JCBP

Notes From the Field: Identity, Inclusion, Intimacy Choreography and Cultural Competence

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Notes From the Field: Identity, Inclusion, Intimacy Choreography, and Cultural Competence

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This issue was collaboratively edited by Amanda Rose Villarreal, Cessalee Smith-Stovall, and Mya Brown

Call for Papers

The *Journal of Consent-Based Performance* invites artists, educators, and scholars engaged with consent-based performance—in theory or in practice—to interrogate our existing practices and propose new ideas in pursuit of increasingly more equitable, ethical, anti-oppressive, and effective consent-based practices within our field. In our endeavor to promote the work of all individuals engaged in improving the intimacy specialization fields, we invite authors to submit any writings centered upon consent-based performance practices. We encourage authors to submit essays that do the work of:

- Analyzing or interrogating current or past understandings of and approaches to performed intimacy and consent—in theory or in practice
- Questioning or commenting upon the practices that are currently being used to establish consent within performance, modeling continuous adjustment of artistic praxis
- Introducing or investigating theories related to consent and power imbalances in other fields, contextualizing these theories' potential impact upon the further development of consent-based performance
- Documenting the evolution of consent-based performance and similar intimacy specializations throughout history and our current moment
- Analyzing or responding to artistic productions and writings that engage with simulated intimacy and/or the processes that shape these works.

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The Convergence of Consent and Cultural Competence While Staging Intimacy: Editors' Comments

In *Actions Speak Louder: A Step-by-Step Guide to Becoming an Inclusive Workplace,* author Deanna Singh acknowledges that privilege and cultural biases are inherited, comparing privilege to fine China that the inheritor can choose to hoard and defend and display as a symbol of status, or share with guests. Singh acknowledges that the privileges we inherit are varied and do not, in and of themselves, reflect upon the inheritor, writing:

> *When talking about 'privilege,' [the author] won't imply that the people who have things like native-born, Christian, or neurotypical social identities automatically have a life of ease. Furthermore, having any kind of privilege doesn't mean someone intentionally stole advantages from another or consciously participates in immoral actions that ensure others suffer disadvantages. Certain social contexts privilege certain social identities. Regardless of who we are, what we think, or what we do, just showing up in particular social contexts with specific social identities gives us certain kinds of privileges.* (7)

For performance artists and educators, each class or production comprises its own "particular social context" within which our own social identities can increase or decrease our privilege. Working as a faculty member, one may have far greater privilege in a classroom than in a faculty meeting, for example. Establishing this, Singh's second chapter, titled "Check Yourself: Diversifying Your Business Thinking" utilizes multiple case studies and anecdotes to clarify the ways in which culturally uninformed practices add to bias, working to centralize privilege–to hoard the fine china. Meanwhile, Singh argues, cultural competence and remembering that the criteria each workspace uses to define 'professionalism' are culturally and socially specific can improve not only individuals' experiences within our processes, but can improve the financial stability and marketability of the organizations we are working within.

Many theatre artists and educators may balk at company-centered language, but the editors of this issue start there so that we may highlight how "family" oriented language can be combined with cultural incompetence to disempower participants. In a recent online research working group hosted by Alexandra Haddad, Theatrical Intimacy Education, and Purdue University, Gloria Imseih Petrelli highlighted the ways in which this verbiage is utilized, using the example of "friends and family discounts" to illustrate how the concept of "we're all family" is often used as an argument to pay theatre practitioners–especially femme-presenting persons of color–less, by manipulating participants to endure more and accept less in return. Similarly, Haddad named the "passion project tax," which Greg Geffrard elaborated as the "meaningful project tax." Geffrard described this phenomenon: "when a project speaks to your identity and really excites you, you really want to be there to represent, and to ensure they're telling the story about your community with respect. Then, [the producers] know they can compensate you less than you deserve, because the project is important to you." Haddad added that this is exacerbated when the artist in question is less-resourced or carries less privilege.

All of this is to say that, yes, whether we like to think of ourselves this way or not, we are in *the business* of creating art, and we need to begin reckoning with the fact that as performance arts

organizations, institutions, and producing entities, our business practices have–like all other fields–been informed by a long inheritance of socially specific beliefs and values shaped by the nation and community within which we work. Most often–at least in the US–this inheritance is limited in its understanding of cultural contexts outside of white, cis, hetero, neurotypical, Christian cultures. And while we have no power over what we've inherited, it is up to us to determine what we pass on. And because consent is always hyper-specific to the individual artist and their personal, professional, physical, and cultural boundaries, those of us seeking to inform and utilize consent-based practices must choose to pass on more awareness around our cultural competencies and our lack thereof, so that the practices we pass on serve to feed, rather than to keep our current privilege in the display hutch, out of reach.

The editors of this issue acknowledge the Bennett model of Intercultural Sensitivity, which requires awareness of other individuals' experiences and cultures as the entry point for cultural competence.

Cultural competence is not a one-off event; nor is it accomplishable, as cultures are constantly shifting, impacted by local specifics, and multifaceted. The editors of this issue reject the notion that any single individual's experience is a substitute for the deep connections that must be made and maintained in order for an individual to build cultural sensitivity and awareness. Using the *Bennett model of Intercultural Sensitivity*, Cultural Competence requires at minimum awareness, but ideally deep and meaningful integration. Being able to reach integration requires a multitude of verbal, environmental and non-verbal conversations to occur that help to uplift safety, articulate and respond to access needs, and establish a baseline level of trust and a culture of belonging. Without those basic steps, the assumption of cultural competence is derailed even before the work begins.

Acknowledging that no one individual's experience can speak for an entire community, the editors have curated a collection of experiences that we hope will serve as a reminder of the vast multidimensionality of intersecting identities that impact our lived cultural experiences and the ways in which we communicate and create. We hope these six Notes From the Field can serve as an invitation to consider the cultural competencies we hold and those we lack outside of the limitations of a binary, encouraging our consideration to include the vast and intersecting cultural identities that inform the multidimensionality of each individual artist. We hope that this selection of Notes serves as an invitation to recognize, and reflect upon the value of, our own lived cultural competencies, rather than assuming that these cultural competencies are shared by all of our collaborators. Simultaneously, we hope these Notes will inspire increased questioning and research related to specific approaches and supports to consent-based performance that can further the development of culturally sustaining practices that not only support, but elevate, the multifaceted and pluricultural identities of all artists.

We open this issue with Emily Kitchens's "Puppy Love and [Information] Play." This Note illustrates one faculty director's journey of recognizing a gap in their own cultural competence and the ways in which working to learn about and actively include cultural competency impacted the artistic process. In reflecting upon her process, Kitchens models ways that faculty and directors can

acknowledge and seek to overcome our own lack of cultural competency, and how artists can work to respectfully include others' cultural competence when it is offered.

Joy Brooke Fairfield's "The Scope of Practice in India Today" then presents an interview with Aastha Khanna, who has been hailed by Indian media as the first intimacy choreographer in Bollywood. This note serves as a reflection of the ways in which intimacy choreography can become flexible to serve the varying needs of different national, local, legal, or artistic cultures, communities, and production practices. This piece highlights the ways in which cultural expectations related to genre and form can be included in intimacy practice, rather than imposing one approach on all artistic communities.

Matthias Bolon's "Awareness in Casting" presents readers with an artist's reflection on their experience as a trans individual performing a gender not their own. This Note presents a lens on gender inclusivity that has not been widely explored, while offering tools that supported this actor in the process of performing a role that does not align with his gender. Bolon offers a kit of tools so that other educators and artists considering casting someone to play a character of a gender that fuels the actor's dysphoria may use these tools as guidance or as starting points. The tools presented offer practical steps collaborators can take to support genderqueer artists; the tools presented relate to communication, casting, costuming, and other supports that may be needed throughout the production process.

"Devising in Hawai'i" by Michael Poblete, PhD, presents an artist educator's concerns and experience with facilitating devising processes with students not of his own culture. In this Note, Poblete reflects on his own practice and on the ways that Eurocentric devising practices can intersect with–and incorporate–the culture of participants. Poblete centers students' agency in the creative process, and then reflects upon and analyzes the resulting work, considering the analysis of local artists who share the students' culture. Poblete highlights the artistic and interpersonal value of approaching devising with intercultural awareness, by acknowledging one's own cultural competence and lack thereof, and by centering care when seeking to uplift collaborators' cultures within the devising process and devised product.

"Am I Halo-Halo? Finding the Filipino-American Re-Storying Framework Through Consent" introduces a new framework developed by author Matt Denney, created to support culturally sustaining practices for Filipino-American artists. Denney highlights the cultural specificity of first-generation Filipino-Americans, calling readers to think beyond overgeneralizations such as "Asian" and to consider the ways in which we can offer individualized, specific, and culturally sustaining support for diverse artists and collaborators.

Finally, Elaine Brown's "Fawning, Masking, and Working as an Intimacy Professional on the Autism Spectrum" invites readers to consider the cultural competency required to facilitate collaboration with neurodiverse artists. This Note reflects upon the author's own experience learning about and working in intimacy choreography as a person on the autism spectrum, and calls readers to consider the ways in which our work can impact, and be impacted by, neurodiversity. Brown's Note highlights common misconceptions, asking artists and educators to recognize the ways in which these generalizations hinder their collaboration with neurodiverse artists. This note reminds us to consider

the ways in which our own lack of certain cultural competencies may impact our collaborators when we do not realize their multifaceted and diverse identities.

Established societal systems and institutions are complicit in the erasure and concealment of the struggles marginalized artists face which further exacerbates their challenges to work in a safer and braver environment. A sense of safety is a minimum baseline for an artist to do their best and most fully realized work. As Rikard and Villarreal acknowledge, “a person who is marginalized is already, and always, carving out a brave space within and for themselves, not by choice, but as a requirement created by a world, a society, and an industry that was not created with them in mind” (6). These Notes have been curated to highlight the ways in which we can acknowledge, and work to address, our industry’s current lack of culturally inclusive practices, while seeking to expand our industry’s mind in consideration of the multidimensional identities our collaborators bring into each room. The editors present this collection of notes as reminders for us to acknowledge our lack of cultural competence with humility, elevate the identities of those who have been historically and systematically excluded, and create structures to support those who have had to carve out brave spaces for themselves. This issue aims to highlight how diversity, equity, inclusion, and cultural competence require thinking beyond binary identity markers, recognizing the many intersecting identities every individual inhabits, and working to alter inherited practices, whether by utilizing tools or frameworks such as those our authors introduce, or by taking other purposeful action to support one another.

Because the status quo that we have inherited should not be passed on unchallenged.

Amanda Rose Villarreal, Cessalee Smith-Stovall, and Mya Brown
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Puppy *Love and* [*Information*] Play: An Intersection of Theatre, Queer Kink, and Consent

Emily Kitchens—*Kennesaw State University*

About the Author:

Emily Kitchens (she/her), MFA, is a theatre artist based out of NYC and Atlanta and is currently Assistant Professor of Acting at Kennesaw State University. She has acted in contemporary and classical works with theaters including: American Conservatory Theater, Yale Repertory Theatre, The Kennedy Center, The Guthrie Theater, Berkeley Repertory Theatre, The Denver Center for the Performing Arts, The Alliance Theatre. Her original works have been performed in NYC, the Bay Area, Edinburgh, Berlin, and Leesburg, GA. Her writing appears in *American Theatre*, *Brooklyn Rail*, *Women & Performance: a journal of feminist theory*. MFA: ACT. BFA: University of Evansville. She is mother to Ramrao.

Introduction

This note from the field centers on a nexus of queer kink subcultures and consent-based intimacy work in theatre. Importantly, as I detail process, learnings, and craft, I note that I am a white, queer, cisgendered woman not currently living with a disability[1]. What follows was, in effect, my introduction to queer kink subcultures; I'm not a kinkster and have never been in a BDSM "scene." Thus, although trailblazing theorists, artists and scholars have been doing revelatory deep dives into the sexual, racial, political, and performative intersections of BDSM (see, for example: Cruz 2016; Flanagan 1993; Leiser 2019), my introduction to these intersections was as a performing artist who recently incorporated queer kink aesthetics in theatrical work, and I find myself compelled to report and investigate the ways in which cultural competency impacted our process. This note shares potentially useful instances of collective learning, accountability, and playfulness to investigate methods for culture-building around consent-based performance practices. I'm reminded of a time a former cast member of mine retorted with an audience member in a post-show talkback—"It's called a play, not a serious." I see a theoretical generative alignment of kink and theatre as descendants of the bonds of performance and play, but what I have learned and hope to demonstrate throughout this paper, is that queer kink subcultures can be paradigmatic examples of communities built on consent, and we as performing arts practitioners can more visibly expand the margins of our cultural and emotional competency dialogues to not only include them but look to them as productive modes to investigate relationships of power, embodiment, and performance.

First, I will provide contextual information about the play we worked on, including some specifics about process, approach, and personnel. Then I'll wrangle with some of our rehearsal experiences and the intentions and impacts involved. I will contend that learning about queer kink subcultures was an avenue into productive embodiments of consent, and I will invite space for more scholars and artists to explore kinky intimacy work in the performing arts as kinksters and non-kinksters.[2]

Collaborative Framework and Concepts

I directed a university production of *Love and Information*[3] by Caryl Churchill in February 2023. Though it is one of Churchill's most recent works, I was unfamiliar with the play until the previous year's production season selection process. As one of the coordinators of the Acting Concentration in my university's theatre department, I was hunting for scripts that were inherently

inclusive of abundant intersectional identities in their casting possibilities, and I came across it. The more I talked about the play, the more I realized I might like to direct it, as it speaks pretty loudly to my personal aesthetic. Its intentionally sparse format and open given circumstances demand principles we prize most in our training program: critical thinking, problem solving, and collaboration.

With fifty-seven short plays, more with the optional “Random” section, as dictated by the playwright, we’re not living in a *Love Actually* (Curtis 2003) or *Valentine’s Day* (Marshall 2010) movie world where everything ties into each other or people know each other in different stories. The playwright has made it clear—these are separate and distinct worlds. Quite possibly the trap of this piece is to try to connect them all. So, we became interested in divesting from a familiar and often patriarchal five-act play structure and investing in the pieces/fragments/short plays that make up a whole. I felt we got to lean into its queerness.

We saw relatable and modern context for this notion in Instagram: scrolling social media—posts or stories— is being in one world/short play after another. You are an audience to a good friend’s baby, followed by an ad about underwear, followed by pictures of an ex’s trip to Prague. The only thing that links these experiences to each other is me—my scrolling session—however long or short it may be. We invited audiences to experience this play as an Instagram feed—scrolling through distinctly different posts/stories/plays.

Importantly, at its core, this play is about what it is called—love and information. It’s impossible to divorce technology from the way information and, arguably, love are relayed in our modern contexts. To that end, our production team was interested in accessibility in communication. We used a web captioner, and audiences observed words of the piece appearing on the screen as they were being spoken. It is meaningful to identify that our live supertitles, though moving in the direction of inclusionary theatre, were by no means a perfect solution or accommodation. They did reflect a preliminary experiment into how we can bring live theatre to life for more people's diverse backgrounds and experiences, influenced in part by Carolyn Lazard’s powerful treatise on “Accessibility and the Arts” (2019).

What precedes is prudent for understanding choices within the design process, approaches in the rehearsal room, and experimental goals for the audience’s experience. With this design idea of an Instagram feed, there were strong world-building impulses from our collaborative team made up of students, faculty and professional artists with diverse intersectional identities. We followed

our creative noses, so to speak. The scent of what was interesting led to many of our earliest drafts of worlds. A rave for a short play called "Secret," a content creator's youtube feed with screens for another called "The Child Who Didn't Know Fear," and so on. Our costume designer, Andrew, volleyed up a BDSM "puppy play scene" for the piece that is called "Dog." This is the short play in its entirety:

> ***DOG***
>
> *Come. Sit. Stay. Come. Good dog. Fetch. Drop it. Fetch. Good dog. Roll over. Good dog. Come. Heel. No. Come.* (Churchill 2013)

I'm ignorant as to whether this is a common design interpretation of this moment in the script, but he conceived of this puppy play as a vibrantly pink, almost Gibson Girl femme in a BDSM scene with a pup in a leather dog mask, mesh shirt, boots, and leash.

Andrew Hobson. "Dog," *Love and Information,* 2023.

Pup Play: A Queer Kink Subculture

As we would learn and discuss, puppy (or pup) play is a type of role-play behavior in which adult humans adopt the characteristics of dogs often with specialist gear (Wignall & McCormack 2017). It largely stems out of the broader BDSM (bondage and discipline, domination and

submission, and sadomasochism) community, and there is burgeoning research that it is best understood phenomenologically as a kink "postmodern-subculture" (Lawson & Langdridge 2020, 574). Wignall and McCormack define "kink" as "the collection of activities that involve the mutually consensual and conscious use, among two or more people of pain, power, perceptions about power, or any combination thereof, for psychological, emotional, or sensory pleasure" (2017, 801).

I'm totally game for the design offering from our costume designer. I love that he had this strong impulse. The rendering is already a postmodern work of art—totally gorgeous and subverting cultural expectations, almost invoking the work of Guillermo Gómez-Peña[4] in its "cyber-punk" blurring of borders aesthetic. I also think," Whew, I'm so glad we had the opportunity to budget for an intimacy coordinator to facilitate this work." As the director, not only was I faced with my lack of familiarity with kink cultures, but I saw relational choices depicted in the design that suggested enactment in some fashion or other for which I wanted more support.

From jump, we wanted to bring on board an intimacy coordinator because, though there was much conceptual openness about what each of these worlds would be, the thematic subject matter of love (and information) implicitly lent to the inclusion of intimacy or the deliberate exclusion of intimacy. Furthermore, there were a few worlds that were at least somewhat textually interested in touch. Moreover, I'm personally becoming an advocate that this is invaluable personnel in any rehearsal process—if solely as a third eye on the text pointing to dialogues around consent. We lucked into an amazing Atlanta-based professional intimacy coordinator, Ash,[5] willing to dig in with us. We started the rehearsal process with workshopping consent-based spaces together on our feet, particularly focusing on defining boundaries with ourselves and each other. I think this paved multiple pathways to a trusting environment, flexibility, transparency in creative collaboration, and care.

Adrien, the student actor playing the pup partner in "Dog," approached me after the company design presentation about snickering and unfortunate comments from some cast members in reference to the design for "Dog." Adrien is a trans man and was completing his senior year. He believed the nature of their discomfort came from being uninformed on queer kink, and he wanted to address it head on. He volunteered to prepare a few words for our subsequent tablework rehearsal, and I wholeheartedly invited his perspective. In the moment, I think I mostly saw Adrien's impulse as a gesture of care for the rehearsal room and of modeling transparency of

communication. Hindsight has exposed to me my shortsightedness about the heavy cultural competency lifting Adrien generously undertook, as a trans person, an actor, and a student. Adrien educated those involved in the process, teaching us that there are many motivating factors of kink:

> There are lots of people who are in the kink community for various reasons. The way the world treats gay folks, trans and nonbinary people, and those on the Asexual spectrum can be deeply traumatizing. And a lot of these people turn to kink as a way to express themselves sexually that doesn't trigger that trauma. Kink, when practiced correctly, is all about mutual respect, establishing and maintaining boundaries, and rejecting the heterosexual binary.[6]

Admittedly, I had no clue about the nuanced sociological debate and scholarly work on kink subcultures.[7] Indeed, investigating the pup play subculture was an opportunity for my personal queer identity to expand and to queer, as I was confronted with some of my own heteronormative and queernormative (see Fielding 2020) societal ideals. As Wignall and McCormack articulate, there has traditionally been a contested pathological classification of kink activities. They go on to highlight the problems of that model and cite another sociological research point on kink: "The community is a rich and complex social organization constructed around an immersive recreational pursuit" (Newmahr 2011; Wignall & McCormack 2017). Though I probably wouldn't go as far as to say "pathological," I had osmosed the pop culture BDSM tropes perpetuated by *50 Shades of Grey*. Any notion of pup play I had was that it is a gay male kink. And though aware of the manifold manifestations of perversion in queer culture, I had lumped kinks and fetishes into purely sexual preferences. Though there may be some nuanced unpacking of truths to do in my assumptions, I hadn't acknowledged the intersectional belonging possible in perversion, that Ariane Cruz highlights as a realignment of "perversion in a way that queers—lays bare and denaturalizes—the discursive mechanisms of sexuality as a technology of power to contest the terms of intimacy" (2016, 13). I hadn't acknowledged consensual community and care.

> Puppy packs and communities, like other BDSM communities, are not groupings brought together through biology or cultural expectation but instead freely chosen and egalitarian caring relationships…They bring considerable comfort and support, as well as sexual pleasure and fun, within a mutually sustaining commitment, and are sustained on that basis alone. (Langdridge & Lawson 2019)

When I think about subcultures, my mind immediately goes to surfers, folx who are living life by the tides. I think about rock climbers ascending the next peak. Language and gesture get formed and evolve as a function of the specific relational aspects of the sport and its members.

Cecilia Cutler writes, “Language plays a key role in the creation and maintenance of subcultures as a way to signal distinctiveness” (2006, 236). BDSM scholar Ayesha Kaak establishes there is a common language of consent within BDSM kink communities (2016). Among a few other variations, the terms “Safe, Sane and Consensual (SSC)” and “Risk-Aware Consensual Kink (RACK)” are popular acronyms articulating the philosophical model.[8]

A Messy Coherence

All design, dramaturgical and performance-related “Dog” conversations continued to be complex, very raw, with lots of feelings throughout the collaborative team—some folx being changed and engaged by Adrien’s address to the group; some folx finding a great excitement in pursuing a kink depiction in a somewhat simultaneously realistic and surrealistic frame; some finding an emotional resonance from lived experience; some not really having any point of reference and interested in learning; some voicing thoughts as in “no matter what you do, people are going to laugh if you go on stage in a dog mask with a leash around your neck,” or “people are going to feel really uncomfortable,” or “are you really going to use a riding crop?” or “isn’t this inappropriate?” or “I feel like my peers are going to construe things about me if I am on stage for this”; some calling into question the efficacy of Andrew’s design, that perhaps if we saw a more realistic depiction of a pup play scene audiences would take it more seriously. One of the student dramaturgs advocated to me privately that they didn’t want to lead the dramaturgical support on this scene. And in these specific conversations around kink, I always felt led back to a mental exercise around power dynamics being immediately real. Real as in the essence of the BDSM subculture we’re representing and in the collaborative process we’re engaging as diverse individuals belonging to all kinds of cultural and subcultural identities that occupy a spectrum of systemic societal privilege and disenfranchisement. In practice, there are many intersections of power and consent in a rehearsal room. Not the least of which are projected or actual hierarchies within a creative ecosystem. I can do everything I’ve learned to care for others ’individual nervous systems[9] and felt sense of safety or trust in a rehearsal process, and still there are power dynamics at play purely by being a director/teacher in the room. We had already invited boundary-setting language into the process. I felt we were activating deep listening to each other by prioritizing nuanced, open conversations and acknowledging gaps of cultural and emotional competencies as Adrien had embodied. We had united in practices of respect in the form of community agreements and access needs. And though there was an undercurrent of consent primacy running through our

work, I wondered if explicitly naming the nature of (projected) collaborative power dynamics (e.g. teacher, director, designer, actor, student, etc) at the beginning of a rehearsal process would offer additional alignment of mutuality and boundaries? Does that level of transparency further support choice of participation as it seems to in consensual kink agreements?

I was experiencing accountability as a symptom of being in a position of authority, and sometimes it was just plain challenging. I was afraid of causing unintentional harm. I felt my limitations of facilitating often powerfully intersectional discourse. I wondered if we would cut "Dog" out of the show: it is in the optional "Random" section of the piece. Even though the costume shop had begun building the elaborate pieces for "Dog," I wondered if the moment of the whole play it occupied was worth the amount of time and energy in conversation, research, and discomfort we were giving it. Would any of this matter to an audience?

And therein lies another useful thread of interrogating craft and the nature of consent within the performing arts: we can never predict exactly what an audience will take away from any given performance. Even if we try to spoon-feed precision, the ephemera of a live art form includes, "How is this landing with this make up of individuals that is today's audience?" Essentially, is an audience consenting to a dose of the unknown by showing up to live art? I have counted that as a productive thing about theatre—the continuous practice of letting go of control, a rehearsal of faith. This perspective becomes problematized looking through the lens of queer kink where the interchange of power, pain and pleasure necessitate consent above all else. How are we taking care of the audience as well as this grouping of artists? For those of us in the performing arts, this echoes in the age-old process and product dialectic, compounded in an educational environment in a Capitalist country.

Teresa De Lauretis writes in her iconic introduction to *differences* (Vol 3 Issue 2) on queer theory:

> The differences made by race in self-representation and identity argue for the necessity to examine, question, or contest the usefulness and/or the limitations of current discourses on lesbian and gay sexualities, be those discourses dominant, or be they separatist, emergent, or oppositional. Those differences urge the reframing of the questions of queer theory from different perspectives, histories, experiences, and in different terms. (1991, x)

In the performing arts, I see exploring intersectional constructs of queer kink subcultures as another lens in which to investigate the "usefulness and limitations" of our current systems and

organization: ways we scrutinize, imagine, and rethink relationships with an audience; intentional and unspoken hierarchies in rehearsal processes; language and rhetoric; and structure of performance texts and training models.

This is the moment that was a sort of messy coherence of theatre, kink and consent for me. Midway through the process the actor playing the femme handler in “Dog” found me and said privately, "I thought that I was okay, but actually I don't feel comfortable doing this scene." Even though we were weeks into rehearsal, I counted that as a real win for the process: this actor being able to take space. Hopefully, particularly in an educational environment, we get these moments to affirm, "I hear you. Thank you for coming to me. *You* are making a choice. This is a powerful example of consent, of feeling like you are autonomous in this process to decline, to say no." The actor needed those weeks of process to know their boundaries. There was another actor that jumped at the chance to be in the scene, "Absolutely, yes, I want to do this." Facilitating the transition of partners felt very delicate; it was something that had to be cared for, albeit imperfectly, with affirming and complex conversations.

Because we had started the process with workshopping embodied consent, I believe we as a subculture of makers were set up to become literate with its language. Our language of consent was learning new spaces for simultaneously holding, "I'm uncomfortable with this" and, to borrow a surfer term, “I’m stoked for this.” We're setting ourselves up for embodiment of our own autonomy through active choice. In fact, I felt more autonomous to embrace the queerness of the original design, subverting any “normative” perception of a pup play scene. Somatically, we might say that an embodied experience of autonomy lays foundations of support for intimacy. From this place, there can be an experience of the paradigm shift from "I have a body" to "I am a body.”[10] I experience the sensation of my body walls, where I begin and end. I acknowledge and respect my individual process, as well as another’s. Interestingly, this can often invite more of a feeling of the impersonal—in a useful way. I experience more freedom with connections to others, and partnering exchanges come and go with ease having a felt sense of my autonomy.

Imperfect Intention and Imperfect Impacts

Our intimacy coordinator had a reflection that in theatre, TV, or film we never see the moment before the BDSM ‘scene. ’The moment of getting ready. The moment of nerves or excitement and establishing consent of the events to follow. They advised that kink gets to be very

taboo in performance because we focus on the sexual act not the humans involved. So, they had this idea of "Dog" actually being a sort of rehearsal of what was to come as the partners are getting each other dressed and ready. That the femme handler is rehearsing her lines, "Come, sit, stay…" with a degree of nerves as she adjusts her partner's mask and collar, then there's a moment of caring touch from the partner playing the pup to slow her down and a sweet affirming kiss. The 'scene 'begins with the final word, "Come." As the actors assume dominant and submissive positions, the lights blackout. This was the choreography we developed with Ash and the actors, and when we got costumes in the room, we had to make a few adjustments to communicate the story of care. The dog mask's closure mechanism was different than we had thought and holding a parasol and riding crop just got complicated. We simplified. We opted for using the parasol in a way a BDSM scene might incorporate a riding crop. It was a great reminder of the moving pieces of collaborative art forms and of given circumstances being an opportunity for critical thinking. I remember the first time we did a run-through with this moment in the context of the whole play, I was in tears because the actors were in such care of each other. In this production of a play called *Love and Information*, I felt definitively this part of it is about love.

For me, another takeaway of working with putting queer kink culture on stage in *Love and Information,* even in a tiny little moment, is to ask the question: Is it love? Is it motivated by love? And of course, the answer doesn't have to be yes. But isn't it an interesting question? Couldn't it be a useful point of investigation in this kind of work? Is there love here? In this scene between the characters? Or as an actor with my scene partner? Or self-love, me to myself? Or more globally with the audience? In an acting class, can I give that as a sub question in "what do I want?"[11]: 'Where is the love? 'We started to ask that question in working on each short play. Potentially, love roots craft in positive actions. I remember being taught in grad school that positive actions are very interesting, especially when they're harder to choose.[12] I loved relearning that through engaging and gaining more competence with kink culture in this play. In that way, love is perverse and queers. Love as a word can come with baggage and mean many things. I know that it's not going to be so useful for everyone, but in this context and with these people, I found it mostly was. It set us up for care, inquiry, and growth, as well as holding space for different opinions, feelings and embodiments.

Reflecting on audience's responses to our interpretation of "Dog," I can say there was a gamut of mundane to excitable reactions. It is such a brief moment in a sea of brief moments that

I imagine for some folx the whole play was an experiment of short-term memory retention. Because of the university setting, there were friends and peers in the audience whispering, guffawing, clapping, and lots of contemplative "hmmmm's." And then there was the occasional reflection of surprise—that the moment caught them off guard. I heard things like, "I was surprised how tender and pretty it was." "It was sweetly subversive." Somebody reflected after seeing the show that they were glad to see kink depicted in something that felt real. And I often ponder the impacts of a political intention Adrien laid out, "I think it's extremely important to represent kink on stage, to show a partially naked trans body on stage, and to openly acknowledge the importance of kink in altering what we as a society consider socially acceptable sex." I wonder how that translated to an audience. Did representation and approach plant a societal seed, as Adrien proposes?

Conclusion

Exploring pup play in *Love and Information*, we found various loci of consent with theory and embodiment. Traversing a theatrical process necessitating cultural competence with a queer kink subculture amplified the intersectional, nuanced and sometimes surprising power dynamics in a rehearsal room. Indeed, it prioritized consent at most turns in our making, which organized space for emergence of boundaries, integrational spirit, and aesthetic innovation. Going forward, I think there's more to learn as collaborative artists from these subcultures built on consent. There's more to be studied in these ecosystems that embrace and embody the elevated stakes of consent in power dynamics that applies to intersectional anti-oppression work navigating positionalities in creative spaces—be it a rehearsal room, a performance, a conversation. Additionally, I think creating informed spaces to problematize the heteronormative societal ideas of perversion can craft more complexities in the work of the artist. It feels messy and productive. More than anything, I hope this note from the field is an invitation for more visible dialogue on queer kink in the performing arts. I'd love to hear from others, scholars and artists doing this work. What are you learning? How's it going?

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[1] As many researchers on reflexivity argue, power dynamics situate knowledge, and I remark particularly in a director/facilitator role with a combination of students and theatre professionals. I know that even as I work to uncover and eradicate unconscious and conscious biases in myself, they exist.

[2] Though “kinkster” is a term heard popularly, I probably first heard it on Savage Love, Dan Savage's podcast

[3] I'd like to acknowledge and thank the cast, crew, designers, production team, and faculty and staff for all the dedicated work on this production. Where I reference personnel, I have sought and been granted permission to use their names and contributions. I’d like to specifically thank Tom Fish, PhD, as KSU resident dramaturg and his mentorship to the student dramaturgs on this production, as well as his invaluable collaborative spirit.

[4] Samples of Guillermo Gómez-Peña’s illustrious work can be seen on the artist’s website https://www.guillermogomezpena.com

[5] Ash Anderson is a tremendous human and resource in this work. More on them here

[6] Adrien Kay graciously sent these words to me in an email prior to sharing them with the team. He also graciously gives permission for me to share them in this note.

[7] Many researchers highlight the critical and undertheorized nature of the intersections of race in queer kink subcultures, such as the imperative interventions of Ariane Cruz’s *The Color of Kink: Black Women, BDSM and Pornography* and Amber Jamilla Musser’s *Sensational Flesh: Race, Power, and Masochism*.

[8] Other kink philosophy of consent model acronyms sourced from google:

> Personal Responsibility, Informed, Consensual Kink (PRICK)
>
> Safe, Sane, Informed, Consensual, Kink (SSICK)
>
> Committed, Compassionate, Consensual (CCC) and the 4 C's — Caring, Communication, Consent, Caution

[9] Though introduced to principles of the autonomic nervous system and Polyvagal Theory by Jeffrey Crockett, I loved encountering Sheridan Schreyer's powerful paper in JCBP on incorporating this into the work https://doi.org/10.46787/jcbp.v2i1.3495

[10] There are many approaches to embodiment and somatic experiencing work. The principles and terms I use are learned and interpreted from the Breath Embodiment work of Jeffrey Crockett from Middendorf Breathwork. His work is foundational in my teaching, facilitating and artistry.

[11] The acting questions. Derived from the work of Stanislavski, "What Do I Want?" is the phrasing based in the work of Earle Gister that I learned in actor training and generally use with students in acting classes.

[12] Among the instrumental teachers that taught this principle to me were Melissa Smith, Gregory Wallace, Domenique Lozano, Stephen Buescher and Jonathon Moscone

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The Scope of Practice in India Today: An Interview with Aastha Khanna About Intimacy Coordination

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About the Author:
Dr. Joy Brooke Fairfield (she/they) is a professor and media-maker who contributes to live performance, independent film/video, and community organizing. Dr. Fairfield is a member of the Society for Directors and Choreographers (SDC) and an alumnx of the Drama League Director's Project, Dell' Arte International, Harvard University (BA), New York University (MA) and Stanford University (PhD). They edited a special issue on Intimacy Choreography in the *Journal for Dramatic Theory and Criticism* and serve as faculty with Theatrical Intimacy Education (TIE). Recent directing projects include *Earth as Lover: An Ecosex Walking Tour* at the Bundesgartenschau in Mannheim, Germany, and *Ecosex in the City* at P.S. 122 in New York City (both with performance artists Annie Sprinkle and Beth Stephens) and *As One*, a new opera based on a transgender woman's journey towards peace under the Northern Lights, which was staged at Crosstown Theatre with Opera Memphis.

Aastha Khanna, 28, is known for being one of the first intimacy coordinators in the Indian film and video industry (Chibber 2021). While serving as assistant director on an Indian romantic drama in 2019, she was asked by the director to lead exercises to build the sense of intimate relationship between the main actors. Through this research, she encountered the work of intimacy coordinators in the U.S. and elsewhere, and she began to incorporate their strategies into the film's process. This led to a deeper dive into current practices of intimacy choreography and coordination, including completing the full training program with Intimacy Professionals Association (IPA) in Los Angeles, after which she began serving as an IC. She's now worked on over twelve productions, including *Gehraiyaan* (Batra 2022), the first Indian film with a full IC department and the most acclaimed mainstream project in the region so far to hire and credit these roles.[1] In 2021, Khanna founded The Intimacy Collective, a non-profit organization based in India with an international scope. Alongside co-founders Sara Arrhusius and Neha Vyas, as well as their growing network of members and specialists, Khanna works to educate media and performance industries from within. Through online discourse on Instagram and Clubhouse, the Collective is jumpstarting important and accessible conversations about consent in film and media production in India, while building valuable connections between practitioners and supporters of the work. In the coming year, the Collective will hold several public events in India to advocate for more widespread use of intimacy coordinators, directors, and choreographers.[2] In addition to the Intimacy Collective, Khanna recently launched the Intimacy Lab which, as she discusses below, will train the first cohort of intimacy coordinators for national and regional Indian industries.[3]

After learning about her work through social media, I reached out to Khanna in June of 2022 for an interview for this publication. In this moment when intimacy practices for stage and screen are expanding exponentially, it is crucial to pay attention to the unique affordances of transnational approaches. Those of us committed to consent-based practices in media-making must build connections across regions not just to share established techniques, but also to further develop these practices. Ongoing cross-cultural conversations can generate deeper understanding of how intimacy norms and specific media production legacies have been differentially shaped by forces like patriarchal domination, colonialism, racial capitalism, homophobia, and transphobia. Because these

intimacy norms and production legacies are culturally specific, the requisite shifts in pursuit of equitable, consent-based frameworks will be local to region, industry, community, and context. Khanna and her colleagues in the Intimacy Collective model how IC professionals can build power and capacity transnationally through shared training and ongoing conversations. In addition to working on sets advocating for safer and braver environments for actors, Khanna and her colleagues advocate for intimacy coordination writ large, which, as she chronicles, is slowly making headway into the media production landscape. In this interview, Khanna discusses her background and entry into the field as well as her understanding of the scope of practice of intimacy coordination in Indian media industries today.

People in the United States often underestimate the robustness of the contemporary Indian film and media ecosystem. Film production took off in Mumbai in the 1920s with the establishment of studios, and over the last century, other production hubs have emerged in cities like Chennai, Hyderabad, Karnataka, Kolkata, Kerala and more, each in their own language. For generations, going to the cinema has been a popular pastime, even when television began diversifying media options in the 1980s. India has historically maintained high theatrical ticket sales with low individual prices, making movies accessible across many income levels. Today, films are produced in all of India's official 22 languages, and then some (Wikipedia 2023).[4] In 1986, India outpaced the United States for most individual films produced annually by a national market—a distinction it has held ever since ("Film Industry" n.d.). Commercial Mumbai-based Hindi studio films, often called "Bollywood" have historically dominated the box office. The most popular form is the "masala film," a mixture of singing, dancing, adventure, and romance. The long-form, large-cast, ultimately uplifting genre has mass appeal both inside and outside the subcontinent. Bollywood films, like Hollywood films, are often critiqued for repeating storylines and recapitulating stereotypes, but nonetheless they have a huge influence on Indian culture. Even if you don't go to the movies, it is near-impossible to avoid these films and their larger-than-life stars. Today, the majority of Indian cinema is made outside of the Bollywood system in smaller but growing linguistic and cultural markets. Since 2021, there have been more films produced in Telugu, Kannada, and Tamil than in Hindi. (Dastidyar 2020). Many have received critical and box office acclaim, the most record-breaking being S.S. Rajamouli's

2022 Telugu film *RRR.* The stylish historical fiction— following revolutionary fighters from Andhra Pradesh rebelling against British colonialism—resonated globally in the wake of social liberation activity. Indian independent films (called parallel cinema or art cinema) have run alongside the commercial music/dance genre since the 1950s. Often more serious thematically, more naturalistic in style, and more explicitly political in content, these films can uplift unique voices of directors, including women and others historically excluded from the mainstream industry. As distribution norms shift, independent films gain new ways to find their audience.

Indian media industries, like those in the United States, have been in a period of transition following the swift shift in media consumption modes under COVID lockdown. Already on the rise before the pandemic, streaming options blossomed after 2020, and cinema attendance declined. Streaming platforms—referred to in India as OTT (for "over-the-top")—bring movies and TV shows directly to people's devices through familiar internet services like Netflix and Amazon, as well as over forty different regional and single-language providers. Cell phone data connectivity in India is currently the lowest priced in the world, and researchers are seeing a rapid increase in video consumption. Streaming OTT content avoids private cable networks and does not require pre-certification by India's Central Board of Film Certification (CBFC) which has strictly regulated media content since 1952. This is significant because, as Khanna describes, the CBFC is particularly stringent about representations of physical intimacy. OTT streaming makes possible a greater diversity of programming both through increased international imports and (potentially controversial) local content. This work features more physical intimacy and, notably, the presence of LGBTQ+ characters and storylines, which are often excluded from film and TV. The advent of this more adventurous content regarding sexuality and gender opens the door for the establishment of professional intimacy coordination in the subcontinent. In this interview, Khanna discusses how she and other professionals are interfacing with new markets.

We also discuss the relationship between the field of intimacy coordination and longstanding feminist critiques of "the male gaze" in media. Building from the scholarship of Laura Mulvey, "gaze theory" explains how narrative cinema reaffirms a sexist power dynamic through presenting men as the ones looking while framing women as the "given-

to-be-seen" (Mulvey 1975). Often, as Mulvey notes, women in film function as erotic spectacle both to male characters onscreen and to spectators in the audience, aligning the perspective of the camera itself with a heterosexual male gaze. The camera's shifting frame can visually cut up the body of an actress and present it to the spectator, who may find libidinal pleasure in the brief sense of possessing her image, regardless of whether sexual acts are even represented onscreen. Many thinkers after Mulvey (including herself, in later works) have complicated this somewhat general mechanics of spectatorship. Theorist bell hooks (1992) notes the "oppositional gaze" of Black feminists like herself, for whom viewing mainstream films from a subaltern position can serve to quicken their critical insight and grant rebellious pleasures. José Esteban Muñoz's "disidentification" (1999) offers another kind of pleasure for queer Brown spectators who rework for their own ends the very media that might seem to exclude them. But neither these interpretive strategies nor decades of feminist filmmaking by women and queer directors have managed to solve the problem of the sexist and sexualizing tendencies of moving images. Screens shift size and shape; the gaze adapts. Is it the responsibility of the intimacy coordinator to counteract the voyeurism of the cinematic stare? India's 2018 #MeToo movement, catalyzed like the US movement by high-profile cases of sexual misconduct in media industries, resulted in raised awareness of the injustices within the system but so far have provoked limited structural change. How might intimacy choreographers deal with the added pressure to "solve the problem" of the patriarchal gaze in the wake of these public conversations about consent violations?

Throughout our conversation, I'm inspired by Khanna's interdisciplinary intelligence: she is simultaneously practical, politically astute, and artistically sensitive. As a fellow IC and IC educator, I find her vision for training intimacy professionals who will be ready to grapple with the cultural and political realities of current Indian media industries urgent and necessary. As a frequent viewer of cinema on small streaming screens, I look forward to the more complex and liberatory stories we will be able to tell, given more equitable and consent-forward production spaces to work within.

Joy Brooke Fairfield: I appreciate your career story, the way you went out looking for intimacy professionals nearby, and finding none, became one. How did your undergraduate education in Film and Television Production prepare you for this

work? What other experiences in your life would you consider preparatory for being an intimacy coordinator?

Aastha Khanna: My degree prepared me to be on set for a film or any kind of video production. Specifically, that education allowed me to understand power dynamics and the ways in which people function within the Indian filmmaking industry on an executive and an executioning level, by which I mean both in the way decisions are made in advance as well as how they play out in the heat of production.

Other than that, I am a dancer, so I have had a regular movement practice practically my whole life. Since I was four, I've been training in Indian classical dance, and I’ve gone on to do all different kinds of body movement practices that helped me understand rhythm and choreography and arc in the telling of stories.

In terms of how I was introduced to social practices that honor diversity and the care of marginalized people, it's been an interesting journey. The first time I was introduced to new concepts of gender and sexuality was at university in England. It was my first week of my bachelor's and it was the first time I was living abroad. One of my housemates was pansexual and that was one of the first things they said about themselves when we were meeting. At that point I had no idea what a pansexual person was! Another one of my housemates was gay. Everybody decided that they wanted to go to the Fresher’s fair together. I’m never going to forget that day in my life. We went through all these different societies' stalls, sizing up which ones we wanted to sign up for -- and the most colorful and beautiful stall that stood out amongst all the others was the fetish society! Here I am with all this information coming to me and I'm like “Oh my God! What is going on? This is an institution!”

For a bit of context, I went to a Hindu girls school. Sexuality was very regulated. In year 11, my friend and I would do scandalous stuff for fun. Neither of us were gay, but we would, just for shits and giggles, do things like kiss on the lips. Some teachers saw us do that and it became a huge deal. We were called into the principal's office, who said this is completely unacceptable behavior, and our parents were called in. For perhaps the first time in my life, my parents didn't agree with the way that the school was dealing with it. I remember my father turning around and saying, “I'm happy to go and have a conversation with this principal of yours, because whether or not that is *your* reality, it could be somebody else's and the fact that they're being so intolerant will not look nice if people outside the school get to know about this.”

Joy Brooke Fairfield: I'm glad your dad was cool like that.

Aastha Khanna: My parents are very liberal. I couldn’t be where I am without their support. I love them, honestly. But anyway, to come from that kind of scholastic space of intolerance and then to suddenly walk into a university where there is institutional support of a fetish society, it's like being an astronaut! Am I on the moon?

I learned something that day. And I kept absorbing. When I came back to India to start working again, the intolerance became jarring. Because all of a sudden, you're back in this environment where people make tone-deaf media content, particularly in regard to LGBTQ+ characters. And you're like: do they not know what they're saying? Those experiences added to me feeling the need to do intimacy work in India.

Joy Brooke Fairfield: In an interview with *The Hindu* you had some very thoughtful things to say about how this work can interface with what we call in film studies "the male gaze," specifically about making its impact on the actors less unfair without infringing on the artistic vision of the director (Chhibber 2021). How do we make it clear to the industry that we aren't "the sex police," while enacting some changes that protect the safety of performers?

Aastha Khanna: I often get asked the question of whether I work towards informing the gaze, frequently by journalists who think that having an intimacy coordinator on set would involve a *correction* of the kind of content that comes out. Recently I was talking with a couple of intimacy coordinators from my cohort in LA about how people don't realize how that's not necessarily our power to have.

Certainly, there have been times when a director has come to ask me if their gaze was correct, or if there was additional information that I could give in order to make something more authentic, or to inform a certain style. Those are moments as an intimacy coordinator that feel very fulfilling. But the collaboration aspect is the main part. We are trying to reach a point where creators trust us enough to feel like our collaboration can add value to their vision.

In terms of how much we can creatively contribute regarding the gaze—it's flexible. It depends on who the creator is and how welcoming they are to the process. There will be times that we can have a big impact. I've been on a film set where the director has turned around and said: "The monitor is yours; the mic is yours; the set is yours. I'm going; just give me what I need," then they've gone and sat in a corner in video village and just let me do my thing, giving me complete creative control. But there have also been times where I've not even needed to go near video village, because they don't listen to anything I say once tape is rolling. But at least I know in a space like that, my performers and the rest of the crew are feeling safer and that the absolutely mandatory basic protocols we brought to the table in pre-production are being upheld.

For me in India, the most important goal has been to bring an intimacy coordinator into the room *at all*. I'm one person, and there are a few other people that have recently started working as intimacy coordinators in India, but even for us, this cannot be a full-time job. You will not pay your bills. Not because India is not making content! It's because people are not hiring intimacy coordinators. They're not valuing it within the budget. That's a huge battle to fight. The aim is to make

sure that producers are comfortable hiring an intimacy coordinator. We want them to know that we work in a flexible way to get people what they need. Filmmaking requires flexibility on all sides: you can't walk in with a stencil and be like: “I'm going to do it like ABC and everybody else must adapt!” That's not the way it works, at least over here. To reach a point where producers feel like intimacy coordinators are simply helping to execute intimate scenes in a safer way, making their presence on a film set worth it, *that* would be an achievement for me.

Usually in this conversation about the violence of the gaze, people speak of women being the oppressed and men being the oppressors, exclusively. It’s very binary and cis-heteronormative. They also articulate to me their concern about hyper-sexualization of bodies, whether it's an item song or a sexual violence scenario where there's some kind of glorification of the male character. When those kinds of conversations arise, well-intentioned outsiders often ask: “Will you be able to change that?” And I’m like: “No! If it's what the creator's going to make, if it's the vision, if it’s in the script and the shot list already, I can't necessarily change that!” Maybe someday I could walk into a room and turn around at them and say: “This is absolutely inappropriate. I'm not going to engage with you. I'm not going to be part of the project.” But can I stop them from making the film? No! The only way that I can make certain tweaks is by entering the process myself, to become a part of it myself.

The only way that issues with the sexualizing gaze are going to change is when people that are *consuming* that content turn around and say: “This is rubbish, I'm not going to consume it.” The onus of that responsibility lies on the audience as much as it does on the makers.

Joy Brooke Fairfield: Yes, that’s a very important point.

Aastha Khanna: Turning that onus on us, trying to find one shoulder to lean this weight on, to make us responsible for the way society views certain stories? It’s unfair! So no - I’m not the sex police. I’m not the gaze police. That’s not my job. It can’t be.

Joy Brooke Fairfield: It makes me think of the harm reduction model used in addiction frameworks and other social work contexts. We have to meet people where theyare; we can’t pretend we live in a perfect world, or a swiftly perfectible one. Straight men do still dominate the roles of director, producer, and cinematographer in every national film industry. Heterosexual romance tropes are full of violent overtones that get glamorized by the power of the big screen. We can’t change all these things. At the very least, intimacy coordinators are trying to enact some harm reduction protocols as we all continue muddling forward in these troubled industries. It’s not our responsibility to fix thousands of years of objectification of women; that's a high ask.

Aastha Khanna: Yeah, and overnight! That's not gonna happen! I’m very quick to admit that I myself have 25 years of systemic coding and unconscious bias that I'm

working against internally to do the work I do every single day. Not to admit that would be a failure on my part. It's very important to me to be cognizant of the times that I make mistakes. There are times I've looked back at something I've said in a production process even a few years ago and thought: "Oh my God, what are you thinking?" But one is ever evolving.

Joy Brooke Fairfield: Yes, we keep evolving and so do our industries. How is intimacy direction currently interfacing with different media production methods and mechanisms in India?

Aastha Khanna: Here in India, intimacy coordination is currently starting to make some impact in the OTT and the Web series space. The reason for that is that these are the only media contexts involving much representation of intimacy at all! In India, the theatrical release of films requires a censor certificate. The censors will usually end up requiring that filmmakers cut out scenes that are visually representative of simulated sex, nudity, or violence in any literal way. Kissing is allowed in features, but actors must be fully clothed. If they aren't kissing, there is some room for suggested or implied nudity. For women characters, they will allow just the back or shoulders, and for male characters they will sometimes allow a shirtless situation. In certain scenarios they'll allow bathing suits, but in that case there's no kissing or thrusting motions allowed, even for films designated for mature audiences, what we call the "A certificate" (which is like an "R rating" in the US). If it starts to get more realistically sexual, they will completely cut it out, so this affects what filmmakers will even *try* to make. Bear in mind, most of the people that sit on the censor board are sixty-plus year-old men, like most other politicians.

Joy Brooke Fairfield: Right, they're like the censor politicians. We have a different regulatory system here.

Aastha Khanna: Yes, in India only those films that can pass their barometer will be released theatrically. That same censor board also regulates content for TV. The only certificate they give for anything on TV or telecast in our networks or satellites is the "U certification" or what the US would call PG-13. This means no kissing on TV at all! If they want to imply it, they just show two people kind of falling into each other's arms and then closing the door or the window shade! In live theatre as well, adult content is all implied only. There are certain experimental theater groups outside of mainstream spaces that will include intimate scenes in some way or another, but again, no real nudity and no real simulated sex on stage. So, the scope for growth of an intimacy director at this point is very limited because there are still so few detailed intimate scenes being produced. Justifying their job role in those scenarios is difficult. That's kind of how it is right now.

In India, the actor's union is not extremely strong. It's mainly TV actors, in fact, most of the people that work in mainstream cinema or on web shows are not members. However, the producer's guild is important. If the producers guild is able to put down some kind of guidelines around intimacy work and the use of intimacy

coordinators, that would be a big step. That's the aim for this year. I'm working tirelessly on this advocacy, and hopefully before the next election we will be able to find some kind of movement forward there.

Joy Brooke Fairfield: I look forward to hearing more about it as it develops. Along those lines, what do you want folks outside of India to know about your work there? How can intimacy professionals elsewhere support you?

Aastha Khanna: It's important for all the countries that have made significant strides in professional intimacy practices to know that we're still working on it, and that there are far fewer people working in staging intimacy here than elsewhere.

Globally, the more conversation around it, the more it'll be able to penetrate into our space of work in India, because India is extremely open to global social media and global news. Our media pays attention to and borrows from Western pop culture, so it's important for people that work in the space of intimacy in the U.S. and elsewhere to keep pushing it and considering its global impact. It is encouraging to see what intimacy coordinators in the West are doing! Hearing these stories gives us strength to keep pushing at all these boulders impeding this kind of work here.

The understanding of an intimacy professional is only a few years old in India. I was the first Indian here to do this work, I think only one person before me was flown in from Canada to do one show, Amanda Cutting, but other than that nobody else! So it's young, I feel like we have a long, long way to go.

We are currently starting a Lab here, which has joined hands with IPA (Intimacy Professionals Association) in L.A. Since IPA is SAG-AFTRA accredited, the program we're bringing in is that same training but adapted to India, adding four more classes contextualizing what it is like to work here. These added modules will allow us to explore the different forms of diversity in India and educate future I.C.s around unconscious bias, legal issues, and specific conversations about how sexual harassment functions here in India. So instead of it being a 16-week program, it's a 20-week program beginning August of 2022. I'm looking forward to leading these trainings and sharing what I know!

Having the training program here in India will allow for a lot more people to learn the practices. Then they will start to find ways to penetrate the business and to reach out to their own networks to involve intimacy professionals. I feel like we're there now, that's the phase we are ready for.

Joy Brooke Fairfield: What do you feel like intimacy coordination work in the subcontinent has to share with the rest of the world?

Aastha Khanna: I think one of the most interesting local elements is not about the content but about how we work on set. The flexibility of our processes and the conversation

around how we must be responsive and collaborative in order to become a working gear in the larger system of filmmaking are the kinds of things that the West might learn.

Many parts of the West already have intimacy coordinators, but already in some places they are becoming just another thing to sign off on, and so the focus becomes on the paperwork rather than the embodied process. I've heard from a lot of working I.C.s in the film industry in the West that they often don't get the opportunity to creatively involve themselves and truly influence the art form. Here in India, we are seeing that change really quickly, and I believe there is the possibility for intimacy coordinators here to truly become creative directors of scenes of intimacy.

Joy Brooke Fairfield: This makes me think of what you mentioned at the beginning about your training in classical dance - the power of physical practice and a performer’s own embodied awareness.

Aastha Khanna: Yes - that’s one thing that I feel like India does well that perhaps we might be able to share with the rest of the globe as we expand and explore: not just training of intimacy coordinators, but training of performers. I’m interested in developing workshops with performers where they can explore their own bodies and their own boundaries. How wonderful it would be if we could give actors opportunities to train in consent-based performance practice and give time for them to evolve through those processes. People here appreciate the value of acting school, actors go to workshops to learn different acting methods. It’s important to the future of intimacy in performance to enable actors to develop their skills through affirming, professional workshop spaces, not only in the short timelines of film and TV where it’s often so rushed. I think there's hope for performers to get to know a lot more about themselves and what they can bring to the creative process if they're given the opportunity to understand the intimacy work outside of the power dynamic of a live set where they have to deliver a tight performance. That embodied learning space for performers will be super fruitful for intimacy work.

Joy Brooke Fairfield: Yes! Thanks so much for sharing these ideas with me. I look forward to watching our field grow as it sees uptake in the Indian context, particularly given this rich history of embodied performance training that you’re talking about. Perhaps we can have a follow up conversation in a few years to see how the scope of practice continues to develop.

Postscript:

After speaking with Khanna, my mind turned to my acting teacher Veenapani Chawla (1947 - 2014) founder of Adishakti Laboratory for Theatre Arts Research, an experimental performance training facility near Puducherry in Tamil Nadu. The multi-faceted acting methods developed by Chawla and her company for their unique stage plays are physically rigorous and known for powerful results, making it a favored destination for

Indian film and TV actors.[5] Like Khanna, Chawla had extensive training in both European and Indian performance production traditions. Seeing beyond the false binary of these cultural histories, Chawla sought in her work “an in-between space of cultural ambivalence” that was “opposed to the idea of purity and the authenticity of origins” and was able then, to “transgress the confinement of both metropolitan and provincial orthodoxies” (Chawla 2006, 2). I hear in Khanna’s insights this same kind of productive cultural ambivalence and a rejection of simplistic reductions to East vs. West or traditional vs. contemporary. There is nothing particularly western about consent-based practices—on the contrary, history shows us that the Euro-colonial project of cultural domination has taken sexual misconduct with it wherever it has sailed. As other scholars of consent-based performance have pointed out, many of these practices are only coming from the so-called “West” today through lineages of non-violence and repair emergent from international subaltern liberation struggles in the first place (Fairfield et al 2019; Barnette et al 2019; Jones 2019; Villarreal 2022). Issues surrounding consent, boundaries, and respect for the sovereign individual are fraught today particularly because global flows of power situate subjects differently against the backdrop of history. Approaches to staging simulated sexual acts must be informed both by our community norms as well as an understanding of how we’re enmeshed into transnational dynamics.

As actors training at Adishakti, we practiced sometimes arduous physical and imaginative skills to help us access what Chawla calls “the source of performance energy” (Gokhale 2014). These techniques borrow from Indian classical forms like the Kudiyyattam dance theatre of Kerala as well as contemporary European traditions that Chawla trained in at Odin Teatret and London School of Drama. Together, the framework helps to cultivate an open inner space for the performer, strengthening our expressive flexibility as well as our resilience in allowing intense emotional energies to flow through us. Today, I understand the intimate self-knowledge and self-management developed through these trainings as also necessary to the work of responsibly simulating scenes of intimate pleasure or violence. Chawla’s vision of a performance practice grounded in self-aware physical acting techniques invites actors to craft intentional reproducible forms and then find the vital flow within it that makes it appear fresh. Remembering the power of these methods offered by Chawla and other teachers at Adishakti, I grow particularly

excited about the work that Khanna and the Intimacy Collective are doing to popularize notions of consent-based practice within creative industries in India, and how new techniques developed under different cultural contexts might inform and enrich global approaches to staging intimacy onscreen and in live performance. Khanna's vision for embodied learning spaces in which performers can explore and train in simulated intimacy practices sounds like it would result in not only safer and more ethical workspaces but also bolder and more creative media output. Given supportive contexts like the ones Khanna envisions, what braver and deeper onscreen stories could we tell about ourselves and the ways we love and hurt and try to heal in this wreckage of history?

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[1] For more on the process of shooting *Gehraiyaan,* see: https://www.firstpost.com/entertainment/inside-the-intimacy-department-of-gehraiyaan-intimacy-director-dar-gai-and-her-team-on-the-art-of-shooting-sex-scenes-10334471.html and https://www.firstpost.com/entertainment/with-gehraiyaan-intimacy-seems-to-come-of-age-in-hindi-cinema-10327811.html

[2] For more information about the Intimacy Collective, follow them on Facebook at https://www.facebook.com/theintimacycollective/ and on Instagram at https://www.instagram.com/theintimacycollective/

[3] For more on the Intimacy Lab, see their website at https://www.theintimacylab.in/about or follow them on Instagram at https://www.instagram.com/theintimacylab/

[4] Wikipedia lists Indian films in 33 different languages

[5] Learn more about Adishakti here: http://adishaktitheatrearts.com/

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Identity Awareness in Casting: When Trans Actors Play Roles Outside Their Gender Identity

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This article has been adapted for publication from MA coursework at the University of Colorado, Boulder.

About the Author:

Matthias Bolon (he/they) is an animated bundle of unintentional humor and strange facts. Most of these quirks only became applicable after he graduated with his MA in Theatre & Performance Studies from the University of Colorado Boulder. He is currently swimming through an ocean of projects for his MFA in Shakespeare & Performance at Mary Baldwin University. His scholarly interests lie in intimacy choreography and consent-based practices, and trans and queer depictions in media. His interests as an actor lie in educational touring theatre and workshops for young audiences.

Beginnings

In the fall semester of 2022, I was cast as Lady Bracknell in the University of Colorado Boulder Theatre & Dance Department's production of *The Importance of Being Earnest*. I was bemused by the choice since (1) my first principal role (as a female-presenting student actor) in the fall semester of 2020 was in a university production of *She Kills Monsters: Virtual Realms* as the male-identifying dungeon master Chuck Biggs, after which (2) I socially and medically transitioned to a transgender (hereafter "trans") man just in time to take on the classic feminine role of Bracknell. The whimsical contrast between these two experiences let me explore gender identity in an unusual way both before and after my transition.

My purpose for sharing the notes from my experience playing Lady Bracknell is to record the practices that improved my experience as a trans masculine actor choosing to play a well-known feminine character. This role was challenging both for me as a trans person and for the production team tasked with producing a well-crafted performance with a non-traditional actor choice for a major supporting role. It was emphasized early in the process that we were all learning together how to incorporate a trans company member into an otherwise all cis-gender (hereafter "cis") cast, so there would undoubtedly be some discomfort and mistakes. Incorporating this philosophy established a shared understanding of experimentation and growth through discomfort. Nonetheless, we began to fumble forward together. The phrase "fumbling forward" was introduced to my Theatre department by dancer, associate professor, and associate dean for student success Erika Randall, as a concept to name mistakes when they happen in order to bring the team's focus to progress rather than nitpicking.

Taking on a female-presenting role can be frightening for trans masculine actors for a number of reasons, but one of the biggest is the potential of experiencing more frequent gender dysphoria during rehearsals and performances. Gender dysphoria is a feeling of emotional distress in a person whose gender identity in the internal (mental) sense is different from the biological sex they were assigned at birth based on external physical features. Gender euphoria, on the other hand, is a feeling of enjoyment or happiness that occurs when a person feels assured in their gender identity in all possible ways: physically, emotionally, mentally, socially, and spiritually. In general, this feeling of euphoria is a background setting for cis persons where little conflict exists in their gender identities, but this euphoric state must be actively sought and sustained by trans individuals

faced with regular buffeting by differences in their personal experiences and societal expectations regarding gender identity.

Personally, I experience gender euphoria when being perceived as a man, and when people use masculine ("he/him" or "he/they" pronouns for me). Such acknowledgment by others confirms for me that they care and respect me as a human being, specifically in the way I express my sense of self. My joy in being able to explore my sense of gender identity carries through in my acting, alongside my interest in giving a committed performance as an actor. I am not opposed to performing as female-identifying or female-presenting characters *on stage*; the only reason I hesitate as an trans masculine actor is the possibility that the theatrical team I work with may—unintentionally—perceive *me* as a woman and use gendered pronouns ("she/her") that are no longer appropriate for who I am *offstage*. I have been conflicted in trying to balance my interest in performing as many stage roles as possible (including characters of various genders) while also being worried that performing as a female-identifying or femme-presenting character will activate the gender dysphoria that inherently comes with such roles.

I have observed considerable fear regarding how to approach working with trans student actors. The following sections record the practices that worked well for our company, and for me, when incorporating a single trans actor as part of an otherwise all-cis cast; these sections also outline the consent-based practices utilized to support our student production of *The Importance of Being Earnest*. I hope that my notes from our shared fumbling will offer guidance for trans student actors in other companies and for the teachers and faculty learning alongside them. My attempt here is to offer the tools that benefited my personal journey as a trans masculine actor. These consent-based tools provide practical recommendations on building a support system; optimizing communication; implementing apologies; using self-care cues; separating the actor and character (entrance and spring-boarding gestures, closure routines); creating individual and group closure practices; undertaking structured pre- and post-rehearsal check-ins; and giving compliments. Some of my suggestions may not work for every trans student, so ongoing communication will always be important as this process is fashioned for each individual on a case-by-case basis.

Practices that Supported the Process

Building a Support System

Being a trans individual can be considerably distressing as running into people who devalue trans people's lives is high, and these frequent experiences can affect a trans person's sense of self. So, having a support system in place is important to me for my comfort and success when acting in a production. A *support system* is a communication network of key individuals who offer practical advice or emotional comfort to me (and vice versa). Building a support system helps me clarify methods of communication with the production team and creates outlets for gently venting frustration. For me, this process begins with creating a list of people I can contact if necessary and making note of the kind of support I would hope to receive if I reached out (TABLE 1). My starting point for crafting the list was my prior experiences with members of the production team. For our staging of *Earnest*, a second resource available to me was a production packet prepared by the Theatre & Dance department and handed out during the first rehearsal. This folder contained production members' contact information, rehearsal dates, a chain of communication chart, and an apology system. If there was anyone absent from the list who I thought I might want to reach, I would request their contact information or I would find out who I could communicate with to reach them. Another possible resource in some venues might be an institution's policy handbook. Building a support system takes some time and thought but is well worth the effort in terms of enabling the success of the student actor as an individual and the production team as a whole. Faculty may feel that this work is not necessary, but many university students find themselves distanced, perhaps for the first time, from their familial support system and may have little or no experience in building their own in a new place. Trans students, along with first-generation students and others who have been historically marginalized, may need guidance with this, as they may not have been introduced to the institutional community areas. Helping students find their support network during their actor training prepares them to do this work for themselves in the field.

TABLE 1: MATTHIAS' SUPPORT COMMUNITIES FOR *THE IMPORTANCE OF BEING EARNEST*
INSIDE THE PRODUCTION

Cast mates - peers who were involved in similar situations and responsibility for the play as me and who offered support and humor while we explored characters together.

Actor Deputy - I was the elected Deputy (advocate for persons encountering difficulties with someone else in the production) to start, but a little later in the production another actor was brought in when I was shifted to do intimacy choreography for the show (to provide another person for actors in case they had concerns about me and my choreographic suggestions). If I had concerns I could bring them to the new deputy or straight to stage management.

Stage Management - individual(s) who support and organize the production teams and day-to-day aspects of the process. They were a great secondary point of contact as they have connections with everyone.

Director/Assistant Director - oversees the production team, leads rehearsals, and manages the vision of the show. They hold space in rehearsal for check-ins with the entire cast to create open communication, and they determine the physical/emotional needs of the day’s work.

Production Coordinator - handles the technical elements of the show, making sure that the show is safe, on time, and on budget. They were new to the department and made themselves readily available for concerns and questions, trying to establish community and understanding of the needs of the production.

Theatre & Dance Departmental Leaders (Associate Chair and Chair) - in university settings, these individuals set the departmental curriculum, interview new professors, manage faculty schedules, and settle faculty and student disputes. They were the production's final line of contact for conflict resolution before things had to be taken outside the production line of communication. This level did not have to be utilized for conflict between actors for this production.

OUTSIDE THE PRODUCTION
Office of Victim Assistance (OVA) - this University office offers trauma-focused services to mitigate the impact of traumatic events. I kept the phone number in my phone “just in case” but never had to use it.
Counseling and Psychiatric Services - this office had options for in-person and virtual (informal and formal) consultations for students, up to at least six free sessions at my university. I did not feel the need to use this service during the production process.
Faculty – I felt comfortable that certain faculty members who have acted as mentors during my thesis research and embodied exploration were available for advice. They offered space for me to logically walk through my acting process of handling a female-identifying role ~~again~~, as an additional option to the assistance of my director(s).
Friends/Roommates - I am fortunate to have a large community of friends within the Theatre & Dance department who I felt comfortable telling about my excitement and struggle with the production process. Even the best productions have moments of difficulty, and having people outside the production as potential sounding boards helped keep me centered. My roommate also let me vent on occasion about all the things I was doing. These outlets allowed me to discuss how I was enjoying my semester but also feeling overwhelmed. They would often let me just talk, and then if I asked for advice they would offer little solutions to help smooth the immediate distress without infringing on my autonomy.
Family - having relatives physically nearby who have known me for years and assisted me without judgment through my social transition and gender-affirming surgery as a trans masculine actor was and is wonderful, and it offered an additional space to express myself.

Table adapted from Matthias Bolon (2023), “Trans Identity On and Off Stage: A Guide for Supporting Trans Actors Playing Roles Outside Their Gender Identity.” *ProQuest LLC* (Ann Arbor, MI).

Pre-Production (communication and apologies)

In a collaborative environment like theatre, communication is vital in establishing working relationships and approaches to managing conflict. The standard for communication style may be glimpsed in auditioning, which reveals the potential approach a director may assume during the process. When I was auditioning for my university production of *The Importance of Being Earnest*, I was asked after delivering my initial monologues if I would be open to being called back for a traditionally female-presenting role, like Lady Bracknell. It was a pleasant surprise to be asked about my interest and willingness to play a female-identifying character instead of being faced with an unspoken assumption made by the casting director about the kinds of roles that I would be open to playing. The inquiry and details offered (being called back for Bracknell) allowed me time for reflection before making an informed decision; this is *consent-based casting*, which is based on inquiring, offering context, and receiving confirmation about an actor's openness to a role with no assumptions or preconceptions. The directors being open to casting traditionally gendered roles in a new way was interesting, and their concern for the emotional well-being of the actors (trans or otherwise) affirmed that I had support in the theatrical learning environment. Being offered the role of Lady Bracknell let me continue my exploration of gender identity as one tool in an actor's repertoire while letting me tackle head on my concern that a production team might misgender me. I had wonderfully supportive directors, an attentive production team, and a communicative costume crew ready to fumble forward with me during that process.

During the first rehearsal, stage management established a common communication style for the people in the room by reading through the *method of apologies*. The Ouch/Oops system (Myers and Fisher 2015) given here permits the team to address any conflict rapidly so that the team can continue forward quickly in the rehearsal and performance space. This system allows for immediate acknowledgement that a mistake was made but permits the team to move on knowing that a more complete discussion will take place later. In the case of misgendering, one can say "Ouch" to note that harm was experienced, whether unintentional or intentional. The person who made the mistake then responds with "Oops," acknowledging that they made a mistake and are willing to address it later while not repeating it now. If misgendering is a consistent issue, then a more immediate discussion between the impacted party, offender, and an arbitrator (e.g., director, or stage manager or actor deputy) should be held about accountability and how growth can be supported. Ouch/Oops is also a great tool for harm of any kind when things are too busy in the

moment, as this method acknowledges the harm now but can be looked at when there is a moment of pause. Apologies are a system for recognizing a mistake and taking accountability in the moment, and they can be used for issues other than misgendering. In the production of *The Importance of Being Earnest*, Ouch/Oops was our system of apologizing and moving on in the moment, knowing that a full discussion could be held after rehearsal if needed. I never felt the need to use "Ouch" during our process.

TABLE 2: OUCH/OOPS IN ACTION	
OUCH	OOPS
Misgendering: Person A: "When she steps toward me, do I lean back?" Person B: "Ouch."	Misgendering: Person A: "Oops. I'm sorry. When they step toward me, do I lean back?" Person B (might offer): "Thank you. Yeah, do they lean away?"
Comment on Appearance: Person A: "You look so cute in that dress. It fits your figure." Person B: "Ouch."	Comment on Appearance: Person A: "Oops. Apologies. I like the design of your costume, and think it works great for your character." Person B: "Thank you. I like the way it spins when my character twirls in Scene 3."
Overstepping Boundaries: Person A: *touches Person B's upper, front of chest area during a moment of dialogue. This contact was not discussed previously.* Person B: "Ouch."	Overstepping Boundaries: Person A: "Oops. Sorry." Person B: "We have not talked about physical contact for this moment. I would like to not incorporate touch until we discuss it later."

Table reproduced from Matthias Bolon (2023), "Trans Identity On and Off Stage: A Guide for Supporting Trans Actors Playing Roles Outside Their Gender Identity." *ProQuest LLC* (Ann Arbor, MI).

Ahead of apologies, conversation is a proactive method to communicate needs when one wants to prevent or minimize potential mistakes. In *The Importance of Being Earnest*, our costume designer asked to have a pre-rehearsal meeting, which included me, to discuss my comfort as a trans actor with various female-presenting clothing styles and how to fashion them to best support me as an actor. Lacking prior experience with a situation like this, the designer was unsure how to approach costuming for the female-identifying character when working with a trans masculine actor. Therefore, instead of assuming how I might feel about it, they reached out to hold an extended discussion. This exchange led to mutual understanding of each other's creative possibilities and limits. Importantly, the conversation was unprecedented for me since it was the first time anyone had asked me about my boundaries and needs as a trans masculine actor, which was beneficial to me in the moment as this was the first time I had been asked to play a female-identifying role. I was encouraged because my opinions were sought, heard, and merged with the concerns of the designer so that we could support the production and my lived experience while also fulfilling the creative vision for the show. I was able to express my fears about possible gender dysphoria if we used costumes too extreme (i.e., overwhelmingly feminine modifications) to modify how I looked, like emphasizing my bust or hips. Having the space early on to express concerns from both sides, we were able to find where there were boundaries and how to stay within them. The costume designer still chose the style and pattern of the costume to fit their artistic vision but took into account my needs. The discussion lessened the worries I had going into the production, letting me focus on my character work. The combination of distinct costume styles and verbal cues (e.g., use of gender-appropriate pronouns) permitted separation of Lady Bracknell on stage and Matthias in real life.

In Rehearsal (working together)

During the first rehearsal, the stage manager communicated the apology system (Ouch/Oops, as described above) to the cast and discussed the department's conflict resolution pathways (below) for the production. Three levels were established to handle conflict: (1) addressing the concern with the individual(s) involved, (2) engaging an impartial referee if necessary (stage manager/director/actor deputy), or (3) in extreme cases taking the dispute to the

departmental level (e.g., associate chair/production coordinator/department chair). Level One meant having a personal discussion between those involved in the conflict, if they are comfortable doing so. The intention of this level was to foster open communication and honesty among the members of the production company. Level Two may be used if an individual is not comfortable directly discussing the conflict with those involved. Instead, the distressed person might go to the stage manager, director, or the actor deputy to serve as a bridge to facilitate calm communication. Level Three comes in when an issue cannot be resolved through the other levels and would involve more senior leaders such as the departmental production coordinator, associate chair, or chair. If a concern is conveyed to one person in the Level Three area, it may be shared with other members as well to maintain open discourse for the department leadership. The company of *The Importance of Being Earnest* was informed of these options during the first rehearsal, and an actor deputy was elected by the entire cast later in the week. Intriguingly, I was chosen for the actor deputy role although I was joined later by an additional actor deputy when I was appointed to a second non-acting role as intimacy choreographer.

Self-care cues were another method of communication stage management shared during the first rehearsal and included in our actor packets. *Self-care cues* (Pace 2020) are a way to create a pause when an actor needs a moment (no matter the reason) to think or re-center themselves in the room. For *The Importance of Being Earnest*, the team chose the verbal word “button” as the verbal self-care cue. In speaking this word, the actor does not need to justify why they need a moment to take a break from the scene or choreography. Having been trained as student actors to say “Yes” and to not be a contentious (“hard to work with”) actor can make saying “No” difficult in the moment. A cue word like “button” can be enough of a shift from a hard stop “No” to a soft stop “Give me a minute” to allow the actor to engage with the pause. The word does not necessarily need to be “button,” it could be something silly like “banana” or magical like “unicorn.” Pace (2020) says, in her book *Staging Sex*, that the key is that the cue word does not appear in the show’s script, thereby preventing it from being confused with dialogue. An alternative self-care cue might be a distinct physical gesture such as a double tap (applied somewhere on one’s own body, such as the thigh or shoulder) to non-verbally indicate a need for a pause. If a self-care cue is used in rehearsal, gently stop the process and offer the team a quick break. If the cue occurs during an intense or intimate scene, asking for clarity once the break has occurred (“Do we need a water break/to check in about boundaries?”) can better inform the quality and length of the pause needed.

It may be that the actor just needs a moment to breathe and refocus, which might be accomplished on stage, or perhaps a short period of solitude off-stage for uninterrupted thought would be more appropriate; only the person giving the cue can tell. I never felt the need to use a self-care cue, as the 5- or 10-minute breaks we took fulfilled the majority of my needs.

A main way that I requested support from the production team in rehearsal was for a clear separation of me as a trans masculine actor versus my female-presenting character. S*eparation of actor and character* can help an actor (cis or trans) remove themselves from the emotionally taxing aspects of a character's personality and physicality at the end of the day; the goals being to prevent an actor from bringing the character with them after the session has ended and blocking those character-specific aspects from affecting the actor's real-world interactions. Villarreall (2021) builds on Nordic scholarship to examine this concept, which they call "actor-character bleed," further examining multiple tools intimacy specialists use to "mitigate" this bleeding of character into actor's lived reality (129). Power dynamics related to the director-actor relationship can come into play here (TABLE 3). There is an inherent power dynamic that the director (even a student director) has authority over the student actor in a variety of circumstances outside of the rehearsal space. The power imbalance is magnified further if faculty members are directing student productions. A first step in handling power dynamics is acknowledging that they exist and offering and affirming methods of support for students both inside and outside of the production team. The power dynamic between me and the director and assistant director was a bit different for this production. The director was a former teacher from my undergraduate days, though I no longer was in their classes as a graduate student. Therefore, I did not feel the same compulsion to say "Yes" to everything they asked for fear that my grades or future professional references might suffer. The assistant director was a fellow student in my Master's degree cohort, and we had a pre-established collaborative relationship. Both the director and assistant director demonstrated during casting that they were invested in asking questions and creating a space where I could consent to the process.

TABLE 3: SEPARATION OF ACTOR AND CHARACTER		
CONCERN	OFFER	EXAMPLE
Potential misgendering due to the actor performing a role they do not identify with or that uses different pronouns than they do off-stage	Holding space in the first rehearsal for everyone to share their name, role in the production, and pronouns. Training about apologies and Ouch/Oops.	"Hi, I'm [so and so], and I am playing [this character]. I am excited about it. I would just like to emphasize that I would like to use [these pronouns] for me even when talking about the character."
Being perceived as the gender of the character while in rehearsal and hearing the character's pronouns used for them in direction.	Having a conversation about using gender-neutral pronouns when giving directions and use of the character name in rehearsals when intentions are discussed.	"On that line, could [character name] cross stage left toward their sister?" "At this moment, what do you think your character feels? Why are they moved to this action?"
Being misgendered outside of rehearsal in costume fittings, make-up tests, cast meetings, etc.	If gender-neutral terms are being used to separate actor and character, have a discussion or include in the production report the use of gender-neutral pronouns for the character.	"[Actor] is using they/them pronouns when discussing [character] to help minimize dysphoria." "[Actor] is comfortable using the character's name when discussing costuming/plot context/intention of character, but not when being directed in rehearsal or off-stage."

Table reproduced from Matthias Bolon (2023), "Trans Identity On and Off Stage: A Guide for Supporting Trans Actors Playing Roles Outside Their Gender Identity." *ProQuest LLC* (Ann Arbor, MI).

When introducing ourselves in the first rehearsal, I expressed my concern to my company about being misgendered and so requested that production members use my pronouns (he/they) whenever possible when talking to me during rehearsal and outside of the theater. My peers and the directing team took initiative and asked questions about how this request might be implemented when blocking and performing a scene. Together, we experimented first by using "she/her" pronouns when discussing Bracknell when working on scenes and when speaking directly to me as an actor. It became clear for me by the second rehearsal that I was still experiencing dysphoria. For example, when discussing any character's relationship to another person in the play, it was easiest to gesture at the actor, leading to moments like someone pointing at me and saying, "Your aunt [Lady Bracknell], when *she* says…" that would make me hyper-aware of my presence as a "woman" in that moment. In order to remedy the sense of dysphoria I experienced we shifted our language to support my needs. The director, assistant director, and myself had a discussion about experimenting with the use of "they/them" pronouns for Bracknell when directing. It was a subtle difference in wording, but it was enough that I felt affirmed when I was gestured to or referred to by the character's name when discussing context and relationships. When there was a slight slip-up after this new agreement on language, the director would adjust it casually in conversation without making a big deal out of it: "Your aunt, *she* is facing this way right now. And on this line *they* are glaring at you." The immediate adjustment limited such simple mistakes to that moment, and we did not have to hold discussions about it because there was always a quick correction that let us carry on. In this moment, "Ouch/Oops" (TABLE 2) could have been implemented, but it was not necessary as I did not feel the need to say "Ouch" because the self-correction followed immediately. During the actual dialogue of scenes when characters referred to Lady Bracknell with she/her pronouns, I mentally and emotionally felt fine, as I could distinguish the literal text-based separation. We also used *check-ins* at the end of rehearsals for the first two weeks to see if I felt the gender-neutral language and support I was receiving was good. Check-ins are a short five- or ten-minute conversations after rehearsal to see what is currently working or needs to be adjusted to make the process supportive for everyone involved. The intention is always to avoid harm. The need for regular check-ins subsequently ebbed away because I felt the process was going well; mistakes occurred less and less often, and they were always minor and addressed immediately.

Therefore, while faculty or directors may feel that this creates additional labor, this practice decreased the amount of time I needed for check-ins, making the process more efficient for me as an actor and the directing team.

In costume fittings, the use of "she/her" for Bracknell felt fine. The costume designer focused on the look of a costume and the way it would fit on stage, and the appearance of sleeves/patterns/style in relation to the character and "her" personality, instead of confusing me as a male-identifying trans actor with the character. In such sessions, the focus was directed toward how costuming and traditional feminine qualities and mannerisms felt for the character, rather than how they impacted me as a person. The designer also discussed with me the use of a wig and pantyhose, as an extra layer of separating the core me from the character. The goal was that whether I was in or out of costume, there was an extreme difference between who I saw in the mirror and my real self which allowed me to minimize my sense of gender dysphoria.

In Rehearsal (individual practices)

Two forms of separation that can actively be done in rehearsal are entrance and spring-boarding gestures. An *entrance gesture* is an action that mentally informs the actor that they are stepping into the character as they go on stage or begin working on a scene in rehearsal (Baker and Burke 2022). The action typically is something fast and simple like taking three slow breaths or spinning in a circle three times. When I would get ready to play Lady Bracknell in rehearsal, I would do three finger snaps by my ears as the auditory signal to help me focus. This separation can be assisted further by a *spring-boarding gesture*, an action that is done while in character as the actor is about to exit the stage; this is a practice that was introduced to me by Greg Geffrard and Emily Rollie during Theatrical Intimacy Education's "Best Practices" workshop in 2022. The gesture should be something that only occurs when they are getting ready to leave. In intense scenes, a spring-boarding gesture may be extended eye contact with another character, a moment that lets the actor recognize that they are leaving the stage. When performing as Bracknell I did not use a spring-boarding gesture when exiting the stage, but once I was done with a scene and had already stepped off stage I instead would do two finger snaps by my ears and bring my hands in front of my face in a silent clap before going to sit down.

The practice of stepping off stage with a spring-boarding gesture is a form of closure practice often used in intimacy choreography. A *closure practice* is a physical routine that indicates

the end of the day's work. Charlie Baker and Zoe Burke mention in the "Level 2 - Foundations of Intimacy" (2022) zoom workshop that closure practices can act as a mental signifier for releasing and closing out imaginative stories and reactions that the actor holds while working in a space. It is a form of separating the blocking (character's position on stage) and emotions of a character from the actor as a person, thus leaving the character in the rehearsal room. Closure practices can include the whole cast: standing in a circle with each person saying goodbye, doing a group clap together on an exhaled breath, etc. It can also be done alone after getting off stage: three snaps by the ears, a singular clap after an exhale, putting on an article of clothing and doing a meditative breath, etc. A closure practice that feels good for the actor is best as it lets them feel more like themselves; choices involving noise and sensation (a loud clap, snaps) or personal symbolism (putting on a ring or hat) can be adjusted for a group closure practice involving other cast members.

A practice I developed to help separate myself from Bracknell after rehearsal was creating a complex closure practice that involved clothing, goodbyes, and a moment of pause. Rehearsals were occurring during the colder fall months, so I usually wore my plaid jacket and beanie to keep myself warm while walking across campus. The jacket was a hand-me-down from my older brother, and the black beanie had my university's logo on it. When rehearsal ended, I would slowly put these items on, the jacket being a more traditionally masculine garment, and the beanie and logo reminding me I was returning to my real-world persona as a student after playing a female-identifying character. Taking my time and very intentionally processing the actions of putting these items back on was important for me to center my identity. When I was ready to go, I would make sure to say goodbye to at least three people. These could be fellow actors, individuals on the stage management team, or my director and assistant director. On a few occasions when saying goodbye to my directors, we had a moment to check in about the process and how I was feeling. This brief exchange was an additional closure practice for me as I was verbally informing other people of my emotional well-being while reminding myself that I was an actor performing a role. Finally, after exiting the building I would pause for a moment. It was usually fairly brisk outside, or sometimes snowing, which helped center my mind in the present moment: I was Matthias Bolon, a young man leaving rehearsal after performing as a woman and heading home to do homework. This combination of practices worked for me as I benefit from more extensive routines that involve multi-sensory elements, especially physical contact (clothes) and verbal cues (check-ins and goodbyes). Trans actors may already have a practice that works for them; however, when an actor

is lacking tools, a mentor can provide training in these practices as part of acting training for actors to use when needed. Other actors may need fewer or more closure practices to re-center themselves at the end of the day.

In Technical Rehearsal (working together)

During *The Importance of Being Earnest*, a brief training was held the evening before the technical ("tech") rehearsal to discuss *compliments* and costume and to introduce the actors to the stage area and meet the backstage crew. Tech is the time when the lighting components of the production are assembled as it will be projected to the audience; costumes, make-up, and props are added in soon after to finalize the director's vision. The conversation included a discussion of costume preservation (not eating in costumes or wearing a jacket over costumes to protect them), the names of the costume crew and who to approach with costume issues, and methods of complimenting a fellow actor that do not involve comments about their body. Compliments (TABLE 4) focused on design elements but may be extended to encompass portrayal of character to provide another option.

TABLE 4: COMPLIMENTS	
BODY-FOCUSED	DESIGN-FOCUSED
"That skirt really works for you."	"That design makes sense for the character!"
"I mean this in the best way, that outfit makes you look super hot."	"The way that outfit comes together is super cool."
"I wish my figure looked as good as yours in a dress."	"The overall look of your costume is awesome."
"Does it feel weird to be in a dress again?"	"Does it feel right for the character? Do you think it changes your portrayal of them?"

Table reproduced from Matthias Bolon (2023), "Trans Identity On and Off Stage: A Guide for Supporting Trans Actors Playing Roles Outside Their Gender Identity." *ProQuest LLC* (Ann Arbor, MI).

In Performance

Some additional adjustments were necessary to support my gender identity during the actual production dates. For instance, during *The Importance of Being Earnest*, our restrooms were mostly away from the audience, but every so often actors would run into people who got lost in the building. For the production, I was a trans actor who usually presents in a masculine fashion but in the moment was wearing a dress, make-up, wig, and pantyhose. Therefore, going to the men's restroom was a game of careful timing to avoid any run-ins with male-identifying audience members unacquainted with the real me beneath the character's costume.

My own clothing choices also helped me center myself. During *The Importance of Being Earnest*, I chose to wear gender-affirming undergarments (boxers) under my Lady Bracknell costume as the garment did not impact the costume designer's vision. The pantyhose worn by my character activated my gender dysphoria, but the singular cloth layer of the boxers was enough for me to focus and feel assured in my sense of self.

In terms of active practices to frame my performance, I employed physical gestures when entering and exiting the stage to separate my character from the real me. Whenever I was about to step on stage, I chose to do an entrance gesture of three quiet finger snaps by my ears. When I stepped off stage, my exiting gesture was to perform two finger snaps by the ears and a silent hand clap in front of my face. My closure practices involved changing out of my costume, finishing by taking off my pantyhose and putting on my pants. The final element was removing my make-up and putting on a specific "trans pride" necklace I wore every day. Once the necklace was on, I mentally and physically recognized myself again. It also helped in my process to say goodbye to the actors with whom I shared the dressing room and thank my costume crew for helping me keep all my pieces organized and clean. This "Thank you" practice is a welcome courtesy as a human being but also mentally let me be present and recognize that I was actively leaving a performance space.

After Closing (working together)

For *The Importance of Being Earnest*, my university held a post-show reflection, as is done for all our shows as a learning practice for both the students and faculty. I had a fairly positive experience overall during the production, which was primarily due to early conversations to set expectations, regular check-ins, and consistent communication I had with the directors and other company members. I was ultimately inspired to focus my thesis research on working successfully with trans actors because there was fear expressed by some faculty members about the unusual casting choice for the show (a trans man playing a well-known feminine character). The main concern was the potential legal ramifications if my incorporation into the production were mishandled along the way. Despite the concerns, in the end the process was a team effort that resulted in a good experience for me as a trans actor. I felt confident enough throughout the play to express my needs and communicate with the directors and crew. I realize that is not the case for everyone, especially for students currently exploring their gender identity.

After Closing (individual practices)

During the production, I kept a private digital journal to discuss the positives and negatives of my experience playing Lady Bracknell. I recorded my thoughts at the end of rehearsals or costume fittings. I knew the role was going to be a big shift in what I was used to as an actor. It was the first time I was being asked to play a female-identifying character after having completed my social and medical transition. Fortunately, I was working with directors interested in supporting me while also putting on a great show. Journaling my experience throughout the process helped me realize that the overall journey was positive; rather than fending off more serious harmful comments or actions, most of the negatives were mere moments in time when I was experiencing minor twists in clothes, make-up, and the act of presenting in a manner inconsistent with my gender identity. The overall experience of getting to portray a female-identifying character with who I identify now as an actor was fascinating.

Where I am Now

I had immense fun playing Lady Bracknell for the CU Theatre & Dance production of *The Importance of Being Earnest*. Knowing my directors were open to regularly discussing my needs as a trans actor, both before and during the production, offered me the space to breathe and focus

on my intention of character. I felt supported as a human being and could begin taking risks as an actor and truly playing as a student. In a practical sense, my experience was a crucial part of my research for a Master's degree but was also a crucial exploration of my abilities as an actor. In a personal sense, my experience showed me that there is space for conversations around the dual identities of actors as human beings and the parts they play.

Encountering these tools revealed to me that culturally competent collaboration between trans actors and the production team can be a "win–win" interaction that benefits everyone, and sometimes this comes in the form of collaborators asking questions and acknowledging when they have a lack of cultural competency. Examples of this success have been seen recently in the television industry with non-binary (e.g., Bella Ramsey) and trans (e.g., Elliot Page) actors. Both actors worked closely with the directors and writing teams to support their gender identities while filming the shows they were working on—*The Last of Us* in Ramsey's case and *Umbrella Academy* in Page's.

For example, actor Bella Ramsey mentioned in an interview with Jack King from GQ Magazine that they wore gender-affirming costuming (a chest binder) while filming *The Last of Us*. The binder acted as an unseen reminder of their gender identity while the actor portrayed a female-identifying character. Ramsey wore the binder "90 per cent" of the time while filming, and it enabled them to "focus better on set" (King 2023). Ramsey says that "[p]laying these more feminine characters is a chance to be something so opposite to myself, and it's really fun" (King 2023). Thus, the simple expedient of wearing an invisible gender-affirming garment under their costume was a substantial aid to Ramsey's process as they portrayed their character.

Similarly, actor Elliot Page came out as a trans man after season 2 of *Umbrella Academy* had wrapped. When approaching season 3, he and the showrunner, Steve Blackman, collaborated in advance regarding approaches to allow Page's character of Viktor to express a transition journey similar to Page's own path. Trans author Thomas McBee was also brought on board as a new member of the writing team. Blackman told McBee that having Viktor transition alongside Page was "right for the actor as well as the character because it deepened existing themes" within the show (Milton 2022). This shift was a challenge as the arc of season 3 had already been determined before this new sub-plot was added, but the team chose to "graft a transition story over the intricate plotting of an ensemble show" (Milton 2022). These thematic choices for the character's story were made collaboratively through discussions among Page, McBee, and Blackman regarding

experiences and feelings that Viktor would encounter during their transition, using Page's own insights gained during his journey. In the end, the fresh subplot added depth to the production without distracting from the season's other pre-established story arcs.

In conclusion, the tools I offer in this article are an approach to supporting trans actors and their colleagues in the artistic world. The examples of Ramsey and Page as well as my own experience described above represent some of the ways that actors have supported themselves and artistic companies have supported all production team members while successfully mounting film and theatrical productions. Engaging in conversations with trans actors during the artistic process may seem overwhelming at first, but it is crucial that we begin these discussions for the future ease of collaboration and artistic development. This article is not an ultimate solution to the all issues that trans actors may face in the performance industry, but it is a call for culturally competent collaboration presented in combination with some useful means for managing such collaborations.[1]

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Devising in Hawai’i: The Efficacy of a Eurocentric Methodology with BIPOC Students

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About the Author:
Originally from Brooklyn, NY, Mike is a playwright, educator, and academic who has written seven full-length plays and numerous one-acts which have been performed in six countries. He has a Playwriting MFA from Trinity College Dublin, and a Ph.D. in Theatre from the University of Hawai‘i at Mānoa, where he teaches theatre history and playwriting. His scholarly research investigates the role of student agency in devised theatre education. His academic work has appeared in journals such as Theatre Topics and ArtsPraxis. His monograph, Student Agency in Devised Theatre Education: Creating Collaborative Dramaturgy in Virtual and In-Person Classrooms, will be available from Routledge in 2024.

In the autumn of 2021, as part of my dissertation research at the University of Hawaiʻi at Mānoa, I, along with my creative partner Kat Rothman, facilitated a devised theatre project with the drama class at Waipahu High School in Oʻahu, assisted by the school's drama teacher. The research aimed to assess whether, as a result of engaging in devised theatre, the students experienced any shifts in their outlooks on learning and their sense of self-agency. Agency, in this context, refers to the socioculturally mediated capacity to act (Ahearn 2001, 112), the understanding that an individual is the initiator of their actions (Tapal et al. 2017, 1552), the capacity to impact and eventually transform an individual's life circumstances and practices in which they are engaged (Rainio 2010, 5), and the concept of ownership of the ideals of individual choice, freedom, intentionality, empowerment and cultural transformation (Lehtonen 2015, 1887). These students are almost entirely of Hawaiian, Oceanic, and Southeast Asian descent, and we, the devising facilitators, are White-passing and from the continental United States. Hawaiʻi, of course, has a long history of colonialism that devastated the Kānaka Maoli population (the indigenous people of Hawaiʻi), along with much of their history, language, and culture, resulting in present-day illegal military occupation, harmful tourism practices, food insecurity, high costs of living, and climate change (Aikau and Gonzalez 2019; Liliʻuokalani 2011; Silva 2004). For two artists such as ourselves who embody in our artistry, pedagogy, and physical presence the Eurocentric culture that has caused so much harm to the Kānaka Maoli, asking these students to express vulnerability through devising had the potential to stir trauma. In this article, I will discuss some of the challenges we faced in bringing this Western theatre methodology into a BIPOC classroom, and I will make the case that, despite those challenges, the process was overall beneficial to the students, primarily because we gave them as much control as possible over the creative processes.

Devised theatre is often praised for celebrating cultural differences as assets, and indeed, there are many celebrated BIPOC devised theatre artists. Much of Augusto Boal's Theatre of the Oppressed methodology is employed within devised rehearsal rooms; in Hawaiʻi, T-Shirt Theatre Company has been devising with young people for twenty years, and over the last decade at the University of Hawaiʻi, quite a few Kānaka Maoli students have presented works utilizing a wide variety of devising methodologies. However, the reality is that devising comes from a Eurocentric theatre tradition, and most professional devised theatre companies in the United States today are made up of a majority of White practitioners. As such, the inclusivity promised by devised theatre

advocates is in question. Western theatre itself holds a complicated place in Hawaiʻi; despite the endurance (and since the 1970s a growing resurgence) of traditional Hawaiian performance forms, as a lasting result of colonization, theatre in Hawaiʻi has been dominated by Western forms throughout the second half of the twentieth century and into the twenty-first. This is why artist scholars like Tammy Hailiʻōpua Baker (2019) and Kiki Rivera (2019) contend that the Hawaiian community would be better served by learning their own performance forms rather than another Western one. So, given the student population I was working with, was devised theatre ultimately a beneficial learning strategy?

We began our process by asking the students to address the prompt, "What does the world need to know right now?" We employed strategies from Viewpoints (Bogart and Landau 2004), Theatre of the Oppressed (Boal 2021), and Tectonic Theatre (Kaufman and McAdams 2018), as well as a unique dramaturgical process of my design. This involved having the students periodically pause to analyze and seek patterns in their generated work to create their own dramaturgical questions to guide their creative expression (Poblete 2022, 83). They then used these questions to edit and refine their material to arrive at a cohesive show. By giving the students as much control as possible, including allowing them to direct and make all design choices, I argue there was minimal artistic influence from myself, my co-facilitator, and the classroom teacher.

The show they created, entitled *Our Legacy*, is eclectic in terms of content, theme, and aesthetic. It overall follows the journey of a teenaged life, going from the simplicity of youth to complications of what happens after graduation, featuring pieces exploring topics such as peer pressure, cyberbullying, romantic cheating, bathroom etiquette, and homophobic bigotry.

A scene from *Our Legacy.*

My friend Sean-Joseph Choo, a Hawaiian theatre practitioner, identified several Hawaiian cultural through lines throughout the show. For example, he believes that the bookends of *Our Legacy,* an elderly woman looking back at her high school yearbook, is an example of exploring nostalgia, a common theme he observes in contemporary local Hawaiian theater. He also saw clear influences from prominent Hawaiian comedic artists throughout the show:

> I cannot help but think of my own family's sense of humor, as well as historically the teasing and integration of different peoples on the plantation that created local culture, as well as the comedians that came out of all that (Rap Reiplinger,[1] Booga Booga,[2] Frank Delima,[3] Andy Bumatai,[4] Kaui Hill AKA Bu La'ia,[5] Da Braddahs,[6] Tumua Tuinei,[7] etc.). I wondered if the rich history of comedy, specifically sketch comedy, has some direct connection with the struggle and hilarity that came from different cultures trying to communicate and sometimes succeed and sometimes fail, and whether these moments and styles of vignettes/slice-of-life stem from the lived experiences of the ancestors here. (Sean-Joseph Choo, interview by author, Honolulu, August, 2022)

Importantly, not only did we the facilitators not introduce the work of these artists to the students, we hadn't heard of most of them. *Our Legacy* also features clear Filipino cultural elements. The classroom teacher, who is Filipino, observed several examples throughout, such as

a family scene featuring an aggressive auntie interrogating her nephew about whether he has a girlfriend in school. All of these observations come from adults who analyzed the students' work rather than from the students themselves: I do not believe the students were consciously aware of invoking these cultural elements; they were simply expressing themselves. But the fact that these moments appear in the show suggests to me that the students had quite a lot of agency over their creative processes. In fact, the students demonstrated increased agency and a positive shift in their outlooks on learning throughout the rehearsal process, as well as a stronger sense of agency over their lives more broadly (as demonstrated by data presented in Poblete 2022, see Figure 1 below for an example). Here is one student's reflection:

> It was a bit scary at first, especially for people who didn't really know what was going on, who are new to drama, and people who are not really good at socializing. But as more activities went by and the more we started having fun with it, I was like, how chill the energy was. We felt like we could be able to breathe and just express ourselves really in the way – it was like art … Like you guys expected very much of us because you have that much faith in us … Overall, it was a great learning experience and great for personal growth, and not just with being an actor, but also like learning how to be a better person (Student, interview by author, Waipahu, December, 2021).

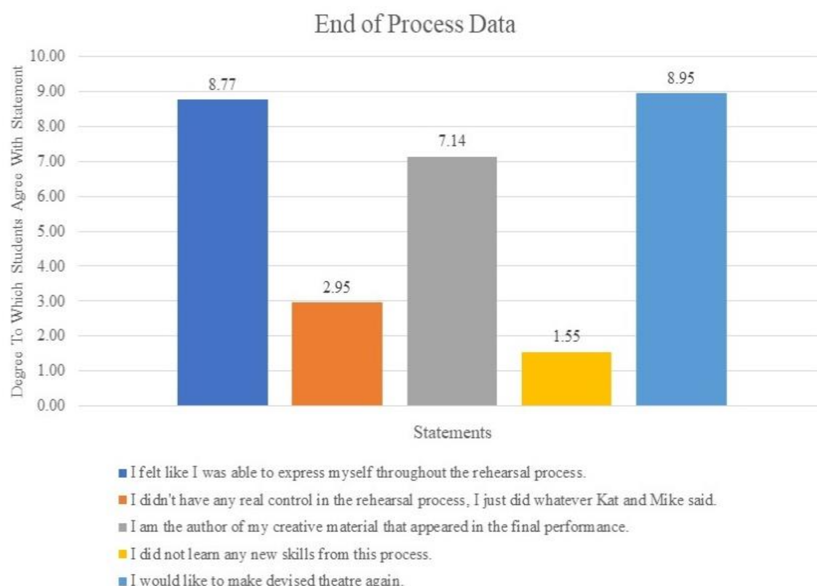

Figure 1: Exit surveys indicate that the students felt a high degree of ownership over their work (Poblete 2022, 178).

As White-passing instructors from the continental United States, the challenges we faced as facilitators in understanding and crossing the cultural barriers in these two classrooms were

considerable. At one point, the classroom teacher indicated that the language I used impacted the rehearsal room:

> I think it's just a terminology thing. Because you're White, the language that you use among your White peers would center around certain kinds of words. I'm not White, but I get it. But for the students, they haven't had exposure to that kind of language unless they watch *Friends*. Because, Mike, you seriously sound like a character on *Friends* (Classroom Teacher, interview by author, Waipahu, May, 2021).

There was also a lot to consider in how we approached this community in the first place and the process we underwent to be welcomed into this project. I had taken several courses at the University of Hawaiʻi on Hawaiian language, political science, history, and theatre, and I took part in several Hawaiian arts projects at our University and out in the community. These experiences contributed to my earning a recommendation from the head of our Hawaiian Theatre Program to work in the community on my own, as well as an invitation into Waipahu High School. We attempted to incorporate Indigenous knowledge frameworks into our methodology, such as an ŌiwiCrit critical race theory (Wright and Balutski 2016) which emphasizes elements of kuleana (right, privilege, concern, responsibility), moʻokūʻauhau (genealogy), aloha ʻāina (love of the land or of one's country, patriotism, particularly within a Hawaiian context), and hūnā (sacred, hidden). In some ways, we succeeded in incorporating these methodologies. However, for various reasons primarily related to time and resources, we failed in most ways. Still, despite those failures, the efforts to educate ourselves and respect Indigenous learning methodologies did seem to come through to the students in subtle ways. Most importantly, the classroom teacher, well-known and respected by all the students involved, was with us every step of the way.

Undoubtedly, elements of the process must have seemed irrelevant and colonial to the students. For example, because I believed the students would benefit from viewing "canonical" devised work, at the beginning of the rehearsal process we screened several videos of devised performances from the United Kingdom and Germany. However, the students responded much more strongly to the performances of local Hawaiian artists. It is little wonder, as Europe is on the other side of the planet from Hawaiʻi, and the cultural relevance of several of the screened pieces was not only dubious but, again, entrenched in a Eurocentric tradition that had the potential to stir cultural trauma.

Reflecting upon these concerns at the end of the rehearsal process, I asked the classroom teacher about the role of devising as a methodology in her classroom and if she felt a praxis modeled after a Hawaiian theatre tradition like Hana Keaka, a Chinese form like Jingju, or a Filipino form like Duplo would have been more relevant and effective with the students. She felt that our devising process, although Eurocentric in its design, was received well:

> I think my kids; if you say those theatre forms, they'll be like, "What? I don't know." ... And maybe the Asian kids will be like, "Oh, I know what that is." Because it's something that their parents know of or have taken them to. So, I want to say that devised theatre is – I can only speak for my demographic of students, my Gen Z kids in my district school – they're more familiar with this kind of skit work or improvisation work, not Hawaiian/Polynesian styles (Classroom Teacher in discussion with the author, December 2021).

She believes that although the devising methodology itself and the most prominent artists who practice it are of different cultures than her students, the storytelling they are most exposed to is Western, and as a result, our methodology was in many ways familiar and did indeed resonate with them. Looking back at Sean-Joseph Choo's analysis of the students' play, the local comedic artists he named draw deeply from their own Hawaiian culture and genealogy in their work, but the formats generally follow Western sketch-comedy structures. Hawaiian artists routinely reference Hawaiian *and* Western storytelling in contemporary performance. For example, Tammy Haili'ōpua Baker (2020) discusses the efficacy of Pidgin Theatre for Kānaka Maoli expression, a form that is neither Hana Keana nor Western dramatic theatre but a hybrid of both. This is not to say that theatre methodologies more entrenched in the students' own cultures might not serve them better. But, based on the data, feedback from the classroom teacher and the students' families, and my anecdotal observations, the students in this class seemed to enjoy our devising process and get a lot out of it.

Ultimately, I believe that devised theatre educators throughout the United States must do better at incorporating global storytelling methodologies into our processes; I am no exception. But I also argue that a devised theatre process aimed at giving its participants as much control as possible can benefit BIPOC communities under the right circumstances. However, creating these circumstances is complicated, involving a deep consideration of consent-based practices and cultural competency. For brevity, I will focus on only four points.

My first recommendation is to allow as much time for the process as possible. Devising can involve allowing students to work as directors, playwrights, actors, designers, technical

supervisors, and producers, which takes time. So does responsibly honoring the knowledge frameworks that shape the students' worldviews. For example, Tewa author Gregory A. Cajete (1994) emphasizes that a common characteristic of Indigenous education is a discussion-heavy learning environment where students learn through stories told many times from different perspectives (213-214). Roderick Jay Spaulding (2010) argues that in contrast to Indigenous learning frameworks, Western education moves far too quickly, a symptom of information being separated from the places and people from which it is derived (24-25). This is one of the ways we failed to to incorporate Indigenous knowledge frameworks into our methodology: we lacked the time to allow sufficient space for our teachings to be contextualized within the students' backgrounds and learning frameworks.

My second recommendation is to bring in local artists and educators to allow students to learn artistic expression from members of their community. We brought in a local Sāmoan performer toward the end of the project to help solidify some of our improv teachings; if we had more time, we would have brought him in earlier into the process, along with other artists who had expressed interest in working with us but who found it challenging to schedule around our rehearsal calendar. This, too, is a way in which we failed to incorporate Indigenous knowledge frameworks into our methodology.

My third recommendation is to consider the exit strategy. If practitioners provide participants with tools and a platform to express their stories, what happens when the project ends? The facilitation of a temporary emotional bond resulting from the collaboration of young artists and the subsequent disbanding of that bond can be particularly dangerous in Indigenous communities where, again, expressions of vulnerability can often stir legacies of cultural trauma. Monica Prendergast and Juliana Saxton (2009) emphasize that in exiting from an applied theatre process, facilitators are ethically bound to create an action plan that aims to continue the process following their departure (196). Because this project took place in a high school and we were working with a longstanding theatre teacher, the negative effects of our departure were not felt as acutely as if we were the sole facilitators. We kept in contact with that teacher, and several months after the end of the project we were invited back to serve as judges for their spring showcase, a performance of original spoken word poetry. The students were delighted to see us again and made us feel very welcome. By remaining in the community and letting the students know that we still

care about them, we hope that we mitigated any distress caused by breaking any emotional bonds between them and ourselves.

My final recommendation is to allow the students as much control over the devising process as possible. We were clearly from a very different culture from the students, but the project was a success nonetheless because we allowed them to express themselves on their own terms, and in so doing, they brought elements to the process that were foreign to us. This involved letting them fail, both academically and artistically. For example, at one point, a group of students performed a half-baked piece for the rest of the class; they simply hadn't put any effort into it. We did not admonish them or offer artistic critique but rather let the other students provide feedback that not only allowed them to conclude that they had to work harder but also guided them in improving the piece within a context that made sense to them.

There will always be cultural barriers when educators teach outside their community. Nonetheless, I believe that a constructive exchange of ideas is always achievable, so long as the educators are as conscious as possible of the barriers and see those differences as learning opportunities because those barriers are always clear to the students.

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[1] Rap Reiplinger rose to prominence as a prolific Hawaiian comedian in the early 1980s; his cultural influence is considered part of the second Hawaiian Renaissance.

[2] Booga Booga was one of the most popular Hawaiian comedy groups in the 1970s and 1980s, famous for their special brand of "Kanaka Komedy." The original members of the Booga Booga comedy group were Rap Reiplinger, Ed Kaahea, and James Grant Benton.

[3] Frank Delima is an influential Hawaiian comedian. He is known for invoking his diverse ethnic background in his act as a microcosm for the diversity of Hawaiʻi (he of is Portuguese, Hawaiian, Irish, Chinese, English, Spanish, and Scottish descent).

[4] Andy Bumatai is a Hawaiian actor, stand-up comedian, television host, and producer. He has created a number of TV specials for Hawaiʻi's KGMB-TV, most notably *High School Daze* and *All in the Ohana*.

[5] Kaui Hillis, AKA Bu Laʻia, is a Hawaiian comedian known for his use of Pidgin and for wearing a large wig and blacking out one of his front teeth while performing. He starred in a cable television show in the early 1990s and attained fame when he ran for governor of Hawaiʻi in 1994.

[6] Active since 2002, Hawaiian comedians James Roche and Tony Silva are famous for their live performances as well as their ongoing television show as the duo Da Braddahs.

[7] A newcomer to the Hawaiian comedy scene, Tumua Tuinei is a former University of Hawaiʻi at Mānoa football player, who is inspiring a new generation of Hawaiians.

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“Am I *halo-halo*?” Finding the Filipino-American Re-Storying Framework Through Consent

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About the Author:

Matt Denney is a Filipino-American educator and researcher with a mixed-race background. He is currently pursuing a Ph.D. in Higher Education, focusing on Theatre for Social Justice. Matt has a broad range of experience, having worked at various theaters across the country as an Intimacy Director and Teaching Artist. His work has been showcased at several notable institutions, including East West Players, Scoundrel & Scamp Theatre, Ottawa School of Theatre, the Center for Creative Photography, and the Shakespeare Theatre Company. Additionally, Matt has presented his research at the Association for Theatre in Higher Education (ATHE), covering various aspects of his work, including Mixed Race Student Engagement and Food Justice. Beyond his academic and artistic contributions, he has also served as a Grant Committee Member for the National Endowment for the Arts. Matt is the proud recipient of TheField NYC's Fiscal Sponsorship for Social Justice Practitioners for his work with community engagement and self-consent, highlighting his commitment to advancing social justice through the arts.

"I started to worry that I was a stranger to my own identity, and I felt like I was doing something wrong" (DeGuia 2021).

The Impetus

Halo-Halo, consisting of Ube Ice Cream, young coconut, red beans, and many other fruits and toppings, is one of the most famous Filipino desserts. It is one of my favorite desserts that I grew up with, and it reminds me of the connection to both childhood and culture. Doreen G Fernandez talks about the connection between culture and food and how food is a touchstone to memory and history (Fernandez 2021). Halo-Halo translates to "Mix-Mix" which points to how the dessert is eaten: you mix all of the toppings together and either eat it with a spoon or a straw. This idea of Halo-Halo relates to many of the current topics in not only the Intimacy and Consent fields, but also within the identities of what it means to be "Filipino-American." The artistic fields related to intimacy and consent in performance are changing constantly, much like the culture of Filipino-Americans in the United States. With all this change, we also see many people with prior training in other areas that intersect with our own work such as cultural consultants, trauma-informed practitioners, and mental health workers. We are constantly building and rebuilding our own practices within the fields of intimacy and consent. However, with the rapidly growing field that we are in, we must begin to consider what narratives, identities, and inquiries are being pushed to the forefront of these conversations. DëQueer and Valentine polled many Intimacy Professionals within the field and found that 79% of respondents identified themselves as "white" while Filipino representation was at 8% but was the only Asian ethnicity represented among all respondents that were polled (DëQueer & Valentine 2022). As the field has continued to develop further and include many more non-Filipino Asian and Pacific Islander Intimacy Professionals, I began to wonder: is there a reason why there are and were many Filipino-Identifying Intimacy Professionals amidst the Asian Diaspora? Whatever the reason may be, a more important question arose: are these artists being supported in ways that are culturally sustaining? Being Filipino myself, I knew that there was more to this story and the intersection between the intimacy field and the sense of "Pinoy Pride" (Alsaybar 1999) and wanted to generate a framework to support artists such as myself.

The History

I feel that it is important to start from a historical perspective to hopefully understand a bit about the history that the Philippines and America have together. Filipino sailors were among the first Asians in the United States back in 1763; they were first called Manilamen (V 2019). Due to the timing of their arrival, the Manilamen were in the United States during the early Revolutionary War and the War of 1812. For centuries, Filipinos have been a part of the U.S. landscape and American culture. From 1898 to 1946, the Philippines were under American colonization, where Filipinos were imported to America for entertainment and, in at least one case, a human zoo[1] (for real, look it up!). The Philippines has had a long history of colonization and conquests—first conquered by Spain, then Britain, then the United States—before reaching eventual independence on July 4th, 1946. Yes, the United States and the Philippines share the same day of independence, which takes on a whole new meaning as someone who is Filipino-American (Ribunal 2016). The Philippines has been colonized enough times that much of the history we receive in the Philippines is colonized beyond recognition to the point where we don't even have a storyline to follow anymore. However, the 1940s and 1960s were a time where great resilient activists and manongs came to America in hopes of work and education. Activists like Larry Itliong and Philip Vera Cruz, who helped lead the Filipino Farm-Workers Movement and the Great Delano Grape Strike, advocated for equitable pay and conditions for the Farmworkers in California and America as a whole. This led to the National Farm Workers' Association, which worked alongside Cesar Chavez. Around that time, Carlos Bulosan wrote many poems, essays, and novels, the most famous being *America is in the Heart,* on what it was like to be a Filipino in America. We rarely see these names in history books, but they contributed to the continued activism that has rooted our experience in America (Romasanta 2019; Solano 2019). Filipino-Americans are grounded in activism and, as such, prioritize uplifting and advocating on behalf of others—not by a want but by necessity to survive in equitable conditions.

The Story of Now

There has been a rivalry amidst the Filipino-American community on what makes a "true" Filipino and how we are able to assimilate to a culture that is relatively unknown to those of us who are first-generation American. What does it even mean to be Filipino-American? What does it even mean to be Filipino? Usually it comes down to which culture we associate more with, and Filipino-American culture is continuously evolving into its own subculture that creates a

Eurocentric version of Filipino traditions around family parties, holidays, and how loud we cheer when Lea Salonga sings. Dr. Anthony Ocampo says that we are the "Latinos of Asia," pointing to parallel histories of durational colonialism and highlighting how the negotiations of race and cultural identity are changed through the communities we are in, especially with Filipino-Americans who are first-generation. Through these negotiations, we are continuously finding our own stories and narratives, often both discovering and expressing these stories through the work that we do (Ocampo 2016).

The Framework

Dr. Kevin Nadal (2004) first originated the P/Filipino American Identity Development Model and its centeredness in relation to white-dominant culture within the United States. Artists working in intimacy choreography and direction need to recognize that— especially for P/Filipino Americans due to our specific cultural context and inheritance—those in the dominant white supremacist class have dictated what is socially acceptable to say yes and no to (Blount 2022), imposing those cultural norms onto people of color living and working in places and industries shaped by white supremacist ideals and culture. Consent is discussed and utilized as a tool of empowerment in many intimacy workshops, classrooms, rehearsals, and filming spaces; consent-based practitioners seek to help participants better understand and communicate their physical, emotional, and mental boundaries (St. John 2022). Consent is giving yourself or others the agency and power to say yes and no equally in their lives. As Rikard and Villarreal (2022) write, "we must acknowledge that a person who is marginalized is already, and always, carving out a brave space within and for themselves, not by choice, but as a requirement created by a world, a society, and an industry that was not created with them in mind." (6). For Filipino-American artists who have to work constantly to carve a space for themselves in U.S. culture *and* in the arts, the autonomy to reclaim our stories and communicate our needs is not only affirming—it is a *need*. The Filipino-American experience is embodied research; our bodies breathe in history and a contextual colonization that is beyond ourselves, which includes our ancestors. Due to the specific experience of embodying and living within overlapping histories and ongoing colonial forces, and because Filipinos were the only Asian identity represented among intimacy professionals according to the DëQueer & Valentine's survey, we should consider ways in which sustainable practices that relate to identity development can be introduced to serve the unique cultural needs of Filipino artists. I

offer the Filipino-American Restorying Framework, which is informed by Nadal's P/Filipino American Identity Development Model and the multitude of current and evolving consent-based artistic practices[2] which also emphasize boundary-setting and knowing that consent is only consent when we can actively engage with the practice of yes and no equally. Some environments may not allow us to fully engage with this framework in its entirety due to trauma related to personhood, historical context, or current conditions, such as access to resources. However, I offer the Filipino-American Restorying Framework as a tool to help those in our industry understand the forces acting upon us as Filipino-American artists, to better support our needs, and to infuse consent-based performance practices with cultural competency.

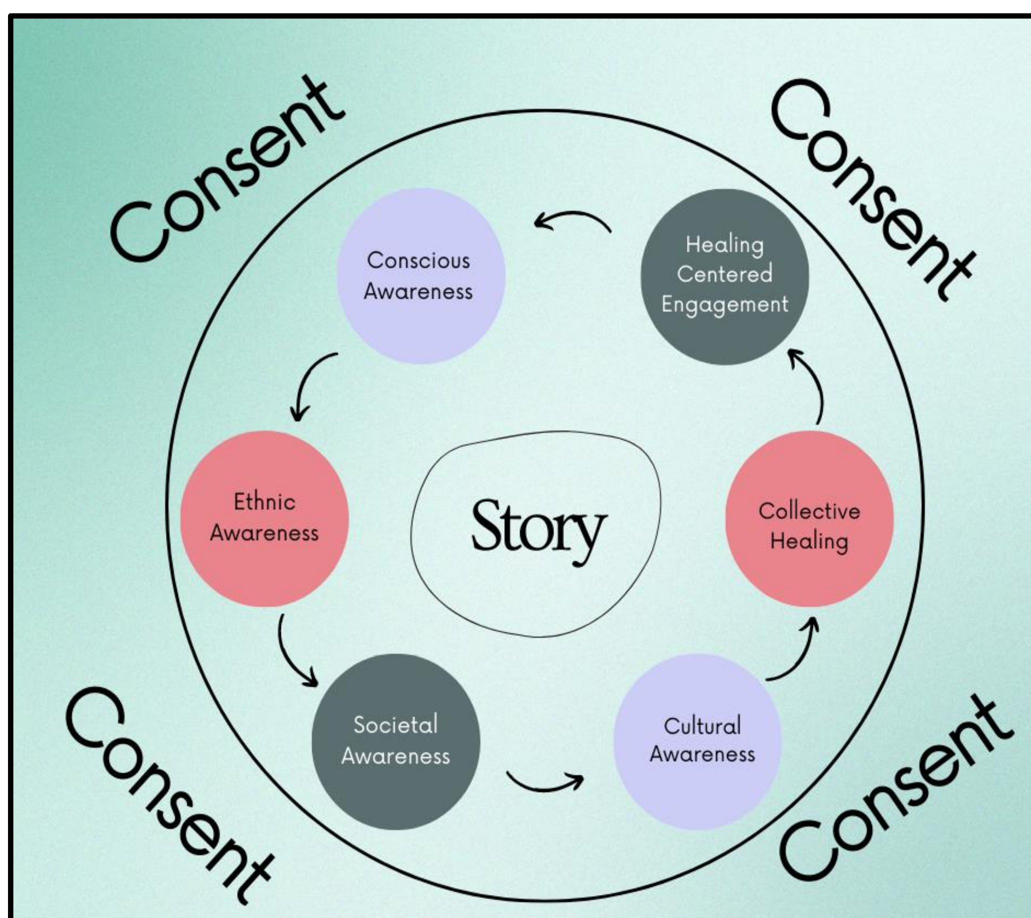

Figure 1: Filipino-American Restorying Framework

Societal Awareness: Social perceptions of us as Filipino-Americans can play a significant role in our identity development. Many people in the U.S. cannot tell if Filipinos are Asian, Latino, or somewhere in between when first meeting us, which affects educational experiences, job opportunities, and abilities to be cast in TV and film (Ocampo 2021). All of these factors also play

a role in our financial and professional stability: when our cultural narratives are clouded or obscured by uncertainty from a societal perspective, we cannot continue developing the story of our individual selves with confidence. In relation to consent, Filipino-Americans have to say “yes" to themselves and be vulnerable enough to seek community within times of uncertainty from a societal perspective. When an understanding of self is paired with a community of other Filipino-Americans or those that are Asian-American, it creates a new narrative rooted in another aspect of the framework—collective healing within each other.

Ethnic Awareness: This stage occurs within the first few years of life, and is often connected to our earliest memories. Many Filipino-American mixed families attempt to teach their children the importance of Filipino culture through food, dance, dress, music, or attempts to teach the native language. Children in this stage will have an impartial view of Filipino culture because they have been socialized to understand that their culture has a place in society (Nadal 2004). In relation to consent and our stories as Filipino-Americans, we must learn our shared and individual histories, as well as learning about the activism that has allowed us to be who we are today. Our stories are beautiful, our people are beautiful, and our creations are beautiful. It is up to us and society to say yes to our history and make our invisible stories visible again.

Conscious Awareness: With many of our stories rooted in activism, we have to spend time understanding how our conscience coincides with the world around us. Professor Virgilio Enriquez discusses Filipino Psychology and the term *kapwa,* which has come to be known as:

> A recognition of a shared identity, an inner self, shared with others… it is the moral obligation to treat one another as equal fellow human beings. If we can do this – even starting in our own family or our circle of friends – we are on the way to practicing peace. We are Kapwa People. (Enriquez 1975, 73)

Cultural Awareness: There are large differences between those who are Filipino and those who are Filipino-American. First-generation Filipino-Americans have to ask ourselves: Do we like our culture, or the Americanized version of our culture? Are we simply chasing a shadow of what life was like in the Philippines? Filipino-American culture is becoming its own subculture as a “halo-halo” of both cultures. One must understand some Filipino culture in order to further develop and understand their own sense of identity as someone who is “halo-halo.”

***Collective Healing*:** Cowan, Dill, and Sutton combine the theories of radical healing and the collective impact model to create what we know as the Collective Healing Framework, which roots

frameworks and community healing in a practice that is ongoing and consistently engaged with (Cowan, Dill, & Sutton 2022). In practice, collaborators can hold or attend community listening sessions, build community voice, and gain an interpersonal understanding of needs while working towards a common agenda within their community.

***Healing-Centered Approach*:** Dr. Shawn Ginwright writes how healing-centered engagement expands how people view trauma and offers more holistic approaches to fostering well-being that go beyond Trauma-Informed Practices (Ginwright 2020). Healing-centered engagement is culturally grounded and views healing as the restoration of identity. As mentioned previously, Filipino-Americans are part of embodied research, with our containers already partly filled historically with stories of how Filipino-Americans have been treated in this country. In order to fully create and contribute to our cultural narrative, we have to understand that healing is a part of the process of storytelling.

Story: The formation of identity and the creation of our own narrative that is both collective and individualistic is at the heart of the framework, and it should be centered in the work we do within the consent and cultural competency intersections. To establish a sense of identity means claiming purpose, vision, dreams, and culture for us as a community and for yourself as a human being. By claiming our story, we remind ourselves of our own humanity in practice. We have to say yes to our story and history because it is tangible and challenging. By consideration, recognition, and celebration, we are able to create the story that encapsulates both our ancestors and ourselves as storytellers.

The Framework in Practice

The Theatre has been and always will be political. If we are disembodied from the context, how do we move forward to a creative and sustainable theater that is interdisciplinary, antiracist, decolonized, and equitable towards their local and international communities? When thinking about putting this framework into practice, a poem by M. NourbeSe Philip (2018, 31) comes into my mind:

> We all begin life in water
> We all begin life because someone once breathed for us
> Until we breathe for ourselves
> Someone breathes for us

We must breathe for one another. How are we as practitioners engaging with our own histories and saying yes to ourselves? If we truly center consent within the work that we do, we must continually embrace our backgrounds and intentionally work with others on a deeper level rather than in the silo of productivity.

In my own practice when working with college students and community theaters, utilizing this framework has taken a more educational and activity-based approach. One activity developed to support this framework is the "Building the Story of Me" activity which enables participants to build their own story and share with the group (Figure 2). By inviting folks you work with to communicate their own story, you can find the intersections your values, lives, and histories, which can be used to create a shared goal, vision, and ways of working and knowing one another moving forward.

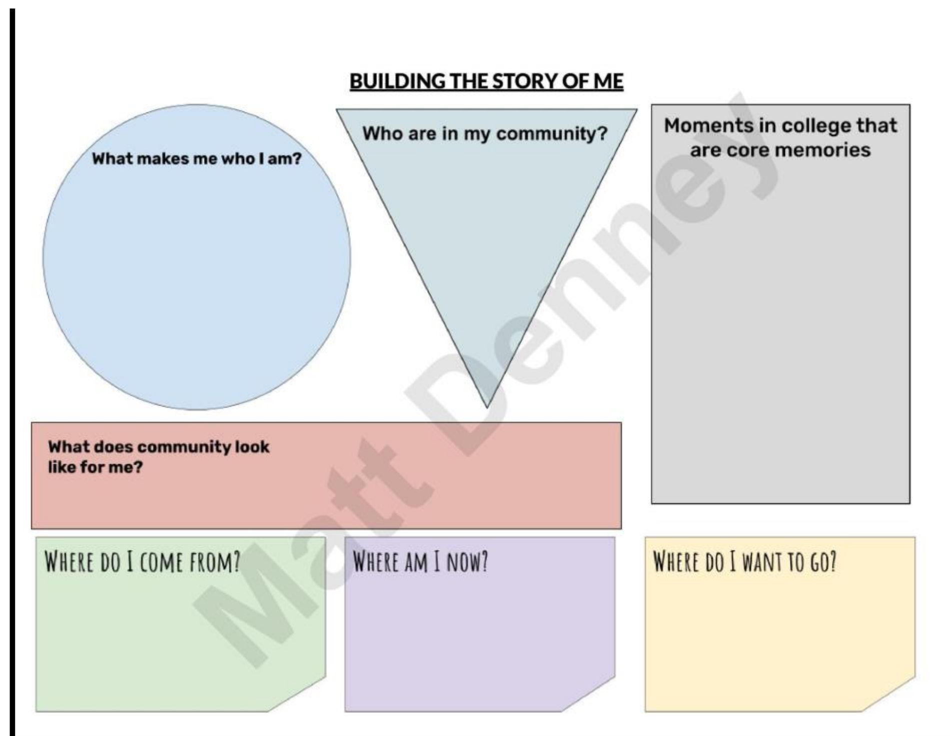

Figure 2: Building the Story of Me Activity

Press Press and the Institute of Expanded Research's Toolkit for Cooperative, Collective and Collaborative Cultural Work (Hanauer, 2020) is another integral resource to facilitate diving deeper into this framework. Hanauer writes:

> Building a shared culture in the group also comes from prioritizing your relationships as part of the work. Prioritizing relationships as part of the work can mean a multiplicity of things, including critically acknowledging the socioeconomic conditions that our relationships are based in; knowing what's going on in collaborators' lives; learning how to best support, care for, and anticipate one another's needs; hearing life updates before delving into the "work" (if time allows); doing "non-work" activities together; and much more.

To begin engaging with the Filipino-American Restorying Framework, we must center and prioritize the relationships in our work. These relationships form and mold the collectivist culture of care that is so central to the consent-forward practices that should be within our work. When considering how to engage with this work and the call to action that follows additional knowledge-building, the introduction to embodying elements of this framework is a great starting point.

The Implications and Considerations

This framework is by no means the end-all-be-all framework for decolonizing the structures that inhibit us from being our best selves. The framework should be utilized as a tool for reclaiming history and our stories as Filipino-Americans as we continue to navigate our own culture and relationship with colonization given the strained relationship with both America and Asia. This framework, article, and crash course on Filipino-American History should serve as the stones and foundation for the bridge that is consistently and constantly being built. Engagement in identity-based practices requires engagement with one's own identity community (Phinney 1996). How can we as practitioners, educators, and researchers create space and conversations around cultural competency if we do not think of the Asian Diaspora? Some opportunities for engagement could be community conversations, mentorship programs, and resources for folks who are Filipino-American. With this framework rooted in consent, we could go further and talk about what intimacy looks like to our bodies that have a history of colonization beyond the physical touch forms of intimacy. I would encourage folks to utilize this framework to explore how they have been creating space for Asian-American Pacific Islanders and not perpetuating the continual model minority myth where we are simply expected to do well, rather than be given space to tell our own stories (Blackburn 2019). So, the question still remains: am I halo-halo? The answer is yes. I am a beautiful mix-mix of both my ancestry and the future. I am a person preserving history while also preserving my own right to humanity. This model was developed using a combination

of research and experience, which one could argue is the halo-halo of academia. I find myself endlessly grateful for those who have contributed in my own learning and development, found in other Asian-American artists who have shown endless collective action and community care for my learning. To conclude this journey and new knowledge acquisition, I wanted to reiterate the importance of community in all works that we find ourselves in. My community of allies has been so vital for my own survival as the work continues to grow and develop, and I am endlessly grateful for those who have contributed knowledge by giving grace and space for me as a human, thus humanizing the educational process.

[1] See, for example, any of the vast amounts of photographic evidence and documentation on exhibition of Igorot Filipino people during the 1904 World's Fair

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Fawning, Masking, and Working as an Intimacy Professional on the Autism Spectrum

Elaine Brown—*Independent artist*

About the Author:
Elaine Brown (they/them) is a Chicago-based intimacy practitioner cultivating and advocating for sustainable working environments for theatre artists through consent-based practices, having graduated from Columbia College Chicago (CCC) with a BA in Acting in Fall 2023. Elaine enjoys working as a liaison between the production team and actors to bring their creative vision to life while ensuring artists feel that they can set and maintain boundaries in their process through shared language. Elaine loves diving into modern adaptions/retellings and new works highlighting queer and neurodiverse representation. Favorite past intimacy choreography credits include Stupid F#@*ing Bird (Bluebird Arts), Fallen Angels Hotel (Frantic Theatre Company), and Late: A Cowboy Song (CCC). When not immersed in intimacy direction/choreography, you can often find Elaine greeting absolutely every dog they meet on the street or curled up at home with a queer novel.

My name is Elaine Brown and I'm an intimacy practitioner. I'm also on the autism spectrum.

In the first two decades of my life, I felt constantly met by people who thought they knew more about autism from reading about it than I did from my own lived experience. People would even dismiss my own lived experience in favor of Random Neurotypical Author #229. Exploring autism-focused searches or hashtags on social media, especially on platforms like TikTok and Instagram reels, reveals that many other people on the spectrum share my experience of facing—and wanting to push back against—stereotypes developed by the neurotypical population. One of the most common stereotypes I have come across is that folx on the autism spectrum are simply born devoid of empathy and incapable of developing it throughout life experiences. The reality could not be further from that ignorance-based sentiment. Many people on the autism spectrum are shown to have even more intense empathy than their neurotypical peers (Rudy 2023); in fact, Lisa Jo Rudy (2023) writes that while some people on the autism spectrum may not express empathy the way that neurotypical individuals have been socialized to, "affective empathy—which is based on instincts and involuntary responses to the emotions of others—can be strong and overwhelming" for folx on the autism spectrum. This is only one of many misunderstandings and assumptions that many neurotypical people hold about their peers on the autism spectrum. As demonstrated by Rudy, the opposite of the assumption is true. For this reason, cultural competency related to neurodiversity, different ways in which neurodiverse folx experience the world, and communication styles shared among people on the autism spectrum could help the artistic community collaborate with neurodiverse artists more effectively—and the artistic community needs to recognize the value that people on the autism spectrum bring to artistic work.

I had incredible opportunities to learn from intimacy professionals while studying at Columbia College Chicago (CCC), namely Greg Geffrard (he/him/his) and Laura Sturm (she/her/hers). I first met adjunct faculty member Laura Sturm in the spring 2020 semester, mere weeks before the COVID-19 pandemic ripped through Chicago. Like many others, Sturm took the time during the pandemic to further her education and take intimacy classes and workshops. As CCC returned in person and we met again, she quickly became a dedicated mentor to me and never shied away from learning from her students, just as we learn from her. Sturm approaches intimacy through a vibrantly intersectional lens, where queer and neurodiverse folx are at the forefront when asking questions related to how we can keep pushing the industry to engage in emerging and

evolving best practices. Additionally, Sturm opened the door for me in my first professional production as an intimacy choreographer, and I credit a great deal of my growth in this field to her guidance and mentorship. I would be remiss if I did not point out that I would very likely be half the practitioner I am now had it not been for her dedication to empowering diverse students.

Also at CCC, Greg Geffrard's Intimacy Choreography/Directing class provided me with the specific intimacy choreography training, techniques, and theory that became the foundation for my own work.[1] Geffrard had a number of mantras he would share with our class, and my favorite (that is actually my computer background) is, "Your boundaries are your boundaries and they are perfect exactly where they are." I bring that phrase with me to every boundary workshop and every rehearsal—it has become a mantra in my own life. At that time, Geffrard was the resident intimacy consultant at Steppenwolf Theatre and an associate faculty member with Theatrical Intimacy Education, in addition to working as a practitioner-in-residence at CCC. I worked as a TA for Geffrard, which is when I started leading boundary workshops for various productions on campus. Through working with Geffrard on shows at CCC and learning from him in class, I also studied *Staging Sex* by Chelsea Pace and Laura Rikard, co-founders of Theatrical Intimacy Education. *Staging Sex* became a foundational guide in starting my practice as an intimacy professional; Pace and Rikard's detailing of power structures in the introduction massively broadened my understanding of the role that power plays in the rehearsal process:

> As the director you may not feel powerful—you probably feel stressed, underpaid, underslept, overjoyed, frustrated, elated, all in different measures. But those feelings don't undermine your power. Neither does a good intimacy practice. This system is not about empowering actors at the expense of directors, but rather actors and directors alike gaining a vocabulary to meet the demands of the art they are creating together. (Pace and Rikard 2020, 7)

This technique of establishing a shared vocabulary between actors and directors is similar to how I have experienced people on the spectrum communicate with each other about emotions, sensory issues, or the act of navigating life in a very neurotypical world. The main difference I have found is that an IC will explicitly establish this with the ensemble, whereas folx on the spectrum tend to implicitly establish a shared language, often with a patterned repetition of specific words, intonations, or gestures. With some of my closest friends on the spectrum, we often joke that we are sort of parrots to each other in that once we hear a certain word said in a certain tone, we will continue to say it that way for months (especially if it is current popular internet lingo that our

neurotypical pals are using). Social media platforms have facilitated strengthening of neurodiverse communities by providing a space for people to easily find one another, connect, and learn from one another. Partially through these online communities, it has become apparent that many neurodiverse folx interested in intimacy work already have many of the tools required in an intimacy professional's toolbelt.

As I have found in my academic and professional experiences, working as an intimacy choreographer requires great empathy; it asks you to hold space for the most vulnerable people in the room and find ethical practices for helping create a safer workplace in the theatre industry. People who believe that folx on the autism spectrum do not have the capacity for empathy may argue that this belief would render us ineffective in this field, but as already established, this belief is incorrect. The vast capacity for affective empathy demonstrated by many neurodiverse people makes those of us in this field strong IC candidates; we are able to sense and feel the emotions of others very well, even when our displays of empathy do not align with the socialized expectations of the neurotypical population. And because many people with autism have spent their lifetime immersed in neurotypical expectations, we have developed cultural competence related to the dominant neurotypical culture. Moreover, an IC on the autism spectrum is likely to have cultural competence when working and communicating with other neurodiverse artists, whereas neurotypical people have not honed their awareness of the specific needs and communication styles of people on the autism spectrum. Therefore, neurodiverse ICs may benefit from the enhanced empathy and cultural competency that comes from our neurodiversity. If we reinforce societal narratives that neurodiverse people are not capable or not properly emotionally equipped, what impact might that have on young neurodiverse kids and students who think they can only *look* at a vibrantly artistic career and life through a window from the other side? How do we ensure that we uplift neurodiverse artists as adults so that neurodiverse kids see themselves reflected and know they are just as capable?

I surround myself with many other queer, neurodiverse people, and we often talk about our shared experiences living on the autism spectrum. One of those common threads is almost immediately being aware, consciously or subconsciously, of the power dynamic in the room when walking in. That is a vital tool in working as an intimacy professional; this job asks you to notice the power dynamics in play and actively call attention to them. The more we pretend that power dynamics don't exist, the more we amplify those in power to take advantage of the vulnerable

people in the space. The more we call attention to those power dynamics and remind people that they are fully allowed to say "no" and set boundaries, the safer the industry becomes.

My lived experience as an artist on the spectrum has made me particularly aware of power dynamics and how to look out for the vulnerable people in the room. For example, I was always the quiet kid in elementary school; while that acquired me the occasional odd look from a peer, being quieter allowed me the sensorial room to observe. My brain wasn't hyper-focused on the right thing to say, so it freed up that availability to observe the social interactions around me. From there, I grew a deeper awareness of power dynamics in the spaces I was in, and I started to realize there often were vulnerable people in the room other than just myself (shocking, I know). Some lovely folx brought to my attention recently the idea that life sometimes teaches us to look out for others, but not necessarily *how* to. The foundational question I ask as a way to look out for others is simply: "What do you need?" I used to ask, "What do you want?" but that would elicit responses along the lines of "a million dollars" or "a six-month vacation." As I started training to be an intimacy choreographer in college, that question "What do you need?" popped up time and time again, because it is also a foundational question in Geffrard's approach to working as an intimacy practitioner. Being on the autism spectrum did not inherently give me all the tools to take care of vulnerable people, but in my experience, it allowed me to tune into my observational instincts, which I feel is an important skill for an intimacy practitioner to possess. Training as an intimacy choreographer has taught me how to effectively, ethically, and efficiently look out for folx in a way that positively impacts the nature of an industry that is notorious for taking advantage of young artists, especially those who are fem-coded, BIPOC, queer, from a lower socio-economic status, or marginalized due to other elements of their identity.

Boundary workshops allow the intimacy practitioner to work with the actors, director, and stage management team early in the rehearsal process before physical blocking is implemented. I am very pro-boundaries, so these workshops are always exciting for me; it is incredible to watch it dawn on the faces of a roomful of semi-anxious actors that they are perfectly valid in setting boundaries and perfectly capable of respecting their peers' boundaries. In assisting Geffrard with these workshops and then leading my own, I learned more about fawning, the lesser-known fourth survival state, next to fight, flight, and freeze. In a *Psychology Today* article, Ingrid Clayton writes, "We surrender our boundaries and lack assertiveness when we are fawning. We over accommodate, appease and submit to the very person or people who have harmed us" (2023).

Anybody can enter a fawn survival state. However, some neurodiverse folx, especially folx on the autism spectrum, often live in a fawn state, especially when aware of the power dynamics in the room. Honey Bachan, a neurodiverse business coach, posted a couple of TikTok videos about her interpretation of “fawning” and “masking.” In the caption, she stated that both are: “self-negation of a body-mind connection (ignoring cues from the physical and mental bodies) in exchange for the perceived worth of social relationships” (Bachan 2023). This self-negation often occurs when there is a heightened power dynamic in play, such as in the director-actor relationship, or there is abuse from an authority figure in the room. Even if the director is the most warm, welcoming person outside the theater, they still hold power in the space due to the position they hold, and that can activate a fawn survival state for someone simply trying to appease their director.

Introduced to Theatrical Intimacy Education’s teachings and practices through Geffrard’s classes and mentorship, I learned “button” can be an excellent self-care cue; calling “button” in a rehearsal space is essentially like hitting a pause button on a remote. An actor might use this if they feel their boundaries are being crossed, if they need a moment to breathe before continuing, or if they want to step out of the space to assess what they need for a few minutes before returning. If folx prefer a nonverbal self-care cue, I suggest another tool I learned from Geffrard: a double tap with their hand somewhere like the upper chest or head. This also serves as a cue for others in the space to ask, “What do you need?” Of course, “button” does not work for shows if it is a word that appears in the script or if the production team references building a “button” for the end of the scene; I introduce “button” as a basis for each show I work on, but I encourage every ensemble to pick their own self-care cue word, so long as it is not in the script, as it will be unique and simply more fun for folx. Neutral, de-loaded, two syllable example self-care cue words could be: hot dog, popcorn, yee-haw, ding-dong, and so many more. It is vital to use a self-care cue if you enter a survival state or find yourself saying “yes” to the person in power when you want to say “no.”

Many folx on the spectrum spend a great deal of time and effort “masking”—or attempting to present as neurotypical in order to make those around us comfortable—which is a similar cognitive process to experiencing the fawn survival state. Both cognitive processes suppress the individual’s needs in an attempt to avoid harm from another individual. For many on the autism spectrum, this might look like forcing or faking eye contact during conversations when we do not feel equipped to do so, scripting conversations in advance, and especially pushing through sensory discomfort in ways that appear “normal” to neurotypical people. These sensory discomforts impact

each person differently, and overcoming these discomforts looks different for each person. Sensory discomfort can come from loud noises, bright lights, big crowds, small spaces, different textures on clothes or food; these elements of daily life which are relatively easy for neurotypical people to ignore can cause great discomfort or mental torment for people on the autism spectrum. But many of us have learned that we are not socially allowed to take care of ourselves when we are feeling this distress. Instead, we mask or fawn and force ourselves to adapt to the comfort needs of the neurotypical people in the room. Cultural competency related to neurodiversity and neurodiverse artists is important to the work of an IC, then, so that intimacy practitioners can better understand when consent is consent versus when it is masking or fawning.

Society tells us we must suppress our natural reactions to those sensory-stimulating things to survive and function in a neurotypical society. It is outwardly saying "yes" when everything in our brains and bodies is saying "no." This means that quite often, what appears to be consent is actually fawning—it is "agreeing" in order to survive the moment. But survival is never consent. However, if participants in the room do not understand the concepts of masking or fawning—and especially if they lack the cultural competency to recognize that someone is masking—there may be an assumption of consent that causes harm. Cultural competency is relevant in every process because neurodiverse artists may be in any or every production without outing themselves by explicitly stating their neurodiversity. Furthermore, masking is something to be aware of as a neurodiverse artist, so that you can better care for yourself in these moments. And for neurotypical folx, it is something to be mindful of when working with neurodiverse artists. A common thread between nearly all performers is that at some point, we had a director, instructor, or mentor effectively train us to say "yes." And if neurotypical actors are often taught that way, imagine the effects on an actor on the autism spectrum. The impulse to say "yes," to please the person in power at the expense of one's own well-being comes in that much stronger.

Realizing the connection between fawning and masking through my studies and rehearsals has driven me to work as an intimacy professional. I know through my lived experience on the autism spectrum that working as an intimacy choreographer and director is not just something I am capable of doing at par but something that my unique brain chemistry may give me an even greater capacity to navigate. My goal is to uplift the voices in the room who have been fed a narrative that their boundaries do not matter and that they will be labeled "difficult to work with"

if they say no. Intimacy practitioners are working to change that, and neurodiverse artists could immeasurably strengthen this still-new and growing field.

For anyone who has ever been told otherwise: words matter. Your words matter. Your boundaries matter. And for my other pals on the autism spectrum: living on the autism spectrum is not a hindrance. You are valid. You are capable.

[1] Most of the techniques taught by Geffrard came from the research and teaching of Laura Rikard and Chelsea Pace, founders of Theatrical Intimacy Education (TIE). Until Fall of 2023, Geffrard was working with Columbia College to build a curriculum for an intimacy choreography program, rooted in the work of TIE. This note from the field references Geffrard heavily, but acknowledges that much of his work was building upon the collaborative work and research of TIE's founders and faculty.

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