NYU | STEINHARDT

ARTSPRAXIS

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ARTSPRAXIS

Emphasizing critical analysis of the arts in society.

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ArtsPraxis Volume 11, Issue 2 looked to engage members of the global Educational Theatre community in dialogue around current research and practice. We welcomed traditional academic research as well as narratives of practice. The call for papers was released in concert with the publication of *ArtsPraxis* Volume 11, Issue 1 and following on from Amplify & Ignite: the Symposium on Research and Scholarship, offered in concert with the American Alliance for Theatre & Education (AATE) at NYU Steinhardt in April 2024. The submission deadline for Volume 11, Issue 2 was **October 1, 2024.**

Submissions fell under the following category:

Amplify &Ignite: Reimagining Research and Scholarship in Educational Theatre

We invited submissions that fell under one of the following frames:

- Researcher as artist
- Researcher as audience member
- Researcher as educator
- Expansive understandings of research and scholarship from emerging and seasoned scholars
- Decolonized and antiracist research and scholarship
- Innovative pieces that reimagine access, engagement, collaboration, and co-construction

We encouraged article submissions from interdisciplinary artists, educators, and scholars engaged in work associated with the Symposium topics. Our goal was to motivate a dialogue among a wide variety of practitioners and researchers that will enrich the development of educational theatre in the coming years.

Call for Papers
Papers were to be no longer than 6,000 words, had to be accompanied by a 200 word abstract and 100 word biographies for the author(s), and conformed to APA style manual. For this issue, articles could include traditional academic scholarship and narratives of practice.

Reviewing Procedures
Each article was sent to two peer reviewers. They provided advice on the following:

- Whether the article should be published with no revisions/with revisions.
- The contribution the article makes to the arts community.
- Specific recommendations to the author about improving the article.
- Other publishing outlets if the article is considered unacceptable.

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Cover image from NYU Steinhardt / Program in Educational Theatre production of *Two Noble Kinsmen*, directed by Amy Cordileone in 2024.

ARTSPRAXIS

Volume 11 Issue 2 December 2024

ArtsPraxis
Volume 11 Issue 2

In Memoriam: Juliana Saxton (1933-2024)

Figure 1: Juliana Saxton on the Frederick Loewe stage at the NYU Forum on Educational Theatre in 2016, celebrating the 50th anniversary of the Program in Educational Theatre. Here, in a process drama facilitated by Cecily O'Neill, Saxton beckoned children to follow her into a forbidden land.

Dear Juliana. She always called me Dear Jonathan, so Dear Juliana she will be. Such a larger than life figure—ever humble, ever thoughtful and wise. In 2024, at NYU during the Symposium that served as the genesis for this issue, Juliana Saxton and Carole Miller joined in our working group on research in drama education. Juliana advised:

"Tie into who are the writers you like. What are their sources? Let that be a guide."

Juliana was ever a guide and will be missed.

ArtsPraxis
Volume 11 Issue 2

Editorial: On Reimagining

JONATHAN P. JONES
NEW YORK UNIVERSITY

Departures

It's more than a year ago now, but I'll never forget my journey to Fayetteville, Arkansas. If at all, Fayetteville is known to be a lonely liberal corner in an otherwise conservative locale in Northwest Arkansas. Liberal due in part to hosting the University of Arkansas. But it is also home to the international headquarters of Walmart. And as can happen in the center of the United States, it is flat, it is sprawling, and often there is nothing but road ahead of you as you travel about. And peppered at every intersection, roughly one mile apart, there stands another Walmart. They have Walmart testing centers where they're figuring out what will be most eye-catching to customers; where should products be placed; what should displays look like. And rest assured, you need a multitude of shopping centers to achieve these goals for the largest retailer in the world (National Retail Foundation, 2023).

That my extended family lives in an area where Walmart is a way of life, I know well what a destination Walmart can be. For many, it serves as the retail hub of a community. Your one-stop-shop for

anything and everything. Amazon.com brought into tactile reality. In Fayetteville, the suburban sprawl can give the impression that there isn't a large enough population to fill all of these Walmarts, but the local population has doubled in the past three decades (US Census, n.d.). So here they are, Walmarts as far as the eye can see.

Curious thing about traveling to Fayetteville is that most people have never heard of it. So when you're looking to book air travel, you run the risk of being routed improperly and that is just what happened to me. My flight to Fayetteville was out of Newark airport and I had a connecting flight in Charlotte, North Carolina. I only had about an hour of transition time, so I was worried I might not make the connecting flight. So you can imagine my relief when I arrived at the gate and boarded the tiny little plane that had only single seats on one side of the aisle and pairs on the other. Puddle jumpers, we used to call them. For a few days prior to my departure, I'd been wondering how it was that this flight was only 45 minutes—but I figured with crossing to another time zone or something, it had to be fine. Obviously a flight from Charlotte to the Mississippi River couldn't possibly be only 45 minutes. *Obviously*.

So I get on the plane and the plane takes off and within about 10 minutes, I was aware that our cruising altitude was surprisingly low. And having flown in a puddle jumper or two in my day, I knew that this meant we weren't traveling very far. And with full certainty, the hard truth came over me like a revelation—we were going to Fayetteville, North Carolina and not Fayetteville, Arkansas.

Most people who know me are aware that I am often unflappable. Calm under pressure is ever my modus operandi. So I got my wits together, and went into 'fix it' mode. OK. I need to get to the Mississippi River. The plane lands and I immediately start looking for solutions. OK, what if I rent a car and drive? How far is it to the Mississippi River? Google maps…and…900 miles. OK. I'm not driving. I think I'm going to have to fly. How am I going to fly from Fayetteville to Fayetteville? Expedia…oh…WOW…So I discover that I can get *to* Fayetteville but not *from* Fayetteville. I need to get back to *civilization* because Fayetteville, North Carolina is a-ways-away from anything other than a regional airport—and I need to go national. I don't think there was even a jetway here at Fayetteville. I think we climbed down the rolling stairs to get off the plane, then walked to the terminal—which was just one long room. Expedia tells me I can travel, but in order to get where I

need to be, I have to get myself to Raleigh—roughly 90 miles away. And there's only one flight to Fayetteville, ARKANSAS (we must be deliberate about these things), so I purchase a ticket that departs in two and half hours. Tick tock. So how do I get to Raleigh?

I *can* get to Raleigh. The replacement ticket is purchased so I *must* get to Raleigh. Back to driving. I will rent a car! Fifteen minutes later, after waiting for someone to emerge at the car rental desk, I learn that in order to rent a car in Fayetteville, North Carolina, you have to book the rental at least 48 hours in advance so someone from somewhere can deliver a car to the airport. A fascinating discovery. Fifteen minutes down and new knowledge and no progress. I can get to Raleigh. I ask one last question to the car rental associate, "How can I get to Raleigh?" "Oh," they respond, "just go out that door and hail a taxi." A taxi? Why not? I go outside to the taxi stand and inquire, "So, how much to Raleigh?" "$200," the driver responded. And I think, no. I must get to Raleigh, but **not** for $200.

I check on Uber: $150. Better. I check on Lyft: $90. I think, they are not paying these drivers anything—but, OK. $90. I will pay $90. I will get to Raleigh and I will get on that plane!

And the Lyft driver—she could not have been a nicer woman. She told me all about her kids. It was the beginning of November so she was just getting ready to have the kids visit for the Thanksgiving holiday. She was giddy telling me about the kids coming home. She was from New Jersey and the kids are still back in New Jersey. She moved to North Carolina because she had gotten remarried. The new husband has a job and he only works a couple of days, but he wanted to live in Fayetteville—so the wife had to come along for the ride. Though she'd only been there for a little more than a year, it had become home to her. And she was driving a Lexus. Here in Fayetteville, North Carolina—a Lexus—and she was a new Lyft driver. Hey, North Carolina, *what is going on?* But she said she loves that she's getting to know her neighbors. And she said she misses the kids, but they'll be coming home to visit for the holiday. And the drive couldn't have been more pleasant.

Looking back on it now, you know—I think, God, when I looked at the ticket confirmation, I was figuring out what time I was gonna fly out—I was focusing on the short connection time and the shorter second leg. When I was researching the travel options a few months prior, I noticed that there was this problem of two cities with the same

name in two different states. And I thought, this must be confusing. And when I sent the flight information to the administrator who is responsible for booking my flight, I was very intentional about getting the correct airport code in order to avoid this kind of mix-up. But I gave them the information. I had done my research so I had done my part. I would get to Arkansas and I trusted them. So I didn't actually look at the details when they booked the ticket. When you know better, you do better. Now, I know better. But I think about that 90-minute ride and I think, you know, it wasn't the trip I planned but it was extraordinary to have that time with someone. I don't even know her name but I gave her a $90 tip—it was all the cash I had. But I was so incredibly grateful for that time. If I were a different person, I could've been very agitated—very upset—very angry—very reactive. But I thought, I'll get there. And she did—she got me there. In a Lexus. I got to the Raleigh airport in no time and I got to Fayetteville, Arkansas. I saw the Walmart. And the next one. And the one after that.

Figure 1: Departing Raleigh-Durham airport just after sunset; photo by this author

Arrivals

I write this in a moment where I'd thought my destination had been clear for a very long time. But something has shifted in the last year. And with that in mind, imagine my surprise sitting in a movie theatre about a month ago, watching the adaptation of *Wicked*, and given a connection that I can't go into at this time that I have with my family and *The Wizard of Oz* and otherwise (the genesis of which I wrote a little about in an editorial in 2020, Jones, pp. ii-iii), I was an emotional mess in the theater. And though I read the *Wicked* novel twice and had seen the stage show seven times, I was ill-prepared for Dr. Dillamond coming into the lecture hall and pronouncing, "My dear students, this is my last day here at Shiz. You see, Animals—are no longer permitted to teach" (Holzman & Fox, 2024, p. 72). I wanted to jump out of my chair and scream, for I too had recently been told that I was no longer permitted to teach.

What does it mean to be silenced? On one hand, it's just a policy—that Animals can't teach anymore. And on the other hand, it is an intentional silencing of diverse thought. And while I'm not being silenced because of disagreement with what I have to say, I am being silenced at NYU.

Over the past decade and a half, I have taught almost every class the Program in Educational Theatre offers. And in all these years, I had one overriding objective—that all of the work that we did had to be transferable to wherever the students were going to be working professionally—every handout—every activity—*every* everything. As I was coming to university teaching after a number of years as a public school teacher, I knew how valuable teachers' time was and the universal distaste for professional development workshops with concepts that were not applicable to our classrooms. And so I held myself to a standard that every instructional moment should be worthwhile to the students and their current or future classrooms. And in teaching such a wide variety of classes over the years, I had to push myself—whether I was teaching a course on Shakespeare, world drama, creative drama—whatever the subject matter. When I was teaching an acting class, for example, our orientation was not for people who were looking to develop their own skills as an actor, but instead, I wanted to give them insight into how I developed an acting curriculum—how was it planned, how was it delivered, how did I modify

the curriculum based on the students in the class, how did I assess their learning and growth, etc.

When I was assigned to teach a class on Assessment in the Drama Classroom, I was immediately frustrated that there wasn't a book that explicitly addressed assessment in the drama classroom—what was that absence about? Random chapters on assessment appeared here and there, often written by people who were not classroom teachers—who did not seem to understand what a public school drama teacher needs to know and be able to do in order to be successful in the classroom. These chapters often lacked guidance for how drama teachers could talk about pedagogy in such a way that would be meaningful to their administrators and to their student population. It took 10 years, but I wrote that book because our students needed it (Jones, 2024). And over the last year since the book came out, hearing from professors that they're using the book in classes with pre-service teachers—or hearing from current K-12 teachers that they're reading the book and finding it valuable—receiving invitations to talk to more teachers and to have more conversations about classroom teaching has been invigorating. And yet, I am no longer permitted to teach.

Administrative policy can be fickle. One day, administrators can teach. One day they can't. Nevermind your subject matter expertise. Nevermind your years of service to a program. An administrative policy is handed down from on high that employees with administrative appointments are no longer permitted to teach.

Hard to write that. But it's been much harder living it for the last year knowing this day would come. But in this moment of transition—professional transition—political transition—I am reminded of my graduate course the day after the 2024 US presidential election where I told my students, "I'm not giving up and neither should you." So that's what's on my mind. As 2024 draws to a close, I am mindful that I had a different expectation for where this year would end up. I had a different expectation for where my time at NYU would end up. I had a different expectation for where my flight to Fayetteville would end up. But sometimes, you end up somewhere you didn't expect. You encounter a detour. A re-calculation. And for me, at the end of 2024, destination=unknown. Dr. Dillamond's departing words in *Wicked* are instructive: "Don't worry! They can take away my job, but I shall continue speaking out!" (Holzman & Fox, 2024, p. 75).

I'm not giving up and neither should you.

IN THIS ISSUE

In this issue, our contributors document and reflect on innovative educational theatre practices. **Shavonne Coleman** and **Meriah Sage** examine the pervasive absence of Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) narratives in the history of Theatre for Young Audiences (TYA) and advocate for restorative documentation and inclusion. **Gus Weltsek** and **Alycia Elfreich** apply a Critical Performative Pedagogical (CPP) lens to Weltsek's work with the Living Museum: The Empires Project, a five-year inquiry with a local STEM high school in the Midwest. **Amy Petersen Jensen** explores the potential benefits and complications of utilizing AI in the development of theatre/drama curriculum, emphasizing the critical need for innovative research practices to maximize AI's effectiveness in pedagogy. Six incarcerated artists—in partnership with prison arts scholars and practitioners—**George Chavez**, **Andrew Draper**, **Matthew LaBonte**, **Angel Lopez**, **Terry W. Mosley Jr.**, **Brett Phillips**, **Ashley Hamilton**, **Danielle Littman**, and **Clare Hammoor** present a new model for forging shared humanity in correctional settings: Artistic Justice (AJ). **Tahnee West**, **Peter Wright**, and **Robin Pascoe** explore complexities faced by drama educators striving to cultivate meaningful relationships across diverse cultures. Drawing on decolonization theories and principles of applied drama education, strategies that foster change, decolonization, and community engagement, **Kaitlin Orlena-Kearns Jaskolski** studies how the universal languages of theatre can be reclaimed and decolonized to create more accessible and inclusive theatre, focusing on youth and community programs in Papua New Guinea. Finally, **Donna C. Seage** examines two steps taken by one high school program to address the issue of unintentionally neglecting students and the impacts these interventions had on the program, the culture, and the students.

LOOKING AHEAD

Our next issue (Volume 12, Issue 1) looks to engage members of the global Educational Theatre community in dialogue around current

research and practice. We invite members of the Educational Theatre field to submit works that will share ideas, vocabularies, strategies, and techniques, centering on varying definitions and practices. That issue will publish in mid-2025. Thereafter, look to the Verbatim Performance Lab for outreach and innovation from the NYU Steinhardt Program in Educational Theatre.

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AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Jonathan P. Jones, PhD is a graduate from the Program in Educational Theatre at New York University, where he earned both an M.A. and a Ph.D. He conducted his doctoral field research in fall 2013 and in spring of 2014 he completed his dissertation, *Drama Integration: Training Teachers to Use Process Drama in English Language Arts, Social Studies, and World Languages*. He received an additional M.A. in English at National University and his B.A. in Liberal Arts from NYU's Gallatin School of Individualized Study. Jonathan is certified to teach English 6-12 in the state of California, where he taught Theatre and

English for five years at North Hollywood High School and was honored with The Inspirational Educator Award by Universal Studios in 2006. Currently, Jonathan is an administrator, faculty member, coordinator of doctoral studies, and student-teaching supervisor at NYU Steinhardt. He serves on the editorial board for *Applied Theatre Research* and *Youth Theatre Journal,* and on the board of directors as well as chair of Research and Scholarship for the American Alliance for Theatre and Education (AATE) where he has been elected Chair-Elect and will serve as Chair from 2025-2027.

Jonathan has conducted drama workshops in and around New York City, London, and Los Angeles in schools and prisons. As a performer, he has appeared at Carnegie Hall, the Metropolitan Opera, Town Hall, The Green Space, St. Patrick's Cathedral, The Cathedral of St. John the Divine, The Southbank Centre in London UK, and the U.S. Capitol in Washington, D.C. Jonathan's directing credits include *Hamlet, Twelfth Night, Julius Caesar, Elsewhere in Elsinore, Dorothy Rides the Rainbow, A Midsummer Night's Dream, Bye Bye Birdie, The Laramie Project, Grease, Little Shop of Horrors*, and *West Side Story*. Assistant directing includes *Woyzeck* and *The Crucible*. As a performer, he has appeared at Carnegie Hall, the Metropolitan Opera, Town Hall, The Green Space, St. Patrick's Cathedral, The Cathedral of St. John the Divine, The Southbank Centre in London UK, Bord Gáis Energy Theatre in Dublin, and the U.S. Capitol in Washington, D.C. Production credits include co-producing a staged-reading of a new musical, *The Throwbacks*, at the New York Musical Theatre Festival and serving as assistant production manager and occasionally as stage director for the New York City Gay Men's Chorus, most recently directing *Quiet No More: A Celebration of Stonewall* at Carnegie Hall for World Pride, 2019.

At NYU, his courses have included Acting: Scene Study, American Musical Theatre: Background and Analysis, Assessment of Student Work in Drama, Development of Theatre and Drama I, Devising Educational Drama Programs and Curricula, Directing Youth Theatre, Drama across the Curriculum and Beyond, Drama in Education I, Drama in Education II, Dramatic Activities in the Secondary Drama Classroom, Methods of Conducting Creative Drama, Theory of Creative Drama, Seminar and Field Experience in Teaching Elementary Drama, Seminar and Field Experience in Teaching Secondary Drama, Shakespeare's Theatre, and World Drama. Early in

his placement at NYU, Jonathan served as teaching assistant for American Musical Theatre: Background and Analysis, Seminar in Elementary Student Teaching, Theatre of Brecht and Beckett, and Theatre of Eugene O'Neill and worked as a course tutor and administrator for the study abroad program in London for three summers. He has supervised over 50 students in their student teaching placements in elementary and secondary schools in the New York City Area. Prior to becoming a teacher, Jonathan was an applicant services representative at NYU in the Graduate School of Arts and Science Enrollment Services Office for five years.

Recent publications include Discoveries beyond the Lesson Plan: A 'How to' (with David T. Montgomery) in *Education in the North, 31* (2), "And So We Write": Reflective Practice in Ethnotheatre and Devised Theatre Projects in *LEARNing Landscapes, 14* (2), Let Them Speak: Devised Theatre as a Culturally Responsive Methodology for Secondary Students in *Routledge Companion to Theatre and Young People* (edited by Selina Busby, Charlene Rajendran, and Kelly Freebody; forthcoming), *Paradigms and Possibilities: A Festschrift in Honor of Philip Taylor* (2019), and Education at Roundabout: It's about Turning Classrooms into Theatres and the Theatre into a Classroom (with Jennifer DiBella and Mitch Mattson) in *Education and Theatres: Beyond the Four Walls* (edited by Michael Finneran and Michael Anderson; 2019). His book *Assessment in the Drama Classroom: A Culturally Responsive and Student-Centered Approach* was published by Routledge in winter 2023/24.

Recent speaking engagements include Establishing Communities of Practice among Pre-Service Drama Teachers: Revisiting Learning to Teach Drama: A Case Narrative Approach, EdTA Teacher Education Conference: Building CommUNITY, Minneapolis, MN (2024), Assessment in the Drama Classroom: A Culturally Responsive and Student-Centered Approach, AATE National Conference: Rooting Change, Chicago, IL (2024); Communing with the Ancestors—a keynote lecture for Amplify & Ignite: A Symposium on Research and Scholarship (AATE/NYU, 2024) and featured guest spots on Fluency with Dr. Durell Cooper Podcast, speaking about Origins, Inspirations, and Aspirations, and Conversations in Social Justice Podcast, York St. John University, speaking about Activism and Race within University Teaching and Research (2021); panel moderation for AATE Leaders of Color Institute (We Will Not Be Erased: Combating Censorship and

Book Bans in Theatre by, for, and about Youth, 2024 and Cultivating Spaces for LOC in Educational and 'Professional' Theatre Settings - Opening Keynote with Daphnie Sicre and José Casas, 2022), invited workshops for AATE Theatre in Our Schools (Reimagining Drama Curriculum: The Gradual Release of Responsibility Framework, Locating Order in the Chaos: Revisiting Assessment in the Drama Classroom and Stage to Page: Reimagining the Teacher/Practitioner Role in Scholarship) and the AATE National Conference (Classroom Justice: Culturally Responsive, Student-Centered Assessment in the Drama Classroom and Pandemic Positives: What Do We Keep? Looking Backwards to Move Forward); invited workshops for the 2024 NYC Arts in Education Roundtable (Assessment in the Drama Classroom: A Student-Centered Approach), LondonDrama, 2023 Dorothy Heathcote NOW conference in Aberdeen, Scotland (Assessment in the Drama Classroom; and co-facilitation with David Montgomery: *The Bear That Wasn't*: A Process Drama Investigating Identity and *The Last Book in the Universe*: A Process Drama Unpacking the Consequences of Book-Banning); an invited lecture on Performance as Activism at the Research-Based Theater Seminar, Washington, D.C. Citizen Diplomacy Fund Rapid Response COVID-19 Research-Based Theater Project, The COVID Monologues, part of the Citizen Diplomacy Action Fund for US Alumni Rapid Response made possible by the US Department of State and Partners of the Americas (2020); a keynote lecture on Drama and Education: Why and How for the Drama and Education Conference, Shanghai, China (2020); and an invited lecture, On Creativity, for the University of Anbar, Iraq (2020).

In addition to his responsibilities at NYU, Jonathan teaches Fundamentals of Public Speaking, History of Theatre, and Introduction to Theatre at CUNY: Borough of Manhattan Community College.

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The Opposite of Absence Is “To Occupy”

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the pervasive absence of Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) narratives in the history of Theatre for Young Audiences (TYA) and advocates for restorative documentation and inclusion. Through the Hidden and Erased BIPOC Histories project, the authors explore the contributions of figures like Ann K. Flagg and Rosa Lee Scott, as well as institutions such as Karamu House, as critical to understanding TYA's evolution. The article critiques the dominance of Eurocentric frameworks in theatre scholarship and calls for the integration of Black and Brown stories into classrooms, conferences, and academic texts. By uncovering hidden histories and creating new systems of recognition, the authors propose a shift from absence to "occupying" the field with equity and radical inclusion. This work seeks to ensure that BIPOC contributions are celebrated as integral to American theatre’s past, present, and future.

Absence. Absence has the power to predetermine outcomes, to change history, and to alter value systems. Whether factual or fictitious the perceived reality of absence is not only an annoyance but goes beyond that to an effective weapon to be yielded to gatekeep, build barriers, or fashion bridgeless motes. Anti-Indigeneity and Anti-Blackness is what this country was built on, a foundation of a nation that can’t truly be dismantled until we are a country that acknowledges how it impacts the present and the future, pulling the weeds out by the root not just lopping off what can be seen on the surface. American Theatre can only be changed through a learning and knowing of historical realities which can only be done by understanding what was happening in not only dominant theatre culture but those communities and populations segregated, red-lined, and intentionally marginalized to the hoods of the United States. Specifically here, we explore TYA (Theatre for Young Audiences) and its hidden and erased histories held by Black, Indigenous, and all People of Color, often referred to as the Global Majority, racially minoritized, or racially and ethnically marginalized. Here we will use BIPOC, not as a hierarchy of melanin but as a more broadly understood term that acknowledges that this country was created or better yet, colonized through acts of genocide, violence, exploitation, and other intentionally harmful acts for the purpose of furthering colonialism. So what, for us, is the responsibility of our work, organization, and field to not only uncover the histories that go unheard or underrepresented in our classrooms, conferences, and board rooms, but also to create new systems, now, that will ensure we don’t repeat the cycle of segregating the work of our artists, educators, and practitioners? The work involves digging, retrieving, dusting off or sometimes assembling the puzzle pieces of artifacts, narratives, and experiences said not to exist to then catalog and celebrate just as widely and loudly as those who’ve navigated similar paths in the bright lights of dominant culture.

What is this Project?

The Hidden and Erased BIPOC Histories project was started by

Shavonne Coleman, Kristala Pouncy Smart and Meriah Sage (all alumni of the EMU Applied Drama and Theatre for the Young Program at Eastern Michigan University) and quickly expanded to include Joshua Streeter and Elizabeth Horn. The goal of this project is to uncover hidden and erased persons, facts, experiences in the TYA field and to catalog, celebrate and disseminate these narratives. We hope to develop a web of researchers across the country, each searching in their own communities and/or areas of interest. We propose working together to find, document and share the names and histories of the BIPOC TYA artists, drama facilitators and practitioners. We recognize that the artists, educators, and leaders we are seeking may identify as storytellers, divisors, educators, social workers, etc. instead of drama or theatre artists. They may have focused on applied drama/theatre, multidisciplinary, or/and community engagement work for multigenerational audiences rather than work formally titled “theatre for young audiences”. Puzzle pieces are currently being shared on cmtadtfy.wixsite.com/histories with the goal of writing articles and a book which celebrates these narratives.

Karamu House

We started digging for narratives in the places we knew. In our published history of the TYA field, there is often one theatre/organization mentioned that centers BIPOC artists: Karamu House. Karamu House, located in Cleveland, Ohio, is the longest continuously running professional African American Theatre in the country. Karamu House is also the most documented Black theatre in children’s theatre history texts. Inspired by settlement houses in Chicago, Karamu House was started in 1905 by Rowena and Russell Jelliffe as the Playhouse Settlement in what was then called Cleveland’s “The Roaring Third” (History, Karamu House). Rowena and Russell, graduates of Oberlin College, were among the first social workers to graduate with sociology degrees from Chicago University’s School of Civics (Newald).

The Jelliffe’s Playhouse Settlement to “establish a common ground where people of different races, religions, and social and economic backgrounds could come together to seek and share common ventures” (Home, Karamu House). The arts were part of the foundation of Playhouse Settlement, and plays began shortly after in

1917. As Black families moved to the North during The Great Migration, many settled in this community. Karamu House became known for adult and children’s theatre as well as youth and community programming. In 1941, the Settlement was renamed Karamu House. Karamu is a Swahili word that means “a place of joyful gathering.” Notable artists of Karamu House include Langston Hughs, Ossie Davis, Gilbert Moses, Shirley Graham DuBois, Rudy Dee, Robert Guillaume, Bill Cobbs, Ivan Dixon, and more (Newald).

Karamu continues to thrive today, with a new multi-million dollar grant to support infrastructure and capital improvements. Karamu, now located in Cleveland’s Fairfax neighborhood, holds robust educational programming, rich community engagement, and professional productions (Karamu).

Ann K. Flagg

Tucked in the pages of textbooks mentioning Karamu House, there is one BIPOC drama facilitator and TYA Director: Ann K. Flagg. Ann K. Flagg was an American playwright, stage actress, director, public school teacher, and teaching artist. Outside of her work as an educator, she’s known to have toured with the American Negro Repertory Players as a stage manager and actor in 1947. Flagg is also known for her work as the director of children’s theatre at Karamu House in Cleveland, where she integrated children's theatre, directed, and taught classes from 1952 to 1961. In 1961, Flagg attended Northwestern University for graduate school, studying with Winifred Ward and earning her master's degree in playwriting. During this time, she also taught drama in Evanston Schools, District 65. Ann K. Flagg is best known for her play "Great Gettin' up Mornin'," which aired on CBS television in 1964. Ann is mentioned in Chapter 6 of Spotlight on the Child, in Nellie McCaslin’s Theatre for Children in the United States: A History, and in Winifred Ward’s introduction to Children and Drama by Nellie McCaslin. There is an AATE award named for Ann K. Flagg which honors “an individual, organization or company who has made significant contributions to the field of theatre/drama for youth or arts education dealing with multicultural issues and/or reaching diverse audiences and constituencies”(AATE).

We went to Arizona to explore The Theatre for Youth and Community Collection (previously known as Child Drama Collection) at

the Arizona State University, specifically looking into Ann K. Flagg's archives there. We also visited the Karamu House archives located in Cleveland at the Kelvin Smith Library at Case Western Reserve University, and the Ann Flagg and Winifred Ward archives at Northwestern University. While at the Ann K. Flagg and Karamu House Archives, we uncovered programs with artists names, as well as details about Ann K. Flagg's "Magic Carpet Room", images from production, letters from students, drama lesson plans, scripts, and speeches (Abookire). There were many letters to and from Winifred Ward, confirming Ward's respect and admiration for Ann. In Children and Drama, Winifred Ward states that Ann was "...the most remarkable teacher of creative drama we ever had in Evanston" (Ward, xxviii). A 1964 article entitled Drama Class Aides Deprived Children frames the Black Urban students as struggling or deprived but Anne K. Flagg uses the specific term, "culturally deprived" to describe the state of the Black child in a White-centered educational system. She mentions experiences and terms like; low self-estimation, self-hate, self-contempt, and self-discipline which all can be tied back to another one of her observations among these students, "culturally deprived students often experience alienation from society" (Austin). Flagg, in the 1950s was using creative dramatics to turn these negatives around and create or build not only IQ but EQ, something that only recently mainstreamed in our education system through the rise of 'socio-emotional learning' programs and classes.

Rosa Lee Scott

In the Theatre for Youth and Community archives at Arizona State University, we also found images and letters documenting connections of Ann K. Flagg to others including director/educator Rose Lee Scott, an activist who started as a young artist in shows with and assistant to Flagg on several shows who went on to study at Colorado College and mime, pantomime and commedia dell'arte in Paris at the L'École Jacque Lecoq. Later Rosa Lee Scott facilitated drama programs at The New York Encampment for Citizenship. Scott was awarded a grant in the 1970s to study creative drama in England and France. In 1973, Scott was invited as a United States delegate to the ASSITEJ (International Association of Theatre for Children and Young People, or, L'Association internationale du théâtre pour l'enfance et de la

jeunesse) Congress in Venice, Italy (Ross).

Connections & Puzzle Pieces

Until recently, there were little to no widely available anthologies or history textbooks highlighting Black and Brown artists in TYA. Palabras del Cielo: An Exploration of Latina/o Theatre for Young Audiences was published in 2018, compiled by Josè Casas and edited by Christina Marín was the first of its kind, holding both plays and scholarship by Latine playwrights. In 2025, Every Great Dream an Anthology of African American playwrights and scholars will be released, also being the first of its kind specific to Black TYA. Due to the segregated nature of our country’s past, the hope is that many more of these BIPOC focused anthologies will be published as a push toward radical inclusion, appreciation, and a new reality where BIPOC history is every American’s history.

To uncover these hidden and erased histories, we found ourselves seeking information outside of the TYA field. In the book Profiles of African American Stage Performers and Theatre People, 1816-1960 by B. Peterson, Jr. highlights select drama teachers, performers, playwrights and educators. Exploring the text, we discovered the names of Irene Colbert Edmunds, Olivia Ward Bush-Banks, Oscoela Archer, Vignette Caroll, Mary Burrell, Angela Grimke: all connected to children’s theatre and/or theatre education.

In exploring the text Plays and Pageants from the Life of a Negro by Willis Richardson, we discovered playwrights and educators Inez Burke (an elementary school teacher in Washington D.C. and playwright of Two Races), Mary Frances Gunner (educator, YWCA worker, and playwright of Light of the Women which included such heroines as Sojourner Truth and Phillis Wheatley), May Miller (high school teacher and one of the most widely published female playwrights in Harlem Renaissance) and more.

Once the names were uncovered, information on these artists and educators was, in many cases, not difficult to find. They were there: hidden just beyond view. For example, further searching into Irene Colbert Edmonds uncovered she not only was a teacher, youth theatre leader, director and playwright in children’s theatre, she wrote articles in SADA’s Encore including “An Experiment in Creative Dramatics” and participated in the Children's Theatre and Allied Arts Conference.

Following bread crumbs, we discovered a full dissertation about Irene Colbert Edmunds, written by Dr. Valencia Eloris Matthews.

One mention of Olivia Ward Bush-Banks' "School of Expression" in Profiles of African American Stage Performers and Theatre People, 1816-1960 revealed that she identified as African-American and Native American Montaukett (Guillaume). She worked as a drama teacher at Abyssinian Baptist Church's Community Center, the assistant theatre director at Robert Gould Shaw Settlement House during the great depression, taught theatre with the Chicago Public Schools and wrote many poems and plays including the play Indian Trails: or Trail of the Montauk (Wilson). She held salons at her home supporting African American artists and started her "School of Expression" which focused on "dramatic arts, public speaking, and cultural dramatics for children" (Poise is Power).

In digging into Hull House records, we came up empty regarding BIPOC Theatre/drama facilitators, but found a typed/handwritten script called "Halsted Street" devised in 1939 by Viola Spolin and members of the Hull House community. Each scene was a different stop on the Halsted Street trolley line and every stop told a different story. One theater critic from the Chicago Daily News described the show, "There were about 150 people in the cast: Italians, Greeks, Mexicans, Negroes, and I don't know what other racial strains. …The important thing about it was that it was conceived, written, and played by the people themselves …" (O'Brein). We also discovered evidence of Black Settlement Houses with theatre/drama programs such as the Richard Gould Shaw Settlement (Boston), South Side Community Service (Chicago), and Clotee Scott Settlement (Chicago), Phyllis Wheatley House (Minneapolis) and Parkway Community House (Chicago).

Theory Absent of the Diversity of Practice

There is a theory that is reasonable to operate from, there were plenty of Black and Brown practitioners that have been doing TYA in America even before what is often considered the recorded start of the field in the Settlement Houses of the 1900s (Bedard). If we consider the state of America during the 1900s, we could imagine that TYA practitioners or companies doing it may have experienced one or more of these barriers:

1. They were not in the position to separate their production work by age. Quite possibly intergenerational work or family friendly shows may have served this need despite lack of infrastructure, resources, or anyone being interested in documenting this work.
2. Due to the lack of resources, in a segregated and redlined America, Black and Brown communities that had not assimilated into white culture may have only had access to theatre with children by integrating it with education or human services.
3. Due to the communal nature of many of these cultures, they may not have wanted to separate the idea of children’s theatre (theatre for children) or youth theatre (theatre with children) as a genre but felt the term theatre was all encompassing of these.

If we operate under this theory, it becomes much easier to identify professional artists and educators that may not regularly be included in our classes and texts. For example, Osceola McCarthy Adams (Osceola Archer) who was an artist, activist, and educator is coined as being one of the first Black women on Broadway though she also worked at the Harlem School of the Arts as a drama teacher. Irene Colbert Edmonds, another that rarely graces the pages of our anthologies or textbooks, established the first children’s theatre at an HBCU, Dillard University in 1935. We are not necessarily looking for companies or artists, we are also looking for programs in church basements, at neighborhood recreation centers, or settlement houses by artists, teachers, and social workers. There is a privilege that needs to be recognized that allows us to have a professional focus of TYA, or to deem ourselves solely a TYA scholar or creator. The historical reality was that Black and Brown artists and audiences didn’t have equal access to space, money, or other resources including childcare, publishers, and libraries. The Global majority were not typically the archivists of dominant culture, limiting the ‘scholarly’ documentation of their existence. Accepting, acknowledging, and activating this theory has cultivated an open invitation to stop assuming what feels or is blatantly presented as absent as objective truth and traverse like Indiana Jones into the tombs which hold what, subjectively was deemed less than, subversive, or ‘not a good fit’ toward the goal of upholding neocolonialism nicely and neatly defined as field-specific

practice.

Navigating The Tombs & The Privilege of Designations

What then is the responsibility, level of accountability, and necessity in our field, research, and/or practice? We expect 'serious' artists to know that Stanislavsky sprouted Michael Chekhov, Meisner, and Adler among many others. Why don't we just as readily teach that from Ann K. Flagg propagated artists like Gilbert Moses? Moses, who attended classes and performed at Karamu House, grew up to be a Broadway performer, playwright (*Roots*), film actor and one of the founders of the Free Southern Theatre, was a student of Ann K. Flagg. Moses worked with Flagg on classes and productions from age nine through high school. He stated "Ann was a great transmitter of love, and the power of self-potential, self-discipline and self-control through the process of creating a character, or a prop, or a costume" (Abookire, 189). When looking at Ann's "Magic Carpet Room" and her "pillow circle" where "children would…take a pillow from a large hamper in the corner and each child would sit on the pillow while Flagg or an older member of Student Theatre read to the group: Sometimes we would read to each other, or ourselves and then we would act out the stories" (Abookire, 191). It makes perfect sense that this young artist would grow up to found Free Southern Theatre and help to develop Story Circles, where "audiences and actors sat together in circles to share personal stories evoked by the show" (Cooper Davis, 128).

The lack of representation in mainstream or dominant culture notoriety, reveals where we place value in this field. The absence of publication in academic journals or conference records has limited the inclusion of BIPOC names in citational practice alluding to a false reality that this history is minimal or non-existent. Privilege is in "presence" when presence requires acceptance from others or assimilation for pacification of systems meant to exclude, oppress, and depress. Therefore many histories may be written, photographed, recorded, or stuffed in boxes un-designated or identified only by 'multicultural', 'race-specific. 'Human services' for those deemed less-than-human. The act of digging through the tombs is not only to prove value but to gain knowledge on the practices that have bound us to segregation decades after Jim Crow. The act of uncovering is not only an 'AH-HA!' moment but also an intentional act to dismantle systems

that say only certain work or certain beings are enough. As a result, our responsibility becomes not only to illuminate these histories and make them readily available, but also to serve as a conduit to our commitment to build new ways of documenting and knowing. The past BIPOC TYA leaders, Anne K. Flagg, Osceola Archer, Olivia Ward Bush-Banks, and Irene Colbert Edmonds along with the present visionaries: Jose Casas, Tiffany Trent, Reiko Ho, Gloria Bond Clunie, Larissa Fasthorse, Paige Hernandez, Johamy Morales, Idris Goodwin, Cheryl L. West among many many others should inspire us. Through their work and their presence, the weight of what previously was considered “absence” should change our approach to citational practices, mitigate our language biases, and reposition our stances on expectations and excellence. To occupy is to move away from the status quo as we confront the realities of how narrow our documentation and datasets are due to dominance, eurocentrism, and neoliberalism.

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AUTHOR BIOGRAPHIES

Shavonne Coleman (she/they) is a Detroit-based fabulist, teaching/performing artist, director, writer, and dramaturg specializing in applied theatre. They are currently an Assistant Professor at the University of Michigan and continue to work across community, artistic, and educational spaces. Their recent past includes serving as the Director for Theatre for Dialogue and Assistant Director for Transformative Learning at University of Texas, respectively. They gained recognition

for transformative learning. Shavonne has directed youth performances internationally, contributed to TYA Today, and received the Ann K. Flagg Multicultural Award from AATE. Currently, they are adapting Your Name is a Song, written by Jamilah Thompkins-Bigelow for Seattle Children's Theatre and developing an original piece entitled Cause Play as part of the TYA BIPOC Superheroes Project commissioned by Spinning Dot Theatre and Eastern Michigan University. Shavonne strives to challenge the status quo in theatre, centering approaches that prioritize the human experience, equity, access, and creative exploration.

Meriah Sage, M.F.A. (she/her) is an Associate Professor, Director of Applied Drama and Theatre for the Young MFA/MA Program, and Director of Theatre at Eastern Michigan University. Meriah also works as a director, actor, and teaching artist who enjoys telling stories focused on social justice, human tenacity, and the power of imagination. She is a certified teacher in the Michael Chekhov technique through the Great Lakes Michael Chekhov Consortium (GLMCC), an approach that enhances her directing and teaching by emphasizing imagination, physicality, and psychological gesture. Her versatile background spans across acting, directing, and education, and she is dedicated to fostering artistic and personal growth in her students and the communities she serves. Before her tenure at Eastern Michigan University, Meriah worked in various capacities in theatre, education, community engagement, and artistic direction. She served as an Assistant Professor/Director of Theatre at the University of Findlay, as the Education Director for the Auditorium Theatre at Roosevelt University, as the Artistic Director for Theatre for Young Audiences at Apple Tree Theatre on Chicago's North Shore, and managing director for the Aesthetic Education Program with Education for the Arts. Meriah has also worked as a Teaching Artist/Facilitator with organizations such as Lincoln Center Institute (National Educators Workshops and Teaching Artist Mentoring Program), Education for the Arts, and the International Thespians Festival. Meriah is honored to have been the first recipient of the Don and Elizabeth Doyle Fellowship.

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Towards a Critical Performative Pedagogy: Living Museums – The Empires Project

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ABSTRACT

What follows, is conceptual and theoretical and emerged through my ongoing conversations and collaborations with the co-author Dr. Aly Elfriech. This an extension of our work on how a Critical Performative Pedagogical (CPP) lens focused on the ways the emergence of the 'self' informed pedagogical positions in a graduate multicultural education foundations and general secondary methods of teaching course. In this piece I apply a CPP to my work with the Living Museum: The Empires Project, a five-year inquiry with a local STEM high school in the Midwest. Drawing from the work of Garion, Pineau, and Gaztembide-Fernandez, I imagine how a CPP lens may function as a conceptual and theoretical space for wonder into how and why I did what I did and struggle with the idea of just what do the arts do.

Figure 2: Young people's Arts creations for Living Museum: The Empires Project, Weltsek & Koontz, 2018

> "In this time and the state of the world that it's in right now, I feel like everyone kinda has their own of suffering. It seems like no one's life is perfect… It seems like I've not met, met anyone who doesn't have problems." (Student post-event reflection, Weltsek & Koontz, 2018)

The Collaboration

Dr. Aly Elfriech and my collaboration began through the development of an online graduate course. We chose early on to concentrate our curricular engagement through collaborative arts-based strategies to engage the students in honest and vulnerable shared reflection. We wanted them to learn together, from each other's life stories. The arts-based reflections, the creation of collages, small films, and poetry (for example) were centered upon who they thought they were ideologically, politically, spiritually and why they believed that to be so. They shared these stories and compared their lives and the way they

saw the world. Continuing to work through the arts-based strategies, the graduate students connected a critical sense of 'self' to what they believed it meant to educate and to learn. The final element was to hear how the group thought about how a critical sense of 'self' connected to education, brought about through sharing stories, informed what they would do in class with young people and why.

Aly always reminds we that we never do anything alone. This statement is at the heart of the critical reflection within a Critical Performative Pedagogy (CPP). Materially, this piece grew out of text we discarded for our forthcoming article, "Storying As Curriculum: Critical Performance Pedagogy and Relational Identity Emergence in an Arts-Based Teacher Preparation Course*."* That work led me into the fascination with how the deep critical self-reflection inherent in a CPP is always a collaborative event. Our work together reignited my interest in how the wonder of a CPP lens insists that we be 'with' rather than be alone. This is to say that although this is a first-person conceptual and theoretical piece, all my thoughts and much of the way this text emerges is a result of my close collaboration with Aly. It is impossible to, nor would I want to uncouple our collective thoughts.

My Wonder

The image and quote above were gathered from Living Museums: The Empires Project (Weltsek & Koontz, 2018). This project was a human subjects-approved, longitudinal collaboration. I facilitated this project as an associate professor at a research one Midwestern university with my host teacher and their students at a local Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) magnet school. I created this project to work to subvert what I saw/see as an essentially oppressive educational systemization perpetuated through a standardized curriculum designed to force students to pass standardized tests. In his article "Why the Arts Don't Do Anything" (2013), Gaztembide-Fernandez problematizes:

> Regardless of the approach, mainstream advocacy arguments for the arts in education typically evoke the arts as a substance with the power to influence any number of educational outcomes and individual experiences, or even to transform the consciousness of individuals. (p. 212)

Gaztembide-Fernandez's idea challenges me to struggle with the gnawing sense that I had embraced that very oppressive sensibility of which I fought. You see, due to my desire to work with young people to understand how their education was designed as imposed Eurocentric enculturation, I positioned my work as a commodity to be consumed with the goal of gain. I saw myself as using the students to achieve an end. I had stripped the young people of their personhood and reduced them to subjects to be objectified. However, like Haiven and Khasnabish (2010), I wonder about the idea that "Creating anti-capitalist alternatives, new modes of being and working together beyond the profit motive, in the present is a form of "exodus" from Empire: not so much an explosive revolution but an abandonment of exploitation" (p. 25). Through this piece I apply a critical performative pedagogical lens, (CPP) (Pineau, 2002, 2005; Alexander, Anderson & Gallegos, 2005; Giroux, 2001; Weltsek & Medina, 2007) to challenge myself to continue to think about how to view my work through the arts. I apply a CPP and view that,

> classrooms are perceived as spaces where students and teachers perform and imagine multiple social realities addressing political issues, moving beyond superficial under-standings of 'difference', 'the other', or assumed 'naïve' notions of empowerment and instead explore the embedded multiplicity of discourses. (Weltsek and Medina, 2007, p. 78)

I embrace a CPP as it allows me to step back from my need to prove that the arts do something. Rather, the CPP lens draws my attention to how my pedagogy manifests itself with the young people with whom I work. I use, as a point of reflection, my experiences with the Empires Project.

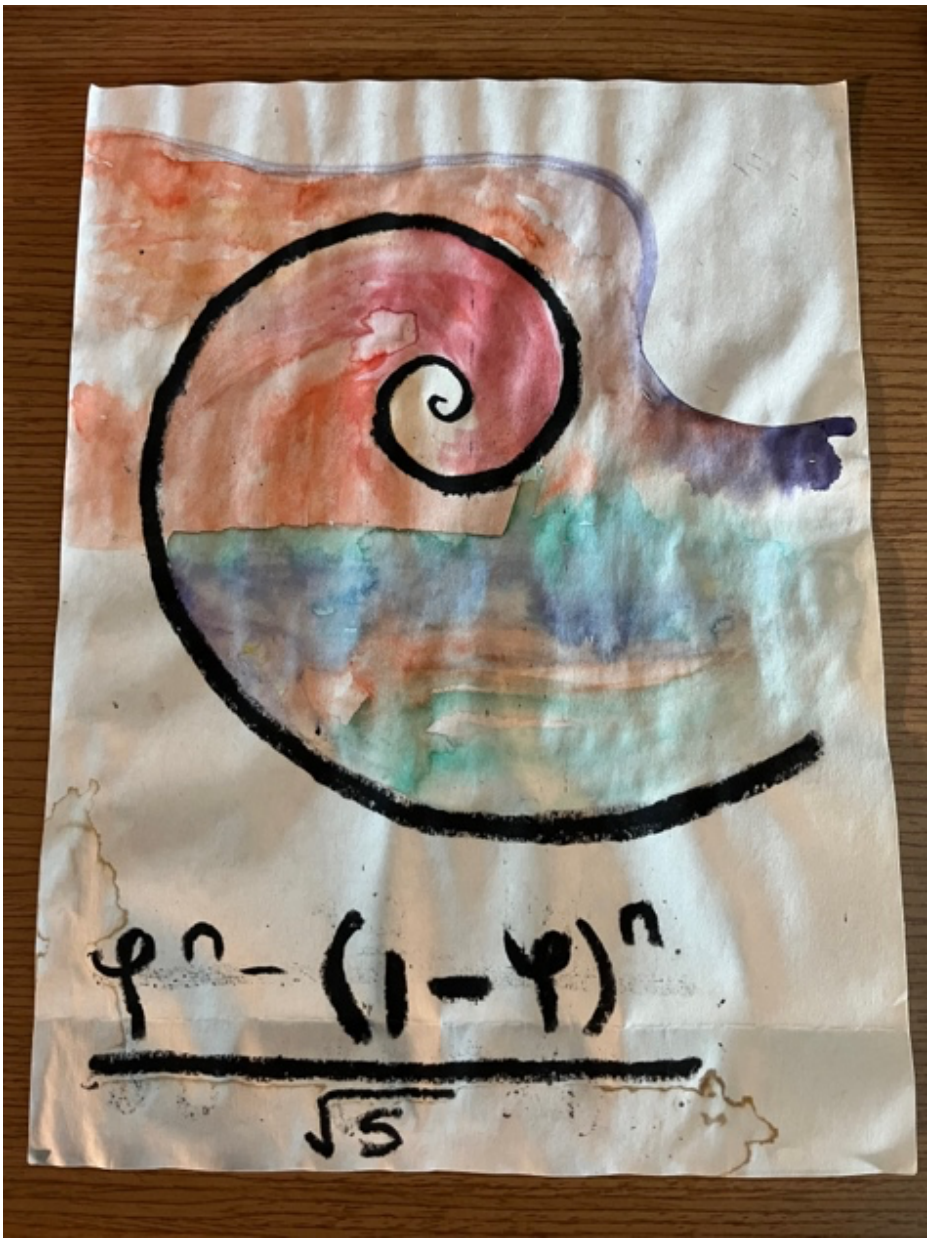


Figure 3: The Golden Ratio, Theodor Savich, 2017

Context for the Wonder: A User Guide

Through this written piece, I do not wish to prove the value of the Arts in and as education or as in the service of other subjects or outcomes. My perception of the Golden Ratio entices me to share and experience the written work outside a utilitarian dictum. I do not look for nor intend to share answers. Like the two lines of the ratio's spiral, I see my reflection here as ontologically contradictory yet proximal, as I occupy a multiplicity of temporal and spatial realities, infinite in movement. I reflect upon the Empires Project as an existential pedagogical referent and confront the collision of individual and collective realities that grow from my sense of self as a scholar, educator, artist, and activist, all the while aware of how my understanding is always a part of a larger social dialogic continuum.

As mentioned above, I started the project with a very definite utilitarian goal in mind—to subvert what I saw and continue to see as an ongoing struggle for progressive educators with the oppressive, marginalizing, and inherently racist US public school system which seeks to indoctrinate students into a Eurocentric phenomenology (Neundorf, et al., 2024). Despite the many positive, and I dare say progressive work being accomplished in our public schools, here in my hometown and the United States in general, I experience an educational system mired in political partisanship. In my own state for example, in my article "Let's Make Theatre Illegal Again," (Weltsek, 2022) I wrote about the 37 state bills that intended to make it illegal to teach Critical Race Theory. The Bill, HB 1134, in my home state is now State Law SEA 202 (2024) which legally eliminates free speech and critical thought under the guise of Intellectual Diversity (Critical Brief on Indiana SEA 202, 2024). Similarly across the US, a learning system called *The Science of Reading*, heralded as a cure-all for poor reading scores (Snowling et al. 2022) as Tierney and Pearson (2024) share, may actually restrict critical thought through an imposed imbalanced focus upon phonics, grammar, and mechanics. It also restricts the use of authentic literature in favor of leveled reading text sets and a curriculum overseen by the legislature that limits what words and phrases may and may not be used. This struggle is with an implicit White Supremacist, patriarchal, heteronormative, ableist, and capitalist ideology designed to indoctrinate young people and marginalize and exclude those who cannot or will not be indoctrinated.

Grosfoguel (2007) described a condition where institutional

systems attempt to marginalize other's ways of being as a "colonial power matrix" (p. 219). I see this matrix in one of its most insidious forms under the guise of equity within the US public educational system through standardized exams. As Kendi (2019) explained, "The use of the standardized test to measure aptitude and intelligence is one of the most effective racist policies ever devised…" (p. 101). Kendi's position arises out of the test's lineage from the eugenicist Francis Galton in 1869 to prove the inferiority of the Black race. This act of White Supremacy is an extension of Eurocentrism— "a dominative orientation within Western thought, which actively subjugates its periphery" (De Lissovoy, 2010, p. 285). Through the imposition of standardized tests, enforced within a standardized curriculum, I saw/see an intentional gauge where not only young people of color, but all young people are deemed intelligent or not through their ability to learn White Western thought and values. Through the Empires Project, I wanted to use the arts to engage young people to confront and subvert what I saw/see as innately racist tests—in a sense, confront the existence of a White, patriarchal, heteronormative, and ableist and colonial empire; to use a drama and arts based praxis to de-colonize the classroom (Delgado & Stefancic, 2023; Bridges, 2019; Taylor et al., 2016, Mignolo, 2006). As Khoja-Moolji (2019) explained, the objective of a decolonial praxis is to "take an active stance toward confronting marginalization due to colonial modes of human relationality and undertake resistive and reparative work" (p. 151). As noble and or ignoble as your politics position you to receive my agenda, it is that very intentionality of agenda that I hope to here problematize. I am not trying to prove my supposition about the US educational public school system. Rather, I use a CCP to wonder how I might understand my own onto-epistemological positioning as informed by the pedagogical space of Arts engagements with young people.

Living Museum: The Empires Project

Freire explained, "Education must begin with the solution of the teacher-student contradiction, by reconciling the poles of the contradiction so that both are simultaneously teachers *and* students" (1995, p.72). Freire always inspired me to think deeply about how my pedagogy and praxis may perpetuate or challenge my biased and

privileged sense of the world. Freire's concept of teacher-student contradiction continues to foreground my attention on experiencing with young people. It also reminds me, as Aly said, "We never do anything alone." To understand the young people with whom we work as co-creators of the space begins to disrupt my immersion with traditional educational hierarchies.

Through the Empires Project, I was privileged to engage with a group of young people of high school age and their three teachers in a combined Social Studies/Language Arts class in a Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math (STEM) magnate high school in the Midwest United States. The young people were in this combined section as part of their high school graduation requirements. The adults acted as co-curricular designers to weave together social studies, physics, and language arts through arts-based engagements. Through student-developed characters from various historical empires, the young people In Role (Booth, 2005) engaged museumgoers in political dialogues in an interactive experience we called a living museum.

To create the characters, the young people researched empires throughout history. Our goal as educators remained to listen and wonder but not direct how the young people made sense of their empires. As part of the social studies element, we guided the young people to use primary and secondary sources such as the examination of translated diaries, letters, written plays, poetry, and fiction, cultural artifacts like paintings and pottery, music, and professional periodicals, along with textbooks. With these resources, each group developed a sense of how the empire came to be, what its apex looked like, how they arrived there, and finally, what elements led to the decline of that empire. The physics element was introduced through the challenge to think about what technological advancements defined the empire, adding to its ascension to power. The language arts component wove the other pieces together through an understanding of arts literacy and its multimodal and multiliterate nature. Stemming from the young people's inquiry, characters were created based upon each group's notion of how specific empires rose and fell. These characters emerged through a series of arts-based experiences such as mural design, three-dimensional arts creations, drama improvisation, and In Role journaling. Characters of great power emerged, as well as those who were oppressed and exploited.

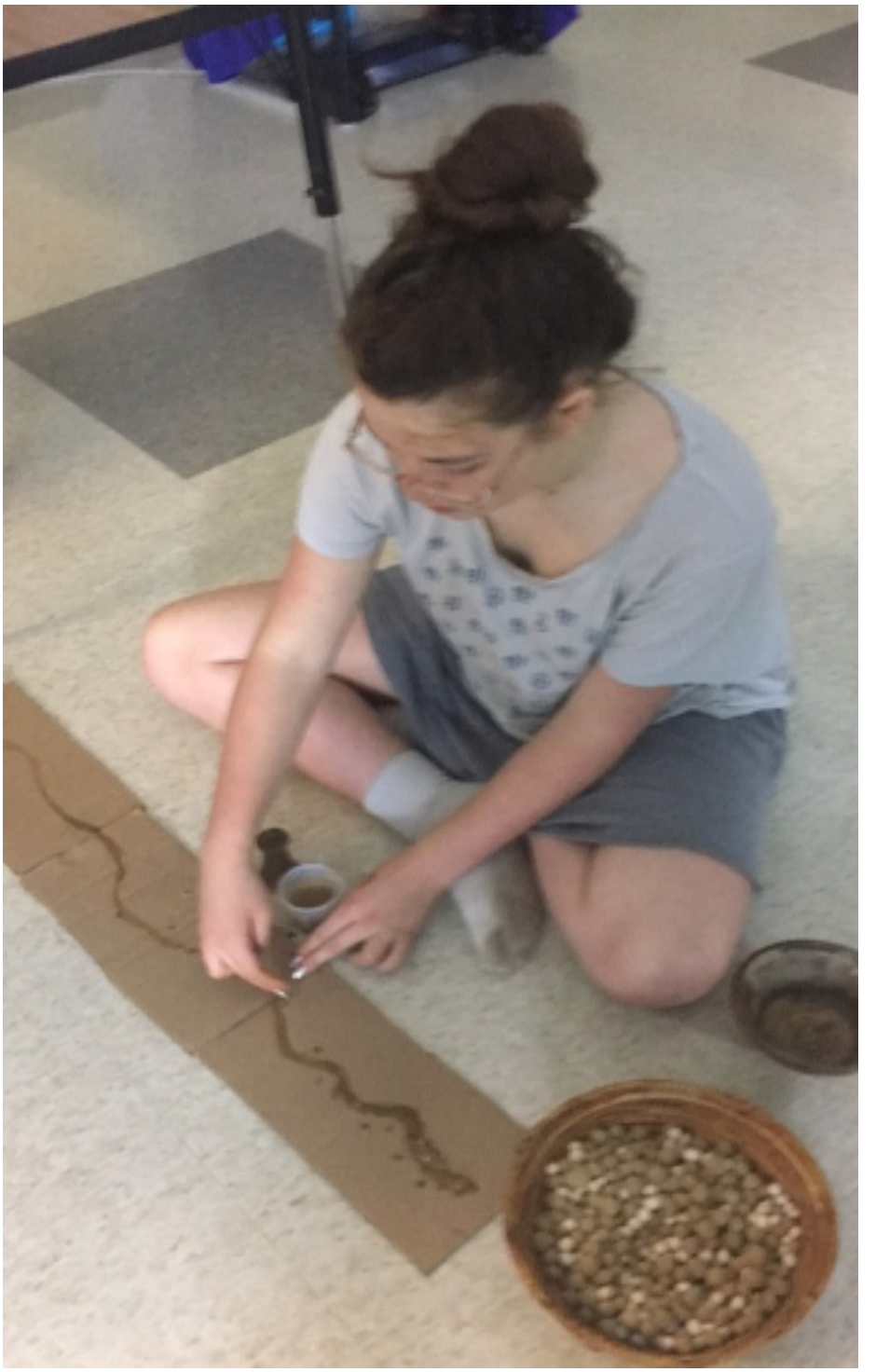
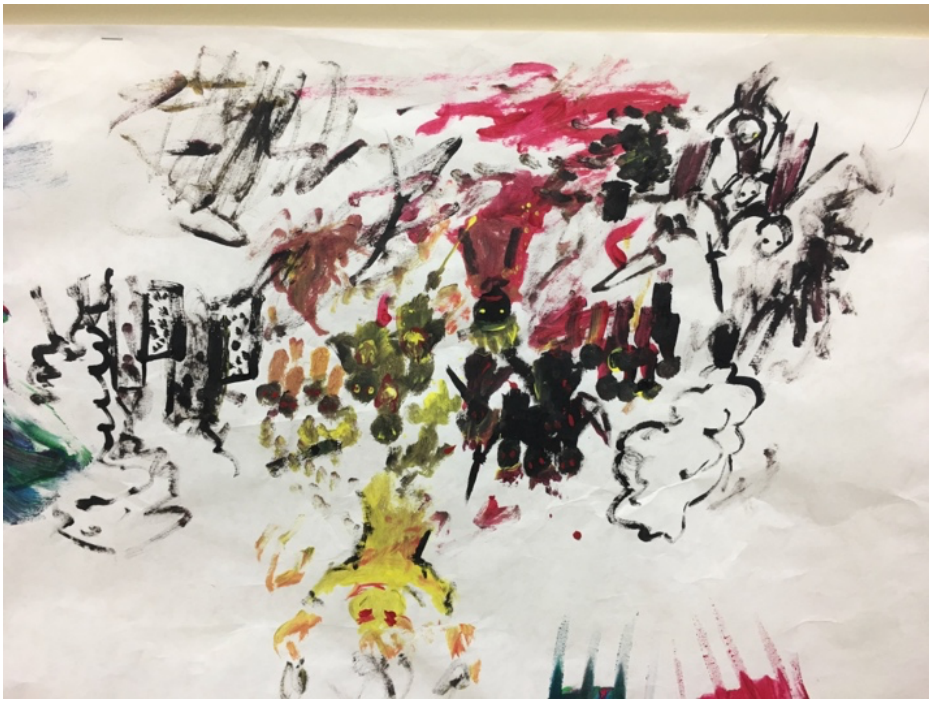


Figure 4: Student in role, Living Museum: The Empires Project, Weltsek & Koontz, 2018

The big element of the museum was that it lived. As the museumgoers moved through the space, they were greeted with sights, sounds, smells, and even tastes the young people felt created the atmosphere and culture of the empire. Through the physics element, the students built replicas of technology they felt defined that empire. For example, based on their research into the Ming Dynasty of 1368 to 1644 A.D., one young person (as seen in Figure 3) created a role of a person forced into labor to build the Great Wall of China. This young person felt that the technology of the wall not only defined how China was able to be safe but also defined the human cost of that safety. In Role, the young people would then engage the museumgoers in dialogues about the political, social, and personal injustices of their empire from the perspective of their characters. Here though is the point: my pedagogy may be seen in my provocation for political engagement. I insisted on, and assumed that a product involving some intellectual and socio-political awareness could be gained. I believed that the Arts do something, rather than really allow myself to find “with” the young people what this experience was about.

Figure 5: In role image of injustice, Living Museum: The Empires Project, Weltsek & Koontz, 2018

A Critical Performative Pedagogy



Figures 5-7: Mural creation, Living Museum: The Empires Project, Weltsek & Koontz, 2018

In their text, “Thinking Things Through,” Henare asks that we “…take ‘things’ encountered in the field as they present themselves, rather than immediately assuming that they signify, represent, or stand for something” (2006, p. 3). To struggle in this space of my intentional uncertainty, I use Critical Performative Pedagogy (CPP). I have used CPP to think about and articulate the ways a multiplicity of identities intersect and diverge within symbiotic relationships across moments of doing between self and others to create a relational presence in space and time, particularly those moments we see as educational. Again, I am not alone in this moment. As a concept, CPP serves to focus individuals and collectives within the complex phenomenological interplay of wondering about ideas of becoming, identity emergence, and alternative ways of being in and of the world. For example, in the Empires Project, our curricular design was conceptually centered on critical theory and culturally responsive practices, yet our generative strategies were emergent—devised in direct relationship to the ways

we, as a collective, (students and teachers) experienced our interactions. This is to say that artistic engagements were designed within the moment of doing as ideas and perspectives were seen to emerge across student and teacher interactions.

The above mural (Figures 5-7) is an example of the intended fluidity of the process. In a classroom focused through a CPP, assignments are looked upon as interactive strategies designed to engage young people in critical meaning-making. The mural strategy was the first strategy within the Empires Project. On day one, the young people entered the room and found a long white piece of paper. The young people were asked to use the markers and crayons laid about to play with their notions of what power meant through image and/or word. The pedagogy behind the event was that the young people would create meaning based upon their sense of truths connected to the idea of a word—power. The obvious complication is my imposition of the forced provocation of having young people think about power. Now of course as teachers we must do something. Yes, that is not the point, it is here that I problematize how we arrive at that moment of praxis.

A CPP approach intends that a classroom be a place where identities are viewed as being performed in time and space. Like Barad (2007), who understands the self as an 'onto-epistem-ology,' agential realist account where it is "possible to acknowledge nature, the body, and materiality in the fullness of their becoming without resorting to the optics of transparency or opacity" (p. 812), in a CPP, identities are in a constant state of emergence rather than residing in some stoic sense of a fixed and pre-established self, operating through predetermined schema and conscious sense-making. A CPP lens is not an excuse for my agenda-laden focus on power. A CPP lens rather allows me to see that agenda, own it, and challenge me to experience how my and others' performed 'selves' emerged around that agenda. This is to say that, yes, I did impose the focus. Yet, I wonder how my 'self' appeared. How did my emergent 'self' manifest, and how did that moment inform the next engagement with the young people?

A Note on Self-ness

When I wonder about the 'self,' I am drawn to French existentialist philosopher, playwright, novelist, and political activist, Jean-Paul

Sartre. I imagine a space of artistic and educational creation where an existential 'I' emerges from unreflected consciousness into consciousness (Sartre, 1960) giving an account of oneself (Butler, 2005) to action within socialized reality. Sartre dove deeply into notions of how the 'self' becomes. In his work *The Transcendence of the Ego: An Existentialist Theory of Consciousness,* he postulates, "The problem, indeed, is to determine the conditions for the possibility of experience" (p. 32). This is to say that in order to determine if a 'self' indeed exists being able to place that 'self' within an 'experience' is essential. The Arts and Drama rely heavily upon the belief that those who participate in the event 'experience' something. What, however, are the conditions for naming an Arts event as an 'experience'? Sartre thought of 'experience' that "One of these conditions is that I can always regard my perception or thoughts as mine, nothing more" (ibid., 32). It is possible to say that, as I engaged with the young people and considered which arts-based strategy to engage the group in next, our artifacts and dialogues were evidence of our ownership of the event and proof that we had an 'experience'. The acknowledgement of 'experience', however, still does not address my potential to position the young people as objects to reach my goal of subverting what I saw/see as an systemized oppressive educational institution. The acknowledgement of this moment does, however, become a springboard into a conversation into how the individual comes to the pronouncement 'I' have had such and such 'experience'. In my case this pronouncement of 'I' allows me to at least consciously own my presence. It is the 'conscious' acknowledgement of my 'self' as an active agent that becomes that through which I might actually take a critical look at how my sense of the arts-based moment moves me to select/design the next arts-based strategy.

Although consciousness may become the sense of existence, Sartre is careful to remind, that this conscious sense is not knowledge of a thing, things or self it is rather "…purely and simply consciousness of being conscious of that object" (p. 40). In other words, consciousness does not suggest a knowledge of a thing, an engagement with a thing or with and of the 'self' above a basic sensory awareness. Even though I was aware of a 'self' and aware of the young people, it did not mean I knew or understood them. Sartre terms this moment as the unrelfected consciousness. It is a moment before an 'I' enters and begins to name, react and respond. The unrefelcted

conscious is the rudimentary moment of human consciousness where there is no consideration of the object's qualities or how that object informs a notion of 'self' and or reality. So how do I come to know a person outside of objectification so I can even begin to consider the complex performance that take place as we engage across realities, as supposed/proposed through a CPP?

In our 2019, graphic novel style piece, *Notes from Nowhere*, Dr. Clare Hammoor and I take on this very wonder as we consider the dissociated space. The dissociated moment of the creative, whether that be an arts piece, the creation of a lesson in Arts education, or a piece of scholarly work is for us a leap into the unknown. This dissociation is just prior to Sartre's unreflected consciousness, a moment prior to even this rudimentary sense of existence. A moment of non-being. We theorized that it is in this dissociated space where the journey to experience an 'I' begins that leads to a later re-association and to the later pronouncement and performance of the creation of self as in a CPP.

What does the moment look like when the 'I' begins to reflect to re-associate back into a socialized and reality, in relationship to the wonder of this paper, it is when I chose which strategy to use next. How does the moment of creation of 'I' occur? Sartre believed, "The me appears only with the reflective act, and as a noematic correlate of a reflective intention" (p. 60). The noematic correlate in this moment being an actual complete sense of the other as a full a complete being outside of the 'self'. It is a moment where the 'self' realizes it is a complex embodied whole with its own very specific sense of the world that may or may not align with other complex whole 'selves'. The alterative pronouncement of that is not me occurs. This moment, the ability to actually embrace the wholeness of another person, body, mind and spirit, is unfortunately often culturally denied, specifically as I am a product of the very oppressive systematized educational institutions of which I write.

The Cut: Or I Want My Body Back

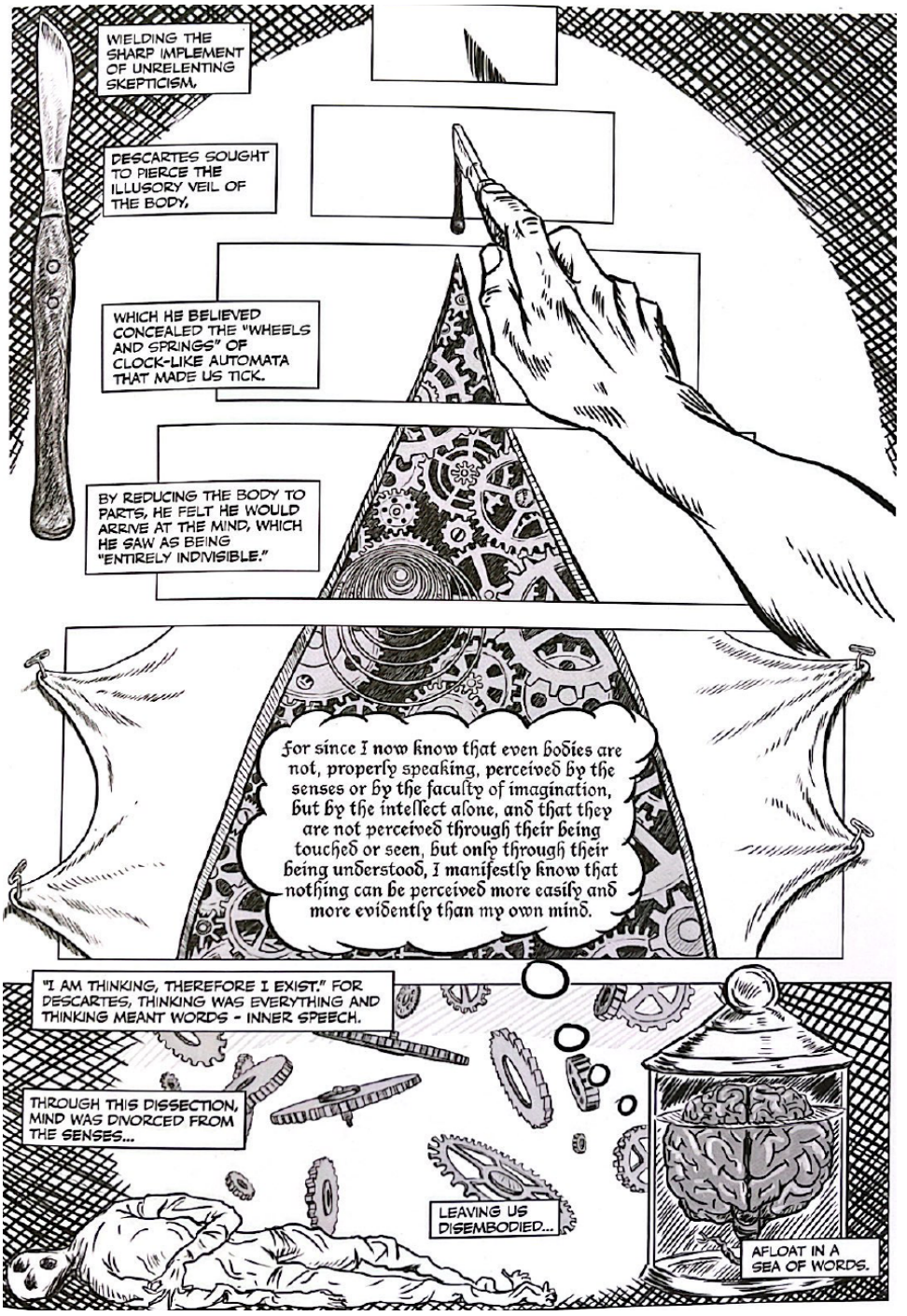


Figure 8: Unflattening, Sousanis, 2015, p. 55

In “Unflattening,” Sousanis (2015) explained how, in 1637, in “Discourse on the Method of Rightly Conducting One's Reason and of Seeking Truth in the Sciences” (*Discours de la Méthode pour bien conduire sa raison, et chercher la vérité dans les sciences*), Rene Descartes with one catchy phrase cogito, ergo sum, “I Think therefore I am” (Olscamp 2001, Part iv), literally cut the body out of Western phenomenology. Sousanis went on to playfully ponder how that brutal cut created an environment that made Western thought primary over cultures that value the entire embodied experience as knowledge. My wonder about how my ‘self’ showed up is connected to this existential laceration.

A CPP, for me, relies heavily upon deconstructing a Cartesian dualism, that separates the mind from body, intellect from sensations, and instead owning the embodied self (Perry and Medina, 2015). In a CPP, an embodied experience is not to be viewed as something fixed outside of the experiential that can be read and acted upon and through but rather as the corporal manifestation of a non-representational emergence (Deleuze and Guattari 1987). Here, as Leander and Boldt explain, “life is understood as Emergent, having no natural directions of growth or boundaries or barriers” (2012, p. 4). The notion of the embodied self is in this way in a constant state of flux performing spontaneously re-forming and re-defining the ‘self’ in the moment of doing through an intimate and sensual embrace of the corporal world, through the sight, sound, smell, taste, touch, and spirit. The idea that the body is marked or written upon in a static and defining and definable way becomes anathema to a vibrant and dynamic emergence that is making meaning rather than re-making tropes and social inscriptions. Through a CPP lens, in this moment of doing as I performed my role as teacher, although I had chosen the word *power*, the fluidity of my own emergent embodied ‘self’ informed how I uttered the word *power*. Due to the very presence of the young people in space and time, my performance of ‘self’ as teacher was impacted by the complexity of the moment in so far as I was critically reflecting upon the potential influence this strategy and that word might have with a group of young people I had only just met. Garion explains:

> Within the context of educational practice, performance represents the teacher’s pedagogy, the students’ interactions with that pedagogy, and their mutual involvement in school. Significant to

> cultural politics, however, is whether this expanded field of performance manifests the oppression of cultural workers or their political agency (1999, p.8).

I must speculate, however, were the students and I actually engaged in the mutual and embodied creation of the educational experience. Were we all focused and exchanging ideas that in some way took the totality of our 'selves' as complete and complex spirits in time and space to inform each moment of creation? What was I doing?

Doing, Not Do: Research?

The idea of what I did or did not do transcends a meager attempt at a critical self-reflection. My point here is to bring attention to the impossibility of stating what drama does and bring into focus how the intention to prove that drama and the arts serve a purpose has problems. This begs the question of whether inquiry into, upon, with, or through drama and the arts that situates itself as in support of a quantitively and or qualitatively supporting a 'doing' is existentially flawed or at least situated in an onto-epistemology of positivism and a deliberate statement of reality as ultimately knowable? Was I that critically in tune with the moment and aware of the complex interplay of self and other as a defining variable on how the word *power* was uttered? Patraka pointed out it is impossible to name with any sense of purity the moment of doing, as our onto-epistemological socially imposed tropes intrude in the naming and "represents particular discursive categories, conventions, genres and practices that frame our interpretations, even as we perceive the present moment of doing" (1999, p. 6). A CPP presents the idea that moments, particularly those understood as performative, exist in the doing and are gone even as they are done. Naming these moments, let alone proving that they do anything other than what we creatively imagine they do, is akin to trying to catch air with a butterfly net. What the experience did or did not do, what I did or did not think, and being able to read what occurred in the classroom, or 100% fully and accurately inquire into and report on what happened would necessitate that I view any one moment in time, any one curriculum as a static temporality fixed moment in time and space. I would have to state that the multiplicity of individually collaborated performances within this fixed moment could

be positioned and articulated as fact and truth.

In a CPP, barring the ability to dwell within a multiverse or quantum reality where I could continually revisit the moment of doing, naming the doing is replaced with a perpetual sense of emergence on onto-epistemological interpretation. In other words, an opinion. Through a CPP, the value of the event as educational lay not in being able to name its value but rather in unknowability and an embrace of the experiential. In a CPP, learning becomes experiencing and action and not naming or showing value through some material, quantifiable, or intellectual outcome. As a teacher in this space, I see myself as vulnerable, malleable, and ultimately unknowable as the young people themselves and more the intangibility of a curriculum and or research that positions itself as fact and truth. At best, I am merely an inquisitive provocateur who, like the young people who entered the room and saw a big white piece of paper and had no idea what was going on or what might happen.

CPP Does Not Deny Responsibility

CPP is offered here, not as a cure-all or fix to the complexity of personal imposition into any moment. Nor is it presented to deny teacher and or student responsibility for the moment. On the contrary. A CPP demands a much more rigorous responsibility to the complex interplay of ways of being, knowing, and acting in and upon the world. Again, CPP is a conceptual lens that invites teachers and young people to see the moment of doing as a performance and an invitation to see any interaction with someone else, especially in those moments we label educational, as the collective creation of reality. In our forthcoming article titled, “Storying As Curriculum: Critical Performance Pedagogy and Relational Identity Emergence in an Arts-Based Teacher Preparation Course,” Aly and I struggle with the notion of how relational perspectives inform responsibility within a CPP guided course. We felt that a relational perspective shaped the theoretical and methodological engagement with student creations/coursework as “encounters with difference… *in relation to*—rather than apart from—the self” (Asher, 2003, p. 235), where experiences are always in relation to the experiences of others (Huckaby, 2013). Indeed, meaning-making is collective, relational, and always becoming. This moving away from the Cartesian cut, as relational thinking suggests,

centers on how meaning is developed within entangled relations, of moving knowledge, and conceptions of meaning that are not fixed or static (Kuntz, 2015). This idea is crucial to understanding how a CPP may provide a space for a critical self-awareness that creates opportunities for much more intimate understandings of what occurs to inform responsible actioning.

Relationality is an inherently ontological feminist tradition, including Black Feminist Thought, Chicana/Latina Feminism, and Indigenous and Queer feminist epistemologies. Indeed, Canella & Manuelito (2008) posit to challenge patriarchal and colonial oppression is to recognize the relational and connected. Anzaldúa expands upon this further and incorporates a radical interconnectedness as the "deep common ground and interwoven kinship among all things and people" (2002, p. 565). Anzaldúa's radical interconnectedness through a relational worldview pushes against binary-oppositional frameworks and creates a collective responsibility toward issues of social justice, equity, and activism (Keating, 2008). In *Living a Feminist Life* (2017), Sara Ahmed parallels this responsibility towards creating relationships "with others that are more equal; how to find ways to support those who are not supported or less supported by social systems; how to keep coming up against histories that have become, histories that have become solid as walls" (p. 1).

In *Teaching to Transgress* (1994), bell hooks' engaged pedagogy actively invites students and teachers to bring their entire selves to the classroom, both their intellect and their spirit, as they examine ways of knowing with habits of being. Thus, the relationship of both students and teachers becomes part of the curriculum and builds a different history through communities of responsibility. hooks (1994) further suggests that to be responsible educators, just as teachers encourage their different students to embark on their journeys of learning and growth, so do they need to engage consciously in their own self-reflexive process of growth. Such a recursive, pedagogical process allows for the development of synthesis across the differences we and our students bring to the classroom. This recursive process maintains an ethical accountability that we are always already in relation, and thus, can create new ethical imaginings of relating with one another (Elfreich & Dennis, 2022). For example, McKittrick (2021) suggests that we may "read outside of ourselves not *for* ourselves but to actively unknow ourselves, to unhinge, and come to know each other" (p. 16)

beyond the self, there is a collective capacity to build social change. In this way, questions of individuality that shift to relations with others also involve rethinking responsibility (Pearce and MacLure, 2009).

Re-Positioning The Empires Project

By re-positioning the students through a CPP lens, as the active responsible producers of themselves and their sense of knowledge rather than responsible consumers of Eurocentric epistemologies and ontological schema found in the standardized tests, the possibility existed to imagine, like Seth (2007), that "knowledge was always in the plural, always took the form of so many knowledges and practices" (p. 34). One of the mainstays of the Western White educational system is the imposition of their phenomenology through limiting the ways of knowing. Primary to that ability to limit and define reality for all is the US Eurocentric reliance on written literacy as the preeminent form of meaning-making to the negation of any other embodied way of knowing or being. Perry (2020) described these "normative constructions of literacy education as Eurocentric and neocolonial, effectively supporting a pedagogy that normalizes certain practices and people…" (p. 1). Extending out of the field of critical literacies (Janks, 2020; Campano, Ghiso, & Sánchez, 2013; Gutiérrez, Larson, & Kreuter, 1995), Perry's position is that a pluriversal sense of meaning-making "acknowledges forms of meaning-making, experience, and knowledge that exceed the normative, Western or Eurocentric onto-ethico-epistemologies. An epistemology of pluriversality requires a framework of pluriversal literacies" (ibid. p. 4). What this means is that to create a classroom dynamic that allows for a multiplicity of ways of knowing and being within the world, all participants would focus on how those understandings were made and embrace the range of epistemologies and relative ontologies present within the classroom as well as the range and varieties of ways those phenomenologies were performed. That is not an easy ask and possibly an impossibility. So again, what is it that truly happened throughout the Empires Project? What did I do, or not do?

Figure 9: Proximity to the Problem, *The Empires Project*, Weltsek & Koontz 2019

Continuations

In this piece, I have reflected on my agenda to design the Empires Project to work with young people to confront what I believed to be a standardized public-school curriculum that was/is inherently racist. I wondered how my pedagogy and praxis may or may not have fed into it. Aa a continuation of these thoughts, I believe that my interest lay within a commitment to understanding Western colonial domination. In *Orientalism* (1978), Said explains that:

> [t]here is nothing mysterious or natural about authority. It is formed, irradiated, disseminated; it is instrumental, it is persuasive; it has status, it establishes canons of taste and value; it is virtually indistinguishable from certain ideas it dignifies as true, and from traditions, perceptions, and judgments it forms, transmits, reproduces. (pp. 27-28)

My interpretation of Said's comment above is that the US educational system and my own pedagogy and inquiry practices remain heavily structured around ideologies, philosophies, religious beliefs, spiritual beliefs, and cultural standards. These structures will always further the perpetuation of hegemonic centers through the manipulation of individual ways of being and becoming through pedagogies that focus upon curriculum over individual ways of knowing—through a culture of

utilitarianism. I see the Western White perspective as couched in an ontological belief that the universal exists and that universal truth exists solely within the superior Western White culture and race or, as Escobar (2018) states, “the hegemony of modernity’s one-world ontology” (p. 4). Ultimately, the colonial power resides in an ability to force the belief that the universal may only be gained, if at all, through educating the biologically inferior races (Wynter, 2003; Glissant, 1997; Said, 1978; Fanon, 1963). I feel this reflection has brought me once again to the space where I see the event horizon at the end of the Golden Ratio. I feel more than before that to subvert the ability of institutionalized education and its scholarship to perpetuate the domination and colonialization of the other through bigoted educational paradigms cemented within positivistic pedagogies, and research paradigms, a radical shift towards the unknowability of the performative is needed in my pedagogy and scholarship.

The point of this piece was not to explain my process of creating an interdisciplinary arts-based experience, nor was it to highlight some sort of critical discourse analysis of what the young people said, did, or produced and draw a conclusion about what they learned. Through this piece, I attempted to explain and use a CPP lens on the performance of my ‘self’, pedagogy, and praxis. To that end, and relevant to this piece, was the identity I performed as teacher in the creation of the Empires Project. In this reflection, I took the struggle against Freire’s Banking methodological approach to education seriously, where the “teacher talks about reality as if it were motionless, static, compartmentalized, and predictable” (p. 53). Through the emergent sense of a performed self within a CPP, like Mohanty (2003), I challenged myself to “explicitly link a historical materialist understanding of social location to the theorization of epistemic privilege and the construction of social identity” (p. 524) or as Mohanty (2003) explains, the objective of this theoretical dive became for me to subvert what “imperial rationality [has] convinced us to be real, and that the real is accountable by only one rationality” (p. 13).

I leave this space, not alone but with a hope to be with you the reader, and offer this inquisitive provocation. What is it you think you’re doing? Is it possible to turn your gaze away from the other as subject/object and instead turn it inward upon your emergent self? How are you responsible for the reading of the moment, for the conclusions you draw, for the ideological and political positions you

impose/introduce/bring, what responsibility to you take for your power in the situation and the actions, you and young people may take within arts based engagements? And more, why do you believe this to be so, to be, dare I say the truth?

Peace and well-being.

SUGGESTED CITATION

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Educating Ourselves and a Large Language Model: A Small Study Looking at the Affordances and Limitations of Generative Artificial Intelligence for a Theatre/Drama Curricula

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ABSTRACT

The integration of Generative Artificial Intelligence (GenAI) into the development of theatre/drama curricula offers a multitude of opportunities, and simultaneously presents complex challenges. This article explores the potential benefits and complications of utilizing AI in the development of theatre/drama curriculum, emphasizing the critical need for innovative research practices to maximize AI's effectiveness in pedagogy. I assert that ongoing exploration and research is imperative to identify best practices in the nascent relationship between AI and educators. I describe the efforts of BYU Theatre Education faculty to explore AI-driven content curation and recommendation algorithms as a means of strengthening curriculum design. I assert that this can only happen when Artificial Intelligence

directives are paired with informed, embodied, decision-making processes that preserve the richness of drama pedagogies.

Introduction

In the fall of 2023 faculty from the Brigham Young University Theatre and Media Arts Department participated in a university faculty training about Generative Artificial Intelligence (GenAI). The presentation focused on responding to student's academic writing in a climate of fear about the impact of Large Language Models and artificial content generators. The information shared was practical and informed by academic research. The presenter, Brian Jackson, a colleague from the English Department, carefully interrogated the challenges and opportunities that GenAI presents in the academic setting. My Theatre Education colleagues, and I left the meeting with new insights but also a lot of worry. We knew that our students were invested in using GenAI to develop curriculum and that we needed to be better prepared to help them effectively and ethically engage them in this technology (Seemiller & Grace, 2017; Chan et al, 2023). We wondered how we would know if our students were using GenAI to better understand pedagogies or develop their theatre/drama curriculum. We also questioned whether we would be able to determine if our students could develop and create an innovative and research-based curriculum for their future classrooms if artificial intelligence was doing the work for them. We were also aware that studies have shown that the more frequently educators like us used GenAI, the more positive their perspectives about integrating the technology became (Kaplan-Rakowski, et al, 2023).

We acknowledge that the integration of technologies, including Generative Artificial Intelligence (GenAI), into the development of theatre/drama curricula can offer young teachers' opportunities (Piriyaphokanont & Sriswasdi, 2022). We are also aware that some scholars have found that the integration of digital technologies into arts education can lead to students' readiness for the future (Khujamberdiyeva & Isakov, 2021).

We hope that in our small study we will be able to present the potential benefits and complications of utilizing AI in the development of theatre/drama curriculum and its associated pedagogies. This study

does not focus on the overarching structural program changes necessary to impact course outcomes or student learning outcomes. Instead, we see this nascent study as an initial exploration of Artificial Intelligence as a classroom tool. We believe that exploring the ways that Artificial Intelligence might be used as a classroom tool will aid us in determining how best to go about those eventual structural changes. As we looked at the existing literature about this subject, we also thought it could be timely to emphasize the critical need for innovative research practices to maximize AI's potential effectiveness in pedagogy. We agreed that the encroachment of AI into educational settings requires us to identify possible methods and practices through which theatre educators can conscientiously engage with AI to the benefit of their students.

Drawing on the work of our colleague Brian Jackson (2023) our theatre education faculty determined together that we would proactively study ways that our theatre education faculty could:

1. Critically engage with Generative Artificial Intelligence models to better understand their form, function, and place in our pre-service theatre teaching program and in the curricula of both theatre education professors and pre-service teachers.
2. Better understand ways that theatre/drama education professors and our students could effectively expand our understanding of various modes of communication by exploring Generative AI as a teaching tool.
3. Treat generative pre-trained transformer models as potential multipliers that might amplify our processes and products.
4. Make our values about the use of generative content explicit to the theatre education faculty and eventually to our pre-service students.

We also believed that some educational practices that were already integral to our program culture could influence the ways that we might explore the affordances and limitations of Generative AI content creation models amongst ourselves and in our classrooms. For example, we regularly teach our students that the exploration associated with theatre/drama process can be more valuable than a theatre/drama culminating product. We believed this tenet might also apply in the investigation of GenAI and its uses. Additionally, we teach

our students that the context(s) in which we study and make theatre/drama work should inform and shape the content we create in our classrooms and performance spaces. This principle could also apply when considering the appropriate uses of Generative AI in educational settings.

We decided that we would work in two phases. In the first phase faculty members would critically engage with Generative AI models to actively develop our own questions and responses to the four parameters listed above. Then armed with new understandings we would conduct a second study where we would engage our students in an exploration of the ways that generative AI might be used in the development of their future classrooms. This article focuses on our work in the first phase of our project in which we examined how Generative Artificial Intelligence might impact the work of theatre/drama education professors and our own curricula.

Terms

Throughout the paper I will use several interrelated terms to describe our interactions with ChatGPT 3.5. For the purposes of the study, we defined the terms in the following ways.

Digital technologies: A general term describing the tools, systems, and devices that can generate, create, store or process data.

Machine learning: The use and development of computer systems that learn and adapt without following explicit instructions, by using algorithms and statistical models to analyze and draw inferences from patterns in data.

Artificial Intelligence: The theory and development of computer systems able to perform tasks that normally require human intelligence. Some of these tasks include visual perception, speech recognition, decision-making, and translation between languages.

A Review of the Literature

In reviewing the literature on Generative Artificial Intelligence, we found support for our beliefs that the tools associated with GenAI have the potential to benefit the development of curriculum and instruction. Conversely, the academy is only beginning to understand and contextualize the inherent challenges that the encroachment of GenAI may have on schools and schooling. Below I provide some of the major themes that are surfacing around this topic.

Artificial Intelligence is Impacting Every Facet of Higher Education

In May 2023 the *Chronicle of Higher Education* produced a report of the diverse ways that Generative Artificial Intelligence might be applied in higher education settings. The intent of this report was to make known the benefits and challenges that machine learning presents within the academy. The fifty-seven-page document examines the uses of artificial intelligence from a variety of perspectives including those of faculty, administrators, and students. Summarizing the findings of the report the Editorial Board writes "[T]he release of ChatGPT suggests that we're at the dawn of an era marked by rapid advances in artificial intelligence, with far-reaching consequences for nearly every facet of society, including higher education. From admissions to assessment, academic integrity to scholarly research, university operations to disappearing jobs…" (2023, p.6)

Anxiety About Artificial Intelligence

Some members of the academy and adjacent artist communities feel anxiety as they consider the impact and implications of artificial intelligence on learning and creation in educational environments. At times within the *Chronicle's* account selected members of the academic community write about AI with a sense of despair. Owen Kichizo Terry, an undergraduate student at Columbia University, writes that his peers are so adept at using these technologies that even "AI catching technology" can't find the marks of artificial intelligence in student writing (p. 25). Joseph Keegan, a graduate student at Tulane University calls on academic leaders to plan for a triage of its university systems to lay out rules and establish clear and reasonable guidelines that prevent rampant plagiarism (p. 27- 29).

Artists also express concerns about our lack of seriousness about

artificial intelligence in creative communities. The general worries about AI's impact stated with the *Chronicle's* reporting match with the arts specific concerns of theatre professionals. For example, theatre artist and director Annie Dorsen is well known for creatively investigating the uses of digital technologies in her staged work. She has previously thought of digital technologies as additive tools that might benefit the creative process. However, as she has engaged with machine learning in recent productions fear has made her skeptical of machine learning technologies. In a recent essay in *American Theatre*, she strongly advocates for a critical, more reflective use of digital technologies, and especially artificial intelligence in theatre settings. She says:

> AI Technologies were not designed to assist artists, they were designed to replace them. The datasets are hidden, dated, sloppy, and nobody knows exactly what's in them. The outputs are full of plausible-sounding nonsense. Artists are in danger of becoming unwitting propagandists for Big Tech…. We make the technologies seem interesting, cool, full of potential, maybe even beautiful. (2023)

Dorsen invites artists to be more critical and conscientious about their own decision-making process related to technologies of this kind. She asks the collective community to determine the ways that we want to use our time and capacities. Dorsen summons theatre artists to make deliberative and responsible choices about technology use. She aggressively calls on artists to determine whether they will be in the service of big technology companies or push back while using the tools. She asks other theatre practitioners:

> Do we want to put our skills and imaginations at the service of these tech companies, or not? And if not, what is the right way to push back? Should we reject these tools entirely, or try to use them to question [the tools], reveal how they operate, and pierce the illusions? There may be no perfect answer. But taking these questions seriously is the very least we can do. (2023)

Re-Examining Learning Environments

Other members of the academy view the advent of machine learning as an opportunity to re-examine their own learning environments, specifically focusing on ways that teachers and students might be empowered within technology contexts. In contrast to Dorsen, many members of the higher education community embrace the potential learning opportunities that AI presents university faculty, staff, and students.

Hollis Robbins (2023), humanities scholar and Dean of Humanities at the University of Utah reminds us that, “Education is still a matter of teaching people how to access information and how to turn information into knowledge” (p.11). She strongly advocates for the university as a space where educators and researchers should be curious about the affordances and limitations of artificial intelligence. She says, “Scholars are best situated to know what is not yet known, to identify ‘blank spaces’ in the universe of knowledge.” She then adds, “Until culturally inflected AI is developed, models such as ChatGPT will stand apart from culture. Knowledge production within culture will not fully be absorbed by AI. Specific and local cultural knowledge will become more valuable” (pp.11-12).

Leon Botstein (2023), President of Bard College, determines that AI will force educators to “focus on those talents and skills that will remain uniquely human.” He says, “For those concerned about students’ abusing the power of ChatGPT, we just have to take the time and make sure we know our students and have worked with them closely enough to both inspire them to do their own work and take pride in work that is their own” (p.19).

Leveraging Digital Technologies

Arts educators are leveraging digital technologies to enhance student experiences in classrooms. These educators have been utilizing digital technologies in classrooms for some time. Researchers have identified digital competencies that are useful in an artistic context (Webb & Layton). Others have suggested that because “theatrical performances have always been associated with culture and a people’s way of life” there is a cultural imperative to integrate ever present digital technologies into drama in education practices (Piriyaphokanont and Sriswasdi, 2022, p. 678). Hamadi and El Den (2023) describe ways

that the integration of digital technologies into Higher Education settings has dramatically changed the way students learn and find these technologies valuable in learner centered classrooms. They also caution educators to find sustainable ways to integrate digital technologies (p.3).

In “Drama/Theatre Performance in Education through the Use of Digital Technologies for Enhancing Students’ Sustainability,” Zakopoulos et al. (2023) conducted a comprehensive review of the ways that theatre/drama performances in educational settings are effectively using digital technologies as a means of persistently engaging students. They call on educators to “Redesign … [drama] curricula to integrate the goals and dimensions of sustainable development into digital drama education to cultivate the ecological awareness of students.” They also propose that:

- Drama teachers aim at digital upskilling for students and [themselves] to exploit digital opportunities in creating, sharing, and delivering drama content in educational settings.
- Drama teachers should work collaboratively, discuss and exchange valuable ideas and techniques, attempting to find feasible solutions to overcome problems.
- Drama teachers are urged to create an interdisciplinary interconnectedness of drama pedagogical philosophy, digital technologies, and sustainability awareness of their students.
- [Drama researchers should] carry out …. small-scale or large-scale studies [to identify] sustainable development in education through the application of digital dramatic techniques. (2023)

These guiding principles offer a pattern that helps us imagine ways that we might sustain the integration of Generative Artificial Intelligence into our education settings. They were also helpful in determining how we might conduct our own investigation.

A Description and the Results of Our Qualitative Study

Below I describe our efforts to engage artificial intelligence using our own curriculum, and our associated curricular needs as a guide.

Study Context: Beginning Conversations and Questions

Our study began with a spurt of short conversations between the three members of the Brigham Young University Theatre Education faculty. In these initial conversations we shared anecdotal stories about students using GenAI in ineffective and sometimes insubordinate ways. We also admitted to ourselves that we had not really done enough purposeful research to make our values about the use of artificially generated content clear to our students or to ourselves. We established that we were not ready to counter any perceived problems with students' approaches to using the available technologies.

We wondered if it was possible to heed the guidance we had received in the university training to begin to engage with AI. We also considered whether there was anything that we could do to critically engage with Generative Artificial Intelligence models to better understand their form, function, and place in our pre-service teaching program. We asked each other what we would need to know to treat generative pre-trained transformer models as potential multipliers. We wondered if GenAI could amplify our processes and products. We decided that we wanted to see what happened when GenAI directives were paired with our own informed, embodied, decision-making processes. In these small but successive conversations we determined together that we needed to see if our own expertise plus machine learning could improve learning outcomes and assignments while preserving the richness of drama pedagogies we used in our classrooms.

Following the conversation, I developed three questions that framed the investigation:

- How might Theatre/Drama Education professors utilize Generative AI to enhance established drama activities and assignments?
- How can Theatre/Drama Education professors and by extension their preservice teachers effectively respond to the encroachment of GenAI as they develop, teach, and revise curriculum?
- What do Theatre/Drama Education professors need to know about Generative AI to consider the ways we might reshape a drama curriculum?

Methods, Data Collection and Analysis

The goal of this study was to explore and report on the ideas we generated about professional practices for using Generative Artificial Intelligence in curriculum development for theatre education courses at Brigham Young University. Our study took place during the 2023-2024 academic year. The study involved three Theatre Education Faculty Members. I served as the key researcher and my colleagues Julia Ashworth and Kris Peterson served as collaborators and participants in the investigation of the ways that we might consider leveraging artificial intelligence in our curriculum.

During this year our study team selected learning outcomes and a capstone assignment from two current Theatre Education Program courses. Because our goal was to initially experiment with Artificial Intelligence our data set only included learning outcomes and capstone assignments from two course that are included in the Brigham Young University Theatre Education Program Core Curriculum. Specifically, we examined an Acting Pedagogy course, and an Applied Theatre course. Both are required courses that all students within the Theatre Education Major take to complete their degree and receive a teaching license.

Then I used Chat GPT 3.5 to process those learning outcomes and capstone assignments. This action let the technological processes review, revise, and offer alternate learning outcomes and assignments to the faculty. Then I sent the various iterations of the materials Chat GPT 3.5 created to my colleagues. This included modified learning outcomes, assignments and activities. The two faculty members initially read through the materials related to their specific courses. Kris Peterson reviewed the materials ChatGPT 3.5 produced for the Acting Pedagogy Course and Julia Ashworth reviewed the materials produced for the Applied Theatre course. After their initial review they re-read the materials with me. Each faculty member identified and highlighted useful components (items that improved the learning outcome or assignment) of AI generated materials in green. Then they highlighted components that were not useful (items that made the learning outcome or assignment more confusing or inappropriate) in red. The faculty members also used the comment feature to describe why they found components useful or not helpful. This activity in the comment section helped them to review the items they had coded and then flesh out their reasons for determining whether items they reviewed were

useful or not. Later the information in the comment section helped us to identify themes and those themes' relationships to each other. Finally, we gathered to collectively discuss the data and their implications for our practice. Following this discussion, I analyzed the faculty member's recorded verbal responses along with their written response to the materials to develop the key themes that emerged as we examined the data together. Finally, I developed written responses to the questions we had about the practical use of Generative AI in our own curriculum development. Below we will describe themes that emerged from our investigation.

The analysis represents the beginning of our work. Next steps in our effort to better understanding Generative AI's affordances and limitations include establishing investigation processes that includes more refining and iterating prompts to effectively develop sound learning outcomes and activities. We also plan to work directly with students as co-researchers to learn from their experiences with large language models.

Generative AI Can Enhance Established Drama Learning Outcomes, Activities, And Assignments.

In our survey of the GenAI produced learning outcomes, activities and assignments we established that GenAI has an emerging mastery of theatre and education language. Because of this the technology was able to inform and improve our original language choices for learning outcomes and assignments. For example, when Julia examined the AI generated learning outcomes created for her applied theatre class, she found that the Chat GPT "language provides clarity in thought and idea" and determined that the language produced would be "helpful to add to her syllabus."

Generative AI Can Write Learning Outcomes and Assignments that are Detailed and, in Some Cases, Nuanced.

When considering a GenAI learning outcome Kris found that the technology could produce some learning outcomes that improved upon hers. When considering an Acting Pedagogy learning outcome she writes, "this [learning outcome] is probably better phrased than what I have written." Sometimes the accuracy of the AI response unnerved

us. On encountering a particularly strong learning outcome related to her class Julia writes: “This outcome stands out as being particularly on the nose [in relation to my own learning outcomes], it makes me wonder both how it knows [what it knows] and also makes me feel justified in some of my own choices.”

Generative AI Can Produce Strong Clear Written Assignment Instructions.

Kris noted that the content generator produces strong clear assignment instructions when we provide the digital technology with a carefully worded and strong prompt. This happened when I invited Chat GPT to revise an assignment for the Theatre Education Acting Pedagogy Course. I wrote: “Create an Acting Pedagogy Workshop assignment in which students describe the design, development, and facilitation of a workshop in which they focus on the pedagogical approach of one acting pedagogue including specific details created by that pedagogue. The audience for the workshop should be new acting students.” As Kris responded to the assignment it created, she noted, “This prompt helped the AI generate far more specific and navigable assignment instructions.”

Working with Generative AI Can Create a Space for Critical Dialogue.

One pleasant, but not unexpected, finding that I discovered when reviewing my colleagues’ responses to the GenAI produced assignments and activities was that as they engaged with the technologically produced materials, they began a critical dialogue with the technology guided by their own personal knowledge and experience. They completed the coding assignment which was to determine whether the materials were useful. And because of their expertise in developing curriculum materials, they saw possibility in the AI generated materials. For them the materials were not perfect, and they would need to be modified or changed but the faculty perceived value in simply seeing what the technology developed. They viewed their critical reading and evaluation of the work as a kind of dialogue with the digital technology. This seemed like an important finding because it demonstrated that human interaction with ChatGPT 3.5

could be a reciprocal relationship where the embodied teachers pushed the technological processes to improve. In our discussions we noted that building a reciprocal relationship with a large language model where the user maintains power must include an element of critical-creative agency. That agency only occurs when users work reflectively to utilize and engage more than one data set, including data sets from their lived experience. This becomes more difficult as we are siloed into finding a fast or easy solution to a curricular challenge. My colleagues modeled this possibility in their discussions about using the technology. They maintained power over the technology. They never assumed that the materials created by the technology should be either accepted or rejected, instead they interrogated the materials created by the digital technology so that they could develop sound pedagogical resources.

For example, when Kris examines the AI generated assignment entitled “Cultivating Artistic Pedagogy: Integrating Diversity, Spirituality, and Community in Acting Education” she notes that while the overall assignment is strong it “does not take into consideration the complexities of humans working together in the classroom.” In this way she brings her embodied knowledge of the classroom experience to her critique of the generated materials.

Later while examining this same assignment, she acknowledges that ChatGPT 3.5’s different approach to one aspect of the assignment might be considered. Here is the example and her response:

As a component of the assignment ChatGPT 3.5 instructs students to:

> Develop Personal Acting Pedagogical Philosophy:
> - Create an outline and lesson plan for a performance workshop based on individual artistic beliefs and educational principles.
> - Receive feedback from peers and instructors to refine and strengthen the philosophy.

Kris responds with an emerging reconsideration of her own curriculum: “I like this idea … we cover this in a paper. Perhaps it's something to consider for future classes.”

Julia has a similar response to Kris’s when considering Chat GPT’s written workshop “Unveiling Oppression: A Theatre of the

Oppressed Workshop" She responds effusively saying that: "This written assignment makes me wonder why I would ever write with [only] myself again. The reason I say that is because it's fully detailed and if there was some nuance I needed to change that would be so much faster than creating the assignment from scratch."

Then when reviewing a second more refined version of the Chat GPT workshop Julia writes: "The detail in this [Theatre of the Oppressed or TO] workshop assignment is spot on. It's thorough and nuanced in expert ways. Again, I'm thinking of all the ways I could use it if I didn't have some [of the TO] materials I already have [access to], but I know that it's only gonna work because I understand where the holes might be. So how do I get my students to understand the same thing… That is the primary question I have right now. And my primary feeling is shock that this assignment is so good."

Generative AI Is Not a Substitute for Established Drama Learning Outcomes, Activities, and Assignments or Classroom Teachers.

Our survey of Generative AI produced learning outcomes, activities, and assignments also reaffirmed our suspicions that there are many ways that GenAI does not enhance curriculum development. In our examination of the GenAI produced materials we found that AI cannot replace the embodied classroom experiences of the practitioner.

Generative AI Does Not Take into Consideration Time, Space, or Classroom Constraints.

When examining the ten AI produced learning outcomes for her Acting Pedagogy course Kris remarks, "[It] seems like this is a LOT of information to cover in a 2.0 credit class." And when considering the assignment descriptions for the same course she recognizes that the same broad approach to learning that appeared in the learning outcomes is also a challenge in the assignments developed for those learning outcomes. She says, "to study various acting pedagogies in one workshop is a practical difficulty as it becomes a lot of material to cover. Multiple pedagogies in the workshop mean that we only cover breadth not depth. Students often report that they'd like more depth even in the short workshops we do in class." In this case Kris has knowledge based on classroom experiences that Artificial Intelligence

cannot replicate.

Generative AI Often Uses Appropriate Terms but Without Definition or Clarifying Contexts.

In one instance ChatGPT designs a thirty-minute Theatre of the Oppressed workshop entitled Identifying Oppression. In the plan students learn and utilize Forum theatre, Image Theatre, Rainbow of Desire, and Legislative Theatre with that brief timeframe. When encountering this section Julia writes: “This is ridiculous. There's no way one human could do all of this work in the time they've laid out. [ChatGPT has] no experience with Theater of the Oppressed. While the language is accurate and they identify key concepts in Theater of the Oppressed, there is not only a lack of time to do the amount of work they're listing, but also a lack of contextualization. If these were the instructions given to students being introduced to Theater of the Oppressed, they would be lost and confused and kind of baffled.”

Generative AI Struggles to Incorporate Authentic Measurement into Learning Outcomes and Assignments.

Sometimes the statements are so comprehensive that our reviewers describe them as “vague and impossible” (Julia) or “a broader learning objective for the [department] rather than something specific to an Acting Pedagogy class” (Kris).

Two sample learning outcomes created by ChatGPT emphasize my colleagues’ concerns with the appropriateness of course level learning outcomes.

ChatGPT writes:

> For the Applied Theatre Classroom: “Synthesize learning from the course to develop a comprehensive understanding of the role of applied theatre in community development, education, advocacy, and personal transformation.”
>
> For the Acting Pedagogies Classroom: “Demonstrate a commitment to lifelong learning and growth as an acting educator, engaging in reflective practice and seeking out opportunities for further training, mentorship, and professional advancement.”

In both examples the language used is appropriate for the field but there is no understanding that these are introductory courses. Each ask students to complete tasks that are well beyond the skill level that would develop in a beginning exploration of the content shared in the class.

Generative AI Does Not Take into Consideration modifications that Reflect Individual Student, Faculty, or Facilitator Needs

In their overall assessments of the materials that ChatGPT developed Kris and Julia expressed the most concern about the technology's lack of humanity. Julia writes: "Oftentimes nuance is missing, sometimes the AI language feels impossible or almost irresponsible because of the lack of experience and nuance. There is a lack of understanding that comes from experience and time and space working in and facilitating these theater pedagogies. Something that really stood out to me were impossible expectations for facilitators or participants in a workshop. Not only impossible because of time constraints, but because of lack of details or lack of understanding how huge the ask was."

Kris concurs with Julia and writes: "I rely heavily on what I'm seeing/hearing/feeling in class in addition to my spiritual intuition during the actual workshops. [It] seems next to impossible to have AI help me in this regard." Both comments hearken back to Robbins' (2023) assertion that specific and local cultural knowledge is more valuable than the "machine's capacity for knowledge production" (pp. 11-12).

Conclusion

Understanding the Form, Function and Place of AI in the Context of Our Theatre Education Program

Through critical engagement with Generative Artificial Intelligence models like ChatGPT 3.5 the BYU faculty better understood the form, function, and place of machine learning. After analyzing ChatGPT's creations and then participating in a critical evaluation of the materials Julia reported that she was ready to expand the ways that she invites her students to interact with AI. She says, "I've been scared to introduce AI into my classes, so my first thought was I just need to do it, which is what I always tell my students. They don't learn unless they

have experience, which ironically a robot does not have. But I can clearly see how it's helpful, and I am fully aware that it's part of our society and our students are using it so, to pretend otherwise is silly and unproductive."

She also began to formulate ideas about how AI might be used in the context of our pre-service teaching program. She noted that in using the tool she found that it might help us improve our course level learning outcomes in classes across the program. Julia thought that ChatGPT could be "especially helpful on our [theatre education program] assessment day." In that yearly meeting faculty spend a lot of time looking at our course level learning outcomes and how they are impacting the flow of curriculum. In those conversations we also determined how those course level learning outcomes affect all the courses that we teach. Julia believed that AI might improve our efficiency in those meetings because of its capacity to generate refined iterations of our original course level learning outcomes.

Kris thought that we could use time in faculty meetings to set goals for our own experimentation and further exploration of AI. She writes, "... this is a technology that won't be going away anytime soon, it will behoove us to understand the limitations of this technology so that we can help our students know how to navigate what quality curriculum will look like in the future."

Understanding the Affordances and Limitations of Generative AI Models as a means of Improving Curriculum Design

The Theatre Education faculty found limitations in ChatGPT's products. Generative AI could not replicate the lived classroom experiences of faculty, it could not adequately articulate the embodiment of performance and performance practice, and faculty members found that the technology was limited in expressions of authenticity. Julia found that AI can often create a "central topic but not the [real world] application." Kris writes: "[W]hat I find … missing is that because AI is unaware of some of the nuances of performance or performance practice, it speaks too much in generalities."

Faculty members also found that Generative AI has some strengths. It could effectively gather information on general education subjects, develop strong learning outcomes, and when specifically prompted AI could also generate basic lessons and activities for theatre education courses.

More importantly, through their own exploration both colleagues began to imagine ways that generative prompts could improve on the ChatGPT 3.5 data sets and could potentially amplify both faculty and student's processes and products. In their responses, each proposed nascent ideas about how using and modifying Generative AI datasets could be integrated into the courses in our program. They had a better understanding of specific ways that we could help our students to productively explore Generative AI as a teaching tool. In meetings following the study we have begun to systematize course assignments that would introduce Artificial Intelligence into curriculum design.

For example, Kris proposed that we could engage students in practicing and refining user developed prompts. She suggests an interactive and iterative process to teach them to develop progressively sound prompts: "... we will need to help them create or develop prompts that may generate clearer responses from the AI. I think it's worth exploring with our students, especially the beginning theatre education students as they [initially create] their own curriculum." She continues, "I would predict that in the future, one could create a lesson plan or workshop structure that could be input into AI and be used to generate quality curriculum. So, it may be worth it [for our students] to experiment with the sorts of inputs we can use to help us [develop quality artifacts]."

By determining some of the strengths and challenges of the learning outcomes and assignments produced by Generative AI both faculty members ultimately decided that it was our program's responsibility to increase our collective (faculty and students) critical literacies around AI. We agreed to continue our own experimentations. We also agreed to develop course level assignments in which students were invited to shift from a potentially passive consumptive practice of interacting with GenAI to a more critically engaged effort. Julia expresses this saying "My gut response to this is full transparency with our students. And partnering with our students because the idea of doing it on our own feels counterintuitive to the world that they live in and [the world] I'm trying figure out." Their responses hearken back Bolstien's (2023) invitation to "know our students" and to "inspire them to do their own work and take pride in work that is their own." (p.19). What Julia and Kris add to Bolstein's invitation is their confidence that they and their students can successfully work together as co-researchers investigating the learning opportunities presented to

educators with the advent of large language models.

A Final Note, Making our Values About the Use of Generative Content Explicit

There are certainly ethical considerations about the use of AI in the development of theatre/drama pedagogies. We continue to be worried about the originality of student work, and we certainly care about the widespread use of copyrighted material in the development of technology datasets. Our active exploration of GenAI-driven content curation and recommendation algorithms helped us to determine how this new technology could inform our curriculum design processes and curricular products. More importantly it aided us in determining the ways that we could manage the emotional impact of the potential disregard for critical and creative thinking that can arise when using Artificial Intelligence without reflection. We determined we would not teach in fear of the new technology. Instead, we are “trying to figure it out” in the ways that Julia described above. A value system for using Generative AI is emerging in our conversations. Our early framework includes being transparent with our students about our beginning understanding of the technology. The framework also embraces partnering with our students to better understand the ways that we can all work together to better leverage artificial intelligence in our future classrooms.

Next Steps, Further Research Directions

Since the writing of this article, we have begun to implement the second exploratory phase of our small research study. Grounded by the ideas that we generated during this study we are now partnering with pre-service teachers in our program to further consider the uses of artificial intelligence in their own curricula. Drawing on Leon Bolstein’s (2023) charge that university educators “focus on those talents and skills that will remain uniquely human” (p.19) we have invited student teams to find ways to use traditional drama tools to play with and interrogate their work with large language models. In this way we are trying to create a reciprocal relationship with the digital technology that still values embodied approaches to curriculum creation.

We hope that more theatre/drama-based research will follow. We agree with Zakopoulos that it is vital that arts researchers explore

"digital dramatic techniques" that allow for a continued sustainable development of theatre/drama education within the ever changing technologically driven world (2023). Ideally these studies could further identify the affordances and limitations of artificial intelligence as a means of curriculum development. Hopefully those students can further address issues of creativity, ethics, and the impact large language models have on the primacy of embodied learning as a key aspect of curriculum creation.

SUGGESTED CITATION

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Artistic Justice: A New Model for Corrections

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THE CIRCLE: A CENTER FOR ARTISTIC JUSTICE

ABSTRACT

Prisons are places where histories of violence and trauma reign commonplace, and opportunities for connection and recognition of shared humanity within prison walls remain sparse. However, many folks inside prison find ways of breaking down these barriers—between themselves and other incarcerated individuals, and even with correctional staff. Art and storytelling is one medium for such connection. In this article, six incarcerated artists—in partnership with

prison arts scholars and practitioners—present a new model for forging shared humanity in correctional settings: Artistic Justice (AJ). The authors share the origins of this concept, how this team of artists created an AJ-focused workshop series for incarcerated individuals and correctional staff across eleven prison facilities in the state of Colorado, and the findings from pretest-posttest evaluations indicating promising outcomes: correctional staff and incarcerated individuals who participated in AJ workshops experienced increased empathy for one another, expanded perspectives, and expressed appreciation for meaningful opportunities for connection unavailable elsewhere in carceral settings. These findings offer insight into the potential of AJ as a tool and philosophy which can shift understanding of our shared humanity in carceral spaces and beyond.

Introduction

> *"It (the system) wasn't built to help people who were dealing with trauma in some sort…the whole experience was one of people crossing the street to avoid seeing me because they felt so awkward about my pain. And I understand that, but you know, I couldn't help it. I was where I was, and I couldn't be where I wasn't."*
> *– Ethan's Mom, Victim's Mother, IF LIGHT CLOSED ITS EYES*

What is Artistic Justice?

The Artistic Justice Praxis: *Artistic Justice strives to create individual and community connection and healing in and around the justice system through storytelling. Artistic Justice uses the vehicle of an artistic project or process which utilizes personal storytelling or narrative as its foundation. The practitioners involved in the project must hold a willingness to heal and transform individually and systemically. Practitioners must believe that individual change and healing can lead to community and systemic healing. Additionally, this shared space and experience of the artistic process must be based in intentionally crafted spaces that support new possibilities and a willingness to travel*

through the liminal. (Chavez, Draper, Hamilton, LaBonte, Lopez, Mosley, Phillips; 2021)

Prison is a place where histories of violence and trauma reign commonplace; most incarcerated people have endured traumatic histories, including physical and/or sexual abuse, substance use, abandonment or insufficient support from families and communities, among other stressors (Maschi et al., 2015). Further, there is a known tie between *experiencing* and *perpetrating* violence – histories of violent victimization have been associated with higher levels of involvement in violent crime (Harlow, 1999). In other words, there is no denying the adage: *Hurt people hurt people*. Yet, few practices within and beyond prison walls recognize—and attend to—the shared humanity within the cycles of violence experienced before and after incarceration.

Artistic Justice (AJ) claims the criminal legal system can shift to function as a space that is aware of, respects and thus acts from an understanding of universal, shared humanity. This shift comes from being accountable to our harm and working to forgive our own, and others', harm. As authors of the AJ theory and of this article, we believe that all humans are endlessly complex, are able to transform, and are inherently redeemable. This belief, with the artistic justice process, can create a sense of hope and healing that leads to a shift in one's sense of identity, which then can impact harmful actions which are creating and perpetuating our current correctional system.

The praxis of AJ formally emerged from a unique devised, collectively-created, interview-based theatre and film project that took place from 2019-2023 within Sterling Correctional Facility (a men's maximum-security prison) in Sterling, Colorado with a group of over 100 incarcerated artists, and led by Dr. Ashley Hamilton—titled IF LIGHT CLOSED ITS EYES. As the AJ praxis founders (Chavez, Draper, Hamilton, LaBonte, Lopez, Mosley, Phillips; 2021), we were also the interview team for IF LIGHT CLOSED ITS EYES. Together, we conducted over 100 interviews with incarcerated people, prison staff, victims and survivors of harm, family members of incarcerated people and victims, district attorneys, lawyers, senators, politicians, educators, spiritual leaders and more to understand their experiences with the criminal legal system. We then spent countless more hours crafting, designing and producing an unprecedented verbatim play—

and eventual movie—from those interviews. Through this process we discovered the power of collecting and holding other people's stories and how those stories connect us to our shared humanity and complex histories. This led us to create the very first Artistic Justice workshop in 2021, which we discuss at length in this manuscript. The IF LIGHT CLOSED ITS EYES process was a rich incubator that allowed for an exploration of the American criminal legal system at a pivotal time in history, as well as a vision of possibility for corrections in the future—thus birthing the Artistic Justice praxis.

AJ is, at its heart, a combination of artistic and educational practices, storytelling work based in personal narrative, and an intentional process of creating spaces to explore our shared humanity and responsibility to each other. AJ takes place specifically in and around the criminal legal system, where it was formed and claimed. The scope of AJ, on a macro level, does intend to reshape the criminal legal system—through a process of healing, accountability, and transformation on the individual level. Although AJ was created in majority by people who are incarcerated, we would also argue that the principles of Artistic Justice are universal and instrumental in not only shaping the lives of incarcerated people, but all stakeholders in and around the criminal legal system in the United States. We see the work of AJ existing on three co-existent planes: individual accountability and healing; intentional relationship and community building; and systemic change.

Paper Aims

The purpose of this manuscript is to provide a clear understanding of the definition and scope of Artistic Justice. We will describe the inception of AJ as a concept, the translation of the AJ concept into a two-day workshop for those who live(d) and work(ed) throughout the Colorado Department of Corrections (CDOC), and a case study pretest-posttest evaluation of the first set of AJ workshops. In doing so, we wish to form a foundation for AJ model development that can illuminate the shortcomings and gaps in our understanding and provide a clear path forward for ourselves and other correctional systems to follow.

A Note on Positionality

Before we proceed, it is helpful to name our positionality as authors of this text and some of the context under which this manuscript was written. You will notice that the paper is written in both present and past tense at different moments, as well as through the voices of diverse authors. Showing these cracks is intentional to capture this passage of time, our distinct perspectives, and our respective humanity as authors. The majority of this manuscript was written in the summer of 2022 by six of our nine authors, all of whom were and are (at time of publication) incarcerated—Chavez, Draper, LaBonte, Lopez, Mosley and Phillips. The manuscript was then completed in the summer and fall of 2024 by our other three authors—Hamilton, Hammoor and Littman—none of whom have been incarcerated but are experienced prison art and education facilitators and scholars. Together, these co-authors have over three decades of experience working closely with people who are incarcerated as well as with others in other applied arts settings. They also hold advanced degrees in applied theatre, education and social work.

As the authors who are incarcerated—we are also the co-founders of the Artistic Justice Praxis with Dr. Hamilton—and we have all spent between 16 and 30 years in prison with an average of 22 years each. We all have worked for the University of Denver Prison Arts Initiative (DU PAI), as the Artistic Development Team (ADT) and directly with Dr. Ashley Hamilton, for five years. DU PAI, as a large prison-arts program, had used AJ as a part of all of its curriculum, projects, and programming. The six ADT members functioned as DU PAI staff on the inside of prison working directly with day-to-day operations of the program, as well as driving the philosophy and maintaining the ethos of DU PAI for the last several years. As part of our work tasks, we support, participate in and manage all of the modalities of artistic expression offered within DU PAI's programming including creative writing, journalism, visual and fine arts, filmmaking, podcasting, radio, theatre making, producing and editing music. As a collective, we have all been drawn to this work because in our hearts, we all believe we owe society for the wrongs we have caused, and for the trauma and impact we have created because of our harm. In this work of Artistic Justice, we find solace as well as accountability. We want to pay back a debt we know we can never repay, as well as offer opportunities for others to change thereby reducing future harm. We know it is much

more difficult to cause harm when you see the humanity of another, and our work with AJ allows for continued creation of spaces of shared humanity.

The Context and Need for Artistic Justice

There are many factors that contribute to the necessity of Artistic Justice. However, this need, and Artistic Justice itself, lives within a much larger context of the United States criminal legal system. We see the United States criminal legal system as built on a foundation of crisis and as a violation of social and moral contracts. It is no wonder then, that we would struggle so deeply as a society to address and find solutions that catalyze meaningful change and healing for those who are incarcerated and those who work within the system of incarceration—and thus for our larger community. Our current criminal justice system is built on a complex mix of well-intentioned and ill-conceived notions. Its inherent immensity, danger and fragility make it a very difficult system to take apart and re-evaluate. These systems have been studied, litigated and designed over hundreds of years, but rarely if ever in collaboration with those on the inside who are serving time and being impacted by the system itself. We want to acknowledge both the work of those well-intentioned devotees to the difficult problem of rehabilitation and corrections as well as address a system that still has some tainted bones in the skeleton of its makeup. Here are a few of the issues we see, as part of the larger context, which point to the need for a new approach:

Mass Incarceration. At present, almost 2 million people are confined in the United States, inclusive of state prisons, local jails, federal prisons and jails, immigration detention, involuntary commitment, and youth incarceration (Sawyer & Wagner, 2022)—this phenomenon is often referred to as *mass incarceration*. Mass incarceration has awarded the United States the title of *leader in incarceration*, by incarcerating more people per capita than any other country in the world, thus creating fault lines in our economy and an aging prison population from survivors of decades of incarceration (Maschi, 2015; The Sentencing Project, 2021). Further, residents are often underserved within the facilities due to overcrowding, and system-impacted individuals often wait to enter

into the prison system from county jails across the country (American Civil Liberties Union, 2015). This only foretells the worsening conditions contributing to an already troubled criminal legal system. In our view, the laws U.S. society has constructed around crime and punishment are suffocating our humanity. Our laws do not incorporate our human ability to change, to heal, and to share with each other in that healing when we work together.

Recidivism. Recidivism, defined as a return to prison after release, in our home state of Colorado is around 50% within three years of initial release (Colorado Division of Criminal Justice, 2022). Recidivism rates in Colorado—and across the United States—contribute to the cycle of mass incarceration, and illustrate that prison—as it presently stands—is insufficient in preparing those incarcerated for return to society. We believe that changing the culture of prison environments creates possibility for self, and community healing.

Correctional Staffing Issues. Understanding experiences of correctional staff is vital to understanding systems of incarceration; correctional staff have the ability to directly impact the lives of those incarcerated, each other, and the families they return to every night. Through the type of interactions they have, or are empowered to have, they make a huge difference in opportunities for rehabilitation and healing.

Around the country we are seeing staffing shortages that create disruptions in every facilities day to day functions and make prison more dangerous (Blakinger et al, 2021). Just from 2019 to 2022 there was a 10% drop in staffing in state correctional facilities across the United States, with some states seeing much larger declines (The Marshall Project, 2024). The functions of correctional facilities are built to maintain control and safety, first and foremost. With staff shortages, meaningful programming and educational freedoms begin to suffer. Even the individual case plans to help residents progress out of the system begin to disintegrate, in our experience. An example would be that of a Case Manager who would normally serve residents at every stage of incarceration, starting with entry into the facility to the necessary

steps for progression, all the way up to reentry into society—no longer being able to do those tasks because that case manager is called to simply “operate” the prison so that it can function. When this happens, re-entry and rehabilitative measures fall by the wayside.

Literature Review: Foundations of Artistic Justice

While the concept of Artistic Justice is novel, it draws upon important historical lineages which are helpful to outline here: restorative justice practices, relationships between those who live and work in prisons, and prison arts programming more broadly which we will discuss in more detail. We want to specifically honor the prison art and prison education scholars and practitioners from across the globe who have come before us, whose work we have learned from and whose shoulders we stand on including the work of Katherine Vokins at Rehabilitation through the Arts, Michael Balfour, Nancy Smithner and Nicole Fleetwood at New York University, James Thompson and so many others.

Restorative Justice

Restorative justice (RJ) comprises a constellation of practices which transform our social understanding of ‘crime’ and ‘punishment,’ including facilitated dialogue (e.g., Victim Offender Dialogue), circle practices, and at times, offers of apologies and/or material exchanges between those who harm and are harmed (Menkel-Meadow, 2007). While restorative processes have been around for centuries—and are often embedded in spiritual and community-based practices across the globe (especially in Indigenous communities across the globe)—RJ has been gaining traction as an alternative to retributive justice practices in the Global West since the 1970’s (Marsh, 2019). At their core, RJ practices aim to repair harm, restore relationships, and offer opportunities for reintegration into community for both those who harm and are harmed. Recognizing that we are all human—and thus all have the capacity to cause harm—RJ centers relationships over procedural justice processes, in opposition to harsh and punitive practices which prioritize punishment over rehabilitation and repair.

Most often, engaging in RJ practices involves direct

communication between those who harm and have been harmed, as often seen in circle practices and Victim Offender Dialogues. AJ extends beyond these bounds to include symbolic (i.e., non-literal) representations of those engaged in harm or conflict, relying on archetypal versus personal relationships in repairing harm. In the case of AJ, this includes the relationships between those who live and work in prison settings, and the use of narratives and storytelling to build connections and relational possibility between two groups who have historically experienced (at best) distance and (at worse) distress and suffering when coming into contact.

Relationships between Incarcerated Individuals and Correctional Staff

Incarcerated individuals and correctional staff have few opportunities to connect with one another outside of (or beyond) their roles in carceral settings, which—alongside the power relations ingrained in such roles—creates a recipe for relational distress. Ample research within the study of intergroup relations has shown that people view their own 'in-groups' as more human than other groups (see: Haslam & Bain, 2007; Leyens et al., 2001; Viki et al., 2006, among others), sometimes even using uniquely human words (e.g., person) to refer to 'in-group' member, and animal-like words (e.g., creature) to describe 'outgroup' members (Viki et al., 2006). Research has even shown that individuals view themselves as having more 'human' traits than other people (Haslam & Bain, 2007), posing grave implications for the treatment of perceived 'outgroup' members.

In seeking to offset such dehumanization, Bain and colleagues sought to test the *contact hypothesis*—which suggests that face-to-face encounters between socially/psychologically distant groups may reduce prejudice and inter-group hostility (Allport, 1954)—to understand whether contact may mitigate dehumanization. They found that higher quality of contact among correctional staff was associated with less dehumanization and punitiveness towards incarcerated individuals (Bain et al., 2013). Further, when correctional staff 'buy in' to meaningful experiences of contact with incarcerated individuals they also tend to experience a shift in their sense of purpose and value in relationship to their work. This can create opportunities for a more positive work culture and even decreases cases of violence within the facility. And, when incarcerated individuals are able to share their

stories with those who hold power in carceral settings it allows those leaders to make more informed, thoughtful and even more humanistic decisions, while also creating a greater sense of autonomy for the residents. As such, opportunities to engage in meaningful face-to-face encounters—such as the AJ workshops—may offer promising alternatives to the dehumanization and distance often experienced by those who live and work in prison.

Prison Arts Programming

The arts have a long history in prison settings. As early as the 1800s and early 1900s, incarcerated people across the U.S. organized peer-led arts programming, such as music, performance, storytelling, and creative writing. Today, incarcerated artists are creating powerful art problematizing mass incarceration and elevating the human experience of isolation and punishment (Fleetwood, 2020). The prison arts movement has also been linked to the acceleration of critical consciousness through liberatory education, entangling with degree-granting and non-degree-granting liberal arts programs.

While prison arts practices and programs have been prevalent for over a century, a more limited body of research has documented the outcomes associated with participating in prison arts programs. Members of our own writing team (Littman & Sliva, 2020) have analyzed this body of work; we find that there are four main domains of outcomes associated with participation in prison arts programs: social emotional outcomes, educational and vocational outcomes, disciplinary outcomes, and community and policy outcomes. Participants also evidence social emotional outcomes such as social connections and relationships, such as building trust with one another and trusting environments (Marie Heard et al., 2013, Dunphy, 1999), empathy between other incarcerated individuals and community members (Albertson, 2015; Miner-Romanoff, 2016), and developing communication and collaboration skills (Tett et al., 2012; Marie Heard et al., 2013). However, no known work has explored the potential of arts in building connections between incarcerated individuals and correctional staff. AJ offers a framework and set of practices which draw upon the potential of both restorative and artistic practices to build connection and offset the dehumanization omnipresent in carceral settings.

Methods: Developing Artistic Justice

As previously mentioned, the theory and practice of Artistic Justice was born and grown from a devised theatre project and process entitled IF LIGHT CLOSED ITS EYES. IF LIGHT CLOSED ITS EYES is an interview-based play and movie created by the ADT, Dr. Hamilton and several other incarcerated artists at Sterling Correctional Facility, a maximum-security prison, which is the largest prison facility in the state of Colorado. This project officially began in November of 2019 with a team of nearly 50 incarcerated artists. When the COVID-19 pandemic began in early 2020, like many prisons across the United States, the entirety of Sterling Correctional Facility was locked down for extended periods of time. The ADT was quarantined in the same cell house in the prison and thus were given a unique chance to focus the project, by necessity and happenstance. During that period of extended lockdown, our incarcerated members of the IF LIGHT CLOSED ITS EYES interview team (and eventually co-founders of AJ) were able to meet on a limited basis in their cell house, and at times in a programs building, and work on the project by setting up interviews with other incarcerated people, correctional staff and with others outside of the prison via virtual meetings—through Dr. Hamilton and CDOC staff support. From summer 2020 through spring 2021, the team was able to conduct over 100 interviews with a diverse group of people from every perspective and experience of the criminal legal system. This was a deeply impactful, transformative, emotional and powerful experience for the team. Together, we were able to bear witness to the power of people's deep truths and stories about their experiences with the correctional system, but also about other aspects of their humanity—from their relationship to their own identity, to their experience with accountability, responsibility, hope and healing. These interviews awoke something deep within our incarcerated interview team, and in Dr. Hamilton—creating "a reckoning of souls" through the lens of others' experiences. From that large interview experience, our team felt a deep need to share what we had learned from those rich, impactful interviews and to attempt to translate their power into culture change for the system as a whole.

In early spring of 2021, the ADT, with Dr. Hamilton's guidance, began to create an arts-based, educational curriculum for a two-day workshop that was based upon our findings from our interviews, as well as exploring the theme "buckets" that were designed by our initial

team of 50 incarcerated artists at the very start of the project. The theme buckets were chosen after a devising workshop process led by Dr. Hamilton in late 2019/early 2020, leading the team through a process of distilling our topics for our interviews and creation of the larger projects content. These buckets explored the themes of 1) Identity and Self Knowledge, 2) Systems and Environments, 3) Accountability and Responsibility, 4) Forgiveness and Redemption, 5) Hope and Healing and 6) Transformation and Care.

During our interview process, we interviewed several correctional officers, and other CDOC staff, and found that the experience of speaking with and getting to know correctional staff and their experiences in the system was deeply transformative and meaningful—creating that sense of shared humanity—for those on "both sides of the line." Thus, our 2-day AJ workshop curriculum was created to intentionally allow for interaction between the incarcerated population and CDOC staff (particularly for line staff who have a bulk of the daily interactions with inmates in the course of their regular work duties). We were in a system which breeds hostile environments but the prevailing thought in the ADT, from our experiences, was that experiencing the humanity of those normally perceived as the "other side" could begin to affect the culture of the facilities experiencing the workshop. As we knew anecdotally and through prior research on prison arts programming, the arts can create an environment that leads a person to a healthier path of identity and self-knowledge.

The workshop curriculum was completed in the summer of 2021 and was first facilitated at Sterling Correctional Facility as a pilot workshop. The 2-day workshop was co-facilitated by the ADT and Dr. Hamilton. The over 40 participants of the workshop, both incarcerated people and staff, were selected through a voluntary application process. There were pre-and post- workshop surveys distributed and filled out voluntarily and anonymously, with a participant-selected identifier for comparison of the changes in attitude and perspective.

After the initial workshop at Sterling Correctional Facility, the ADT and Dr. Hamilton immediately could sense that the workshop was powerful and had created something impactful for the participants. Bringing over 40 correctional staff and incarcerated people into the same room for a 2-day workshop is a "radical" act in and of itself, but then exploring the themes of the workshop, through an arts-based and storytelling activities, had created a transformative and healing

container for almost everyone present, from our perspective. While reflecting on the initial workshop, we had a few strong first takeaways:

1) Change comes back to building relationships.
2) We have to be willing to help *everyone* who is willing to listen, as well as those who do not even know there is a need *to* listen.
3) We re-discovered that we are all connected in some way or another.
4) It is not easy getting people to see themselves as the best version of themselves.
5) It takes being intentional in getting to know a person in every facet.
6) Incarcerated people are not the only ones who are "broken"—we re-discovered that everyone is "broken" to some degree or another.

With these learnings, and the success of the first workshop, the ADT and Dr. Hamilton went "on tour" around the state of Colorado for the summer and fall of 2021—bringing the AJ workshop to eleven prison facilities across CDOC, and to almost 300 incarcerated people and correctional staff. As each workshop was conducted, the pre- and post-workshop surveys were offered and completed on a voluntary basis. What the ADT and Dr. Hamilton discovered and re-discovered during the experience of facilitating this curriculum a dozen times was the power of art to create the liminal space necessary for growth and healing in even the most complex of circumstances. As defined, Artistic Justice involves an intentional act of art and storytelling as the stage, or aesthetic element, to produce the liminal space. It is in that space that we realized art creates the power and agency for change, as well as the power to affect people that were not involved in the artistic process itself. It is because of these qualities that, with our shared humanity, we can learn to provide more opportunities for real care for self and for others. It is this assertion that we put words to after a time of reflection and contemplation upon the completion of the workshop tour, leading our team to begin discussions of defining Artistic Justice in a more formal way.

The ADT and Dr. Hamilton realized after hours of discussion and reflection that we had been practicing the tenets of AJ well before we

actually grasped that AJ was a definable entity. And, that our immersion into this process, into the prison culture—as facilitator or participant, staff or inmate—proved to not be a hindrance to the experience; instead it was possibly our greatest strength as we were only able to discern the momentous effects the practice of AJ had due to the extreme circumstance of our shared experiences.

It is also important to note the challenges, complexity and some of the moments of resistance that occurred during the process of the AJ workshop tour. On a micro level, the realities of organizing the logistics of this workshop across twelve prison facilities (several of which were maximum security facilities), with almost 300 participants, and six currently incarcerated co-facilitators was extremely complicated. Dr. Hamilton and the ADT organized much of the logistics of the tour as a team, with the helpful support of Noah Toops, a CDOC staff member at the time. From announcing the workshop to the various prisons, gathering interest and applications from both incarcerated folks and CDOC staff across the sites, reviewing applications, communicating acceptance and details to participants, setting up space for the workshops, clearing staff's time to attend the workshop, clearing unique arts-based materials with the prisons, and managing the ADT's schedule and needs on tour (including moving the team of six from prison to prison with their needed belongings across the state multiple times—an unprecedented ask and occurrence) Dr. Hamilton sent quite literally thousands of emails. Dr. Hamilton and the ADT worked 12-14 hour days, daily during that period of time to manage logistics, the workshop itself, to reflect on each facility's needs—as well as to process the ADT's experience. Dr. Hamilton lived in motels and hotels across the state of Colorado for over a month "on tour" and even drove behind the prison van that carried the ADT in restraints from prison to prison.

Additionally, to speak to the challenges on a macro level of the system—we were introducing an intervention, the AJ Workshop, into our current day prison system with its centuries old model, norms and beliefs. And, our antidote was not only arts-based—which is unique enough, but was co-facilitated by incarcerated people (to CDOC staff—again, unprecedented), and was proposing the idea that no matter what side "of the line" you are on, we have shared humanity—asking CDOC staff to open up and be vulnerable with their experiences in life and work. "Radical" might be an understatement, given the context of

the space, time and system we were in. Our team continually experienced push back from CDOC staff and facilities over our work in small and big ways—both Dr. Hamilton and the ADT—experienced hurtful comments, pushback and intentional road blocks to their work during the process. Although, it is important to note that those experiences of resistance rarely (if ever) came from participants in the workshop, but were generally experienced outside the workshop space. However, those negative experiences were only a drop in the pond compared to the joy, connection, healing and transformation we witnessed emerge during this experience.

Case Study Findings: Implementing Artistic Justice

Data Collection

In presenting the possibilities of AJ, it is helpful to share findings from the pre- and post-workshop surveys collected at the AJ workshops in summer and fall 2021. For acceptance into the workshop, there was no pre-qualifying criteria other than the participants needed to somehow be involved in the criminal legal system as staff/administrators or incarcerated residents of CDOC facilities, and had to identify as interested in shifting the criminal legal system in some way. The applications were reviewed by the ADT, Dr. Hamilton, and each individual CDOC facility programs staff. In all, the ADT and Dr. Hamilton facilitated the AJ workshop to a total of 285 correctional staff, support staff and incarcerated persons across the twelve CDOC facilities. Roughly half of participants were CDOC staff, and half were incarcerated individuals.

At each workshop, the ADT distributed pre- and post-workshop surveys to each participant (with the exception of one facility due to administrative oversight). We reassured attendees that participation was completely voluntary and anonymous. Participants were asked to rate a series of statements at pre-and post-test time points on a Likert scale ranging between 1 and 7, measuring constructs such as empathy, sense of purpose, sense of community, hope, and relation to harm and repair. Participants were also asked to provide written open-ended responses to the following questions: *What, if anything, changed for you as a result of taking this workshop? What was the most meaningful moment in this workshop for you?*

Data Analysis

Quantitative Analysis. Of the 285 workshop participants, between 187 and 224 of the participants reported answers to both pre and post-test questions that we were able to match. Our DU PAI evaluation team used a paired samples *t*-test to analyze the differences between the mean values on each question and pretest and posttest, as shown in Table 1 (pp. 81-82).

Qualitative Analysis. Our DU PAI evaluation team analyzed qualitative open response questions using content analysis as described by Hseih & Shannon (2005), which included inductively creating categories after immersion in qualitative responses to the two listed questions. We conducted two rounds of coding – open coding to first create a comprehensive set of categories, then a second round of coding to combine the open coding categories into three themes per question, which comprehensively encapsulate our qualitative findings

Quantitative Findings

Table 1 outlines the results of the paired samples *t*-tests. Of the 11 questions which were asked at both pretest and posttest, 10 were statistically significant—nine at the <0.001 level, and one at the <0.05 level. As such, there is compelling evidence that participating in the AJ workshop is associated with feeling *closer with those participating in the workshop, a sense of purpose in daily life, feeling like a community member of the institution, empathy for incarcerated individuals and correctional staff (being able to imagine what others are thinking), feeling heard by incarcerated people and correctional staff, recognizing there are things one can do to repair harm in one's community, feeling a need to make amends,* and *feeling a sense of hope for the future*. While participants were more likely to endorse the perspective that they *have ways to process what they are thinking and feeling* after participating in the workshop, this item was not statistically significant.

Table 1. Pre and post AJ survey values, and paired samples t-test results (mean N=219)

	Pre-workshop		Post-workshop			
Item	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	*t*	*p*
Of the people in this workshop, I feel close to...	3.53	1.29	5.01	1.41	-10.69	<0.001***
I feel like I have a sense of purpose in my day-to-day life	5.99	1.12	6.20	1.03	-1.98	0.049**
I feel like a community member of this institution	5.07	1.60	5.71	1.26	-4.49	<0.001***
I have ways to process what I am thinking and feeling	5.93	1.07	6.07	0.96	-1.47	0.14
I can imagine what incarcerated people at [facility] must be feeling	4.41	1.67	5.32	1.39	-6.174	<0.001***
I can imagine what correctional staff at [facility] must be feeling	4.27	1.83	5.28	1.43	-618	<0.001***

Table 1. Pre and post AJ survey values, and paired samples t-test results (mean N=219) [cont.]

	Pre-workshop		Post-workshop			
Item	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	*t*	*p*
I feel heard by incarcerated people	4.71	1.38	5.44	1.25	-5.98	<0.001***
I feel heard by correctional staff	4.02	1.57	5.16	1.33	-8.142	<0.001***
There are things I can do to help repair harm that has happened in my community	5.65	1.29	6.14	1.06	-4.45	<0.001***
Personally, there are people I need to make amends to	4.94	2.04	5.73	1.61	-4.57	<0.001***
I have a sense of hope for the future	6.08	1.28	6.36	0.97	-2.71	0.01***

***indicates significant at the .05 level*
****indicates significance at the .01 level*

Qualitative Findings

At the post-test, participants were asked: *what, if anything, changed for you as a result of taking this workshop?* And, *what was the most meaningful moment in this workshop for you?* When sharing about what changed as a result of participating in the workshop, participants described how they *gained perspective of oneself, others, and the (criminal justice) system*, the recognition that *change is possible*, and how they learned about the *potential of forgiveness.* When sharing about the most meaningful workshop elements, participants described a sense of *trust to be real with each other*, the fact that *blue and green can come together* (describing the colors worn by correctional officers, and incarcerated individuals, respectively)*, and impactful workshop elements*—the letter of forgiveness, and sharing a meal together. Table 2 (pp. 84-85) outlines the key themes we identified within the qualitative responses, as well as participant quotes which represent each theme.

Table 2. Qualitative themes	
What, if anything, changed for you as a result of taking this workshop?	
Gained perspective of oneself, others, and the (criminal justice) system	"Ultimately my perspective. I can see light in things that felt dark. I see approachability in people who seemed untouchable." "Perhaps my perception that there are entrenched and malignant forces in this prison is misplaced. I will need to reframe my points of reference.
Change is possible	"How similar we all are. Developing relationships with others is the foundation of change." "This workshop cast the vision of what culture change looks like by inviting staff & offenders to a safe space for conversation. The conversations were what changed people. Gave me a lot of hope & also confidence in the daily exchanges with people & the cumulative impact."
The potential of forgiveness	"I was able to address the idea of forgiveness and begin the process of healing" "I'll be paying more attention to forgiveness"
What was the most meaningful moment in this workshop for you?	
Trust to be real with each other	"Seeing grown men moved to tears. Showing how vulnerable and weak we are shows how beautiful and strong we are because at that moment you are original." "Being able to be myself. Also, seeing other strong minded men being able to break down emotional walls."
Blue and green can come together	"Connecting and sharing and listening, to others, feeling their pain, understanding their struggles, and focusing on their healing instead of being so selfish and thinking only of myself" "I like that blue and green can come together"

Table 2. Qualitative themes [cont.]	
Impactful workshop elements	*Letter of forgiveness* • "When I read my partners letter back to him. He was talking about his children and how he is there for them because of his mistakes. It made me [realize] that I take for granted being able to just see and hug my children every day. • "When I read my forgiveness letter to a staff member. I could see that he saw the humanity in me and we weren't that different" *Having a meal together* • "Its super [simple] just eating with staff members gave me the biggest expression of hope. It let me know that we can get along"

Discussion

Through our shared experiences of living and creating Artistic Justice, and now naming it, we believe it is an important addition to the canon of prison arts work for several reasons. The co-creation process of coming to know and claim Artistic Justice between incarcerated people, scholars and correctional staff is a unique offering to the literature. It is a model that is applicable to the full spectrum of experience across the criminal legal system. So often, incarcerated people are not able to claim their own need for the system they are forced to exist in. AJ shifts this dynamic.

The blend of key elements that create the praxis of AJ—an artistic project, narrative storytelling, willingness to heal and intentional space—are a particularly special recipe that has proven, for us, to be life altering for our relationship to identity, accountability, forgiveness and healing—all themes that are threaded into the fabric of the criminal legal system yet rarely explored intentionally. And, the AJ belief that individual change and healing leads to larger community and system healing is vital to a culture change in our criminal legal system, yet is so rarely explored thoughtfully in our experience. Artistic Justice is a

unique container for vital, intense work.

Additionally, Artistic Justice has the ability to complement long-held and practiced restorative justice practices in and around the criminal legal system, that are powerful, healing and transformative for those who participate in them. However, the addition of AJ's use of an artistic project as a vehicle by which to create such healing allows for a similar experience to that of restorative justice, but has the potential to be more palatable for the participant(s) due to the aesthetic distance of the art. The artistic vehicle can allow for a level of safety in an incredibly unsafe environment for the similar work of restorative justice to be expanded upon.

Lastly, Artistic Justice is uniquely created for every human that is connected to the criminal legal system—not just for incarcerated people, correctional staff, victims or legal teams—but rather AJ is a praxis that can be used to impact any and everyone who is touched by the system. A system that is riddled with violence and trauma, for all parties who encounter it. Because the AJ praxis was born of holding so many complex stories, across so many identities and perspectives, it can also continue to hold that same complexity as a model.

Next Steps for Artistic Justice

Because of the success of the AJ workshop tour, the ADT, Dr Hamilton and co-author Dr. Hammoor, were asked in the spring of 2022 to collaborate with the CDOC to bring the praxis of Artist Justice to an unprecedented, first in the United States, project. They were asked to vision, design and co-create a new model for corrections in the United States—The Beacon at Skyline: A Correctional Community (The Beacon) in Canyon City, Colorado. Together, with CDOC staff, the team was asked to use their experiences with Artistic Justice to inform the creation of a new minimum correctional facilities structure and everyday practices. The Beacon would operate in a new, innovative, progressive way in its everyday operations, programming structure, re-entry services, visiting structure and more—with AJ as a foundation for its creation. The Artistic Justice ethos, projects and workshops would be a core part of The Beacon's model. The Beacon at Skyline: A Correctional Community officially opened to incarcerated residents, with its new model, in January of 2023 with Chavez, Draper, LaBonte, Lopez, Mosley Phillips, Dr. Hamilton and Dr. Hammoor as co-founders

and leaders of the facility.

Additionally, in the fall of 2022 the ADT created their first “train the trainer” process for other incarcerated leaders across the CDOC—training fellow incarcerated participants to be able to eventually conduct their own AJ workshops and projects at their respective prison facilities.

Conclusion

We believe Artistic Justice can be a new model for our correctional system. Through the experience of creating IF LIGHT CLOSED ITS EYES, which created the Artistic Justice workshop and praxis, we came to know that there is great potential to positively impact and cultivate change within our criminal justice for both incarcerated people and correctional staff. Our experiences, as incarcerated artists and as prison art educators and scholars, have shown us time and time again that our shared humanity is universal. And, one of the greatest ways we have to access that sense of shared humanity is through an artistic process that involves narrative storytelling. Through holding a willingness to share our individual stories with others in an intentional fashion, within a holding of an artistic project or process, we embarked on the journey of healing not only for ourselves, but also for our larger community.

Creating intentional space and opportunity for arts practice and storytelling creates new possibilities for healing and transformation, which can create systemic culture change. Although our whole team has lived and worked in correctional spaces for decades, it has been through the practice of Artistic Justice we have brought into the light what was in the dark for so long in our individual journeys with the system. And, because of these life changing experiences with Artistic Justice we now choose every day, in every encounter, to explore healing and shared humanity—a way of being that we argue is the most meaningful, transformative and life giving way to live and work in the criminal legal system.

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AUTHOR BIOGRAPHIES

George Chavez, Andrew Draper, Matthew LaBonte, Angel Lopez, Terry W. Mosley Jr. and Brett Phillips are the co-authors who are incarcerated—and are also the co-founders of the Artistic Justice Praxis and The Beacon at Skyline Facility with Dr. Hamilton. Each co-author has spent between 16 and 30 years in prison with an average of 22 years each and all are still incarcerated at the time of publication. Each co-author worked for the University of Denver Prison Arts Initiative (DU PAI) for years, as part of the Artistic Development Team, and functioned as DU PAI staff on the inside of prison working directly with day-to-day operations of the program, as well as driving the philosophy and maintaining the ethos of DU PAI across the state of Colorado. As part of their work tasks, they have created, managed and participated in all of the modalities of artistic expression offered within DU PAI's programming including creative writing, journalism, visual and fine arts, filmmaking, podcasting, radio, theatre making, producing and editing music. The co-authors are writers, poets, performers, producers, photographers, dancers, chefs, mentors, philosophers, leaders, teachers, fathers, brothers, sons and full of humanity.

Dr. Ashley Hamilton, Dr. Clare Hammoor and Dr. Danielle Littman have never been incarcerated but are experienced prison art and education facilitators and scholars. Together, these co-authors have over three decades of experience working closely with people who are incarcerated as well as with others in other applied arts settings. They also hold advanced degrees in applied theatre, education and social work. They are writers, directors, dancers, performers, gardeners, chefs, teachers, philosophers, mentors and full of humanity.

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In Rashad's Shoes: Facilitating Peer Relationships Through Drama Education

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ABSTRACT

This article explores complexities faced by drama educators striving to cultivate meaningful relationships across diverse cultures. It specifically addresses the research question: In what ways may participating in a drama education program affect the development of peer relationships between diverse young people? *The study employed aspects of action research, case study, and feminist methodologies, conducted through an eight-week drama education program with up to 40 culturally diverse young people. It examined the various challenges and experiences encountered by students in forming and maintaining reciprocal culturally diverse peer relationships. The findings indicate that drama experiences emphasizing ensemble building, relationships*

of trust, and devising were associated with fostering friendships in a culturally diverse student population. This research provides important insights for educators and artists reimagining arts engagement strategies for marginalized youth.

In November 2019, Rashad[1], an eleven-year-old refugee from South Sudan—the youngest in the group of participants—sat with other workshop participants and Tahnee in Perth, Western Australia, and shared a harrowing personal story with those participants in a drama workshop. He recounted:

> *I was being chased by two older men in a park near my house. I zig-zagged this way and that, trying to get away and then catch my breath. The men split up. They came at me from different directions and caught me by my feet. So, I tried to pull my feet out of my shoes to escape them. That didn't work. I was like a fish caught in a net of these men's bodies. They were shouting and swearing in a language I didn't know. My brother eventually caught up and pulled hard at the hair of one of the attackers. The guy stopped fighting, and they both ran away.*

Rashad, bright and cheeky but reserved at times, wriggled in his spot and awkwardly smiled. The stuffy atmosphere in the room seemed to be holding its breath. This moment felt prickly given the seriousness of Rashad's disclosure. Other groups around the room stopped their chatter to hear his story. An Afghan teen, Omar, placed a hand on Rashad's shoulder in a comforting gesture.

As facilitator of this drama workshop and the associated action research project, Tahnee became aware of the eyes in the room darting to Rashad's oversized, scuffed sneakers. Some of Rashad's peers hesitantly smiled along with him. We were no longer simply listening to a story; we were feeling Rashad's story with him. Within this strong affective moment, a pathway to devised drama was opened. The potential for understanding and connection was growing

[1] Names have been changed to maintain participant anonymity.

from the purposeful use of storytelling as a drama process to build trust and develop empathy. The symbol of shoes that Rashad repeated throughout his retelling provided a metaphoric shared point of entry for participants, underpinning the symbolic potential of drama to represent experience.

The research project associated with Rashad and his peers explored one particular context for drama educators: teaching drama in diverse cultural contexts wherein several groups may exist alongside one another but don't necessarily meaningfully interact. This issue has become more pressing in times of globalisation, dislocation and lack of connected belonging (Wright & Down, 2021). In the post-Covid era, wherein cultural diversity and globalisation are topics of acute public interest, the idea of relationship development and bridging across cultures is particularly relevant. Since 2020, Dovchin reports, racism against people from culturally and linguistically different and Indigenous backgrounds, both in Australia and overseas, has increased at an alarming rate (2020).

While deeply concerning, the rise in racist incidents is perhaps unsurprising, given that racism is a deeply entrenched systemic problem in Australian society (Gatwiri et al., 2021). The lack of work and study opportunities and the interpersonal difficulties experienced by new migrants to Australia (Li et al., 2016) also contributed to the study's rationale, which involved adolescents from refugee backgrounds.

In the context of the issues underpinning the study, this project specifically addressed the question: *In what ways may participating in a drama education program affect the development of peer relationships between diverse young people?* Drawing on an eight-week drama program in an informal community context, the project explored, through drama, the experiences of a diverse group of adolescents. Conceived from the first author's desire to better understand the young people with whom she worked in an educational context, the project sought to engage these young people in an embodied exploration of how feelings, experiences and culture affect successful engagement in both arts and friendship. Drama, as a site for such an inquiry, contains the possibility of hope (Wright et al., 2022) and how intercultural understanding can be animated through the aesthetic and relational ways of being (Greene, 1992).

Recognising that researchers' worldviews profoundly affect

research topic, design, and interpretation (Denzin & Lincoln, 2008), the research question, and the broader topics of drama education, friendship and cultural diversity, reflected both personal and professional 'lenses'. Our experiences as arts teachers, for example, have consistently highlighted the pervasive effects of healthy (and unhealthy) peer relationships, particularly during adolescence, when identity is shaped and explored (Pfeifer & Berkman, 2018). We shared the view that performing arts and cultural inclusion in schools are critical issues, personally and professionally. We noted that students from minority cultural groups face exclusion from social and learning-related tasks, and articulated feelings of isolation, which they perceived as a result of their cultural differences. This study consequently focuses on these issues generally and culturally diverse friendships specifically, and examines the potential of drama therein.

Overview of the Literature

The study fits within the fields of cultural and educational research. The literature review considered three research areas: first, drama education focusing on cultural awareness and the elements of building ensemble, relationships of trust, and devising; second, adolescent friendship and the significance of friendship quality; and third, cultural diversity itself.

The Roles of Drama Education

In ascertaining the role of drama education in developing culturally diverse friendship, we concentrated on how cultural awareness is connected to expressive developmental and social pedagogical purposes or 'social aesthetics' (Born et al., 2017). Similarly, ensemble building, relationships of trust building, and devising exercises provided specific lenses on social pedagogical and aesthetic cognitive learning (Georgina et al., 2017). We also explored the idea that drama provides enduring qualities of respect where the imagination is released and participants taken beyond themselves, resulting in learning language, personal development, interpersonal relationships, and aesthetic understanding (Wright, 2017; Wright & Pascoe, 2015). This understanding of drama played a role in providing a collaborative pathway towards culturally diverse friendship for Rashad and his peers

in this project. We now turn to these drama processes themselves.

Cultural Awareness

Some forms of drama, such as Boal's Theatre of the Oppressed, are specifically designed to encourage social and cultural activism and subvert political agendas (Boal, 1979). Boal's techniques have been employed worldwide to address power relations between diverse sociocultural groups. Boal also addresses theatre's ability to recognise sameness between people from vastly different cultural settings, asserting that 'they are all, like me, just human beings' (2002, p.2). This perspective is particularly relevant to the study, as the researchers utilised Boal's work as a basis to encourage culturally diverse students to both acknowledge and transcend their differences while recognising the power struggles they face (Wright, 2020). Likewise, Logie et al. (2021) integrated Theatre of the Oppressed techniques into discussions around sensitive topics to empower refugee youth in Uganda to take collective action against social issues. This process aligns with findings from Sloane and Wallin (2013), who noted that methods such as Forum Theatre and Image Theatre provided former refugee youth with opportunities to address community challenges collaboratively, enhancing their sense of belonging in a diverse group. Additionally, a case study by Carter and Sallis (2016) demonstrated the effectiveness of participatory storytelling in helping young people to view diverse cultures as valuable resources.

Building Ensemble

A second key feature of participating in drama is the potential for drama activities to build a sense of ensemble where participants work together, emphasising the success of the collective rather than the individual. Unsurprisingly, Ensemble theatre is often linked with democracy and democratic processes (Neelands, 2009) and is described by Kitchen (2020) as being closely linked to a sense of 'family' where participants are encouraged to think in 'socially hopeful' ways (2020, p.385). Understanding 'ensemble pedagogy' highlights the values of student diversity and democracy over the deficit models of class, race and culture sometimes enacted in educational contexts and was thus an important element of drama to consider in this study.

Relationships of Trust

A key feature of both friendship and drama is trust. In the context of the research, it has been established that trust is generally stronger within ethnic groups than between them (Rydgren et al., 2013). Therefore, it was an important area to consider. Research by Neelands and Nelson (2013) involving 18 ethnically diverse teenage students reported that all participants experienced increased feelings of trust, cooperation, altruism, and empathy after the completion of drama exercises and performances involving the entire ensemble. Underscoring the reciprocal relationship between trust and drama, Thorkelsdottir's more recent research found that drama skills can be strengthened through drama experiences that involve trusting relationships (2022).

Devising

More often than not, devising is a group activity that challenges the notion of the solitary creative artist (Mermikides & Smart, 2012, p.1); hence, it is significant to this study's focus on the relationality and collaborative nature of drama. The original creation of drama is linked with the context of people involved and the space in which it happens because in devising participants make visible the relationships between themselves and their situation (Perry et al., 2013). Devising is also a practice often linked with building a sense of democracy because it can "build community, and counter individualism" (Wessels, 2012, p.56). Hallewas (2019) builds on this idea in her devised theatre project, asserting that it can also catalyse young people to attempt to make social change.

As a tool for fostering community in drama education, devising is not, however, without its limitations. As Wessels (2011) highlights, the process is inherently shaped by the politically charged dynamics of silencing and privileging of speech. Particularly in drama contexts that demand sameness, certain voices may dominate while others remain marginalised, challenging the notion of a collaborative community. Gallagher (2007) emphasises that fostering a democratic drama community should begin with recognising difference and encourage the acceptance of conflict as a constructive element of devising. Similarly, Grady (2001) highlights the need to acknowledge and engage with the complex and diverse identities of youth theatre participants, ensuring that their unique perspectives inform and enrich the creative process. This work was particularly relevant to the social

justice goals of the authors' study, complementing Boal's (2002) view that, despite the depth of our differences, humans share a fundamental commonality.

Adolescent Peer Relationships

As our research dealt closely with friendship, a relationship that scholars have argued is one of the most important features of adolescence (Brown & Larson, 2009; Waldrip et al., 2008), it is important to highlight the factors that are believed to constitute 'quality' in friendship. In reviewing the literature, seven key features of culturally diverse friendship were identified and informed the study, including *trust* (Rawlins, 1992), *tolerance* (Carter & Sallis, 2016), *empathy* (Eisenberg & Fabes, 1990), *communication* (Selfhout et al., 2009), *conflict resolution* (Burgos-Cienfuegos et al., 2015), *intercultural learning* (UNESCO World Commission on Culture and Development, 1996), and *sameness and difference* (Salas et al., 2018). Importantly, as the study progressed, the participants identified three further meaningful features of friendship: *familiarity, support and fun*. These ten features of culturally diverse friendship were analysed throughout the eight-week study and acted as markers analogous to the quality of participants' friendships.

Of further significance is drama's ability to build and mend adolescent relationships. O'Toole and Burton's (2009) longitudinal research into the role of process drama and forum theatre in managing bullying, for example, indicated significant changes in bullies' and bystanders' attitudes following their action research project, leading to some participants developing friendships with peers by whom they were initially intimidated.

Cultural Diversity

Culture is an important concept in this study but is understood differently by theorists. For example, Hall provides two seminal descriptions of culture and cultural identity. The first is "a collective 'one true self' … which many people with a shared history and ancestry hold in common", which presents cultural identity as largely fixed (Hall & Ghazoul, 2012, p.223). The second is "the different ways we are positioned by, and position ourselves within, the narratives of the past", which alludes to a more changeable and communal concept

of self (Hall & Ghazoul, 2012, p.225). Our study drew on aspects of both definitions, as it concerned collective identity, the role of culture, and participant's personal narratives.

Cultural diversity is a concept that emphasizes the variety of cultural expressions and practices within a society, and our study highlights the importance of recognizing and valuing different cultural identities. Kincheloe and Steinberg (1997) provide a framework for understanding cultural diversity by outlining various positions that reflect differing values and perspectives on culture. In the context of this study, their analysis provided a tool for assisting our deep examination of how cultural diversity can enrich societies, as opposed to merely categorizing individuals into multicultural frameworks.

Ghassan Hage (2000) critiques a superficial appreciation of cultural diversity, particularly in the context of Australian society. He argues against the notion of 'White multiculturalism', which tends to celebrate cultural contributions without fostering genuine integration and understanding among diverse groups. Hage (2000, p.140) posits that "if we are diversity, there would be nothing to 'appreciate' and 'value' other than ourselves," suggesting that true cultural diversity requires more than acknowledgment; it necessitates active engagement and interaction among different cultural groups. This perspective is crucial for understanding how cultural diversity can lead to more meaningful social cohesion and mutual respect.

The implications of these discussions on cultural diversity were significant for our study, which involved participants from various cultural backgrounds, including both minority and dominant cultural groups in Australia. By focusing on cultural diversity, we can explore how different cultural identities interact, influence one another, and contribute to a richer societal fabric. This approach allowed for a more nuanced understanding of the dynamics at play in culturally diverse settings, moving beyond mere coexistence to fostering genuine intercultural dialogue and collaboration.

Summary

While many articles discussing the weight of cultural diversity in the education system were available, none explicitly stressed peer relationships as a starting point for developing richer intercultural connections in adolescence. Consequently, we identified that more research was needed into the ways that an adaptable drama education

program could influence the quality of peer relationships in culturally diverse, secondary school-aged students, and in this case with a focus on growing tolerance, empathy, communication, conflict resolution, intercultural learning, sameness and difference.

Consequently, the focus of our study was to devise and enact a series of drama workshops with adolescents from diverse cultural backgrounds while exploring the development of their friendships through artistic and pedagogical processes.

Process of Inquiry

This research investigated culturally diverse adolescent peer relationships through eight workshops conducted over three months. It had ethical approval by Murdoch University Human Research Ethics Committee (Approval 2019/108) and participants provided informed consent. The fieldwork was conducted at a community centre in a suburb where a vast majority of residents' parents were born overseas, reflecting the cultural diversity of the centre's attendees. The centre itself is neighboured by an African grocer and a Multicultural Services Centre. A jovial cartoon mural that fittingly features two men, one Black and one white, arm-in-arm, grinning, is painted across a nearby shopfront.

The study involved 40 young people from 11 different cultures: 13 from South Sudan, two from Turkey, two from Burundi, three Australian of European descent, seven Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander, one from Afghanistan, six from Ethiopia, one from Liberia, one from Somalia, one from Japan and three from Uganda. At the commencement of the workshops, we observed a range of relationships between the 8-22-year-old participants, most of whom were somewhat familiar with the other attendees but did not know their names or basic information. The group had a small number of close friendships and family relations. This was significant as we noted the variations in the potential for friendship development in those who did not consider themselves to be ‘friends’ with anyone in the group, versus those who already possessed a strong bond.

A qualitative methodology, drawing both on action research (Reason & Bradbury, 2012) and case study (Yin, 2009), was used to explore the social relationships of participants. At its core, action research is the “pursuit of practical solutions…and the flourishing of

individual persons and their communities" (Reason & Bradbury, 2012, p.14). This standpoint was imperative to the study design considering our aim to provide a relational drama experience that would, first and foremost, benefit the participants. Models of action research work towards transforming social inequalities through collective action and diverse ways of knowing (Lykes & Hershberg, 2012). The perspectives of participants were key to the decision-making processes within the study and the practical recommendations of the research.

The case study approach intended to capture the complexities of participant relationships in detail within their context (Yin, 2009). Case studies explore a real-life, bounded system (Alpi & Evans, 2019); in our case, the study was bounded by the specific context of the community centre and the group of culturally diverse young people who attended the centre for the weekly arts program. Focusing on this specific setting and group, as opposed to investigating relationship development through drama education more generally allowed for an in-depth exploration of participants' interactions and experiences. For example, we considered minute changes in participant hand gestures, laughter, and eye contact as small but salient indicators of relationship development, and in turn, were able to provide 'thick' descriptions of these nuances (Taylor & Thomas-Gregory, 2015).

The research also drew on feminist theory, which aims to create social change and represent human diversity (Reinharz, 1992). Specifically, this meant questioning the existing dominant intellectual paradigms of research and placing high value on the voices and experiences of participants (Hesse-Biber & Yaiser, 2004), allowing for marginalised participants to generate knowledge and theories with these voices informing the path of the study (Harding, 2020).

Informed by the literature on elements of drama that appeared most promising in both the development of friendships and drama skills, eight workshops were developed consisting of drama exercises based on relationships of trust, storytelling, building ensemble, role, focus, voice and movement, and devising. Activities ranged from theatre sports and improvisation activities to storytelling and Theatre of the Oppressed performances (Boal, 1979), all of which encompassed one or more of the key drama exercises.

Data were collected through researcher observations documented in the research journal, and two focus groups, one held during the first workshop and the other following the culminating workshop. Finally,

the research outcomes were presented through a series of narrative portraits (Rodriguez-Dorans & Jacobs, 2020). These portraits included both verbatim quotes from the participants and narrative portrayals of participant experiences.

Rashad's experiences lead these narratives. Rashad, an 11-year-old boy from South Sudan, was reserved at times throughout the project, but keen to participate at others. His story is presented as a composite narrative that incorporates the experiences of several other participants. While composite narratives are "useful and accessible to those outside academia" (Willis, 2019, p. 471), we acknowledge their limitation in conveying accurate depictions of the affect and beliefs of those represented. We deliberated this approach and ultimately found it beneficial in conveying the diverse and shared aspects of the lived experiences and expressions of the participants (Eastmond, 2007); however, we acknowledge the highly subjective nature of our roles in the interpretation of participant communications. What Rashad's composite story revealed was emblematic of change from an initial lack of connection with any other participants to a developing sense of friendship as the workshops progressed.

Emergent Findings

This study sought to explore how experiences of drama may affect culturally diverse friendships, and specifically examine which drama practices and experiences might develop friendships. The model of culturally diverse friendship informing the study focused on ten dimensions: *trust, tolerance, empathy, communication, conflict resolution, intercultural learning, sameness and difference, familiarity, fun* and *support.*

Throughout the study, we observed that certain drama experiences potentially affected participant friendships more than others. In reflecting on the way that many of the exercises used in the workshops related across these ten dimensions, the research revealed that those drama activities that focused primarily on *building ensemble, relationships of trust,* and *devising* appeared to have the most significant impact on features of friendship.

We focus specifically on these now and highlight the developmental trajectory of the participants' relationships with one another, revealed here through narrative portraits that illustrate

changes in participant friendships through three phases of research: introductory workshops, medial workshops, and culminating workshops.

Building Ensemble

Rashad didn't hear which exercise the class was preparing to undertake, but he didn't seem comfortable enough to interrupt the conversations of his peers to ask. As he considered slinking away from the group, a tall boy looked across the circle at Rashad, quietly asking his neighbour, 'Should we see if that guy over there needs a chair?'

Rashad risked a slight smile in the boy's direction. Rashad thought he might be from South Sudan, like himself.

'Want to sit with us?' the tall boy's neighbour asked Rashad, gesturing to a chair nearby.

'Sure,' Rashad blurted back, immediately looking back down. He shuffled over.

'What are we meant to do?' Rashad asked.

'We're playing 'All Those Who'. You have to move chairs if you answer yes to the leader. Say your name before talking if you end up in the middle,' one of the boys explained as a rambunctious Jacquie raced into the middle of the circle, volunteering as leader.

'My name's Jacquie and… Who has a brother?' Jacquie squealed.

The chairs surrounding her shook. Half the group stood and ran to the opposite side of the circle. Rashad remained rooted to his seat. He had two brothers, so knew he was supposed to move, but he was overwhelmed by the pushing and yelling. A small group of people were shouting in a language he didn't understand while vying for space on a singular chair.

The tall boy now stood awkwardly in the middle of the circle and muttered, 'My name is Sol, and I want to know who's been to

Europe.' Again, a handful of the teens sprang up, diving for empty chairs, shrieking loudly. Rashad had never been to Europe. He stayed put.

'Hey! You haven't even moved yet!' came Jacquie's cry. Rashad glanced up at her.

'You're cheating. You must move chairs if something applies to you.'

Rashad looked to his new peer, Sol, for support. Sol shrugged.

In Rashad's story, an ensemble-building activity is described. The narrative reflects six areas of culturally diverse friendship that were either not present or not well developed at the beginning of the workshops: familiarity, communication, conflict resolution, trust, tolerance, and intercultural learning. When the project commenced, participants exhibited and described varying levels of familiarity with one another. Many did not know any of the other participants' names, nor basic information about their peers and cultures.

Visible in this illustrative example, communication during ensemble building activities such as 'All Those Who' was at times reduced to shouting. Rather than aiming to resolve conflict through positive communication and problem-solving, participants would ignore one another or make harsh comments in retaliation, such as when Jacquie's lack of trust in Rashad resulted in her accusations of cheating. Jacquie was not accepting nor tolerant of Rashad's actions and did not allow him to explain his choices.

As the project went on, and activities focused on *building ensemble* were undertaken, familiarity, communication, conflict resolution, trust, tolerance, and intercultural learning began to develop. The following narrative portrait outlines one of the ensemble-building activities and the development of these six friendship features.

Rashad impatiently waited for Sol to arrive. He'd taken an earlier bus than usual to arrive a few minutes before their workshop started, hoping to discuss a recent South Sudanese football game with Sol. As Rashad had suspected, Sol was also from South Sudan. Rashad sat near the door, saving a chair next to him for

Sol and Sol's friend, Omar. The two boys eventually walked in while Tahnee explained an exercise called 'Circle of Knots', from a few weeks earlier. The football update would have to wait until after the activity.

Rashad moved with Sol and Omar to form a small group. They all joined hands, then tried to detangle themselves, with the aim of arranging themselves back into a perfect circle without letting go of one another.

After several minutes of moving in all directions, the group still resembled a knot, rather than a circle. Some students wanted to let go of one another and give up, while others were adamant they could succeed. Seeing a stalemate, Sol, the tallest of the group, suggested a new approach. He asked everyone to crouch down while he stood on his toes, gaining a clearer view of their predicament. Sol then instructed Rashad, "If you go under Omar's arm, that will help.'

Rashad ducked as Omar lifted his arm high. A space opened, and the circle began to reform. Jacquie, who had been vocal about abandoning the activity minutes before, whooped, 'Nice one!'

Omar simultaneously suggested, 'Sol, why don't you step over Rashad's arm?'

In this example it is possible to see changes in the developing friendships of the participants by the end of the workshops based on building ensemble. Participants became familiar with names and cultural information about their peers, enabling more effective communication. Rather than using vague language, such as 'that guy over there', participants communicated directly, using each other's names.

Following conversations about tolerance during our ensemble building workshops, participants appeared slower to anger during activities that introduced tension, such as 'Circle of Knots' and 'All Those Who'. We observed, for example, the formation of more trusting relationships reflected in fewer accusations of cheating. Following our ensemble building workshops, it was heartening to hear Sol remark

that ‘Drama is good because we act out our everyday life to other people. Drama is a way to impress or act this out on other people and [a way of] communicating’. Sol raised the idea of ‘performing’ culture as an “unfolding performative invention” (Tulloch, 1999, p.5). His description of drama as a tool to illustrate one’s culture to those outside it was a pertinent finding of the study.

The more direct communication and greater tolerance of the participants intersected with their ability to resolve minor conflicts, such as the group’s disagreement about persisting with or abandoning the Circle of Knots activity by way of example. Rather than pushing and shouting about their conflicting views as they had in early workshops, participants learnt to pause and consider new paths towards mutually agreeable solutions, managing their emotions and de-escalating potentially explosive situations (Ntawiha et al., 2022).

Activities associated with building relationships of trust similarly appeared to reflect changes to participants’ friendships throughout the eight workshops, as outlined in the following narrative portrait.

Relationships of Trust

Asked to form teams, Rashad’s eyes flicked from group to group. He’d talked to a few kids before, but he still wasn’t sure who to trust. Should he slip silently into the group of older boys who looked friendly but unfamiliar? Or approach the younger group of girls whose bright dresses matched their boisterous behaviour? Sol appeared in the opposite corner, looking equally thrown. They wandered awkwardly towards one another, looking for a familiar face to join them. A small, shy boy, whom Rashad knew to be South Sudanese like him, walked in their direction, and they finally had their group.

Tahnee explained that they would use a Theatre Sports exercise called ‘Space Jump’, which would require them to trust each other to develop ‘offers’ to move the plot of their improvisation along. Rashad quietly groaned to himself; he hated being the centre of attention but knew that he would have to enter the circle to perform at some point.

Rashad’s upper lip was covered in a sheen of sweat by the time it was his turn to join in the act. Jacquie was frozen in the shape of a

> *galloping horse in the circle, and Rashad frantically wracked his brain for some way to contribute to a new storyline based on her posture. Precious seconds passed, with Jacquie's face becoming more annoyed as they did. Jacquie's friend, another Ethiopian girl, sighed loud enough for Rashad to hear, 'Just think of something.'*

Rashad and his peers exemplified a lack of trust, support, fun, and conflict resolution skills in the weeks prior to the trust-building workshops, during the introductory and medial phases of the workshops. When given the opportunity to choose partners or groups, they tended to move in cultural cliques, perhaps indicating a lack of engagement with the friendship features of intercultural awareness and a lack of appreciation of sameness and difference between cultures. During workshops, Tahnee reminded participants that one of the intentions of our exercises was to build trust through making and accepting offers (Johnstone, 1981); a tool that requires all participants to accept and embrace others' contributions.

In the early phases of the fieldwork, this type of side-coaching (Spolin, 1999) was common, indicating perhaps that the group needed some guidance in conflict resolution skill development and creating a supportive environment. In response, we incorporated conflict resolution and support building into the project discussions and activities. We also encouraged participants to 'branch out' and work with those they had not yet met, particularly when discussing topics related to participants' cultures.

Rashad and his peers required significantly less side-coaching from Tahnee in later weeks of the study, as evident in the following narrative portrait about the culminating workshops. It was time for Rashad to share his story. He had been too nervous to contribute anything in the previous week's workshop on storytelling, but he had a moving story he now felt safe enough to share. He'd chatted to the group of intimidating Ethiopian girls a few times now, and discovered that they were football fans, just like him. Even though they could be overexcited sometimes, they were okay by him because of their love of the 'best sport in the world', a point of connection. He was eager to tell them his story.

> *'I was fast asleep the night the fire started, but the haze of smoke must have woken me up. I ran into my parents' room, panicked. At*

first, I thought our house was the one on fire. But once my dad rushed us out to the street, I could see the flames licking the windowsills of my neighbour's home. I remember how piercing the sirens were in the silence of our cul-de-sac. They were too late, though. I never got to see our neighbour again.'

While some shocked faces gazed up at Rashad from the audience, there was also applause, and someone yelled, 'Rashad, do you need a hug?' Sol raised his eyebrows and gave him a thumbs up, checking that Rashad was okay.

Throughout the eight-week program, trust-based tasks appeared to influence the friendships of Rashad and his peers in several ways. The workshops on relationships of trust affected the participants' conflict resolution skills, intercultural learning, and experiences of fun and support. They provided opportunities for participants to discuss their cultural similarities and differences. They also appeared to develop more trusting relationships. Evident through participants' verbal and non-verbal communication with one another, the young people became less reserved in each other's presence and more willing to converse with those they had not previously befriended, including people outside of their culture. We also observed how the presence of cultural cliques diminished, and participants found ways to support the risks their peers took in trust-based activities.

Empathy and communication skills appeared to develop following activities based on devising drama, as did participants' feelings of support, their intercultural knowledge, and their understanding of sameness and difference. These friendship features are explored in the following narrative portrait in terms of the devising activities that assisted in their progress throughout the workshops.

Devising

Rashad reluctantly joined the brainstorm that was taking place about daily issues his group faced, which they would eventually turn into tableaux. He felt too tired to contribute. Someone had just mentioned homework, which was met with nods and mumbled agreement. Bringing a silent Rashad into the conversation, a pre-teen girl with straight blonde hair, who he now knew as Rachel, asked, 'Didn't you say you hate getting the bus, Rashad?'

'Yeah, it's the worst. People stare at me, and I never have enough money on my transit card.'

The group burst into chatter.

'Man, public transport is so annoying!'

'Right? I can't wait to get my license.'

The group scribe wrote 'public transport' on their brainstorming sheet. Rashad felt encouraged by the group's acceptance of his idea. He continued.

'Someone pushed me off my seat on the train once because they thought I'd touched their backpack.'

'Should we say public transport is a pressing issue, then?' the scribe asked.

What we were able to see in this story was that devising drama "contests the model of the singular creative artist" (Mermikides & Smart, 2012, p.1), significant to this study's focus on the collaborative nature of drama. This narrative reflects that the activities we facilitated in the realm of devising seemingly influenced participants' communication skills, shows of support and empathy, intercultural learning, and understanding of 'common ground' or sameness.

The empathetic dialogue of Rashad's peers during the devising exercises demonstrated their understanding of his experiences and their concern for his safety (Singer & Lamm, 2009). Devising tableaux based on shared concerns allowed participants to unite in discussion of their commonalities. Following the devised performance workshops, one participant noted that her favourite part of being in the audience was, 'learning about a different culture.' Considering the importance of intercultural learning in culturally diverse friendship development (Theobald, 2016), devising drama was a positive step in developing friendships within this project.

Conclusion

The project's findings provided insights into the role that drama education can play in young people's understanding of their peers and themselves. In the words of Zina, the program coordinator at the community centre, ‘The kids have learnt to appreciate friendships... Some of them had issues getting along, and we really didn’t know how to help them, but this has… They’re not trying to impress you; they just are better friends now.’ Interactions between participants and data collected in focus groups throughout the eight-week drama program indicate improvements in participants’ senses of trust, support, tolerance, empathy, familiarity with other participants, and fun, following their engagement in drama activities that centred on building ensemble, forging relationships of trust, and working collaboratively to devise original performances.

The research helped make visible the ways that drama can promote positive relationships, improved conflict resolution and communication skills, and a greater understanding of participants’ cultures. Diversities and commonalities within the group were explored in meaningful ways, with the identification of similarities encouraging social cohesion and decreasing cultural cliques. While other possible explanations for the social growth demonstrated by the participants certainly exist, the role drama played during the eight workshops appeared to affect participants friendships positively.

Drama’s likely role in developing these relationships is perhaps due to the potential for drama to enable dual and simultaneous learning (Piazzoli & Kennedy, 2014). Drama is unique in its ability to encourage metaxis, the focus on one’s performance as well as the world within the performance (Boal, 1995). Participants, for example, simultaneously learned drama skills while teaching one another about their unique cultural backgrounds and beliefs; they experienced drama education and intercultural learning concurrently.

These findings support the study's central aim of exploring how drama education affects friendships between diverse young people. The features of drama that framed the study acted as a collaborative pathway to friendship for the young people involved. What this drama pathway reflected is the intimate nature of the activities within the areas of ensemble and trust building, and devising, as well as the reinforcement of basic knowledge, such as names, ages, and family status about each participant within the group in an enjoyable setting.

The participants themselves stated that they felt closest to one another when they were having fun and when they were learning to work together cohesively rather than, for example, performing a solo scene to the group.

This study highlights the role that a drama education program can have in nurturing the social development of the artists of the future, and recommends further research into the intersections between drama education and culturally diverse adolescent relationships. The research also clarified the complex, interconnected nature of drama, culture, and friendship. We recognise, importantly, that each does not exist in a vacuum and are best explored as overlapping, intertwined concepts of equal importance.

SUGGESTED CITATION

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Tokstret: Youth Arts, Activism and Decolonization in Papua New Guinea

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MORESBY ARTS THEATRE

ABSTRACT

In Tok Pisin, the vernacular of Papua New Guinea, 'Tokstret' means "be honest" or "talk straight." As the official language, Tok Pisin unifies 850+ indigenous languages while blending and borrowing words rooted in the country's colonial legacies. This case study explores how the universal languages of theatre can be reclaimed and decolonized to create more accessible and inclusive theatre, focusing on youth and community programs in Port Moresby. Drawing on decolonization theories and principles of applied drama education, strategies that foster change, decolonization, and community engagement are highlighted. Linda Tuhiwai Smith's (2012) framework for decolonizing research is extended into applied drama and performance to demonstrate how these practices can serve as inspirational principles for reimagining social change. The 'Youth Arts Program' (YAP) serves as a catalyst for new works addressing social issues, while post-YAP involvement in 'Arts Activism,' a grassroots collective, amplifies

community voices. These efforts are juxtaposed with traditional 'mainstage' Moresby Arts Theatre performances, revealing the complex dynamics of development, decolonization, and the empowerment of young artists in a post-colonial milieu. Through applied drama and theatre performance, these initiatives embody the essence of 'Tokstret,' fostering honesty, dialogue, and empowerment as tools for cultural revitalization and social transformation.

> *Outside a traditional hauskrai or 'house of crying' grief ritual, a young woman begs her brother to "Tokstret"- be honest- in discussing the financial and social burdens placed upon her due to her late father's passing.*
>
> *"Tokstret!" a police officer shouts in the face of a young intoxicated 'raskol' being questioned for theft outside a bustling street market.*
>
> *"Tokstret" in a hushed whisper into the ear of a teenage girl by her boyfriend as he pronounces his love but moves his hands without consent.*
>
> *"Tokstret" can be heard autotuned to a serenading beat by local hiphop artists on radios, or on the podcast Tokaut Tokstret, wherein a local playwright discusses the dire need for HIV awareness in his community.*

Tokstret means 'be honest' or 'talk straight' in Papua New Guinea's official language, Tok Pisin. Tok Pisin is a quilted montage of languages; a creole pulled together from the hundreds of indigenous tongues (over 850 documented in Papua), with added influences of Melanesian, German, English and colloquial Australian sounds and phrases. Tok Pisin functions to unite different individuals, tribes and communities, to amplify voices across the country, and to stimulate communication across groups. In many ways, it's a universal, inclusive, mixed language that attempts to reclaim communication from colonial and oppressive histories. At the Moresby Arts Theatre's Youth Arts Program (YAP), tokstret echoes onstage as secondary school

students share stories from their own communities and address urgent social issues in the performances that open this article. In these performances, tokstret takes on new life as a tool of empowerment, demonstrating how YAP employs applied drama techniques. Here, tokstret becomes both expression and action, amplifying youth voices and advancing the decolonization of theatre in Papua New Guinea.

“Learn by Doing”: Frameworks for Decolonizing Theatre as a Tool for Youth Empowerment

How can the universal languages of theatre be reclaimed and decolonized to create more accessible and inclusive theatre? This question is explored through the experiences of past YAP participants who have gone on to develop new works and engage in arts activism within their communities. Linda Tuhiwai Smith’s (2012) framework for decolonizing research is extended into applied drama and theatre education, demonstrating how these initiatives serve as potent tools for social transformation and cultural revitalization. By juxtaposing these culturally resonant practices with the established 'western' mainstage performances at the Moresby Arts Theatre, this exploration accentuates the intricate dynamics of decolonization and the empowerment of young artists within the post-colonial milieu.

Smith's “Twenty-five Indigenous Projects” (2012) establish principles to reclaim, protect, and celebrate indigenous cultures, histories, and identities (Louie, et. al, 2017). These project principles form a framework for decolonization research which include (in no particular order):

Claiming – Asserting rights
Testimonies – Truth telling
Storytelling – Collective histories
Celebrating Survival – Honor resilience
Remembering – Recalling traumas
Indigenizing – Reclaiming practices
Intervening – Influencing change
Revitalizing – Restoring traditions
Connecting – Relations & Environments
Reading – deconstructing accounts
Writing – Documenting culture
Representing – Re-imaging identity
Gendering – Exploring roles
Envisioning – Imagining futures
Reframing – Redefining narratives
Restoring – Healing communities
Returning – Repatriating belongings
Democratizing – Equalizing voices
Networking – Building alliances
Naming – Reclaiming terms
Protecting – Safeguarding knowledge
Creating – Innovating arts
Negotiating – Finding solutions
Discovering – Unearthing histories
Sharing – Exchanging knowledge

The examples from this case study show aspects of these twenty-five principles as they provide a strong starting point for the important work of decolonizing through theatre education and performance. The principles applied will be defined, explained and then explored through the experiences of the MAT (Moresby Arts Theatre), the YAP (Youth Arts Program) and Arts Activism in Papua New Guinea.

"God, I hate Shakespeare!": Setting the Scene(s) at Moresby Arts Theatre

"God, I hate Shakespeare! That's right, I said it. [No!]. I do! I hate Shakespeare!" The lyrics of Wayne and Karey Kirkpatrick's 2015 Broadway hit *Something Rotten* fill the building as a troupe of Moresby

Figure 6: Papuan actors dressed in western suits for adaptation of Shakespeare's The Tempest

Arts performers warm up. The actors, zip-zap-zop dressed in an eclectic montage of thrifted costumes that create 'Elizabethan meets 1980s mashup,' with an Oceanic flare. The irony of this warm-up for the group's adaptation of *The Tempest* is palpable. Other popular warm-up tunes that oft fill the house include anything Sondheim or Lin Manuel Miranda, along with healthy doses of *Wicked, Dear Evan Hansen,* or local artist hip-hop/reggae/rap blends. In many ways, the Moresby Arts Theatre (a.k.a. the MAT) is like many Western-influenced community and amateur theatres: a local hangout for teens and young adults who do not always fit in elsewhere, a black painted proscenium with decades of paint built up, a storage junkyard of broken and breaking set/prop/costume pieces, and an endless campaign to keep funds flowing. There is a huge set of keys that gets passed around, posters and graffiti that document over a century of performances, and, in-between rehearsals, a group of smokers who constantly intend to quit.

Unique to the MAT, as opposed to community and amateur theatres found in Australia, the U.S. or the U.K., is a theatre that sits on a grassy, well-gardened knoll, tucked in-between the parliament buildings of Papua New Guinea and international embassies. Fallen mangos, mosquitos and the occasional black mamba python are scattered amongst the grounds, and a series of makeshift temporary dwellings are growing along the back-security fence. An armed security guard opens the ancient gate, his smile stained red with betelnut, (a favored stimulant around PNG, whose deep red stains are oft mistaken for blood by visitors on the streets of Port Moresby). Although expertly designed as a cinderblock Victorianesque proscenium stage, the hundred plus years are wearing on the building, along with the clashes of power on the board of directors.

The colonial hangover of expat theatre-makers is being challenged by the next generation of Papua New Guineans, most of who were born well after the country's 1975 independence. The theatre itself is both a literal and metaphorical relic of colonialism and postcolonialism arts funding. The lobby is covered with a collection of posters spanning the last century, mostly Shakespearian or Greek classics, with a sprinkle of popular musicals starting in early aughts. Also in the lobby are posters commemorating the works of famed Papua New Guinean Nora Vagi Brash, which are staged annually (most frequently her independence-era play *Which Way Big Man?*). The mainstage shows are heavily influenced by funding from the Australian High Commission, with consideration for what might bring in more audiences, and a heavy hand of expatriate favor. The MAT serves as a community space for theatre and art that strives to uphold Smith's principles (2012) of decolonization. It does this by fostering *networking* and building alliances, *sharing* and exchanging knowledge, and *connecting* to build community relationships while *reframing* narratives, *indigenizing* performance practices, and *storytelling* the collective histories. The MAT is a constant *celebration of the survival* of the arts, the strength of the community, and the resilience of a complex with vibrant set of often-clashing cultures.

In 1912, the MAT was built as an expatriate drama club that specialized in bringing "the Bard" to those "in the bush," with *those* initially referring to the Australian expats rather than the local communities ("Join the MAT" Poster, n.d.). There is much to be debated about "claiming that a Shakespeare production [in a

previously colonized space] simply reinforces a history of colonialism," or if that "undermines the agency of the artists" (Al-Saber, 2016). Arguably, it would depend on the who/what/where/why/how of the production, but Shakespeare as, "a powerful tool of empire, transported to foreign climes along with the doctrine of European cultural superiority" (Al-Saber, 2016) is not the current focus within this case study of decolonization. The current demographics of the MAT are a mix of native Papua New Guineans, Australians and a cycle of international expats. Similar to the Tok Pisin language, the people of the MAT are a blend of colonial influences with indigenous execution that negotiate development and communication between people from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds. Hananiah Dickson, a MAT participant, YAP mentor and longtime community member describes her experiences of *networking, connecting,* and *storytelling* in her experiences at the MAT:

> Telling stories has always been at the core of who we are as Papua New Guineans. To be able to write and be able to put on stage with such creativity, turning words into life, is amazing! Stories connect us to people and connect us to our ancestors. It is a way in which we stay true to who we are as a people; we carry ourselves through our stories. The community that comes together to put on a show, the effort put in, the bond that remains after the show- that is what I am proud of. (personal communication, 2024)

On any particular day, the theatre often shares space with a *haus krai*, or traditional ceremony akin to a funeral or wake. Mourners camp out on chairs for days or weeks; tea cups and beer bottles litter the space in what almost looks like a post party in a university share house. The MAT is frequently a community space before a performance venue, and currently sits as the last community 'accessible' theatre in the country. With the closure of Goroka's Ruan Ruan Theatre in 2017 (Looser, 2012), the demise of the National Theatre (ABC, 2000), and the "elitist" (Ballard, 2012:42) gatekeeping of local university dramas, the MAT is the last community-driven theatre space. This is not to discount the flourishing performative cultures of Papua New Guinea; there are a number of *haus tambarans***,** or places of ancestral worship and meetings for elders, that have performance-based traditional cultural rituals, song and dances. These are

traditionally closed to all women and anyone outside of the specific tribe or community. Oral storytelling is central to the intergenerational transfer of knowledge and wisdom in Papua New Guinea. There are stories in the drama of everyday life in churches and markets as well as public performances of cultural celebrations, such as *Singsings*, when tribes and villages annually gather to share cultural dress, song, dance and dramatized reenactments of traditions or customs, including funeral ceremonies, intertribal wargames, making fire and life celebrations.

Figure 2: Traditional Singsing attire for performance

From Mandate to Movement: Bridging Western Structures and Indigenous Stories

The National Department of Education mandates an Arts Syllabus (2017), but lack of funding results in these programs being cut in many public schools. Those that do offer programs often graft “indigenous material loosely onto predominantly western theatrical frameworks,” (Looser, 2012) such is often seen at the MAT’s mainstage Shakespeare and popular western theatre musicals, satire or farces. These efforts at *indigenizing, reframing* and *storytelling* (Smith, 2012)

reflect a slow long process of empowerment and decolonization. Theorists and practitioners describe this as a radical task aimed at disrupting the colonial legacy that continues in academic and cultural institutions, promoting narratives and practices that represent the diversity and richness of marginalized communities (Madison, 2010). A task in which artists and academics must be “actively seeking out and elevating the narratives of those who have been silenced by colonial histories, ensuring that the stage becomes a space of representation and resistance." (Young, 2013) The legacy of pre-independence era playwrights such as Nora Vagi Brash or John Kasaipwalova began the work of decolonization, but the movement has slowed since 1975, and the need to share stories of the diversity, strength and richness of Papua New Guineans is left dangling for future generations.

Figure 3: Which Way Big Man? A scene juxtaposes a traditional Asaro Mudman with an Expat Supervisor on stage.

"Which Way Big Man?": Mentoring Next Generations in the Youth Arts Program

> "You think you are better than me because you wear a suit and tie? You think you know better because you speak English? This land does not belong to you, it belongs to us, the people who live here." (*Which Way Big Man?* Vagi Brash, 1975)

Nora Vagi Brash, one of Papua New Guinea's most revered playwrights, reflects on how her decades-old work remains deeply relevant today when speaking with hundreds of youth gathered at the MAT. She eloquently discusses the history of modern Papua New Guinean theatre, particularly highlighting the politically charged, passionate dramas written by young men at the University of Papua New Guinea- and herself- during the years leading up to the country's independence from Australia in 1975. This speech, one of her last at the MAT before her passing, urges the next generation: "Our customs and traditions are who we are. If we lose them, we lose ourselves." Vagi Brash whispers her love and adoration of each performer present, reminding the room that "Theatre is our way of telling our stories, of keeping our culture alive. It's about us, by us, for us" (YAP presentation, 2023). Vagi Brash represents the decolonizing methodology principles of *claiming* rights, *representing* identity and *reading* the past into the present for the future.

In order to train new voices and the next generation of Papua New Guinean playwrights and performers, the MAT partners with the University of Goroka and local secondary schools around the capital city. Dr. Jane Awi, of the University of Goroka, and her team of teachers-in-training partner with MAT performers and artists for the month-long Youth Arts Program. The program is open the to all the local and private secondary schools in Port Moresby. Over the course of a six-week program, 500+ students from local public and private schools meet with and are mentored weekly by the teaching artists, student-teachers, local performers and/or MAT volunteers. YAP students attend intensive workshops on theatre skills, acting basics, physical and contemporary styles, technical aspects, improv, playwriting, and theatre games. Meanwhile, the chaperoning teachers from each school attend workshops on process drama, educational drama praxis and ways to incorporate drama and theatre pedagogy

into their core curriculums. In terms of Smith's (2012) decolonizing methodologies principles, Dr. Awi, Life Drama and the Youth Arts Program model the application of *democratizing* the equality of voices, *returning* the performative styles of ancestors and cultures, *envisioning* futures full of aspirations, *intervening* to influence societal change and *claiming* the rights of youth, education and citizenship.

YAP is created around what Awi designates as "Life Drama" techniques (Awi, 2014, 2018; Baldwin, 2010; Haseman et. All; 2014). Life Drama is a participatory workshop program based on the principles of applied theatre. It centers on an "open story" of a societal issue and its impact on the family and community. The program initially used drama-in-education and theatre-for-development techniques, including role-play, image theatre, and Boalian methods to help participants explore the emotional, social, and economic effects of the issue at individual and community levels. The Life Drama curriculum encompasses facilitated games and exercises in role play, hot-seating, tableau and image work inspired and adapted from by the work of Boal, Heathcote, Neelands, Prendergast and Saxton, and other such canonized process drama, applied theatre and drama practitioners. The list of applied drama theorists and facilitators habitually sits in a western perspective, but the work of applied drama offers a powerful tool for decolonization by providing a space where marginalized voices can reclaim their narratives, challenge dominant discourses, and reassert cultural identities that have been suppressed by colonial powers (Prentki & Preston, 2009; Prendergast & Saxton; 2013; Landy & Montgomery, 2012). Through mixed devising, process drama, and Theatre of the Oppressed (Boal, 1992; 2006), utilizing indigenous song, drum, dance or stories, students create original performances of social action theatre. At each school, students perform their original creation for their peers, followed by a schoolwide reflection and workshop run by MAT teaching artists. The culmination of YAP is a three-day theatre festival held at the MAT with parents and community members invited to attend.

Weaving Song and Story: The Unique Identity of PNG Folk Opera

The original performances that conclude Awi's use of the Life Drama Curriculum are created through the concept of Folk Opera (Murphy, 2010; Baldwin, 2010; Haseman et. all, 2014; Awi, 2014, 2018). This

approach, unique to Papua New Guinea, encourages people to express their ideas and feelings through their own cultural means of expression. Developed in the 1970s by the Ruan Ruan Theatre, Folk Opera draws on traditional folk tales, music, dance styles, and costumes of traditional dress to create a performance or scene. Folk opera is driven by three key elements:

- **Story force** – which refers to the impact of the events that unfold
- **Picture force** – highlighting the visual and auditory power of the spectacle
- **Feeling force** – encompassing the emotions and the way they resonate with both participants and the audience

In Papua New Guinea, *Folk Opera* functions as a potent vehicle for storytelling that incorporates traditional music, dance, oral history, and communal participation. Unlike Western operatic traditions that often focus on high drama and formal compositions, PNG's Folk Opera serves as an immersive experience rooted in cultural practices and community rituals. For instance, *Folk Opera* often weaves ancestral tales, contemporary social issues, and communal concerns into a single performance, creating a narrative that is both reflective and forward-looking. Through songs, chants, and dances, Folk Opera becomes a living archive of communal memory and a space for intergenerational knowledge exchange, emphasizing values of kinship, resilience, and cultural pride.

Performers blend cultural practices from different provinces and communities across Papua New Guinea, which, while unique to each community, are generally understood by most. These practices may include the Siassi dance, the art and ceremony of the Gulf, the farce traditions of the Eastern Highlands and Simbu, as well as Manus dance and Garamut music. As a "folk" art form, Folk Opera sidesteps the hierarchical nature of formal theatre spaces, making it accessible to wider audiences while serving as both entertainment and activism. In doing so, it transcends performance to create a communal space for cultural reclamation and resistance. This aligns with many of Tuhiwai Smith's decolonizing principles, such as sharing, storytelling, celebrating survival, indigenizing, revitalizing, connecting, representing, and envisioning.

Awi's use of Life Drama combined with Folk Opera works to decolonize both theatre and education in Papua New Guinea by "disrupting the dominance of Western narratives and aesthetics, foregrounding the diversity and richness of indigenous and formerly colonized cultures in performance" (Gilbert & Tompkins, 1996). *This work* fulfills a dual purpose: it honors traditional narratives while enabling a critical examination of contemporary social issues, from environmental concerns to economic hardships. With YAP students, themes and stories drawn from earlier applied drama techniques—such as reflections, poems, stories, or moments—are used as stimuli to create original works. In 2023, over 30 original performances addressed topics like domestic violence, food insecurity, teen pregnancy, arts in education, the pressures of continuing education, social media footprints, alcohol/drug use, and climate change. Each performance wove together the elements of Folk Opera, integrating song, dance, traditional craftwork, and ceremony into relevant, modern pieces.

Figure 4: YAP performance blending tradition with modern performance

One notable performance from Bethel Sunrise School, entitled *For the Future*, explored the balance between tradition and modern

progress, achieving a strong and supported 'feeling force' that idealistically represented the principles of *democratizing* and *envisioning* to influence change. This montage began with a call for national unity, spoken in multiple languages and dialects, and incorporated tribal symbolism from across the country. This, with the use of pictures projected from different provinces, drove the 'picture force'. The performance's compelling 'story force' blended Christian missionary beliefs with satires of prominent political leaders to tell the stories of individual students on stage, highlighting their origins, ancestors, and aspirations for the future. The Folk Opera structure allowed the students at Bethel to actively seek out and elevate "the narratives of those who have been silenced by colonial histories, ensuring that the stage becomes a space of representation and resistance" (Young, 2010).

Collectively, each YAP performance contributed to the decolonization of education and theatre in Papua New Guinea by elevating these stories and "confronting and dismantling the colonial mindset, making space for indigenous and marginalized voices to reclaim their stories and their stages." (Moraga, 2011) The Youth Arts Program exemplifies Smith's (2012) decolonizing methodologies by promoting equal representation of voices, reclaiming ancestral and cultural performance styles, envisioning aspirational futures, intervening to drive societal change, and advocating for the rights of youth, education, and citizenship. Arguably, the propensity of all-male and all-female schools also embodies Smith's idea of *gendering,* wherein acting out roles (both male and female) interprets the actions of each gender and empowers both performers and audience.

"The unspoken is very controversial.": Post-YAP Development of New Works

> "I know this, his story will help heal others, but before it does, it needs to help heal us… it's not about just showing the mistakes and the wrongs. It's about what comes after; seeing all that what comes after is healing." (*He Is Victor*, Kuliniasi, 2020)

He is Victor (HIV) boldly delves into taboo subjects such as mental health, suicide, discrimination against people with HIV, and tuberculosis. The play challenges perceptions of how these diseases

are contracted, addresses issues of sexual contact, LGBTQIA+ communities, gender roles, and family secrecy, while critically questioning aspects of Papua New Guinean culture. During the premiere of *He Is Victor*, Nelson Kokoa embodies a judgmental pastor, Hananiah Dickson drives the narrative as a truth-seeking journalist, and Andrew Kuliniasi brings ancestral wisdom to life as he portrays the family matriarch, Nagi. Two of these talented performers began their journey in the YAP program during Year 9, all three have served as YAP mentors, and are now leading sessions and workshops in addition to their own work as professional artists. In a discussion about the influence of YAP on their lives, each responded:

> **Nelson:** The Youth Arts Program (YAP) at the Moresby Arts Theatre has honestly been a great and profound experience for me. Although I never had the opportunity to participate in this program during high school, I've been fortunate to be involved as a speaker for the NGO sessions over the past […] serving as a mentor and being in the thick of it. I've seen firsthand how performance and art can be powerful tools for building confidence in young people.
>
> **Hananiah:** YAP has made a significant impact on me. I've grown to be more confident in who I am. Learned how to work in a team and picked up so many skills.
>
> **Nelson:** It really allows [the youth] to tackle important topics, as each year, YAP focuses on a different theme. It gives them the chance to dissect these important issues and relay their thoughts and feelings through art, theatre, and performance.
>
> **Andrew:** The most important thing about sharing stories is, I guess, what everyone nowadays has been fighting for: inclusivity. Papua New Guinean storytelling in the form of theatre, film, and voice is almost nonexistent, so the art of it needs to be captured in order to inspire Papua New Guineans to listen to their own stories. Right now, we are inundated with stories and entertainment from other countries and often try to replicate them, but we have our own stories, and they need to be told.

> **Nelson:** I believe this [YAP] process not only enhances their creativity but also equips them with the crucial skill of critical thinking, which is needed to navigate the world around them. In PNG, this skill [critical thinking] is lacking, not just at the grassroots level but across all levels of society. Programs like Arts Activism PNG and the Youth Arts Program allow young people to not only practice their art, but also to engage in critical thinking, while encouraging audiences to critically analyze the art presented to them. It's inspiring to see how these young artists grow and transform through the program, and it reminds me of the importance of nurturing the next generation of creatives.

As they have transitioned into adulthood, these three Papua New Guineans have remained deeply connected to performance, their community, and the pursuit of new works that champion decolonization and empowerment through the arts in Papua New Guinea. Their journey from YAP participants/mentors to community leaders in theatre underscores how the program equips young artists to reclaim the narrative, decolonize performance, and inspire social change through the authentic representation of Papua New Guinean voices.

Andrew Kuliniasi describes himself as “a director, scriptwriter, producer, and dramatist” from the Meisoga clan of Suau Island in the Milne Bay Province. He has been a prominent figure at the Moresby Arts Theatre for nearly a decade, starting as a youth volunteer, advancing to a participant in high school, then becoming a mentor, and now emerging as a leading director, actor, and playwright. His playwriting debut, *Meisoga*, was produced on the mainstage when he was 16 years old. In the spirit of YAP’s Folk Operas, *Meisoga* interweaves cultural taboos, witchcraft, intertribal bloodshed, folk stories, and ancestral knowledge to tell the story of the Meisoga clan’s matriarch, Sine Kepu. Kuliniasi describes it as “a story about survival, and what people will do to survive and how it changes them.” Reflecting on the pre-missionary setting and the ancestral knowledge in his work, Kuliniasi emphasizes, “There is so much material out there to write songs, books, and plays—but if we don’t do that, our culture dies. Who we are dies. There won’t be anything unique about us.” Kuliniasi, as a playwright, director and dramatist, embodies the decolonizing methodologies (Smith, 2012) of *discovering* by unearthing histories, *restoring* the healing of communities, *writing* the

documentation of culture and injustices, *remembering* and *naming* the traumas of the past, the present and potentially the future.

To preserve and document the true stories and experiences of Papua New Guineans, Kuliniasi's works embed historical accounts and societal snapshots infused with the supernatural elements of folk culture and community. His *Pearly Shells Trilogy*—which includes *He Is Victor*, *For My Father*, and *Letters from Bradley*—is connected through themes of modern trauma and tragedy. These plays are structured around the concept of *hauskrais*, where family, tradition, and the passage of time converge to reveal the stories that "Papua New Guineans are afraid to talk about." By using theatre to unearth and share these often-silenced narratives, Kuliniasi not only keeps the cultural memory alive, but also advances the decolonization of theatre in Papua New Guinea, reclaiming the stage as a space for authentic Papua New Guinean voices and stories.

"PNG Ways": Arts Activism in Methodologies

"We draw inspiration from the resilience and strength of the people of Papua New Guinea, and we are dedicated to amplifying their voices through art. Our movement aims to empower citizens with information, enabling them to make informed decisions and take meaningful action. Together, we can create a society where art is not just a form of expression but a force for positive change. We're not just a movement; we're a community where every artist, supporter, and contributor plays a crucial role in shaping our narrative." (Arts Activism PNG Mission Statement, 2024)

Nelson Kokoa is the co-founder and director of Arts Activism PNG and the current Senior Coordinator, managing the facilities of the Moresby Arts Theatre. His work "centers around empowering young people and communities through the transformative power of art" (personal communication, 2024). Onstage, Nelson has presented NGO material to hundreds of youth and portrayed a range of characters, from an evangelical preacher and a youth caught in police corruption to a hopeless romantic Elizabethan lyricist. He has performed hip-hop, traditional, lyrical, and interpretive dance, while also managing backstage set pieces and overseeing daily maintenance. In many ways, he is a passionate quintuple threat: singer, actor, dancer, coordinator, and activist.

Nelson describes himself as “deeply passionate about using art as a tool for social change, promoting and fostering critical thinking, and giving a voice to those who may feel unheard. In PNG, there is not just a generational barrier, but also a significant communication barrier between generations. I feel that many young people, because of the values they have been taught growing up—such as respect and respecting your elders—may feel held back from speaking their minds freely.” Members of the Arts Activism PNG collective include Moresby Arts Theatre members, university students, former YAP participants, community leaders, and other stakeholders from across the capital city. Reflecting the call for decolonizing methodologies by Smith (2012), Arts Activism PNG brings together diverse voices from multiple disciplines (Louie et al., 2017).

Figure 5: An Art Activism artist adorned with traditional bilas holding a woven bilum bag.

As a grassroots performance movement, Arts Activism PNG creates “a space where thoughts and opinions are celebrated, especially among young people, to speak about issues” such as

mental health, sexuality, abuse, and addiction. The organization is committed to empowerment, creativity, collaboration, advocacy, inclusivity, resilience, hope, integrity, education, and celebration. Currently, the collective is addressing the "challenge of youth unemployment" by envisioning "a world where art could be a viable career path, a world where creativity could fuel economic and cultural growth. The creative industry has untapped potential, and [Arts Activism PNG aims] to unlock it, nurturing a thriving community of young artists and creative professionals" (Dickinson et al., 2024). The group's work reflects Smith's decolonizing methodologies (2012) and represents a culmination of the YAP-to-Activism and community leadership pipeline.

Arts Activism PNG celebrates the rich cultural diversity of Papua New Guinea and strives to foster unity, understanding, and empathy through artistic expression. The collective embodies many of the twenty-five principles established by Smith (2012): *negotiating* solutions to issues such as unemployment and violence, *creating* innovative art and performances, *representing* and reimagining Papua New Guinean identity, *revitalizing* artistic and cultural traditions, and *testifying*, by giving voice to the lived experiences of the community. In practice, Arts Activism PNG hosts performances focused on themes like gender-based violence, addiction, hope, or aspirations. These events create a distinctly Papua New Guinean mosaic of arts to promote dialogue, normalization, and visibility around the chosen themes, featuring spoken word, music, dance, monologues, scene work (both indigenized adaptations and new works in progress), film, and visual art installations. Performances at the Moresby Arts Theatre are often sold out, with standing room only, and Arts Activism PNG also ventures into community spaces as frequently as possible. They have performed for conferences, both international and domestic, as well as for prime ministers, schools, and NGOs. Most significantly, Arts Activism PNG is working to continue education and empowerment to further decolonization through arts and education in Papua New Guinea. "Art and theatre have become powerful mediums for addressing social issues here in Papua New Guinea. Whether it's through a play that sparks conversation or a dance that challenges the norms, the impact is tangible. We've created a space where people can express themselves, explore topics, and connect with their culture in ways that are both meaningful and transformative" (Kokoa, personal

communication 2024).

"We are weaving a fabric of change": A Conclusion

The final principle of indigenous decolonizing methodologies to consider is the protection and safeguarding of knowledge. Nelson Kokoa eloquently reflects on this: "I believe that preserving our culture, cultural art, and stories is incredibly important. As my mentor, Serena Sasingian, always says, they are the threads that weave our identity as a people—from our stories to our sing-sings to our traditional *bilas* [body decoration or adornment] . Art has been part of our people for generations; it connects us to our ancestors, our land, and our heritage" (personal communication, 2024).

The work at the Moresby Arts Theatre, through YAP, local artists, and Arts Activism PNG, exemplifies a commitment to reclaiming performative traditions, nurturing youth leadership, and fostering cultural pride and identity. Each performance, workshop, and initiative are an act of resistance against the silencing effects of colonial legacies, demonstrating the power of storytelling to bridge divides, heal wounds, and promote understanding across generations and communities.

By employing Linda Tuhiwai Smith's (2012) framework for decolonizing methodologies, these initiatives have created a platform where Papua New Guinea's diverse narratives can be shared with authenticity and integrity. Smith's 25 projects serve as a guide to weaving these narratives into the community's fabric: by reclaiming traditions, envisioning new futures, and speaking truth to power. The collective efforts of YAP, the MAT, and Arts Activism PNG show that decolonization is not merely theoretical but an ongoing, lived practice that challenges colonial legacies and amplifies marginalized voices.

However, as Kokoa cautions, "Some stories are sacred and should remain within the confines of our tribes, villages, and communities to maintain their integrity and meaning. That said, I also believe that through modern creative arts, we can find innovative ways to preserve and share cultural treasures without diluting their essence. We can ensure that while we innovate and share with the world, we do so with respect and mindfulness of the significance of these traditions. In this way, our art and stories will continue to be passed on and inspire future generations" (personal communication, 2024).

The trajectory of the Youth Arts Program at the Moresby Arts Theatre, alongside the work of Arts Activism PNG, reveals a dynamic interplay between traditional and contemporary storytelling, grounded in Smith's framework for decolonizing methodologies. These projects create spaces where young people's voices are not only heard but amplified, allowing them to "Tokstret"—speak truthfully—about their lived realities and challenges in a rapidly changing world.

Ultimately, decolonization in arts and education is about honesty—telling the stories that matter, that resonate, and that reflect the complexities of life in Papua New Guinea today. As Kuliniasi (2020:1) reminds us, "I believe in one thing, stories should reflect the truth." And so, the artists at the Moresby Arts Theatre continue to "Tokstret," forging a path toward a more inclusive and equitable society, one story at a time.

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DISCLOSURE STATEMENT

Informed consent and signed consent forms were obtained from all participants, who were given the option to be identified by name, pseudonym, or to remain anonymous. Each participant was fully briefed on the study's purpose, scope, and the potential use of their contributions. Only those who explicitly consented to be named are identified in this research. The author reports there are no additional financial or non-financial interests to declare.

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What's in a Name? Quality Theatre Experiences for All Students

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ABSTRACT

Busy high school theatre programs may do a great job of offering opportunities to those students already performing at a high level while unintentionally neglecting students whose skills are currently more suited for the ensemble. This focus on the high achievers is damaging to the culture of a program and breeds resentment among students. It is challenging in a busy high school theatre teacher's already packed schedule to find ways to support and lift those members of the ensemble so they can get the skills practice and confidence to compete in auditions. This article examines two steps taken by one high school program to address this issue and the impacts on the program, the culture and the students.

The High School Theatre Challenge: Good Parts for All

A high school theatre student, a senior approaching graduation, sat in front of my teaching colleague and me, distress twisting her face as she talked with us during our traditional exit interview. Generally, these interviews were a final moment to touch base with students who were on the edge of stepping out into the world as high school graduates. Sometimes there were sad tears as the thought of leaving the soft nest of high school theatre occurred to them. Many times, there was shared laughter at the retelling of favorite moments. This time, there was frustration and accusation.

Our student, on being asked to share any suggestions they might have to improve the program, gave us a laundry list of what was wrong with the department from her point of view. I was a bit taken aback. Had she not been part of award-winning one-act plays? Had she not been cast in everything for which she had auditioned? Had she not been an essential part of the department during her four years with us? A leader in our very large, active theatre department? Yes, to all of that.

What she hadn't done, she pointed out, was ever get cast as a character that had a name. Ouch. She was right.

"I've been a loyal member of this department for four years and I've never had a part that was a named character or had more than a few lines in a show. That's just not right," she said.

This was more than just sour grapes about casting. We've all endured that. You post the cast list on Friday afternoon and run out the door, so you don't have to hear the complaints.

You're just trying to get the best cast possible! And, in a large, active department like ours, there were always multiple students who could all do a great job in several different roles, so casting is an agonizing, difficult process. You choose who you think will get you the best quality show so that the community gets to see what your kids can do!

It's not even that we were casting the same students in leads over and over. We've all seen that kill the culture in departments and we had avoided that assiduously. We were fortunate to have built a large department and have a wide range of students who could carry a lead

or secondary role. This meant we were able to spread the wealth out to many different kids. We taught that having a leading role once didn't guarantee a leading role in the next show. Some of my proudest moments were seeing students that had leading roles in the past really dig into secondary characters and make them shine. We were doing a great job! Awards! Accolades! Community buy-in! A growing program!

Rethinking the Culture

Our upset student, however, caused us to sit back and rethink what was happening in the department in terms of our vision and mission and how we executed that for kids who weren't the leads. We were not a professional theatre or even a community theatre, where the mission was simply to put on the best show possible. We were an educational theatre, and our calling included providing educational opportunities to all students who expressed the interest. We were doing a great job educating and providing opportunities for that student who would probably go on to major in theatre. We weren't, however, providing those same supports and opportunities to the students who were committed but participating for fun. We were taking for granted that students would want to participate without that focus and attention.

Indeed, we had too many students want to participate. We put 168 students on stage during one of the musicals! Don't tell me we aren't including people! We were cramming everyone we could into shows to meet the demand. So, it was difficult to listen to what our student was saying. But we had been put on notice that we weren't educating everyone to the best of their ability and to the level they deserved in an educational setting. In his book, *Educational Theatre Management,* John E. Clifford posits the following:

> The paradox, however, is that the human institution of the theatre has important aesthetic values, and when it is part of an educational institution it loses many or most of its aesthetic values and takes on the educational values and functions of the school. Educational theatre, to be true to both terms, must be two things at once: theatre and educational. (p. 11, 1972)

Where had we gone wrong in trying to create something both theatrical and educational? Why had our student never had a character with a

name? Who else was not getting what they wanted and needed to experience?

In *School and Community Theater Management*, Lawrence Stern admonishes the readers in the very first paragraph:

> It is easy to overlook the importance of theatre education, because people tend to judge it solely by its productions. Its main purpose, however, is student development. (p. 3, 1979)

If our main purpose is student development (and my colleague and I were adamantly agreed about that), then additional questions surface; why had some of our most talented students never experienced the key skill of being an ensemble member? What was missing in the culture we had created that the educational calling consistently came in second to the artistic one, but only for some students? Did this culture cross over into the technical side? And, most importantly, what could we do about it?

The Solution: Increase the Types of Opportunities

The obvious answer of course, is more opportunities for stage time for all students. That answer however, felt suspiciously like a clarion call for adding at least one more show to the already-packed theatre department season. Doing that would mean spending even more time away from our homes and families. But the need was there, and it was real. If one student felt this lack of opportunity, then others did also, so we sat down and brainstormed to come up with solutions. What follows are some of our ideas and a bit about how they helped us correct the imbalance in our department and put educating all young artists back at the forefront of our high school theatre program. The answer we chose was to increase the types of opportunities we were placing in front of students.

In *Theatre in the Classroom, Grades 6-12; Methods and Strategies for the Beginning Teacher*, author Jim Patterson proposes offering a variety of ways to increase participation and opportunities as part of developing your production philosophy:

> In short, teachers must consider the extent of their commitment to developing new student work, providing opportunities for students to do advanced or difficult plays in small cast settings, and how

> new students will get stage time to develop skills and experience in the performing arts. (pp. 108-109, 2017)

In considering our season, we realized that one of the ways to increase the types of opportunities for all students while decreasing our possible additional workload was to use a junior musical rather than adding another full-length production. I know, I know, another show?

But junior musicals were a great response to our problem because they have several virtues; among them is the fact that they are shorter so require less rehearsal time. This meant less additional time in the building as we attempted to meet this new situation. In addition, junior musicals come with a director's book that have tons of suggestions about staging and technical aspects. They basically carry some of the mental load of producing a show if you choose to use their suggestions.

Using a junior musical turned out to be one of the best things we could have done for the department as a whole and not just as a solution to this issue. We chose the junior version of a popular musical and announced that everyone in the department could audition. But we also said that anyone who had previously been cast in a named character role in the department would only be eligible for the ensemble in this show. This meant that every named character would be played by an actor that had never had the opportunity to step up and get that stage time. It also meant that some of our already established triple threat actors would get to work on the crucial skill of being an ensemble member, a skill foreign to many of them.

Former student Hannah, now a stage management intern in New York, emphasized the wide variety of opportunities and skills the junior musical allowed her to practice.

> I think having those opportunities allowed for me to not only have the chance to get a variety of roles, but it also allowed for leadership opportunities. As a sophomore, being Mrs. Mayor in *Seussical*, *Junior* allowed for me to grow as an actor by having multiple chances to go through the work of creating a character. It allowed for people to start having leadership skills when sometimes students weren't given that chance in other places. I think because of the leadership opportunities with the younger students, I was able to feel confident in other things like stage

> management and production management. (personal communication)

This addition of the junior musical and the decision that lead/named roles were only for those who hadn't had one yet lit a fire among the performers in our department. We had students who had never gotten to polish their skills in a larger role suddenly able to get the attention and time they craved and deserved. It strengthened the equity for all performers across the department. Many of these new leading performers went on to get named and or leading roles in our other season offerings. Being in the junior musical had given them the practice and confidence in their skills that they had been lacking. It worked in two ways, really; students received increased and more personal direct instruction from us during rehearsals and we got to build those performer/director relationships that showed us we can depend on them as performers.

At first, our triple threat performers didn't audition as much for these junior shows, knowing they wouldn't get a leading or secondary role. Gradually though, they began auditioning anyway, just to be on stage. Working with them during and after the production, you could see how much they were learning as ensemble members. Watching them figure out how to focus audience attention during a scene, how best to support other performers, or sharpen their physical reactions to scenes in which they had no lines was stunning. Their awareness of stage pictures increased, they saw the need to develop their focus and attention. You could see them become exponentially better performers during the experience and many expressed their pure enjoyment at performing in a show with less pressure for them.

Former student Jack, who in his time with us was cast as The Baker in *Into the Woods* and Sweeney in *Sweeney Todd*, went on to get a degree in vocal music. His described his experience being in the ensemble for *Seussical*, *Junior* this way:

> I think for me, being ensemble in the junior musicals was a great opportunity to get more perspective on the shows as a whole. Of course, being a named role or lead brings its own rewards, but it can often feel like a much more singular or isolated experience. It's a shift of priorities. You're no longer so focused on making your performance the best it can be, you're making sure the show as a

> whole is the best it can be. You get to see (and remember) the show a bit more holistically and honestly, I think. (personal communication)

Not only did this new addition to the department boost all the performers, but it also changed the culture of the department and the role of the department in the school. Students who previously didn't bother to invite friends and family to see them in small roles now had many people coming into the theatre, so ticket sales increased across the season. Friendships blossomed between groups of students, with our junior show leading performers seeing those performers in the ensemble as people who were willing to do all the work of theatre instead of just the leading role work. This one decision boosted the overall skill level of our department and increased the quality of all shows across the board. It also gradually lessened disappointment with casting choices as students realized how much talent there was in the department. They began cheering for each other when the cast lists were posted.

The first two years of this new addition did mean more work for us and for the department. But, as the popularity of the junior musical grew, we were able to bring in guest directors and support our most mature students as they student-directed some of these productions. The junior musicals always sold well and were self-supporting from the start after the first production, so they added to the bottom line of the department in a positive way.

The additional benefit of the junior musical was it proved to be a very positive thing for our technical theatre students. We took the same approach with student designers for these productions as we had for performers. Only those who hadn't previously gotten to design were selected to design for these shows. This meant we had students designing and realizing sets, costumes, props and lighting designs as early as 10th grade. Their technical portfolios increased in complexity and the content deepened. We added younger students as stage managers, board ops, and spotlight ops. Suddenly our technical theatre bench was deeper and better prepared to take on a "mainstage" production as juniors and seniors. There are multiple technical students whose first design was with us as a sophomore who are now working professionally in technical theatre or are in a collegiate technical theatre degree program.

Former student Adam, now in his senior year of a BFA in technical theatre program states:

> Having that design experience (set design, Honk, Junior) definitely helped me understand more clearly what a theatre set designer is truly expected to do. Sure, I didn't necessarily fulfill all of the aspects that are expected from a professional set designer. But going through the design process from research images to hand drafting was really eye opening and helpful for me. Not only did it help me get 90 call backs at SETC for undergraduate programs, but it helped me once I started working within a BFA program. (personal communication)

Another decision we made to increase the types of opportunities for performers was to encourage our 11th grade directing students to cast primarily 9th and 10th graders as performers in our annual 10-minute play festival. Where previously all students were encouraged to audition, changing the guidelines ensured that interested younger students got to experience carrying a show very early in their high school career. Making it a 10-minute show meant they got to practice all the skills with less time required from them.

This decision cost us no extra time as the 10-minute play festival was already a part of the season as a class project in one of the advanced theatre classes. Focusing on those younger performers provided a showcase for their talents and a way to practice their skills. It also gave them a short look at the production process in the department, so they learned the department-wide warm up routine, worked with a stage manager, learned how to adjust in the move from rehearsal space to performance space, and what was expected of them in tech rehearsals.

This shift in the focus of the project ensured that everyone who wanted stage time as a freshman or sophomore got it. Some of the performers even acted in two different 10-minute productions, although we drew the line at no more than two for scheduling purposes. As a result, we kept the interest of more freshmen students as they didn't feel like they had to wait to get cast. This in turn, upped the course requests, increasing our numbers in class. Since the auditions were open to the whole school, we also saw an increase in the numbers of students who weren't signed up for a class participating in theatre

through these 10-minute plays.

As with the junior musical, we added younger students to the 10-minute plays as stage managers, designers, board ops and technicians. This increased the early interest in our technical theatre program and started students on the road to being leaders in the department earlier in their school career.

In his 1996 doctoral dissertation which examined how students develop leadership skills through participation in theatre, Kent Seidel found that, “The combination of collaborative artistic work and the day-to-day operations of the program results in the students learning to build community, a key skill for leaders to possess” (p. iii, 1996). We found this this held true for our younger tech students. Given the chance to lead in one area, they began to show up and lead in other areas as well, such as showing up to auditions to help organize and run them. Many of our student department production managers, an indispensable role, were students who had these early opportunities to be leaders in the 10-minute play production process.

It also allowed students to easily explore more than one technical area without a huge commitment. This lower time commitment brought in students from other departments such as visual arts and CTE classes to explore being part of the technical theatre program. Former student Corinne served as our student production manager her senior year. She has since earned a BFA in lighting and is working as part of a large staff for a community-based arts center. She believes that using 10-minute plays to encourage younger students in design and technical areas allowed students a safe space to explore technical theatre:

> Being able to stage manage or design for a 10-minute play instead of the big musical did a couple of things. First, it allowed people to try a new part of theatre with low stakes. If they found they didn’t like it, they could say they tried and move on. Second, it gave us the opportunity to develop technical skills on a smaller scale. If they fell in love with technical theatre, they were able to learn the basics and build on them rather than being thrown head-first, with little to no experience, on the biggest show of the school year. (personal communication)

Conclusion: Solutions Create a Better Balance

These two solutions to a problem we didn't know we had didn't simply address students getting more stage time or more backstage time. They broadened they types of experiences students could have and lowered the stakes, allowing them to experiment a bit. They absolutely shifted the focus of our after-school productions to more clearly center on arts education for all students, no matter their skill level. The balance of student work in the department changed to a more holistic, inclusive approach. The solutions enabled us to meet students at their level and support them as they practiced skills necessary to take the next big step and assisted us by providing a structure to include all students in a more equitable manner.

The benefits to the department were obvious. We had better prepared performers, technical staff with deeper, more complex knowledge and skills and more positive attitudes about the casting process. It promoted student leadership among more students and contributed to a sense of ownership about the department. It contributed to increased class enrollments and brought in students who weren't in theatre classes to participate in the after-school productions.

It also lifted the skill levels of our already high-achieving performers, giving them the real-world skills needed to compete as a beginning university or professional performer. They saw their process from another point of view, and they gained more realistic insights into their place in the wider world of theatre and performance.

Not all students will go on to major in theatre or become professional performers or theatre designers or technicians. I think we can agree that most won't do any of those things professionally. But, in an educational setting, all students deserve the chance to design or to have a character with a name. Not only do they deserve it, but it also turns out it's good for the whole department as well.

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