the chair from in front of me and lean completely forward, in between my legs, widening and releasing my lower back. My leaning forward was the incorporating of another exercise called “Seated Monkey” (168). While leaning forward, I would whisper “ahh” or “lalala” to activate my vocal folds. This is also an appropriate time to reintroduce one of the mantras I created for my mental state of being. Some of the benefits of this work that related to Polatin’s exploration included “Freeing my neck, widening my lower back and the ability to produce sound without any extra effort” (174).

An exercise that contributed to the process of “unburdening” post-performance came from studying Augusto Boal’s *The Rainbow of Desire*. Boal’s research is considered an applied theatre technique, which is focused on engaging with spaces and groups of people that mainstream theatre normally exclude. Boal’s work includes an exercise called the “interior monologue.” The exercise advocates: “All the actors who go to make up the image should utter, without self-interruption, the thoughts their characters are thinking at a particular moment without any movement. . . the actors say everything that comes into their head as the character, not as actors, that is everything that is related to the situation of the characters they are animating, rather than the theatrical situation, which they - as actors - are experiencing” (79). At the end of performances, I would take time to remain in costume, look at myself in the mirror, say what mattered to Alea in that moment. An example of this would be improvising lines that I would imagine Alea saying directly to a character in the play, such as “Val, why would you do this? I would have never put our lives in jeopardy the way you did.” This work would also transfer into improv sessions with a character that is not written in the play, such as a close friend or mother.

Boal uses “interior monologue” as an exercise to further develop scene work between two people. I adapted this practice as a releasing exercise after every performance. This helped me notice “How” I was *feeling* as Alea as well as unpack *feelings* that Alea had to suppress for the sake of the story. The process of journaling was helpful documentation, but it was not always the full body “unburdening” that I needed to

shift my mental state from the character, then back to myself as the actor. Verbally releasing and mentally being aware of the thoughts and questions Alea had after each performance gave me the opportunity to recreate a healthy mindset for myself. There is a common saying that I heard from theatre stating, “Leave it all on the stage.” The script does not allow Alea to have a full resolution on stage. Boal’s “interior monologue” is a useful practice which allowed me to experience a conversation which was a necessary method for reflecting and “unburdening.”

There are beneficial outcomes associated with connecting the mind and body to release burdens. Black women who perform in realism may experience the neurological impact of fatigue, burdening and trauma. This is consistent with the research on kinesthetic experience from dancer Bonnie Banibridge Cohen. During Fall 2021 rehearsal for *Split Second*, I took Professor Sidney Monroe Williams’s Movement III course, which featured techniques and resources from prominent dance practitioners. Cohen’s introduction to kinesthetic awareness started with “Body-Mind Centering,” which she defines as follows:

Our body moves as our mind moves. The qualities of any movement are a manifestation of how the mind is expressed through the body at the moment. Changes in movement qualities indicate that the mind has shifted focus in the body. When we direct the mind or attention to different areas of the body and initiate movement from those areas, we change the quality of our movement. We

find that movement can be a way to observe the expression of mind through the body, and it can also be a way to affect changes in the body-mind relationship. (1)

Typically, my dance practice always began after I centered my mind, followed by centering of my body. When I “observed the expression of my mind” through my physical movement, I noticed a shift in focus. The shift in my focus was what I identified as “changes in the body-mind relationship.” This created space to develop new movements that reflected my current state of mind - ultimately leading to a release of “weight” that did not serve me in the movement.

Cohen’s, Developmental Movement practice helped with hidden expressions stored inside my body. Cohen suggests that this is due to “basic neurocellular patterns that establish our basic movement patterns and corresponding perceptual relationships and basic levels of communication” (5). Also adapted from Cohen was the method of cellular breathing and spinal movements. Cellular breathing is the process of breathing fully in relation to mind and movement. My process of cellular breathing consists of full deep breaths that fill my body and initiate movement. For example, once I inhale, I allow my breath to fill my chest. My chest is now the part of my body that can initiate new movement. Cohen’s spinal movements were specifically helpful in incorporating this practice with ease. In spinal movements, I would initiate a roll by activating my horizontal plane. The process of initiating this roll with the mind, followed by the breath is what brings inner and outer awareness to the body (5). The application of Cohen’s

technique was an important process that can connectively alleviate burdens in the mind and body.

THE EXTRA STEP: SOULWORK AND SPIRITUALITY FOR “UNBURDENING”

In this last section, I explained the impact of incorporating my spiritual identity. My spiritual identity has always been a crucial practice in developing my Black and creative consciousness. I was reminded of incorporating my spirituality by Dr. Barbra Ann Teer. In “Set Your Blackness Free: Barbra Ann Teer’s Art and Activism during the Black Arts Movement”, LaDonna L. Forsgren explains the role of spirituality in Teer’s political theatre: “The spirituality of Blackness helped revolutionaries to remain self-aware and confident and to take action to meet the needs of the collective community” (145). Connection with my spiritual being was the final step in honing in on a healthy holistic practice as an actor. I gained confidence, I embraced my community of cast members and challenged all creative obstacles connected to Black womanhood and realism.

Teer’s practices stemmed from a deep concern with psychological effects of portraying distortions of Black womanhood (137). Teer’s critique of the images of distorted Black womanhood applies to contemporary images of Black women realistic theatre. Teer stressed that this type of portrayal “dehumanizes and destroys the creative minds and souls of Black actresses” (qtd. in Forsgren 145). With the hope of finding what practice worked for my mental and physical being, I took the extra step of reevaluating

my spiritual practices and how they contributed to my wellbeing during and even long after my performance in *Split Second*.

Teer's theory was built on the foundation of African culture and Folklore. As a Black woman, raised in the South with a deep connection to culture and tradition, a consistent practice or ritual was necessary to get connected to myself, cast members, and the story. Ritual for the production of *Split Second* was encouraged by the director, Professor Sidney Edwards. Edwards served as a similar reflection of my identity in the space, i.e. a young, Black woman, from the American South. Edwards included a practice of communal check-ins that offered the communal repetition of speaking affirming mantras and pre-show prayer, which was led by different ensemble members each night of the performance. Our ensemble ritual started with check-ins, which were a time for all cast members to make eye contact and express how they were doing presently. Following check-ins, cast members would bow heads in prayer in recognition of our souls and higher power. It is important to note that the beauty in recognizing the divine in this case-study was not met by any monotheistic, atheist or agnostic resistance. The goal in taking this extra step was not about practicing the dominant religion in the space; rather it was about incorporating a communal ritual and social support before putting on our characters. It is also important to note that any belief system that expresses reverence for multiple gods, a different God or no god does not affect the positive outcome of *my* incorporation of spirituality as a means of "unburdening." My practice of prayer during this ritual was rooted in Christianity; however, the ritual of sharing a moment of stillness,

acknowledgement and release is not only rooted in Christianity. This further proves that prayer is just one of many ritualistic practices that can be incorporated not only for social support, but as a means of “unburdening” Richard Schechner’s *Performance Theory* defines ritual as a “social situation loaded with metaphoric and symbolic significance” (124). Such a “social situation” does not have to be rooted in prayer. A consistent “social practice” before actors put on their characters can be any healthy type of “metaphoric” and socially “symbolic” act. That symbolism can look like dance movements, engaging with music, games and more. Schechner’s “Performance Studies: An introduction – Ritual” also states, “We have all kinds of social interaction rituals – which is shorthand for keeping the peace” (1:24) and “Ritual is an intermediary behavior. Ritual is when a routine is elevated to bring further consciousness (mindfulness)” (2:12). Ritual was an “elevated” social support practice used for developing “further consciousness” for myself and the other actors. It also served as “social interaction” that indirectly encouraged me to break the pattern of being isolated from the ensemble.

Following prayer, the ensemble would collectively chant the affirmations, “I am, because you are!” The chant would be initiated by Edwards, “I am” and the ensemble would respond, “I am”, engaging with Edwards in the typical call and response fashion. “I am.” Edwards would continue by stating “because you are” ending the prompt with an empowering phrase such as “fantastic, creative, Black.” Because I was approaching this work while faced with the burdens of race and gender disparities, stereotypical content, and while not experiencing a full resolution for my performance of Alea, spiritual

practice was the balancing act that I needed to “unburden” myself to portray my character truthfully. This moment was liberating, energizing, powerful, communal, and uplifted my body from the inside out before every performance.

Although my incorporation of spirituality was inspired by engaging with the article on Dr. Teer, inner reflection and reverencing God as a creative source has not always been embraced by the theatre communities I have performed with. I have experienced an unspoken rule that urges many performers to remove the mysterious, unexplainable or the divine from the study of acting. To be clear: this section is not advocating for any particular public profession of beliefs systems. I am suggesting that this extra step, which was taken for the sake of “unburdening” was a useful ritual that directly correlates to my cultural identity, lived experiences and my performance process in the case study of realism and *Split Second*. In “Stanislavsky, Spirituality and the Problem of the Wounded Actor,” Benjamin Lloyd argues that conventional actor training will not help the wounded actor, but that the reintroduction of spirituality may do so. I replaced Lloyd’s concept of the “wounded actor” with the “burdened actor,” correlating wounds to the weight that is pressed upon Black women mentally, physically, and inwardly. Lloyd states, “The practice of healing wounds starts with directing attention away from self and onto a higher purpose. The actor must see his work as something he gives to others; for it is in the posture of the supplicant that grandiosity may be soothed. The framework for achieving this shift of emphasis may be found in any number of spiritual systems” (73). I noticed that one of the mantras used for mental “unburdening”

placed an emphasis on “directing [my] attention away from self and onto a higher purpose.” As a reminder the mantra stated, “I am a vessel for this story. I am not this story.” The idea of a vessel serves as a reminder that my physical being is a medium used to reflect real life, rely on messages, and provide some type of critical analysis of self. It is empowering to ‘unburden’ weight, wounds and trauma to a source that is beyond self.

Faith is a common tool for Black communities in America, especially Black women in America. It may even be considered a survival strategy to believe in God for perseverance. This customary practice is why release techniques are necessary for Black women who perform stories close to their lived experiences. *Sister Citizen: Shame, Stereotypes, and Black Women in America* argues that Black women in America employ their faith in God to “straighten out the crooked room” or in other words combat race and gender stereotypes. Melissa V. Harris-Perry explains, “By focusing on a divine valuation based on their character, kindness, service, and strength, Black women shift the angles of the crooked room and produce a new image for themselves. Faith is a resistance strategy” (222). I consider my spiritual incorporation a “resistance strategy” for Black Woman Burdening. The avoidance, isolation and suppression of thoughts and emotions sometimes made the rehearsal room appear as a “crooked room,” an environment that can produce negative coping strategies. While performing in *Split Second*, I redirected my attention towards God before every show, to practice kindness towards myself, to serve the character and maintain strength against triggering content in the show.

The inner workings of incorporating SoulWork to “unburden” is a contribution that is felt rather than seen. SoulWork is a practice by Cristal Chanelle Truscott, created to unite all parties involved in the performance process. Truscott’s mentions, “SoulWork is a technique through honoring the particularities of the holistic individual and the collective/ communal/ contextual whole” (43). “Communal” engagement of the cast, previously mentioned, shifted my focus from “me” to “we”. As I took the time to verbally honor other cast members, I no longer had to unpack all of my thoughts. I simply was present with myself and all the others around me. Truscott also states, “Engagement with the arts, artistic practice and/or soul was not an isolated experience segmented and segregated from daily life. The arts were woven into the fabric of community function, dialogue, and engagement on multiple, concurrent levels” (43). This “communal engagement” and “dialogue” before each performance was practiced among the ensemble in the performance process for *Split Second*. It became a ritual layered on to the practice of “unburdening” the mind and body. SoulWork is important for “unburdening” Black women who perform realism because it adds value to the actor's creative contribution, especially since Black women often occupy spaces where their existence is rarely valued.

NEW CONSCIOUSNESS

Acting can be a stressful and sometimes discriminatory process. The lack of mental, physical, and spiritual consciousness can add additional ‘weight’ to the performance process for a Black woman in realistic theatre. Techniques derived from the creative practitioners mentioned in this chapter allowed me to experience the therapeutic

benefits of “unburdening” while performing. Due to acknowledging and activating these tools for “unburdening” I ended this process with a “new consciousness,” which will forever include personal and communal techniques for releasing weight and trauma associated with realism. Realistic theatre can be a contributing factor to how Black Woman Burdening can manifest itself in the performance space; however, the benefits that are also associated with theatre may serve as a therapeutic playground for Black women to “unburden” during rehearsals and performances. In my conclusion, I will propose that Black women in performance engage in more practices that are a reflection of hope and healing, specifically while engaging in realism. This incorporation of practices not only dismantles the Eurocentric acting methods associated with realism, but it can also create space for theatre to serve as a therapeutic intervention for Black Women Burdening.

CONCLUSION

Realistic stage representations of Black Woman Burdening can add to the tension, stress or fatigue that Black female performers experience. In fact, the actor is vulnerable to additional burdening, which can hinder truthful character development. In realistic stage representations of Black experiences, it is easy for Black actresses to find parallels between their lives and that of the character or the plot. Moreover, Black women cast in a realistic play need a healthy release from the connection between their offstage lives and onstage characters in order to cultivate a space for artistic and communal well-being.

Practices adapted from various sources can be used by Black women working in realistic theatre to “unburden” themselves. Because realism can manifest itself as a burden for the Black actress, it can negatively impact the mind, body, emotions and spiritual wellness of the performer. Yoga and personal mantras helped ease mental burdening. The vocal and physical practice of Alexander Technique and central body awareness contributed to physical “unburdening.” Physical “unburdening” was followed by SoulWork and my spiritual practice to release burdens emotionally and internally.

In Chapter Three, journal entries were used to dive deeper into my burdensome thought process. Chapter Three also explains a connection to my mental and emotional health as I started to feel tension, which was eventually stored in my body and affected the creative process and the truthful character development of Alea. Some of the responses I manifested in the space due to Black Woman Burdening were avoidance, no creative consciousness, isolation, anger, and mood swings. The research found in this

chapter shows that the personal journey of acknowledging this dynamic in the rehearsal space allowed me to be more aware of my habitual patterns of expression versus Alea's patterns of expression. This act of awareness was also therapeutic in nature because I was able to identify and address some of the triggers I had stored in my body before the *Split Second* rehearsal process. Said triggers were in connection to power dynamics, police brutality and limited authentic expression or emotional release.

Chapter Two is where I argued that the realistic aesthetic of *Split Second* can contribute to the cycle of Black Woman Burdening and its manifestation in the rehearsal space. I further examined *Split Second* based on the question of "Who can tell whose story and to whom?" The social identity of the playwright and the style of realism can be problematic when character responses are framed as true but actually based on social construction. Dennis McIntyre's white male subject position is associated with privileges that do apply to the social issues dramatized in *Split Second*. McIntyre's realistic play presents a Black female character that is based on the white dominate culture's views on Black women and the position they play in the household. Alea suppresses her emotions and response in the best way for her husband to feel comfort over her own. This chapter proves that realism can not only be difficult for the actors, but it can become extra burdensome when realistic theatre reflects white racist, sexist implicit biases characterization of Black women.

Chapter One examines the disparities that already put Black women at a social and burdensome disadvantage. The condition of Black Woman Burdening was initially

adapted from my research on Mary-Frances Winters's *Black Fatigue*, which mentions the extreme exhaustion connected to being Black and being a woman in America. I also find the language around Black Fatigue a helpful resource in identifying the contributing factors to Black communities being mentally, emotionally, and physically unwell. Black Fatigue is proven to be connected to years of systemic oppression and generational trauma. For these reasons, I argue in chapter One that the condition of Black Woman Burdening or Black Fatigue is not solely caused by an individual's actions; rather, the condition is developed because of one's mental, emotional, and physical response to said systems of oppression. The Black community's recent approach to mental health and well-being was a helpful asset for Black communities to express the *feelings* connected to Blackness. The opening chapter also engages with research on "intersectionality" and "double jeopardy" and its connection to the social disparities that Black women uniquely experience. Black Woman Burdening differs from Black Fatigue because it is identified as a weight that Black women carry. If the weight is not met with a healthy means of coping it can not only manifest in theatrical spaces, but it can further damage the Black woman's well-being when realistic stories are dramatized on stage.

FINAL CONNECTIONS: INTERNALIZING DRAMATIZED REALITY

Dramatizing reality can be internalized differently based on one's identity and lived experience. If I can closely relate to the reality of a play, then it can become a problematic performance process for me a Black woman. Lived experiences and stored trauma are not the only contributor to the burdening of Black actresses. Burdening can

also be caused by the dramatization of stereotypes, inequalities, and social disparities. Although telling stories that reflect oppression in America is important, it can still be a mentally, emotionally, and spiritually unhealthy for Black actresses. This argument was developed around the case study of my thesis performance as Alea, during the UofL's 2021 Fall production of Dennis McIntyre's *Split Second*. Although the genre of *Split Second* is realism, this condition of burdening is something I experienced during the majority of my performance career. Recalling lived experiences to truthfully portray a character was not an intentional choice. It did manifest as an unhealthy practice for plays I performed in. It was not until Fall 2021, that I had reached a level of creative maturity that led to a new consciousness centered around this unhealthy performance practice.

I've experienced "burdening" in the majority of the content I have performed in. The previous plays that I performed in that contributed to this observation include: *Torn Asunder* by Nikkole Salter; *Milk Like Sugar* by Kirsten Greenidge; *Detroit '67* by Dominique Morisseau; and *#Hashtag*, based on a concept by Sidney Edwards written by the cast. Each play was a different genre related to various different topics, but the commonality was being able to embody, relive, and dramatize the essence of a Black woman. I was able to capture most – if not all – of her experiences without building in a release because they were directly related to a lived experience of mine. This research is to suggest that all performance processes that specifically include oppressed or non-white identities should include release practices. This is to assure there is a system in place to encourage moment of processing and release.

I am not suggesting that what worked for me as a release during *Split Second* will work for every Black woman or every performer. However, there are foundational steps mentioned in this research that creatives are encouraged to implement. First, observing and acknowledging *feelings* about content in the script. This can be done by checking-in with questions such as, “What is uncomfortable for you after this reading? Where were moments that you noticed a visceral response? What might have that response been connected to”? This strategy connects back to Chapter One in order to notice what actors may have previously experienced based on their identity and proximity to privilege and oppression. This strategy can also connect with Chapter Two’s examination of stereotypical tropes in a play. Different identities and lived experiences may determine what an actor may view as problematic or offensive playwriting. Naming an unsettling response in the creative space can be beneficial for developing a unified sensitivity for approaching the work. It can also improve the social support which the ensemble can offer one another. Second, incorporate awareness practices after the ensemble begins to “activate” the script. Mental stability, emotional responses and physical patterns can change as the rehearsal process intensifies. Activating a check-in with those three bodies can alleviate stress and may prevent the actor from engaging in ineffective coping strategies, such as isolation, suppressed emotions or ineffective use of the physical body. Lastly, this research encourages ensemble members to take the “extra step” and create a practice that can activate one's inner being. In this case study Chapter Four's “extra step” included merging my personal spiritual practice with my creative process. I am not

suggesting that spiritually should be recognized before every performance. I am encouraging ensembles to think about what is the “extra step” that can be taken to release and support one another in a deeper way. This can be in the form of creating a practice that is ritualistic, repetitive, and specific to the ensemble. Taking the “extra step” may be in the form of a chant, playing a low-stakes game, passing energy to one another, doing a dance, or playing music.

Incorporating these three steps in theatre can result in having a moment of total release with the social support of the ensemble members and other respective creatives in the rehearsal space. Remaining in a state of discovery driven by the willingness to perform a truthful version of *Alea* led to the discovery of unfortunately noticing my own condition of Black Woman Burdening. As a result, I did experience “unburdening” as a healthy release for the mind, body, emotions, and spirit, all of which I will advocate for in every performance process that is internalized as dramatized reality.

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Strong Black Woman." *Studies in Gender and Sexuality*, vol. 9, no. 1, 2008, pp.

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CURRICULUM VITA

NAME: BRANDI L. THREATT

EMAIL: THREATT_BRANDI@YAHOO.COM

EDUCATION & TRAINING:

B.F.A. Mass Communication
Claflin University,
2013-17

M.F.A. Performance
University of Louisville
2019-22

G.C. African American Theatre
University of Louisville
2019-22

ACADEMIC TEACHING

EXPERIENCE: Acting for Communication, University of Louisville (2019-22)
Enjoyment of Theatre, University of Louisville (2019-20)

REGIONAL THEATRE

TEACHING EXPERIENCE: StageOne Family Theatre (2021-22)
St. Louis Black Rep (2017-19)

REGIONAL THEATRE: *Unfolding the Story*, Louisa, Locust Grove Historical Cite,
Dir.

Christian Wiltshire (2020-22)
DragonSoul Online, Sade/Gamer 1, StageOne Family
Theatre, Dir.
Janelle Reanee Dunn (2021)
UnKnown Project, Beverly, IdeasXlab, Dir. Sidney Monroe
Williams (2021-22)

UNIVERSITY OF LOUISVILLE

ACTING EXPERIENCE: *Fires in the Mirror*, Cato/Anno. Girl/ Cato, Dir. Ari Calvano (2019)

Detroit 67, Bunny, Dir. Johnny Johns (2020)

Milk Like Sugar, Talisha, Dir. Sidney Monroe Williams (2020)

Lots of Littles (LOL), Dir. LaShondra Hood (2020)

Bee's Lives Matter (BLM) Dir. LaShondra Hood (2020)

Black While, Dir. Sidney Monroe Williams (2021)

Hashtag, Ensemble, Dir. Sidney Edwards (2021)

Split Second, Alea, Dir. Sidney Edwards (2021)

Afromemory, La'Nia Rose, Dir. Nefertiti Burton (2022)

UNIVERSITY

SERVICE: Graduate Recruitment, Retention, and Curriculum Committee Member (2020-22)

Graduate Faculty Search Committee Member (2020-22)