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EMBODYING AN AFROFUTURIST CHARACTER ON STAGE: A CASE STUDY IN  
THE PERFORMANCE OF SARAH B. IN *AFROMEMORY*

By  
Candace S. Spencer  
B.A, Greensboro College, 2019

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

Master of Fine Arts  
in Theatre Arts

Department of Theatre Arts  
University of Louisville  
Louisville, Kentucky

August 2023

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B.A, Greensboro College, 2015  
M.F.A., University of Louisville, 2023

A Thesis Approved on

July 24<sup>th</sup>, 2023

by the following Thesis Committee:

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Professor Nefertiti Burton

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Dr. Janna Segal

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Dr. Sherri Wallace

## DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to God,  
my grandma, grandpa, mama Celeste,  
sister Raquel, Auntie Angie, and  
to my best friend, Maiya.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

First, I want to thank God for his strength and guidance for getting me here. If it wasn't for him, I would have nothing. I'd also like to thank my department Chair, the director of *Afromemory*, and my first reader, Professor Nefertiti Burton. You wear many hats, and your support during my thesis writing process has helped me tremendously. Next, I'd like to thank Dr. Janna Segal for her dedication day after day, week after week, month after month! Thank you to Dr. Sherri Wallace for agreeing to be a part of this process with me and sharing your knowledge. I will forever refer to my committee members as superwomen and individuals I look up to! Next, I'd like to thank my colleagues in the 2022 MFA program, Jahi, Lamar, and Brandi! Our third year has been hard for us, but with y'all by my side, we were able to encourage each other! Lastly, I love and appreciate all those who supported me through this process.

## ABSTRACT

### EMBODYING AN AFROFUTURIST CHARACTER ON STAGE: A CASE STUDY IN THE PERFORMANCE OF SARAH B. IN *AFROMEMORY*

Candace S. Spencer

July 24<sup>th</sup>, 2023

This thesis explores Afrofuturism and positions Afrofuturist drama as a new, 21<sup>st</sup>-century genre of theatre. My thesis defines Afrofuturism and characteristics of Afrofuturist plays by Black women. My examination of Afrofuturist pieces and performance strategies is for Black female performers working in Afrofuturism. I show how Black female fiction writers contributed to Afrofuturism by examining two 20<sup>th</sup>-century plays by Black women that have Afrofuturist features but were written before the term was coined. I use *Afromemory*, a play produced by the University of Louisville Theatre Arts Department in Spring of 2022, as a case study of an Afrofuturist play. I analyze the play and the protagonist, Sarah B., and share the physical, emotional, and vocal work I did to develop and perform this character. I detail specific performance techniques I found effective to bring this Afrofuturist figure to life.



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## INTRODUCTION

Before going to graduate school, I had no idea what Afrofuturism was, nor had I ever worked on an Afrofuturist play. My first impression of this word was that it was confusing, and I felt as if I would never understand it. However, reading literature focused on Afrofuturism and reading and watching stories and films, I noticed that Afrofuturism has unknowingly been a part of my life for many years. My definition of Afrofuturism seeks to contribute to the work already written about this term. Therefore, I can proudly define Afrofuturism as the representation of the Black experience in novels, plays, films, and other forms of entertainment that share a futurist representation (i.e. where the writer sets the Black body in the future). In this thesis, I explore the embodiment of an Afrofuturist character on stage through a case study in my performance of Sarah B. in Teshonne Powell's *Afromemory*.

In this thesis, I confine my study of twentieth-century dramas to those written by authors born in the United States who present as cis-gender and identify as Black women. Through exploring works written by and about Black women from the twentieth century, I serve to prove that Black women have been writing Afrofuturist dramas for a century and Black women playwrights have been writing these dramas before the term was coined. I argue that the works I investigate from the twentieth century, Aishah Rahman's *The Mojo and the Sayso* (1988), Marita Bonner's *The Purple Flower* (1928) and Octavia E. Butler's *Wild Seed* (1980) were precursors to Afrofuturism, meaning the works were written before the term Afrofuturism was created. I analyze twenty-first century works,

Ryan Coogler and Joe Robert Cole's *Wakanda Forever* and Teshonne Powell's *Afromemory* and position *Afromemory* as an example of a twenty-first century Afrofuturist drama. Though, *Wakanda Forever's* production team is represented by men, I include this analysis to show readers that they may be familiar with a well-known Afrofuturist work. I analyze my experience embodying an Afrofuturist protagonist, Sarah B., in *Afromemory* and discuss the challenges I experienced performing this character on stage in this type of drama. For my thesis role, I played Sarah B., the protagonist in *Afromemory*, directed by Professor Nefertiti Burton and produced by the University of Louisville Theatre Arts Department in Spring of 2022. I also inform readers why I needed specific techniques for performing in an Afrofuturist play.

My project is focused on Black female protagonists and for Black female actors embodying a character in Afrofuturist theatre. Embodying a character is equivalent to living as the character. I investigated sources specifically for, by, and about Black women because it mirrors my Black cis-gender body and my process of living as Sarah B. in Teshonne Powell's *Afromemory*. The presence of Black female protagonists and Afrofuturist novels and plays that I have identified in these works is an important part of my project because with this focus, it shows that Black women authors and playwrights have a long history of contributing to Afrofuturism. The authors and playwrights use their work to represent the Black female character and the Black female experience. I address that Black women performers can explore their sense of self through this specific style of theatre and acting practices.

The twentieth-century plays and novels and twenty-first century play I analyze by and about Black women contributes to Afrofuturism and Afrofuturist theatre. Afrofuturist

theatre requires actors to perform in futuristic worlds that are created on the page and then on the stage to promote the advancement of Black identity. My case study about my performance in front of an audience as Sarah B. in *Afromemory*, contributes to Black-female authored Afrofuturist works' depiction of Black women as they reclaim and envision their version of their story. However, there could be other dramas that can fit into this category. Therefore, I am calling for scholars to see if they can identify these works that are precursors to Afrofuturism. After the exploration of the works that are precursors, my study reveals the lack of resources for performing in this genre. I want scholars to find more dramas that are already published to add to the contribution of Afrofuturism as a theatrical style.

I discovered that the twentieth-century and twenty-first century works I explore include a representation of the Sankofa principle. Afrofuturism emanates from the Ghanaian concept of Sankofa, which in the Akan language means “to return” or literally “get it” (san – “to return;” ko – “to go;” fa – “to fetch, to seek and take”) (Small, et al. 1). Sankofa is visually represented by the Adinkra symbol that “depicts a mythical bird flying forward with its head turned backward” (African Tradition). In an interview with Teshonne Powell, she encourages readers and audience members to embrace the Sankofa principle through her work. She explains that the Sankofa Principle is “The ability to be able to take a look at your past and maybe the past of those who came before you to withhold or hold onto certain lessons that will lead to your survival as a person” (Powell). In *Afromemory*, the representation of the protagonist is a depiction of Sankofa because she embraces her connection to her ancestors, and she gains a positive outlook toward her future.

## Afrofuturism

To introduce Afrofuturism broadly and Afrofuturism as a form of theatre specifically, I examine how scholars define Afrofuturism. Prominent Black female writer N. K. Jemisin defines Afrofuturism as a “shorthand for ‘Science Fiction and Fantasy (SFF) by black people’” (Lavender III and Yaszek 26). In *Afrofuturism Rising: The Literary Prehistory of a Movement*, Lavender III and Yaszek further define Afrofuturism as a genre that “address[es] the concerns that people of color face in contemporary culture” (3). Afrofuturism has become an established literary genre thanks to pioneers like Jemisin who wrote fourteen books, completed various book series, and has gained accolades for her work as a popular fiction writer. She has contributed to Afrofuturist novels and short stories that “address the concerns that people of color” face in a fantastical world.

Afrofuturism is established as a literary movement; however, it is less established as a dramatic genre. The authors of *Literary Afrofuturism in the Twenty-First Century* address this term as a literary movement and their emphasis is on literary works made for readership, not performance. However, my thesis addresses Afrofuturism as a genre of theatre. Lavender III and Yaszek state, “Afrofuturism represents a multigenerational, multi-genre, aesthetic and social movement that responds to/engages social media and Web 2.0, and that includes black authors stretching back to the beginning of modernity and spanning the entire globe” (7). In this quote, the authors define this term as “multi-genre” and only address literary genres. This source does not address plays, which are intended for live performance. They make it clear that Afrofuturism includes various genres, ideas, and perspectives which continuously expand generation after generation.

The authors inform readers that Afrofuturism is a sort of umbrella term that includes the various art forms that are a part of Afrofuturism. For example, this term can be viewed as a literary genre, an aesthetic movement, a theatrical style, or as an aesthetic style, Afrofuturism can be a means of self- and community-expression. These art forms are four of the many components of Afrofuturism and they offer people of the Black diaspora new ways of thinking, being, and looking at the world.

The dominant white cultures' mainstream idea of science fiction shifts when you start looking at the features of Afrofuturism. Afrofuturism exists on a spectrum where several of the following features are typically included:

- The Black perspective
- A connection to the past (one's history and culture)
- A vision of the future
- An individual further developing their self-conception
- Magical/Fantastical element(s), which could include a futurist setting (e.g. advanced technology, alien life forms, etc.) or an alternative time and place

Afrofuturism has been “fueled by sci-fi loving” (Womack 16) artists' work and Lavender III uses his work to highlight the similarities and distinctions between the two genres. Lavender III explains that “Afrofuturism, like SF [science fiction], is always in dialogue with the present in which it is written. However, unlike SF, Afrofuturism looks to the past to move forward the aspirations of an entire race in all of its cultural complexities” (2). Like other mediums of Afrofuturism, Afrofuturist theatre attends to the “aspirations of an

entire race.” Afrofuturism is different from what white people write about in SF because SF is typically written about the white race.

Womack, the author of *Afrofuturism: The World of Black Sci-Fi and Fantasy Culture*, mentions the lack of representation for the Black body in SF. She investigates prominent SF writer Octavia E. Butler’s experience of prejudices she faced as the Black fiction author of the *Parable* series. Butler, who “laid the groundwork for countless sci-fi heroines and writers to follow, said it never failed that she’d be confronted by someone at a conference who would ask, ‘Just what does science fiction have to do with black people?’” (Womack 11). When reading or watching pieces in white sci-fi, most white people may not recognize or even notice the absence of “black people” because they are not aware enough to see beyond their own white lens. Ricardo Guthrie argues, “American sci-fi futures include racialized beings who have not really solved the problem of racial hierarchy and white dominance” (47). Thus, the characters in science fiction rarely represent the Black body where they have a chance to become aware of their full potential through pushing past “the problem of racial hierarchy and white dominance.” However, Black female Afrofuturist writers bring a unique perspective to understanding Black women’s historical and cultural experience because they “defy old meanings imposed on black women’s bodies and amplify their voices, creating characters that become the heroines of their own adventures, the creators of their own unforgettable tales” (Lavender III and Yaszek 37). Black women have been creating wonderful imaginative stories in SF, and Afrofuturism provides a platform for Black women playwrights to place Black women at the center of their stories.

#### Afrofuturist Drama

I discovered that Afrofuturist theatre differs from other forms of Afrofuturism. Afrofuturist theatre specifically tells the story of the futurist Black perspective and represents the futurist Black perspective on stage. The live performance of Afrofuturism offered in this medium makes it distinct from other forms of Afrofuturism. Hence, when looking at Afrofuturism as a literary movement, this form is not performed live before an audience, it is read. Reading about Afrofuturism is different from exploring dramas in Afrofuturist theatre, because the plays represent live performances. The performances are seen in the present tense with the performers and the audience at a theatre going through the journey together.

Black women playwrights have opened a door for the representation of Black women protagonists on stage by contributing to theatre pieces that are rooted in Afrofuturism. Based on the research I have done for this thesis, I classify *The Mojo and the Sayso* (1988) and *The Purple Flower* (1928) as Afrofuturist dramas. My primary examination is of the Afrofuturist play *Afromemory*. In Afrofuturist works by Black female writers such as Powell's *Afromemory*, the "look into the past," or Sankofa journey, is often represented through Black female protagonists in particular as they connect to their past through their ancestors. I saw this same theme in the novels and plays I analyzed in this thesis. These works center the Black female experience by having Black female main characters. My emphasis that there is a presence in Black female protagonists in these Afrofuturist works, provides a platform for Black actors to relate to my work and utilize the resources for performing an Afrofuturist character. The protagonist often experiences the process of Sankofa. Based on the Sankofa journey, the



characters that Black women create in their works not only gain a relationship to their past, but they also begin to view a positive version of their future.

Unlike non-dramatic forms of Afrofuturism, Afrofuturist drama displays characters on the stage before a live audience and presents a sense of positivism. In *Afrofuturism Rising: The Literary Prehistory of a Movement*, Lavender III states, “Afrofuturism must be considered utopian to some degree because it seeks to perform world-building on a scale that imagines black being in new ways, in new worlds where race and racism sometimes exist and sometimes do not” (5). Afrofuturist drama focused on Black women depicts a future where a character experiences their given circumstances on the stage. For example, *Afromemory* depicts a world in which the government has tried to dictate that race doesn’t exist. Instead of people being referred to as Black/White, they are considered “Brown-hue/non-hue” (Powell 27). Afrofuturist drama depicts Black women characters in a positive way as readers can see Black women push past the constraints placed on them by their dominant white culture.

The twentieth-century plays by Black women that I address include key features of Afrofuturism. Ytasha Womack, the Black female author of *Afrofuturism: The World of Black Sci-Fi and Fantasy Culture*, offers a crash course on Afrofuturism and science fiction. She states, “Afrofuturism as a term was coined by cultural critic Mark Dery, who used it in his 1994 essay ‘Black to the Future’ to describe a flurry of analysis fueled by sci-fi loving black college students” (16). Considering Dery’s creation of the term Afrofuturism, I classify twentieth century dramatic work by Black women as Afrofuturist if it includes my key features of Afrofuturism. I also analyze novels and a film that fit into this perimeter as well. Like *Afromemory*, Marita Bonner’s *The Purple Flower* (1928)

and Aishah Rahman's *The Mojo and the Sayso* (1988) also display some of the Afrofuturist features listed above. These plays imagine a space that audiences may not have seen on stage by boldly representing a fantastical, magical, and/or futurist version of reality where Black culture, Black identity and Black female protagonists burgeons.

### The Challenges of Performing Sarah B.

To analyze the challenges of performing my thesis role as Sarah B. in *Afromemory*, I first introduce the primary challenge that this protagonist faced. Sarah B. goes on a journey to discover who she is, or in other words, she develops her self-conception. Self-conception is how a person perceives themselves and can also be considered as “a social force: it influences what is perceived, felt, and reacted to” (Oyserman). A person's self-conception is used to “perceive, feel and react” to their environment. Sarah B.'s self-conception develops toward self-actualization, which is a process of realizing one's full potential by “perceiv[ing]” one's ability “to satisfy basic needs” (Heylighen 50). The process toward self-actualization can be achieved by connection to one's past, whether “perce[ption]” is gained through one's history or culture.

For rehearsing and performing Sarah B., Betsy Polatin's *The Actor's Secret* helped me gain awareness to connect to her ancestors. Sarah B. was visited by her ancestors, Imani Nina and La'Nia Rose. Sarah B.'s ancestors represent the past that she seeks to connect to. By accessing her ancestor's memories Sarah B. was able to discover a part of her history that had been hidden from her. “Turning backward” to learn from her ancestors allowed her to move forward and envision a satisfying future. The protagonist

had a goal of connecting to her heritage and Sarah B. achieved this goal by embracing her ancestors.

*The Actor's Secret* was beneficial to my process, however, I discovered that Luckett and Shaffer's work from *Black Acting Methods*, which is rooted in Afrocentricity, were similarly rooted with what it takes to perform Sarah B. I discovered that it was difficult to transfer Polatin's work, taken from the dominant white culture, to my Black body. Therefore, I realized that I needed a source that was rooted in Afrocentricity, which coincides with Afrofuturism. Luckett and Shaffer's *Black Acting Methods* defines Afrocentric as "the centering of Blackness and Blacks in their education" (3). *Black Acting Methods* provides essays that are "rooted in Afrocentric centripetal paradigm where Black theory and Black modes of expression are the nucleus" (2). In other words, Afrocentric is the umbrella of the various "modes of expression" for the Black diaspora. Therefore, Afrofuturism is inside of Afrocentricity because it is based in an African centered perspective. The essays I studied from Luckett and Shaffer's book address the Afrofuturist component of performing an Afrofuturist character, which is ancestral connections.

After processing the work I did on *Afromemory*, I discovered that what was missing in my process as an actor was the experience of ancestral connections. I realized that the shows I was in during my undergraduate study were roles written for white women, like Nora Helmer in *A Doll's House*. When performing in the past, I always felt lost and felt as if I needed to act white or change my voice and demeanor to fit in with the white actors that I worked with. After working on *Afromemory*, I discovered that I had never embodied a protagonist who becomes enriched in their history. Through

performing Sarah B. I was able to connect to her character because I related to her discovered history, heritage, and culture. Her character even undergoes a ritual to connect to her ancestors. A ritual is “an altered state of consciousness, which the artist willingly enters” (Luckett and Shaffer 111). I have always seen Black dramas that attend to these elements, but I had never “willingly enter[ed]” or embodied a character that experiences this. I embraced the experience of ancestral connections and began to realize my full potential as an artist.

I discovered that I lacked resources for performing a character in Afrofuturist theatre. Upon the first read of *Afromemory*, I noted that Sarah B.’s character was missing a part of herself. She gains internal access to her ancestors, and she bears the weight of her ancestors’ memories so that she can move forward in life. Sarah B. expressed to her roommate, “there’s something inside me...that knows I was something more” (Powell 45). I recognized that Sarah B. goes on a journey to feel more complete with the help of her ancestors. During my rehearsal process, I lacked the knowledge of techniques that could have guided me to physically tackle the journey that my character embarks upon. I discovered that I needed techniques that can aid actors in connecting to their Afrofuturist character’s past and this connection can include literally embodying this shift through the character. As an actor, I needed to look for ways to physically manifest my character when rehearsing and performing in Afrofuturism. Therefore, I share the warm-ups and techniques I used for rehearsing and performing Sarah B.’s character in *Afromemory*.

I not only became aware of the physical manifestation of my Afrofuturist character, but I also used warm-ups and techniques to find a connection to the ground, which I discovered is needed when connecting to Sarah B.’s ancestors. I needed a

technique that would help me to prepare my body for performing as I released tension before rehearsing and performing. I noticed that in Afrofuturist pieces, such as *Afromemory*, the character's body figuratively, and sometimes literally, crosses a plane to communicate with the ancestors and they remain linked to the past as they embark on a voyage to discover their identities. For example, Sarah B. crosses a plane by participating in the Ancestral Memory Procedure. This procedure allowed her to figuratively cross a plane or gain internal access to her ancestors as she was periodically receiving visions from their eyes. Sarah B. and her ancestor remained linked as she saw "Everyday things that would remind me of distant memories, memories that are mine, but aren't mine" (Powell 39). This procedure allowed Sarah B. to access "memories" that prove that the government was lying to citizens. As an actor, I noticed that connectivity to Sarah B.'s ancestors is needed when physically manifesting her Afrofuturist character.

Chapter One identifies two twentieth-century plays that are precursors to Afrofuturism by first identifying the characteristics they share with two Afrofuturist literary works. I pinpoint the presence of my key features of Afrofuturism in twentieth-century works for, by and about Black women. I look at the Afrofuturist literary works, Octavia E. Butler's *Wild Seed* (1980) and Nalo Hopkinson's *Brown Girl in the Ring* (1998), and the plays, Aishah Rahman's *The Mojo and the Sayso* (1988), and Marita Bonner's *The Purple Flower* (1928) to evidence how each piece includes features of Afrofuturism. These works also represent the theme of Sankofa and contributes to the long history of Afrofuturist works. I analyze these works to acknowledge that the plays from the past prove that Afrofuturism has been making a contribution longer than has been acknowledged previously. I analyze the protagonist in the popular film *Wakanda*

*Forever* to further evidence features of Afrofuturism and provide an example of the positive self-image of Black women in a well-known Afrofuturist work. I look at two novels, three plays, and one film to prove that Sankofa guides Black women past their given circumstances and pushes them forward toward a future they can be happy with.

Chapter Two provides an Afrofuturist analysis of Teshonne Powell's drama, *Afromemory* to demonstrate the type of analytical work that is needed to embody an Afrofuturist character in performance. I do this by examining who the characters are, what each character wants, background information, and my intuition in approaching this work. I explore the genre, style, main idea, and major events from the play. I also identify the climax of the play to get readers to see how the Sankofa principle is represented in this piece. I share details from an interview I conducted with Powell and discuss the journey Sarah B. undergoes to further share the main idea of the play.

Chapter Three details my process for developing and performing Sarah B. in Powell's *Afromemory* to assist Black actors perform their Afrofuturist character when working in Afrofuturist theatre. I analyze my process rehearsing and performing by first talking about what Sarah B. wants, how she is going to get it, what is in the way of her getting what she wants, and her will. I also talk about her physical description, her personality, her level of awareness in relation to the other characters in the play, and her relationship to these characters. I explore how Sarah B.'s ancestors, Imani Nina and La'Nia Rose, supported her through her journey. I also talk about the Ancestral Memory Procedure and how this procedure helped Sarah B. gain access to her ancestors, which led her to envision a positive version of her future. I introduce these elements of Sarah B. to show how I manifested this character in preparation for the production. I explore my

process as an actor performing a protagonist in Afrofuturism by sharing warm-ups and techniques I used for performing Sarah B. I show how aspects from Luckett's *Black Acting Methods* and Polatin's *The Actor's Secret* helped me develop Sarah B.'s character. I lay out my experience using Noticing Your Sensations, Whispered "Ah," Monkey, and Lying-Down Work to gain the physical, emotional, and vocal awareness I needed for performing Sarah B. I discovered that I had never explored exercises or techniques that attended to performing in Afrofuturism until approaching this work. I talk about how I combated the issue of embodying an Afrofuturist character for the first time by using work I learned in my graduate program and the Afrocentric work I discovered outside of the program. I share voice-recorded documentation of my process to share my initial reaction to the challenges I faced. Lastly, I investigate a source I discovered outside of my program, which is Lundeana Marie Thomas's *Barbara Ann Teer and the National Black Theatre: Transformational Forces in Harlem*. I discovered that this source could have helped me in my process if I had it early on.

I build on the scholarship on Afrofuturist literature by Lavender III and Yaszek, Anderson and Jones, and Ytasha Womack by examining an Afrofuturist play. My study expands on the practitioners' essays in *Black Acting Methods* by suggesting a method through which to perform Afrofuturist theatre. While Luckett and Shaffer's anthology provides methods that a performer could apply to Afrofuturist theatre, their collection does not include a detailed case study related to Afrofuturist drama. In fact, I cannot find any existing works that address how Black female performers can perform in Afrofuturist theatre. While Lavender III and Yaszek study Afrofuturist literature broadly, my study focuses on works by Black female playwrights. My study differs from others because I

offer ways an actor can perform Afrofuturism based on my analysis of working in Afrofuturist theatre.



## CHAPTER ONE

### AFROFUTURISM, *AFROMEMORY*, AND OTHER AFROFUTURIST PIECES

Afrofuturism has expanded from a movement to a dramatic genre. To date, I have not discovered any plays that have been labeled by scholars as Afrofuturist. Scholars have not published extensively on Afrofuturist drama, but Teshonne Powell is one of the few to write an Afrofuturist play. Afrofuturist dramas are works written for live, stage performance that include key features of Afrofuturism. The features of Afrofuturism are outlined in the Introduction. I analyze Marita Bonner's *The Purple Flower* (1928), Aishah Rahman's *The Mojo and the Sayso* (1988), and Octavia E. Butler's *Wild Seed* (1980), which were written in the twentieth century by Black women, to establish that this genre existed before there was a name for it. The purpose of identifying these two plays as precursors to Afrofuturism is to prove that Afrofuturism has a longer history than what I thought it did. I identified this by going back to the early twentieth century. I discovered it initially in a twenty-first century play, *Afromemory*, and from this analysis, it proves that some works in Afrofuturism predate the naming of the style by scholars. I analyze an Afrofuturist film to map out the connections between Black films and Black plays that share Afrofuturist features. This argument proves the expansion of Afrofuturism as a dramatic genre and shows my contribution to the field at large as my work contributes to Afrofuturist theatre.

In this chapter, I pinpoint the presence of key features of Afrofuturism in a select few twentieth century and twenty-first century works for, by, and about Black women. I

focus on the Black female protagonist and the theme of Sankofa. I investigate Black female protagonists because it shows how Black women authors and playwrights have been contributing to Afrofuturism and using their work to contribute to the representation of the Black female body. I do this by analyzing Butler's *Wild Seed* and Hopkinson's *Brown Girl in the Ring* to evidence the positive depiction of Black women in these two works. I then analyze *The Mojo and the Sayso* and *The Purple Flower* to prove how these plays are precursors to Afrofuturism and to additionally pinpoint how the Sankofa principle guides Black women characters through their given circumstances and pushes them toward a happier future. Analyzing these works allowed me to see that Black female playwrights and authors have been contributing to Afrofuturism for centuries. I then examine one twenty-first century work, which is *Wakanda Forever* (2022) starring Letitia Wright as Shurri and Angela Bassett as Ramonda. I analyze this film to show readers that they may have already been familiar with the genre and style in film, but my focus is about this style in drama for, by, and about Black women. This film also provides an example of the positive self-image of Black women and include the key features of Afrofuturism as well.

An important feature of Afrofuturism is the Sankofa principle; however, the presence of the Sankofa principle alone does not make the work Afrofuturist. Lavender III states, "Afrofuturism looks to the past to move forward the aspirations of an entire race in all of its cultural complexities" (2). Afrofuturism "look[ing] to the past to move forward" is an example of Sankofa. Two features of Afrofuturism, a connection to the past (one's history and culture), and a vision of the future, stand firmly with the theme of Sankofa that is represented in Afrofuturist dramas. Afrofuturism works hand in hand with

Sankofa as they support the strong stance on “mov[ing] forward” “an entire race.” This is what makes the Sankofa principle so important to Afrofuturism and this theme is seen in the twentieth century and twenty-first century novels, plays, and film(s) I will explore.

### Twentieth Century Afrofuturist Novels By Black Women

Science fiction novels by Black women offer Black female readers a chance to gain awareness of the stereotypes and cultural perspectives put onto their Black female body. In *Literary Afrofuturism in the Twenty-First Century*, Lavender III and Yaszek state, “Through imaginative works, [Black female writers] offer spaces for black women and other readers to inhabit, new dimensions of consciousness, and innovative new narratives to interrogate family, race, gender, class, and identity” (38). Through the various stories, readers can see that the work “offer[s] spaces for black women” and makes sure that Black women audiences and characters share perspectives involving “new dimensions of consciousness and innovative new narratives”. This perspective is apparent in Nalo Hopkinson’s *Brown Girl in the Ring* and Octavia E. Butler’s *Wild Seed*. Although both writers classify their pieces as science fiction, I classify these novels as Afrofuturist.

An example of a Black female science fiction writer’s work that centers Black female experience by featuring Black female protagonists is Nalo Hopkinson’s *Brown Girl in the Ring*. Her novel shares the theme of Sankofa and includes features of Afrofuturism through a captivating, fantastical, and magical story about an Afro-Caribbean woman named Ti-Jeanne. This protagonist is faced with the obstacle of controlling her visions and her self- and cultural identity. Ti-Jeanne’s feelings toward her circumstances were that she “hated the visions” (Hopkinson 9). Her grandmother, Mami

Gros-Jeanne, teaches her granddaughter how to control her powers, with which, if it is achieved, she can minimize the pain and confusion she feels as she receives the “hated... visions.” Mami Gros-Jeanne teaches her granddaughter that a component of controlling her vision is through a connection to her ancestors. Through Ti-Jeanne’s process of self-conception, she often asked her grandmother about the names of her ancestors, and when it was time for her to call out to them, she did so confidently. She confided in her mother, which was initially a futurist technological device that Ti-Jeanne’s grandfather transferred her mothers’ body into. She exclaimed to her assumed deceased mother, known as Jab-Jab, that she couldn’t keep giving her will into other people’s hands, “I have to decide what I want to do for myself” (Hopkinson 220). It was directly after this declaration that she developed self-conception and continued to reach out to her ancestors:

Papa Legbara, my Eshu! Come down, come down and help your daughter...all you children; every one Rudy kill to feed he duppy bowl—come and let we stop he from making another one! Dunston! And Mami! And Mi-Jeanne! Melba, you come, too! Climb the pole, allyou; climb the pole! (Hopkinson 221)

Ti-Jeanne forges a connection to her past through her awareness of her ancestors. The fantastical element is represented in this piece when she asks her loved ones to “come down and help” her by defeating the antagonist, her grandfather Rudy. As the ancestors “climb[ed] the pole,” “Ti-Jeanne’s head felt stuffed full. She could hear the rhythm of the blood vessels in her brain, pounding like drums” (222). This description of her “hear[ing] the rhythm of the blood vessels in her brain” suggests that there is a presence within her body, as her grandmother, mother, and other ancestors crossed from the land of the dead to the land of the living to assist her through her journey toward self-actualization. Through Ti-Jeanne’s character, Hopkinson’s fictional and fantastical work brilliantly

represents a Black woman who goes on a journey of envisioning a version of the person she wants to be.

Octavia E. Butler's *Wild Seed* is another example of a novel that contributes to Afrofuturism. Butler's work exhibits the features of Afrofuturism and the depiction of Black female characters creating a better version of themselves for their future. Butler's novel includes a depiction of the past, present, and future as this story includes the fantastical element by bringing readers to the edge of their seats in anticipation of what is going to happen next. The magical story unravels about lovers who live in what seems to be multiple versions of reality. Readers see a journey of Black immortals, Anyanwu and Doro. The Black female character, Anyanwu, embarks on a journey to define her destiny after being faced with an obstacle she could not control. The obstacle is Doro's tight grasp on her. Before developing her sense of self, Anyanwu often changed her appearance to fit in with the time period because each decade presented danger and "every change she made in her body had to be understood and visualized" (65). Anyanwu could metamorphize by consuming any creature and molding herself into that form. After being fed a whale, Anyanwu expressed to Doro her desire to turn into the whale so that she could interact with the sea creatures. However, Doro responded, "Shall I let you do this?" This response "startled her" because "it had not occurred to her that he would disapprove" (94). Doro's control impacted Anyanwu's ability to comfortably see a version of herself where she could live freely as any creature she wanted to be.

Anyanwu represents Sankofa as her character uses the connections to her past and present for more than a century to protect her descendants from Doro and to envision a better future for herself and her descendants. Her goal was to create a family that she

could care for and love longer than the typical human lifespan, and she believed she could create children like this with Doro. For Anyanwu to reach her goal, she continued to embody various forms to develop herself. Anyanwu begins her journey toward individual development by accepting her true form in the presence of Doro. She takes the form she is most comfortable in and tells Doro that this is her true form “as I would always be if I did not age or change myself for others” (Butler 21). Despite her efforts to gain a healthy self-conception, Doro finds ways to hurt Anyanwu; however, she becomes stronger and determined to be free despite the death of her descendants at the hands of Doro. Butler’s representation of Anyanwu gives readers a chance to see a version of the future where a Black woman embraces obstacles and keeps pushing forward to create her future.

### Twentieth Century Plays By Black Women

Marita Bonner’s *The Purple Flower* is an Afrofuturist play because it includes all the key features of Afrofuturism, even though it was written before the term Afrofuturism was coined. This piece includes features of Afrofuturism and presents readers with an imaginative view of possibilities as the theme of hope is expressed through the characters. In Bonner’s play, individuals, called the Us, escape being trapped below the characters called the Sundry White Devils. A fantastical element is the play’s indeterminate setting: “Time: The Middle-of-Things-as-They-Are. (Which means the End-of-Things for some of the characters and the Beginning-of-Things for others.) Place: Might be here, there or anywhere—or even nowhere” (1). This work undertakes an imaginative journey “anywhere—or even nowhere,” offering a forward view of the various possibilities of reality and looking at the past to look toward the future.

In *The Purple Flower*, a Black female character, The Old Lady, faces obstacles and represents the Sankofa principle through her journey. The Sundry White Devils live on the upper section of the stage, while the Us live in the lower section. Throughout the story, the Us make efforts to find a way to reach the upper section, as the White Devils continuously prevent them from getting to the flower that is almost within their reach “up on the hillside” (4). To reach their goal, the Us read books written by the White Devils about how to get to the flower. However, the readings do not help because the White Devils “aren’t going to put anything like that in there!” (6). The Old Lady realizes, through the support of the ancestors, that the Us can gain freedom. The Old Lady recalls a dream of “a White Devil cut in six pieces” (8). The Old Man takes this as a sign from the ancestors to try again to reach the purple flower, and he instructs one of the Us to bring him an iron pot for a ritual (8). The Us call out to the ancestors, “Old Us! Old Us! Old Us that are gone, Old Us that are dust do you hear me?” (9). The visions the Old Woman had while they called out connect her to her ancestors and allow her to envision her future. She praises the higher powers for guidance, saying, “Yes. A handful of dust! [I am] Thanking God I could do something if it was nothing but make a handful of dust!” (10). The power from the ancestors adds to The Old Lady being able to move forward, which clearly supports the Sankofa principle. Bonner then writes the following stage directions: “All the Us listen. All the valley listens. Nowhere listens. All the White Devils listen. Somewhere listens.... Is it time?” (14). The open-ended “Is it time?” suggests that the Us, specifically The Old Lady, has taken the opportunity to use her past so that she can then move towards the future. This question can open up a range of possibilities for The Old Lady, such as her being able to envision a version of herself she wants.

Aishah Rahman's *The Mojo and the Sayso* is another example of a play that I consider Afrofuturist even though it was written before the term was coined. The play takes place in the living room of a Black family called the Benjamins. The Black female protagonist, Awilda, grieves the murder of her son, Linus, and his death represents her disconnection from the past. Acts, Awilda's husband, grieves by building a car in the middle of the living room throughout the play. One of the various magical elements appears at the end of the play when "the car headlights" magically blink, "the motor" runs, and "the horn" honks (319). However, this does not aid Awilda's process towards self-conception. As Awilda recalls memories of Linus's life with Acts, she finally snaps in agony, "I want you to stop...time... now. Turn time back in its track. Make time go back to when Linus was alive...Turn back time! Stop! Time! Stop!" (298). Awilda's request for Acts to control time suggests that through Awilda's grieving process, the death of her son is holding her back from developing who she is and who she was before her son died. This aspect was especially clear in the moments when Awilda tries to maintain a connection to her dead son. To maintain this relationship, she lights candles in the living room to represent Linus's life. When the candle was lit, Awilda would wallow in the grief. However, throughout the chaos, the candle got blown out and Awilda took this moment to sing a song, which allowed her to sing about church and God, block out what was happening around her, and forget for one moment, about the death of Linus. The connection to the past that Awilda sustains through the candles is the very essence that was holding Awilda back from developing her self-conception. A stage direction states, "Awilda is lighting all the candles as if to revive him" (312). Awilda had to discover that she doesn't have to wallow in the past, rather she can hold onto the past, to



move forward. It wasn't until the end of the play, when the candle was not lit, where Awilda was able to convince her family to embrace the obstacles, the grief, and all the bad things that happened to move toward a version of the future she desires.

This story shows a Black family, specifically the Black female character, journeying towards self-actualization. Awilda and Acts were given a government check as “Payment for Wrongful Death.” Awilda decided to give the check to the pastor's church; however, Blood, the older son, and Acts disapproved of this decision because of their accusation of the pastor taking money from other members of the church. Acts and Blood demand that the pastor reveal himself, and it turns out that he is a mythical creature, a vulture who preys on the dead. Awilda falls into Acts and Blood's arms, encouraging Acts to tell her what happened the night Linus died. Acts finally tells the story and the car magically turns on, as if the family received just what they needed—to remember the past, instead of trying to forget. Acts tells the family, “Come with me. Mojo can take us anyplace. Mojo will get you through...you won't have to worry your head about nothing” (320). His words bring a sense of peace, freedom, and calmness as they drive straight through the door. Awilda began her process of healing and recovered a sense of self after her devastating loss. By connecting to the past, Awilda discovered a version of the future she was happy with, but she could not self-actualize until she got her son and husband to embrace the memories of the past.

*The Purple Flower* and *The Mojo and the Sayso* are examples of Afrofuturist plays written specifically by and about Black women, as they represent one's past and future through ancestral connections. Awilda, in *The Mojo and the Sayso*, maintains a connection to her past through her family by getting them to embrace the death of her

son, Linus. The Old Lady/Old Woman in *The Purple Flower* gains a connection to her ancestors through her dreams and becomes self-actualized by completing the ritual with the rest of the Us. These works contribute to Afrofuturism because they present a vision for the Black female characters to imagine a version of the future by connecting to their past. Sankofa is a common theme in both works and this can be identified in other works as well.

### A Twenty-First Century Film

An example of a well-known science fiction film is *Wakanda Forever*, starring Letitia Wright as Shuri and Angela Bassett as Ramonda. *Wakanda Forever* is the second film adaptation from the *Black Panther* graphic novel by Stan Lee and Jack Kirby. This film includes a reconnection to the past in a journey toward awareness of self. For Shuri, T'Challa's sister, to become a Black Panther who is a more prepared ruler with compassion, she had to not only access the ancestral plane to create a connection to her ancestors, but she also had to embrace her resistance to questioning her culture's religion. The Heart-Shaped Herb is a key component to accessing the Ancestral Plane and Shuri sets out to recreate it. The many fantastical and magical elements in this story aided Shuri's ability to form a healthy self-conception. For example, there were elements such as the act of her successfully recreating a printed version of the Heart-Shaped Herb to let the herb "give [her] the strength of the Black Panther and take [her] to the Ancestral Plane" (*Wakanda Forever*, 01:52:31-40). This idea of getting the "strength of the Black Panther" and bringing her "to the Ancestral Plane" before becoming a leader/ruler suggests that this world is not only about her, as Wakanda grieves too and needs a protector as well. After Queen Ramonda's untimely death, it was clear that Shuri was

familiar with the process of crossing over to the Ancestral Plane, and she wanted to cross to gain a connection to her deceased family, alter her self-conception, and be empowered for rulership. However, when Shuri arrived to the Ancestral Plane, she was met by N'Jadaka, her cousin, instead of her mom. It was as if her consciousness was telling her that she was not ready to move forward. N'Jadaka informs her that her mind chose him because she “didn't believe the Ancestral Plane was real” (*Wakanda Forever*, 01:54:33-35), which suggests she needed to develop her cultural identity based on her disbelief in her families' religious traditions.

*Wakanda Forever* provides a notable example of the Black female character developing her sense of self. Queen Ramonda makes strides to get Shuri to become aware of her ancestral guidance. Before she died, she led Shuri's process toward self-conception. Queen Ramonda informed Shuri of the support she could receive from her ancestors. Queen Ramonda exclaims, “Burning the funeral garments marks the end of the mourning period and the beginning of a new relationship with our loved ones that have passed on” (*Wakanda Forever*, 00:25:52-26:02). Queen Ramonda sustains a connection with her ancestors and even her deceased son through her declaration to her daughter that Shuri could work towards the “beginning of a new relationship” with their “loved ones that have passed on.” After Ramonda's death at the hands of Namor, the King of an unknown Kingdom in the Underworld, Shuri begins to feel the weight of her grief and determines to kill Namor. Just before she is about to kill him, Shuri envisions her mother telling her to “Show him who you are” (*Wakanda Forever*, 02:18:43-47) and she decides to make a truce with him. This truce offers them both a chance to work together so both the Wakandans and Tolokans can live. It is Ramonda's guidance to embrace her past that

gives Shuri the courage to become aware of envisioning a future where she is the new Black Panther.

The twentieth century plays I've analyzed by Black women predate Afrofuturism. In my research of plays by Black women, I have been able to find very few that meet the criteria of including the key features of Afrofuturism. The only ones I have been able to find to date are *The Purple Flower* (1928) and *The Mojo and the Sayso* (1988). These plays contain the characteristics I've identified as Afrofuturist, thus I classify these works as Afrofuturist dramas. Despite the fact that *The Mojo and the Sayso* is based off a real-life event from the 80's and *The Purple Flower* is a one-act written in the 1920s, both these plays have elements that make them Afrofuturist. I analyzed these works to prove that these pieces fit into this category of being an Afrofuturist drama even though these works were written before the term Afrofuturism was created.

The twenty-first century film, *Wakanda Forever*, contributes to the genre of Afrofuturism and stars a Black woman; however, it was not written, produced, or directed by Black women. *Wakanda Forever* was instead written by Robert Coogler and Joe Robert Cole. It was also directed by Ryan Coogler and produced by Kevin Feige, Nate Moore, and Kyana F. Davidson. Therefore, this film was written, produced, and directed by a crew of Black and White men. While the film centers on Black women, the production team is not centered on Black women. What I instead address is a live performance of a play in Afrofuturist theatre. This is distinct from my study, which is instead focused on Afrofuturist plays by, for, and about Black women.

## CHAPTER TWO

### PLAY ANALYSIS OF *AFROMEMORY*

*Afromemory* was initially a ten-minute play, and the one-act script was first produced in 2018 by the FRESHH Incorporated Theatre Company (Powell). Much like approaching a non-Afrofuturist play, actors working on an Afrofuturist play such as *Afromemory* can look at the play itself to create a foundation for building a character. For example, this play, set in 2269, portrays the perspective of a Black woman envisioning her future. There are various aspects of *Afromemory* that combine to make-up the play such as the plot, the characters, the genre of the play, the style, and any other background information. To explore how an actor can approach the embodiment of an Afrofuturist character, I first provide an analysis of *Afromemory*.

This chapter will include an analysis of Powell's drama, *Afromemory* to investigate how a Black female actor can approach the embodiment of an Afrofuturist character in preparation for rehearsals and performances. This kind of analytical work is needed to embody an Afrofuturist character in Afrofuturist theatre. In my analysis, I first provide a breakdown of the characters, their relationship to the main character, and each character's objective. Then I give a synopsis of the play and identify the moments where Sarah B. took strides toward reclaiming her destiny. I share details from an interview I conducted with Teshonne Powell, the playwright of *Afromemory*, and discuss the journey Sarah B. undergoes to further share the representation of Sankofa. I then identify Sarah B.'s journey to self-actualization. I identify the climax of the play to get readers to see

how the Sankofa principle is represented in this piece. Lastly, I explore the genre of the play and the style of the UofL 2022 production to provide background information of *Afromemory*. I discuss elements from the play and detail how the play was transferred to the stage. The discussion of the production's aesthetic allows readers to see the documented process of working on an Afrofuturist drama in Afrofuturist theatre.

The central component of this play analysis is the theme of *Afromemory*, which aimed to propel Sarah B. toward self-actualizing. I had the pleasure of interviewing Teshonne Powell, an emerging playwright, during rehearsals for the UofL 2022 production. In the Zoom interview, Powell described how Sarah B. went on a journey to self-actualization by reclaiming her power. She shared her interpretation of the theme of *Afromemory*: "There is this world that exists where people are made to forget where they came from, quite literally. And so it's all about kind of grabbing...taking that power back" (Powell). Powell's reference to "taking that power back" is seen in *Afromemory* with Sarah B.'s character when she is on the cusp of pushing past "this world that exists where people are made to forget where they came from." In Scene 5, Sarah B. made the difficult decision to go against her government and forge her own path. She decided to send a signal to a friend that says she would like to proceed in getting the Ancestral Memory Procedure. Sarah B.'s quick decision helped her to connect to her ancestors, which led her to reclaim her power.

#### The Characters and Plot of *Afromemory*

Teshonne Powell's *Afromemory* (2018) includes characters that have specific wants and some characters' objectives differ from the protagonists'. The characters are Sarah B., a young Black woman who embarks on a journey to discover who she is and

where she came from; John, a young Black man who goes on a journey to get individuals like Sarah B. to discover who they are and where they come from; and Sarah S., a young Black woman who is Sarah B.'s roommate. She wants to get partnered and "out of Single-Living Status" (33) as the government wants citizens to do. Imani Nina and La'Nia Rose are ancestors who want Sarah B. to journey toward discovering who she is and where she comes from. Alexa is an Artificial Intelligence device that gathers information, enforces rules, and works for the government. Alexa wants all citizens to follow the governments' guidelines. Lastly, the Server is a young Black man who secretly works with John so that he can help liberate the citizens who want to be liberated.

*Afromemory's* seven-scene Afrofuturist structure helps accent the theme, which is reclaiming one's culture through the process of Sankofa. In the first four scenes, Sarah B. takes strides toward learning about her past. Scene One, entitled "Imani Nina," starts with Imani Nina talking about the issues of race in the world of the play. She details how race was removed and individuals are now referred to as Brown-hue and non-hue. She also talks about how the government removed her eggs and she states that she is Sarah B.'s ancestor. Right before Sarah B. walks into the scene, Imani Nina shares how she hopes that Sarah B. will make a life-changing decision when the time comes, to set things back right (4). In Scene Two, entitled, "The Sarahs," Sarah B. begins her journey of reclaiming her culture when she prepares for her date with John. Fast forwarding to Scene Three, entitled "The Date," Sarah B. meets up with John and he immediately jumps into what drew him to her profile. John pointed out Sarah B.'s mentioning of "the man" (11), which led to an important topic of "deep reading." Individuals that want to learn about their past

make the choice to commit the illegal act of deep reading. According to the play, “deep reading” is the act of searching the web for information that is forbidden to citizens. It gets revealed that John is married and that Sarah B. was deep reading at work, which sparks John’s pitch of getting Sarah B. to undergo the Ancestral Memory Procedure. Within this pitch, John tells her that the government has been feeding lies to citizens about “the Memory Riots of 2241” (14) and the Ancestral Memory Procedure. It turns out that the riots started out as a healing circle and John presents a photo of proof that the government initiated the riot. In Scene Four, entitled, “La’Nia Rose,” La’Nia Rose appears and reminisces about her grandchildren and her hopes for them to tell stories of their history to their children. She ends her monologue by saying that “something in [Sarah B.] called me. I don’t think she knows it yet, but she’s calling all of us [ancestors]” (21).

In the last three scenes, Sarah B. connects to her past to look toward her future. In Scene Five, entitled “Contemplation,” Sarah B.’s state of shock after the date leaves her sitting and pondering on the slew of information she gathered from John. She then receives a voicemail from her boss, in which he states that they have discovered unauthorized deep reading on their archives. Sarah B. contemplates the punishment she would receive for committing this illegal act and contemplates undergoing the Ancestral Memory Procedure. Sarah B. opens her matchmaker app and signals to John, that she has decided to participate in the Ancestral Memory Procedure. In Scene Six, entitled “Lunch,” Sarah B. goes to meet John at “a well-hidden medical facility” (26) in the basement of the restaurant where they met for their first date. Here Sarah B. undergoes the procedure that will allow her access to the memories of her ancestors. Imani Nina and



La’Nia Rose watch Sarah B. sleep on the bed in the basement after the Procedure. She twitches and stirs as the ancestors talk about the resilience in their blood and the positive changes that can happen for Black people if they remember their past. Sarah B. wakes up and tells John of the visions she has had when she was under. She recounts glimpses of her ancestors’ memories, which include “A rose bush...burning. A cross, burning. Crying. Heat. Screaming...” (29). John then prepares Sarah B. on the steps necessary to disappear and live with other people that have undergone the Ancestral Memory Procedure. In Scene Seven entitled “Goodbye,” as Sarah B.’s ancestors watch, Sarah B. arrives back home and immediately decides to pack a bag. While she frantically packs, Sarah S. walks in and confronts Sarah B. about missing work and displaying symptoms of the procedure. When Sarah S. attempts to alert the government through Alexa, Sarah B. pleads to Sarah S. to let her leave before reporting it. Amid Sarah B. pleading with her roommate, Sarah B. receives memories from her ancestors. Sarah B. visualizes the memory of her ancestor’s lover being “beaten within an inch of his life right in front of her” (36). After witnessing the horrifying stories of her past from her ancestors’ point of view, Sarah B. begins to tell Sarah S. the information she has been given so far from John and from the ancestors’ memories. Sarah B. informs Sarah S. that she is Black and she feels a sense of wholeness and completion, as she knows she has “a million ancestors that can tell me who I am and where I came from” (45). Sarah B. carries on with her decision to leave to be closer to individuals that have undergone the procedure and exits the space. Imani Nina sees this and says, “It begins” (46). Sarah B.’s ancestor saw that Sarah B. had successfully connected to her past and she now is able to look toward the possibilities of her future.

## Sarah B.'s Journey to Self-Actualization

In my interview with the playwright of *Afromemory*, Powell talks about the creation of Sarah B. and I realized that Powell's creation of this character promotes Sarah B.'s journey toward self-actualization. Powell talks specifically about the missing component that drives Sarah B. to fill a void in her life. She explains the process of creating Sarah B.'s character:

The main character is struggling with...an identity crisis, in which she is doing all the right things, she is considered a good citizen. She goes to work, she makes her money, and she pays her bills, all of those things. But there is still something that is missing from her life. There is still something that is nagging her...I am doing all I can, but for some reason, in my heart, it doesn't feel like there is enough for me. And so, that is kind of what I kind of poured into the character Sarah B. (Powell)

The "missing" or "nagging" aspect is Sarah B.'s "identity crisis." There were more moments of "in my heart, it doesn't feel like there is enough for me" than I am "doing all the right things" and I am "a good citizen." Sarah B. gained awareness of what was prescribed onto her by society. She felt like something was not right and took steps to fill in the holes. The first step Sarah B. took was to create a unique bio on her profile for the matchmaker app, which is run by the government. Her profile reads, "loves chocolate, puppies, deep house. Hue: Mahogany 43 in the winter. Mahogany 49 in the summer. Currently working for the man at Unlimited Media Magazine..." (11). The mention of "the man" shows Sarah B.'s awareness of government oppression as this statement challenges the identity the society has given citizens, like being referred to as Brown-hue or non-hue. Sarah B.'s statement alerted John that she might be willing to learn more about her history. John asked her to rate the date higher than a seven on the dating app to signal that she wanted to undergo the Ancestral Memory Procedure. She says, "It was the

worst date I've been on in years...8—out—of—10" (26). Sarah B. yearned for something more and she used her desire for more as a drive toward envisioning a version of the future where she can control her own destiny.

In our interview, Powell stated that Sankofa was a huge part of creating the characters in *Afromemory*. Powell said the overarching theme of the play "is the concept of Sankofa. The ability to be able to take a look at your past and maybe the past of those who came before you to withhold or hold onto certain lessons that will lead to your survival as a person." The Southern Illinois University, School of Africana and Multicultural Studies, shares an image of the Sankofa Bird on its website. In this picture, the bird is "twisting its beak behind itself, in order to bring forth an egg from its back" (About the Sankofa Bird). Additionally, the website explains that "the word Sankofa can be translated to mean, go back to the past and bring forward that which is useful" (About the Sankofa Bird). The idea of "bring[ing] forth an egg from its back" is what Powell examined when she mentioned "the ability to be able to look at your past...to withhold or hold onto certain lessons that will lead to your survival." Sarah B. allowed her present awareness of her past to positively inform her future, when she states at the end of the play, "I can't be a part of this anymore" (45). With her newly developed self-identity she made sure to be a part of the few "who are seeking to understand...ourselves...this world...the man" (17). After Sarah B. underwent the Ancestral Memory Procedure, she tapped into her ancestors' memories by "go[ing] back to the past" and created a new identity for herself by "bring[ing] forward" her ancestors' memories. Sarah B. remembered "distant memories, memories that are mine, but aren't mine" (39). Sarah B.

was able to discover and hold onto the memories of her past so that she could work towards a positive vision of her future.

Sarah B. took a chance on the Ancestral Memory Procedure, which marked the crisis of the play. This procedure indicates how Sankofa was represented in this play. The procedure benefitted her journey to discover who she is and where she came from. As the procedure's name suggests, it is a process performed to help individuals gain memories from their ancestors. By doing this procedure, Sarah B. could see memories through her "ancestors' eyes" (15), which allowed her to envision a more self-fulfilling future. The Ancestral Memory Procedure enables Sarah B. to push past the ideologies and social prescriptions placed on citizens by the government to become fully aware of her past and "more whole" (45). I define "awareness" as being "open or receptive to both internal states and external conditions" (Desi 112). The world in which the characters exist inhibits "receptiv[ity]" because any talk about one's history and participating in the Ancestral Memory Procedure is considered illegal and the individual can be punished by being sent to "prison" or even "killed" (41). Sarah B. pushed past what she had been told by experiencing the procedure and thereby connecting to her ancestors.

#### The Genre and Style of *Afromemory*

*Afromemory* includes all the key features of Afrofuturism described in the Introduction; therefore, I classify this piece as an Afrofuturist drama. The representation of Sarah B., a central Black female character in a futuristic setting, is consistent with the focus on Black female experience that is in the other Afrofuturist pieces I analyzed in Chapter One. Sarah B. also undergoes self-actualization, connects to her past, and envisions her future after accessing the Ancestral Memory Procedure. Lastly, this play is

fantastical because the Ancestral Memory Procedure allows individuals to reconnect to their history by literally viewing their ancestors' past through their eyes.

As called for in the script, the style of UofL's 2022 production of *Afromemory* was fantastical. The designers and director followed the script and added advanced technology to fit the futuristic technological setting. For example, there were many references of individuals walking in and out of rooms in the script, so the production created a futuristic door to uphold this illusion as actors entered and exited. In the production, the procedure was executed as a ritual that included the ancestors. The specifics of the Ancestral Memory Procedure were not written out in the script, though Burton envisioned and directed the Ancestral Memory Procedure as a ritual. There were also references to characters talking on the phone. The costume designers, Melissa Shepherd and Zhanna Goldentul, created a futuristic way to achieve this goal, where a phone could be accessed from the top of the skin of an individual's hand. The script also indicates Alexa as a listening device that sits on a piece of furniture in the home. However, Burton cast a Black female actor as Alexa, thus making the device humanoid. Burton's vision of the production with the help of the tech team and the script, magnified the fantastical elements of *Afromemory*.

After analyzing the script, the details of Sarah B.'s process toward self-actualization, and the details of the productions aesthetic, I realized that this type of analytical work is needed to embody an Afrofuturist character in performance. As an actor working in Afrofuturist theatre, the work in this chapter helped me better understand the development of Sarah B. I was able to take the indications from the script and work those aspects into the development of my Afrofuturist character. There are

other components, such as Sarah B.'s textual and inferred elements that contributed to the development and embodiment of Sarah B. In the next chapter I will address those elements and detail my process of embodying an Afrofuturist character.

## CHAPTER THREE

### CHARACTER ANALYSIS AND EMBODIMENT OF SARAH B.

I advocate that Black female actors should use the resources I offer regarding analyzing and performing an Afrofuturist character when working on an Afrofuturist play. This relates to my project as a whole because I discovered there is a lack of resources for performing in Afrofuturism. I used the resources I gained from my graduate program and resources I learned after the completion of my first draft. Through performing in Afrofuturism, it took my case study of performing an Afrofuturist character and multiple drafts of my thesis for me to discover how my past can help me in life as an artist and as an individual. The consideration of my past propels me forward to now have the awareness to prepare for what my future may hold. The analysis offered in this chapter contributes to my field at large because it can assist Black female actors with performing their Afrofuturist character when they are working with an Afrofuturist drama like *Afromemory*.

In this chapter, I analyze Sarah B.'s objectives, tactics, and obstacles in Powell's *Afromemory*. I then introduce textual provided and inferred elements of Sarah B. to further evidence how I crafted this Afrofuturist character in preparation for the production. These elements are Sarah B.'s relationship to the other characters, personality and values. I then explore my process of rehearsing and performing Sarah B. by sharing warm-ups and techniques I utilized. I used exercises from Polatin's *The Actor's Secret*

and essays in Luckett and Shaffer's *Black Acting Methods* to gain the physical, emotional, and vocal awareness to perform Sarah B. There is no documentation of the physical, emotional, and vocal manifestation of a Black female actor performing an Afrofuturist character in Afrofuturism. Therefore, I share voice-recorded documentation of my process to share my initial reaction to the challenges I faced. Lastly, I investigate Thomas' *Barbara Ann Teer and the National Black Theatre* to pinpoint acting techniques that focuses on Black characters and experiences. I discovered that the elements of Teer's work are rooted in the same elements that Sarah B. was rooted in.

The techniques I've analyzed from *The Actor's Secret* and *Barbara Ann Teer and the National Black Theatre* have existed before *Afromemory* was published. Actors in all genres use Polatin's work as a basic, fundamental, grounding technique and her work was specifically valuable for my journey as Sarah B. Having been first exposed to Polatin's work in my undergraduate studies, I later was reminded of her work during my graduate training here at UofL. Though, with Teer's work, her techniques have been used for many years and her work acts as a resource for people working in all genres. I did not know about this work beforehand because in my undergraduate education, there were never classes that were offered to promote Blackness, Black culture, Black perspective, or the Black body. UofL has allowed me to learn techniques I had never been exposed to before. Polatin's work helped me develop Sarah B. and Teer's work could have benefitted my character development.

#### Sarah B.'s Objectives, Tactics, and Obstacles

As I approached Sarah B.'s character, I used the script itself as the core of developing and embodying her character for the stage. Just like human beings, there are



many components that drive characters to do what they set out to do and there can be many routes that characters can take to achieve their goal. It is up to the actor to discover how to get their character to reach their goal. The use of the script can help actors pinpoint the elements from the character that can be applied to the exploration on the stage. Once an actor learns the essence of their character, they can then find ways to live as the character reaches their goal(s).

Sarah B. displays two objectives in *Afromemory*. Sarah B.'s first objective or main goal is to find a piece of herself that is missing, which turns out to be her heritage and culture. She tells Sarah S. that "there is something inside me...that knows I was something more" (45). She sets out to become aware of being "something more" than what her government assigned her to be. Her secondary goal is to get her roommate to see the mistreatment they are experiencing from their government. For example, Sarah B. recognized that Sarah S. was a "goody," which refers to a citizen believing only what the government tells them, as opposed to discovering things on their own. Sarah B. was informing Sarah S. the truth of what their society calls the "Dark Period," which was "Slavery, genocide, murder, terrorism, racism. Things the government sanctioned, supported, aided, was complicit in.... You're a goody. You won't get it. Look, I made a choice, now you make a choice, and...that's it" (44). After this moment of explaining the magnitude of what was erased by their "government" to form their society, Sarah B. made the disheartening discovery that Sarah S. was incapable of understanding or even believing the truth from her, stating, "You're a goody. You won't get it." Sarah B. realized there was no hope for Sarah S. because she could not grasp the obstacles the government placed on her Black body, as she had not received the Ancestral Memory

Procedure. The dominant culture of this artificial world had conditioned women like Sarah B. and Sarah S. to refrain from any knowledge of the past. The Ancestral Memory Procedure gave Sarah B. the knowledge to understand the erased perspective of race and identity. However, Sarah B. realized that Sarah S. had to discover the truth on her own. Sarah B.'s objectives govern her actions for the entire play and later in this chapter, I will analyze the positive impact of Sarah B.'s objectives on my process.

Through rehearsals and performances, the tactics I used for Sarah B. helped me tap into the steps she takes to reach her goal. Some tactics I manifested towards the beginning of the play were *to remember her past, to search for the truth, to admonish Sarah S., and to confide in John and Sarah S.* Other tactics I chose for Sarah B. were *to defy the government, to discover the truth, to reject the lies from the government, and to withdraw from the society that is run by the government.* To fully manifest Sarah B. and find moments of discovery, I explored these various tactics. These actions drove Sarah B.'s character forward through her journey.

As Sarah B. went on her journey, there were obstacles that impeded her discoveries, which were the opposing figures in the play. The government is one of Sarah B.'s obstacles and an antagonistic force in the play. The government does not want citizens to remember where they came from or talk about their past. The government makes sure to prevent such discoveries by assigning an opposing figure, Alexa, a surveillance device that is in all spaces to monitor citizens. The government's attempt to hide information from citizens impedes Sarah B.'s journey to discover the truth and fill in the missing components about herself and her past. Even though Sarah B. risks being severely punished by the government she defies the law to discover the truth.

Sarah S., at times, acted as an opposing force for Sarah B. The relationship that Sarah B. had with Sarah S. sometimes impeded her journey. For example, her roommate, Sarah S. believes in the information the government feeds to citizens, and she enforces them as well. When Sarah B. was experiencing symptoms from the Ancestral Memory Procedure, Sarah B. asked Sarah S. to turn the device off so that she could speak freely to her. Sarah S responds, “I can’t turn her off. That’s illegal” (38). Sarah S. repeatedly reminds Sarah B. of the government’s rules, which at times stalls Sarah B. in her pushing past the rules and discovering herself.

#### Facts About Sarah B.

The relationship that Sarah B. had with John aided her journey. John and Sarah B.’s relationship begins with her expecting a date with a potential future partner. However, when she meets up with John, she is thrown a curveball when she discovers his intention of recruiting her to the side where “there are those of us who find within it the very answers we were searching for” (Powell 19). John informed Sarah B. of the individuals who undergo the Ancestral Memory Procedure and stated, “Look, I’ll give you some time to think on it. If you decide you want to forget the whole thing, me, all of it, just rate this date as low as you can. You’ll never hear from me again” (Powell 19). Sarah B. was skeptical at first, but soon realized that this was what she wanted. She took an opportunity to undergo the Ancestral Memory Procedure and her relationship with John allowed her to move forward to self-actualization.

Sarah B.’s personality and values are challenged within the script and gets developed into a version of herself that she can be satisfied with. Sarah B. is the type of person who acknowledges the rules and laws set out for citizens but also yearns to

discover and learn more about what she does not know. She is a respectful Black female in her thirties who has a routine of going to work, going on dates in search of a partner, and returning back home. However, the values the government inflicts upon its citizens began to conflict with Sarah B.'s values. For example, a value the government enforced was believing that Alexa was important to citizens' lives. Though, after the procedure, Sarah B. pleaded to Sarah S. to shut the device down and like stated above, Sarah S. denies her request. Sarah B. was gaining memories from the procedure and this moment allowed her to sense that the values of the government no longer coincide with what she believes. Sarah B. decides to rewrite her values to fit the person she desires to be. She tells Sarah S., "Good grief, girl, I knew you were law-abiding, but I didn't realize how much you really believed the bull shit" (Powell 41). She feels so strongly about her decision to break away from the government's grasp that she is willing to accept the possibility of going to prison or being killed just to develop herself. Death and imprisonment are both examples of punishments for committing an illegal act such as talking about/receiving the Ancestral Memory Procedure or turning off the Alexa device.

Sarah B.'s identity and sense of completion is granted to her by her ancestors. After the Ancestral Memory Procedure, Sarah B. shares the memories gleaned from her ancestors with Sarah S. Sarah B. explains that it is because of the ancestral relationship that she feels complete:

There's something inside me. And I think it's in you too. Something inside me, that knows I was something more. I had no strength to figure it out on my own. None at all. But now, I have a million ancestors that can tell me who I am and where I came from and all of a sudden, I feel more whole. The pain? In the course of 7 hours I've had nightmares of being whipped till I passed out, raped till I went limp, beaten within an inch of my life for walking up to a voting booth. But the thing about the pain is, it lets you know you're alive. This world...this world just

wants us to be numb, so we can't even tell the difference between life and death. But there's joy. (Powell 45)

The perspective of "the pain" informing her that she is "alive" allows Sarah B. to feel the sense of empowerment because of her ancestors. Sarah B.'s ancestors echo this positivism, as Sarah B. iterates to Sarah S. that she believes "there's joy" to life. Sarah B.'s ancestors let her see these positive images and their presence pushes her forward. Sarah B. exclaims to Sarah S. that she has "a million ancestors" who can tell her who she is and where she came from. There is a clear distinction between Sarah B. having no strength before connecting to her past and feeling more whole after connecting to her past. This order of events depicts that Sarah B.'s connection to her past has aided her process toward self-actualization.

### Embodying Sarah B.

There are two ways I approached my process of working on *Afromemory* and in my first approach, I realized that Polatin's techniques were authored by a white person. I learned Polatin's warm-ups while in my graduate school program and I learned about my second approach, the Afrocentric work, outside of what was taught in my program. I took courses while in graduate school that pertained to getting comfortable with focusing and improving one's range of movement. *The Actor's Secret* details warm-ups to help an actor gain the awareness they may need when approaching a character. There were various exercises that allowed me to center my character's awareness as Sarah B. connected with her ancestors. Outside of my program, I discovered essays from *Black Acting Methods: Critical Approaches*, edited by Sharrell D. Luckett and Tia M. Shaffer. This book includes various essays written by authors who specialize in Afrocentric work. I found Freddie Hendricks's "The Hendricks Method," an acting technique for Black

performers, and Ritual Poetic Drama (RPD), an activity for Black actors, applies directly to my work on *Afromemory*.

In my process of developing Sarah B.'s character, I found the most useful aspect to be the process of warming up. I utilized Betsy Polatin's *The Actor's Secret* to inform my warmup as I journeyed toward becoming aware of myself and my environment. Polatin trains performers to become aware of their bodies and her work helped me to be physically open to tackle a character ready for restoration. Of the variety of warm-up techniques Polatin provides, I discuss Noticing Your Sensations, Whispered "Ah," Monkey, and Lying-Down Work. These warm-ups helped me to gain vocal and/or physical awareness.

The first warm-up, Noticing Your Sensations, teaches performers how to gain physical awareness before embodying their character. This warm-up teaches performers how to execute a full body scan by sitting down, mentally turning inward, and scanning the body (Polatin 166). For example, by "turn[ing] inward," I was able to clear my mind to overcome various obstacles I faced such as tiredness, frustration, sadness, or being overcritical. Clearing my mind before tackling Sarah B.'s character in a rehearsal or performance space helped me focus my attention on Sarah B.'s objectives, tactics, and obstacles. After I cleared my mind, I noticed a shift of focus on what was happening within my body, such as my pace of breath or my feelings. The goal of this warm-up was to release aspects that might prevent me from tapping fully into the character and on most nights, that goal was achieved. On the nights when I accomplished this goal, I noticed the exploration of the exact moment in which Sarah B. connected to her past and I accessed

how that felt in the moment. I had to mentally prepare to actively listen and react as Sarah B.'s character physically combated her environment.

Noticing Your Sensations was a helpful addition to my practice because it enabled me to become aware of my internal obstacles and deepen my self-conception. For example, one occasion when I was having a bad day, I noted in my vocal journal that "I am a perfectionist, and I am very judgmental of myself... Today's performance, I was not able to feel the same weight in gaining the connection to Sarah B.'s ancestors as I did last night" (Spencer). During the performance, it was as if Sarah B. did not undergo the Ancestral Memory Procedure that day because I let the sensations of Sarah B.'s feelings work against my own. I did not "feel the weight" of Sarah's B.'s past because I had missed my warm-up session, and I did not have total awareness of my body. Despite being overcritical of myself, the next day during my warm-up session, I realized that "I can't beat myself up for that. I can't force something that is not there. I have to find it, discover it, and be confident with the techniques that I am using" (Spencer). For me to "find," "discover," and "be confident" in my characterization, I had to be consistent with my warm-up sessions and include a moment for release. I discovered through rehearsing that I am fully capable of "pushing my limits... to allow a deeper connection" of Sarah B.'s character. I "push[ed] my limits" to discover new ways to play on stage as Sarah B., by going against what I would normally do. After my failed attempt of connecting to Sarah B.'s ancestors, it was clear how this warm-up aided my awareness of traveling toward self-actualization.

The Whispered "Ah" warm-up added to my physical awareness, and it helped me connect to the scripted material. This warm-up begins by sitting comfortably and doing a

full body scan to bring awareness to the body. After performing the scan, the actor inhales and “breathe[s] out with a whispered ‘Ah’ sound” (174). After “breath[ing] out,” Polatin asks, “Can you feel yourself expanding?” (174). The feeling of “expanding” in the ribs offered me a sense of calmness, which helped me center myself and fully connect to Scene Four of *Afromemory*, when Sarah B. subconsciously reaches out to her ancestors. La’Nia Rose, Sarah B.’s ancestor, sensed that “something in her [Sarah B.] called me. I don’t think she knows it yet, but she’s calling all of us” (Powell 21). Sarah B. becomes whole through her relationship with her ancestors, and the sense of Sarah B. feeling complete enabled me to make room for character exploration on the stage.

Polatin’s Monkey warm-up helped me connect to the lower part of my body, which also helped root Sarah B.’s character in her culture and history. The relationship to the ground was essential to my process as Sarah B. underwent the Ancestral Memory Procedure. During rehearsals for the procedure scene, the cast learned a ritual from the Yoruba people, “a set of diverse people united by a common language, culture, and history” (Asikiwe 1). In most African cultures, especially the Yoruban culture, ancestors are called upon from the ground. Polatin’s exercise guides actors to become aware of the basic instructions of body awareness, bend their knees, and pivot forward to create a monkey-like stance (169). According to Polatin, using the entire body is valuable to a performer:

When you ignore your lower body, you tend to stiffen your legs. Thus, you block the impulses that would have you move around the stage. Then you need to convey the story from your head and arms, which is not as complete a performance as you could give if you had access to your whole body connected to the ground. (167)

The Monkey warm-up helped me get my “whole body connected to the ground” as I tried not to “block the impulses” of Sarah B.’s physicality by keeping my knees bent. In



preparation for the performance of the Yoruban ritual used for the Ancestral Memory Procedure scene, I used this warm-up to gain a relationship with Sarah B.'s ancestors. I was able to gain use of my "whole body" as the "lower body" supported the "connection to the ground" and the upper body offered the rest of the physical movement upward and out, thus "access[ing]" the "whole body connected to the ground." Rooting Sarah B. in the Yoruba culture "gave rise to a strong sense of identity, belonging, home, and spiritual connection" (Asikiwe 128). I discovered that through this African dance, I used my body's support to gain a "spiritual connection" that comes from the center of the Earth.

The UofL production's staging of the Ancestral Memory Procedure aided my connection to Sarah B.'s ancestors. During the rehearsal for Scene Six, the director placed me as Sarah B. in a chair and directed the actor playing John to prep Sarah B. for the ritual by sprinkling symbolic water over her head. Professor Burton then instructed Tajleed Hardy, the actor playing John, to draw a straight line down my forehead with chalk while the ensemble performed an Egungun chant, which Professor Burton had us learn for the production. *I Hear Olofi's Song* describes how "Egungun allows you to tap into the awareness of your behavior and bring your Ori to balance" (Quinones 20). Ori refers to "the inner person" or "the 'very essence of [one's] personality'" (Ogunade 49). The Yoruban chant and ritual are used to praise the ancestors. After the chant, Burton instructed me to dance in slow motion while Imani Nina and La'Nia Rose danced at a regular speed. The speed of the movement suggested the ancestors and the living characters were in different times and spaces. The dance and chant helped me to "tap into...[my character's] awareness" and find her "very essence."

Monkey enabled my body to truly react to the ritual through Sarah B.'s body. I was able to allow my body to respond in the truth of the moment and fully connect with Sarah B.'s ancestors. This connection between me as an actor and as the character made it easier to experience Sarah B.'s physical reactions. The chant created an impulse through Sarah B.'s physicality to travel to her ancestors. From the start of the Egungun chant, Sarah B.'s hands jolted simultaneously until she felt the urge to get up and leave her physical body. I felt Sarah B.'s body remain in the chair, while her soul connected to the chant and moved around freely. As a performer, I felt the moment of realization as Sarah B. tapped into self-actualization.

Polatin's Lying-Down Work allowed me to become aware of and release any tension so that I could fully execute Sarah B.'s character (176). The instructions for the exercise tell you to "Lie down on your back...allow your knees to be bent up toward the ceiling...allow your feet to be flat on the floor. Allow your hands to rest on your abdomen. Allow the floor to support you" (178). Throughout the practice, the actor lies on the ground with total "support," and their focus is on breathing and letting go. This release allowed me to fully free my mind, embody the genuineness of Sarah B.'s past, and connect with the character's goal. An example of a moment when this exercise helped me was when La'Nia Rose was talking to Imani Nina about the importance of supporting Sarah B. and she begins to wake up after receiving the Ancestral Memory

Procedure:

I know you're scared. I know what they did to you. I felt it in my soul when they did. But she and we, we're going to make sure they never touch another Black body again. And none of that Brown-hue/non-hue mess. We're BLACK. It's more than a color. If it wasn't, folks wouldn't be here fighting to remember where they came from. (Powell 27)

By referencing “we’re going to make sure they never touch another Black body again,” Sarah B.’s ancestors suggest that this is a mission that Sarah B. is now a part of, in which she is closer to “fighting to remember” who she is and where she comes from. Through the words of support from the ancestors, and the ancestors’ mission to get “Black bod[ies]” to keep “fighting,” I used my lower body to create a stance that was ready to undertake the obstacles Sarah B. faced.

Lying-Down Work enabled me to stay present in the moment despite the social prescriptions Sarah B. faced from her government. This routine of using Lying-Down Work helped me manifest Sarah B. on stage. I documented in my voice journal that “this warm-up is helping me to step in as Sarah B. and choose to let my habitual tendencies go” (Spencer). I became aware of a couple of my physical and vocal habits, such as slapping my hands against my thighs and downward inflecting at the end of every line. This warm-up allowed me to become aware of my habit as an actor and decide to “let my habitual tendencies go.” These habits differed from Sarah B.’s habitual tendencies because her character was restricted toward the beginning of the play due to her choices being limited by the government. After she received the Ancestral Memory Procedure, her character felt free but not to the point where her arms were loose enough to be slapped against her body. I noticed that Sarah B.’s character moved in a spontaneous way, where the words of the text informed what was done next as she listened and reacted in each moment.

Much of Polatin’s work in *The Actor’s Secret* is to become aware of the tensions and allow for preparedness on stage. The Lying-Down warm-up helped me become attentive to the inward and outward shift that Sarah B. experiences. After she received the

Ancestral Memory Procedure, I felt a shift in Sarah B. as she became aware of the government's mistreatment and began to self-actualize. Before receiving the Ancestral Memory Procedure, Sarah B.'s movements were inward. However, once Sarah B. discovered these constructs, her movements gradually transitioned outward with every memory of her past that came to her. It became easier to play Sarah B. after exploring these warm-ups, which relaxed my mind, helped my character development, and brought physical awareness to my character's circumstances from the script.

I used the Hendricks Method as an acting technique to guide my character development. In *Black Acting Methods: Critical Approaches*, editors Sharell Luckett and Tia Shaffer discuss how they trained with Freddie Hendricks, a Black drama teacher and artistic director, "in an acting methodology that is now known as the Hendricks Method" (23). This acting technique was developed to support young Black artists and focuses on becoming attuned to one's spirituality through Afrocentric pieces. Spirituality is described as "the force that puts power behind the messages, the songs, the dances, and the organization itself" (Luckett and Shaffer 27). I used this component to allow the "power behind the messages, the songs, [and] the dances" to inform the discovery of Sarah B.'s spirituality. The method, which "is an amalgamation of empowered authorship, musical bravado, spirituality, ensemble building, activism, effusive reverence of Black culture, and devising" (Luckett and Shaffer 27), aims to bring positivity to the lives of young Black people in the arts because "this type of positivity is critical for minorities, as they encounter a certain set of experiences that include discrimination and prejudices at a very young age" (Luckett and Shaffer 21). I used this work to immerse myself in Sarah B.'s "spirituality" as she connected to her past.

The components of the Hendricks Method include devising (Luckett and Shaffer 23), spirituality (and the circle) (Luckett and Shaffer 26), and hyper-ego (Luckett and Shaffer 29); however, only two of these components, spirituality, and hyper-ego, are relevant to my work done on the script of *Afromemory*. Spirituality and hyper-ego helped me form a positive foundation for manifesting Sarah B. As Sarah B.'s character was rooted in connecting to her ancestors, the work on spirituality brought awareness to Sarah B.'s relationship with her ancestors as beings that are intangible. I tapped into her spirituality through the Egungun Chant. I used this spiritual component to ground Sarah B. during the Ancestral Memory Procedure. Luckett and Shaffer state that "Spirituality brings oneness...it is that same Afrocentric spirituality that causes black artists to remember who they are and where they come from" (27). I developed Sarah B.'s spirituality through the interaction with her ancestors, in which she experiences her ancestors' presence internally.

The hyper-ego component helped me develop Sarah B.'s self-conception and I realized through this work that I had been incorporating this idea to my life since my adolescence. When I was 12, I remember singing my heart out and being told by my sister that I needed to stop singing because I sounded bad. I succumbed for a few months because she was the oldest. It was not until I faced a common cold combined with boredom that I decided to sing in my closet. I quickly heard my capabilities and said to myself, "I can sing!" I realized at that moment that I should never listen to negative feedback from anyone, and as a Black female performer today, I walk into every situation with confidence that I will perform my best. The Hendricks Method offers actors a positive experience of working in theatre because it recommends providing students with

positive affirmations rather than negative feedback (Luckett and Shaffer 31). As I worked on *Afromemory*, incorporating my hyper-ego allowed me to feel like a “performer” who “can learn and accomplish any and everything of what is being asked of...[me] in a production” (Luckett and Shaffer 30). Due to developing a hyper-ego at a young age, I was able to incorporate it throughout my rehearsal and performance process, and I gained “a sense of fearlessness” (Luckett and Shaffer 30) on the stage as Sarah B.

Tawnya Pettiford-Wates’s essay, “Ritual Poetic Drama within the African Continuum: the journey from Shakespeare to Shange” (RPD), enabled my awareness of Sarah B.’s process toward undergoing self-actualization. This work offered a positive self-conception for me as RPD guided me toward becoming self-actualized. Pettiford-Wates defines RPD as follows:

RPD is a methodology designed to facilitate self-actualization and empowerment through an exploration of [the] rite of passage journey and the lived experiences that expose the emotional blocks and psychological barriers we build that often inhibit our innate creative nature from engaging in the fullness of its potency and/or purpose. (109)

Incorporating RPD into my work added a sense of “empowerment” when I rehearsed and performed Sarah B. I “expose[d] the emotional blocks and...psychological barriers” of my past and heritage as I developed this character. For instance, I have not always felt as free in a role as I did in the role of Sarah B. in *Afromemory*, which is why I can relate to Pettiford-Wates’ frustration when working on Shakespeare and how her feelings shifted as she began to work on Shange’s pieces (106). When I performed Shakespeare plays in the past, I was cast in lead roles written by and for the white body, and I often felt lost in those roles, even though I was encouraged to be myself and try new things. *Afromemory* was the first time I have been cast in a lead role written by and for a Black woman who shares my background. I related to Sarah B.’s history through the connection with her

ancestors. Through this connection, I overcame the obstacle of feeling lost as an artist. Taking Pettiford-Wates' work and identifying my own obstacles positively impacted my journey and my character's journey toward self-actualization.

The steps to the exploration of RPD help mirror the journey that Sarah B. and I undertook to self-actualize. The components of the RPD model outline how performers can access their self-conception by remembering moments of the past:

The student/artist remembers a time during that period [5-8 or 9-12 years of age] when they were having a rite of passage experience or significant moment. This is an experience that had a profound and transformative effect upon the individual. Through breath, sound, movement and eventually text, the individual lives in that moment in a very stylized/abstract manner. It is not a literal acting out of the event and cannot always be completely understood by those who are witnessing the event while facilitating the journey. The stylization is determined by the individual in an organic creative expression of whoever the person is at the center of the journey...throughout the journey the participants live in a series of three different emotional locations that are associated with the same event. They begin with the initiating "happening" or incident and move cyclically to the next moment and the next representing life/death/transformation. The entire journey usually takes from twenty to thirty minutes in length. The process is fully immersive and exhausting. After the cool down period, which brings the participants out of the trance state, they begin to write in their journals at an intentionally fast pace to the rhythm of the drum...After a time whoever is impelled to share in a loud voice with strong emotion does so until we close with the drum. (Pettiford-Wates 117)

RPD is usually done in a circle with other artists and accompanied by a facilitator as each artist merges between "life/death/transformation." When I tried this exercise solo, I felt a sense of empowerment afterward by being able to understand Sarah B.'s journey for my performance. The release of emotions in the final moments helped me feel accomplished and self-actualized such that I felt ready to try something new with Sarah B.'s character. Since I was the only one in my space during the cool down, I felt free to share confidently and voiced the reflections that came from the process. With "life," the first memory that came to mind was a playground in elementary school. That memory

brought the emotion of joy. With “death,” I thought of my father’s untimely death, and that emotion instantly brought sadness. With “transformation,” I thought of getting baptized at church, and that image conjured a sense of wholeness and calmness. Tapping into those emotions warmed me up to explore Sarah B.’s character during the rehearsal and performance processes. These sets of emotions were dear to me, so I could recall them quickly in the moment.

As I developed Sarah B. I discovered that I had various internal obstacles that I needed to release, which were self-doubt and confidence. My discovery of the usefulness of warm-ups led to my realization that there are little to no Afrofuturist techniques available to performers working in Afrofuturism. I discovered that *Black Acting Methods* is one of the few sources that provide Afrocentric techniques for performers. Through Sarah B.’s character, I portrayed a character who is doused in her history, rooted in her past, and undergoes a shift in her self-conception. These elements require resources for performers so that they can tap into what it takes to physically manifest the character. The aforementioned warm-ups and techniques also helped me focus my body on releasing tension before rehearsing and performing Sarah B.’s character. I connected to Sarah B. physically, emotionally, and vocally by using this work to become aware of my body.

Barbara Ann Teer, a Black woman who developed the National Black Theatre in 1968 (Thomas 4), created an acting technique, which is not specific to Afrofuturist plays. When Teer documented her techniques, she was not thinking about Afrofuturism, but the type of work that she offers to students, is the type of work that is needed for performers working in Afrofuturism. Teer’s work addresses the concerns of Black performers working in non-Afrofuturist plays that include perspectives of Black characters and Black



experiences. However, I found that this work pertains closely to the warm-ups and techniques I utilized to embody Sarah B. *Afromemory* conceives ancestral connections through the eyes of a Black woman who undergoes a ritual to develop herself. Based on my investigation of Lundeana Marie Thomas's *Barbara Ann Teer and the National Black Theatre: Transformational Forces in Harlem*, I discovered that Teer's work is rooted in the same elements that Sarah B.'s character was rooted in as she traveled towards developing her self-conception.

It was not until after completing the first draft of my thesis that I discovered *Barbara Ann Teer and the National Black Theatre*. This book talks about how Barbara Ann Teer initially created her acting technique for the National Black Theatre. Teer set out to find a technique that distinguishes African culture from the dominant white culture by "creat[ing] its own unique roots from the theatrical activities of Africa" (2). To discover the Black body's "roots," she explains that the first step in approaching the acting technique she offers is exploring the soul. By investigating an individual's soul, the artist turns inward.

Teer's exploration of discovering the soul compares to the physical manifestations I discovered while embodying Sarah B. Teer's components of discovering one's soul require Black students to attend a Pentecostal church, an African Religious festival, or a Haitian ceremony. She gets the students to observe the body language and physical manifestations of those who attend the event. By observing these events, Teer hopes that students see her notion of soul which involves the following:

"singing, dancing...dip knees and get down, we go down and into ourselves. For the power. To touch the forces. And when they are touched, when it gets so good we release the power in a scream... That's power. That's emotion. That is feeling, primal, unrefined feeling is force...and they release the spirit and they get power.

They kiss the Earth when they give praise. They don't look up to the sky. They go down to the ground where it is practical. (100)

Teer believed the soul is a feeling that can be accessed internally as an individual explores their "power" within. Sarah B. accessed her internal power after she underwent the Ancestral Memory Procedure and gained internal access to her ancestors as she was periodically receiving visions through their eyes. Through this ancestral connection, Sarah B. had a connection to the ground during the ritual and she was able to "kiss the earth" with her feet and "give praise" to her ancestors.

Teer's work is relevant to the ritual Sarah B.'s character underwent in the production, which was rooted in Yoruba culture. Thomas explains, "Teer's idea was to combine elements of the Black Pentecostal worship services and the religious and ceremonial rites of the Yoruba tribe from Nigeria, Africa" (4). Teer's inclusion of the experiences of the Black culture, indicates this work can act as a bridge between character and ancestor. Later I will explain how Teer used the students' visit to the Pentecostal church as a way to teach students about the connection to an individual's emotional sense. Sarah B. experienced a bridge to her ancestors from the ritual. It was through this ancestral connection that Sarah B. was able to internally feel and see the life of her ancestors. She discovered her ancestors were gone in body but not in spirit and this pushed her forward. I could have used Teer's work as a way to connect more easily to what it takes to access Sarah B.'s emotional senses.

The acting techniques Teer offered through her courses at the National Black Theatre provided students with knowledge of where they came from. Chapter Four of *Barbara Ann Teer and the National Black Theatre* investigates three of the courses Teer offered to artists for grasping her acting technique. The first class, "Evolutionary

Movement and Dance,” teaches students about “their African roots through information and physical movement. She covered the geography, resources, people, and demographics of Africa, with attention to the drums used for communication and recreation” (113). The students would listen to “soul” music like African drum music and popular rhythm-and-blues while Teer spoke poetry. She instructed the students to move around the room to the beat and let the music and poetry inform their physical expressions. They would then watch a film about the National Black Theatre’s trip to Africa, which included the exploration of the Yoruba tribe. They then discussed how their movements were similar or different from the Yoruba tribe.

Another class, entitled “Meditation and Spiritual Release,” has artists sit down to meditate for an internal reflection. Through this work, artists have a chance to “work on their bodies, minds, and spirits simultaneously” (115). Teer wanted each student to dedicate moments where they can reflect alone. Thomas explains that meditation enables students to “get in touch with their feelings and to assess their attributes...the importance of being in harmony with heart, mind, and body, and of striking a balance between their mental, physical, and spiritual beings” (116). This class has students dedicating their time to themselves and getting in tune with their internal feelings.

“Liberation Theory” is the final course she offered at the National Black Theatre, which focuses on the positive images of the Black experience. The class lasts seven hours and the goal is to get students to become “responsible for everything in [their] own life” (117). Teer would hold lectures that taught students about the “positive values of America and Americans and of Africa and Africans” (117). Teer would tell students to “take deep breaths, breathing in the ‘positive’ and expelling the ‘negative’ so as to

change how they walked, talked, and felt about their lives” (117). On the inhale, students can envision positive images they learned about “Americans” and “Africans.” On the exhale, students can release the thoughts that were not welcomed while exploring this technique. The goal of this workshop was to have artists get “in touch with ‘your’ power so you could transform your life and increase ‘your’ ability to attract and hold more prosperity, aliveness, happiness and joy” (117).

Within the Liberation Theory Course, Teer assigned a field trip that allowed students to observe and reflect. Teer had students go to a Pentecostal church. While at the church service, the students could observe the emotional state of the church members. The students saw each member’s “connection between spirit and the senses” (121). They saw the church members gain a sense of freedom as they expressed themselves wholeheartedly and fully. After the service, Teer would hold a session for reflection to take this time to put what students observed into practice.

Teer offered a warm-up for students, which compares to the warm-up I used for Sarah B.. Teer’s warm-up consists of releasing tension, which is comparable to the warm-ups I used from *The Actor’s Secret*. Polatin’s “Lying-Down Work” allowed me to create a moment to let go the aspects I did not need before embodying Sarah B. In comparison, a physical warm-up that Teer taught to students was called “shake everything out.” In this warm-up students are asked “to expel their tension through breathing, to release it with a sigh or a physical movement. After an effective acting class or stage performance, many students find themselves exhausted but fulfilled” (122). I experienced this sense of fulfillment after the production closed. Thus, it leads me to wonder if Teer’s warm-up could have benefitted my process of embodying Sarah B.

If I had read *Barbara Ann Teer and the National Black Theatre* before working on *Afromemory* I would have been able to use this work to develop Sarah B. I could have approached Sarah B. by relating fully to her character. I had the knowledge that my history and Sarah B.'s history both include ancestors from African descent. However, I did not realize that there could be a positive impact to embodying Sarah B. if I had rooted my history into the exploration of Sarah B. For example, Teer's work, which is designed for performers whose character(s) are rooted in Yoruban culture, is relevant to my character, a protagonist who experiences ancestral guidance and spiritual connections. I could have approached Sarah B. with the knowledge of my history, which includes being a Nigerian, and used that connection to explore as my character. I could have used the work Teer developed instead of incorporating Polatin's *The Actor's Secret*, which is rooted in the dominant white culture. If I had this source before my process, I would have been comfortable with and aware of my own abilities to perform my Afrofuturist character. Instead, I had to learn, after my process, my level of awareness of the stories and the perspectives of expressing my African roots. I now know how my past can help me in life, and I am aware of how to prepare for my future. If I had this book before working on *Afromemory*, I could have walked confidently into my first day of rehearsals ready to embody Sarah B. on the stage.

Teer exclaimed that she "wanted to see an end to plays about Blacks written or directed by Whites who did not understand the Black experience. And she wanted to attend a theatre where she could see a play which validated her as a Black woman and could leave feeling exhilarated" (56). The sense of positivism Teer references is exactly what Afrofuturism has to offer Black performers and audiences. Through my experience

performing in Afrofuturism for the first time, I experienced many positive firsts. This was my first time performing a Black woman protagonist who journeys toward self-actualization, embodying a character that experiences ancestral connections, having a Black woman as a director, and working with an all-Black cast. Therefore, with these elements in mind, Teshonne Powell's play as produced at UofL in 2022 accents the work that Teer set out to have accessible to people of color at the NBT in 1968.

An acting resource for performers working on Afrofuturist theatre has not yet been developed. Therefore, I share warm-ups and techniques that benefitted me in my process, in hopes that scholars can do further research in this area. There should be a creation of techniques that accompany warm-ups. Specifically, actors need Afrofuturist techniques that accompany warm-ups so that performers can access ancestral memories and tap into a character's emotions as the character undergoes the impact of a ritual. This type of work can benefit other performers working in this genre, so I detail to readers how my resources aided my process.

Incorporating the techniques and ideas presented herein may help the actor create an Afrofuturist character. For example, my investigation of the Black female characters in plays I consider Afrofuturist dramas could be applied to Teer's work by actors performing in Afrofuturist plays. This study speaks to the techniques actors use while on the stage. *Barbara Ann Teer and the National Black Theatre* offers techniques that can help Black performers prepare for the manifestation of an Afrofuturist character. How much a performer uses the recommendations offered in this study is completely up to the individual. One could choose to research their character's ancestry, or one could incorporate a warm-up as their ritualistic practice before a rehearsal or performance to

sharpen their characterization. If the performer is feeling bold and wants to sharpen their artistry through the exploration of this genre, one could incorporate the techniques from *Black Acting Methods* as well as from *Barbara Ann Teer and the National Black Theatre* to deepen their character development.

## CONCLUSION

The idea that the past determines the future has always intrigued me. This fascination fueled this study as I explored Afrofuturism and identified key features in Afrofuturist dramas by Black women. I also discussed *Afromemory* and my process of embodying an Afrofuturist character on the stage. This study examined two plays, two novels, and a film that have key features of Afrofuturism. I found that *The Mojo and the Sayso*, *The Purple Flower*, and *Wild Seed* were written in the twentieth century by Black women before the term Afrofuturism was coined. Therefore, Black women have been writing Afrofuturist dramas for at least a century. I include a twenty-first century film that center Black women characters to unveil how they too share similar features of Afrofuturism. *Wakanda Forever* demonstrates that Afrofuturism is expanding into popular forms of entertainment.

An Afrofuturist character connecting to their past is seen in all of the Afrofuturist dramas I've analyzed. My analysis of Sarah B.'s character in *Afromemory* explores the presence of Sankofa in the story. The Sankofa principle demonstrated how Sarah B. had a chance to look back into her past to look toward her future. I looked closely at *Afromemory* and the journey Sarah B. experienced as she underwent an ancestral connection. Awilda in *The Mojo and the Sayso* and The Old Lady in *The Purple Flower* also relate to a protagonist undergoing an ancestral connection. This important feature



relates to Afrofuturism as a theatrical genre. It also relates to *Afromemory* and my process of embodying an Afrofuturist character on the stage.

This case study of my experience performing *Afromemory* offers Black female actors examples of warm-ups and techniques to perform Afrofuturist theatre. To help Black female performers approach an Afrofuturist character, this study includes techniques taken from *Afromemory* rehearsals and performances that I deemed valuable for the support of Sarah B.'s characterization. It is beneficial for performers to allow themselves to find new impulses, discoveries, and actions when manifesting an Afrofuturist character. Finding new ways to explore a character allows the actor to feel like each performance is being done for the first time.

As little has been written on the performance of Afrofuturist theatre to date, this thesis marks the beginning of groundbreaking work for Black women. There is no published work specifically for Black female performers in Afrofuturist theatre. The only techniques I found that could assist Black female performers with embodying a character in Afrofuturist theatre were two essays from *Black Acting Methods*. The essays depict methods for Black performers working on Afrocentric work but do not include the application of this work on Afrofuturist pieces. However, on Teshonne Powell's website, she mentions that there are more twenty-first century plays being written by her and her colleagues in her writing group. Based on this idea that there are possibly more Afrofuturist dramas being written and because I have identified twentieth-century works that are also Afrofuturist, there needs to be techniques in place to embody characters in Afrofuturist plays.

### Findings

In my twelve-plus years of consuming, breathing, and living theatre, I had never before come across an Afrofuturist play or at least I thought I never had. For instance, when *Black Panther* was released, I always loved the aesthetic and futuristic components of the film, but never knew it was Afrofuturist. I did not learn of Afrofuturist works until I started researching sources for my thesis. Having had the opportunity to analyze other works, such as Teshonne Powell's *Afromemory*, I discovered several tools that helped me throughout my rehearsal and performance processes. Thus, my process of approaching an Afrofuturist character in an Afrofuturist drama may be beneficial for other Black performers.

Sarah B.'s process of developing herself in *Afromemory* exemplifies the journey to self-actualization in other Afrofuturist works. During her journey, she undergoes various steps toward self-discovery. Sarah B. was "deep reading,"—the illegal act of doing research into the past—which sparked her journey toward recovering her past. Sarah B.'s concept of herself in *Afromemory* is similar to the self-concept of the protagonists in *Wakanda Forever* and *Brown Girl in the Ring*. Shuri and Ti-Jeanne's reconnections with their parents illustrate how an Afrofuturist character can discover aspects of themselves by reconnecting with their past or ancestors. In both *Afromemory* and *Wakanda Forever*, the individual becomes more fully developed by recovering their heritage, and that history then carries them forward.

Actors working on Afrofuturist pieces need acting techniques that will benefit their rehearsal and/or performance processes. As discussed in Chapter Three, the Afrocentricity of the Hendricks method offers a sense of feeling grounded for Black female actors and relates to the grounding of characters in an ancestral past. I found this

similar grounding component in Teer's work. This sense of grounding is found by rooting oneself in the different versions of spirituality that can be discovered in Afrofuturism, thus allowing a performer to develop into a deeper character, not only as an actor but also as the character. Teer's technique, which has been utilized for many years, could apply to the work an actor does in Afrofuturist theatre. By maintaining an awareness of the research that an actor does on and off stage for a character, the actor's technique, and the actor's process can allow a performer to embody a deeper development of their character.

### Further Thoughts

The techniques that I discovered is not only important for Afrofuturist plays, but for plays that demand the Black woman actor have an understanding, appreciation, and connection to Black history/culture. Such plays that could fit into this category are other dramas that include the protagonist who is doused in their history, rooted in their past, and undergoes a shift in their self-conception. An example of a type of drama that allows a Black woman to gain an appreciation and understanding of the stories and the Black perspective through expressing their African roots are Black dramas. For example, my work could apply to a Black woman actor working on an August Wilson piece. Almost all of Wilson's plays include a Black female character who connects to her past to have a vision of her future.

The warm-ups and techniques I discovered can be applied to performing the character Berniece in August Wilson's *The Piano Lesson*. This play exhibits key features of Afrofuturism. For example, the connection to the past and the magical/fantastical element is represented through a piano, which stays on stage for the entirety of the play. Berniece has a personal connection to this instrument because of her mama, Ola, who

carved pieces into the piano before she died. Berniece gets drawn to the piano throughout the play. In the world of this play, the piano represents a connection to the ancestral plane because throughout the play, the piano tends to play by itself. Doaker, Berniece's uncle, exclaims, "Sutter [ghost is] here cause of that piano. I heard him playing on it one time. I thought it was Berniece but then she don't play that kind of music. I come out here and ain't seen nobody, but them keys was moving a mile a minute" (57). Sutter originally owned the piano, and he was a part of the family who had enslaved the characters' ancestors. The "keys" motion without anyone present outlines the presence of something that can't be explained. Doaker believed it was Sutter's ghost playing the piano, but it could have been any of the ancestors calling towards the living, because the piano maintains a relationship to the ancestors. Doaker exclaims to his family that the carvings that Mama Ola made on the piano represents "the story of our whole family and as long as Sutter had it [the piano]...he had us" (45). The fantastical aspect of the piano playing by itself suggests that an ancestor crossed over the ancestral plane into the world of the play to communicate with the family.

The connection this piano has for Berniece's character has played a toll on her self-conception by the way she puts up walls against people in her life. She puts up a wall for her brother, Boy Willie, for Avery, a person who fancies her, and even for the piano itself. This act of resistance that Berniece maintains could be considered as Berniece's character inching closer to a breakthrough. Towards the middle of the play, Boy Willie pesters Berniece to sell the piano if she is not going to use it. Toward the start of Berniece's breakthrough, everyone in the house is feeling the impact of the ancestors and Berniece gets closer to her journey of self-conception and gains courage to go to the

piano and play it. Through Berniece playing the piano, she was able to implore her ancestors to help her in this situation. Berniece discovered a connection to her past through stage directions. It states, “in the moment, [Berniece]...realizes what she must do. She crosses to the piano. She begins to play. The song is found piece by piece...A rustle of wind blowing across two continents” (Wilson 106). The stage directions stating, “a rustle of wind blowing across two continents” suggests that Berniece gained a connection to her ancestors. After Berniece’s gained connection through “the song” she “found piece by piece,” she became aware of the piano in her space and even felt like hugging her family. It was as if Berniece realized that her resistance towards the people that love her has positively impacted her connection to them.

Berniece’s character evidently had a transformational experience and this journey mirrors Sarah B.’s journey to self-actualization. When Berniece’s brother arrives, she did not want to acknowledge the past, as she expressed, “Boy Willie, I want you and Lymon [Boy Willie’s friend] to go ahead and leave my house” (Wilson 15). Boy Willie shook things up by demanding to sell the piano for money since Berniece refuses to play it. Berniece exclaimed to Boy Willie, “I done told you I don’t play on that piano...When my mama died I shut the top on that piano and I ain’t never opened it since” (70). With Berniece keeping the piano and not wanting to sell it, this decision is represented as Berniece latching on to the past and making strides toward her possible future. Before, it seemed like it was hard for Berniece to keep the piano. However, after the formation of her self-conception, it was as if it did not hurt anymore to keep the piano due to her gaining an acceptance of the past and of the piano. It was as if Berniece’s future was finally pointing forward in a positive way.

The techniques provided for performing in *Afromemory* and discovering Sarah B.'s character could also be used for Berniece in *The Piano Lesson*. Berniece's ancestral connection has propelled her forward just like Sarah B. It should be recognized that a performer needs to get acquainted with acting techniques that could support them in the specific genre or style they are working on. An example of techniques that could merge perfectly for discovering Berniece's character, is the Hendricks Method or Teer's acting technique. In Chapter Three, I discuss how these methods could allow actors to explore their spirituality and roots. Through this work, a performer can ground themselves in the spirituality of this tie to the past. It was evident how the connection to the past was beneficial for Berniece's character as she drew closer and closer toward playing the piano. Berniece was feeling the weight of her ancestors communicating to her that they were present, after which there was a "calm that comes over the house" (107). It was as if her ancestors were letting her know that they are gone in body, but not gone in spirit. Applying the Hendricks method to discovering Berniece's character could allow the actress to become aware of the character's shift in her sense of self through ancestral connections. With *Afromemory* and *The Piano Lesson*, performers can now sense that this work is applicable if given a script to a character that encounters a connection to the past, and through this, makes strides toward a version of themselves they can be content with.

The fact that Black female protagonists in many Black dramas gain a sense of their history with their connection to the past makes my contribution greater. My research can apply to any Black drama where the character has an environment that requires connection to Black history and culture. There are many similarities between performing in one of the Afrofuturist plays, whether it's from 1928 or 2022 than performing in a

twentieth century cycle by August Wilson. My work is significant to Afrofuturist theatre because I discovered some limitations, but I still found some aspects that can add to my acting process. I have proven that this work is not just for one genre, it can be for multiple. Now that there is this genre called Afrofuturism and the style called Afrofuturist theatre, my work can be in addition to what is already written pertaining to theatre for Black performers.

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Movement: Amanda Diorio (Jazz), Ashley Hyers (Ballet, Tap, Alexander Technique),  
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<i>Afromemory</i>	Sarah B	Nefertiti Burton-2022
<i>#Hashtag</i>	Police Officer/Cadet #1/Student #1/Choir Member	Sidney Edwards-2021
<i>BLM &amp; LOL</i>	Richie and Puppet Master #1	Lashondra Hood-2021
<i>The Birds</i>	Diane	Geoffrey Nelson-2020
<i>Milk Like Sugar</i>	Myrna Desmond	Sidney Williams-2019
<i>Fires in the Mirror----</i>		
-----Ntozake Shange/Rivkah Siegel/Norman Rosenbaum		Ariadne Calvano-2019

### RELATED THEATRE EXPERIENCE

Department of Theatre Arts, University of Louisville <i>Costume Shop Buyer</i>	<i>August 2021-May 2022</i>
Department of Theatre Arts, University of Louisville <i>Production Buyer</i>	<i>August 2020-May 2021</i>
Department of Theatre Arts, University of Louisville <i>Split Second Dramaturg and Assistant Director</i>	<i>August 2021-December 2021</i>
Department of Theatre Arts, University of Louisville <i>Research Assistant - The Athena/Advance Grant through the National Science Foundation (NSF)</i>	<i>August 2020-May 2021</i>
Louisville Central Community Center (LCCC) <i>Assistant Director for Shrek the Musical Jr.</i>	<i>June 2020-July 2020</i>
Department of Theatre Arts, University of Louisville <i>Theatre Box Office Assistant</i>	<i>August 2019-May 2021</i>
North Carolina Theatre Conference (NCTC), Eden, NC <i>Adjudicator</i>	<i>November 4-5, 2022</i>
North Raleigh Arts and Creative Theatre, Raleigh, NC <i>Administrative Assistant</i>	<i>August 2014-Aug. 2016</i>
<b>SERVICE</b>	
Department of Theatre Arts, University of Louisville <i>Search Committee for Asst. Prof. of Graduate Acting</i>	<i>May 2020-June 2020</i>
Black Theatre Network <i>Marketing Intern</i>	<i>May 2021-August 2021</i>
Black Theatre Network <i>Stage Manager – Virtual</i>	<i>August 2021</i>