

The “My Story” Project: A Celebratory Journey in Unmasking the Power of
Identity and Personal Story in the Arts.

by

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Abstract

Journey with me as I explore how a focus on our identities and sharing our stories could change the ways we engage with theatre arts and participate in creative processes. Witness how young college students at an urban university in the northeast over the course of 8 sessions from January 28 to March 25, 2022, become more and more comfortable with sharing their truth and saying no to theatrical and educational practices they do not agree with allowing them to witness the power in breaking away from an oppressive structure. Lastly, watch a year-and-a-half long exploratory journey come to an end as I reflect on my practice and offer guidance to my former self in finding better ways to be co-intentional as I continue to support the practice of personal story and identity. Join me in an adventure through learning, self-love and compassion.

Dedications:

Mamá

Te quiero y te extraño mucho. Colecciono grados en tu honor.

Papí

Papí, gracias por ser lo máximo. Este último año no ha sido fácil para ninguno de nosotros, pero tu fuiste un campeón para nuestra familia y me ayudaste muchísimo. Me diste tanta fuerza para continuar con este grado. Gracias por ser lo máximo. Te extraño tanto. Canto por ti siempre.

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Chapter 1:

A Journey Down the Rabbit Hole

When it came to picking a topic to explore for our master's thesis project from the Applied Theatre program at CUNY School for Professional Studies, my partner Allen and I wanted to focus on what brings us joy and all the ways we felt we could make the joy of performing and creating art better and more equitable for all. In this paper you will journey with me as I look back at the last year and a half of my life and share with you all that I have learned.

Allen and I come from very different theatre backgrounds. Allen attended a well-known and respected conservatory in Boston and I an art history and theatre arts student, also experienced a conservatory -esque theatre training when I studied at The Barrow Group years after graduating from college. Our experiences with theatre arts education vary. As a student of a strict conservatory style education, Allen's educational endeavors as a theatre arts student were almost militaristic in that he felt that everyone is broken down to later be built up to fit a particular norm. Meanwhile my theatre arts education ,where I did my undergrad and at The Barrow Group, was more of a celebration of self. While we did learn about Chekhov, Stanislavsky, Meisner etc., the theatre creators viewed by many as the "greats," my professors and theatre educators really wanted the students to bring themselves to the piece. My instructors were very good about

encouraging me to go out of my comfort zone, to try something new every time and to really find myself in the piece. Allen's educational experience, like so many others, really took away from one's own story and their individuality and wanted to make copies from these expected molds of what they (the conservatory instructors) believed an actor should be like and the rules they should adhere to. I hadn't seen this idea of "right and wrong" till after I graduated and started working professionally. I have been verbally attacked and made to feel like a shitty actor, which I know I am not, because I didn't do things the way so many others believe the craft of acting must be done. I found myself sticking out like a sore thumb, made to feel less than because I could not be placed into their mold. Being cursed at in a rehearsal because I kept trying new things and not doing the piece the way so many others did really made me question my validity as a performer. Was I really trying to be a part of a workforce that wanted look alikes ala the "Slim Shady" music video where countless Eminem wannabes floated behind in tank tops and baggy jeans whilst Eminem rapped "I'm the real slim Shady?" The low self-esteem and feelings of deep inadequacies were so apparent that I could care less at that point if I met with an agent who would want to represent me; I just wanted to get it over and done with and hope for a few claps.

Allen and I discussed our interest in personal story and how we as creatives and applied theatre practitioners can use our stories in conjunction with who we are as artists. Story is a component often lost or at the very least not

placed in the spotlight when it comes to arts education. I speak strictly in regard to one's own story, not the plays which we read and perform from. When we as readers and fans learn about our favorite artists it's their biographies which are oftentimes more fascinating than the work they create. I have argued that the artist and the man are not synonymous but I am finding in this moment that they absolutely are. Why is story and who we are as individuals not part of the curriculum when it comes to arts education? Allen had expressed how before coming to this master's program he only knew of theatre as a place where you learn lines written by another long dead playwright. This idea of self-importance and one's own voice was foreign to not just him, but me as well. As we continued to discuss our interests and hopes for this project Allen questioned why these conservatory style educations focus so much on being the actor they believe is best and then when you walk into an audition the casting directors don't care where you were trained, they want to know about you, the person. Allen stated how he found it difficult when asked after graduating "so tell me about yourself, who are you and what do you like?" He was stumped. "This is not what I was told I needed to be," he told me, "I was told I needed to be this actor and pride myself on my education, but in the room, they just wanted to know me. Who is Allen the person, and how does that correlate to Allen, the actor?"

I found myself bitterly laughing at Allen's story. Why do we educate creatives this way? Who are these educators actually helping? To educate

creatives in a way that is all about “this is the way it needs to be” is detrimental to the work and creatives they are trying to be. Artists are constantly told how art is subjective and that there is no right way of doing things but that’s false. When those who teach emergent artists that there is a right and a wrong way of being/creating and don’t make space to explore and discuss the individual and their story, they are stifling the artist's urge to want to be themselves. Doing this forces the artist into a modern day iron maiden, one where once the door has been opened we find an artist that has been broken down and is missing the parts of themselves that are important and interesting. By continuing this form of education, we as creatives are allowing for the stripping away of the very essence of who these artists are and we are standing idly by as we watch them become identical products on an assembly line.

“What is applied theatre” Allen and I asked ourselves a lot our first year and now as we inch toward the end of our master’s journey, I have an answer to that question. I look at applied theatre work as a gateway to freedom. Working towards freedom from the confines of the patriarchal white supremacist and colonial norms found and celebrated in the education system.

Before this program I hadn't really questioned what I was being taught or what I learned. As an art history and theatre student, I thought that art was already revolutionary so why question it. Now I find myself asking why? Why is there a “right” way of being an artist? Who makes these rules and why do we follow

them blindly? Through this program I realized that these rules we adhere to are deeply rooted in white supremacy. White supremacy has existed in the U.S education system since its inception and overrepresents the values of white Europeans and Americans. It is imbedded in a colonial and patriarchal way of thinking that mainly celebrates cisgendered¹ white men, their views and stories. The individuals who have assumed their rank and importance, mainly due to their race and gender, have forced artists and creatives to be placed under the hegemony and the guise that the Eurocentric way of creating is the only way and anything other is wrong and out of the ordinary. We often times find it difficult to bear witness to our own oppression being that it is all we know.

A Eurocentric education can be defined as a curriculum that focuses on Eurocentric or Western ideas and ignores the histories and contributions that ethnic minorities have made to predominantly white countries.

Eurocentricity is seen in the sugar-coating of information presented to children... Eurocentricity is the limited representation of people of colour (POC) in the curriculum itself (Yung).

While I do agree and stand by the very core of what theater and art education entails (tell stories and entertain), I do not agree with the Eurocentric norms of

¹ Cisgender – denoting or relating to a person whose sense of personal identity and gender corresponds with their birth sex.

creating and realize that they have been accepted due to centuries of colonial and white supremacist indoctrination. We often times find it difficult to bear witness to our own oppression being that it is all we know.

In this paper I will look at how identity and personal story are lacking in the arts realm, in particular the true identities and stories of the global majority. I will discuss the ways in which Eurocentric and white supremacist norms dictate arts education as well as the way we create. I will make claims how white supremacy is the core issue with the way we create and why theatre and film are so white and start to address ways in which that can and must be changed. By working with emergent young artists, I will encourage them to look to themselves and to the beauty of what makes them who they are, by creating a space that puts the student at the center of the work. I want them to acknowledge that this space is for them and created by them, something not found in arts education or in the professional realm. Through this project I want to explore how a focus on identity and sharing story can change the way we engage with the arts and participate in creative processes so that future theatre arts education can benefit all who take part in its creation and celebration.

Point of Departure

PARTNER

We were given the opportunity to work with Knights University and Highlander University theatre program in an urban Environment² in New Jersey. In talks with the schools' administrators Allen and I planned to conduct nine two-hour sessions starting in the Spring 2022 semester. The administrators were concerned that they couldn't guarantee weekly attendance unless there was an incentive (credits, payment). Dr. Weston, Knights University theatre director who was then on sabbatical, said that they could provide the students with this workshop while still guaranteeing weekly attendance by means of an independent study. Allen and I agreed to work virtually with the students. We were asked to write up a flier explaining what the workshop was, what it entailed and what the students would have been getting out of it as part of our agreement and as a way to connect with the students and get them interested in the work before the new year. See Exhibit B

POPULATION

² Names of the partner organizations, their staff and participants have all been changed.

Knights University(KU) and Highlander University (HU) is the only joint theatre program between two universities. Many successful theatre artists, technicians, designers and community activists have graduated from this joint program, me being one of them. KU and HU campuses are both respectively ethnically diverse, located in an urban environment. Knights University has a majority female student body while Highlander University is predominately male. KU has a majority Hispanic student body at 28.9% with White and Black or African American students coming in second and third at 20.5% and 18.4%. HU undergraduate student body is predominantly White, (34%) Asian (23.6%) and Hispanic (20.4%). As for the students that are part of the theatre program, I do not have exact numbers and was told that that information could not be shared with Allen and me.

Both KU and HU theatre programs strive to be inclusive collectives and welcome all who want to take part in their productions, no matter what your course of study may be. Given that HU is a technical school, the performances that are put on by the joint program incorporate technology and are, for the most part, student led. As for the administration and professors, they are mostly cis gendered and white, most of which are male faculty. The program's administrators are always trying to be better and that is evident in the meeting I was invited to in the fall of 2021. The program invited current and former students to speak on the program's lack in diversity and where we felt change was

necessary. They are very well aware of the program's shortcomings and want to hear from current and former students on the ways in which we can assist them in making this program more inclusive and well rounded. But despite being pretty progressive already, there are many changes that need to be made in regard to representation and as a former, Hispanic student, I wonder if they are actually willing to make said changes. As already mentioned, the program is run by mostly cis, white and male faculty. This urban area is not predominately white. It would be nice if the folks who run the program resembled the student body they teach.

At the start of the fall 2021 semester, KU decided to sunset their program, a move that left many up in arms and for good reason. It was a huge part of the urban areas arts community. The choice to sunset this program harms not only the current and former students, but the arts community that uses KU theatre spaces for community gatherings as well as a safe space to share theatre and art.

L. Wells, former theatre arts professor and mentor, said about the decision that "it's a tremendously sad lack of vision that the arts are often the first to go at a sign of trouble.... Both programs were better together, much like how I envision the world, better together, collaborating (Wells)." While the HU theatre arts program is doing well and there is no current fear of it being shut down due to the influx in students applying for the theatre program, it does dampen the spirits of the students and staff knowing that this joint program had done so much for so many since the 1990's. M. R. Ravenclaw, current theatre director of HU and the

person Allen and I had been in closest contact throughout this process said that this move was a “theatre education tragedy.” This sudden and heartbreaking decision is part of the reason Allen and I felt compelled to work with the program and it was Allen who insisted on incorporating the sunsetting of the program into our thesis project session planning.

Another reason we chose this organization is because this theatre program is home to me. It is where I went to school and where I learned that I was more than just an actor and could offer more to the arts. What I learned as a member of this theatre program motivated me to get my master’s in applied theatre. The theatre program is already doing so much of what Allen and I want to address through this project. We acknowledged that we found ourselves in a very unique situation knowing that we would be working with an already fairly progressive program that isn’t a conservatory and we acknowledged that this might make our project easier since the administration already agrees with our vision and has been actively working on being more inclusive. I feared since the program is already doing so much to make room for their students and their varying identities that the participants would feel as though this workshop wasn’t necessary. But despite this lingering fear I was still very much excited to be working with my alma mater and mentors who share some of the same values in how an arts education program should more or less be run. As an alum I wanted to highlight their strengths and

help them broaden their horizons all while celebrating all that they gave me while I was a student.

APPLIED THEATRE FRAMEWORK

Since our thesis project looked at individual stories, the many ways we can tell them and how identity fits in all of that work, we looked at many applied theatre techniques. The concept of storytelling is not something Allen and I concocted on our own but numerous practitioners use this as a way to bring awareness to a community's struggles as well as a historical narrative. Ping Chong said of his work with storytelling that it is important because "we need to retrieve who we are... I'm creating work for ordinary citizens to feel empowered to speak onstage telling their own truth (Chong)." So much of what is learned in these theatre arts programs is someone else's story or perhaps a writer's idea of what that someone's truth may or may not be. Where is the student's story and their identity in the classroom? We wanted to find out as well as let our participants know that this is a valuable tool in creating for others, not just ourselves.

In a Ted talk in July of 2016 Piper Anderson, teaching artist and advocate for closing Rikers Island, spoke on how personal stories can create justice. In working in prisons all over the country she spoke to the stereotypes we often hear about when we think of individuals who are incarcerated; "savages" was the word

she chose. Anderson mentioned how after working with these individuals she did not see one savage amongst them. Men and women who have been banished from communities either literally or metaphorically, cried in Anderson's classroom when telling stories of seeing a father for the first time in thirty years ; or when referring to themselves with the only word they felt could express who they are, which was "love." Hearing their stories helped her see this.

"Over the years I've heard hundreds of stories that have taught me so much about what it means to be human. What it means to be resilient in the face of endless darkness and tragedy...I really believe that we can create this more restorative approach to justice by beginning with the telling of stories. Over the years I've heard stories create catharsis for the teller and empathy for the listener but can stories really create a restorative justice for the millions of people who have been harmed by our criminal justice policies...In order to investigate this question I created Mass Story Lab. Mass Story Lab brings together ten story tellers, a hundred community members in one room in one day to imagine a future beyond prisons... We assembled a group of story tellers that each told a story about how Rikers Island changed their life. What became clear is that Rikers Island represents a culture of punishment that has permeated our entire prison system. Closing Rikers Island would send a message to the rest of the country that it is time for a radical remaking of our justice

system... I turned to the audience and I asked them ‘Do you believe that something must be done about Rikers Island’ and every person in that room raised their hand. In just one morning people who thought they had no opinion on Rikers Island were now advocating for its closure... People believed it was not only possible, but imperative. Mass Story Lab is an opportunity for people with the most at stake to make their stories the instrument of justice.” (Anderson)

Another one of the techniques we used in conjunction with personal stories to reclaim history advocated by Piper Anderson and Ping Chong was play building. Play building “explores alternative structures for devising original theatre productions in a variety of settings with different populations (White).” While there was no original play that was created in the end, play building was explored through the exercises we did that engaged the students in verbatim, ethno and documentary theatre. This was used to assist the participants in finding new ways to create original works which many of them started to do at the end of our time together.

We also looked at verbatim, ethno and documentary theatre. While here in the United States verbatim and documentary theatre are viewed to be one and the same, they are different. Verbatim theatre is “a process in which a playwright interviews subjects on a particular topic and issue, records the responses, then uses those words exactly as they are – no changes. It usually is taken from

recordings to make sure it is precise (Harris Et al.) .” In contrast, documentary theater is the use of documentary materials as the source material for stories about real events and people. The documentary materials can consist of, but are not limited to, newspapers, interviews, government reports, trial transcripts, letters, and film. Ethnodrama is the written transformation and adaptation of ethnographic research data (e.g., interview transcripts, participant observation field notes, journals, documents, statistics) into a dramatic play script staged as a live, public theatrical performance (Harris et. al).” When discussing ethnodrama we shared already written works by established playwrights to show the participants a strong example of ethnodrama. We shared a piece written by playwright and scriptwriter for Living Voices LLC, Rachel Atkins. Rachel has created numerous pieces for Living Voices as well as written plays that aren’t used specifically by the company. Her works focus on issues of history and social justice. We shared some of her pieces as examples for the participants including her most recent piece *State of the Students*, a play she described as an ethno drama, which she created from over 130 students from all over the United States who responded to her online questionnaire regarding their thoughts and feelings on racism, antisemitism and antidemocratic movements. By using her work as an example, we were able to show the participants that stories about real people created or inspired by their words are possible.

Showcasing the various ways of telling story didn't stop there. We introduced the participants to various other applied theatre techniques such as concrete mime, image work and story circles. Allen and I decided on using concrete mime in the first few sessions to introduce to the participants ways our bodies can tell a story with little to no words. Concrete mime is the act of using "related skill of 'pantomime' and applying it to becoming actual concrete objects. So, performers use their bodies to become furniture (tables, windows, doors etc.) or objects (several actors become a giant fork, or a building). It doesn't have to be static; actors can also use their bodies to create hurricanes, or objects that have moving, workable parts" (answer corporation)." We felt it was an excellent introduction to one of the many ways we can tell a story without using words. Another applied theatre technique we used was story circles. Story circles, created by John O'Neal, founder of Junebug Productions, was invented to engage with their audience members after a performance. "Story circles help participants develop, clarify, or structure the digital story they want to create in a supportive group environment. Having individuals share personal stories within a group process gives everyone the opportunity to explore a range of ideas, learn from each other, and polish their own pieces." (George)

As for image work, it is a practice that stems from Augusto Boal's Image theatre which he discusses at length in his book *Theatre of the Oppressed*. His work was influenced by Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* and he used that

pedagogy as a foundation for his work as a theatre artist and creator. I would be lying if I said a lot of our ideas for this project weren't influenced by his work with communities in South America. "To control the means of theatrical production, man must, first of all, control his own body, know his own body, in order to be capable of making it more expressive (Boal 102)." We wanted the participants to create an image with their bodies. This again helped them recognize the various ways our bodies can be used in telling a story but also granted them the opportunity to watch their peers create an image and see how a particular prompt can look in different bodies. Because this workshop was about our individual identities and personal stories, we hoped that in highlighting our individualities it would help us all see how one prompt, one event can affect us all differently in our bodies.

PROJECT GOALS AND OBJECTIVES

Our goal was to partner with college-aged artists and creatives on the verge of their arts education and performative experience. We wanted to incorporate the artist's own unique stories and ideas into the work we created together to realize that they have their own agency to create without feeling boxed in by the Euro centricities often found in theatre and theatre arts education. As theatre artists and those who have once been students we acknowledge how "Eurocentric education has silenced and misconstrued the history and truth of

marginalized communities. There is a need for curriculums that challenge the dominant narrative and help students of color acknowledge the triumphs and challenges their people face (DaCunha).” The idea was to celebrate the individuality of the artist and their communities.

Goals for this project were to:

- Explore oppression, white supremacy and stereotypical racist and sexist tropes embedded in theatre education settings.
- Use personal story as a tool for creating.
- Discuss identity and how it may or may not be lacking in arts education and creation.
- Introduce applied theatre practices and games to assist in illuminating one’s story and identity.
- Introduce various ways of telling story (verbatim, ethno, documentary theatre)

Project objectives related to these goals were to support the students in:

- Addressing oppressive structures and how they have witnessed them either firsthand or through the work they take in (TV, film, theatre)
- Envision what diverse casting can look like and understand how casting choices tell different stories to audiences.
- Dismantle these oppressive norms through applied theatre work based on personal story.

- Know the difference between verbatim, ethno and documentary theatre.
- Start thinking of their own story, that of their community and select effective theatrical structures for telling these stories.

But I wasn't just observing the student participants; I was observing myself as a practitioner as well. I wanted to see how co-intentional I could be while doing this work. Freire's pedagogy really motivated this project's goals and I wanted to use his pedagogy to evaluate myself. Could I remove myself and my preconceived notions from the work I aimed to do in the hopes of "liberating" my participants? This journey down the rabbit hole was more than just a journey for my participants but for me as an applied theatre practitioner as well. I was curious to see where this adventure would lead me and if I could notice the flaws, if there were any, in my facilitation.

ACTION RESEARCH METHODOLOGY AND REFLECTIVE PRACTITIONER STUDY

The methodologies I chose to evaluate my project were action research and reflective practitioner study. Action research is a "systematic process of examining the evidence. The results of this type of research are practical, relevant, and can inform theory. Action research is different than other forms of research as there is less concern for universality of findings, and more value is placed on the relevance of the findings to the researcher and the local collaborators (Klien)." In

an interview with Ernie Stringer, Ros Beadle discussed her action research approach when she worked with an aboriginal group of women in Australia. She discussed how working developmentally alongside these women she was able to be guided by them and have them really lead the way. Much of what she said reminded me of critical participatory action research because both feel they have an approach that is similar to Paulo Freire's views and praxis or practice that is taken from a particular theory such as Freire's conscientization. Conscientization is "the ways in which individuals and communities develop a critical understanding of their social reality through reflection and action."(Steyaert) We do not guide the participants but rather are guided by them and their needs and work together. "People involved in critical action research aim to change their social world collectively, by thinking about it differently, acting differently, and relating to one another differently- by constructing other practice architectures to enable and constrain their practice in ways that are more rational (in the sense of reasonable), more productive and sustainable, and more just and inclusive (Kemmis et al.17) ." We believed that working with the participants as opposed to leading them was the best way we could step into this environment without coming off like the white/white passing saviors or perhaps worse, the individuals who were trying to break away from the norms of Eurocentric theatre practices but were maintaining an oppressive and close minded approach. If we are trying to follow in famed Scottish sociologist and town planner Patrick Geddes, who

coined the term “think globally and act locally,” it is always best to work together as one and that is what we did.

Allen and I agreed to use critical participatory action research for our project and I chose to use the same for my personal research. Since Critical participatory action research “emerges from the dissatisfactions with the classroom” (Kemmis et al. 11) it felt as though it was the best approach when working in an environment in which I was questioning and working against the tide that is the way we teach and create theatre. It really was the perfect action research approach because it has a “strong commitment to participation, as well as to social analyses (Kemmis et al.11).” This form of action research includes the participants and asks that all work alongside each other. It is a collaborative approach that mimics the ways in which theatre and creating is a shared effort. This action research method has that same feeling of we all journey forth together, no man left behind. It is an approach that requires listening and trust.

A reflective practitioner study is “the act of thinking about our experiences in order to learn from them for the future (Libguides).” This methodology involves actively analyzing one’s actions and experiences to improve and develop a better practice. Dr. Itmar Shatz, founder of Effectiviology, compares a reflective practitioner study to that of an athlete after a game. The way athletes and their coaches review game footage help them see what they did that helped or hindered them in their most recent win/loss? This practice comes with many benefits which

is why I also chose to go this route. By conducting a reflective practitioner study I will have a better understanding of myself as an applied theatre practitioner and see where my strengths and weaknesses are to better improve my understanding of the connections between theory and practice.

EVALUATION PROCESS

Being that this project was an independent study for the students, one way we evaluated the class was by conducting a group interview during the final session as seen in Exhibit F. We also conducted surveys and interviews with the participants to gather information through the course of the 8 weeks we worked together. The surveys were not as helpful as we had hoped since not every participant responded, so our main source of information came from what the participants either told us throughout the several weeks we spent together and most importantly during our group interview. We also conducted various check ins which were a very valuable source in finding out where the group was with their progress or lack thereof. Ros Beadle spoke on how a reflective practice is key to understanding where your group is at and where you need to clarify or make changes to your approach. By maintaining a journal, I was able to have a clear timeline of how the relationship with the participants and the work being done had changed over time.

Going into the process as well as during we were very aware of the downfalls of having conversations or sending out surveys that weren't anonymous. We knew there was a big possibility that our participants wouldn't be completely honest with us but it was something we were willing to risk. We wanted to create a space these students never found themselves in and were willing to deal with any repercussions or brutally honest reviews that might have come our way.

As for evaluating myself, I looked over my journals and read my thought process throughout the time with the participants. I also evaluated my overall mood when viewing videotape recordings of the ZOOM sessions and took even more detailed notes. While watching the recordings, I also noted the number of times in a session (as well as which session) I repeated myself after a student expressed not understanding or agreeing with my ideas. Lastly I made a point to pay attention to Allen's and my after-session discussions. Was I frustrated or disheartened? If so, what about and why? Finally, I evaluated my various thesis drafts over the last year. This passage of time gave me a more well-rounded view of the project we did and how it turned out. It allowed for me to remove myself a bit and this distance gave me the opportunity to objectively evaluate myself and the work that I did.

Meet Team Dream

ALLEN

Actor, facilitator, writer, creator and applied theatre practitioner, Allen Warnock (he/him/they/them) is half of Team Dream. Allen is a cis white man who identifies as Queer. When Allen and I finalized our group plans we decided on interviewing one another. We thought “who better to speak for ourselves than ourselves.” Below is what I learned from Allen on our fun, getting to really know you evening in September of 2021.

Allen hails from a small town in Georgia and has lived in NYC for 21 years. He spoke on how their identity as both a cis white man and a Queer man causes him to live as a quiet observer. Allen made a point that he is very much aware that he is white and that their whiteness has historically been used to establish a sense of power over others however the intersectionality of their identity, their being queer, makes them more cognizant of oppression, specifically the oppression Queer individuals face.

Allen made note of his race and how, despite being a member of a marginalized community, as a cis white gay man, he is still very much in a position of power and I believe that he knows and acknowledges this, hence why he carries on as he said, “a quiet observer”. Allen made slight references to cis white queer men and women and how there is now a negative stereotype with this

demographic, as Gabriel Arena mentioned in his article. “White Gay men are hindering our progress as a Queer community, how common it has become that older white gay men have clashed with younger, trans and Black members of the community for ruining PRIDE for making demands they felt weren’t necessary and stated that this act and the overall feel between the community that appears to have split in recent years with being the intersectionalist vs the non-intersectionalists.” [Arena speaks to how some gay white men assume that prejudice is the same for all members of the LGBTQUIA community and refusing to acknowledge the need for inclusive practices and progressive change] Allen wanted to be sure to express that he is not nor does he align himself with the idea that cis white gay men are in some way superior to others in the community and by acknowledging his privilege as a cis white gay man he stated that he knew what he needed to be aware of and what to check at the door whenever stepping in the space.

Allen has worked as a professional actor and when working with young creatives, can provide insight into what it is like to work within the field. Given their history with creating, they bring an understanding into what it means to create within and outside the system while still trying to be true to who they are as an artist and can use those moments when they weren’t, as an example of why listening and caring for oneself is important. Allen currently works within the

social service industry and given his experience can bring empathy and commitment to facilitating.

KASSANDRA

I am an actor, creator, writer, applied theatre practitioner, theatre artist and aspiring director and producer. I am a first generation Cuban- American and am fluent in Spanish. I am a cis gendered white passing female and identify as Queer. I am aware of the fact that I am white passing which means that though I am a Hispanic woman, I do not look like the stereotypical Latinx person and appear to be of European descent. Given the fact that I am a white passing Latina I know what privileges come with my white skin and that so many of these privileges aren't afforded to others in my community. My “whiteness” does grant me not just certain privileges but a sense of safety. But I still acknowledge and have experience with the constructs of what it means to be a Hispanic woman in a white man's world. I identify with the struggles of being a Hispanic woman, specifically with dealing with the stereotypes of “spicy Latina” and how Hispanic women are “angry and crazy.”

Growing up in an urban environment (Union City, NJ) and in my early teens moving to the suburbs, I have experience with how these communities make space (or do not) for members of certain demographics. Because I am white passing, I have experienced feeling like I was not “Hispanic enough” when

growing up being one of few white passing Latinas in the neighborhood but also experienced othering when attending high school in a suburban neighborhood. Arturo Dominguez said “If you’re like me and embrace your Latinidad, you’re subjected to many different forms of discrimination. If you abandon your heritage and embrace whiteness, racists will treat you like a friend as they mock you behind your back. Hate groups might welcome you as one of their own but once they manage to maintain their superiority over all of us, you suddenly become a target.” (Dominguez) As a Cuban-American I can speak to what Arturo Dominguez wrote at length in his article titled *White Latinos Don’t Exist, Wannabes Do*. Cubans do not have the best reputation when it comes to racism that perhaps stems from a history of the light skinned, middle and upper class Cubans having the means to leave the island after the communist revolution in 1959 and many afro Cubans feeling left behind because, technically, they were. I am constantly being told by my family that I am white, despite the fact that I, we, are not white. I have noticed that a large part of my community have this very mixed view on what it means to be white. They view white as the color of our skin and funny enough one too many people in my family don’t even have white skin yet they pride themselves on their light skin which I can only imagine is similar to what Dr. Beverly Daniel Tatum wrote about regarding colorism in her book *Why are all the Black Kids sitting Together in the Cafeteria?*. “Young Black Children may express a desire to be White... they do not necessarily mean that the

child has internalized a negative self-image. It may however reflect a child's growing awareness of White privilege (122)." I don't want to assume anything about my family or other members of not just the Cuban but Hispanic community, but white privilege seems to be desirable enough where we claim dominance and superiority over others in our community who are not as light as we are, despite the fact that our being Latinos makes us all POC. The Latino Policy forum speaks on colorism within the Latine community, an issue that affects more than just white passing Cubans. It is something we are often times not even consciously doing but as the forum mentions "it contributes to the growth of systemic racism in our society." They define it as prejudice or discrimination against individuals with a dark skin tone, typically among people of the same ethnic or racial group." Arguing to my family and others that we are not white is almost always fought with "I am more white than Black" a very odd sense of pride in the color of one's skin, a white supremacist trope created and upheld by the Eurocentric ideals placed on my people the moment the rapist colonizers came to wreak havoc on the Taino people on the island. It is a weird sense of pride in being white and not realizing that we are further falling into the narrative and very real erasure of the BIPOC community, our community.

Race, colorism, where do I stand in this world is something I have grappled with my entire life. It is part of my culture sadly and I find it odd how a culture so proud of being who they are would fight tooth and nail to be considered

white. We think we're better than everyone, even our fellow Hispanics. But I can't put the blame on my whiteness/not whiteness on just my culture . I blame the white people who told me I was white until it was no longer convenient. The folks who said they liked me because I wasn't your "typical" Spanish girl but then immediately threw out how all Spanish girls are the same, crazy and loud, when it was convenient. I was white until it no longer suited the white members of the community. Being treated this way really added to my issues with attending school in high school and forced me to hate my culture. I was consistently questioned about my identity and had to prove who I was by speaking in Spanish, the way one asks a well-trained dog to do tricks, and still that wasn't enough because I was consistently asked "you sure you're full Cuban and one of your parents isn't Italian or something" making me feel that these strangers knew more about who I was than I did. Over the years I have reclaimed my Latinidad and find pride in being Cuban- American, so much so that I chose to go by my middle name Kassandra and added the tilde to Pérez because if you don't see a Hispanic woman before you, I will make sure that you do first with my name and then with my pride in being who I am. Because of my personal experience with the erasure of my culture and being, I can bring a better trauma informed practice into the work I do.

Because I am an actor and have worked within the industry professionally, I can share my experience and unique perspective. Having my bachelor's degree

in art history with a theatre minor and having been a part of the acting program at the Barrow Group, I have a well-rounded understanding of the art world. Having been a theatre student I understand the life of a theatre arts student and can sympathize with the feelings of inadequacy that can arise while wanting to appease an oppressive institution and thinking you need to fit into the close minded idea of what an actor is.

But aside from who I am culturally and what I bring to the table academically, let me tell you about me as a storyteller and why I am so passionate about this work. Pia Amada Lopez, my grandmother, my Mamí, woman who helped my mother raise my sister and I, who was my favorite person in the whole world, died October 5th, 2021; she was 84. She was the original storyteller. My grandmother fought in the counter revolution in Cuba and was even arrested for suspicion of committing crimes against the regime just 24 hours before leaving Cuba and that wasn't even her first time. She came to this country with her husband and 3 young children leaving her whole world behind. She started anew, redid her education, ran for public office and was an active member in the Hudson County political world. She believed in speaking truth to power and always encouraged it. She believed that personal stories were the best part of learning about someone as well as passing on traditions of family legacies. My grandmother expressed how you can only truly know someone when you've heard their story and learned where they come from and she loved to listen. My

grandmother raised me to be a listener, to be a fighter but most importantly to be honest and to tell that story, any story, whichever one I felt was worth sharing. I have a passion for the truth and know that when you really want to know something about someone, you need to go to the source, never assume that an outsider knows what they are saying. Storytelling is in my blood but aside from that your truth is also so important to me and I have found that personal story is missing in the educational aspect of how we educate an artist. Our stories make us who we are and understanding said stories from the source is far better than making assumptions and creating false narratives.

Thesis Question

How might a focus on our identities and sharing our stories, change the ways we engage with theatre arts, and participate in creative processes? Further how might reflecting on my practice and the ways in which I was co-intentional support the participants focus on identity and personal story?

With this project I wanted to see how who we are and how the celebration of self could change the ways we view theatre arts as well as how we create it. Because of the Eurocentric and white supremacist norms that has been the foundation that traditional theatre was built on, I wanted to break away from these norms and create from our experiences and share them with others. I wanted my participants and I to witness how it feels to see our unique stories being told by

way of story circles, verbatim theatre practices, even casting ourselves as leads when a world has told us we are not that type. I hoped that through this project I could better understand what we still need to keep working on. Further I wanted to see how my use of co-intentionality can aid the participants in focusing on themselves and the power they have to make change.

Literature Review

Social Change

The oppressed, having internalized the image of the oppressor and adopted his guidelines are fearful of freedom. Freedom would require them to eject this image and replace it with autonomy and responsibility. Freedom is acquired by conquest, not by gift. It must be pursued constantly and responsibly. Freedom is not an ideal located outside of man; nor is it an idea which becomes myth. It is rather the indispensable condition for the quest for human completion. (Freire 47)

I make connections to Freire's words here to my personal views on how to do this work through the many conversations I have had about this practice with others. For so long creatives have accepted the ways in which we were told to create and how to be as artists and performers that we allowed ourselves to internalize the image of the oppressor through the ways we create. As creatives and practitioners, we need to first acknowledge how we have been oppressed by

the white Eurocentric ways of creating to later find the ways to make it better from within or rebel and leave the past behind us in order to create something inclusive of all bodies.

We in the United States were taught by educators who were using the colonial, western world's way of teaching. It is as Freire calls it "banking." Teaching using a banking approach is to believe that the teacher or in this particular situation, the institution, knows all and is always right. With this banking structure the student allegedly knows nothing so the instructor or institution force feeds the pedagogical thoughts deemed correct by the individual(s) in charge. To not abide by the rules and educational standards set by the oppressor and forced onto us by this system of banking education, is "wrong" and can only be "right" when you follow the strict guidelines deemed correct by the institution. White supremacy culture discusses this idea of there only being one right way: "when they do not adapt or change, then something is wrong with them (the other, those not changing), not with us (those who 'know' the right way) similar to the missionary who does not see value in the culture of other communities, sees only value in their beliefs about what is good (Okun)." The need to break away from this way of thinking is imperative if we want to create a space where all are welcomed into the theatre arts community and one way to start is to put an end to the idea that young Black women can't be ingenues or that Hispanic women can only be sexy and loud as hell (we see you *Modern Family*).

We need characters that actually exist in the real world, or at the very least paint a picture of a certain demographic giving young audiences something to look forward to so that a five year old doesn't feel the need to ask questions like "Do I need to be Black...I want to be chief of paramedics (Tatum 122,123)" after seeing only white doctors in his favorite television program.

We have allowed for young creatives to dream the "impossible dream" but still tell them "Oh I'm sorry you do not fit the role" as America Ferrera has been told throughout her career. At her TED talk Ferrera talked about how this white supremacist culture in the entertainment industry has affected her throughout her career. She speaks on having been told that she couldn't star in a film without first casting a white lead or without her diving into the stereotypes written for Latinx people because it wasn't financeable, explaining how Hollywood was essentially arguing that stories written by or for Latine people don't work without a white lead at the helm or a chola side kick. Despite her being a well-known and respected actor, she has had to endure the downside of being a BIPOC artist.

I thought sunscreen and straightening irons would bring about change in this deeply entrenched value system. But what I realized in that moment was that I was never actually asking the system to change. I was asking it to let me in, and those aren't the same thing. I couldn't change what a system believed about me, while I believed what the system believed about me. And I did. I, like everyone around me, believed that it wasn't

possible for me to exist in my dream as I was. And I went about trying to make myself invisible. What this revealed to me was that it is possible to be the person who genuinely wants to see change while also being the person whose actions keep things the way they are. And what it's led me to believe is that change isn't going to come by identifying the good guys and the bad guys. That conversation lets us all off the hook. Because most of us are neither one of those. Change will come when each of us has the courage to question our own fundamental values and beliefs. And then see to it that our actions lead to our best intentions. I am just one of millions of people who have been told that in order to fulfill my dreams, in order to contribute my talents to the world I have to resist the truth of who I am. I for one, am ready to stop resisting and to start existing as my full and authentic self. (Ferrera)

We in the United States constantly see the role white supremacy plays in the everyday lives of the BIPOC community as well as individuals whose bodies are shaped differently, or those who are not able bodied etc. Even in theatre we see someone's body shape and skin color and assume that they are no longer innocent, an issue we have seen all too frequently in the ways we criminalize Black children. Because they are Black, we have deemed them grown and guilty. We could not go into this thesis project where we wanted to look at identity and story and not discuss how white supremacy plagues not just our society as

individuals in the United States but as artists trying to create within the system that has oppressed and continues to oppress despite our awareness of it.

In the summer of 2020 over 300 BIPOC theatre artists signed and published the now famous manifesto “We See you White American Theater,” aimed at the white producers and creators of the Broadway and theatre arts community. The artists called for “transformative measures guided by principles of self-determination, presence, joy, access, protection, transparency and integrity in the spirit of independence from our colonized past and present (We See You W.A.T).” The statement shared with the public as well as the more detailed 30 page pamphlet, explained how these creatives were tired of being a part of an oppressive structure, how they were more than their bodies and wrote detailed notes on how to break apart from the white supremacist structure Broadway was founded on and still thrives under. The manifesto calls for more BIPOC representation, in not just the creative realm but every aspect of theatre creation. They called for 50% BIPOC representation which begs the question “ what were, or rather are the numbers of BIPOC creatives where a call for equal representation is being demanded.” They called for more stories that resemble those who work in the industry and for more BIPOC reviewers in addition to the white ones for how can we expect a fair critique of a BIPOC story when the ones reviewing it know and understand nothing of the culture. What a “radical” call to action so many

made it seem, but when you read what these creatives are asking for it's simple, humanity.

In their 2017 The New York Times Article titled *In a Body-Positive Moment, Why Does Hollywood Remain Out of Step*, Brooks Barnes writes “about 71 percent of Americans over the age of 20 are overweight or obese, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.” Knowing this we are forced to ask the question regarding why so little representation exists in Hollywood. While yes we can thank actors like Melissa McCarthy for “paving the way” for fuller bodies in film and television, she still is the only mainstream actor to continue to be cast and very rarely is her weight even mentioned in the roles she plays. Barnes references Chrissy Metz from *This is Us* who famously played Kate, 1/3 of the “Big Three” who was known as the fat twin sister whose entire story line revolved around her issues with her weight. As America Ferrera mentioned in her Ted Talk regarding Hollywood essentially refusing to write or produce projects for Latine actors where they were the leads or not the stereotypical Hispanic person, the same is being done for actors whose waist size doesn't resemble that of a runway model. Hollywood is basically telling its viewers “We will give you the job if you're fat BUT your role will be all about your fatness. Oh and also you can be a large part of a production, but you'll never be a lead.” While yes, there is the exception to the rule (Melissa McCarthy especially) and as Barnes mentioned Tracy Turnblad in *Hair Spray* or Gabourey Sidibe in *Precious: Based on the*

Novel "Push" by Sapphire but we have to be honest with ourselves and ask why these leading roles only come about once in a blue moon. The talent isn't lacking, but the sex appeal apparently is according to David Ruben who told Barnes "So often leading roles are perceived by writers, directors and producers as physically idealized, leaving little room for inventive ways of portraying them."

Maddie Sofia, host of NPR's *SHORT WAVE*, did an episode about the history of fat phobia and its white supremacist origins. In the episode she interviews Sabrina Strings, author of "Fearing the Black Body: The Racial Origins of Fat Phobia," who right from the get-go discusses her personal connection to fat phobia.

Looking at 19th-century magazines like Harper's Bazaar...what she found was troubling; articles warning American women - well, middle-class and upper-class white women - they needed to watch what they eat....'And they were unapologetic in stating that this was the proper form for Anglo-Saxon Protestant women. And so it was important that women ate as little as was necessary in order to show their Christian nature and also their racial superiority... by the middle of the 18th century, a lot of French philosophers in particular were arguing that... You know what? When we're in the colonies, we're noticing that Africans are sensuous. They love sex, and they love food. And for this reason, they tend to be too fat. Europeans, we have rational self-control. This is what makes us the

premier race of the world. So in terms of body size, we should be slender, and we should watch what we eat.

Clearly this way of thinking still plagues us to this day, whether we are aware of it or not. Hollywood needs to start looking within themselves and realize that they are telling stories, hiring performers, that do not represent the global majority but rather represent this white supremacist idea of what we wished the world looked like.

The disabled and autistic communities have also been handed the short end of the stick when it comes to a lack in representative story telling. *The Good Doctor*, *Wonder*, *Atypical* are just three examples of well-known productions that have cast able-bodied and neurotypical actors as leads in stories written for autistic and disabled characters. This choice of casting is now given the name “cripping up.” By crippling up we are giving in to the narrative that disabled and atypical individuals don’t belong in the creative art realm yet their stories are inspiring enough to write and direct projects about them, making one wonder how much of this choice of storytelling really is just disability as inspiration porn? Are we choosing to tell these stories and casting able bodied actors just to use the disabled and atypical communities as tools to make the neurotypical community feel better about themselves? Stella Young, who coined the term inspiration porn, stated that many of us have only “experienced disabled people as objects of

inspiration. ... For lots of us, disabled people are not our teachers or our doctors or our manicurists. We're not real people. We are there to inspire." But the issue here isn't just using this community as inspiration, or as a way of being grateful for not living like them (whilst using actors who don't actually represent the community); it is the fact that so many of these stories are being recycled as well as celebrating the magic of these characters like Dustin Hoffman in *Rain Man*. The writing of Raymond Babbit and characters like him idealizes individuals from atypical and disabled communities similarly to the ways we have seen the magical negro. They are written into the story simply to come to the aid of and enrich the white, often male protagonist. It is a trope we've seen for decades and it doesn't seem to be ending.

To not look at our bodies, the way we look and how we are viewed by society, would only make our project half of what it was meant to be. Our issue with femininity, masculinity or fatness (as well as the more obvious issues with race) is also something imbedded in white supremacist norms that need to be addressed and evaluated.

Research Methods

We gathered data by sharing surveys/questionnaires (see Exhibit A) and by conducting interviews in the final session (see Exhibit B). We considered having the data surveys not being anonymous because they are an excellent way to

collect information about what individuals do and who they are. Providing them online came with many benefits such as: they were easy to administer, we got the responses quickly and collected direct data entry which “reduces time spent importing data and data errors” (Varkerisser). But we realized that surveys could be tricky. Surveys can have low response rates which could make our findings inaccurate if only some of the participants took part which is what Allen and I found to be our issue with our mid-session surveys. Not all the participants responded to our mid-session surveys so it made it difficult for us to assess any growth or lack thereof. We had the option of open-ended and closed-ended questions and the benefits as well as downfalls of both made it difficult to make the final decision on surveys. “Open-ended questions allow users to input their own answer and do not provide predefined response options. Open-ended questions produce difficult-to-analyze responses and can be a hurdle for respondents that increases dropout. For those reasons, experts say they should be used sparingly, primarily to explore a topic and obtain quotable material” (Varkerisser) as opposed to closed-ended questions which are typically simple yes or no questions. We knew that when looking at a yes or no format the chances of receiving any feedback would be greater because little to no work would be needed to share but Allen and I knew that we would get so little from closed-ended surveys that we opted for open-ended since we wanted to have actual quotes from the participants. We knew that since surveys were something we felt

strongly about we needed to do various surveys throughout the course of those 9 sessions so that the participants could get used to doing them but also so that we could get information in a gradual manner.

The reason Allen and I felt so keen on using interviews as a research method was because they are great at getting folks to talk about things they care about and to really give them the room to express themselves and since this project was about the self and story, what better way to gather information than from the source.

Qualitative interviews allow you to gain access to rich data about your participants' experiences, memories, and feelings. They are a responsive method which means you can follow-up on and explore issues that are relevant to each participant. Probing for more depth and detail is a key element of qualitative interviewing and this enables you to develop a rapport with your interviewees. Not only can you gather great data using this method, but we have found the people often really enjoy being interviewed and having the opportunity to talk at length about an issue that matters to them. (Wheeler & Brett)

As applied theatre practitioners we were taught early on that listening is a huge component of the work that we do and to be a good practitioner is to be a good listener. We need to be good "at thinking on (y)our feet to develop questions that can probe for more depth and detail." (Wheeler & Brett) Interviews were not

only good for our practice and learning but it also created a space in which the participants who had been working with us for weeks could now have the opportunity to express themselves and the ways in which this practice did or did not serve them and why.

Chapter 2

“Our Story” sessions

Our 9 week, 2 hour sessions began on January 28th at 3pm. Given the Covid restrictions at the universities, Allen and I were tasked with implementing our project via zoom. Prior to our first session we were in constant contact with the theatre program director of HU and emailing with little to no response from the interim director at KU.

The directors of both HU and KU made this an independent study. Allen and I were tasked with setting up a time to have these weekly sessions. It was not an easy feat. To start, only two students initially signed up for the independent study. Given these low numbers HU’s theatre director sent out a student wide email asking if anyone else was interested in the study without getting credit but would need to commit themselves to the 9 week structure. That led to four students now expressing interest which excited Allen and me. We were hoping for numbers closer to 10-12 but felt that 6 was good enough. As far as scheduling, it was a week of back and forth emailing with the participants about who was

available when. Finally, Allen and I opted for a survey and the time that most students were available, 4 to be exact, was Friday. We were hoping to work with everyone but really didn't plan for the issues with it being an independent study and how that means meeting at your own time. One of the students who actually signed up for the independent study was not available Fridays given their very busy schedule so agreed to work with us separately. The student in question will be referred to as Bernice and our meetings with her will be shared at the end of this section. Allen and I questioned how Bernice not being present in the sessions could impact our research. We weren't sure if it could even work but being that she did register for the course we didn't want to turn her away.

Hours before our first session started, we received an email from one of the possible participants saying that they would no longer be joining us because they had a lot on their plate that semester. So now Allen and I were going into implementing our project with three students; we were very, very worried. The three students I will be referring to over the next several pages are as follows: Delaney she/her a Black and Hispanic trans woman and sophomore studying theatre at HU; Mike he/him, a white cis gendered male senior studying theatre at HU and Liza she/her, white cis gendered female art major and theatre minor and senior at KU. Please note that all names have been changed to protect the participants and their identities.

Allen and I , now glorified professors , were tasked with presenting our thesis project as well as grading our student participants. This was something that was not addressed in our meeting with the program directors. Allen and I embarked on our thesis journey nervous but with high hopes though lacking the gusto of Bilbo Baggins setting out on his big adventure.

Note* As mentioned earlier our project had to be done via Zoom due to covid protocols set in place by the schools administration. Zoom was not the desired place to be discussing and creating theatre. It was awkward trying to engage at first because there was a very obvious barrier between all of us. Doing theatre games via this medium was also very challenging. While nothing is ever impossible, some things are just done better, and are more exciting when done in person. It didn't matter how many sessions we may or may not have had with our participants, the games were always a challenge. This project was an intimate one, and Zoom, while a safer option in times of contagion, removed that sense of intimacy we all needed and deserved when discussing our stories and identities. We definitely made do but I would be lying if I didn't make mention of the difficulties zoom provided.*

Session 1: Introduction

We started with a land acknowledgement³. Allen and I felt it very important to have these participants get used to saying what former indigenous land they reside on, especially since our thesis project deals in part with oppressive norms in the theatre arts community. Right away it was an awkward time together. It felt very much like the participants didn't want to be there or talk. Allen and I put on our smiling faces and moved along the best we could. We framed the day and explained in further detail what this project was and why we were doing it.

We went into our first exercise the "I Come From" exercise. It is more of a writing prompt but can be done with pictures if preferred. The objective is to tell the group where you come from and the times you are in using short words with the intent of getting to know one another better. Since there were so few students Allen and I were told by our then advisors that with so few students we had to be participants in our project.⁴ When I shared, I wrote "I come from: Union City, Cuba, loud voices, the smell of garlic, the family barbershop and ANXIETY." The objective is not to tell a long story, just give us a glimpse into who you are and what makes you, you. This exercise is useful because it helps everyone see all

³ A formal statement that a public event is taking place on land originally inhabited by indigenous people

⁴ When sharing our concerns with our then advisors, we were told the best way around this would be to participate ourselves. I worried if doing this would hinder me in separating myself as participant and facilitator. A year later I wish we had not done that and worked solely as facilitators.

the different backgrounds that make us who we are. Food was a big part of everyone's story.

Our next exercise was a graffiti board⁵ where I shared two prompts. The participants shared very few things that scared them about theatre and most of their share were positive words. Comments written that I found intriguing were “the mortifying ordeal of being known” and “remembering lines.” Before going into a discussion about the first prompt we moved on to the second. This one being about the sunsetting of the theatre program garnered a lot more feedback. Many of the words written were similar but expressed so much about what these students were feeling in real time. There was some sarcasm shared on the board which I could only assume was attributed to this one particular student trying to make light of a crappy situation, while others brought a lot more feeling.

I lead the facilitation and the first student to speak on the prompts was Delaney, who stated that she “feels like a decision that was much too hastily made” and that this concept of “not enough marketing” is not good enough a reason to close a theatre program. I realized that once we expressed the desire to have these participants really open up, Delaney really shined and gave us so much of herself. Our only male student Mike expressed how this program “changed my life. It's infuriating to see the work that people put in to creating theatre and all

⁵ Graffiti board: a shared writing space where students record their comments and questions about a topic. The purpose is for students to “hear” one another's ideas

that was made during Covid, to come back from Covid and now it feels like let's not do the work at all." Sitting there I felt good hearing how strongly they all felt about this and it excited me to see how this topic of the sunsetting of the theatre program can aid Allen and I in the work we were trying to create here.

Delaney said something about the sunsetting of the program and the number of professors that are leaving or retiring which I found very important and fits well with Allen's and my view on the arts as a whole: "it's a symbolic reminder about theatre programs around the country that are shutting down. It instills a fear in me because if most people are leaving and programs are closing, I ask myself if I should still be participating in the theatre world." I found it heartbreaking to hear how these issues with lack of funding affect these students' morale. Not enough money, issues with spaces to have classes and create theatre. They really feel like this program, theatre in general, is kind of a nothing thing and the school makes them feel like they're small and need to continue shrinking till they're nonexistent.

From here we did the group contract and they really didn't seem too into it. Looking back now it feels counterproductive to have had such a lively conversation and then tie it down to something that should have been done in the beginning. From there we did story circles on past learning experiences. Delaney's past experiences were pleasant and revolved around ensemble work, Liza's expressed enjoying hearing other people's ideas and perspectives and

enjoys collaborative work and Mike's story was of a time when he was given the chance to do what he wanted and was granted artistic liberties with the work he created. Allen highlighted the good side of the creative field. Allen shared a negative story about a former acting teacher embarrassing him in front of the entire class while I shared a positive story regarding my former professor and mentor.

We moved into our final exercise which was creating a story through movement based on the earlier prompts of "I come from." Rather than splitting off into various groups and doing a share with the entire group (which is how it would be done with a larger group) we all worked together. Delaney and Liza came up with theirs pretty quickly and Mike took a while but essentially did the same as Liza. I was curious about the choice to do the same as another person in the room but I realized that 1. We can all feel the same feeling, and 2. if I were to call out Mike for having done essentially the same thing as Liza, I would have placed myself in the confines of "this is the way of doing things" that Allen and I were trying to break away from.

Overall, the first session was a success. Allen and I did make note that we needed to make the upcoming sessions more entertaining. We asked the participants to share with us what they needed to be more engaged and to make this process better. Not much was given other than Liza asking for more visuals since she is a visual learner and if there would ever be a chance for us to do a

session/s in person. I did state I would share at the end of every class detailed notes on every session as well as a glimpse at what will come the next week but as far as in person sessions were concerned, it was out of Allen's and my hands and we had no choice but to stick to Zoom sessions.

Allen and I worked really well together and were a cohesive unit. While I do see how it could be helpful to be a participant along with the students, I wondered if Allen and I sharing was, in some way, swaying the participants or keeping them from sharing since they really didn't share much. I get that in some exercises it was necessary but it felt almost like we were planting a seed or forcing the participants into following our narrative to prove our points. I wasn't sure but I was curious to see how we would work through it but the fear was still at the fore front of my mind. Allen and I made a note to try and get the participants to engage more and make the next session more entertaining. Zoom fatigue was real and we needed to find a way to make zoom work for us, since we had no choice but to work via this medium.

Session 2: Who Am I

Session 2 began with a check in. After the first session being a bit of a bore, Allen and I really wanted to make this one fun but it was yet another challenging week trying to keep the participants excited.

Mike spent most of the session on a train which was a bit distracting and made waiting for responses a much longer process and there was a lot of awkward silences that were very hard to fill. Allen and I wanted to make it more exciting by playing a game of charades. We were hoping a game of charades would get the participants to move around more but it was challenging to get them to want to move in the first place and being on Zoom didn't really help our cause either. Charades really wasn't anything to rave about, our goal was fun and it was kind of a dud. Really uneventful but bless their hearts for you can tell they really were trying. We were all trying but it was a challenge.

I led the next exercise which was the story of our names. We moved forward with the game and it was a success! Delaney inspired us all to check out urban dictionary for our names which led to some laughter and it changed the feeling of the room. I really enjoyed Delaney and the person she was in the space. You can tell that she had a lot to offer and wanted to offer it. She could read the room and knew when to be the one to take up space and share a lot and when to sit back and let others do their thing.

Being that this session focused on who the participants are as individuals, Allen felt the game "When the Windblows" would be good to play so as to ensure that the participants have a little bit more fun. The game is simple, with your camera on, you take turns saying something true for yourself and the others join (by turning on their cameras) only if it's true for them as well. For example, I

would say “the wind blows for those who love dark chocolate” and anyone who loves dark chocolate will turn on their cameras and sway their body/arms or “blow” with the wind along with me. It’s a great game for you to share who you are and to see who else shares the same thoughts and feelings as you do. Most of what was being offered was very generic offerings such as, if you like to daydream, or if you view yourself as the main character when you look out the window and it’s raining. All fine responses but I wanted something more, something deeper. Since Allen and I are also participating, when it came my turn to share something I tried to make it deeper by talking about stereotypical casting choices and their oppressive ways. Folks joined but then Delaney brought it back to the same offerings as before. Perhaps they didn’t want to talk about “deeper” stuff and I should have respected that and been glad that they were giving me what they were giving me. It is important that I keep in mind that this work is not about me and my participants not doing what I would hope does not speak to my prowess or lack thereof as a facilitator. The work is about the participants and their needs and if not going deep into a conversation and having a good time is what they need in that moment, then I should respect that and go with the flow. Our last game was two truths and a lie which was more of an acting game but we all had a good time with it. Sometimes we just need to make sure the participants are enjoying themselves the best they can. Plus, it was assisting us in getting closer which worked.

For our first exercise related to the theme of the session we did a movement exercise from the “I come from” prompt we did the week prior. The point of the exercise is to share a movement and a word that relates to the prompt and then everyone is supposed to follow you. Simple to understand and a great way to better understand what makes us, us but it doesn’t feel like it was something they enjoyed and I say this simply by watching them in real time and later when reviewing the video. It felt like they were just going through the motions than really enjoying themselves.

When it came to the final exercise “We Imagine a Place.” The objective is for the participants to share words about a place, a future they envision and from there create a piece together with the words and movement. We went around the space and each participant imagined a place different from the last. Delaney imagined a place that was related solely to her future as an artist and director. Liza similarly made it personal and discussed a place where she is an art therapist and leads a simple happy life. Mike’s place is a little more obscure than the others. He envisions a personal library with a writing desk, a computer with a clicky mechanical keyboard. Allen’s place was an office space that was free of anxiety and dog friendly while I brought it to our overall theme of the workshop, a place where individual stories are celebrated and inclusivity is a welcomed norm. I was disappointed again because I wanted more specific answers and I hate that I wanted the participants to read my mind and I wonder if my response was even

right or helpful and for this reason is why I really hated having to participate in the workshop. I was noticing early on that I was having a very hard time separating myself as facilitator and participant. I wasn't being co-intentional.

After reading back everyone's responses I asked the participants to create the piece. What I thought was well explained was apparently not as clear as I thought, so Delaney asked that we share an example. Allen and I were not prepared. In this moment I really felt like that saying "you know when you assume, you make an ass out of you and me" because I assumed that they would know exactly what I was talking about. I was wrong and that came to bite me. Allen and I made a short stitch effort and created something on the fly. It worked but was also terrible to look at. Really need to either come better prepared with examples or work on the way I explain things. After our horrendous example the participants were ready to create something. They didn't want to break off into smaller groups. Delaney said that we should all work together and the other two followed. Delaney really took the reins and it was remarkable to watch. She very much understood the assignment and essentially put the whole thing together. Not sure if it's that the other two are less talkative, which up to this point had been the case, or they just do not understand the instructions, but Delaney did a great job running the show which, she acknowledged and asked that her peers participate more. I felt bad having this be the structure because as I've expressed numerous times, they seemed bored but I also didn't want to just end early without reaching

our points and Delaney so far seemed to be the only one trying to keep the ball rolling and to get the job done. Despite what I felt was more about each individual person, we still managed to make the final piece inclusive of all that also happened to be about the greater good and not just ourselves. So, mission accomplished. I closed out the session going over what we did the last two weeks. I explained the importance of movement and story through movement and congratulated them on achieving this structure. Liza liked the movement piece because she likes visuals and thought it was fun. Delaney on the other hand found it pretty okay and felt that the structure was a bit clunky. She acknowledged that Zoom makes things weird and was clear about not being a fan of the virtual space. Mike finally shared more with us at the end than he did the entire session. He said he appreciated how abstract it was and liked that we were “trying to capture vibes” and that it was different from anything else he’s ever done. Overall, I was happy that the session was over especially after watching back the video. It was painful to watch and even be a part of. This form of creating is not even my favorite and I feel now that we maybe shouldn’t have focused so much time on it, but at the same time, so much of our bodies and the moves we make inform a character when we are performing. Also, we can’t have an identity workshop and not focus on identity. Just curious if perhaps there was a better way of doing that.

After two stressful and frankly boring sessions I was really hoping that as we entered into the next few sessions that we become closer with the participants so that we could all start having a bit more fun. As far as my thesis goes and what I am investigating I have not seen much. I could make an argument in favor of the uncomfortableness of a more personally centered theatre practice but nothing yet on how it can foster positive change. As for myself as a facilitator, already witnessing issues with my being co-intentional. I laid witness to the difference between actually working with your participants and in their favor and how that differs from my own experience with education. So while session 2 wasn't the most exciting and had its "issues" we were already laying the foundation to what a student and student identity focused pedagogy might look like.

Session 3: Verbatim Week 1

I guess it is true what they say that the third times the charm, because this week was great! We started off with an improv game called "Help with mirrors." We move around the "room" and tell a story one at a time while the person speaking is making a movement that the entire group copies. When the person speaking can no longer think of where to take this story, they say "help" and someone joins in. The participants all really enjoyed it and the story we created was fun and revolved around skin care routines. Delaney expressed that it came easy for her and the group who during this time were rehearsing for an improv

play, because this is what they did pretty much every day. So, it was nice for us to share a fun game and exercise that the participants really felt comfortable doing. We chose this game because not only is the mirroring aspect of it fun and carefree, Allen and I felt that it would be a great way to scaffold into the work we do with verbatim theatre.

The theme for the session was verbatim theatre⁶. I used a video found on YouTube from Anna Deavere Smith's "Twilight: Los Angeles." This was a great example to share with the participants because it gave them an idea of what this medium is and how it can still be entertaining.

The participants seemed to really enjoy the shared example and we had a very good lengthy conversation about it. In our discussions I mentioned another work by Smith's where she portrays a Hasidic man and how when she did this years ago it was deemed acceptable but today might not be. I wanted to know what about this work do we need to be careful of, what issues arise with verbatim theatre. Delaney responded almost immediately. She mentioned the issues with accents and race, ethnicity, disabilities and how there have to be ways that we can do this work without touching on certain aspects that would come off as mocking or wrongly portraying someone who is clearly not you. She expressed how she views verbatim theatre and that to her the "words are more important and we need

⁶ Theatre based on the spoken words of real people

to allow the words to be. Say the words how you the actor would say it but still remember you're acting as someone else." Liza agreed with Delaney that the work can still be done without fully immersing ourselves into the characters' voice and mannerisms but still being true to what they're saying.

I appreciated where they were going with this but was still a little concerned that they were solely focusing on the speech patterns and movements of the people they could be portraying and not really focusing on their race or gender. Delaney briefly touched on it but she didn't fully express it as much as she did the issue with speech patterns so I asked about how much artistic license we have with this work. "How much of you can I portray while still being respectful?" Delaney stated that there is wiggle room and how though actors do dialect work there is a fine line that exists that moves from authenticity to the realm of caricature. "Things like speech patterns are safe, word choice but it's a different story when it comes to colloquialisms and dialects." So again, focusing more on the fear of mocking one's speech than concerned with one's being and identity. In recent times it has become important to many creators that we don't whitewash the things we create and this has really changed my personal view on creation as well. I've learned that it is wrong for a person of a particular race or gender to portray another and therefore I'd like to believe that they know that it is now deemed wrong for a white woman to portray a Black trans woman. I felt that I needed them to say it flat out and they didn't and I wished there was a better

way that I could have asked these questions and included that in there. Though I did finish this discussion with how different verbatim is for everyone and its interpreted differently by the practitioner but I still expressed the concern with portraying someone who is in no way like you i.e., Smith as the Hasidic New Yorker. I can only hope that my bringing it up was enough for them to remember the need to do this work in a careful and respectful way.

Allen led the next exercise where we watched an interview and discussed how we could create a piece from said interview. Allen asked that we look at mannerisms, voice, word choice, do we believe what the person is saying and how do we think they feel. The interview we decided on was a comedic interview of Hilary Clinton on the Funny or Die show “Between two ferns.” The fact that it was a comedic interview didn’t totally help our cause because as the participants (Delaney specifically) mentioned this is already a bit of a performance. Despite the issue with it already being a theatrical piece we were able to have a good conversation around the work that could possibly come from it. I was very excited to see that Mike was more talkative and engaged than ever before. He talked about Clinton’s posture and visible frustration and how that would be important to use when recreating her. Delaney stated how her stiffness implied her being a new person with no control while Zach has control and he shows this by the way he sits, leans forward and how he tried to scare her in the beginning. They seemed to really understand the concept of putting this work into our bodies as actors and it

was exciting to see how into it they were given how engaged they were being this week. I feel that, like most things, the participants needed to know us better and put feelers out before really letting loose and engaging with us. That or Allen and I just brought forth a really remarkable session and they couldn't contain their excitement. I'll argue it was a combination of both.

I led the final exercise of the session. A Viewpoints exercise I tweaked to have it work with verbatim. The point of the exercise is to work off a memory that elicits a strong emotion, positive or negative, that the participants felt safe and comfortable sharing. After finding that memory I asked that the participants share it by showcasing very specific moments from it to later share with the entire group. After doing this I broke them into two separate pairs: Delany and Mike and Allen and Liza. While in their pairs I asked that they share their movement with their partner then tell them the story that corresponds with said movement(s). After this is done, have the partner do the others movement to later present to the entire group. They come back to the larger group and presented their partners story as their own. For the most part the exercise worked out well. Liza and Mike presented their partners story as "this is so and so's story" and it was more of a narration than actually embodying their partner and their story. Delaney was the one to fully comprehend the assignment and presented Mikes story in a very comical yet honest way as if she was Mike. Once everyone presented their pieces, they all expressed to have enjoyed the exercise. Mike

stated that it was interesting to see what Delaney took and found to be important to the story while Delaney enjoyed telling the story and found it fun watching Mike react to things she missed. As we closed Delaney expressed to wanting to see where this type of work can go and wondered where the restraints are and asked if she could share something she hates with us. She went on to explain how she hates work that forces folks to feel things that perhaps they don't feel and expressed that is why she is such a fan of comedy. It feels that she wants people to experience theatre and have the feelings come naturally to them rather than falling into that theatre troupe of "I'm crying now cry with me". I would be interested to see how she uses this in her future works.

I appreciated this session for numerous reasons and loved how well we all vibed together. The Viewpoints exercise was a good example and helped the participants understand how important it is to work with another individual's truth and present it theatrically as if it were their own story. I loved how Mike was finally opening up to us and was contributing a lot more and loved that Delaney felt comfortable to share something with us about theatre and what is considered acceptable theatre norms. They appeared to really understand what it is we were doing here and had strong feelings about how this could and should be done. They were aware of the issues with the work but didn't look at much at representation or acknowledge how certain individuals shouldn't be representing certain communities. This is something we are witnessing primarily in the casting choices

made in major Hollywood films presently. I also feared that they weren't thinking of the community aspect of this work and how we can tell our stories. At this point it seemed they might still have been viewing this more as an acting class but Allen and I hoped that in the following weeks we could bring a greater focus on identity, story and our communities and how we can represent ourselves and them better through this work.

Session 4: Verbatim Week 2

Our second verbatim session started off with a bang. What a fun session to be a part of. Weeks earlier Allen and I had asked our cohort if anyone would be available to meet with our participants for our second verbatim session in which the participants would have the opportunity to put the work to practice. Joy, Jaymie and Kelsey all agreed that they would be available and were interested in helping us out. The session started with a fun game called "Face Jam" which is a dancing game where one person is "it" and they dance with their face along to music and everyone follows. We enjoyed it so much that we spent the first 20 minutes of our session playing. Allen and I kept messaging our MA cohort members to pass it over to one of us to end, but they were so in the game that they missed it. Either way I'm pleased everyone was able to have a good time. From there I explained how the rest of the session would go before I sent everyone off to their respective breakout rooms to work on their interviews. We gave them 30

minutes to interview the MA students and then 20 minutes to work alone. The participants were given the space to interview the MA students about whatever they wanted. Delaney focused on Joy's experience with experimental theatre and working in the field, Liza interviewed Kelsey mostly on her work with young people and moving around the country running various art camps, and Mike's interview was a more well-rounded interview of who Jaymie is and where she comes from.

When we all came back together after the interviews and individual rehearsals were done, we asked the participants to share with us their pieces. I had expressed over the breakout room message board that this was a fun exercise and to not be nervous but I wish now I said it again before they shared just to remind the participants that they were in a safe space and we were all just playing and practicing together. Every single "performance" was different and fantastic. Everyone really brought their own version of creating this work to the share and it was really remarkable to see. When Allen asked what they felt about this exercise Delaney expressed how much she enjoyed talking and getting to know someone else. She went first and I loved seeing her smile as she performed as a version of Joy. Delaney was very much Delaney playing Joy but there were moments where I could see and hear Joy's cadence and minor mannerisms. Liza was second and was an incredible Kelsey doppelgänger. She spoke like Kelsey, had her mannerisms down and almost sounded like her. She embodied Kelsey in a way

that you would not believe she only had 20 minutes to work on this. Mike seemed a bit nervous but I am happy to say kept it together and shared a really lovely piece. It looked more like he was reciting a story or as if he was in the rehearsal process of trying to memorize lines, but the work he was putting in was evident and I was proud that he was doing this and doing so well. There were moments where I could see Jaymie and hear her speech patterns. It didn't come as naturally to him as it did say Liza, but that's the beauty of this work that everyone has a different idea of it and I wish I stated that again at the end in the event he was feeling nervous or comparing himself to his peers.

Since this was their first time trying this, I wanted to know what it was like interviewing and then using the words of the folks they interviewed. Mike expressed how he was nervous in the process of translating from conversation to performance because he feared coming off as an "asshole" or misrepresenting something. Liza wrote a bunch down and for time's sake had to cut stuff but stated that she just wanted to have fun and did have fun embodying Kelsey. Delaney also wrote a lot down and chose to go with what felt more narrative driven than expository and said that it was easy to do. She focused more on the words that Joy said than her mannerisms because she didn't want to make Joy a caricature. Hearing this I wanted to turn it over to our guests and see what it was like for them. All of them had wonderful things to say, stated how it was nerve wrecking to see someone play them but appreciated what they felt was picked up

and shared to be important, felt, heard and loved seeing folks interpret aspects of stories that had no context whatsoever. As a facilitator I was excited to see how well this whole exercise turned out for everyone. It helped me realize the power personal story has in the learning process and given that verbatim is different for everyone, also allows for the students to learn in whatever they feel is right for them. There is no right and wrong with verbatim theatre and I saw this while they shared.

Before we closed out for the day we asked “Where and or how do you see verbatim theatre being used affectively.” We felt the need to ask since after our last session we felt that the participants weren’t fully grasping our work and how we were focusing on story, identity and doing that work creatively. Liza said this would work with anything that revolves around talking to people and used standup as an example. Not sure how verbatim could be standup but I’d be curious to see that done. Delaney gave us examples of plays, “Disgrace” to be specific, and stated that anything that shows two different stories at once. There responses were pretty vague and didn’t speak to what Allen and I were hoping was the understanding of this workshop so I elaborated further. “Knowing that this workshop is about our stories and how we create/teach art, where can this work be used if we’re trying to be true to our identities, communities etc.?” Everyone was quiet for a moment. I feared not being clear and considered that maybe Allen and I were not doing great at getting our message across. Delaney

responded again with an example. “Sweat” by Lynn Nottage and gave us a quick synopsis of the piece. She said that verbatim theatre is about interviewing a lot of real people and pulls from real life but expressed that although verbatim dives further into it than regular theatre, it already exists in regular theatre. Naturally I appreciate her honesty but I was concerned that Allen and I were not doing a good enough job in explaining how this is different and how and why it is different. Regular theatre and verbatim theatre are not the same just like applied theatre and regular theatre are not the same. The feeling is different, the end goal is different and I found myself struggling trying to figure out how to better make that point. Since I felt that our message was being lost in translation, I really made a point to explain this whole process in my session notes shared with the participants. This is what I wrote to them:

“Overall, these past 2 weeks were a success. Allen and I were very excited to see you folks thriving and doing this work with ease. I am pleased that you all brought up a lot of issues with this particular way of creating because that just means that you are already thinking ethically and will in turn be ethical creators and that is so important and still lacking in the work that we do. I want you all to remember what this workshop is about as we continue forward. I want us to look at this work as a way to break away from the norms in general theatre and creative practices. This workshop is for us all to take ownership over who we are and what we do when we are creating. It is to change the narrative and place us in a position

of power. This workshop is for us to look at all the issues with the way theatre is taught and created and challenge that. Let's keep that in mind as we continue working in the weeks to come." Hopefully sharing this reminder helped them and us as we continued working together for several weeks after. Given our concerns Allen and I agreed that a survey would be our next step to assess how everyone was doing and where they were all at with this work. I just wanted them to take away new ways of creating but also remember that the self and our communities and our shared identities are so important.

Session 5: Ethno and Documentary Theatre

Allen and I really wanted to scaffold the methods we shared, using each session as a building block. Since verbatim, ethno and documentary have so many similarities or to some are considered the same, we felt it was best to place these methods of storytelling one after the other. We introduced ethno and asked for the participants to read the definition followed by an example of ethno theatre. I shared a play called "State of the State" written by Rachel Atkins. I explained how Rachel put this piece together and how verbatim and ethno differ from one another. Both are based in focusing on a particular subject matter and focusing on one part of it, though verbatim is interviews we present exactly as shared and ethno requires a little more research and has a lot more artistic liberties. To write her play Rachel shared a survey with students ranging in age from 12-22 all

around the country. The survey was about racism, anti-Semitism and how the rise in that was affecting this demographic in early 2021. She later wrote composite characters from the information given to her. The participants understood the concept of this rather quickly and then noticed something about their performances the week earlier. Mike had expressed how when he presented Jaymie's interview it was more of the feeling of what they discussed and did not say word for word what she told him. He noticed the fine line between saying and doing exactly as the subject and using the subject and using what you feel would better make for a character and your point of view.

After our brief discussion we presented the theme for the session, the sunsetting of their joint theatre program. We chose this route primarily because Allen was very moved by the one university's choice to sunset a program he understood to be very successful. Upon him explaining this to me, we felt using this would help the students better understand this form of storytelling since it was so close to them and was happening in real time. It wasn't until after this session did it occur to me that it would have been just as affective if we used a subject with more aesthetic distance. Just to keep the participants more removed from the research and protect their feelings a bit more than we did.

We shared a few letters written by former students on their feelings about the closing and told them that they would be creating a piece from them. I asked the participants to read over the letters aka the research materials and improvise a

scene. We gave them about 10/15 minutes to prepare and upon returning they told us that they did not use the full time and stated, “you said to improvise so we just read it over and are going to go for it as one would an improvisation.” Hearing this I realized I should have been more specific or just not used the word improv. The intended goal was for them to read over the materials, discuss them and the characters present, and to create a short scene with this information. While the scene was great and did evoke emotion from the participants, which they expressed to not liking because it reminded them of their feelings regarding the program closure, it wasn’t what we were asking for. Delaney created a character and narrative that wasn’t present in the research materials given. Her character was an administrator making arguments in favor of the closing but that argument wasn’t in the letters. The letters shared were written by former students against the sunsetting. The more my understanding on this medium grows the more I realize that Delaney wasn’t exactly wrong to share this point because ethno would involve a dialogue but I state again, there was nothing in the research that was about the administration. I explained that the performance was excellent and noted what parts I loved then explained how this exercise was taken from a playwriting/play building exercise and explained to them how it would work in a classroom setting. i.e., you do the research, you improvise a scene given what you read, write something down, improvise, write etc. When I asked what it was like to create a piece using another person’s words, no one responded. Allen asked if it

was useful to which Liza responded that she found it useful because it gave her an idea of what to talk about. Mike shared that it put him in an emotional headspace and that the anger he exhibited was very real and how reading the letters enabled him to do that. “Without the letters, I wouldn’t have been able to garner that feeling and emotion.”

Delaney explained how she didn’t enjoy talking about this theme because it brought on feelings of hopelessness which moved me to address her and the rest of the group about hopelessness. I explained how this work, how applied theatre, keeps us from being hopeless because we are reminded that making change and addressing things we don’t like or think isn’t fair is within our power to make better. I explained how theatre is a tool for change and how what we do and how we create it can make a difference in the future. I used Tony Kushner’s “Normal Heart” as an example. I explained how seeing that once was all I needed to be moved and to view the world differently. It will forever stay with me and because of it I do and address things differently. The chances of us stopping the sunset of this program is slim, but we have within us the power to make a difference, to create something to evoke feelings in individuals that will one day keep the arts programs from being shut down elsewhere. It was a long winded rant but it broke my heart to hear her explain how sad she was and how she felt hopeless and powerless and I hate that the administration is doing this to their students, it’s not fair or right. I later apologized to Allen for going off the rails here but I do not

want anyone to feel like we can't make a difference, that our art can't create positive change. If I didn't address that then what am I even doing here with this entire project? Allen stated how it was within my right to speak to this because this too is my community and I very much appreciated being allowed to be the voice of positivity because the sunsetting of this program that I love so much breaks my heart too.

We go into discussing documentary theatre and explained the difference between all three. We explained how documentary is all encompassing and far more research based. We used Ava DuVernay's documentary "13th" as an example of how to tell a story through research while still arguing your point and said that we could do the same when creating something related to the sunsetting of the program by being true to all sides but still selling our point. From here we went on to brainstorm how to create a documentary theatre piece using our theme.

Delaney immediately stated that we need a more nuanced and interesting way to look at the protagonist and antagonist since both have very specific and valid points to make and that it was important not to demonize anyone. She said this could be about the importance of theatre and how people need it, how the community, not just the students but the people of this urban area, need it. All of the participants stated the various different characters and perspectives needed to drive that narrative. When we asked how they were going to get the information needed to write a factual piece they all just popcorned ideas: interviews, read the

letters, interview the Dean KU look at documents and dates, statistics, research how theatre arts departments thrive on other college campuses as an example to prove the importance. They discussed where they would like the piece to be set, what the different acts would look to answer: Act 1 -will it change the Deans mind? Act 2- did they change the mind? This was probably the most engaged I have seen them and it was very exciting to see how much they wanted to create this narrative. We ended by asking the participants to tell us the difference between the two forms.

Five sessions down and I'm noticing a difference in their excitement. For one the way they were now engaging was in no way similar to the first two weeks, if I didn't know better I would have guessed these were different students. I am also bearing witness to how giving students the opportunity to speak their truth while still creating and learning about theatre is allowing them to see the difference in traditional educational spaces and the more inclusive and student centered one we were trying to create. By simply letting them do what they felt was right is one way of seeing this. Also, letting them openly discuss their feelings and connecting it to the session allowed me to see how a student can still learn what you feel they need to learn by connecting it to their lives, experiences and feelings.

Session 6: Classical theatre through the lens of our identities

The start of this session was really exciting because it really felt that we are all finally friends. We were chatting and taking up space in a way that felt like we were hanging out and not in a class setting. This made me feel like they not only liked us but trusted us and that was really exciting. It was nice to see that we have all gotten to a place where we feel comfortable just hanging out and chatting. Once our movie chat had ended Allen led us through a very beautiful share that involved personal artifacts. Everyone one of our artifacts were different and emotional in their own right. Delaney shared a pepper spray bottle that represented the Black trans community being attacked and how it is a symbol of her identity and how people don't do enough to protect these women. Mike shared his late brother's X-Box controller and shared how when he plays with it, it makes him feel like his brother is with him. Liza shared a piece of art she made during the height of the pandemic as a reminder that there is always a positive way out. Allen shared a sleeping puppy figurine his grandmother left for him after she passed and I a pink plastic rosary given to me by my mother as a child. It was a really beautiful moment to have us all sharing these personal artifacts that represented so much of who we are. From here we went into a discussion about classical theatre and how creating a piece of theatre that has already been written can still be informed by a particular community and individual.

The play we discussed was Shakespeare's "Romeo and Juliet." We told the participants that we would be setting the play in their modern day urban environment. Together we looked at demographics, how gentrification is affecting the community and the classism currently experienced in the city. After, we all established that the city is predominately Black and Hispanic and that our cast would need to resemble that. Mike made mention of the big tech buildings that take over the skyline and how that too needs to be addressed by the piece but together the group worried that this would turn into a play about rich vs poor or white vs Black and how that is a tired trope. Mike also stated how that wouldn't work anyways since the two family's hatred for one another isn't really known, just known to exist, and they just follow tradition to which I reminded Mike that like hate, racism, white supremacy etc. it is a learned behavior and not many know where it stems from just know they were told by someone who was told by someone else to do and say the things they do. We looked at how different genders, personalities, faiths, sexuality etc. can inform these characters in ways we've never seen or thought before. This concept of identity informing a role was challenging for them and something we came across later in the session. They understood rather quickly how a community can inform the look and feel of a piece but one person's identity informs their character was a tad bit challenging. I used the example of MJ Rodriguez playing Audrey in "Little Shop of Horrors" and how because she is a trans woman how it changes the narrative and the way

we look at the characters feelings and struggles. I explained how “Suddenly Seymore” has a completely different feel to it because of who she is and how we can’t and shouldn’t ignore the identity of the actor when creating these pieces. We later cast the two leads using famous actors. Delaney stated that she would love to see Elliot Page play Romeo and another trans actor play Juliet.

Next Allen challenged them to cast a piece of already created and well known theatre doing what we did in the first discussion and present it to Allen and myself as if we were producers they wanted to sell their show to. The play they chose was “Macbeth.” Their cast was predominantly Black and Latino with various trans actors in the cast. They cast Chris Pratt, the only white actor in the piece, as Duncan and all laughed and said, “yeah we felt it appropriate being that his character is the first to die.” In my after session notes I asked them if they realized what they did with the role of Duncan and how Pratts reputation as a homophobe informed his character. That was enough proof to me that they understood what Allen and I meant, they just didn’t know how to make sense of it yet, but by casting Pratt, a homophobe, as Duncan, the former tyrant of a nation that is predominately Black and Queer folx, they completely changed the narrative as well as informed the character. It was very exciting to witness.

The last exercise was a sharing of monologues we hoped would be informed by the actors’ identities. The performances were lovely and I was so pleased that they felt comfortable to share but I quickly realized that this was just

that...a performance and not an exercise in what we were discussing. Delaney did a piece from "The Comedy of Errors," Liza did one of Ophelia's monologues and Mike did the Porter monologue from "Macbeth." Liza stated that when she works on a character, she just uses the characters words and becomes the character and changes her entire demeanor to become said character. Mike shared how he liked the Porter because he sees himself in the character and Delaney stated how she looks to characters such as the one she read for and tells herself when she is preparing that she is just as worthy of reading these roles as any other woman. Allen and I acknowledged after the session that perhaps asking to do this with one monologue was too challenging. A lot of the times we will read one monologue for an audition and not have enough to fully know who the character is and decide how our identities can impact the characters way of being. So, in the after session notes I presented a challenge to the participants. I asked that the next role they are cast in to do all the work they would normally do to prepare; to read the entire play get to know what happens and familiarize themselves with the story. Then practice what Allen and I were trying to get them to do with this session. I explained how who we are as individuals, how we identify ourselves, can absolutely inform the character.

Session 7: A Review

Session 7 was our easiest to date and we just talked about the work we've done. Liza was not present because she had a personal matter to attend to. After going through the plan for the day Allen had expressed that we wanted to go over the identity work we discussed the week prior. We really wanted to make sure that they understood and acknowledged the importance their identities have in the work that they do and how they do it. This led to a very exciting and eye opening discussion on identity, casting choices, representation and issues surrounding representative casting choices.

Allen and I both used examples from our personal lives where our identity and individuality were torn apart by directors and acting teachers. We talked about this idea of art being the space where individual identities should thrive but made a comment to Hollywood (since it is the easiest example given everyone knows everyone) and how Hollywood actors all look the same and no one "sticks out" yet we as artists tell other emerging artists just how much we love and admire individual identities. I really wanted to make sure that they acknowledged the issues with this and how even though they are part of a program that is progressive and forward thinking, they are still being taught methods of acting by individuals who when they created these methods, wanted their actors to be their vision and broken apart any form of individuality. I expressed how this vision of ours is inspired a lot by what I understood to be Seth Barrish of The Barrow Groups' method of acting which inspires the actors to use themselves when they

are finding a character so that when they are performing, the audience sees a person, not an actor playing a role. Too many methods of acting strip away our identity because they tell us “become the character” as opposed to “you are you playing a character, how does that change things?” I explained how I find this very important in the work that I do as an actor, storyteller and facilitator because I don’t want myself or anyone to lose who they are in the work being created. I worry if this harms certain communities specifically the trans community. I asked if this way of thinking and wanting to create harms this community and does it force them to be in just one box? Do trans actors ever want to just play non trans actors and from here is where the conversation really took off.

Delaney shared a story about when she was in a summer acting program. She read a monologue from a Shakespeare play and was told that she didn’t get the A she deserved for a performance well done simply because a Black trans woman has never read for Shakespeare before. She expressed how that’s wrong because it is not the way history intended it to be and we all agreed how that was not only wrong but also unfair. This archaic way of thinking was forcing a young artist to feel that who they are can’t be seen or celebrated because hundreds of years ago only cis white men read the role. This way of thinking both harms creatives but also doesn’t allow for the art to be informed by the artist and their identity. Not to mention lacks inclusivity.

Her story moved Allen and I to discuss this issue with creators using identity incorrectly or not at all. Allen referenced a production of “Our Town” with a Black cast and upon the first table read the studio was filled with images of white New England which forced one of the Black actors to question this. This proved that the casting of Black actors was just to appear “woke” and didn’t allow for the identity of the Black actors to inform the piece at all. Similarly, there is an infamous story of famous director Anne Bogart who cast a Black woman in a role. The actress asked if the character she was playing was Black because if she was, there were things that needed to be addressed in the piece to which Anne allegedly responded that it “didn’t matter.” But it does matter as Delaney and Mike expressed when discussing identity and representation. They explained their issue with “blind casting” and gave examples for it in “Bridgerton” and “Hamilton.” They explained how sometimes trying to represent a community for the sake of just representing can actually hinder the story telling because it’s not realistic. They explained how in colonial England, there were no Black aristocrats or how Alexander Hamilton owned slaves. They mocked the choices of essentially white washing history with Broadway’s “Hamilton” making subtle jokes about child slavery and never mentioning the owning of human beings. Though the conversation did go off a bit from the chosen topic, I very much appreciated what we were discussing and how we were discussing it.

I appreciated how they acknowledged how part of this work involves inclusivity, representation and celebration of one's identity but in the process of being inclusive we also have to acknowledge that sometimes it just doesn't work. This brings out the fear and felling of being woke for the sake of being woke. Further proving that art created by the people and for the people is always best.

Session 8: The Final Share

The final session was a success. Everyone shared something regarding an original piece they wanted to create. When we gave the participants the instructions for the final share, we asked that they do whatever they want but to come prepared with examples, and step by step instructions on how they wanted to do this work. Delaney presented a minimalist show that she had been working on which explores womanhood through transness and planned to use a little bit of documentary and ethno theatre. She shared an eloquently written monologue about a trans woman finding love in a newborn baby. It was beautiful and you could really sense her passion in this project. Delaney shared with us how she plans to focus partly on her story but also plans to interview other trans women in her community. Next Mike shared his idea for an original piece that would follow a more general play structure that also was inspired by his story and identity. Though he wasn't sure what medium he wanted to use per say, he knew it was either ethno or documentary. He wants to focus on his families experience with

losing his younger brother to suicide through the lens of his now girlfriend and how she has come to know his brother through his family. I was worried when weeks earlier he said this was an idea he wanted to explore because I felt that maybe it would harm him in some way, but he seemed genuinely excited and moved by his passion project and it was really moving as well as emotional to see and hear. Being that he would be doing this through the experiences of his girlfriend I was curious as well as concerned feeling that maybe he was too far removed or that it wouldn't work, so I asked him very specific questions about how he plans to make this. Mike planned to interview his family members as well as himself (though he's not sure how exactly he's going to "interview" himself) and write the piece from his girlfriend's perspective as well as her being the narrator. He explained his vision as "think Dear Evan Hansen, but better." His girlfriend would be involved in the interviewing process and insists that her perspective would be the most important and said that he would be viewing/writing by looking through the eyes of his girlfriend looking at his family and plans to solely look at his family's story. Both Delaney and Mike really felt excited and proud of their idea and their objective was clear. It was their story, their identity and how their story moved them to want to create an original piece that celebrates that.

Liza was the last to share and while her idea was a good one it was the only piece where who she was, was missing. She said how she wanted to hear the

stories of people of color and wants to explore that somehow through photography and interviews maybe using verbatim and ethno as her foundation. Her hopes were that doing this would help her see herself in the shoes of the people she was interviewing. I am pleased to say that whilst she was presenting her ideas to us, she did state that she is aware of her place as a white woman and there is an issue with verbatim and ethno not working given her identity but she still wanted to explore the idea. Liza said that she “wants to just listen and not focus on herself. Use her privilege and give a voice to these people in a positive way.” I realized that not everyone is going to understand or fully grasp the work that Allen and I were trying to do and that is something I as a facilitator have to be cognizant of. At the very least I am proud that she immediately stated her privilege and how she was aware that she is coming from a position of power. On the other hand, I am disappointed that this being a story telling and identity workshop she chose to focus on a community that isn't her own, making me wonder just how imbedded this need to focus on others and not the self is ingrained in our psyche as we teach and work with emergent artists. I did state that there are ways this idea could possibly work using Boal's work with oppression and photography (Boal 99) and still allowing the subject to speak for themselves but Allen and myself were really taken aback by her stating she wants to “give voice” and I explained how we cannot come into a community thinking we are going to help them and then walk away for them to pick up the pieces, we

are not white saviors nor should we want to be. She took the critique well and as mentioned was aware of how this could be problematic given her identity so I felt that she was at least listening to what we discussed over our last 8 weeks.

The second half of the session we had the participants answer questions for us so that we could better make sense of what this workshop was for them and how they felt about it. Overall, they were pleased with the outcome just expressed the Zoom was not the ideal place for them, to which Allen and I agreed it would have been more fun had this been in person but they gave us their feedback. I am pleased to say that they enjoyed our time together and liked what Allen and I shared with them. There were exercises they felt weren't helpful, but were fun, and I felt that explained a lot about why they struggled so much with the identity portion of this workshop, but that is something I will expand further in Chapter 3.

Final Share with Bernice

Bernice (she/her) identifies as first generation Mexican- American. She is a junior at Knights University and is a journalism major and theatre minor. She was the student who did the work on her own via the session recordings and session notes I shared with her. Allen and I only met with her twice. The first to check in and see what her thoughts were on this whole process and what she needed help understanding and again after the groups final share.

Allen and I really didn't know what to expect from Bernice since we didn't get to work with her and I questioned how her role in this whole project would help me and Allen as we dove into the answering portion of this research, but she was a part of this and really surprised us and it felt right and fair to celebrate this young woman's understanding of our work and the pieces she started to put together. Bernice expressed that she was really taken by the ethno and documentary theatre concepts and felt that given her major as a journalist worked well with putting together a piece or in her case TWO pieces. The first was a really beautiful verbatim concept that discussed social media and how it affects people. Bernice planned to interview psychologists to look at self-esteem and self-image and how social media plays a role in this. She wanted millennials & Gen Z being the main focus since we are the generation that really grew up with social media being such a big part in our upbringing. She wanted to interview plastic surgeons and how they feel about altering peoples looks to fit a certain beauty criteria that has really taken full force in the last several years. When Allen and I asked where she fits into this subject, she expressed that being someone who is interested in fashion and beauty had shared her interests on social media and how that had left her to experience bullying. She explained how there is pressure placed on her to fit in and how it had affected her. Her ultimate goal was to write and direct it but not to perform and stated that she plans to have the actors involved in the interview process but wasn't quite sure how.

Her second piece revolved around Covid and quarantine though explained that this concept is not nearly as well fleshed out as her first. As someone who got Covid early in the pandemic because her father was an essential worker, she views Covid and its affects differently than others. She hoped to interview different groups of people and of those would include psychologists, people in different work fields, essential workers, their families and Gen Z and their experience with online learning. I couldn't help but smile the entire time she presented her ideas to us because she got it, she understood the assignment. Bernice though never having worked with us live took our work into account and established the importance of her story, telling it and working with a community she is a part of. I shared with her how excited I was and how validated her work made me feel especially since we did not have the opportunity to work with her in real time. That did not stop her from doing the work and understanding our vision. As far as identity and bringing it to the work goes, I can't say whether or not the concept resonated with her but she grasped the story telling aspect of this workshop and I was excited as well as incredibly proud.

Chapter 3

A Journeys End: A New Beginning

I found myself in a difficult position when it came to evaluating our project and the realistic/unrealistic objectives we/I had for this project. I realized

that what we intended was something far greater than what is actually possible. We very much, perhaps subconsciously, aimed to “CHANGE THE WORLD” as I wrote in my notes early on before implementing. Allen and I very much thought that we were going to change minds and fix all the world’s problems therefore making it very challenging for us to witness what worked and what didn’t. Our goals and objectives changed drastically day by day because of this unrealistic view of the work and what it might mean to others, other than ourselves.

In Chapter 1 I asked how might a focus on our identities and sharing our stories change the ways we engage with the arts and participate in the creative process? Further how might reflecting on my practice and the ways in which I was co-intentional support the participants focus on identity and personal story? Through this project I came to understand how incorporating personal storytelling and identity might be able to change the way we learn how to make art; we just have to be open to the change. This project leaned heavily on the self, something that I found to be lacking in theatre and arts education. Earlier I argued that theatre arts education specifically is embedded in cis white male and white supremacist values that are oppressive and celebrate uniformity and not individuality. I explained how the arts as a whole claim to love the individual but insists we follow strict guidelines which at the end of the day we are left with artists who resemble one another on an assembly line. So much of the self is lacking in the arts, so much of the personal story is missing and Allen and I

wanted to explore how we could change that, or at the very least get others to question it.

Our participants were young emergent artists in their early 20s. They came in with preconceived notions of how one is to be as an artist and showed us that throughout the 8 week process (originally set for 9, but with 3 participants we all agreed it was best to combine the last 2 sessions). Doing this work on Zoom was in no way ideal and I believe hindered us a bit. While we were able to get the best possible work from our participants, it was very obvious that Zoom was not the proper place for this and they expressed that on our final day together in our group interview. The first few sessions seemed to bore them. They were quiet, barely moved and had expressionless faces. Allen and I also noticed that they were looking at this workshop as more of an acting class than a story telling and identity workshop so we had to be very precise with the words we used going forward to assure the group and ourselves that this was not in fact an acting class. Allen and I really wanted to make this workshop different from anything they've ever experienced and I would like to believe that we did that. However being that there were so few participants, Allen and I were encouraged by our then advisors to partake in the process something I now wish I never did and my reasons for this will be explained in greater detail later in this chapter.

From the very beginning we shared the importance of who we are and worked on creating a space in which all could feel comfortable sharing their

stories and themselves. We started with movement pieces that came from the following prompts: “I am”, “I come from” and “We Imagine a Place.” We wanted to remind the participants/ introduce them to new creative mediums in the form of telling a story with their bodies. From there we scaffolded into personal narratives which we shared with one another, dove into verbatim, ethno and documentary theatre and lastly a session where we focused on identity through the lens of already written works of theatre, in this case Shakespeare. Allen and I quickly noticed the important role personal story play in the creating process. Not only did we explore the ways in which personal story can move your fellow actors, we looked at how it can also speak your truth and educate an audience. The participants really took the concept of personal story and storytelling with stride. Over the course of the 8 weeks together we had lengthy discussions on various communities, the ones we hail from and the importance of telling our stories that also include the story of our communities. We looked at representation being closely connected to the communities we are a part of and how as creatives it’s important that we not only tell these stories, but also assure ourselves that as we journey forth into story telling we don’t go into another community that is not our own without a partner from said community present. I argue this because my views on this work are that it should never be about being a savior but rather should be about bringing up ones community and giving them the space to be heard/ address issues within it as a member of said community.

When it came to the final share, we gave the students some options in what to present to the group : An outline for an original piece using the methods we discussed in our earlier sessions, performing a monologue that is informed by their identity, a movement piece or anything they felt would showcase what they took from our time together. We were elated to see how much of themselves and their communities were brought to their final pieces, or rather the outline for eventual pieces since they all chose to go this route. The look of pride and joy the participants had in knowing they created something that tells their story but also knowing that they are doing their community justice was so validating for Allen and myself. Only one of the participants, Liza, created an outline for a piece that had nothing to do with herself or her community or at least not entirely. I feared very much what this would look like. She is a cis white woman wanting to work with the BIPOC community to better understand herself while also using problematic language choices to describe her idea. Allen and I expressed concern with her being a white savior. She kept saying how she wanted to “give a voice” to this community, though in a positive way, yet not realizing that her using the word “give” implies that this community doesn’t already have one. When we had the open discussion after her share, I explained how the language we use is important when we go about doing this type of work outside of our communities specifically. I explained to her about being a white savior and how we do not want to do that and how that was one of the first things Allen and I learned in our

graduate program. If we want to work with a community that is not our own, we cannot assume that they need saving, or in this case a voice to be given. I also expressed that it would be in her best interest to reach out to someone she knows that is within this particular community so she's coming in with a partner who is close to the community and not solely as an outsider. I told her how despite wanting to look at and dissect her privilege and how that is commendable and not something many white folks care to do. We do not want her to think she can and should go into a community under the false pretense of wanting to work with, but really using the community as a way to evaluate her white privilege, to later walk away thinking she fixed a problem later leaving them to pick up the pieces. After her presentation I wish I had discussed with her the use of Black and brown bodies as a subject to learn about oneself. The Black community and other people of color shouldn't have to be used as subjects for white people to understand themselves and human history better. It is something Black people have spoken out against in recent years and I wish I had brought this to her attention. As a Black trans woman, Delaney expanded upon what I was thinking and saying and asked a very poignant question regarding why this community and which specific community within the umbrella POC community. She went on to explain how POC have lives that extend past their oppression and being oppressed isn't the only thing that makes them interesting and worth knowing and working with. She expressed to Liza that she needs to be specific about why she wants to do this and

without specificity that there is no reason to work with the community. So the issue is not wanting to work outside your community but rather wanting to work with them for the wrong reasons. After weeks of working on personal story and the stories of our community, it felt like a personal blow that she chose to go this route.

How is Oppression Deeply Rooted Into Our Ways of Being?

1. The White Savior

When looking back and discussing with a colleague why Liza chose to go this route, I realized her position of privilege and why it might have been so difficult for Liza to see the issue with her wanting to go this route with her final share. While I know that there was no malintent behind her vision, it further proves the point I have been arguing since the beginning. White supremacy and racism are so deeply rooted in this country, in our education system, that it forces someone like Liza, a cis young white woman, to think that she can and should do this kind of self-discovery work whilst using Black and Brown bodies to do it. Her doing this comes from a place of privilege and while she acknowledged her privilege when presenting, she still didn't fully comprehend why being the only white person working with the BIPOC community was problematic. History has shown us how just about everything we take in is centered around whiteness and white stories. In some case when it is not solely white stories and narratives, it is

stories where we question how BIPOC culture can fit into white culture opposed to it being its own thing entirely. Liza choosing to focus on another community as opposed to her own and using language like “I want to give voice” takes away from her community being the center of attention in a conversation about race and white supremacy. To want to focus on the BIPOC community and to argue how you want to do it to see and better understand yourself as a white person through the eyes of the oppressed community still takes blame away from the community that has been the known oppressor for centuries. If Liza’s goal with her project was to learn about how to be a better person or ally, just like any form of personal growth, it needs to be done with the self-first, not off the backs of others. Her vision is lacking herself and the community she is part of and even though she is trying to make it about the Black community she will still make it about herself because after all it is about herself. It is very typical white savior complex where we acknowledge our whiteness and rather than address it within our own community she, like so many before her, is choosing to go to an outside community. She subconsciously acknowledges that working on the self (or in this case the self being her community) is harder and would force her to really take the blame. White supremacy refuses to acknowledge its part in oppression and racism yet still celebrates it. Disappointing to think just how ingrained in our psyches this cultural phenomenon actually is.

2. The Problematic Revolutionary

At the end of our last session, Allen and I interviewed the participants in hopes of getting a better understanding of what they liked, didn't like and their overall feelings about the work done and discussed in our two months together. Allen and I tried to incorporate our findings with a survey we did in the middle of our 8 weeks together but not everyone responded. So our conclusions come from what we learned in each session and in our group interview on the last day. This next section explores the answers to the questions Allen and I asked in our group interview.

The first half of this section are my exact feelings and thoughts on what was said during the group interview process and my note taking right after. The second half of this section are present me responding to said thoughts and feelings from a year ago. This section culminates past and present me concluding the events that transpired over 8 weeks in the Spring of 2022.

KP 2022: All the students (those who were working with us in real time) agreed that after doing this workshop that they now had more tools in their utility belt in regard to creating new and original stories and had the foundation and new vocabulary to go about doing the work. However, Delaney and Mike had some issues with the lack of writing because they had expressed wanting this class to help them ignite the flame to write more plays and felt that discussing ideas rather than giving a chance to write was not entirely what they wanted. They shared that

they felt there was too many discussions and found the session on identity through already written works of theatre to be the least helpful. In particular they did not love the casting exercise. They found it to be a fun experiment but ultimately felt that it didn't matter and that the discussion that was had along with the exercise didn't involve the analysis of the issue (the issue being representation). Mike stated how he didn't find it as helpful as some of the other exercises we had done in our 8 weeks together. Delaney added to Mike's sentiment and expressed how talking and discussing diversity are very different than putting it into play hence her stating earlier how it didn't matter. Ultimately, they viewed that exercise, that session as a representation exercise and not an identity one.

I won't lie, I was disappointed and a little hurt when hearing this because that was perhaps the one session, I was looking forward to the most, not including verbatim. In Chapter 1 I go into representation, the concept of informing a character with our own identity and how both go hand in hand when it comes to creating and telling a story that is inclusive but also is part of who we are. I genuinely do not understand how they found this exercise to be unhelpful or not important. I wish I had asked them to elaborate further but being that this was a Q and A, Allen and I felt it was better for us to just listen.

I feel that I could and should have done better at explaining how representation and an informed acting practice through our identity go hand in hand but also, I acknowledge that we spent so much time on this, even the

following week. I needed to accept that sometimes things won't go according to plan. It is only one day a week and 16 total hours together. It took Allen and I years to come to this important conclusion of identity, representation etc. I can't expect that this whole project would go as I wanted it to. That's not realistic and I need to give myself and my partner some grace because at the end of the day they understood everything else we discussed and worked on. It's worth mentioning how us pushing for an identity informed practice is a pretty radical concept and something that goes against so many acting practices that have been put in place long before Allen or I were even born. But going forward I could argue that perhaps the delivery of the overall concept needs some editing. I should work on better explaining how these sessions (or this idea) is to look at already written works of theatre and to remind ourselves that we can and should inform our characters and how when we do this, we change the narrative of the story without changing a single line of dialogue. For example, the participants chose to cast the imaginary production of "Macbeth" set in their urban environment in modern day. We asked that they cast it to represent the urban community they went to school in. The casting was beautiful. The cast was predominately BIPOC Queer actors with the exception of Chris Pratt cast as Duncan. They informed this play and didn't even notice and seemed to have forgotten the discussion we had about it weeks later at the final share. When they didn't seem to understand what they had done with the casting of this piece, particularly the casting of Duncan, I asked

them who Chris Pratt is and what is it about him that they found problematic. Pratt has the reputation of being a homophobe. In fact, many members of the Queer community, Queer Hollywood especially, want to hold Pratt accountable for his views on homosexuality and the church that he affiliates himself with which is known to attack and belittle members of the Queer community. The casting of Duncan was motivated by Pratts identity as a homophobic cis white man. The character of Duncan is a tyrant who is damaging his country and Macbeth comes in, at first, to save the nation and then we all know what happens after that. I had them look at their casting choices, talk about the story of Macbeth and how Pratt being who we know him to be, as well as having the rest of the cast be Black, queer actors, further tells this story of the nation we live in right now. After breaking this down they were in awe and really surprised by how this worked and made sense. We as actors and viewers know that there is a different story being told depending on who is playing the role. Allen and I explained how the Black company of “Our Town” was angry and confused to walk into the rehearsal space and see a setting that didn’t include them but included photographs of a white suburban neighborhood. The actors were left wondering, what about this production is going to be different if our identities don’t inform the piece? I mentioned the casting of MJ Rodriguez as Audrey in “Little Shop of Horrors” and how when she sings “Suddenly Seymore” how the song holds new meaning because she is a trans woman. Who we are matters in the stories we tell

and Allen and I wanted to celebrate that and tell our participants that this concept is powerful and should be used when we are bringing ourselves to a character and were surprised to learn that they did not agree or see the value in it.

KP 2023 : I wasn't sure what to do with this information and still almost a year later I am still grappling with the effect this conversation had on me and my practice. I thought maybe identity work is separate from personal story. Maybe working on these ideas of what an identity informed practice is and could be is its own project. I was dumbfounded and questioned whether it meant that these participants were allowing the oppressive norms to rule their ways of thinking or if maybe I did not have a fully thought out plan, shared it too quickly or worse, I was becoming what I hated and was here to address: the oppressor telling others what was right and what was wrong. It did however force me to look at how I may or may not use this approach again for future facilitation. For one, I know that I will need to work better at staying quiet and not letting my need to be right move me. Also I need to better evaluate what I mean by identity informing the work so that I can lead an exercise where the participants ask less questions because I have confused them.

KP 2022 : When Allen and I were discussing what we wanted to do with our thesis and the questions we wanted to ask we talked a lot about what we have studied and done as actors. I explained to Allen how The Barrow Group really helped me as an actor and made me see the value in myself as an artist. For those

unfamiliar with The Barrow Groups pedagogy, in simple terms it's all about bringing yourself to the piece so that an audience sees a person, not an actor performing. The Barrow Group encourages its actors to be spontaneous, to be free and to be true to what they are feeling in the moment, creating a more sensitive and responsive performance. When I was there its founder, Seth Barrish told me in a class when I was questioning playing a role and how "I become the person. Isn't that always just correct?" Seth kindly responded with "you are never the character you are playing but simply yourself playing the character." I loved this idea when it was explained to me and my classmates years ago. I explained my understanding of this to Allen and that was the catalyst for us to discuss identity and the ways it can, and we felt should, inform our characters. So much of theatre arts education is about telling actors to do the work a certain way, to become a character a certain way. All these methods have one thing in common: each one tells you their method is the right and only way and when you deviate from it even slightly, you are, in laymen terms "not good." Even in a program like the one this university prides itself on ,being progressive ,this notion of right and wrong is still very much a part of the way they educate their students. A former co-worker of mine and student at this university was frustrated and shared her distaste for a professor who I can't say for sure is still present or not. She explained that while in an acting class her professor completely ripped apart a student for not doing their monologue the way he thought it was appropriate. This

notion of berating your student for not adhering to the oppressive Eurocentric acting norms is exactly what Allen and I want to bring awareness to and end. This example could very well explain why these participants couldn't see the value in their identities informing their craft. Do we really want performers to be lookalikes? Could this be the reason why casting choices and performances get so boring after a while? It's worth exploring the multifaceted issues with teaching and exploring art this way. It also needs to be addressed because harassing your students into submission isn't acceptable. Or in my opinion shouldn't be.

While brainstorming our project and later organizing our weekly session plans, Allen and I looked at all the ways actors informing their characters can make for a more multi-dimensional production and discussed how representation falls into all of this. To start, and this is something I realize now I didn't fully explain to the participants, but my theory of informing a character with your identity is to see how who you are plays a role in creating that character. The words, songs etc., do not change in the text, but from an audience perspective tell a slightly different story. (KP 2023: We as both reader and writer will quickly realize the flaw here)

In our brainstorming session while looking for examples on identity informing a character, I heavily discussed my concerns with casting a Black Glinda in "Wicked" something I also shared as an example for my ideas with the participants. I feared that when we don't inform the characters we play OR when

casting executives cast an actor for the sake of just casting an actor based solely on talent (similarly thinking to blind casting) we can be left with serious plot holes and poor story telling. I used the Black Glinda casting in my argument because it was such a big deal when announced. At the time I felt that it was not a strong casting choice because the story of “Wicked” is a story about racial prejudice and a nation hating and making a villain out of the only character of color that I feared by casting a Black Glinda, the producers and story tellers were trying to ignore the issue with race being discussed within the piece. In my mind I felt that this would now turn the character of Glinda into a self-hating POC. To me it felt problematic and that it used representation for the sake of it without thinking how casting choices inform characters.

KP 2023: Since discussing this with Allen and later our participants, I saw the performance with the Black actress in question. She is talented beyond belief and I feel, from a talent perspective that it made sense to cast her, but I have to admit I am still unsure what this did for the story and the telling of it and whether or not it hindered the character of Glinda or made her yet another victim of this racist society. I am not completely sold or unsold on my thoughts from a year ago. However, I can admit that this concept of “informing a character with your identity” is not as easy a concept to grasp and honestly I’m still asking myself “what exactly was I saying” and “can you really tell from where the audience is

concerned if you can inform your character with your identity?” and lastly “why did all this sound more and more like us creating a new acting method?”

KP 2022: Funny enough, it didn't matter how many examples Allen and I gave our participants about identity and having it inform the characters we play and cast, they still were hell bent against the notion .And after having my then co-worker share the experience they had with their former professor and how he berated a student to do something a certain way, I can conclude that their education is keeping them from accepting this way of thinking. Or was it?

In the session where we looked at identity, we asked that the participants share a monologue with us where they informed the character with their identity. Delaney's monologue felt like herself and wasn't her playing a character, but rather her bringing herself to the piece. This was more or less what I was hoping for from the participants. Mikes felt more like he was just reciting lines and there was no informing of any kind and more like he wanted to share something because we asked him to. When we came to Liza's monologue, I didn't see one aspect of her. She had an accent, but not an accent in the way we think of British or Australian, but an actor, performative accent. Her movements were different and you could tell that Liza was not “present” and it was someone else. Now this wasn't about talent vs no talent, this exercise was to see if they could make sense of the concept of informing the work as themselves and Allen and I realized after this that perhaps asking for this work to be done with just one monologue and not

an entire play is probably asking for too much. Also it would have helped to have seen them perform the monologue twice, once by bringing their own identity and the other performing it as a “character” anchored in the text rather than make my decision on whether this exercise worked or not with just one read. However it was still obvious (to me) that Liza has deeply ingrained the oppressive structures within the artistic academic realm .When we asked for everyone’s journey, we learned that Mike went with this monologue because he knew it well and liked the character because it reminds him of himself, Delaney just wanted to see herself in reciting a Shakespeare character since Black trans women were never given the opportunity to play the roles but Liza explained that she is never part of the process when it comes to creating. She is always the character and becomes the character and doesn’t see the value in bringing herself to it.

I was confused. How could they grasp the concept of actors informing their characters when doing the casting exercise but be stuck and dumbfounded when it came to themselves. I realize that to focus on identity is not something that can be done in one session and could really be an entire workshop of its own. For the participants to do what they did with the monologues was to do as they always have in the classroom setting. They viewed this as a performance, as a way to show their talents while still fitting within the mold that they have been forced into by the academic system. It wasn’t an educational experience in the work we were trying to uncover or rather highlight together, it was just another

acting exercise. Allen and I thought that by giving them a heads up a week in advance and doing the casting exercises earlier in the session would be enough for them to grasp this radical concept of identity informing their roles. Identity work isn't something that can be done in one sitting, especially now realizing just how radical the concept actually is. If identity is lacking in the way we educate/are educated how could my partner and I possibly think that they would understand this and roll with it the way we had hoped? A focus on our identities can change the way we create art but we need to sit with it first and really dissect it before we expect change overnight. Focusing on our identities forces us to look at ourselves and the oppressive structures we subconsciously allow to take hold of us as artists and creatives and that is a much harder thing to attain than my partner and I previously thought.

Delaney later went on to explain that she didn't see the value or importance of bringing her identity to the piece and have it inform her characters because it was already a big deal that she's performing the roles as is. I am not trans or Black so I can't speak to what that experience must be like, but I am still finding that to be so difficult yet fascinating. I don't know if my being a white passing cis Latinx woman am in the position to implore trans actors to dive deeper since I never had to fight to be seen as Shakespearean-esque. It is just understood and accepted that I would play a role in classical theatre. But I am still bothered as well as floored by the fact that these participants grasped the concept of

storytelling, the importance of their stories and their identities within their stories but couldn't understand or refused to accept its importance when it came to their identities informing the roles they are given. It tells me just how much this oppressive, white supremacist culture is imbedded into the theatre arts curriculum.

As we continued this discussion that afternoon, the following week and the final session I was genuinely taken aback by how none of the participants felt this was necessary. The week after the identity session Allen allowed me to dive into this further. I did all the explaining and imploring I wrote about earlier. I explained just how important it is to bring yourself to the work you are doing because it is more than representation. It tells a different story altogether as well as forces the world to see you and who you are, not a mold that has been broken down and built back up again. They still didn't get it or care to fully grasp the concept. Delaney said something I found remarkable. She went on to tell us a story about when she did a Shakespeare summer intensive at a prestigious acting program. She stated how she was denied her perfect grade because she was a Black trans woman. She explained how the program runners congratulated her for a job well done but that they couldn't provide her with the A+ because in Shakespeare's time she would never have been cast and her being a trans woman didn't fit the "Shakespeare aesthetic". It has me questioning what more can be done and when do we start this undoing of oppressive norms within the arts but also has me questioning if what Delaney argued is enough for now and if I should

walk away and give myself a pat on the back for a job well done. Or if I should push forward and argue how just being in a space isn't enough? It is imperative that I and the reader come to terms and accept that what Allen and I are trying to dismantle is not our reality right now. So many more aspects of this oppressive structure need to come apart before we can even begin to discuss identity in the arts. It is important that I acknowledge safety and how celebration of self, especially if you don't fall under the cis, white male (and at times white female) criteria may put our students and actors in danger.

KP 2023: After all of what you have just read, I conclude this section and explain its title. In these last several pages I go on and on about "identity informed" work, how its lacking as well as how these oppressive norms showed up repeatedly in my participants and how I was bothered or even somewhat angry about it. But truth of the matter is, I too have realized where this oppression lives within me. This is just one of the reasons why I wish I didn't take the advice of our first advisors and become a participant because as a participant, you have ideas and preconceived notions that you want to push and not having that clear break I see now how it confused me. This explains why the "Macbeth" casting exercise worked but also still didn't make sense to the participants. It worked because it was my idea of right, not necessarily theirs. How can I or anyone for that matter, say that Chris Pratt's identity, or part of it, is that of a homophobe. Identity has to do with the self, not with what others think of. How can we

honestly see someone's identity through a character they are playing? The answer is that you can't. I confused what an identity informed practice (something this workshop was until session 6) is with representation and something I as an actor hate, type casting. I unintentionally mixed all these things together to create something else that was ridiculous and frankly unattainable because no one can *see* your identity from a seat in the audience nor can we assume something about your identity. Identity just is and it's about the self, not about what someone else thinks it is.

I was too pushy when I should have taken their initial disinterest and moved on and its even clear in my writing that I wrote a year ago and have been editing since. I did not realize it right away but in discussing my concerns with some of my participants sticking to their oppressed ways, I was becoming, or rather became and am now reflecting on it, the very thing I hated it. It feels almost like I am one of those revolutionaries I love to hate (won't name names but you know the ones.) You know the individual who had this beautiful idea, wanted to "liberate" the people and was so moved by their ideas that they ended up oppressing the very people they were trying to help.

In so many ways my participation helped this project because while it was confusing and hindered me in that separation that needs to be evident and clear, it showed me how yes, these participants were open to storytelling and identity work but there are oppressive structures still hindering them and Liza and I were

the ones who really made that clear for me. But also, if my main goal was to have these participants question the oppressive structure a restrictive educational platform consists of, then Allen and I did achieve these goals. Despite my good intentions, I was pushing narratives that they either didn't understand or flat out disagree with and they pushed against it which further aided me in accepting that my thesis project was successful. These participants focused on their personal stories and took pride in creating a piece that told that story, much like Delaney's monologue shared in Exhibit E. They also questioned an authority's version of right (despite this "authority" aka me not realizing it till now). Up until this moment I felt that my thesis project was a failure because of my issues with separating my views as a participant facilitator and how that brought out the unintentional oppressor to the virtual space, but my work, my vision, was still a success. I asked, "how might a focus on our identities and sharing our stories change the ways we engage with the arts and participate in creative processes further how might reflecting on my practice and the ways in which I was co-intentional support the participants focus on identity and personal story" and the truth is, it made the participants bolder, stronger and more comfortable sharing themselves and perhaps more importantly, in saying "no."

The Answer to My Question

Earlier I asked how might a focus on our identities and sharing our stories change the ways we engage with the arts and participate in creative processes? Further how might reflecting on my practice and the ways in which I was co-intentional support the participants focus on identity and personal story? In working with my participants over the span of 8 weeks and reviewing my findings I have come to a conclusion.

We already know how white supremacy, colonialism, racism and Eurocentricity plagues the way we educate and create art. In the last few pages, I discussed just how it affects us and how deeply imbedded into our psyches these norms are placed. A lot of work needs to be done to fully dismantle this oppressive structure but even before a full radical 180 can occur, I have already noticed the many ways in which personal story and identity can change the ways we participate in the creative process.

April 19th, 2022, marked the 20th anniversary of the now classic film, “My Big Fat Greek Wedding.” Writer and star Nia Vardalos commemorated the anniversary on twitter. “You can’t make anyone embrace change, marginalized voices or new ideas. So love yourself. And write your story (Vardalos).” In her thread she mentioned how her agent and manager fired her and mocked the idea of her writing a script and how only after someone saw her perform it as a one woman show, was the script given the attention it deserved. This film, Vardalos’ experience in creating it, and later sharing it prove how sharing our stories can

change the ways we engage with the arts and how we participate in the creative processes.

When it relates to my thesis project, I am seeing so many similarities to what Vardalos mentioned on the anniversary of the film. It might have taken a few sessions before our participants really dove into the process and got to really sharing themselves but it happened. I saw them becoming more and more comfortable as the weeks went by. I saw this firsthand by how open they were becoming with telling their story unapologetically and with ease. Delaney is an excellent example of this, not just because she was so outspoken from the get-go, but what she chose to share with us over the course of the 8 weeks became more and more personal over time. At first Delaney was a student, sharing that she knows theatre and how to create it but very little of herself was shared. By the end of the workshop she was telling us personal stories about trying to work in Shakespeare theatre companies as a trans artist and the hardships she faced while there. So much so that her final share and outline for her one woman's show centers around herself, trans pride and joy(Exhibit E). By continued focus and celebration of who these individuals were/are, allowed for them to not only be more comfortable but to share their personal stories without fear of judgement. I saw the participants smiling faces when it came to sharing parts of themselves with their peers and Allen and me. They seemed so happy to share and were so comfortable with being themselves that towards the last few sessions we would

hang back with some of the participants, usually Mike, and just talk about whatever was on our minds. There was so much joy in this exploration because we as a whole created a brave and bold space. A space where our participants can bring any parts of themselves and share whatever aspect of themselves they felt comfortable doing and loved to be celebrated for it. It is so important as practitioners that we create space where people can explore their identity and story. When we create these spaces, we are letting these artists and creatives know that who they are is important and their story has value and should be shared because, like “My Big Fat Greek Wedding” when we share our stories, we open doors for outsiders to see who we are and that only creates comradery and respect and a newfound appreciation for a particular culture or a particular way of life.

As for a focus on our identities specifically, there is more to uncover and it really relies on us pulling apart those oppressive structures. Exploring and discussing ones identity is an evolution of acceptance and sharing that with the world. A creative approach where identity is the center of said approach is important and can make a difference. When we focus on the many aspects of our identities we as creatives promote an awareness of ourselves, experiences our traditions and our cultures. It can tell a story that we didn't know existed and can move an audience to see the humanity in a group of people society has deemed inhuman. It can create for a more inclusive and celebratory way of learning and

creating art and it goes hand in hand with the creation of brave spaces where personal story can bloom.

I saw how a focus on identities made a difference in the stories these young people chose to tell. For most, these stories centered around who they are, their experiences and where their cultures align. Through this workshop they not only felt more comfortable in discussing aspects about their lives they perhaps were told before to keep quiet, or so the slight initial resistance when first bringing up gave off that impression, but over time and certainly with the final share there was confidence in being themselves and sharing what they felt was worth sharing.

When Allen and I met with Bernice after the workshop had ended, she was very excited to share what she came up with. As we sat with her I saw how what she chose to focus on as a story telling project was not only personal but difficult for her to share. Both of her outlines were beautiful and well thought out, but when it came to her ideas on a play about beauty standards and how social media pushes that narrative of what is beautiful she let out a sigh that felt almost like a “ahh finally” sigh. She spoke so candidly about the bullying she has experienced online for not having the certain “look” society deems beautiful. When sharing what she wanted to do and how she wanted to do it, it felt like watching someone on the brink of a fascinating and moving discovery. She was excited, was moved and was ready to rip apart this thing that had bothered her so much and felt she

couldn't write about or discuss because its either too cliché or not her place to discuss beauty as a full figured Mexican woman. I would like to believe that this workshop helped these participants in decolonizing themselves and helped them bear witness to the deeply engrained biases certain educational norms have placed upon them. My argument for how that happened is by looking at what was given (or not given) to Allen and myself. They not only told their story, or an aspect of it, they also explored their identities in a self-exploration of self and acceptance, and I as a participant facilitator, came to witness and accept so much as well.

As for my "identity informed practice" where who they are comes into who they play as actors was defeated and I would argue for good reason. It is obvious that in reviewing my writing and my thoughts on the process that I was subtly trying to create a new method of acting one that was not only not the purpose of this workshop nor was it asked for. I will still argue slightly in my favor regarding casting choices and how who we are can and should BE A PART of the creating process to help tell a story more fluidly etc. , what I was trying to convey was both confusing and oppressive in its own right and I was arguing that my participants understand and follow through on a concept that wasn't fully formed. You as a creator can tell the story of "Our Town" using all Black actors and create the world of that play to resemble a Black neighborhood in the early 20th century without going into a spiel about "THIS IS HOW YOUR IDENTITY SHOULD INFORM THE WORK YOU ARE DOING!" I guess all along I was

trying to discuss representation under a new lens and my participants mentioned that to me, that my exercise on this “idea” was just that, an exercise on representation more than identity. But now I ask myself “is there a difference?” The point is, it doesn’t matter what the underlying intent was, what matters is that it didn’t work and that I did not take it with stride and insisted on this extra unnecessary concept. While I believe I was co-intentional for most of the sessions, I found it very difficult to remove Cassandra the participant from Cassandra the facilitator where I became the very thing I was trying to break away from in session 6 in particular. Lucky for me and the first half of my question that the participants really pushed against my oppressive nature, leading me to believe that pushing for oneself really resonated with them. However my constant need to explain something they expressed not being interested in, possibly hindered any further growth they could have made whilst trying to make sense of something that was evident I hadn’t fully grasped while presenting. My wanting to see what I wanted to see and really pushing for it from the participants, showed me that co-intentionality is more important than I previously knew. I wasn’t listening to the participants and while this project was all about personal story and identity, I was trying too hard to push my sense of right and wrong with that session. This would explain their issues with finding themselves within a piece. I decided for myself that my idea was the only one, the right one, and this led to confusion and thoughts that the session and exercises from it weren’t

helpful or useful. I should have let them decide what brining themselves to a role means, not forced them to use my obscure way of doing it. For this session, and any session hereafter where I continued to hound them with my thoughts, was not co-intentional.

Overall, I know that my project was a success. It was a personal story and identity project and every aspect of my participants identities and their personal stories were not only explored but celebrated and shared. Working in a creative setting while exploring ways of educating that revolve around the students and who they are make for good education because not only are you teaching them something new, like how we did with verbatim, ethno, documentary theatre, you are also giving them the space to explore themselves and how who they are can change the art they create. If this approach were more popular, there would be more plays, movies, tv shows etc. that resemble and tell the stories of all those who are members of our society, not just the white guys and their friends drinking beers at the bar downstairs.

Going Forward as A Facilitator

In Chapter 1 I discuss how I was using a Freirean approach to the work I was doing and in the time I spent on working on this final chapter, I realized what aspects of my thesis and the act of doing this project were and were not Freirean. Looking back at this entire process I can say with certainty that I was and wasn't

“Freirean.” When I walked into the virtual space, I came with preconceived notions about what was going to happen and how it was going to happen. I thought that the participants were going to grasp the concepts fully and wholeheartedly and it was going to be a revolutionary experience. I sort of expected balloons and confetti falling from the sky. I know now that there are parts of this project that the participants didn’t fully grasp or better put didn’t follow in the way I wanted. But with that being said, it was an overall success. I wrote about wanting to push for this narrative that I felt was right. In most of my sessions I was not pushy and sat there and observed as we are supposed to. But when it came to session 6 and later 7, I was very pushy and was really pushing for this narrative I had convinced myself made sense but was also necessary and “right.” I believe that it is important that I acknowledge this, because it too is a reminder of the oppressive structures that live within me. When I dove into the identity informing the arts aspect of our project, I spoke ad nauseam about the concept and at some point, had to stop myself because I didn’t want to further push my idea of right and wrong when my entire project is about walking away from those structures embedded into our arts education curriculum. But I fear that my becoming aware of this too late that the “damage” had already been done. I now realize that despite my mistakes, the concepts Allen and I were trying to explore of questioning these practices and those who teach them, was useful because they kept politely disagreeing with me. I could argue I did this on

purpose and was “testing” them to see if the overall idea stuck, but no. I can admit my mistakes here. I am just glad that I stayed quiet and allowed my participants to give their feed- back in our group interview on our final session.

Freire writes about the banking system of education and how one of the many issues with our education system is this notion that the teacher or facilitator hold all the knowledge and the students or participants are empty vessels with nothing to offer (72). I know this to be false, so I was not going to argue any further in favor of something when my participants have already made their decision on the matter and know what happens to be true for themselves. But this wasn't the only space where my partner and I broke away from the banking system of education. We also broke away from it in every session, with a slight exception in our verbatim and ethno and documentary theatre sessions, but only because these were new concepts to the participants. When we explained these practices, as written in more detail in chapter two, one of our participants offered up information about plays they knew about that had a similar structure. I write how we created a brave space and how doing that made us all equal. Allen and I were the facilitators and this was our project, but this was very much a co-intentional structure and one where the participants shared their knowledge with us and it made us all better and more knowledgeable at the end of every session. This process helped me realize what oppressive structures I still need to fully break away from such as my need to be right and the need to egg on how my

ideas are right. I myself am just a student of life, and while I may understand things different than others, does not mean that I know more or that what I know is right. I have my ideas and I can and should share them, but I do not nor should I insist upon them. These are not moral quandaries; they are just thoughts on my process as a creator. There is no right or wrong when it comes to being an artist and very little right or wrong when creating. I am glad that in this process I became aware of this and the deeply imbedded oppressive structures that are still within me.

I learned a lot about myself as a facilitator throughout my 8 weeks with my participants. I realized that I need to better work on my anxious need to always fill the silence rather than let something be. I learned the importance of pre planning questions but also found the value in asking questions off the top of my head. Both are important I think when it comes to gathering information from your participants that can bring about a different skill to the practice. What I need to learn as a facilitator is to know when planning or going with the flow will work best for me and what I am trying to achieve. Lastly and perhaps more importantly, I learned how I need to change the ways I walk into a room knowing what I now know after doing this project. What I learned from what Liza gave me with her stance on story and Delaney and her views on an identity informed practice taught me that these views are important when walking into a room. As a facilitator, storyteller and identity informed practitioner in the making, I need to remember

these talking points and events that took place so I can better assess the work that I do going forward. When it comes to working on our own story, more in-depth discussions on race, white supremacy, colonialism and Eurocentricities and how they affect the ways we learn about and create/take part in art are important to have from the very beginning. As it became clear with Liza (and me), many people do not realize how embedded into their psyches these oppressive structures are. They live rent free in the corners of our minds and we are not even fully aware of it. A look at where these practices come from and how they have an effect on who we are as artists and creatives feels important to spend some time looking at because although the majority of the participants grasped the personal story telling concept of this workshop and the importance of it in the work we do, are they fully aware of the history of oppressive structures in the arts?

Allen and I are not professors so we couldn't use this workshop as a way to educate the students like an actual professor would, but perhaps pushing for a more in depth look at the history of this in their classroom settings could be beneficial to all. With that in mind I also learned that the way we discuss identity needs to be done with a little bit more care. To start we need to understand what the word identity means and how ones identity is forever changing. We shouldn't look at identity as yet another way to place individuals into a box. If our goal as forward thinking individuals is to create more community and equity within said community then how can our thoughts on identity and an identity informed

practice change the ways we work together and create together. As mentioned earlier identity work is an evolution of acceptance but that acceptance needs to extend past ourselves and into the community. The concept of identity and exploring it means so much to many different people and because of that, work around it needs to be done with care because it means something different for everyone. We also need to ask ourselves if focusing on identity and creating art around it means better representation or being more accessible to all? It is not something that should just be thrown around to sound “woke” but should really be explored with all who are involved.

Conclusion

An identity informed practice is not new but it is not common. What it entails is a focus on ones experiences, their history, language, traditions etc. that have not been recognized or celebrated. The reasons for it lacking commonalities are because it is a radical concept and radical concepts in this day and age come with fear and are dangerous to uphold.

When Delaney addressed her gender expression and sexuality and how her just being present is good enough it is important as a facilitator that I am empathetic to her and her community’s ability ,or lack thereof , to take space. This is not me saying that we shouldn’t push for an identity informed practice because we need to acknowledge the trans community struggles to exist in this

world and being present in it is already a big deal. What we need to do is to understand the importance of identity as a whole with conversations surrounding things such as casting with examples stated earlier (Black “Our Town” company, Black Glinda, trans Audrey) and then break apart from there. When we understand the history of arts education and the reasons why we do things the way we’ve been doing them for centuries, then we can unpack the importance of identity and personal story. If we cannot expect the arts education system to teach their students about the history of racism, white supremacy, colonialism and Eurocentric norms in the classroom, then my future as a facilitator will need to incorporate these truths and make space for discussions on how this is used in the creating process and how it can be dismantled. It would probably mean me and a partner using other applied theatre techniques such as theatre in education⁷ practices to bring up these truths and would force us to focus on another form of storytelling therefore making the workshop a longer process. The specifics aren’t quite clear yet, but I now know how I need to address this practice differently going forward.

I walk away from this still wanting to know just how far I can push this work and how far will my pushing go so that the theatre arts community starts to listen and becomes aware of the issues I am trying to break away from. I believe

⁷ Interactive theatre / drama practices to help in the educational practice. Situations are created to assist students in understanding issues and exploring relationships connected to the given topic by active participation and improvised drama.

there is hope nay, I know there is! People are aware of the importance of personal story and identity, they are aware and are doing it, it just hasn't been accepted by the system. Maybe we don't need to be accepted and for all I know that can very well be the future of this work but I am curious of the ways that I can make a difference and all the boundaries I can push.

I leave this project feeling hopeful but also a bit weary because I do not know how to address the identity work when it comes to communities like the trans community. I acknowledge how I need to reevaluate the ways I come into a space wanting to do this work but that's not the question I am asking. I want to know how much farther I can push before being pushy and asking for too much from a community that is fighting so much to just be accepted and seen. I do not want to throw in the towel but I need to have a better understanding of how I can discuss this with trans actors and discuss the ways in which them just being allowed into a space isn't enough. I don't want to force them into believing something they might not think is true. I am coming from a place of privilege and so I can't push this narrative. I just know that this project has me feeling fulfilled and excited but still questioning all the ways I can continue this work in a respectful and celebratory manor.

The "My Story" project is not the end of this work. My life as a storyteller and identity informed practitioner is only the beginning. As we know from Chapter 1, personal story holds a special place in my heart and now identity work

is something that moves me in ways I can't quite put into words. This work speaks to my soul and one cannot escape soul work. I am an artist and I am ready to create and advocate for other artists and their personal stories and a celebration of their identity in the art we create and are a part of. I am ready to continue pulling apart the thread of the oppressive structures that our arts education is hidden beneath. I have learned so much and still have so much more room to grow and I am so excited to see where this soul work takes me. All this time I thought that what we as creatives had to do was revolutionize the art we create and how we create it. What I learned instead is that what we need is an evolution. Let us evolve the work that we do as we grow to love and accept ourselves in our own personal evolution through self-acceptance and celebration. Thank you for journeying with me.

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Appendix

Exhibit A: Group Contract

Group contract for thesis project Allen and Cassandra

Schedule:

Meeting twice a month in person on Sundays

The other Sundays will be on Zoom

Meet one day during the week and we will plan which day every week for the weeks ahead

<p>Allen Needs:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Honesty. If we aren't honest, we can't really address issues that arise. - To be nudged if I'm being too quiet. ("What are you thinking, Allen?") - Kindness. - Clear understanding of next steps at the end of meetings. - Occasional encouragement - Time to piece together my thoughts if needed - Check-ins on how I/we are doing. - Honest feedback/constructive criticism - 	<p>Kassandra Needs:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - To be told when I am talking too much (I need to learn to be comfortable with silence) - Patience - Honesty- I don't want to feel like I or anyone needs to walk on eggshells - Kindness especially in moments of stress - time to register - to plan things out in advance - to be able to express myself without fear - guidance when I am feeling lost or confused - organization - To feel safe and cared for in the space - Moments of collective breaths when it feels necessary - To have fun and be reminded that this is and should be fun
<p>Allen expects:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - For others to be prepared to bring what was promised (with full understanding 	<p>Kassandra expects:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - That the work we say will be done, will be done and if we can't meet the

<p>that life happens sometimes)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Patience if I am struggling with comprehension - Notification (as much as can be given) when others are running late - Transparency of what others are thinking (if it pertains to the project). - For us to check in with each other: Is this fun? Are we excited? Is anything troubling us? 	<p>deadlines we have set for ourselves and one another, we will be kind to one another and offer assistance where necessary to assure that what we need to address within the project is being dealt with.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - To be told/share when anything arises that might keep us from deadlines - For everyone to be on time unless of course we state it otherwise and with time - That the work will be evenly divided - To be honest/speak up when we have a concern or issue about the work or group - That we will come back to this document often to stay in check - To level the playing field and assure that everyone takes turn in each meeting i.e. facilitator, note taker etc.
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Exhibit B: My Story

An applied theatre workshop that explores identity through various aspects of storytelling

Are you an emergent artist and creator wanting to look at all the ways you can tell a story? Then join Kassandra Pérez (Rutgers 16) and Allen Warnock, graduate students and applied theatre* practitioners, as they utilize the many ways identity can inform your artistic endeavors and the ways in which you tell stories.

In this workshop you will have the opportunity to create using various kinds of applied theatre techniques over the course of 9 sessions. In telling and creating your own stories, you'll be asked to think deeply about storytelling/performance while advocating for yourself and your identity. Some of the practices we will look at include: verbatim theatre, ethno dramas, documentary theatre** just to name a few. Together we will explore the many tools available to us as storytellers and will put these tools to work throughout our time together.

Allen and Kassandra will work in conjunction with the participants and the sessions will be informed by your own interests and needs. After our time together you will be able to inform your practice as storytellers and creators using the many tools brought forth throughout the entire workshop.

A note by Allen and Kassandra

We as individuals find ourselves on the precipice of change as we witness society acknowledge the necessity of diverse stories. The personal connection we have to our own story and the sharing of that story can speak truth to power.

We believe that it is our duty as theatre artists and creators to use stories to educate society because no one knows your story better than you do.

We hope to continue this conversation and look forward to seeing you in 2022.

If you have any questions, please feel free to email:

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BrittaneyKassandra.Perez98@spsmail.cuny.edu

***Applied Theatre** is an umbrella term for the utilization of theatre as a medium for education, community development, and the pursuit of social justice.

**** Documentary Theatre** is the use of documentary materials (e.g. trial transcripts, interviews, newspapers, film) as the source material for stories about real events and people.

Ethnodrama is the adaptation of ethnographic research data (e.g. journals, documents, statistics) into a script staged as performance.

Verbatim Theatre is a process in which a playwright interviews subjects on a particular topic/issue, records the responses, and then uses the words exactly as they are - no changes.

Exhibit C: Session Plans

First Session - Introduction to “My story” workshop

- 1) **Allen** Name, pronouns, adjective and acknowledgement -
2. **Kassandra** Frame the day: Who we are and why we are here.
3. **Allen** “I come from” ...
4. **Kassandra** Graffiti Board Graffiti Board 1: What about theatre education excites/ scares / challenges us?
 - a) Graffiti Board 2: What are your thoughts about the sun-setting of the program?
 - b) Graffiti board and then discuss as a group. What resonates? Questions about what anyone wrote?)
5. **Allen** Create Group Contract
6. **Kassandra** Story Circle: Let’s reflect on past learning/creative environments. (Example prompts: What, if any, past experience was productive/positive? What, if any, were negative?)
7. **Allen** Word and movement collage from story circles/graffiti boards. Seek to present the essence of stories, their power, their effect and how they resonate.
8. **Kassandra** Reflection and close out day
 - a) What about today resonated with you? Please elaborate.

Session 2: Story through movement

- 1) **Kassandra** Check in
- 2) **Allen** charades
- 3) **Kassandra** Story of my name
- 4) **Allen** Wind blows
- 5) **Kassandra** Two truths and a lie
- 6) **Allen** Movement from “I come from”
- 7) **Kassandra** movement part 2: “We Imagine a Place”
- 8) **Allen** Share and Reflect (40 minutes)

Session 3 - VERBATIM THEATRE - part 1

- 1) **Allen** - Opening exercise - ‘Help! w/ Mirrors’
- 2) **Kassandra** - Verbatim discussion. What does it mean? Examples - Anna Devere Smith
 - a) <https://www.annadeaveresmith.org/category/about-anna-deavere-smith/>
 - b) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=quwD3Fyh0pw>

- 3) **Allen** - Watch interview video. Discuss the mannerisms, what do the mannerisms communicate? intent of questions, do you believe the answers - if not/so, why?
- 4) **Kassandra** - Viewpoint Exercise: Personal material - Chapter 9 - page 119 exercise 4
- 5) **Allen** - Discussion /Close out

Session 4 - VERBATIM THEATRE - part 2

Warm-up (5 min), guests arrive and are interviewed (30 min), present (1 to 5 minutes)

Session 5 - Ethno/ documentary Theatre

- 1) **Kassandra** Room check
- 2) **Allen** Frame the Day:
- 3) **Both** Definitions of Ethnotheatre and Documentary Theatre
 - a) **Allen** Ethnotheatre: Ethnotheatre, a word joining ethnography and theatre, employs the traditional craft and artistic techniques of theatre or media production to mount for an audience a live or mediated performance event of research participants' experiences and/or the researcher's interpretations of data. The goal is to investigate a particular facet of the human condition for purposes of adapting those observations and insights into a performance medium. This investigation is preparatory fieldwork for theatrical production work. Used a lot for theatre focusing on social issues. (Examples: The Laramie Project (about the killing of Matthew Shephard), The Exonerated (about people sentenced to death row but then later exonerated), The Vagina Monologues (based on 200 interviews w/ women), The State of the Students by Rachel Atkins
- 4) **Both** Exercise using Ethnotheatre
 - a) Share transcript from a trial or letters re: the sunsetting. What stands out? Who - What - When - Where? What might you use to create a performed piece?
 - b) Create a piece quickly
 - c) Share Piece
 - d) Discussion
- 5) **Kassandra** Documentary Theatre is the use of documentary materials in the creation and performance of a theatrical piece. (Ex. Come from Away)
 - a) Difference between documentary theatre and ethnotheatre is that documentary theatre uses research materials that are all encompassing of the subject matter and don't focus on just one aspect of it as say ethno would.

- i) Remember that despite documentary theatre using the “full story” you can still use artistic liberties to argue your point
 - b) How could we create an original piece of theatre using documentary theatre with the sunsetting of the theatre program theme?
 - c) Let’s work together and brainstorm an original piece of theatre and how we plan to do it.
- 6) **Allen** Close out discussion: What do you think of this form of creating. Anything you need to be defined further
- a) Reminder for monologue and personal artifact next week.

Session 6 Classical/ theatre through the lens of our identities

- 1) **Allen** Open the session with introduction about personal artifact
- 2) **Kassandra** Looking at classical theatre and how identity fits or would need to fit to make the story where all are and feel included
 - a) Romeo and Juliet
 - b) How would this play be different, how would the story change if it took place in modern day Newark
 - c) Discuss how different genders, personalities, faiths, sexuality etc, would inform these characters in ways we’ve never seen or thought to see before.
 - d) Cast the piece
 - e) Discuss
- 3) **Allen** CHALLENGE Cast it
- 4) **Kassandra** Monologues informed by our identities
- 5) **Allen** Discussion
 - a) What resonated about each person's performance?
 - b) How was the like for you
 - c) What was your process like?

Session 7: Planning (gauge where they are at and what they want to do with all this work)

Session 8: Final Share & Feedback Questionnaire

- 1) Share guidelines for the Final Share
 - a) Everyone will share.
 - b) Once everyone shares, we will offer positive feedback (what resonated, what did you appreciate). After positive feedback, we will open up to any questions the group may have for the storytellers/performers.

- 2) Final Share
- 3) Feedback/Questions for participants re: their shares.

Exhibit D: Halfway point survey questions

1. What have you appreciated most about the sessions so far?
2. How has this workshop differed from other acting or theatre courses that you've taken in the past?
3. Typical theatre arts training glorifies cis gendered white men and perfectionism (and classic actor training endorses the removal of individuality and forces actors into a being a blank slate). Do you feel like these Applied Theatre sessions are supporting you in gaining tools to create original theatre that is informed by your communities and/or "who you are"?
4. Starburst or Sour Patch Kids?

Exhibit E: Delaney Writing Sample for final share.

ACT I

DORY:

We were walking her down the hall and I looked down and Marge was crouched over holding... it! I guess somewhere along the way the baby just sorta loosened out of her and she was able to catch it in her hands before it fell. I find that it is awfully presumptuous for babies to decide when they're ready to come out, but I have never seen or heard anything like this. Flaca and I froze immediately. Chris, we were absolutely shocked! I mean ABSOLUTELY SHOCKED. It was a mess. Just Imagine two trannies in the hallway standing in front of a woman holding her screaming newborn baby in her hands with fluids everywhere! I took my scarf, helped her wrap it up, and we got in the car. Speeding. Flaca drove and I sat next to Marge and the baby—

A beat.

And I can't take my eyes off it. In that moment, it was all I ever could care about. How strange. I spent so much of my life avoiding kids because they exhausted me. I just never entertained the idea of having my own so why the hell would I interact with them if I never have to be near one out of societal pressure. If there was a transexual on this earth with motherly instincts, I certainly wasn't she. But this baby, oh my god if you could fucking see this kid, Chris. He looked fierce. Beautiful shiny black hair, beautiful skin. All I could think about is how lucky he is to be new. No bullshit, no nothing. No shitty experiences, no hunger, no confusion, no fear. He just... fell into someone's hands. It felt like a sign. I looked at the kid and told myself, "I am going to be in this kid's life for as long as I can". The next day we visited Margie in the hospital, she told Brian to look up because his other moms were here!

Exhibit F : Final Questionnaire for the participants

- 1) Allen: Do you agree with the following statement? Yes/No then elaborate:
'This workshop and the experience of sharing myself and my identity changed the way I choose to do (or share) my art.'
- 2) Kassandra: "What part of the workshop felt richest to you and why?"
- 3) Allen: "What discoveries did you make during these sessions?"
- 4) Kassandra: "What did you find challenging?"
- 5) Allen: "Having done this workshop do you feel aware, or more aware, of the issues we are trying to address within the arts/theatre community? If so, what issues?"
- 6) Kassandra: "What activities or aspects of the workshop did you find least helpful?"
- 7) Allen: "Anything you wished for more of within the workshop?"
- 8) Kassandra: "Do you feel like you have the resources/understanding to support the voice(s) of your community, and yourself, to bring awareness and hopefully evoke positive change?"