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TRANSgressive Acts: Adapting Applied Theatre Techniques For A Transgender Community

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TRANSgressive Acts: Adapting Applied Theatre Techniques for a Transgender Community

A Thesis Presented

by

THEO FINLEY LEFEVRE

Submitted to the Graduate School of the
University of Massachusetts Amherst in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

September 2017

Theater
Dramaturgy

TRANSgressive Acts: Adapting Applied Theatre Techniques
for a Transgender Community

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Approved as to style and content by:

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Gina Kaufmann, Department Head
Department of Theater

DEDICATION

For my chosen family.

For my trans family.

For my younger self, who needed this the most.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

ABSTRACT

TRANSGRESSIVE ACTS: ADAPTING APPLIED THEATRE TECHNIQUES FOR A TRANSGENDER COMMUNITY

SEPTEMBER 2017

THEO FINLEY LEFEVRE, B.S., UNIVERISITY OF EVANSVILLE

M.F.A., UNIVERSITY OF MASSACHUSETTS AMHERST

Directed by: Professor Priscilla Page

This MFA Thesis traces my work as a joker (a la *Theatre of the Oppressed*) and facilitator through a three-year-long project with a trans applied theatre troupe. The troupe explored several techniques, including Image Theatre, Playback Theatre, storytelling exercises, and somatic movement. In three semester-long workshops, the troupe focused work around three sets of techniques. In the first workshop, the troupe explored the community-based interview process of *Undesirable Elements*, as designed by Ping Chong in collaboration with Talvin Wilks and Sara Zatz. These techniques were interrogated using queer and trans temporalities. In the second unit, the troupe practiced Augusto Boal's "Cops in the Head" techniques from *The Rainbow of Desire*, utilizing a sociological perspective to examine the "ghosts" these techniques produce. In the final semester, I devised techniques specifically for and about transgender people, invoking trans theory and queer theory to explore issues of naming, trauma, and trans possibilities. Through this work I argue that techniques designed for cisgender bodies require adaptation to find success in transgender communities. I argue that the future of this work is not transforming existing techniques to suit our needs, rather it is creating techniques with transgender bodies and identities at the core.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER 1

TOWARDS A TRANS APPLIED THEATRE

<u>Introduction</u>

I come to this work as both a trans person and a theatre artist. These two identities are inextricably linked and mutually beneficial. I came to this discovery—that my trans identity could serve my theatre-making, and vice versa—from both sides, but first as a trans person trying to work in theatre. In 2011, in a workshop in Minneapolis, I was asked to participate in an applied theatre technique called Story Circles to facilitate the development of a playwright's project. The Story Circles, I later learned, were gleaned from the training of John O'Neal, whose community-based work, grown from civil rights and Black Theater movements, is pivotal to applied theatre and story-telling, particularly within marginalized communities. A director, playwright, and community organizer, O'Neal developed these techniques while founding two companies—Free Southern Theatre (FST) and Juneburg Productions—the latter of which is still his artistic home. In one segment of this Story Circle workshop, we were each asked to respond to the word "transition" as it related to our own lives and experiences. The "circle" was composed of people of various backgrounds; other than myself, however, none were trans, so when I naturally opened my story by saying I had instantly connected the word "transition" to its usage within trans narratives, the circle responded with an audible "aha" moment (not with shock, but with realization). Within trans narratives, "transition" usually refers to the social, medical, mental, and/or legal process of aligning oneself more closely with personal identity. In more recent literature, some theorists argue the reverse. Sociologist

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Lori B. Girshick writes that it can be construed differently, asserting, "it is not the person

who is transitioning but society, which is transitioning its perceptions of that

person" (73). As my story opened with how the narrative of transition expects various

achievements and changes, the circle continued to respond audibly, to the point where I

grew uncomfortable. Though the structure of Story Circles generally suggests individuals

tell their entire story and the circle comes around fully before "cross-talk" is ever

initiated, the facilitator of this circle did not disengage the other participants as they

began to ask me questions. My story devolved from a personal narrative about the

expectations of gender and performance of change into a Q&A about trans identity,

hormones, surgery, and other general topics divorced from my individual experience. The

circle was focused on me in ways that felt both counterproductive to the work and nearly

hostile—though the questions were never offensive, they were clearly also expecting me

to speak for a community greater than myself, which was not my original intention.

Unsure if my discomfort with this experience was because of my targeted identity

or because of the structure of the work, I spoke to another colleague at 20% Theater

Company about her experiences with Story Circles. She told me how the circle had been

used to develop trans and feminist spaces for theatre makers in Minneapolis, including a

previous iteration of a project they were working on now. She walked me through how

Story Circles can be used effectively, and connected me with another organization that

was hoping to use the technique with LGBTQIA+ youth. Exposed Brick Theatre

Company, in partnership with a queer and trans youth counseling center, allowed me to

participate as a co-facilitator and dramaturg for a series of circles. As a dramaturg and co-

facilitator, I was able to see both how the circles could be used to create a safe and effective story-telling environment, and how my identity as a queer and trans person was useful in decoding the language (spoken and unspoken) used by participants when collecting their stories for devising. Because I knew the codes they were using, and had already felt the trauma of a poorly facilitated circle, I found myself more able to encourage these story-tellers and notate their stories. Their stories were eventually collected, and willing participants continued on to devise pieces about high school bullying, coming out, violence, homelessness and more. This project was one of the first times my trans identity and my theatre work intersected in a way that improved both.

From the opposite side, my work within the trans community soon intersected with my theatre work. A few months later, I returned to Evansville, Indiana, and co-founded an organization called Gender Warriors with my dear friend and colleague, Eliot Colin. Gender Warriors was founded initially as a social organization for trans folks to find peer support, network, get help finding resources, and share information. Because the gap was so wide and the need so strong, what began as a few friends meeting to share stories grew into a small non-profit organization that gave public workshops, continuing education trainings, conference presentations, peer support groups, parent groups, and more. In our third year, I began using some of Augusto Boal's techniques in small group sessions and during workshops with local solidarity-building organizations, such as PFLAG, the Unitarian Universalist Church, and university LGBTQIA+ clubs. Boal's techniques are a series of exercises and story-building processes called Theatre of the Oppressed. In these sessions, I implemented exercises such as The Empty Chair to help

demonstrate effective ways to stand in solidarity with trans people. In the sessions with the trans group, I also started trying Jokering techniques within my group facilitation methods. Jokering is the method of facilitation used in Theatre of the Oppressed that involves being both an insider and an outsider, a troublemaker and an energy-focuser. As I stretched my theatre training into these spaces, I found both success and a greater need than I could fulfill.

It was at this stage that I felt the strongest pull to find others who merged trans identity with applied theatre practice—towards a training that could strengthen me as an artist so that I could return to my community with greater tools. In graduate school I found space to stretch these muscles, support to get the training I needed, and conditioning to constantly assess and reassess my work. But I also found absence. Instead of a community of trans applied theatre artists, I found a smattering of scholarship and rare blips of practice. And yet I find that the glaring void of trans representation staring back at me is less invitation and more provocation. I am provoked to make space. I am provoked to puff up my chest and hustle through the swelling crowd of cis theatre makers presenting our stories (or their version of our stories using their bodies and our lives for profit). I am provoked to call out into the deep absence and wonder where my people are.

In many ways I felt provoked to answer my own call—to create my own troupe of trans performers engaging with applied theatre work. I was provoked to make a space for our voices and our needs, by creating an applied theatre troupe built around those very needs. Forming this troupe in Fall 2014, I only knew that I needed to create a community and a space to work together, but I did not know what that project would become.

This project has been a labor of necessity, and from it I have found one possible response to my call. Reflecting on the work I've done over the past three years, I have found dozens of artists and theorists and trans people reaching out in their own calls. I started this work thinking we would find a way to use our collective ingenuity as trans people to make space within existing frames for our bodies. I gathered trans people around me and we dove into applied theatre to search for the techniques and practitioners whose work heard our call and whose methods might amplify our own voices. I spent the first two years of this project collecting these techniques, building a troupe whose repertoire was full of tools that had been repurposed to suit our needs. Those techniques often required adaptation, because they were built for cisgender people or because they could not contain the multiplicities and contradictions that make up the experiences of the trans community. Though I found a number of trans artists creating powerful applied theatre work, in all my labor and calling out into the theatre community, I found no techniques built for and by trans people.

As the troupe grew and changed, our desire for autonomy and trans-specificity also grew. After spending two years exploring and adapting existing applied theatre techniques, the troupe was ready to delve into our own process of building and shaping techniques for and by trans people. These techniques started off rocky and required adaptation, just as those designed by cisgender people—but not because they weren't built for us. They started off shaky because they are *new*, they are uncharted examinations of a *trans* applied theatre. These techniques, which are the culmination of this thesis, may or may not exist as techniques beyond the trans community, but that is

not the project of this thesis. The project of this thesis is to find a trans applied theatre—even if I have to make it myself.

Applied Theatre

Applied Theatre has been defined in various ways throughout its relatively short existence. In my research these definitions fit generally into three categories: processual, participant-oriented, and goal-oriented, though the work is far more nuanced than the definitions suggest. In the first category, artists and scholars define the work based on how it is made, even if it has no end result, no public performance. In their book, *Applied Drama: A Facilitator's Handbook for Working in Community,* Monica Prendergast and Juliana Saxton begin with the definition of applied theater as "a field of dramatic arts practice that is process-based" (2013, 1). Prendergast and Saxton even go so far as differentiating applied *drama* as opposed to *theatre* as a way to distinguish that which requires an audience (theatre, from the greek *theatron* or "seeing-place") from that which is done in rehearsal halls (drama, from the Greek *dran* or "to do" or "to act"), a distinction made but not named as such by other scholars using the process-based model (2013, xi).

Gareth White explores this distinction in his text, *Applied Theatre Aesthetics,* describing applied theatre "as a way to *apply oneself* as a theatre maker, and thus placing artistry, skill, and creative ambition at the core, alongside critical thinking and political awareness" (2). White goes on to explain that this particular way of viewing applied theatre creates an imagined binary between applied and "pure" theatre (or traditional

theatre), though applied theatre is still often subject to a product-oriented model that expects results and a goal-focus rather than process-focus. The work White espouses in this text is much more process-focused, looking at the ways theatre techniques (ranging from improv to design to ensemble work and more) can be used within non-traditional theatre settings, such as community groups.

White's central thesis is the use of aesthetics, and he describes how these aesthetics are still participant-focused: "an aesthetics of participation must show…how the practices of participation and the experiences of participation should be valued as art works" (46). From this definition it is clear that White, and those artists whose work echoes this definition, believe that applied theatre is a way of doing theatre—it is not one particular style or genre, but a way of implementing any style or genre with a group of participants. In this way, the work he describes is also fairly participant-oriented, as he describes the aesthetics of participation requiring "putting active participants at the heart of the performance experience," though this also feels like it may reinforce that binary between applied and "pure" theatre (24). This rejection of audience-focus is also present in Prendergast and Saxton's work: "applied drama is not concerned with making meaning for someone who is outside this process (as in a public audience)" (2013, 1).

This participant-oriented definition is also key to Helen Nicholson's framework in *Applied Drama: The Gift of Theatre.* Nicholson argues that applied theatre must be "specifically intended to benefit individuals, communities and societies," but her work then diverges from White's as she begins to unfold a more goal-oriented model that includes setting intended outcomes with participants and producing work for

consumption (public performance) (Nicholson 2). While the goals as used in Nicholson's

work are admirable and borne from participant and community needs, Mojisola Adebayo

warns that an entirely goal-oriented applied theatre "carries an implication of work done

by one group *to* another" (cited in White 2). Heeding Adebayo's warning, an applied

theatre practitioner ideally should not come into a space as a director, prepared to reshape

and change a community. Rather a community forms around an issue, geographical

region, identity, etc., and a practitioner brings them a set of tools with which to express

and explore this issue/area/identity/etc.

From these various definitions and elements, I choose to define applied theatre as

a method of working within communities using theatre techniques to achieve goals and

evaluative techniques that are established by the community. This might mean a group

could choose to culminate their work in a traditional production, or that at the end of a

workshop session they will return to their daily lives, implementing whatever they have

learned as they see fit. Later when I describe my research methodologies, I will get into

more detail about evaluation of outcomes, but for now it is important to note that in my

system the community must establish their own yardsticks with which to measure

achievements.

<u>**Survey of Trans Applied Theatre Projects**</u>

As I began my last section defining Applied Theatre, I must also begin this

section by defining its modifier, Trans. The "trans" that I am using is the umbrella term

for all those who identify their genders as something different than the sex they were

assigned at birth—whether they are agender (without a gender), bigender (identifying with two genders), genderqueer (identifying with the queering of gender or a gender not within current structures), a binary or non-binary gender, or more. When I started writing this thesis in March 2016, I was using the term "trans*" to serve as this umbrella, a term that originated as a search Boolean tool (using the asterisk would inform a search engine to search for any words beginning with trans, such as transgender and transsexual). From these origins, trans* denoted for a time the potentiality of a multitude of identities encompassed by one umbrella term. In the last several months, trans theorists began writing about the ways this asterisk was made inaccessible, misapplied, and used in binarist ways to deny the identities of folks who identify under the trans umbrella but do not use words such as "transgender" to describe themselves (these include people who identify as genderqueer, for example). This exclusionary usage of the term has led to trans theorists arguing for a move away from the asterisk, reclaiming the unmodified "trans" as an umbrella that inherently denotes all those identities that "cross" (the Latin *trans*) the gender spectrum rather than remaining the "same" (from the Latin *cis*) as their identified sex at birth (Diamond and Erlick). This change reflects how the field of Trans Studies is still very new and changing quickly, and how much this thesis is trying to reflect the multiplicity of beliefs, experiences, and identities within it.

The trans community, to which I turn my focus, is one to which I've felt most drawn throughout my career in and out of theatre. As a trans theatre maker, I've often felt those two parts of my identity incongruous, while simultaneously inextricable. Because I have grown into and out of my body, coming to know both how it is read and how it

performs, I am better at interpreting the movement and signs produced by bodies in theatre. I am more aware of the nuance of gender, but also of other performed and experienced identities. I am a better theatre maker for making use of this lens than I was without it.

As I started this work, I searched for other artists who used both sides of their identity to create theatre. The amount of trans theatre I discovered was immense, but there was much less in trans applied theatre. I was again provoked to call out for others doing this work. My call was, briefly, returned by the discovery of small pockets of applied theatre work about trans bodies and trans stories.

A short distance from my current home in Western Massachusetts, a group of LGBTQIA+ youth are making theatre using applied and devised techniques as part of the "True Colors" Troupe at The Theater Offensive in Boston, Massachusetts. With a youth focus, this troupe combines leadership training, theatre workshops, and public performances with a social justice focus. The troupe emerged as a wing of Theater Offensive's education department. The troupe has three main seasons, each with different goals, ranging from touring productions to a theatre festival.

There are a number of LGBTQIA+ applied theatre projects based in New York City. One such project, led by theatre maker Jamie Cacciola-Price, culminated in a piece called *Sanctuary* after a two-year-long applied community process. The troupe has now dispersed, and the piece seems to have been the ultimate goal of the project. Another NY-based troupe has continued beyond an initially successful production, the Ali Forney Center Theatrical Society. Based out of the Ali Forney Center for homeless LGBTQIA+

youth, this troupe is a partnership between the Center and Theatre of the Oppressed New York (TONYC), where I received some of my own Boal training. TONYC and the Center formed this troupe with LGBTQIA+ youth, focusing on their community needs and desires. The work uses Theatre of the Oppressed techniques and culminates in Forum Theatre productions such as *Da Struggle is Real* (2014). This piece is focused entirely on the issues of trans and gender non-conforming youth, particularly those experiencing homelessness. Despite the trans focus, this troupe is not a trans-only group, and none of their other pieces have focused on trans issues (though they have always been a part of the conversation). The troupe is facilitated by TONYC director Katy Rubin and Joker Jon Leo.

Another NY-based group, the Trans Women's Theatre Troupe, uses devising techniques to develop works such as *In My Skin* (2013), produced by the Red Umbrella Project in Manhattan. Their work, though based around community issues, focuses on hiring trans women actresses, a goal that deviates from a more community-based approach of non-performer participants. The line is unclear, and whether this project fits the applied theatre definition is a question for the troupe itself, but it is one of very few projects I've discovered that is trans-focused and led by trans people.

Another group, Gender Justice LA, based in Los Angeles, California, reports using Theatre of the Oppressed techniques in community-based workshops, though their work seems to now be discontinued.

Another distant troupe, Youth Empowerment Performance Project, based in Chicago, is similar in structure to the Ali Forney troupe. This group is an LGBTQIA+

focused youth project, based around homeless and street-based youth. The works sometimes deal closely with trans issues, but are not the sole focus. Their troupe is led by LGBTQIA+ theatre makers and culminates in productions that have toured to various universities.

This scattering of projects feels both like a beautiful testament to my community and yet so distant from the work I am doing. Nearly all of these troupes are LGBTQIA+ —a combination that is often necessary to share resources, but also often leaves trans identities by the wayside. Similarly, most of these organizations are helmed by non-trans leaders; capable and brilliant as they may be, their experiences will differ greatly from the folks they facilitate. And finally, each of these projects is goal-oriented (though equally often process and participant-focused). I do not wish to diminish the value of goal-oriented applied theatre projects, as it is often only with a public presentation that these projects continue to receive funding and support, but I also hope to validate the importance of applied theatre work without a public event. In the initial phases of my own troupe's development, as I will discuss later, the troupe decided collectively that a public performance would inhibit our growth as a group, and would preclude the participation of any persons unwilling or unable to publicly "out" themselves through such a performance. Our troupe's successes are no less apparent within the space, but to the outside world, we are almost entirely invisible—which makes me wonder how many other trans applied theatre troupes are out there, working and playing completely unknown to me, and to others like me who are seeking this community.

It is because of this absence that I am further provoked to document this work. It is not enough for me to participate in a trans applied theatre troupe anymore if there might be others like me out there searching for community. I am provoked because I know there's someone who's asking the same questions, someone who got different answers, someone who's not quite sure what questions to even ask. Because I am that someone, I am documenting here the questions I asked, the methods I tried, the things I learned, and the community I found.

The Project

While there are many theatre companies throughout the United States that have trans performers, and even a few applied theatre projects that work within trans communities, there are no existing sets of applied theatre techniques created specifically around this population. The goal of this project follows three steps. First, I wanted to create a trans-specific applied theatre troupe. Second, I used scholarship and theory from trans and queer studies to understand how these existing applied theatre methods could be used in a trans-specific theatre troupe. Finally, I took what I learned about the troupe's needs and goals and created a set of applied theatre techniques specifically for trans people.

From October 2014 to December 2016, I workshopped a selection of techniques designed for marginalized populations and identity-based applied theatre work with a troupe of trans members. The troupe was developed from a call for participants, as I

searched for others who shared an interest in theatre and/or performance whether or not

they had any formal experience. This troupe then established goals and articulated needs

that focused my labor on particular areas of applied theatre, namely identity-based

projects that dealt with issues of the body, personal narratives, and community

development.

In Chapter 2, I will discuss how I formed the group, my facilitation style, and an

overview of the techniques we chose as our primary focus. This chapter centers around

the early ideas that inspired the selection of techniques, and how these techniques served

our needs and goals as a trans-specific troupe. In Chapter 3, I will examine the structure

of individual workshops and describe the early phases of the group development. This

chapter looks at the way the troupe functioned before we decided to transition towards a

longer research project, and how our goals as a troupe shifted to those that inspired the

development of the semester-long workshops in Fall 2015, Spring 2016, and Fall 2016. In

Chapter 4, I will detail my research methods for the long-term workshops. Since the

project had been done as an independent project with no research goals to this point, this

chapter will detail which methods I chose to deploy in the remainder of the thesis, and

how those methods grew out of the troupe's established goals. In Chapter 5, I will explore

the first long-term workshop: the *Undesirable Elements* project. I argue in this chapter

that these techniques faltered for our troupe when met with a trans theory of temporality.

In Chapter 6, I will continue with the second long-term workshop: Augusto Boal's

Rainbow of Desire. In this section, I explore the ways I adapted these techniques to expel

the ghosts of transmisogyny and other trans-specific traumas. In Chapter 7, I will

investigate the possibilities of my own design for applied theatre techniques with trans

bodies and identities at the heart. These techniques are varied in scale, goal, and success,

but they are each techniques the troupe has found effective and powerful for trans people.

I conclude with an Afterword: a letter to my community. Though I know most of the

people who read this thesis are not trans, this thesis is and always will be meant for my

community. In this afterword, I offer a few words of provocation to those who have not

yet heard the call.

CHAPTER 2

PROJECT OVERVIEW

<u>Introduction</u>

I came into this project with more questions than answers. When I started the group, I did not know what goals we would eventually establish or what structures would eventually form. I did not know what techniques I would end up exploring deeply in Chapters 4-6 and which would become part of the overall development of the group. I only knew that I wanted to create a space in which trans people of any theatrical and non-theatrical background could explore applied theatre techniques.

What follows is an overview of the early creation of this group and the facilitation methods that I used to lead and grow the group into what it has become now. Below is a basic timeline to guide the sections in the following chapters:

Fall 2014 - Spring 2015: Early Phases

October 2014: Group formation and first phase of recruitment

October 2014 - May 2015 - Several techniques examined in short-term workshops

Summer 2015: Additional Recruitment (recruitment has reopened when necessary)

Fall 2015: *Undesirable Elements* Workshop

October 2015: Implementation of survey methods

Spring 2016: "Cops in the Head" and Rainbow of Desire Workshop

Fall 2016: Trans Techniques Workshop

November 2016: Final workshop for the purposes of this project

Group Formation

In my time at Gender Warriors, one thing became abundantly clear: trans voices and bodies were more able to grow and shine in trans only spaces than anywhere else. While this may not be true of all trans people, the importance of these spaces cannot be diminished. With this impulse, I chose to create a trans-specific applied theatre troupe. The formation of this group is equal parts the structure (described below) and the people whom I chose to be a part of it.

In setting up this original group in Fall 2014, I intended the troupe as a youth group (approximately high school to college aged), both because this population has so much to risk and gain and because this is the age with which I have the most experience. College and younger trans youth are at a high risk of isolation, low self-esteem, and violence, often directly as a result of their school environments, but also because of their lack of resources (money, stable housing, social support networks) (Beemyn and Rankin). They stood the most to gain from a process that would strengthen both their individual voices and their connections to others within the community. Some of my earliest short-term workshops with this troupe were composed mostly of youth. The group quickly expanded to encompass all ages. This expansion served two needs: first, it was a response to community need (some non-youth community members had approached me with their desire to participate); second, it created a more manageable group size, finally settling the group in my ideal range of eight to ten consistent weekly participants. The group has fluctuated in numbers quite a bit, ranging from thirteen consistent participants in Spring

2015 to five consistent participants in Fall 2015. Each semester has had ranges of consistency as well, with few participants attending every session. In the early phases, from Fall 2014 to Spring 2015, the participant numbers were most unreliable due to the transient nature of youth (as many graduated, moved, shifted needs/interests). Some young participants' inabilities to secure parental permission precluded their continued participation after Spring 2015.

Beyond age, my initial call focused on finding participants who had a variety of experiences, who represented a diverse set of genders/races/bodies/etc., and who were willing to play and experiment. I put out this request for participants in local LGBTQIA+ blogs and Facebook pages, listservs, and organizations. I announced the group in other LGBTQIA+ spaces and at queer performance venues and events. My initial group of participants reflected the scope of my call: mainly local college students. As the goals of the group shifted and participants have come and gone, I expanded this call to surrounding cities and organizations, and clarified that this diversity of bodies/identities/ peoples is not only welcomed but *necessary*.

Facilitation

I start this work first and always as a Joker. A Joker is a facilitator within Augusto Boal's Theatre of the Oppressed. But a Joker is much more than facilitator. A Joker steps in and out of participation, observes and tweaks the frame, constantly questions and interrogates both process and participant, and holds the energy of the space. Boal assigned this role as the "Joker" because the Joker is the only card in a deck that

does not have a suit. As such, this card is able to play all sides, jump in when needed, and observe when not. The Joker is the wild card, the monkey wrench, but the Joker is also more than this metaphor—they are responsible for building a community of equal participants and providing the tools to continue beyond the scope of a workshop (Boal, *Theatre of the Oppressed* x, 172-186, 193). A Joker comes into a workshop ready to provoke. I come into most spaces already feeling provoked—I am provoked by my past experiences, by my fears for the future, but my desire to create space for my own body and for my community. Beginning with that heightened tension is not necessarily effective for a facilitator, but it can be for a Joker. A Joker can enter a space ready to push buttons and inspire others to feel provoked to push themselves and scream louder and make big art. When I enter a space as a Joker, I can use my existing passions to stir others.

Often I will enter a space that is full of low-energy people who have had difficult or stressful days if not weeks. They will be here, willing to participate, but without the motivation to back it. Jokering is a method of teasing out the things that trigger participants—both the things that will make them laugh and the things that will enrage them. I tug at their stories or their actions until something sparks and they are ready to work. For example, in one workshop, the participants came in grumbly, low energy, and having had bad weeks. We always start a workshop with a check-in to establish what everyone is feeling and what baggage they bring—to work with it intentionally, or to find a way to discard it. This time, the circle went around mentioning things like a bad essay grade, overloaded work schedule, a sick pet, and basic mundane human things. These

things were so human and universal that someone made a joke about how they were sorry they didn't have anything trans to offer me today. I thought this was funny, so I poked at it and said all of those things were still "trans things." At first they laughed it off, but then I made them all play an improv exercise to warm up based on this idea. I had them each improv a mundane human event (like washing a car) *while trans*. I didn't give them any directions on what that meant; I just told them to figure it out. As they each improvised their short moments, they created silly, ridiculous scenes of everyday life *while trans*. The game got us to tease out how being trans impacts more parts of our life than we often notice, but also how often we want to just go about our business without having to be reminded of our trans identity—and sometimes we aren't able to do that. This little exercise was a direct result of my training as a Joker to pull on threads, keep asking questions, and provide an exercise or frame in which to critically examine an idea.

Being a Joker has also deeply impacted the way I hold energies in a room. Because of my own ruffled skin from previously antagonistic or triggering workshops, I had initially entered this work with the goal of creating a "safe space" for the trans participants. As Prendergast and Saxton note, "safety is at the core of applied drama practice; paradoxically it is working in safe spaces and in safe ways that helps us to look at the risky issues that can arise in our lives" (2013, 3). I had taken this to mean the space and work must always feel safe for all participants (a lofty goal, to which I was soon provided an alternative). At a Joker training in January of 2015, Theatre of the Oppressed New York (TONYC) director and Joker Katy Rubin told us a story about how Augusto Boal, her mentor and the creator of Theatre of the Oppressed (TO), actually admonished

"safe spaces." Rubin told us that within TO work, no participant can ever really be safe. They are accessing some of the most difficult moments in their memories, moments that are naturally embodied, and thus potentially extremely painful, triggering, and unsafe. The work they then encounter is a process of digging deeper into those moments, connecting them to a network of similar moments across a community of other oppressed persons, and finding the structures that create this system of oppression. This is not safe work. Instead, Rubin offers, we should challenge ourselves to create spaces that are anti-oppression, anti-racism, anti-ableism, and more. Spaces in which we actively ask for and freely give that which is needed to keep ourselves healthy and able to continue the work. We, as facilitators, can never know what needs each of our participants may have, but as a community we can communicate those needs to one another—look out for one another, build trust with one another, and ensure that the burden is not on one individual. We must always respect the safety and needs of participants while recognizing that we cannot "fix" any traumas that might be recounted or prevent the work from digging them up. Instead, we can only develop a space in which doing this *unsafe* work still feels *safe*.

In this fashion, I rewrote the way I create a space as a facilitator. Whereas I had previously entered a space hoping to keep everyone safe, I now ask that we share the burden of the space with one another. I ask that we come prepared to encounter unsafe topics and to exit (either for a brief break or long-term) if the burden becomes untenable. I ask that we articulate our needs as clearly as we can, and keep one another accountable for respecting these needs. Sometimes this is as simple as being told a participant needs a food break every hour or so and reminding the group to take this time. Other times it is

more difficult—recognizing when a participant is having trouble emotionally processing an exercise and asking to debrief either as a group or individually.

This understanding of the creation of space is fundamental to the idea of Jokering as a facilitation method, both because Jokering requires a balance of power across a group, and because it involves being able to step in and out of the group. I will frequently set up a question or frame for a scene, and use my own body as an example. I never ask the participants to do something I would not do myself. If I start an exercise, such as Complete the Image, I will pair with another participant to display the technique. Usually I will also perform the exercise at least long enough to get the sense that the participants are comfortable before stepping out to observe, take notes, or provide additional questions. Participating in the work allows me to feel firsthand whether my directions are clear and whether something I have asked the participants is difficult or requiring further discussion. When I step out, I am able to take the experience I felt in my own body and observe it in the others, offering more provocations or additional directions.

This shifting proximity is visible throughout Boal's work. In his practice, Boal refers to "metaxis" as the process of using a fictional frame to create critical proximity—the same telescoping used to cross the lines between spectator and actor, or in TO the "spect-actor" as someone who participates in the change rather than watching as audience (*The Rainbow of Desire* 42-44). This shifting proximity found throughout the work is key to understanding a Joker's role in facilitation: how and when to jump into the mix on equal terms with complete transparency, and when to hold and maneuver energies toward a common goal from a critical vantage point. Often, in an exercise, the energies vary

enough to make me step out of the participant role in order to see everyone's needs

without my own goals clouding my vision. In a recent improvisation exercise, for

example, I was trying to lead the participants towards a reflection on the different masks

we wear in different encounters. My goal for the exercise was to get the participants to

wear a different mask than the expected one for that scene, to experience the dissonance.

As the protagonist shifted from scene to scene, the other participants playing opposite her

started to talk to one another and break scene. As I was playing a role in this scene, it was

hard for me to see how or why this was happening, until my role came into play. Because

I was in the scene *and* watching the scene unfold (and watching the performers

themselves) I was able to recognize that her shift in masks had actually altered the masks

worn by the other characters. My vantage point as Joker afforded me the ability to

connect these experiences, but it also empowered the participants to reflect critically with

one another on what they noticed in the others' scenes. Because of my transparency and

critical eye, the other participants were empowered to break scene, to notice the energies

of those around them, and to signal these shifts to me. This demonstrates two essential

elements of facilitation: the development of trust and the dispersion of power.

While trust can be established in many ways, I was inspired most by the exercises

of somatic movements in developing early group trust and cohesion. Somatic exercises

are defined by Sondra Fraleigh as "movement disciplines that use a variety of methods

and skills, including subtle qualities of touch, empathic verbal communication, and

multifaceted movement experiences, sometimes confirmed through touch" (26-27).

Though the discipline of somatic work is broadly concerned with bodily knowledge, it is

also focused on how that knowledge is communicated and shared. The teaching of somatic work is deeply related to the techniques of Jokering. Fraleigh describes the qualities of a somatic facilitator as one who choses "to start here and now…to stay present to improvement…to teach and learn with curiosity…to practice non-judgement… to remember the trickster…" (45). Jokering similarly requires the facilitator to access community needs without first placing value judgements or expectations. A Joker must use her intuition and her cunning to tease out hidden themes, traumas, and interconnections. The ethics of somatic work could have easily been written by Boal, but to couple them with the respect of bodily experience found in somatic work makes this practice feel significant in trans spaces. For me, trans spaces are where that bodily knowledge and those internalized oppressions intersect, are given voice, and find healing.

Somatic movements were introduced to me during an early workshop session by a participant, which inspired me to further research their usage in applied theatre. I discovered somatic techniques were especially effective in finding ways to access emotional memories in the body—locating sites of trauma on the body and in the way we move, breathe, carry ourselves, and more. In my early work with somatic techniques, we did exercises that combined Image Theatre (a Boal technique in which the body is used to create a still image of a story, concept, or event) with somatic awareness to externalize how our bodies have been impacted by traumatic events, dysphoria, and transphobia. Transphobia refers to the fear, hatred, and discrimination against people who are or are perceived as gender variant. This particular phobia intersects and often coexists with sexism, homophobia, and misogyny (Simmons and White 17). Image Theatre and

24

somatic awareness help communicate difficult-to-articulate feelings; for example, when a participant was unaware of his residual tension over retelling a story, our somatic body work allowed him to identify that this tension was a physical feeling of fear, not just mental anger.

The aforementioned techniques also helped me establish a sense of community and connection with my troupe. As I exposed my inner truths, my troupe felt more able to freely express their own. As we all expressed our truths, we found connections across the similarities and respect across the differences. Occasionally, our somatic expressions created similar images. For example, one exercise ended with several participants realizing they held tension in their necks from looking down. From such a simple image, we each found others who had felt similarly guarded, afraid, or unsafe in certain situations. Conversely, our images often differed wildly. In one exercise, we created a movement link between a "before" and "now" still image of where our genders are located. Though the images varied so extremely, we were able to recognize and validate one another for this exposure, this difference, and found solidarity where each of these realities could coexist.

In my second year of workshops, Fall 2015 to Spring 2016, I extended my somatic work to develop deeper trust and connections between myself and the participants with a technique called "somatic matching." While a participant is acting a moment or creating an image with their body, I would "match" them, by mirroring their movements, their breath and physically connect myself to them so they could see themselves mirrored in me. In this work, I was better able to achieve "affect attunement,"

or an understanding of a participant's feelings, needs, capabilities (Fraleigh 32-33). From this position, I could slowly alter my own body position, breath, and movement, and ask the participant to ease into matching me. This transition was often useful in leading exercises for the first time, to share the posturing, breath, and gait of that exercise. I also found it useful in transitioning a participant out of an intense moment while still recognizing the power and pain they experienced. One participant, accessing a traumatic memory in a scene, described herself as being near a panic attack; she used my breath and the feel of my pulse to find a new rhythm, which stopped her hyperventilation. Fraleigh describes this use of somatic matching as essential in respecting the body in personal narrative work: "The body holds memories and is laced with habits. We can move beyond habits and provide renewal through tactile-kinesthetic matching while respecting body memory. We find 'not fixing' very important to improvement. Matching while not fixing communicates wellness through touch" (35-36). She describes this "not fixing" because, as a facilitator, it is often so much easier to correct. If the body is respected as doing the right thing for where it is in its development, more trust is built, and the body can be eased into new movements.

It is important for me to note that somatic work, alongside much of my other work, involves touch. While it is not mentioned expressly in most of these texts, I find that the "trust" portion of my facilitation method cannot exist without consent. For the above exercises, consent is always asked for, as is consent to interrogate a personal scene, to document a story, to change a narrative for the purposes of an exercise, and so on. This consent also leads to another important aspect of developing trust in facilitation:

transparency. Though I often play the "trickster," throwing in a monkey wrench or a challenge to participants, they also know that at the end of the session I will debrief them on what I've seen, why I asked them those questions, and what tools they can take away. Unlike the group Adebayo warns of, I do not want to apply these techniques to this group, rather I want this group to explore them with me. For example, in a Boal exercise called Homage to Magritte, participants stand in a circle around an object and take turns jumping in to perform charades with the object, transforming its meaning. I often find that participants want to use the object in a way that is congruous with its size or shape, so I like to throw in extra challenges. In one scene, for example, they were all treating the object—a water bottle—like other similarly cylindrical objects, like a microphone or rolling pin. I threw the challenge that they had to change the weight and size of the object too, not just its use, and they started coming up with things like dumbbell, skateboard, and oar. I want them to leave feeling more capable of expanding on this work on their own, or at least feeling like this work has opened up channels of connection and communication. This can't be done if I don't make my work apparent.

This transparency then leads to the second key element of my facilitation: the dispersion of power. Though I come into this group each day as a facilitator, I also come in asking for each of the participants to share their knowledge, define our goals collectively, and provide feedback that shapes the work's trajectory. Participants are asked to look out for one another's needs and share responsibility for making the space accessible. To practice this sharing of power, for example, I brought in a giant paper flip board and asked the participants in each phase to collectively define the guidelines for the

community. We wrote our needs first (correct pronouns and physical rest came up every time) and then came to agreements for actions we could hold one another accountable for that would help meet these needs. Participants devised guidelines such as "take space/ make space" as a way to know when one's voice/body/energy is overwhelming or overpowering others and, therefore, to make space for those whose voices/bodies/ energies are missing. They committed to considering when to join a conversation and when to amplify the ideas of others, while always trying to ensure that all group members have a way to participate at their own pace and in their own way. Participants also came up with guidelines about "calling in" rather than "calling out." Instead of simply noting when someone has said or done something harmful (calling them out on their behavior), they asked that someone who felt comfortable doing so should take that opportunity to explain why the behavior was problematic and how they might behave differently. This "calling in" method comes up almost every time we meet, as we get better at recognizing when we are speaking for another person or group. The feel empowered because they know—and have defined for themselves—what an ideal group looks like, and can work together towards creating it.

Peter O'Connor and Michael Anderson compare this method of empowerment to the method of "community-based participant research (CBPR)" in their text *Applied Theatre Research: Radical Departures.* This type of research has four components:

> 1. Genuine partnership means co-learning (academic and community
>   partners learn from each other)

2. research efforts include capacity building (in addition to conducting the

research, there is a commitment to training community members in

research)

3. findings and knowledge should benefit all partners

4. CBPR involves long-term commitments to effectively reduce

disparities. (Isreal et al,. cited in O'Conner and Anderson 20-21)

These components each mirror my own ethics of working within this group: first, we

share knowledge. Second, I leave them with the tools to continue this work either

introspectively or within their communities. Third, the debriefings are primarily public; I

share everything relevant I learn in my research. Finally, having worked within this

community for six years, and within this specific group for nearly three, I will continue

this work well beyond the scope of this thesis. This work cannot be taken on as a simple

jaunt into trauma, it must be taken as an effort to create change in all future spaces.

Though these techniques may not be right in every instance, they helped our space feel

like a better one to try, fail, and learn in. I do not shirk these responsibilities, as I am more

powerful when we are all empowered. My work is stronger when participants feel

ownership over the process and the outcomes. When I leave, I won't leave a gap as broad

as I found here, but a group of leaders prepared to grow their communities as they see fit.

The Techniques

As this project has evolved, I've noticed that the applied theatre techniques we've gravitated towards have fallen into two categories: community building and introspection. These two categories echo the primary goals both of my own work and of applied theatre methodology: to give tools to individuals to develop their own voice and to help bring together communities around common goals. The trans community is subjected to intense violence, hatred, and structural oppression, leaving us scattered and often internalizing these very negative messages which oppress us. There are innumerable other applied theatre techniques and exercises we could have tried, but these techniques were chosen because I felt they had the most power and applicability to the unique lives and bodies of trans participants.

In the first category are techniques designed to build a company—a group of individuals focused on common goals, and community building beyond the scope of the troupe itself. Techniques include John O'Neal's Story Circles, Boal's Forum Theatre, and *Undesirable Elements* (UE) designed by Ping Chong in collaboration with Talvin Wilks and Sara Zatz. My previous experience with Story Circles inspired me to introduce them, but the group's interest in movement-based work ended up transitioning us further from those techniques. Boal's work is always a part of my facilitation, and his Forum Theatre games and exercises make their way into nearly every workshop session, if only to begin thinking about our bodies as tools for storytelling and how we can use them to change a story. Forum Theatre is a type of Theatre of the Oppressed work that culminates in a performance for an audience that is asked to step in and alter the outcome of a scene. The

final product, the Forum Play, requires an audience, but there are dozens of smaller steps that help a troupe build up to a Forum Play. These techniques, what Boal refers to as his "arsenal", can be applied in a troupe setting, whether or not the goal is a Forum Play. From this arsenal, I nearly always use Complete the Image when introducing new participants to the process. In this exercise, participants are asked to begin shaking hands with a partner, then freeze in that position. One partner is asked to step away while the other remains frozen. The moving partner looks at the frozen partner and finds a way to reenter the image using their body to completely change the story of the image. Where there was once a handshake, there is now something completely new. This exercise and its extensions (Dubbing, Building Out the Image) are a practice in using our bodies to make change around us, but they are also practice in interpreting bodies and using our bodies to express certain meanings. Beyond these games and exercises, the group has not decided to move towards a Forum Theatre performance, both because the aspect of public performance would potentially out non-public members of the group, and because the group has not found one unique topic around which a Forum piece must congeal.

Finally, the UE techniques developed into an entire semester-long session of work in Fall 2015. UE is a set of techniques designed by Chong to take disparate narratives across a population and weave them together to form a meta-narrative of a community. This happens in several stages: interviews, name games, cultural songs, constructing a timeline, external research, developing a script, and more (Chong, Wilks, Zatz 210). The script is then developed using standard elements, including: "The Introductions, The Name Game, Personal and Historical Entries, What Do You Think Of, Songs/Poems, and

'Out'roductions" (201). I was initially taught these techniques by Professor Priscilla Page at the University of Massachusetts in Fall 2014, and later practiced the techniques in a course taught by Professor Judyie Al-Bilali with guest presenter Talvin Wilks in Spring 2015. I found the work compelling because it was able to connect people across time and space to a story that was larger than any of its pieces. The UE project was originally designed to look at a place and to find about four to six different people and stories within that place that made its history. Later, Ping Chong and Company transitioned to focusing also on UE projects based around identity (208). This transition intrigued me, as I was working with a group of trans people whose narratives were not spatially linked, but could be linked around this identity. I wanted to explore if this shift towards a focus on identity would be as successful in creating a meta-narrative as the location-based projects of previous years.

In the second category are the techniques that involve getting to know the body, understanding the performance of self, decoding and reconditioning that performance, and externalizing internalized structures. Of this category we explored and briefly worked through somatic exercises—primarily as group development work—personal narrative and storytelling exercises, and finally Boal's Rainbow of Desire techniques. Within the Rainbow of Desire, we specifically focused on a set of techniques called Cops in the Head. Cops in the Head springs from a narrative Boal frequently returns to in Forum Theatre. A protagonist (the participant who is currently experiencing an oppression) recounts a story in which they could not get their needs met or achieve a desired goal. In a typical Forum Theatre piece, the storyteller identifies certain figures of power or

oppression who stopped them from meeting their needs. In some cases, Boal encountered

participants who could not identify any person or structure that was keeping them from

their goal. Boal then asks these participants, "Where are the cops?" If there are no

physical barriers (no *actual* cops stopping them), then Boal responds that the "cops" are

in their head. He is not gaslighting them. In fact, he is doing quite the opposite,

recognizing that there are very real barriers in the world, which have such power that

oppressed people often internalize their messages. The cops are internalized forces that

are manifestations of external oppressions. Through the exercises, a facilitator helps the

participant dismantle real-world representatives of these internalized oppressions.

These exercises were selected for two primary reasons. First, my own experience

and training with Boal's work has often felt useful, effective, and powerful. Second, the

topic of internalizing oppressions has been significant within this troupe. During our

work with UE, a few participants argued that one participant's desire to place our

narratives within a normative timeline reflected the internalization of the pathologization

spurred by Harry Benjamin's 1966 text *The Transsexual Phenomenon.* Benjamin's work

is largely credited with institutionalization of medical transitioning, and the creation of a

series of "life tests" required for transgender people to be considered for the next steps in

treatment. The structures Benjamin's work instilled are still felt within the medical and

social work fields today, despite the passage of various changes to the Diagnostic and

Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM) and Standards of Care (particularly the

option of informed consent). These structures were based on certain beliefs, beliefs that

transgender people must all experience certain types of dysphoria (the hatred, pain,

trauma, disconnection, or disgust associated with an element of the physical or social self related to one's gender), must all want certain changes, and must all aim towards specific ends—beliefs several group members argued this participant had internalized to the point where they stopped her from seeing outside possibilities. Regardless of the outcome of her own personal narrative, the discussion itself inspired a deeper focus on internalized oppressions, for which we turned to these Boal techniques.

For two years of both short and long-term workshops with this troupe, I ruminated on what a set of techniques designed for and by trans people might look like. Finally, in summer 2016, a piece of research sparked a connection to a previous workshop: a participant was describing an experience of nostalgic mourning for a conversation she never had, and a theorist, Christopher Shelley, was describing the way in which trans people mourn for experiences they never got to have. I, in the middle, was struck by the connection, and developed the first applied theatre technique I ever created by, for, and about trans people. This technique sparked ideas for others—exploring questions specific to trans experience of naming, loss, futurity, and power. I developed the set of techniques over the summer and returned in Fall 2016 to test them with the troupe. The tests started out shaky, and the techniques were less than polished. We talked about them, made them more specific to our needs but broad enough that any of us could use them, and tried again. When I came back to the group the following week, they were energized and ready to play in a way I had never seen before. It wasn't that the techniques were particularly astonishing at first; it was that we were creating them from scratch, and they were ours. In Chapter 7, I explore the new set of techniques I crafted, some of the experiences I had

with the troupe that inspired them, and what I learned as we performed them together.

This section is truly the culmination of my work, both with theory and practice.

CHAPTER 3

INITIAL PROJECT IMPLEMENTATION

<u>Introduction</u>

My work is process-oriented and participant-oriented; hence, this thesis spends

much time considering the structure of that process and how it has been impacted by

participants' voices. In this chapter, I delve into the possibility of a dramaturgical

workshop structure and how the individual applied theatre techniques both inspire and fit

within that structure. This section will focus mainly on the first year of the troupe, since it

was in this phase that the structures began to take shape and the theories started to click

with my experiences. The initial dramaturgy of a workshop eventually led to how we

determined our long-term goals; this chapter explores those processes, detailing the work

I did with the troupe from Fall 2014 to Spring 2015, and how that dramaturgy inspired

the transition to a research project in Fall 2015.

<u>Structuring a Workshop</u>

I think of workshop in two ways, both the micro understanding of a workshop,

meaning the day on which we worked (generally a three or four hour session), and the

macro understanding of the collection of individual workshop sessions that comprise a

longer workshop focused on one set of techniques, one theme, or one idea. The way I

work, each individual workshop day has a dramaturgy to it, a structure that is more

apparent in these early shorter-term workshops than in the day-to-day work of the

semester-long workshops in Fall 2015, Spring 2016, and Fall 2016. In those longer

workshops, the dramaturgy of the process is much more drawn out, so the arc is less visible on the micro level. But here I find it useful to examine the ways I think of individual workshop days and how that thinking plays out in the early formation of the troupe.

The theme of agency within applied theatre work is common. O'Conner and Anderson describe the goal of participatory action research (a term they connect to applied theatre work that is done with research at the heart) as "a means for enabling people to see themselves as actors rather than spectators, as people with agency and control" (O'Conner and Anderson 21). Given that applied theatre in general is deeply rooted in empowerment and agency, it is not surprising that I gravitated towards Augusto Boal's methodology when structuring my workshops. Boal describes four phases of work within a Theatre of the Oppressed (TO) workshop as 1. "knowing the body," 2. "making the body expressive," 3. "the theatre as language," and 4. "the theatre as discourse" (*Theatre of the Oppressed* 126). These steps transform the "spectator into actor" or, in other words, give a participant agency within a workshop (126).

Each of these phases are composed of several games and activities within a normal TO format, some of which I used in my own work. I primarily focused on the goals of this work. Using some Boal exercises alongside applied theatre techniques, I constructed my workshops to follow the general dramaturgy of a TO workshop, excepting the fourth phase, "the theatre as discourse." In this phase, the work of the troupe moves towards public performance and engagement with audience (spect-actors).

The public performance stage is not a goal of this troupe, and as such, our work mainly

echoes Boal's first three phases, as follows.

In the "knowing the body" phase, Boal writes about games and exercises intended

to "demechanize" people. People come with their bodies pre-trained to behave, move,

and speak depending on their jobs, socioeconomic status, enculturation, etc. This first

phase is used to make these ingrained behaviors more conscious—to make the

participants more aware of when they are socialized (or "mechanized," to use Boal's

language). Some of these exercises are intended to make participants hyper-aware of the

rules, socializations, and structures that coerce their movements.

Within the first part of the "knowing the body" phase, I used games such as

Opposite of Jackson, 1 by 2 by Bradford, somatic matching, and reflective Image Theatre

(still images that respond to a word or phrase) to guide participants into thinking about

how their bodies entered the space. I find it useful to combine the somatic training I've

gained with Image Theatre, not only because somatic movement teaches a stronger

connection to the body and produces more in-tuned images, but also because Boal (one of

the most significant sources of Image Theatre work) considers Image Theatre an act of

somatisation (*The Rainbow of Desire* 182). This segment is usually one of the hardest, as

participants often enter carrying the weight of their outside lives, traumas, and memories;

this section forces them to confront that baggage. I usually begin with the lighter, more

fun exercises so participants can begin to think about their bodies in neutral or positive

terms before we delve into more serious work. The earliest games in a workshop, like

slow-motion races or Tempest, are also intended to get participants energized and in the

right mindset to begin work. In Opposite of Jackson, for example, participants are asked to move around following certain commands (walk, stop, jump, clap, etc.). After they get the hang of this "Simon Says"-type game, the rules are switched—they must do the opposite of whatever they are told. After around 20 minutes of fun "play"-type demechanizing games, I transition into more "conscientizing" (in the Freirean sense) (Freire 110, 119) types of games. One game in this section is the game of walks in which participants are asked to move about the space "walking" (or however they move) and shift their walks according to commands, such as "how do you enter a bathroom," "how do you move in your family home," "how do you walk home alone at night," and so on. These commands force them to connect their instinctive physical responses to a conscious awareness of how circumstances affect these movements. I continue these types of games for longer—usually 30 to 40 minutes at least—and offer time to discuss what we discover. In one session, I used both Opposite of Jackson and the game of walks back to back to intentionally think about how our body responds to commands. The participants called out the juxtaposition during our discussion afterwards. One said he had instinctively shirked from responding the way he naturally would, out of defiance built from the "opposites" game. Another noted that the competitive nature of Opposite of Jackson led her to compare her body positioning to others more frequently during the game of walks—something that led her to notice how many of the other femme/female participants shared similar guarded and closed-off posturing during several commands. Most of the participants also agreed that this exercise made them aware of how quickly

certain types of movements instilled certain emotional and narrative responses (they would construct the scenario in their heads) and vice versa.

The second part of the "knowing the body" phase is intended to shake up the participants' bodies and minds until they start to see new ways their bodies can interact in the world. Boal offers a number of pattern exercises in this section, which pair nicely with the somatic movements. Though not articulated in the text, partner work helps participants find new capacities of movement and expression; a partner can push you past your limits, and when you are made to match that partner, you can use your partner's abilities as well as your own. Within this section, I use exercises such as Colombian Hypnosis, Imaginary Journey, and somatic matching. In the first two exercises, partners push you to move as they move and reconsider the meaning and potentiality behind your movements. In Imaginary Journey, for example, one partner keeps their eyes closed while the other manipulates the first's body to perform a task. The partner whose eyes were closed then tries to figure out what task their body performed—playing a sport, driving a car, tap dancing, etc. Sensory deprivation combined with external manipulation creates an imagined possibility for the first partner in which they could be capable of anything. These games are generally still fun and can be silly, but often have more serious implications in our debriefing. In one such workshop, while debriefing the Imaginary Journey, a participant remarked on the powerful nature of that instilled humor. Her partner had taken her through the action of getting ready for the day, including showering, brushing her teeth, and dressing. Because this participant is very tall and her partner much shorter, the pair spent much of the "Journey" giggling and stumbling about

as the shorter partner tried to manipulate the taller's limbs awkwardly through simple movements. In the debrief, she told us that these same actions were often fraught—filled with the dysphoria of having to be intimately aware of her anatomy, trying to find clothing that made her feel both feminine and also recognizing the fear she still held in dressing as herself. Through the Imaginary Journey, these daily activities were turned into a fun, funny experience for her. I can't say that these exercises are always that productive and poignant, but they often help us reconsider our bodies and the structures around us.

The second phase, "making the body expressive," is the basic building block of all performance and generally where most applied theatre techniques I've found begin. Without the prior phase as a structured, intentional section, this phase is less useful for trans bodies. Trans bodies are probably no more or less expressive than their cis counterparts, but they certainly are mechanized to think about and even use their bodies in very specific ways that make beginning with this expressive phase less effective, particularly when the goal is to consider their trans identities in tandem with their theatrical possibilities. During this phase, I focus on exercises that, as the title suggests, practice expression. This phase includes a series of Image Theatre exercises such as Homage to Magritte, Complete the Image, Tableaux, and individual images. The individual images, similar to the Game of Walks, start with me calling out a "command," usually a word or phrase. With participants standing with their eyes closed or in a circle facing outwards, I will say something like "birthday"; participants then have a few seconds to compose the image with their bodies/faces before revealing their image to the group or opening their eyes. The two different ways to reveal the image yield different

outcomes, both of which I've found useful in the context of trans spaces. In the first

scenario, I had participants face outwards and then turn inwards after striking their image,

exposing their understanding or experience of my "command" to the others in the group.

This produced intense reactions of both dissonance and connection. In one workshop, for

example, I focused on specific and simple gendered words. Starting with the word

"masculine," participants produced such a broad range of images. Some were even

shocked, audibly responding to the images their peers produced. I often follow the reveal

with a few moments to examine each other's images before asking participants to call out

either reactions to what they see around them or to express what they did themselves. In

this image, two of the women in the group found that their images, though visually

different, were inspired by similar experiences of the idea of masculinity: one had created

a mask over her face, and the other had enacted a shield. The men in the group ranged

broadly, from one who had stretched his shirt out and shrunk his body to express the idea

that he was trying to fit into something (like the idea of fitting into his father's suit), to

one who was embracing himself in what looked like a moment of comfort, safety, and

contentedness. Of those who identified as neither male or female, one image stood out:

that of a hulking monster, looking as if it were about to attack. While others noted what

they saw around them, several mentioned this image, saying they viewed it as a

representation of how masculinity is scary. Nearly everyone in the group agreed with

both the interpretation and the experience—but what became most interesting was that, in

the later debrief, we found that masculinity had been "scary" to us for vastly different

reasons: fear of not "passing," fear of violence, fear of oppression, fear of being overpowered, fear of a part of themselves they didn't understand or didn't like, and more.

"Passing," as it is used here, is a reference to the "Real Life Test," which was a step towards receiving a medical diagnosis of transsexualism necessary to receive trans health services as defined by Harry Benjamin's work in *The Transsexual Phenomenon*. To "pass" meant to live publicly as your identified gender without being "read" as your previous gender. I use the term here only as it was used by participants, as I find the term harmful. It has connotations of failure, as if someone can fail to be their identified gender, and it places the burden of passing on the trans person rather than on those who should accept a trans person's gender. In its current use, passing is now a fraught term meant to denote being read as cis of the gender you identify with—both reifying gender roles for cisgender bodies and expectations of binary genders for trans bodies (Shelley 49-50).

The "reveal" in this exercise exposed some of the common threads of trans experience, and our own struggles with both internal and external forces. In a different workshop session, we worked in a place with a full mirror wall, so I had participants close their eyes while they created the image. They opened their eyes and "revealed" the image then to *themselves*, actually, as an unexpected result of the exercise. When they opened their eyes, instead of immediately examining each other's images, several eyes were quickly drawn to examining their own bodies in the mirror. In this workshop I used questions instead of words as commands. I asked the participants to create an image in response to "what do you need?" By this time, I learned that giving the participants more time before revealing their images produced more thoughtful, conscious images, while

giving them very little time produced more instinctive, guttural responses (both have their benefits in different scenarios). For this command, I gave the participants a couple seconds to produce an image. Their responses were poignant, pointed, visceral, and immediate. Most were not necessarily trans-specific, as all humans have needs that often outweigh their desires or identities. Some were easily intertwined with their identities, like one whose gesture suggested "armor." One was easily connected with her identity, as she made a triangle with her hands in the vicinity of her genitals. She told us, laughing, that the first thing she thought of was a vagina. It wasn't necessarily the most connected to her survival or even the most immediate need, but in that moment it was what had been on her mind and what she felt she most needed. So maybe it is actually necessary to her survival. Beyond the above examples of how useful this expressive work is to interrogate how trans bodies are read and how we can use them to tell our stories, this phase is also crucial to developing the performance skills of a troupe of primarily non-performers. For this reason, this phase lingers, generally another hour or so.

The third phase of Boal's structure, and the final phase I use to structure a workshop, is "theatre as language." Boal breaks this into three sections: simultaneous dramaturgy (or participants interpreting and responding to images or scenes), Image Theatre, and Forum Theatre. This structure works from the place of participants as respondents, to participants as creators, to participants as change-makers. While I don't follow the three sections Boal uses (since I don't intend our work to culminate in a Forum play), I do use this dramaturgical structure to organize this phase. By this point in a workshop, we've already begun creating and responding to images, but now we transition

into communicating our own stories. I use exercises such as Playback Theatre, memory and personal narrative-based storytelling, and scene improvisations.

Playback Theatre is a method of applied theatre in which a participant tells their own story and watches as the others enact the story. In our application, we begin by having the performers enact the story silently alongside the storyteller's words. As we delve into a story and tease out details or questions, we then transition to enacting the scene with dialogue and movement, still with the storyteller observing outside the scene. This is a particularly sensitive method within trans spaces, as the visual representation of trans bodies in media is so defamatory, sensationalized, and transmisogynist that seeing one's story performed by others can be incredibly triggering and/or terrifying. The type of transmisogyny used here was coined by theorist and activist Julia Serrano as the term for the combination of gender and transgender phobia or discrimination particularly pointed at transfeminine individuals (Simmons and White 17).

For the aforementioned reasons, performing these stories carries high stakes and immense weight. It has, however, also started some interesting conversations about intersectional identities (being trans and a person of color, being trans and queer, being trans and physically disabled, and even the distinctions between being a trans woman, trans man, genderqueer person or other identity). Intersectional identities within trans communities are radically understudied, but what research exists suggests a myriad of interconnected and deepened oppressions (Cava 574). In one Playback scene, for example, a white trans woman in the troupe was narrating her experience of being arrested after an altercation with a man who was harassing her. After watching the others

"playback" the story, in our debrief she noted that the scene had a much different impact than her original story. The participant who had played her in the story was black, and her skin in combination with the existing story had an additional set of implications, such as a direct reflection of police brutality on black bodies. Additionally, the participant playing that role noted that she thought the participant playing the cop was going to accuse her of being a sex worker, because even though this was not her story they were acting, that felt like what typically would happen to her and her friends—a reflection on the sexualization and demonization of black women's (and particularly trans women's) bodies.

Playback Theatre has also offered some troupe members moments to reconsider their own interpretations of their stories. On several occasions participants who watched their story played back described feeling like they had originally put so much more blame and regret on themselves for whatever transpired, but watching the events unfold made them feel defensive towards the actors playing them or recognize that they were not at fault. I think this response happens partly because we are so quick to judge ourselves; as performers, however, we are constantly told not to judge the character we are playing but instead play their circumstances and their actions. It may also happen partly because we have developed trust and respect for one another, so that we empathize when watching the events happen to someone else in the group, even if we had not felt that way about our own experience. These examples are not specific to work within trans communities, but they do occur differently because of that added identity.

It is also in this phase that I most reflect on the "problem-posing" structure Paolo Freire espouses in his foundational text *Pedagogy of the Oppressed.* As opposed to a

"banking model" in which students (or the participants) are filled with knowledge as passive observers or vessels, the problem-posing model "affirms men and women as beings in the process *of becoming*—as unfinished, uncompleted beings in and with a likewise unfinished reality" (Freire 84). It is unsurprising that I turn to Freire's work, as it inspired the structure and ethics behind *Theatre of the Oppressed*. I find this model useful here because I think of this section as a dialectic—a trial and error, an explore-discuss-change-explore again style. We do not enter a storytelling session with the idea that our stories are finished or what they mean; neither do I enter this phase believing I can simply use their bodies to show how truly impressive trans people are. I instead enter this with questions and tools with which to approach these questions. Often these are questions that grew out of our previous work. It is crucial to this type of troupe to have the community establish its own questions (or "problems" in the Freirean language). Because this phase deals with Storytelling, narrative-based or experienced-based scenes, it is in this phase that we generate the ideas that will be our guiding questions for the remainder of the workshop or for future workshops. Sometimes the questions have been more topical, like looking at intersecting identities. Other times, the questions have been more about technique—such as exploring what it means to tell trans stories, embodying other trans people's stories, telling stories that are larger than yourself, and so on.

Working Towards a Longer Workshop

From Fall 2014 to Spring 2015, these questions guided the process. I asked participants to bring in any "tools" or techniques they had to approach the questions, and

47

we used this simple structure to build from knowing our bodies to making them expressive to making theatre with them. Some months we met with the same group several times to explore one topic. A few times I put out a notice that I was going to explore a specific topic/technique and do one-off workshops with both regular and new participants. This year was loosely structured in that way; it was also the source of some of the most productive work for me in terms of crafting the above structure, developing my style as a Joker/facilitator, and prioritizing what I wanted to explore in the longer workshops to come. There were several large changes from the first year of shorter-term workshops to the second and third year of longer-term workshops, including our overall goals, who would participate, the workshop structure, and the research methods used to asses this labor.

One of the biggest changes was the goals. At the end of Spring 2015, the group and I decided we wanted to work towards a long-term troupe because we wanted to create a stable space with lasting connections to the trans community and because we wanted to focus our work on techniques that required deeper exploration. At first, I had simply hoped to create a trans-specific space in which we could explore applied theatre techniques. I had not yet articulated or discovered my long-term goals. (When I refer to goals here, I don't mean necessarily a product, performance, or data set—I mean a question I want to deeply explore; a technique I want to learn and deconstruct; a feeling I want to instill.) This logic, a focus on process as product or as goal, is articulated by Gareth White in *Applied Theatre: Aesthetics*: "an aesthetics of process suggests the value of working through, motivated by an end point of some kind, but not necessarily arriving

conclusively at that end point" (47). White is pointing out that process itself can be the focus, and that while we are moving towards something, that something may continue to evolve as we do. A huge part of finding that goal was discovering the importance of having the group determine the goals based on our collective needs and desires. Because I have spent much of my applied theatre work studying and training in oppression-based work, I instinctively turn towards naming and fighting oppressions, but this group also helped me see that we can't stop there—there has to be a goal beyond the oppression. This theme recurs in work by other applied theatre artists as well, with O'Conner and Anderson explaining, "performance research which focuses purely on the forces of oppression, but does not consider the potentiality of hope, is ultimately disempowering for communities" (29). What these two applied theatre artists are tapping into is crucial to how our group articulated our goals: we must strive not only to dismantle, to critique, to name, to fight, but we must strive to create. We are, after all, creating ourselves. Under this goal, we decided the long-term workshop should strive to create something new, something made by and for trans bodies. Our initial goals in Fall 2014 and Spring 2015 were to create a space where trans bodies were empowered to express their stories in affirming ways. As the first workshop proceeded into Fall 2015, the goal extended to working towards adapting existing techniques to better fit our needs. Finally, in summer 2016, the goal shot even further than I'd imagined when I asked the group if we were ready to try exploring a set of techniques I'd designed myself with trans bodies and identities at the heart. The goal is ever-moving and always built on a foundation of hope,

potentiality, and growth. But underneath all that, my initial goal of creating this space for myself and for others like me still drives everything I do.

In order to create the group for this longer-term workshop, beginning in summer 2015 I altered my call for participants to note a commitment both to each other and to a long-term exploration of the work. I noted that I planned to participate for at least two years, and hoped participants could offer at least a semester's commitment to the project. This was a difficult shift, as it meant excluding the many people whose work, home lives, and transience disallowed them from coming to regular meetings. On occasion I have asked some of these folks to reenter the space when a larger group was needed, but I have tried to maintain a more solid base group throughout these changes. In the transition from the first to the second year several participants left the group. Some could not get the proper permission to participate in the feedback process. Others graduated, moved, or acquired jobs/schedules that made the regular meeting times difficult to maintain. We eventually developed a core of about six consistent participants, a couple semi-regular participants, and several more who participated for one or two of the longer-term workshops but not all of them. The consistency in the group has shifted the way I think about developing trust in the space, and has allowed for us to get to much deeper and more personal work. It has also made the work more cumulative, as I rarely have to catch up folks who missed a topic or take steps back to build back to our current project. It has also meant the energy in the space is easier to read—there are fewer variables and interpersonal dynamics or new people to create different energies. On a less positive note, in some ways the shift has made the group more homogenous: there are fewer young

participants, fewer people whose work and/or lifestyle makes them more transient or gives them an inconsistent schedule. There are more students, more people in my general age range. We still represent a variety of bodies, races, and genders, but there is less diversity of class and age.

This shift also required looking at how to apply my dramaturgical workshop structure to a longer timeline. The first set of techniques I chose offered me a transition from these short workshops into longer work, because *Undesirable Elements* (UE) comes with its own internal framework and dramaturgy. The work is developed along different timelines given the project, but each phase takes as long as it needs to take—the interviews, for example, cannot be shortened without limiting whatever fruits they may produce. Within this longer structure I was still able to employ my daily structure, but instead of making the *body* expressive, we often focused on language. Instead of games built around learning our bodies, we used games that helped us craft our stories. I also developed the following simple structure for approaching longer workshops: First, we would try some of the games and exercises, without any prior knowledge or experience, as one might encounter them in another applied theatre setting. Taking a step back, we would learn the tools and building blocks (or terms) needed to explore the techniques. Then we would re-try the techniques as designed. Finally, taking whatever we learned and discussed in our debriefs, we would try the techniques with alterations and adaptations to improve their use in trans spaces. This is a somewhat "scientific method" approach I've taken in order to produce the type of feedback I would need in order to

understand both what is working/not working/harmful/useful from these techniques in

trans spaces, and how we might adapt them to fit our needs as trans people.

CHAPTER 4

RESEARCH METHODS

<u>**Introduction**</u>

In addition to taking what I learned in my initial workshops and using it to improve my facilitation, workshop structure, and goals, I also shifted the way I asked for and received feedback. When I started this troupe in 2014, I was not focused on a long-term project or developing a research paper from the work; therefore, much of my early work with the troupe was based on developing the troupe itself and the type of facilitator I wanted to be. We had debriefings and feedback sessions, but they were informal and never intended for later study, so much of my notes from this period of time are scattered and unfocused. While the preceding chapters recount the labor of developing my facilitation method and workshop dramaturgy, they do not have the type of focused research methods and goals that the following sections employ.

These changes all resulted from a shift in my thinking about what it means to conduct research within a transgender troupe. I was inspired by Peter O'Conner and Michael Anderson's definition of research in *Applied Theatre Research: Radical Departures* as "a process and means of confronting, challenging and disturbing the status quo that marginalizes, dispossesses and imprisons millions to the advantage of the few" (6). If research itself is to disturb the status quo, its methodology must disrupt normative models in favor of research that prioritizes the subjects' and community's needs over the researcher's, a method that is as oriented toward process and participant as the applied theatre I am exploring. This emphasis remerges in O'Conner and Anderson's

text as they "argue for research that engages in processes where the marginalized might be the authors of their own stories, as co-researchers, and equal collaborators" (6). I explore what this looks like in practice in this chapter.

Ethics of Research

Just as Adebayo warned, applied theatre should not feel like it is being *applied* to someone; research in the field must grow out of the group, rather than be imposed onto it. Because of these ethics, I haven't always known what questions my research might ask or what paths it might take. I started simply with "what would happen if" and developed research questions with the group along the way. O'Conner and Anderson support this same approach, stating, "our role as researchers is not to tell communities what the questions are but rather to support the construction and design of research methods that respond effectively to the challenges, as they are understood by the community from which they emerge" (51). Their and my belief is grown from that process and participant-focused model of applied theatre, and therefore the research is similarly focused. I have continuously asked participants for their feedback regarding the goals of the work, the techniques we ultimately chose to work long-term, and the ways in which we evaluated that work. My intention was not only to grow myself as a facilitator and Joker, but also to empower participants to define their own goals, needs, and evaluative methods. This goal of empowerment stands in direct opposition to "top-down approaches to evaluation [which] can alienate and disempower" (Meezan and Martin 10). Instead, my research

methods must include participation and feedback at all levels—in structuring feedback

loops, research questions, and interpretations of data.

Returning to my previous assertion of the impossibly contradictory and

multivocal experiences within the trans community, the process of this work has rarely

brought about unanimous decisions. While we may not always be able to find a

consensus, J. Zeelands offers us an alternative, *conspectus*, which "conveys the sense of a

synopsis of opinions, in other words there may be a wide range of opinions (and

differences) reflected in the drama" (qtd. in Prendergast and Saxton 2013, 47). It is with

this focus on multiplicity, difference, and yet a complete group consent that we move

through the work.

Trans, Queer, and Feminist Research

My use of trans, queer, and feminist literatures serves a similar purpose to the

project of Undersirable Elements—I am searching for the place of Trans Studies within

broader theories. Research methods in LGBTQIA+ studies are relatively new, with the

earliest social sciences studies in the 1950s and the first journal with a research methods

issue in 1995 (*Journal of Gay & Lesbian Social Services*) (Meezan and Martin 5-6).

Sometimes the theoretical discussions feel like a reach, as I stretch literature intended for

queer subjects to find its use for trans subjects. There is a distance between queer and

trans subjects, a distance articulated in Queer and Trans Studies but not always crossed.

This is a distance of social representation and acceptance, and a distance in bodily history

and experience (see Salamon "Transfeminism and the Future of Gender" for a thorough

discussion of this divide). Conversely, as Yolanda Martínez-San Miguel and Sarah Tobias argue, "what Queer and Trans Studies actually share is the consistent interrogation of normative definitions of sexuality, gender, and/or social and political identities that make it difficult for people to live their lives and perform their identities to the fullest," and it is this commonality that I seek to use in my exploration of trans applied theatre's place in trans studies (231). To that end, I have chosen both a variety of Trans scholars as well as interdisciplinary Feminist Studies and Queer Studies to theorize about my experiences with the troupe and the potential knowledge created in that space.

Feedback and Surveys

Beginning in Fall 2014, the earliest phase of the troupe, I initiated a feedback system that involved both group debriefs and my own field notes. During each workshop, I listened to the way group members responded to the techniques. After each workshop session, we had a group debrief, where I took notes about their responses to language, techniques, experiences of dysphoria, and identity throughout the day.

Near the end of that first phase of short-term workshops in Spring 2015, I proposed a survey-like feedback system in addition to these group debriefs. In addition to seeking feedback about my own facilitation techniques, I found that because we were doing self-determination and narrative work, this type of research provided a fuller picture. Christopher Shelley, author of *Transpeople: Repudiation, Trauma, Healing,* describes narrative research as "a means to insert the importance of storied lives, of retaining voice, of providing a counterbalance to an over-emphasis on quantitative

methods…narrative is about deeply listening to human experience, emphasizing the

framing of research questions with which to generate dialogue" (11). This is a definition

that resonates with me as both an ethical model of valuing individuals' knowledges and

as a method of reading and interpreting those knowledges. Beginning with the UE project

in Fall 2015, I implemented this survey method. Each participant was asked to complete

an initial survey as follows:

> What gender identity(ies) do you currently hold?
>
> How do you currently express your gender identity?
>
> What other identities are important to you?
>
> If you experience dysphoria, how/when do you experience dysphoria?
>
> What experience do you have with theatre or performance?
>
> What expectations do you have for working in this group?
>
> What fears do you have about this work or this group?
>
> What are your current feelings/experiences of trans people in
>
> > performance?
>
> What does your "trans narrative" mean to you?
>
> What is your perception of trans narratives in the trans community?
>
> What is your perception of trans narratives in the cis community?

I have tried to retain as much anonymity as possible for this project, as I know

many participants have articulated the risk involved in being outed as trans. In a survey of

college campuses, researchers found that "65 percent of transmasculine and 55 percent of

transfeminine students [stated] that they did not disclose their gender identity because of

a fear of negative consequences. An even greater number of trans-spectrum students of color sought to hide their gender identity in order to avoid intimidation or because they feared for their physical safety" (Beemyn and Rankin 23). For this reason, and out of respect for the choices of the participants, I have made anonymity and confidentiality a priority in my use of stories, surveys, and participation. The responses were collected, coded, and anonymous, though my own knowledge of the participants and the small size of the group makes it impossible for them to be anonymous to me. In my writing about these surveys, I have tried to remove all data that is not pertinent to the exact moments described; I have even disconnected the moments from others experienced by the same participant in multiple sections, to keep them anonymous to readers outside of the troupe.

Next, after each session, I sent out a digital survey that asked participants to reflect on their experience. There have been a few additions or changes based on specific techniques or moments, but the base survey is as follows:

> As a trans person, which activities (or elements of activities) engaged this identity the most? Why?
>
> Which activities (or elements of activities) did not engage this identity? Why?
>
> What language (either in the activities or used by the facilitator—Finn) felt problematic to your identity? How so?
>
> What language (either in the activities or used by the facilitator—Finn) felt validating for your identity?

If you experience dysphoria, when did activities engage your personal

experience of dysphoria? How so?

As someone who holds multiple identities (race, ability, income status are

examples) which other identities felt most engaged during this work? How

so?

How/when did this work influence your perception of others' identities?

How might you use this work in your own life and/or community?

What suggestions do you have for the facilitator (Finn)?

What suggestions do you have to make these activities more useful,

inclusive, or engaging for you?

Some of these questions were developed in conversations with the troupe, and others

have been standard throughout the process. Each is intended to elicit personal reflection

on both the practice and experience of identity within the work. The feedback on these

surveys shapes my interpretation of the work we have done, the theories I seek and

connect to, and the arguments I make about this work. It is essential in opening up new

questions of access and efficacy in the techniques, as the participants offer their lived

experiences as people of color, people living with disease, mental illness, and disability,

differing trans identities, as well as other identity factors. While the group is small

enough that any feedback cannot be taken as a reasonable sample size to produce theory,

it certainly disrupts given techniques and offers new questions to interrogate existing

theories. This feedback has also been key to my development as a Joker/facilitator, and

from it I have adjusted my language, tone, and style in the workshops.

Reflecting on surveys, I have found them useful for the above purposes, but not wholly successful in their implementation or response rates. I have had weeks when no one responded, and weeks where participants wrote reflections that covered several sessions. I have had some participants who semi-regularly submit reflections and others who rarely submit responses, and whose experiences I found it easier to extrapolate in person. As we moved into the Fall 2016 workshop, the surveys trickled to a minimum. For these reasons, I have found the surveys an incomplete and imperfect feedback method. I believe this is largely because the more we work together, the more the group feels comfortable sharing in the room during debriefs. I also think the repetition of surveys after each workshop can feel tedious, causing fewer responses. In retrospect, I would do a lot differently with these surveys, particularly offering an option for participants to create their own question that they think the group might want to respond to. I would ask them to journal or think about these questions at the time of the workshop too, since many of the responses come so far after an event that it is difficult for me to figure out what activity they are writing about. Also, the responses are often vague because the questions are open-ended. If I redid this project, I would choose to ask new, specific questions after each session.

In utilizing the responses, I have tried to deeply respect both the language used by participants, the truths they hold, and their own interpretation of their narratives, often by requesting follow-up conversations or asking them to read how I have described or analyzed their experience. Shelley cites this as an important method which "gives authority to personal experience, foregrounds the power of narrative in the form of

reflections and stories, and offers concert examples as voiced by the subjects themselves"

(10). I've also found that much like the work we are doing, written and oral text is not a

complete source. I have therefore put equal energy into alternative methods of evaluation.

<div align="center">**Alternative Research Methods**</div>

Much of my research goes well beyond the written and spoken text of feedback

and surveys. As a facilitator, much of what I do is intuitive and responsive to energies,

through observation, interaction, and my own bodily knowledge. As O'Conner and

Anderson explain:

> The researcher in arts-based research doesn't merely take notes about what
>
> she thinks. She responds instinctively, passionately, critically to what she
>
> sees, hears, feels, touches, fears, hopes, dreams and recoils from. She
>
> moves, she rests, she draws, she paints, she dances and she feels. She
>
> responds with her whole body, and through her senses, to what she
>
> discovers. She then uses her body to understand and represent that new
>
> knowledge. (26)

They are touching on the types of knowledge I feel have most influenced this writing—

the sensory and experiential rather than the written. Often in my process I have journaled

about my felt experience. I note a shift in energy in the space, a tone or tension, a

physical or emotional resistance or acceptance. From this journaling, I then seek out the

more academic knowledge that might help me interpret these events. While I know

starting from my gut and moving towards theory often results in specific types of research, I have tried to resist confirmation bias by seeking multiple perspectives. I specifically sought both trans and feminist scholars as well as theatre practitioners as described above. I will admit, however, that some of that confirmation bias remains, as so often I search for theorists and theories who can speak to the more bodily knowledge I hold.

In addition to this work of drawing theories to connect with bodily knowledge and felt knowledge, I have also tried to represent some of this knowledge on its own terms without seeking authoritative support. It is primarily thanks to Boal that I have found the language to respect and acknowledge this process, because in *The Rainbow of Desire,* he often refers to bodies and movement as a form of writing which must be read.

In the last phase of my workshop, Fall 2016, I developed an alternative research method to measure the effects of the work with the trans applied theatre techniques. For this workshop phase, I spoke with troupe members about what they felt would be an appropriate goal for the work and how progress towards that goal could be measured. While that phase had shifting goals and was much more focused on technique development than personal growth, the group believed that the techniques we were using would change the way trans folks understand, respect, and hold their bodies.

We determined that one way to examine these changes would be through the use of Image Theatre. This is certainly not the first time Image Theatre has been used to evaluate applied theatre, as Prendergast and Saxton note its use in a number of case studies (2013, 194-5). At the first session of the final workshop phase, in the midpoint

session, and after the last workshop session, we each performed a set of images in response to five questions: "Where are you in your body?", "Where is your gender in your body?", "How was your gender formed?", "How has your body impacted you?", and "How have you impacted your body?" These questions, which might sound intellectual, are asked with only a few seconds for the participants to create an image in order to force participants to think with their guts rather than intellectualize the question. The image is then recorded before the participants open their eyes, revealing their image to themselves in the mirror. The participants then analyze their own images, describe what they see and how they feel about what they see. This method produced some of the most interesting knowledge—particularly in the contradictions between what the participants said they "meant" to do or thought they had been doing with what they saw in their bodies. Changes, tensions, or gestures they had not intended as part of their conceived image would enter their bodies instinctively, creating depth, dissonance, and deeper understanding of self.

There were more minute methods of evaluation within this frame as well. As we developed our somatic training, taught to us by a participant trained in yoga, soma, and massage therapy, we began using a few somatic and body evaluation techniques, such as taking/giving weight, breath changing, and releasing exercises. The breath changing and releasing exercises were used to measure how receptive participants felt to take on new tasks. The breath exercise is another somatic matching technique that can also be used to help calm a participant during an intensely felt moment (Fraleigh 43). The taking/giving weight exercise was used to evaluate trust and connection within the space. In the

exercise, partners take turns giving and receiving the weight of a partner, beginning with palms, then arms, then bodies, until they can smoothly transition from holding their partner to trusting their partner with their own weight (45). The exercise is not a test, and should not push past a partner's ability to hold weight. It is instead intended as a way to develop trust and be able to sense needs in another person, both by recognizing their weight-holding limits and by recognizing when they are ready or able to give or take weight. After using this exercise in an early workshop, participants requested we return to it throughout the workshops when new participants entered, as a way to measure our collective trust and respect.

As a final evaluation method on our last workshop day in November 2016, inspired by Tony Goode's "Marking the Moment" work (127), I asked participants to move to the place in the room where a significant moment occurred and reembody that moment (if it took place in a different room, I asked them to simply recreate the moment where we were). From this exercise, we collected the moments that had been meaningful to us, reflected on their power and why we remembered them, and how it felt to reembody them weeks, months, and sometimes years later. Many of these moments are sprinkled throughout these chapters, written even before we performed that final exercise. Several more have made their way into the letter at the end of this text. The rest are stored in my soul.

CHAPTER 5

TRANS TEMPORALITY AND *UNDESIRABLE ELEMENTS*

<u>Introduction</u>

In my own training for Gender Warriors, I attended and eventually spoke at several conferences. At one conference in late 2009, a speaker told us that she had heard a statistic at another conference that the average trans person lives twenty-three years. She offered no data on this point, nor did anyone seem to mind the lack of supporting evidence. No one was surprised. It was like that moment when you are told that someday your parents will die. It felt like a disgusting but obviously true fact of life. It spread like wildfire. I heard the number quoted at least a dozen more times in different conversations before I finally found the original source, buried in the notes from a conference plenary. Similar to the context in which I initially heard the datum, this note was not supported with any evidence nor did anyone seem to question it.

My own further research suggested that while there was little trans-specific data, this number could not be an accurate average lifespan. I had all but dismissed the significance of this statistic until October 2015 when it remerged in a debrief with the troupe. In this phase of the project, I was leading troupe members through the *Undesirable Elements* techniques, designed by Ping Chong in collaboration with Talvin Wilks and Sarah Zatz. This workshop entailed four parts: first, I began this phase by explaining the project goals of *Undesirable Elements* set forth by Chong, Wilks, and Zatz. Most significantly, I explained that these techniques focus on giving voice to the voiceless by reinserting marginalized narratives back into a larger community or meta-

narrative (Chong, Zatz, Wilks 169). In its prior uses, *Undesirable Elements* has gathered

participants whose only previously known connections were location, specific identity, or

element of identity (such as disability, child of war, etc.), and woven their stories into a

collective, polyvocal performance.

Next, participants interviewed one another using the set of interview questions

designed by Chong, Wilks, and Zatz. I moderated the interviews, helping participants

expand on what they heard and asking them to note both the important biographical data

as well as the rhetoric used by the interviewee. For example, when answering interview

questions about parents, one participant continuously referred to her father as "my father"

and her mother as "mama," a key linguistic code choice. In response to the question,

"Have you faced issues of identity? How do you currently identify yourself?" many

called themselves by specific identity words, something I made sure their interviewers

noted and used appropriately. One interviewee preferred the term FTM (a common

acronym for female to male) while others preferred trans man, trans masculine, or trans

boi—a term originating in the queer black transgender community that denotes both the

gender ambiguity of a non-binary masculine identity with the racial identity of being a

black trans person (Simmons and White 11).

Third, after the interviews were completed, we discussed trends within our

individual interviews and meta-narratives within the larger community. This is the

structure of a traditional UE workshop, but it also served a purpose in the dramaturgy of

the troupe's process: at this point in the project, we were interested in growing our roots

in the community, starting by discovering what a trans "community" even looks like and

means. While I have a decent familiarity with historical trans narratives nationally, I started this process with little knowledge of local history or even of how our individual narratives might intersect. This section of the workshop was intended to find those connections and strengthen our sense of collective history.

Finally, we began to cut and collect the stories and form a script. If we were to proceed with the complete UE project, this script would go through many revisions before we would present it in a public performance, but we had agreed early on that we would not have a public performance. The participants requested that this be an internal exercise so that more people would feel comfortable sharing their personal stories, rather than limiting participation to those who would feel confident performing their work.

During one particularly lively discussion following the third phase of this project, the question of the twenty-three-year lifespan reemerged. When I heard this statistic cited by a participant, I offered my standard reply. Having heard this statistic a number of times in various contexts, I had developed a response that deconstructed the number in two ways. First, the data is completely unsupported. I traced it back to a conference plenary where it seems like it originated, but it is never cited in any study. Second, it is incalculable. No such studies have even been conducted, nor could they accurately determine trans lifespan when so many trans people are erased by death—their identities not visible in their final records. My retort had two effects, neither of which were the intended one. First, negating the accuracy of the statistic did not remove the emotional effects it had on those present. Whether it was true, it felt true. We (and I do mean we, as I am not immune to this) had been living under the *accepted* assumption that we were

going to live drastically shorter lives, an assumption I will explore in more depth later in this paper.

The second unintended effect was a reinterpretation of the datum's meaning. One participant responded that if twenty-three years wasn't the average life span of the *entire life* of a trans person, perhaps it was the life span of how long they lived once trans. This interpretation seemed just as agreeable to the group as the previous.

I was immediately flooded with a myriad of temporal questions, some that I was able to articulate at that moment, and others that grew out of the discussion that followed: when does one *become* trans? Does transness begin at the questioning or rejection of a previous assignment, at self-identification, at coming-out, once the individual is read as their identified gender? Is someone trans before they know the word? If someone completes all possible surgeries, body modifications, hormone replacements, etc. and/or begins to live "stealth," can they stop being trans? If someone is not "full-time" and instead lives as their identity only in some contexts, are they trans only during those times of full expression? What of those trans persons who identify as bi or tri or multigender and only sometimes identify as different than their assigned genders?

This type of discussion—one that is critical and theoretical as much as it is experiential—is not uncommon for this group, but the discussions that developed out of this particular phase of my thesis have centered on a unique topic: temporality. This topic is not surprising given Chong's own description of the work: "People tend to see my work as about otherness. Because I am an immigrant, otherness is in the work, and I've always been fascinated by difference and culture. But people miss that my work is also

about time" (166). For him, time is the binding component, the pull of past and potential of future.

Chronologically working through the steps of UE, this chapter will examine ways the temporalities of UE are disrupted when used by trans performers, how the emerging field of queer temporality studies might be used to analyze these disruptions, and the questions these disruptions raise within queer temporalities studies.

The Goals of *Undesirable Elements*

The first stage of this project was a group discussion about UE, the techniques' creation and development, and the goal behind Chong, Wilks, and Zatz ongoing use of these techniques. These techniques grew out of Chong's desire for a multilingual stage, a sonic juxtaposition of tones and tongues and music that created its own story (165). The form then developed with two primary goals: to encourage participants to learn and tell their own histories, and to weave these outwardly disparate stories into a larger meta-narrative of a community, a place, or a people (207-208).

"Which community is ours?" a participant asked, and I followed with my best Joker skill: "what do y'all think? Who would you consider your 'community?'" I did this a lot, turning questions back to the group, trying to ascertain both their own goals as well as how these techniques would function were I not playing both outsider/insider to this group. The discussion that followed began with seemingly innocuous answers of "queers" or "the gay community," or "just trans people". This statement escalated into questions about whether or not trans folks should even be considered part of the "gay

community." Most said they'd rather not be lumped in that community, or that community had not been particularly helpful to them, and one participant bitterly retorted that that community had lumped themselves onto *us* following the Stonewall Riots.

I asked them to think about what this project would mean if we were trying to create a woven meta-narrative with the entire LGBIA+ (gender and sexual variants beyond the "T") community. The question may have been too large at that moment, but in the survey responses throughout the following weeks, participants came back to it several times. One noted that he was fed up with the "born this way" mentality that came from that community, writing: "the truscum use that stuff against us, like if you didn't always know you were [trans] then you aren't…when you don't know anyone else [trans] you can't help but believe them" (Survey, November 2015). This participant is using the term "truscum" referring to a category of trans people, primarily trans masculine, who believe trans identity must adhere to a set of standards (generally those laid out in the DSM-5). Another participant wrote that she was sick of being told to be "proud" when gay people treated her worse than anyone else, writing: "it's not like something to celebrate, it's not like I can have a bat mitzvah and suddenly people will call me [name]…it's just the way it is" (Survey, November 2015). Her comments did not read as ashamed, but a little resigned and slightly indignant—transness was a thing that had happened to her, she was dealing with it, and she did not want to be told she should have to celebrate something that everyone else hated her for. Both of these rejections are responding to threats from within the LGBTQIA+ community, and the first comes from within the trans community itself—marking a clear fracturing of narratives within these communities.

Chong speaks of *Undesirable Elements* like reweaving strands of time that have not quite been pulled together, but what if these threads are irreparably separated, irredeemably broken lines? As Heather Love writes in *Feeling Backward: Loss and the Politics of Queer History*, "figures that refuse to be redeemed disrupt not only the progress narrative of queer history but also our sense of queer identity in the present…the history of queer damage retains its capacity to do harm in the present" (8-9). From this, the trans stories of damage and inconceivable temporal disruption are dangerous not only to themselves, but to contemporary historians and narrative-creators who think they can reconcile and heal the past through juxtaposition with a healed present.

Several more answers emerged, both responding to a disconnect from a progressive movement that to them read as stagnant at best for trans folks, and coming from places of negative affect, disgust, shame, anger, fear, resentment and more. I found here a strong connection to *Feeling Backward.* Love describes the way shame has been a productive emotion in developing community, and I'd argue that anger and bitterness have done similar things for these trans folks (4). Love describes "feeling backward" as a "disposition toward the past—embracing loss, risking abjection," and both the active process of reaching into the past and the sensation of being backward or past-leaning (30). While Love is using the Lacanian frame of the impossibility of love to examine queer love across temporal distance (21, 24), I think it can be expanded to explore the self-love/hate, self-reconciliation, and self-historiography of transition narratives.

Love discusses the use of "disqualified identity" to mean "living with injury—not fixing it," and while the rhetoric of injury is fraught, many of the participants found

71

comfort in community built around feeling disqualified, irreparably removed from "functionality" or "normalcy" (4). Of those in this category, the non-binary folks often expressed the strongest attachment to this mode—noting the way societal gender structures made them seemingly incapable of proper sociality, while even trans communities often deemed them not trans enough and certainly not doing their transitions correctly. These participants commented on the power of this separation, isolation, and sense of brokenness to connect them. Similarly, Love's discussion of Camp within the queer community ties to aesthetic connections discovered amongst the participants (7). Several participants reveled in antiquated fashions, and particularly fashions of their youth as they explored their gender presentations. Two of the trans women participants cheered gleefully upon discovering that they both had acquired Lisa Frank accessories as adults, a shattering of the forward-maturity of modernity, and a move to reclaim unlived childhoods. Just as they relished their Lisa Frank backpack and Lisa Frank notebook set, Camping appears for Love in "defiant refusals to grow up, in explorations of haunting and memory, and in stubborn attachments to lost objects" (7).

The Interviews

The second step of this project was for each participant to interview and be interviewed by another participant. Had I not felt strongly that these techniques could produce amazing community conversations, I would not have considered them for this project. Having had the opportunity to explore these techniques in a classroom setting with Priscilla Page, and later in a workshop with Page, Wilks, and Judyie Al-Bilali, I had

72

seen the potential these questions had for opening up conversations, finding connections, and digging deeper into personal histories. That aside, my own experience with the interviews had already made me wary that they might come with some resistance. I had found moments in the interviews where I personally felt hesitant, and guessed that others with similar identities might also resist. The first question, for example, asks for an interviewee's full given name: "What is your full name? If different from your birth name, please list your current name and your name at birth"—a question I was unable/ unwilling to answer in my own interview, and one I assumed would spark discussion, fear, and even dysphoria (Chong, Zatz, Wilks 215). However, the responses to our discussion on this question were easily the least interesting of the project. I had anticipated struggle because of my own experience with the question, but removed from a cis-centric environment, the question was no longer as powerful. People simply would or would not answer the question, then they moved on. One participant did note in a later survey that replying with his chosen name was a political act of rewriting his history: "everyone around me knows my birth name so it's not like I'm lying…but this is my way of righting it for myself and in the process telling them I've always been me" (Survey, January 2016). Though it sparked little debate in this moment, naming became a recurring question throughout the workshops.

Similarly, I assumed the questions about witnessing and experiencing discrimination might spark lively response, but they did not. These questions seemed almost expected to the group. As if they'd been asked that one too many times and they already had their elevator speech prepared. Thinking back to the tension Love describes

between the "emphasis on damage" and the ever-forward "critical compulsion to fix," (3)

I noted in this response the way projects like the It Gets Better campaign had created in

these participants a sense that speaking their stories was a sign that they had healed, that

they could *only* speak their stories if they had healed—because even though many of

these participants believed it does not, and will not get better, they are forced into a

discourse in which it must. The It Gets Better Project, founded by celebrity writer Dan

Savage, is part of a model of LGBT activism that requires little from participants—they

simply record a video of their story of how their life "got better" and spread these videos

across the internet in order to discourage LGBT youth suicide and inspire a sense of

community. For me, these videos had perpetuated the idea that if you were not finding

success or healing from your identity-related traumas, you were doing something wrong.

One of the respondents referred to this campaign as a "band-aid" method—something

that covers up the real problem instead of offering to help. It is also focused on only

hearing the stories of those for whom it does get better, a question posed by a colleague,

Hillary Montague-Asp. In her piece, "It Gets Better...For Whom?: A Content Analysis of

the 100 Most Viewed 'It Gets Better' Videos," Montague-Asp details the class, race, and

other privileges that make this campaign both inaccessible and inaccurate to other

intersectionally oppressed experiences of LGBTQIA+ identity.

Another interview question proved a strong jumping off point for their trans

stories: "Does your name have any special meaning, and were you named for

anyone?" (Chong, Zatz, Wilks 216). This question opened up storytelling about self-

naming, about poetry (one participant chose his name from the last name of his favorite

author), about adaptation (a few participants had retained the sound or sections of their old names, reshaping them to match their identity), and the way this process had affected their familial relationships. One participant noted that his birth name was of great significance to his mother, and he felt it was important that she be involved then in the naming process after he came out.

These stories were gorgeous and telling, but the questions that sparked the most fiery responses were actually about family history. Participants were asked a series of questions regarding how their parents met, their parents' professions, how their grandparents met, and finally asked to "share any unique or unusual stories about your family's history" (Chong, Zatz, Wilks 217). "Why does this even matter?" One participant asked, adding that she hadn't spoken to her parents since before she came out, so they obviously could not factor into a narrative about her trans identity. Another said that he actually really enjoyed the section about family history, that it made him call his grandpa and he learned that his grandpa had actually met his grandmother at a Malcolm X speech and this led them to one of their first real discussions about current race politics and the #blacklivesmatter movement. This conversation may not have been possible without the questions' prompting, he told us. Later, in his survey response, that participant came to an interesting conclusion: "I can see how this works for me as a black man, I can see how it helps…make me to talk to my grandpa…I used to think I just inherited his ears but there's more than that" (Survey, January 2016). He had found this project (and this set of questions in particular) to be useful in helping him connect with his family, to think about his lineage, and to think about the connections between his

grandpa's experiences and his own with race protests. But—and here is the crux—as a trans person, the questions had not achieved the same effects: "but I don't see that with trans people, I don't see me calling up someone and finding out we like the same ice cream or [interview partner] saying she sees herself in me" (Survey, January 2016). They had not drawn him closer to his community, had not established a narrative across difference, had not revealed some sort of lineage. In "The Dramaturgical Process as a Mechanism for Identity Development of LGBTQYouth and Its Relationship to Detypification," E.R. Halverson pointedly notes that sharing stories in manners similar to UE methods produces a sense of solidarity and community across difference (652). This phenomenon was one I'd noted in other storytelling exercises we had completed, so why was this one creating distance rather than connection? I wondered if this type of relationality might be achieved during the research and scripting process, but I also noted the clear distinctions this participant felt between his experience as a black participant versus his experience as a trans participant. What I marked in this moment was that the intersectionality that we often think of as a flat overlaying of different identities was, for him in this exercise, more multi-dimensional. There were moments when he (and many other participants) privileged one identity over another, forgot one for the other, or compartmentalized in ways that heightened the distance between the two identities' relationship to an experience.

During another interview, a participant's linguistic choice had sparked an interesting temporal question—when answering questions about their childhoods, some participants referred to themselves as their gender assigned at birth, while others retained

their present gender labels in their references to the past. One participant, a woman who identifies as a binary trans woman, began a story about her grandparents with the phrase "when I was a little boy." I watched her interviewer (consciously or unconsciously) "correct" this language in his notes. I brought this up in our debrief that evening. I asked them to think about the way they tell stories about themselves in the past. I asked them which gender pronouns or words they used in those stories. Then I asked them why. Several responded that it was habit (either using their correct pronouns or returning to previous ones), but a few had different answers. One articulated simply that at one point in his life he had truly thought he was a girl, and so he referred to his younger self as a girl. Another participant argued back that because he wasn't a girl, he did not have to respect what other people had made him think about himself when he was a child. The first participant retorted that while he could not say for sure how much he had thought about it at that age, he was certain that he had just as much conviction about his gender then as he did now, so why could he not have been a girl then just as much as he was a man now? He wrote in his survey, "[the other participants] weren't trying to [make me feel bad] but it sucked, it was like I'm not allowed to say what I want to say because it means I've been brainwashed or something" (Survey, January 2016). He had, at that age, been proud to be a girl, had been in the Girl Scouts, had loudly proclaimed that Girls Rule Boys Drool, he wrote, "I was so into those stickers, like the Girl Power ones that we stuck on swingsets or our bikes…those are some of the most fun things I remember about being a kid" (Survey, January 2016). This was a part of his story. Instead of attempting to reconcile the two outwardly different identities, Heather Love might suggest we accept

the "shattering" possibility of "historical identification," that in fact this participant has

been able to find in himself pieces of that girl, and in that girl pieces of himself (45).

Love's discussion is looking into an historical archive, questioning our desire to reconcile

disparate or dissonant moments into a cohesive narrative, but her process achieves

something unique for a trans person searching their own narrative history.

The Meta-Narrative/Timeline

In the third phase of the project, we conducted research into community histories

in order to weave our interview responses into a larger meta-narrative. The actual

research portion was preceded by one of the most animated discussions to date. The

questions that bubbled during our discussion about the purpose of this project resurfaced,

and participants restated their concerns about a cohesive narrative or community. I asked

them to think of it less in terms of a cohesive narrative and more in terms of a timeline of

significant moments in both their own lives and their community.

Once the group collectively decided to focus just on a timeline of trans history, a

new question formed: should we focus on the history and existence of trans bodies

through our timeline, or on the continuing struggle for rights within the community?

Some participants argued that the former model allowed for a timeline that would

highlight developments in medical technology, visibility, and the place of trans stories in

the arc of human history. One participant wrote in her survey that she did not feel like she

wanted to focus on fighting all the time, because "I just want to do me" (Survey, February

2016). She wanted to read and speak about trans people who were just living their lives

throughout our timeline. She wrote, "If I really have like 3 years left I'm not about to risk it" by getting involved in the trans radicalism, I inferred (Survey, February 2016).

I also assumed that this response was a reference to the now oft-cited twenty-three-year lifespan statistic, which had become something of a running joke in the group. In the perversity of this joke, I found more connection to "feeling backward," as explored previously in this chapter, but I also drew connections to the theories of "prognosis time" described by Jasbir K. Puar in "Prognosis time: Towards a geopolitics of affect, debility and capacity" and the "death drive," as examined by Lee Edelman in *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive*.

Puar's "prognosis time" describes the way certain lives are expected to be shorter, less capable of pursuing desirable futures, or less able to fulfill certain capacities (166). Puar examines compulsory able-bodiedness in conjunction with compulsory heterosexuality, but here I have extended her discussion to include compulsory cissexuality, in the way that she explores capacity and homonationalism. Cissexism is the structure in which bodies and identities are judged against the standards of cisgender bodies and uses of bodies (Simmons and White 18). Compulsory cissexuality then, is the forcible (by means of legal, social, and medical regulations) indoctrination of all bodies into a cissexist paradigm. Her argument is particularly useful when she brings Lauren Berlant into conversation with Michael Ralph to examine lifespan in relation to prognosis time. Their arguments together question whether divergent bodies assume or even desire longevity, and she describes the way many of these subjects whose lifespan is known to be shorter have "a euphoric release of freedom occasioned by the sense that you have

exceeded the dismal prognosis that you will die at an early age" (Puar 166). This idea is akin to the feeling of living on "borrowed time," the underlying feeling beneath both the above participant's response, as well as a common experience vocalized by the group. Participants expressed the sense that, despite knowing the statistic was false, they still felt as if they were not intended to live very long, or they were not built to survive within their given conditions. One participant even remarked, to the agreement of the group, that finally being "diagnosed" as trans (after struggling to understand her identity and working with a psychiatrist) helped her feel she had reached the final stage of grieving— like she officially knew she was going to die, but was finally okay with it because at least she knew what was happening. Puar deploys Sarah Lochlann Jain's questions of "risk" to consider this state of "living in prognosis," Puar's assertion being that the assumptions that surround our prognosis affect our relationship to hope, a phenomenon made visible by the above participant (163-5). Puar is primarily focused on bodies labeled as "disabled" in this piece, but I have taken up her arguments to examine trans identity.

One key difference I need to highlight, however, is how these subjects come to receive their prognosis. This "diagnosis" the above participant noted is given differently within trans spaces than disability communities, and her story was actually an exception within the group. Most participants regarded their identity as self-determined, a label they had selected, even though many told stories of moments where they were told they were not X identity or did not meet the qualifications. Despite those external forces, their self-diagnosis also means their prognosis is self-inflicted. Though I am not advocating for a trans "choice" narrative, there is, at least in this group, a general consensus that we chose

to act on this identity by transitioning. Some participants recalled their pre-transition lives as being under similarly limited prognosis time, disturbing yet unsurprising when read alongside the statistics of trans youth suicide. Given that Puar's work focuses on those whose diagnoses are determined by structural means, further research is needed into how this argument shifts when examining self-diagnosis.

I put this in conversation with Lauren Berlant's discussion of pacing in "Slow Death," because when it came up in my surveys it often coincided with the idea of "live fast/die young," or a refusal to pace one's life events according to capitalist structures, because if the life must be foreshortened, so must the space between events. Puar returns to Jain to argue the same, "'If you are going to die at 40, should you be able to get the senior discount at the movie when you're 35?'" (qtd. in Puar 166). Though I have no basis for scientific comparison, several of the participants marked themselves as taking more risks or skipping steps thought to be part of a traditional narrative. This could also be taken simply as speeding up the timeline of a lifespan, but there was also a sense of reordering—they spoke about cycling back, going through puberty again, relearning to date, rediscovering their sexualities, waiting until they felt safely "passable" before going back to old spaces or starting new jobs. A few participants noted their non-traditional student status directly related to their ability to feel "passable" or even personally comfortable in their gender. An older participant noted dating for the first time in her 40s, feeling like the combination of her lessened dysphoria with her surge of hormones from hormone therapy made her feel like a teenager. A couple of participants also told stories of detransitioning or "peeling," as it is sometimes called in the transgender community.

One had detransitioned (stopped hormones, reclaimed an old name, socially transitioned back to her assigned sex) out of a genuine sense that this was her actual gender identity. Now, years later, she has transitioned again to living as a woman, but holds confusing and complicated feelings about how real it felt to be one at that time in her life and how real it feels to be the other now. While some participants asked if she might be genderfluid, she argued that she feels, decidedly, entirely female—now, at least, but she felt that same way at the time about being male. The other participant who noted detransitioning had done so out of fear of job loss, harassment, and social insecurity. She had definitely not felt male in the time she returned to living as "male," so it was more of a feeling of performance for her. Her return to living as female felt like a "return home after a long time at the in-laws," and she felt like she very quickly found herself wearing the same things and doing the same things she had done the first time she transitioned, but now much older (Survey, December 2015). This repetition and return also ties back to Love's feeling backwards.

Many of the participant's life-times (in the way Neferti X. Tadiar uses the term in "Life-Times of Disposability Within Global Neoliberalism," as times delineated for particular types of action, relegated both to parts of days and to parts of a longer lifespan) and pacing of other times (reproductive, work, etc.) did not align with the pacing of these long lifespans. Had this been the result of their prognosis time? Had their sense that they were intended to live a shorter life influenced the way they paced life events within that lifespan? If we, as trans persons, were unsuccessful at making our bodies fulfill the capacities required within this system, should not the pacing of our lives differ as well? The reordering and restructuring of our lives in this way is an inherently queer project, as

Jack Halberstam describes in *In a Queer Time and Place,* we have disrupted and queered expectations of lifespans, "in terms of the ways they live (deliberately, accidentally, or of necessity) during the hours when others sleep and in the spaces (physical, metaphysical, and economic) that others have abandoned, and in terms of the ways they might work in the domains that other people assign to privacy and family" (2005, 10).

Here I also connected to the "death drive." Edelman explores the death drive through a Lacanian lens as not separate from other drives, rather as intrinsic to each as they all pursue their destruction. The Lacanian frame invokes psychoanalyst and linguist Jacques Lacan's post-structuralist thinking. The death drive offered for Edelman a way to examine the essential queerness, the oppositionality of queerness—not to a political identity, but to the figuration of the Child (2-4). Expanding on his argument, transition offers another facet to this discussion, otherwise left out. While trans folks are briefly mentioned in "The Future is Kid Stuff," when Edelman acknowledges that LGBTQ+ folks do not *lack* the ability to produce children, or often the desire, they are not further part of his argument (17). For Edelman, the death drive also undoes "the Child," a figural object that represents reproductive futurity and utopian possibility, by slowly unraveling the ideal child (11). This figural Child must always already be gendered by assignment (19-21), making it stand in opposition to transition as a death drive, as transition both uncouples gender from sex, and can destabilize both, but also rewrites traditional narratives about reproductive capacity, and particularly heterosexual reproduction. The way transition is described and defined by the participants posed the decision to transition as closely related to the death drive—in the sense that it required a complete breaking

down, a tendency towards destruction or disharmony, a desire for repetition or a return to a previous state, and a leaving behind of social and structural unities. The participants cited giving up their entire lives, everything they knew about themselves and the world, in order to recreate their worlds or their bodies from scratch. One described thinking of her body as a puzzle that she looked at piecemeal, rearranging and reordering. In response to a survey question about dysphoria, she noted that each time she learns something or fixes something or changes something, she discovers a new thing that she hates, a new thing that causes her dysphoria: "you get your boobs done and you look down and see your junk just hanging there like 'where did that come from' and suddenly it's something else but you hadn't seen it before" (Survey, October 2015). It is a constant undoing, a shifting goalpost. She wrote that it was like "a rabbit hole…like I jumped in but I had to…and now it just keeps getting deeper" (Survey, October 2015). Her metaphor speaks to the nature of the death drive, in its self-destructive but unending capacity. It becomes itself and creates itself as it is destroyed. For her, the choice to fall was the choice to live, and the death drive is the force that compels that choice. What Edelman offers is an impossibility, but so, I think, is transition.

Then we return, for a moment, to the running "joke" of the twenty-three-year lifespan told at the outset of this section as the predominant mode of transition—that fantastic irony that, in giving up a life leading potentially to suicide, one jumps head first into a life that desperately foreshortens. This irony is the "queerest of rhetorical devices," the force "'which undoes any narrative consistency of lines, and which undoes the reflexive and dialectical model, both of which are, as you know, the basis of any

narration,'" (23, qtd. in Edelman 23). This irony Edelman describes is asymmetrical, undoing causality, linearity, and progress of narratives. In transition narratives, a chrono-linear structure cannot but fail.

Returning to the question of which narrative we would select as our meta-narrative, other participants urged us to focus on trans movements, stating that it was the movers and shakers who marked major developments in both the trans narrative as well as larger social narratives, and that this timeline would show better how we influenced the broader world. They wanted us to focus on the Stonewall Riots, the Compton Cafeteria, Dewey's Lunch Counter, and any number of angry, riotous trans folks burning things down. Here these participants were urging what Heather Love is articulating: the ability "to mobilize negative feelings such as paranoia and despair in order to make social change," but instead of paranoia, it was rage, desperation, hunger, and pain (26). Love warns against the project of attempting to heal these wounds of the past, however, and if we were to weave them into our threads, would we not be attempting to redeem them—to show the progress away from the "bad gay past" (33)?

After some discussion, the group agreed to do individual research into areas of interest and return to the next session prepared to discuss specific moments and why they should be included in our timeline. This conclusion felt like a failure to facilitate on my part, and in retrospect I should have spent more time explaining that these were just our stories, that they could form any narrow or wide set that we wanted, and that we did not have to use all of them at once. But that is the constant burden of this work—participants have articulated that they feel like they often hold the weight of the community within

them, that they are responsible both for its future and its past. I often feel this same

responsibility, as if my voice is supposed to carve the space for every voice in my

community. And nothing so large can be held within one body.

<u>The Scripting Process</u>

The fourth step of this project was to construct a script from the combined stories

of the participants and the facts and stories they compiled from the community. The script

follows a specific structure in *Undesirable Elements*, beginning with the earliest story

and continuing chronologically. A date is spoken aloud, participants speak their own

stories from that date, and other performers fill in the voices of characters or contextual

facts. The story proceeds in this fashion, weaving together each performer through the

sense of continuance and simultaneity. One year, for example, the year I graduated from

college, also marked transitional "milestones" for three participants. Had this been a

professional *Undesirable Elements* project, Chong, Wilks, and Zatz would have done this

step on their own, consulting with the performers throughout, but primarily conducting

their own research and scripting those portions of the text. Chong notes that as the

process develops his hand takes a lighter touch, but it is still one of the three collaborators

who craft the script before bringing it to a group for feedback (169, 210). While I

recognize the skill and success of that work, I also imagine that, in this particular group,

that would have been akin to bringing a script to a Forum Play—and how could I tell this

group what their goals, their community, their history, and their narrative should be? It

seems to me that to do this project with this specific population requires that they be

involved in writing the story themselves. Despite the intentions behind collectivity, the

scripting process felt tedious almost, as if the joy of the storytelling were removed by the

project of ordering our lives and parsing the "highlights."

In our debriefs during this phase, the group nearly unanimously rejected the

chrono-linear structure of the script. Their discussion around this timeline was rife with

potential temporal questions, for which I turned to "Theorizing Queer Temporalities: a

Roundtable Discussion" as a jumping-off point. Participants rejected the plausibility of a

linear and chronological trans narrative except for one participant whose support of this

narrative was likened by others to the pathologization of trans narratives within a Harry

Benjamin frame. Being a couple decades older than other participants, this participant

had begun transitioning in an era when trans people had to do a "real-life test," spend a

year living publicly as their chosen gender. This "test" was part of a series of steps

delineated by Harry Benjamin and regulated into the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of

Mental Disorders (DSM) as well as other medical and psychological manuals in order to

gain access to transgender-related care. This participant argued that each of the dates in

the timeline served to highlight milestones and steps on her path to becoming a woman.

This rhetoric was swiftly rejected by several other participants, who responded that she

was not "becoming" a woman and/or that hormones or surgery were not markers of

womanhood. A.H. Johnson argues that "adherence to a medical model of transition…

emphasizes a *born in the wrong body* discourse and a *discovery narrative* of trans

identity," meaning that a medicalized narrative is one that inherently states a trans body is

"wrong" or must be "fixed," but it also suggests that trans identity is discovered rather

87

than simply given a name (468). The other participants' shaming of her narrative also

sparked questions about the internalized shame that may have built said narrative: had her

desire to focus on these medicalized, solution-based steps stemmed from shame, the

internalized "how *could* you?" to which Heather Love refers (17)? Had she internalized

the idea that her body was wrong from Harry Benjamin and his contemporaries such that

she agreed with their narrative of "fixing" the "problem" through medical intervention?

There are clear connections here between this timeline rhetoric and the

Roundtable discussions of neoliberalism and progressivism inherent in a chrono-linear

narrative. The other participants' rejection of this timeline both admonishes against and

reifies a "transnormative timeline," building from the way that Nguyen Tan Hoang

defines a "homonormative timeline" (Dinshaw et al 183, 185, 190). Hoang's and my own

definition of homonormative is grown from homonormativity as defined by Lisa Duggan

(2003) as "a politics that does not contest dominant heteronormative assumptions and

institutions but upholds and sustains them while promising the possibility of a

demobilized gay culture anchored in domesticity and consumption" (qtd. in Martínez-San

Miguel and Tobias 236). Building to "transnormativity," then, I turn to the A.H.

Johnson's recent usage which invokes similar structures. Johnson defines

transnormativity as "the specific ideological accountability structure to which transgender

people's presentations and experiences of gender are held accountable..both an

empowering and constraining ideology that deems some trans people's identifications,

characteristics, and behaviors as legitimate and prescriptive (e.g., those that adhere to a

medical model) while others' are marginalized, subordinated, or rendered invisible (e.g.,

those that do not adhere to a medical model)" (465-7). This phenomenon is enacted not solely by the medical discourse and pathologization described previously, but also within the transgender community, as it occurred within our own discussion (Simmons and White 8).

I also found connections in the narrative timelines to Hoang's description of the secretive and circuitous paths to finding queerness or levels of outness (192). Participants described struggling with the chrono-linear timeline because some felt they had been living doubly, as if those who were not out yet experienced the world twice through both their internal and external frames, a simultaneous gendered experience. One noted the duality of living "part time," a trans term for living as your identified gender only some of the time, and as an assigned gender the rest of the time, usually for safety. She described her experience of being part time as if she were pushing pause on her life and returning to that same level later (this rhetoric of levels/leveling up was a recurring theme, particularly for this participant, whose video game language reappeared frequently). Others discussed living "stealth," the trans term for living "full time" without ever outing yourself as trans. Being stealth was generally talked about as the most undisrupted experience of their gender publicly. Conversely, one participant said that living stealth created more ruptures, because he had no way of communicating with people why something felt disharmonious with his gender, since no one knew he was trans. For this participant, being a "trans man" was his "whole" self, rather than simply being a "man by way of trans" (Survey, October 2015). Both the experience of living part time and living stealth echoed what Carolyn Dinshaw describes as "felt asynchrony," or

living part of your life out of sync or out of time (Dinshaw et al 191). When attempting to

place their narratives in chrono-linear timelines, these participants argued that feelings of

living doubly or looping back to a previous level were markedly absent.

These feelings also reinforce what Dinshaw was building as "postdisenchanted

temporal perspective," or "a critique of teleological linearity, that…rejects the necessity

of revealed truth at the end of time or as the meaning of all time" (186). Dinshaw is

arguing for a sense of doing queer histories that does not follow a causal/linear

progression through time, and similarly the participants were trying to untangle their own

narratives from the structure of *Undesirable Elements* that asked them to reconcile their

life events with one another. One participant wrote in his survey that a therapist had spent

many months trying to get him to trace moments throughout his childhood when he might

have known he was trans before he had the language. He remarked that at first this

process felt like 20/20 hindsight, but it eventually became a recalibration of his life's

events in order to make sense of the place he now found himself, as if "I couldn't have

just gotten here by accident, like I had to have known somewhere along the way this was

were I was going" (Survey, January 2016). Though there were clearly moments where he,

as a prepubescent child, tried to express feelings about his body that could later be

interpreted as trans-related, there were also so many moments where gender did not, at

least consciously, factor into his choices. The dramaturgy of his life could not be viewed

as a cohesive narrative.

Coda

The fourth step remains incomplete. Although we had agreed before beginning work that we would not proceed towards a public performance, I am certain we would not have gotten there anyway. We began crafting a script together, but the pushback against this stage was too strong to make the project viable. While there have been parts of this thesis where I knew we would have to trudge through a difficult task to get to something powerful, I felt in this phase that objections made the work both unsuccessful and potentially damaging to the overall cohesion of the troupe.

That is not to say this project had no benefit—in fact it is clear to me that what we have failed to accomplish with *Undesirable Elements* has revealed a unique question about the nature of trans storytelling. In the "Theorizing Queer Temporalities" Roundtable, Lee Edelman recalls Roland Barthes' assertion that, "in writing we're always already dead" (189). Edelman combines this with Carla Freccero's position as "a future dead person" (184) to ask if writing (and here he is describing the way we tell histories) is not already the process of creating our death, our stagnancy, our unbecoming? Love contends that this model of history marks the past as a fixed point that can only ever serve the present "as usable knowledge" rather than as "something living" (9). If this project felt as if it strengthened an already dead history for a group who often identified with the "future dead person," should not a trans model of oral storytelling urge changeability, ephemerality, impossibility? The strands may not weave together into a cohesive temporal-logical narrative, but instead bend and burst and loop back into infinite repetitions and revisions, contradictions and contentions, a polyvocal sonnet not unlike

Chong's initial goal. We may have failed at creating an *Undesirable Elements* text. We are left with a smattering of mismatched lines in a jumbled mess of individual stories. Does this mean our community can never really be integrated into a larger narrative? We are left with some stories that make no "sense" by traditional narrative formats, and some stories that don't feel like they fit together—or even contradict one another in their most basic understanding of cause and effect. But sometimes failure marks success—the success of trans people dismantling a project that was not built to suit their needs. Sometimes giving up is a political act, especially when we have hardly any time left to give.

CHAPTER 6

COPS IN THE HEAD

Introduction

In 1938, British playwright Patrick Hamilton published a play known in the US by the title *Angel Street.* In this play, a husband sneaks upstairs to search for hidden jewels, taking their gas light with him. The wife begins to notice that the lights have dimmed; she questions her husband about the change. He rejects her perceived reality, telling her nothing has changed and she is either making it up or has gone crazy. This continues until she begins to question her own perception and mental stability. The play, known in the UK as *Gas Light,* is where we get the term "gaslighting," where one person rejects another's perception of reality, tells them they are overreacting, fabricating the story, or are insane.

This story is not tangential—it is the basis of the work we did in Spring 2016 with Augusto Boal's Cops in the Head. Cops in the Head is a set of techniques described in Boal's *The Rainbow of Desire*, his guidebook to Theatre of the Oppressed work focused around introspective techniques. While his better-known Forum Theatre examines oppressive scenarios and the direct action individuals could take within them to create community change, the work in this text investigates the ways these oppressive systems enter our own thoughts. It is therefore of the utmost importance that we are open to each participant's perceived realities and trust that each ghost we encounter is *real*—even if it is only in their mind.

While struggling against normative narrative structures in our work with *Undesirable Elements*, I noted that so many of the questions and concerns brought up were inspired by internalized structures of what is required for trans identity. Participants were pushing back against narrative structures that asked them to follow an idealized narrative or a pathologized narrative. They were pushing back against their own desires to make the dramaturgy of their stories cohesive and legible. They were pushing back against the desire to be a coherent community with a narrative lineage. These structures had all been internalized—some through the media in things like It Gets Better, some through the medical system because of the DSM or WPATH, and some because of the ways our community judges each other in order to determine who is "trans enough." These structures caused rifts in the group because they were causing rifts within us. It was when I started to notice that these structures had been internalized that I decided our next workshop needed to be a set of techniques designed to dismantle them. Cops in the Head is designed for exactly this type of labor, and thus became the focus of the workshop in Spring 2016.

While Chapter 5 focused deeply on trans and queer theories of temporality, Chapter 6 takes a necessary turn to focus on the practical impacts of Cops in the Head. The trans and queer theories used in this chapter are not the central focus; rather, the work is supported by this theory. First, this chapter invokes a more sociological perspective, using Avery Gordon's text *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination* to interpret the real-life consequences and felt experiences of the ghosts unearthed in Cops in the Head. Boal deliberately refers to these "cops" as "ghosts," and I

find that comparison illuminating. Second, Boal's Cops in the Head is a process of splintering an experience and a mindset into a number of cops, ghosts, desires, antibodies, or other figures. It is only by fracturing that these scenes can be seen for how they really existed. This chapter therefore examines the concept of "integrity," in trans theory of identity, exploring what it means to create a cohesive identity or resolve a fractured one.

This chapter begins with a discussion of the goals of Cops in the Head, and how those goals align or clash with those of this trans troupe. Next, the chapter follows the structure of Cops in the Head to examine the process of selecting scenes, identifying cops, and creating antibodies. Throughout these sections, I will trace the course of this work as it appeared in one Cops scene performed by the troupe, that of a woman being followed onto a bus. Finally, the chapter turns towards another technique similar in structure to Cops in the Head: the Rainbow of Desire, for which Boal's text is named.

The Goals of Cops in the Head

There are several theories of gender development, particularly for trans populations. For trans specialized theorists, the most prominent of these are the social theory, the gender schema theory, the cognitive developmental theory, and the biopsychosocial theory (Erickson-Schroth, Gilbert, and Smith 93-99). The theories themselves are of little importance in this thesis, but the rhetoric that binds them is noteworthy. Each of these theories offers a possible origin story for the birth of trans identity in an individual, and each offers a potential for difference across individuals and

a reflection of the changeability of identity, particularly among adolescents and children. I have been distinctly fascinated by the experience of gender in childhood, and more specifically how these theories articulate the repression or rejection of felt gender dissonance as a marker for later internalized stigma. While growing up, "acceptable gender behavior is reinforced through inclusion and praise, while gender behavior or appearance deemed unacceptable is stigmatized by disapproval and harassment" (Girshick 56) but well beyond those initial experiences of trauma, even if the real-life oppressors disappear and the harassment ends, the stigmatization can become ingrained, and the internalized stigma may "never completely subside" (Frost 827). There is minimal research in the field on trans victimization and oppression, but the research that exists draws a direct link between transgender-related traumas and higher rates of substance abuse, depression, self-harm, and suicidality (Carmel, Hopwood, and dickey 311). External trauma and oppression has been directly linked to later experiences of internalized stigma (Mizock and Mueser 2014, Frost 2011). The experiences of misgendering and transphobia specific to trans bodies are linked to acute internalized trauma, and according to Gayle Salamon, "the location of this trauma is not individual or internal, even though it comes to reside there" (2014, 117). Salamon is highlighting the coexistence of the internalized trauma with the social and structural traumas, making one constituted by the other, even if neither is presently visible to observers. It is this internalized oppression, and most commonly the internalized transphobia, that turned my focus to Cops in the Head.

Boal writes frequently about the idea of catharsis. He writes about different kinds of catharsis and warns against Aristotelean catharses, in which the feelings of fear, guilt, and grief are purged, therefore purging the desire to act. Instead, he argues for a catharsis of blocks—a purgation of the internal oppressions that stop us from meeting our needs (Boal, *The Rainbow of Desire* 69-73). He offers Cops in the Head as the mechanism for that purgation. It is a process in which participants establish a scene of oppression, and take a step back to identify what structures and systems are at play. The structures of oppression, the remnants of which have been internalized into intrusive thoughts or blockages, are identified and labeled as "cops" (a powerful person who can regulate your behavior). The cops are then given a precise name and a face of someone representative of that oppression. If it does not have a face, we cannot talk to it, and if we cannot talk to it, there is no change.

In the story I used to teach these techniques to the troupe, I was getting fired. I was in my boss's office, fighting to keep a job I hated because I needed it to pay rent. As I argued, my boss only responded with vague reasons why she wanted me gone—most sounded like "you know why" (I did not) or "you are different" (read: trans) or the most specific, "you make people uncomfortable." Despite being unfairly treated, my financial situation necessitated I have this paycheck, so I did what I could to keep the job. This was the first cop we identified in my story. I was financially unable to leave, oppressed by my class status and my boss's power over my survival. I could have left this argument and this job if that cop in my head had not told me that I would be risking my rent, my food, and my family's security. In the scene, I was arguing with my boss about why I was being

97

fired, to which she kept responding "I think you know why." I promptly jumped to a thousand conclusions, but the first was that it must be because I am trans. My second cop appeared in this moment, the internalized transphobia that taught me that if anyone dislikes or mistreats me, it is my fault, because I am trans. The scene continued and we stopped to identify more oppressions and more cops to suit the oppressions.

What becomes immediately clear in doing this work is that each of us carries any number of cops with us in every interaction. They haunt the way we interact with others, the actions we stop ourselves from taking, and the potential we never achieve. In Cops in the Head, these cops are given names, faces, and even antibodies to dismantle or drown them out. The more I do this work, the more I have come to think of them less as cops, more as ghosts. As Avery Gordon illustrates:

> Haunting is one way in which abusive systems of power make themselves known and their impacts felt in everyday life, especially when they are supposedly over and done with (slavery, for instance) or when their oppressive nature is denied (as in free labor or national security)…it is an animated state in which a repressed or unresolved social violence is making itself known, sometimes very directly, sometimes more obliquely…Haunting raises specters, and it alters the experience of being in time, the way we separate the past, the present, and the future. These specters or ghosts appear when the trouble they represent and symptomize is no longer being contained or repressed or blocked from view. (xvi)

Gordon is elucidating the connection between the structures of oppressive systems and their effects on the body and mind. She argues that echoes of these systems are present both in our own thoughts and actions (or lack thereof). What is most significant is that she says these imprints become ghosts only when we can name them, when we can recognize and externalize them. Their status as ghosts brings to mind other traits: first, ghosts are not impassable as they were inside the body or mind. Once in ghost form, they can be exorcised, moved through, even seen through. Second, they are not limitless and all-consuming. Intrusive thoughts can permeate all corners of our minds and actions, but identifying them gives them boundaries—at least more clearly defined boundaries than before. We are now able to recognize the areas of our lives they have impacted; we can move around the figure to see it from different sides. Third, the metaphor of cops comes with its own set of traumas and ghosts, especially for transgender people. According to the National Center for Transgender Equality, Transgender people are incarcerated at a much higher rate than the general population, and their time in incarceration has a higher rate of sexual assault, violence, and harassment ("Standing with LGBT Prisoners"). The language of "cops" then brings to mind specific cops, whether they are our own stories or those of our friends and community members. Finding a way to reframe the metaphor for use within this troupe became an early priority. "Ghosts" offered a non-specific entity to start from that served similar purposes to the initial "cops" metaphor, without beginning our work in a place of defensiveness and triggering. While I continue to think and talk about cops in my writing, I rarely used that term to describe the entities in our heads within the workshop. Finally, whether or not you believe in ghosts, in this metaphor they

are real. When they exist only in the mind, they are an individual's problem, and as such, that individual could be gaslighted into thinking there is no problem or that they have exaggerated, made up, or misunderstood the problem.

When the thoughts are made visible, they become a community problem. A community problem has witnesses, and witness provide affirmation, alternatives, and solidarity. As Boal writes, "this theatrical process of recounting, in the present, and in front of witnesses 'in solidarity', a story lived in the past, offers, in itself, an alternative" (*The Rainbow of Desire* 25). The solidarity aspect of this work is another reason why I chose it for use in this transgender group—it has been shown that transgender people's sense of self-worth and well-being are most improved when they are welcomed and accepted by their trans community (Frost 831), so even though most of us are also fighting for respect and affirmation in the broader LGBTQIA+ and cisgender communities, it is this community that lifts us up most.

The goals of Cops in the Head are then organized by the three hypotheses: osmosis, metaxis, and analogical induction (Boal, *The Rainbow of Desire* 40-46). Here, osmosis refers to the transmission of ideas and action between performer and spectator (here, a spect-actor) where there is no barrier: viewers during this work are, through the viewing of the scene, "empowered to penetrate into [the protagonist's] lived experience and they travel within this protagonist" drawing connections to their life, choices, and beliefs (26). They are able to affect change in the scene, which can affect change in their lives. This leads to the hypothesis of metaxis: the process of telescoping in and out of critical proximity, existing both in the conscious and subconscious, real and image world

(42-43). Finally, by analogical induction, Theatre of the *one* Oppressed can become Theatre of *the* Oppressed. One individual story, such as my story of getting fired, can have connections to the lives and oppressions of many others—and it did. By identifying a cop of "class status," we were able to examine how class plays a role in our own actions. By putting a face to that cop, we explored ways to disempower it.

The above goals made Cops in the Head instantly attractive as a technique for use in a transgender group, but were not without faults. These three hypotheses come only after Boal has defined what he deems the requirements for participation. Based on Lope de Vega, Boal argues all that is necessary to create theatre is humans, a passion, and a platform (*The Rainbow of Desire* 16). While I won't argue the latter two points, I will argue with what Boal constitutes as a "human," namely that the subject must be sensitive, emotive, rational, sexed, and be able to move (29-30). While I take issue with all of these for different reasons, in this context, I am most troubled by points three through five. First, the claim of rationality is one that has been used in neoliberalism to identify who is capable of subjecthood, and it precludes the possibility of subjects whose rationality is either illegible to the judger or whose rationality is (at least partially) compromised by mental illness. Given that the project of Cops in the Head is intrinsically focused on dispelling internalized ghosts, it is almost expected that many participants will come to the work with intrusive thoughts, self-damaging behavior, or some form of mental illness. They need not be rational to partake in the work, especially if the work itself requires a leap of faith into the realm of the imagined, the ability to see what is not (materially) there. In the project of identifying ghosts, participants do not need rationality; they need

creativity, imagination, belief. Gordon concurs, noting that in order to even test the perceptions of ghostly matters, we "must first of all admit those hauntings as real" (53). This perception must be understood differently than rational thought. Gordon writes, "being haunted draws us affectively, sometimes against our will and always a bit magically, into the structure of feeling of a reality we come to experience, not as cold knowledge, but as a transformative recognition" (8). This recognition is a bodily one, an experiential one, and one that would often be deemed irrational by current standards. While the ideas offered in Forum Theatre, and in later parts of Rainbow of Desire work, disallow magical solutions, opting instead for choices a person grounded in these given circumstances could actually make, the practice of articulating and dismantling ghosts inherently requires a little magic. While Boal may disagree (as his rhetoric always points to a focus on real, tangible, actionable choices), I argue that the dispelling of internalized oppressions can sometimes be achieved by force of imagination.

Second, sexing bodies is a social phenomenon. We are born with parts, not the labels, determined uses, or social understandings of those parts. I imagine the sexing of trans bodies as a cop, and as such, I do not see it as something required for subjects to be a "human" or for their participation.

Third, the ability to move comes from an ableist logic of the way bodies can interact with their surroundings, and this logic is especially problematic when working with a group such as trans people, whose bodies are already mechanized and managed by gender roles and cissexism. A few of the participants in the troupe consider themselves disabled, differently abled, and chronically ill, but that has not stopped them from

engaging fully in the work. Even on days when one of the participants' chronic fatigue left them with no spoons to move, they were able to use language to actively connect. "Spoons," refers to the crip theory term for quantifiable amounts of physical, emotional, or mental energy. Many of the elements of Cops in the Head ask the protagonist or another actor to "sculpt" the cops into frozen images, using the bodies of the other actors, and in these scenes, that immobile participant had found an easy alternative to the strain of a repeated gesture or action. Just from these simple examples, it is clear that several cops of internalized oppressions permeated the early logic of Boal's work, and that none of us is ever truly without ghosts, their after-image staining the foundation of everything we say, write, and do.

<u>Selecting Scenes</u>

To begin our work with Cops in the Head, each workshop had to focus on a specific story. In our first sessions in early Spring 2016, we talked through what scenes felt most useful for us to explore as a group. We chose some of these stories because they were recurring themes throughout previous workshops, and others came up as we deepened our questions into internalized oppressions. Because Boal mandates that these stories must have something that each of us can contribute and learn from, we looked for stories that were representative of larger phenomena in trans lives or in the troupe's general experience.

To uncover what some of these major themes might be, we used Boal's "multiple image of oppression" technique to craft a common language about what oppressions we

are seeing and what they look like (*The Rainbow of Desire* 114). As we had done with Image Theatre, I called out a command, and the participants responded by creating that image with their bodies, frozen. What was instantly apparent was that even in our responses to one oppression (in this moment, internalized transphobia), each of our bodies was haunted by the imprint of innumerable other internalized oppressions. Just as these ghosts had entered our minds, the structures in which we live had mechanized our bodies. While Christopher Shelley details the experience of transphobia as one that occurs temporally as the internal identity develops and the external demarcation becomes more or less visible (53), here these temporalities are flattened into a single image, making visible experiences that may not otherwise coincide. There were differences between the images, proof of the intersectional identities and, therefore, intersecting ghosts impacting our interpretations of "internalized transphobia." Shelley argues that the added intersectionality of identities also makes parsing out a specific identity-related trauma especially difficult (58). Principally apparent in these frozen images was a physicality reflective of internal versus external harm. Some bodies seemed to tear themselves apart, gripping at body parts or self-destructing. Others more clearly responded to external threats, as if their internalized transphobia was a sustained fear of violence. One of these participants later wrote in a survey that she used to say things like she "knew better" than to go certain places or that she "knew the risk [she] was taking when [she] did this" referring to her transition (Survey, March 2016). When I brought up this question of why fear of external violence is an *internalized* oppression, others noted similar feelings of self victim-blaming. One participant was able to verbalize a ghost she

had only recently developed—her internalized victim-blaming for being a woman. Before transition she walked the street at night without fear, and she did the same at first after she came out. She quickly learned, she told us, that women could not do the same things as men, especially when it comes to personal safety. She had so swiftly adopted this external oppression as an internalized one that she was able to note its exact inception. That was the scene we worked with first.

To begin the scene, she had to tell us all the story, which we then improvised using her as the protagonist (herself) and another participant as the antagonist. In the story, she was walking home from a party and a man was following her. He was antagonizing her, so she decided to catch the bus. He followed her onto the bus. On the bus, he continued to stare at her in a way that made her feel unsafe. She asked the bus driver if he could let her off at a spot that was not a normal stop because she wanted to get away from the man. The bus driver said he would not stop, but he also told her that she shouldn't have been out alone this late. She asked if he wouldn't let her off, would he at least kick off the man, and the bus driver said no. He told her that the man wasn't doing anything wrong, and that she was fine.

Listening to this story, I felt the energy of the room change as many of us anticipated what felt like the inevitable end of this story. We were, happily, wrong. She got off the bus, but the man did not follow her. She got home. She locked her door. And she immediately started crying. She scolded herself for not leaving when her friends had left earlier. She scolded herself for not defending herself against the man's comments. She scolded herself for believing he must have known she was trans and because he knew

he was obviously going to harm her. She scolded herself for making it into a big situation when it was obviously no big deal. She scolded herself for not having a thicker skin. And then when she told us this story, she apologized, saying she was sorry to waste our time when nothing really happened in her story. The danger, Boal writes, is that by reliving a scene, performers are reifying their beliefs and desires within that lived experience (*The Rainbow of Desire* 24). Whether or not her scolded feelings were facts, they were real to what she had experienced and to the way she had since interpreted and understood that night. Trans theorist A.H. Johnson explains this phenomenon:

> Self-narratives may not always be historically accurate accounts, but their importance does not lie in their objective truth. The importance of narratives of a trans self lies in their meaning to the community and the way they are used as transnormative standards against which trans experience is measured. Further, trans people not only learn how to narrate their experiences but they learn the proper emotional response to those narratives and may even internalize them as a part of their understanding of self. (471)

Johnson is reinforcing what I have noted above, that this participant has judged her experience against an expected understanding, a common narrative, and the structures with which that narrative must comply in order to be understood and accepted. Her perception of that evening and the retelling of it become part of how she interprets her role as a woman and as a trans woman. Throughout her story, there were marked

moments where she already started to recognize how she was blocked by her own cops, though she had not yet named them. This is not uncommon in moments of trauma. While trauma is known for causing people to shut down, freeze up, or go silent, Gordon's metaphor of structures of oppression as ghosts is again useful here. Gordon explains, "haunting, unlike trauma, is distinctive for producing a something-to-be-done" (xvi). By making our traumas into ghosts, we are more able to act in moments where we otherwise might not.

Identifying Cops

As I explained in the Goals section, the next phase of Cops in the Head is to identify the cops present in a given scene. As the participant told us the bus story, I was already noting so many cops in the way she spoke about her experience, the way her body shrugged away from us, the way her eyes turned down. We put the scene on its feet and elected to have the antagonist act as the bus driver. While the man who followed her was clearly a problem in this scene, he was not part of the conversation which exposed the cops. Instead, we had the two actors improvise the bus driver conversation as it was told to us. Early in the scene, I recognized her internalized misogyny. She was accepting the bus driver's statements as truth, internalizing them into her body. She was curling inward, softening her voice, dropping off her sentences, and using the apologetic rhetoric we heard in her storytelling just a few minutes before. When the scene stopped, this was the first cop called out.

When a cop is identified in this exercise, it must then be made into an image, sculpted by the protagonist and the actor playing that cop. But it also must be identified as a specific person. While Prendergast and Saxton argued throughout their text that applied drama occurs "under fictional circumstances," (2013, 203), here I agree with Boal that these need to be absolutely concrete and real circumstances from which we develop the cops. Gordon follows a similar line of thinking, explaining, "the ghost registers and it incites, and that is why we have to talk to it graciously, why we have to learn how it speaks, why we have to grasp the fullness of its life world, its desires and its standpoint" (207-208). This is exactly what we had to do to make these internalized oppressions into viable "cops." In order to communicate with it and dismantle it, we have to give it a face, a history, a name. In Cops in the Head, practitioners have to select a real person from their life who is a representative of that structure, oppression, or mindset, and transform the cop into that person. This instills the cop with the same logic and power of that real person and provides the protagonist with a point of origin—who put the intrusive thoughts in her head. While most of our internalized oppressions are ubiquitous (we are taught misogynist ideas in the media, school, our homes, our families, our government), providing one person as the face of that oppression makes the entire structure feel easier to dismantle. As much as I might want to, I could never expect one woman to smash the patriarchy, but I could certainly ask her to argue with her father. Again the metaphor of ghosts is useful here, as the actors performing the cops channel the energy of the chosen representative, becoming an afterimage of that individual's effect on

our protagonist. We practiced ways to embody these individuals, using the idea of them as ghosts to imagine taking their energies, beliefs, and status into our bodies.

The cops in the above scene were fairly easy for the group to identify and name. We chose to focus on the two most significant and intersecting internalized structures. Internalized transphobia became two cops: her old family doctor, and a drag queen she used to be friends with. Her doctor stood reaching to examine her torso, repeating "you know trans people have a shortened life expectancy." The drag queen tugged at her shirt, hissing, "everyone can tell." Internalized misogyny became three cops: one of her teammates on an old sports team, an old science teacher, and her father. The teammate made a buddy-like sucker-punch towards the protagonist, softly repeating "she shouldn't have gone out alone." The teacher put a hand in front of her mouth and calmly repeated, "you made this up." The father pushed her shoulder down from behind and growled "you need to toughen up." Once the cops were identified and posed, frozen, we arranged them around her. Some of the cops were clearly working together, others less so. A participant later wrote in a survey that this part of the exercise made him feel like "it's a conspiracy…things just click together, they power each other up," but he was more able to recognize how the intersectional oppressions others held "add up to a stronger force than all of them combined" (Survey, March 2016). Once arranged, they made a constellation of oppressive forces. She stood in the center.

Then the scene is re-improvised with the antagonist working towards the same conversation; the protagonist is simultaneously arguing with her antagonist, aware of and responding to the surreal world of the ghosts around her, facing her, trying to touch her.

Watching this part of the exercise is the most harrowing and also one of the most powerful moments. Even though I had practiced these techniques before, I had never done so with such a tight-knit group of people whose traumas and internalized oppressions so closely matched my own. It was difficult in this moment for me to remain a steady facilitator and make space for the intense emotions that followed. The protagonist felt "trapped," she said, hyper-aware of how little space and breath she had. She was visibly shaken.

During the first attempt at the bus scene, we stopped work as soon as I noticed the protagonist's demeanor change. We debriefed and only resumed the next week after she felt ready to re-enter the work. This protagonist wrote in a survey months later that looking back, it was incredibly powerful to know that we could all see what she saw: "they were real…they were all there…I know nobody else was supposed to see them but I knew you could" and for her, us being able to see all of these structures that influenced her behavior was a powerful moment of being witnessed and validated (Survey, May 2016). The visible and embodied element of this process made this experience possible. Prendergast and Saxton note that this is the power of applied theatre: "drama allows us to see how past history, present contexts and future dreams have powerful effects on the choices we make," (2013, 61); making her oppressions visible was only possible because of the performative imagination; the magic of theatre allows us to then dismantle them.

After this session, I quickly learned to prepare participants for the role of protagonist more carefully. We even developed a safe word and gesture to signify that they wanted the scene to stop. Later, protagonists occasionally broached difficult topics

and often showed visible dismay, but rarely asked to stop. Once, when a protagonist got extremely heated with an antagonist, I stopped the scene without prompting, and the participant playing the protagonist was upset that I had not trusted him to make up his own mind about how much he could handle. He was right that I had not given him that control. Though I never think of myself as a controlling force as a facilitator, I do often think of myself as responsible for the relative safety of the participants, and I took the judgement of that safety into my own perception rather than trusting in the system we had established for their autonomy. I took this moment to recenter the group around what we expected from one another in terms of safety, self-care, and risk. I also took this pause to show how heated moments can be re-performed using extremely heightened physicality without language, or, conversely, forced to be completely still and speak softly and slowly to better access whatever underlies the "heat." When we are passionate, or afraid, or defensive, we yell. I won't judge yelling as a choice in life, but in performance it is rarely useful in creating a nuanced interpretation of power dynamics and subtext. I find that in Cops in the Head, yelling—while it might be the most successful or only tool available in the real given circumstances—is fairly unproductive at deepening our understanding of oppressions.

I later facilitated these techniques in a workshop at the Trans Futurity Symposium at Hampshire College, in November 2016. Due to the number of participants in the room, I ended up playing the role of the antagonist. I did not have the time to facilitate trust-building and safety techniques, so I felt that my inhabiting the role of the antagonist was the best position to know that the protagonist would not be pushed too hard. It felt like a

verbal version of the somatic take/give weight exercise, and it was exciting to know that I could facilitate from inside the exercise with moderate success.

Creating Antibodies

Re-forming our cops around the bus protagonist after stepping away may have been more useful than I anticipated. Having had time to consider these ghosts, the participants returned with a myriad of ideas to dismantle them. In Cops in the Head, the body that dismantles a cop is called an antibody, and it can be formed in a number of ways. Because we returned to this scene with so many fresh ideas, I opted for a "lightning forum" in which participants quickly jumped up, one at a time, and tried a technique to banish a specific ghost. We all watched the previous attempts, tweaking, giving feedback, and trying our own, until the ghost and the protagonist agreed that one of the attempts was really strong. I was looking for a tactic that invalidated the cop's rhetoric, a physicality that protected the protagonist from the cop, and a phrase that distilled the argument into a useable/repeatable sentence. In this phase, Boal focuses mainly on concrete, actionable choices, but I find that less useful in the context of this troupe. Trans folks can certainly come up with actionable choices, but the logic of the "real" does not always prevail in the logic of the mind. In the logic of the mind, the visual element helps the protagonist feel more protected, and the repeatable phrase can become a mantra for future use. Gordon states that we must use "spells of power in order to tame this sorcerer and conjure otherwise" (28). In this troupe, the mantras and gestures became our spells. Gordon also argues that a ghost must be replaced—just as in order to dispel a harmful

112

thought we chose to replace them with our own mantras. The question of how to replace

these ghosts appears also in Boal's writing, as his case studies reflect this as a serious

difficulty for participants. He offers participants "three wishes" to make any alterations to

their scene that they want, but time and again he notes that they can only construct ways

to remove the ghost, not what system they would like to see in its place (Boal, *The

Rainbow of Desire* 65-66). In the troupe, I tried to embed this question into our work with

the antibodies, asking them to construct not only something that would help them rid

their mind of the cop, but also something that would bring them joy or pride. We were

often not successful in finding our replacements either, and frequently settled for

something that would at least offer a shift in thinking.

Whenever an antibody attempt feels right, the protagonist jumps in to form the

antibody, using her own body and voice to act as that first push back against the cop.

Once the other actors understand what the protagonist has created, they can step in to

recreate the antibody, and the protagonist can resume her place in the constellation of

cops and antibodies. The first time we re-improvised the scene after the antibodies were

formed, the contrast was so stark that we all found ourselves silenced and awed by the

moment. Each of these antibodies was a product of our community's collective

knowledge, but they had ultimately been formed by the protagonist, and she was

surprised by their—and her own—power. As Boal writes, "to surprise oneself means to

learn something new, something strange, something unusual about oneself: something

possible!" (141). Another participant responded to this moment in a survey, saying, "she

was like this six-headed monster, but like AMAZING," because now she had become

something bigger than herself, this combination of herself and her five antibodies

(Survey, March 2016). The fracturing of her self into these five antibodies had actually

grown her capacity, her power, and her possibilities.

We restored the scene and started again, but these next few times were less awe-

striking and more difficult. Despite our previous success with the antibodies, the cops had

developed stronger counterarguments and found new ways to taunt and terrorize the

protagonist. This was not unexpected, as Boal explains, "despite all [the protagonist's]

efforts, *the ghosts always have a tendency to come back to their places and to repeat the*

same things" (139-140, emphasis in original). No matter how they are pushed away, the

cops find a way to reenter our thoughts. After a few runs through, the process stagnated

(or the antibodies lost ground), so we broke from the constellation to try new techniques.

One extremely successful technique was my own creation. During the conversation,

whenever the protagonist got to a part of the discussion that felt connected to one of the

cops, she would interject the antibody's phrase and physicality. The corresponding

antibody would then echo the protagonist, much more loudly and boldly than their

normal performance style. This helped us in two ways: we were better able to see the

exact moments when an intrusive thought entered the protagonist's mind, and we were

better able to support her in combating those thoughts.

There is no end when doing Cops in the Head. We perform a scene, adjust, add to

it, re-perform, and so on until we are no longer getting anything out of it. Then we debrief

and move on. We developed and performed five scenes during our semester-long

workshop. We worked on one scene in which a woman was being kicked out of her house

and found herself facing homelessness because of her identity. We worked on a scene where a man was trying to convince his therapist that he was a survivor of corrective rape. We worked on a scene where a person was trying to buy clothing in a department store. We worked on a scene where a person was coming out to their partner. Each scene resonated with all of us and brought to light ghosts that we each carried. We developed antibodies, with some great success. Occasionally, a ghost would appear and someone would instantly know what to say or do because they had been fighting that ghost in their own life. Other times, though we had all been fighting that ghost, none of us had quite figured out something that worked. Some scenes ended with righteous anger and planned actions; others ended in silent sobbing. They never ended in satisfaction, because this work is not the kind that ends when you leave the performance space. It is the kind of work you might not feel the impact of until much later. Two participants have already noted this impact after the workshop's conclusion. One wrote that she was arguing with a professor about a piece of literature and suddenly froze because she was using tactics we had developed together as antibodies: "she was raising her voice, so I waited and deepened mine…she was spewing these things everywhere so I…numbered my points and gave them to her like a list" (Survey, September 2016). Another wrote that he had taught one of our invented mantras/gestures to his younger brother as a response to playground bullies. The silly and simplified version of the complex argument against one of his own ghosts had become a child-safe way to teach consent.

Though these moments feel powerful and successful to me, this work is still entirely focused on traumas, as much of applied theatre and trans theory are. I found

myself drawn to finishing this semester with a short segment of Rainbow of Desire as the hopeful alternative in Boal's arsenal of introspective techniques.

The Rainbow of Desire

Several of the trans theorists cited in this thesis ruminate on constructing a cohesive self or matching internal identity to external presentation as a sign of healing and reconciliation in trans identity. In *Transpeople: Repudiation, Trauma, Healing,* Christopher Shelley states that in poststructuralist theory, the coherent self is a Western creation, that fragments and dissonance are part of self-constructed identity, but this differs from the Lacanian fragmented body (197-199). Shelley offers this construction of coherence as part of the driving force behind trans people's desire for integrity—which he defines as the cohesion of mental, social, and physical selves in one narrative (194, 199). Lori B. Girshick's data in *Transgender Voices: Beyond Women and Men* follows that same logic. Aligning internal identity with external presentation or reading is described as the ultimate goal for most of her subjects (69-70). "The personal need for consistency was strong," she writes, offering, however, "consistency is in the eye of the beholder" (72-73).

In *Second Skins: The Body Narratives of Transsexuality,* Jay Prosser states that, particularly in trans identity, "narrative *composes* self" (120, emphasis mine). For many theorists, this process of trans people creating self by integration is similarly conscious: "for [Alfred] Adler, the implicit self is responsible for the task of repairing fracture—of making an integrity emerge from fragmentation, establishing healing, or mending, as a

116

useful fiction" (cited in Shelley 169). Shelley details how an Adlerian approach to trans identity and healing is one in which the community is recognized as the site of trauma, rejection, and dissonance, and once that dissonance is noted and healed, the integrated self can heal.

On one side, the goal of trans selfhood is integrity; others argue that the creation of an integrated narrative forms and concretizes the self and identity. These theorists are not arguing against one another's work, but focusing on different ends: the conscious beginning versus the solidified end. In either camp, the healed self is the integrated self. This theory is entirely counter to the theory set out by Boal: "we should not seek to resolve the contradictions," he argues, "but to throw light on them" (*The Rainbow of Desire* 138). In this section of the work, the goal is the opposite of integrity. The goal is to fracture into as many pieces as can be identified. The Rainbow of Desire technique is almost Cops in the Head in reverse. Instead of identifying the cops in a scene, a protagonist must identify each of her goals, needs, and desires. Just as each of the cops were given a face and then able to be conversed with, challenged, and dismantled, here the desires are given a face and made legible. They are able to compete, to contradict, to collaborate. The fracturing of the self into these often conflicting impulses illuminates a more complex self.

In this section of the work, Boal's theory felt better suited to our experience of trans identity than the trans theory did. In the movie *Mulan*, the titular character sings: "Who is that girl I see/Staring straight, back at me/Why is my reflection someone I don't know/Somehow I cannot hide/Who I am/Though I've tried/When will my reflection

show who I am inside?" (Solanga et al). For most of my life I thought I felt that way too

—that my outside needed to match my inside, that I was supposed to look like how I felt.

Trans theories like those above have encouraged that thought. But this is not a Disney

song, and internal feelings do not always have to match the exterior. My feelings have

always been way more complex than what could be created visually, and the

"contradictions" in my choices often highlight the Adlerian theory that the dissonance

exists in our socialization and community response, not in the self. Similarly, when I

brought in *Mulan*'s "Reflection" as a warm-up song, nearly every participant knew the

song word-for-word, despite mixed feelings about the film itself. Nearly everyone

remembered a moment where they felt like this song was an anthem to their trans

identities. Some still hold this belief. When pushed to think about the song again after we

completed the Rainbow of Desire, however, almost half of the participants had shifted to

a view that the inside is far too intricate and convoluted to be integrated, and about a third

of them articulated that they actually did not even want to be legible or integrated in that

way. One genderqueer participant affirmed that they felt confused most of the time about

their gender, and often changed their mind about how they wanted to be seen. For them,

this was a normal state of being. Another participant whose identity shifted from

transmasculine to agender sometime in the first year of the troupe articulated in a survey

that being read as "a genderfuck, or sometimes…too androgynous to tell" gave them

pleasure (Survey, April 2016). While they had initially intended to transition towards

being read as a man, during the part of their hormonal transition when they started to get

almost equally called male and female, they actually found that position more

comfortable. While Salamon argues that the genderqueer subject must "'turn down the volume on the many voices that exert their desires; and tune in to their own inner self-perception,'" (Hansbury qtd. in Salamon 2010, 121) these participants' experiences prove both that shutting out these voices is a practical impossibility, and that sometimes they are even welcomed.

By the above standards, these participants do not fit the bill of the integrated self, or the subject whose goal is integration, yet by my understanding, their internal desires are matched by the same level of external complexity. One trans woman in the group described an experience that broke even this frame of "matching." She has, most of the time, some visible facial hair and has kept her original name. While internally she described a fairly binary female identity, she wrote that her facial hair just "won't go away, probably ever" unless she somehow gets enough money for laser hair removal and overcomes her fear of the pain associated with the procedure (Survey, February 2016). But her name is a different story—she can't afford to legally change it, but she has chosen not to socially change it either, even though it "reminds [her] of [her] blue and green toy box" and what seems like the associated indoctrination of childhood gender roles (Survey, February 2016). When asked to expand on why she chooses to keep it, she offered a number of possible of answers that each started with "maybe" and ended with "but I don't know." Maybe it was because she wanted to change the idea of what a gendered name was, but she doesn't know. Maybe it was because she hadn't found a name that fits better, but she doesn't know. Maybe, but she doesn't know. And that

complexity is exactly the power of Rainbow of Desire that is missing in the above

segments of trans theory.

In one of our chosen scenes, we elected to work on a conversation in which one of

the participants was trying to convince his doctor to help him get approved for surgery. In

Rainbow of Desire, the protagonist is asked (with the help of the other participants) to

identify all of the needs, desires, fears, hopes, and goals that animate their scene. He then

constructs one with his body until another participant can recognize it and replace him,

until each of his desires is formed. He then speaks to these images, tells them he wants to

be more or less like them, shares with them what drives that desire. The images take this

information as they had in Cops, and imbue their later work with its imprint. In this

scene, we formed five images: first, a figure cradling a baby, representative of his desire

to someday have children, imbued with the fear that surgery would make that more

difficult. Second, a gruesome golem-like figure, representative of his base need for

survival, embedded with his desperation for the body he needs. Third, a begging figure,

pleading for a life where he is read and accepted as he is. Fourth, a Rosie the Riveter-like

figure, filled with his desire for bodily autonomy. Finally, a shivering ball figure, formed

by the desire to maintain financial security. Then the images each, individually, speak to

the antagonist (in this scene, the doctor). They carry the scene from only their viewpoint.

After each individual scene, the protagonist resumes his position, and each of the images

is placed around the antagonist in a constellation, just as the cops had been placed around

the protagonist. The images begin to speak, softly, their wishes. The protagonist watches

each, moves between them, witnessing the pieces of his self fight for their competing

needs. According to Boal, this process, "allows the protagonist to see herself not as a univocal being, like her physical image reflected in a physical mirror, but as a multiple being, her image reflected by the prism which is the other participants" (*The Rainbow of Desire* 150). The protagonist in this example was struggling with competing desires that were made visible, and as such, he could watch how they had influenced his original scene. He could fight for the desires he chose, and quiet those he did not. He could prioritize them, but also allow them simultaneous existence. These figures were not like ghosts. They were like parts of a sum or chorus made of one voice. They were all very real. This multiple being offered us the complexity and contradiction necessary to fully realize a trans self.

Conclusions: Cops in the Streets

Moving forward, my question is how we utilize this work beyond theatre practice in our daily lives. One answer came to me just as I was finishing this chapter. I sent several sections to the participant who was the central protagonist in this chapter, and she sent me back a text saying, "why did you have to use my story? others were better or at least more about trans stuff" to which I replied "says who?" She promptly called me, laughing, and said I had caught another ghost. She didn't apologize for the ghost, but acknowledged it. It had not even been my intention to point out this ghost to her, but we had practiced identifying them and questioning ourselves so much that we instinctively responded that way. It is clear to me that this has all been practice, and we have been re-mechanized now to telescope in and out of our thoughts, to ding an alarm when a ghost

appears on our radar. This is Boal's intention, for a participant to "rehearse alternatives for his situation, so that he may be able to extrapolate into his real life the actions he has rehearsed in the practice of theatre" (40). I worry though; we have practiced so many ways of identifying cops in one another's stories, words, and bodies, that I wonder if the participants may become cops themselves, stopping people from making choices because they believe a cop may be in play. I wonder when I too have shut down an argument because I believed no one could actually think or do a thing without cops influencing their actions.

Once we dispel our ghosts, I question what is left. Thinking back to our attempts to "conjure otherwise" or imagine a system to replace our cops, I found time and again that this question of our ideal or potential utopian system was responded to with cynicism and sarcasm. There had been a ghost in the room the whole time that none of us had ever named: none of us believed we could actually change anything beyond our own bodies. And maybe that's enough, for now. Maybe the change in our minds will ripple into our communities. Maybe this "who says" sense of questioning authority will help us in this national moment. Julie Salverson warns that we "can't simply conscientize ourselves and others out of our dysfunctional social systems," offering instead that we need time to mourn and organize our thoughts before taking action (Myers qtd. in Salverson 168). But what if the cops in the streets are unimpeded by the spells cast in our minds? To this Boal says, "if there really is nothing to be done, it is not even worth trying," but he contradicts himself later, offering us another type of action when concrete action is unsuccessful: "we

must have dreams," he writes, "not the sort of dreams that are a substitute for reality but

dreams that can help us to imagine the future" (*The Rainbow of Desire* 59, 114).

CHAPTER 7

TRANS APPLIED THEATRE

<u>Introduction</u>

One of the many things I was taught as a Joker is to pull on threads. In one

TONYC training with Jokers Katy Rubin and Jon Leo, I was taught, rather eloquently,

that if you come across a snag, there's probably something there worth teasing out. And

when you are working with a community to assess their specific needs and stories (rather

than to push a predetermined cause), as I am now, each of these snags is what makes up

the texture of their community. One such snag reared up in the spring of 2016 as I was

working with a group on Boal's Cops in the Head techniques. A participant, playing

herself, was arguing with one of the cops, representing her father, played by another

participant. When the tone of the improvisation suddenly and noticeably shifted, I waited

until what felt like a natural moment to pause the participants and tug at the thread. I

asked her what changed for her in that scene. She responded that she'd felt like she was

having an almost too accurate version of a real conversation she'd replayed in her head a

million times, only this time out loud in an improvised scene. This statement felt like one

of the first times a participant had made a clear discovery and we were starting to get at

the heart of Boal's work. I asked her what made this conversation different than the one

she replayed. She said simply, "Because now I'm me." She went on to tell us that the first

time she'd had this argument, she hadn't known who she was, or even that she was a

woman—she was arguing theoretically about things that felt too close to home for

reasons she hadn't been able to understand, let alone articulate at the time. And now,

years later, she was having the conversation again, but as a completely different person. We talked this moment out for a while and explored how Boal's techniques had helped guide us to it and through it, but the thread sat in the back of my head, percolating.

Then, several months later, this past summer, I was reading Christopher Shelley's *Transpeople: Repudiation, Trauma, Healing*, and that thread found its (theoretical) match. Using a Freudian analysis, Shelley described the way trans people can feel trauma associated with unlived moments—that his subjects expressed mourning and loss for the childhoods they didn't have, the gendered experiences they would never look back on nostalgically or cling to as foundational moments in their identity construction. What this participant had described was the feeling of loss she felt for not being able to have this conversation with her father as his *daughter*, as a *woman*, or as a *girl*—she could not go back in time and give herself these father-daughter moments, or reconcile the memories she had with the absence of those she desired.

This thread was the spark. From here I dove into questions I had never thought to ask, games I wanted to play, stories I wanted to tell and hear, and more. In this chapter, I explore the beginnings of these techniques—what they look like, and why they feel so rooted in a trans experience.

In this chapter, I move from a more reflective space of interrogating and adapting existing techniques, to a space of proposal and potentiality. Because the scope of the work in this section is much broader than the last two, the theories I draw from are equally broad. I draw from the theories and artists from the last two chapters, tying my own work to this lineage of theatre practice. This chapter also invokes trans theory, as

well as feminist and queer theories of nostalgia, naming, and embodiment, but in a more supporting role.

Instead of placing the work in dialogue with an existing theory, this chapter also offers my own theories, speaking both to the gaps in theory and to those cursorily in conversation. One such theory is that of phantoms. Inspired by Christopher Shelley's description of the trauma of absence, phantoms are my metaphor for the experience of a memory (or imagined memory) that is felt, embodied, remembered. I use the language of phantoms here to differentiate from the ghosts of Chapter 6, but also to inspire images of phantom sensations, an experience I find resonant in this trans troupe. By "phantom sensations," I want to draw a connection to that feeling when you think about a spider and suddenly you feel one crawling on you—even though there is no spider. This sense of the psychosomatic, the embodied imagination, the simultaneous lived truth of both the *there* and *not there* is the function of "phantoms" I want to evoke. Many of the memories recounted by the troupe speak to the distance between the moment just before the conscious recognizes the self, the moment in which the possibility of self, the imagined self, is formed. I want to be careful not to push too far into the realm of dissociative thinking, as I find the past association of trans identity with "body dysmorphia" extremely troubling (a diagnosis of body dysmorphic disorder states that a person has an obsession with their body or appearance and/or an inaccurate perception of said body/ appearance). I do not wish to argue that those trans persons who imagine momentarily a different body topography than what they see/feel are dysmorphic. Instead I want to show that they experience that absence, and it is the simultaneous absence and idea of presence

marked by the metaphor of "phantoms." I am also aware of the connection between this idea of phantoms and the experience of "phantom limbs." This is a connection that has been brought up in a number of surveys and conversations. I want to avoid using the concept of phantom limbs, as its use here could be appropriative and ableist. Trans theory and crip theory have many intersections, but this particular term felt more rooted in the latter. I do want to acknowledge, however, that it has been commonly used in trans discourse because it sparks such similar philosophical understandings of the body, imagination, and temporalities.

This chapter first explores the idea of naming—both of body parts and people. Next, I introduce the connections between nostalgia and phantoms and trans applied theatre, and I connect those phantoms to their bodily impacts. Then, I turn towards beauty with a section on superheroes, finally concluding the chapter with a ritual that feels more like a beginning.

The Name Game

Nearly every applied theatre practice I've read or tried starts with a version of the Name Game. In *Undesirable Elements*, this took the form of a name-origin story and the repetition of each participants' familial name lineage, ending in their own name. In Boal's work there are several of these games: Name Gumbo, in which participants' names get thoroughly mixed up before they are reclaimed, and at least two different naming circle games that help participants memorize others' names. Other practices use name games that are also ice-breakers, name games that use the association of the name with an action

or gesture that allows an expressive and creative quality, name games for simple introduction and memorization, and more. No matter the tool used, we always start with a name. The logic of compulsory naming and static names for people carries into the way bodies are labeled, from directions at the start of an exercise to the way bodies and performances are "read." In applied theatre, exercises often task certain body parts with images, actions, or sensations that reify both that body part's name and its implied usage.

This means something different in trans spaces. In trans lives, names are often fraught. They are sources of dysphoria, a reminder of the false gender designation and its corresponding label. They are sources of pride, as one chooses a new name more befitting to their identity. They are sources of sexual freedom, as genital and secondary sex characteristics are re-named or used in a manner counter to the name's suggestion. They are sources of absence, when a new name lacks the history, the culture, the familial connection usually a part of the name narrative for cisgender folks, or when the chosen term for a part of trans body signifies a difference between the trans and cisgender body. Those absences can inspire the feeling of a phantom *loss*. Here, I am invoking the idea of "phantom sensations" and pointing to the moment when the sensation is imagined as the moment of loss.

With the legal, medical, and social expectations of labels and their associated meanings, trans people are often forced to redefine language or create their own, as these participants have. The experience of both personal and body names for trans people can be incredibly isolating. Building on Martin and Hetrick's (1988) definition of the three isolations of growing up queer (cognitive, social, and emotional isolations), Deborah

128

Britzman details an additional isolation: aesthetic, wherein queer youth are forced to de- or recode the images around them to construct their own identities, and develop their own cultural products, languages, codes, and signs (195).

One of the great powers of trans identity is, then, the creative capacity to reshape the world and fill the missing spaces in our understanding of that world. Lucas Crawford uses Samuel Beckett's play *The Unnamable* to explore how this conception of naming relates to trans identity. Crawford first notes that, "Beckett represents name change as a spatial act" related to both that void or lack, and to the way names of people and objects root them temporal-spatially so a change requires movement across these planes (48). Name change "necessitates losing one's 'ground' in discourse" he argues, "losing the stable self from which one is assumed to speak" (48). This instability is not a problem to Crawford, though it speaks back against the idealized integrated identity. Instead, this slippage creates more possibility:

> Names, including new names, could instead move (us) toward the Other in unexpected ways, could dislocate us from that which we feel is our 'ground' and our affective 'property' and propriety, and could motivate us to take changing names as a reminder that we could—rather than unfold identities and proprieties that are already possible—pursue the impossible instead. (62)

Crawford is speaking not only of the power of personal names, but also of the names we choose to understand our bodies, the names that either reify systems and structures designed to mechanize and contain us, or instead names that offer alternatives.

In the foundational and groundbreaking text, *Trans Bodies, Trans Selves*, naming takes at least three different topical strains: the legal process of undergoing name change, the personal process of choosing a new name/identity label/body terms, and the social process of getting others to use and accept a new name (and particularly the connection between parents and dead names). Even the use of the term "dead name" to refer to previous names is telling of the trans experience. That term reminds me of the ghosts discussed in Chapter 6—a name haunts you the way a past life, an expected future, a set of gendered roles can haunt you, leaving their imprint on the body and mind.

Self and body naming has come up numerous times throughout the three years I've worked with this troupe, and often in similar ways to those discussed by Crawford. The participants frequently note difficulties choosing a new name, being called a new name, coming to terms with their body names, and more. When asked by their *Undesirable Elements* interviewer for a story of their name's origin, some participants marked the absence of a traditional birth name story. One participant even said he would lie all the time about his name's origin, because the absence of an origin story was both a haunting felt absence and because that absence could potentially out him to others.

The naming of body parts however, sparked a different reaction. While many participants said they wanted to change their body or wished to someday have body parts they currently lacked, some also noted that they already referred to their current genitals

by names generally associated with a cisgender body. A trans man, for example, had his partner refer to his (assumed pre or non-surgical) genitals as a dick. He, and those who took a similar tactic, had made space within the existing language for his own body's topography. He had not distanced himself from the categorization of bodily names, nor their expected use and association with gender, but he had by nature of applying these terms to his own body produced a linguistic slippage that shifted our understanding of the signified object. Another transmasculine participant said that, while he wanted to think of his genitals in that way, the use of traditionally cisgender male labels made him feel even more aware that he lacked those parts, and made him feel like potential partners would question the label. He felt that the term would be misapplied to him, and instead opted for labels that articulated both his masculinity and the discrepancies between his current and ideal body, terms like dicklet or schmekel. A trans woman in the group had a nearly opposite reaction to bodily labels, writing in an early survey that she used traditionally male terms for her anatomy, "but that doesn't mean that's how I use them" (Survey, November 2015). She was highlighting then the distance between the label and its usage, as assumed within our culture. From their medical labels to their social or colloquial labels, bodily terms are all socially constructed (Erickson-Schroth, Gilbert, and Smith 84-85), and the benefit of a trans group is the ability to see this in practice, as these names are altered, deconstructed, and given new meaning.

As I have described, there is a layered understanding of names within trans identity. In order to reconsider the idea of naming, its instability, its changeability, and its

linguistic slippage, I devised the following name game, called "Nothing Left Deleuze"

for trans applied theatre practice:

In a circle, all participants start by composing their bodies in images or gestures

of their choosing. The first player points to a discreet body part on the person to their

right (anything from an eyebrow to a leg, a belly to a finger), and asks "is that your

[blank]?" In the "blank" the first person chooses a noun other than the actual name of the

body part to which they pointed. They can try to identify an object that might correspond

with the image/movement the second player is displaying or choose something

incongruous, as long as they choose a noun other than the actual name of the body part.

Player 2, the person being questioned, then responds in two ways: physically, they try to

use that body part to embody/recreate/display the image of whatever word the first person

used. Verbally, they respond with "No, that's my [blank]!" Similarly, in this blank the

second person inserts a word other than the actual name of that body part. The second

person then turns to a new player on their right and begins the process anew, starting with

the word they used for their own body. An example is as follows:

Player 1, pointing to Player 2's arm:

"Is that your umbrella?"

Player 2, now using their arm as an umbrella:

"No, that's my blender!"

Player 2, pointing to Player 3's foot:

"Is that your blender?"

Player 3, now moving their foot as a blender:

"No, that's my flower!" And so on.

The game continues moving around the circle until it seems the players are moving/posing as many body parts as is possible.

The game then breaks for a short debrief before restarting with a twist. The second part of the game is focused directly on personal names, rather than the idea of naming, but I found that without this first part as a primer, the question of names was much too personal and difficult to approach. Since names usually come at the beginning of every applied theatre workshop, beginning with names felt important, but it also felt like we needed to start with a common language about names—a common discourse on how we might approach names in this workshop. While the naming process might suggest a stability of naming, Crawford argues that for trans people it is often felt as an expression of linguistic slippage (50). While the players in this game are naming themselves as they choose, they are also playing with the dissociation of the signifier from the signified, destabilizing the sign.

I designed the second part of the game to work with or without the above-mentioned debrief break. If the group feels like they are already developing some trust, cohesion, and willingness, I would recommend proceeding through both parts before debriefing. If the group feels like they are not quite internalizing the themes and are still resisting, taking a moment to stop, talk, and restart might be necessary.

The second part of the game begins just as the first, but now follows people's names rather than objects:

In a circle, all players begin by posing in an image or gesture of their choosing. Player 1 turns to the player on their right and asks "Are you [Player 1's name]?" Player 2 responds in two ways: physically, they embody the gesture or image of player 1. Verbally, they respond "No, I'm [their own name]!" The game proceeds around the circle like so:

Player 1 to player 2: "Are you [player 1's name]?"

Player 2, now copying player 1's image: "No, I'm [player 2's name]!"

Player 2 to player 3: "Are you [player 2's name]?"

Player 3, now copying player 2's original image: "No, I'm [player 3's name]!"

This cycle of taking on the body of the previous person and asking the next if they are your name continues until it returns to the original player 1, who can then choose any player in the circle at random, moving across the circle popcorn-style. An example is as follows:

Player 1 to player 4: "Are you [player 6's name]?"

Player 4, now copying player 6's body: "No, I'm [their own name]!"

Player 4 to player 3: "Are you [player 7's name]?"

Player 3, now copying player 7's body: "No, I'm [their own name]!"

This continues around the circle as many times as feels reasonable.

This game is structured in a way that also takes the parts of name games that are important in applied theatre practice (ice-breaking, introducing oneself, memorizing others' names) and places them into a system that feels comfortable for trans folks, while also deeply engaging the questions of naming in trans identity. While the participants were allowed to retain their names as they chose, they were also made to see the

134

disconnections between the image and the word, and the inability for names to encompass a body: "we can never reach the location of our names," Crawford writes. "Our bodies cannot ever be, in the end, a word. The translation of body to language is never simple, complete, or without remainder" (56). In this game we also begin to question why name games exist—why the memorization is necessary. Extending philosopher Jacques Derrida's theories of naming, exercises like the traditional name games, which associate a body/gesture with a proper name, "simultaneously practice and hide a name's performativity" (Crawford 57) to the point where we see the signifier as sign.

Playing this game in the troupe led to hysterical laughter, a lot of near falls, and some strong conversations about what it means for each of us to deal with the labels placed on our bodies, including our previous names. Though we were never playing with our dead names, even using other participants' names in the game inspired some dysphoria in troupe members who were asked if they were someone whose name was of a different gender. Initially, I was surprised by this dysphoria, as I was hoping that the removal of any dead names and the swift rejection of the wrong name would feel like a solid stance. As we debriefed, I discovered that the game had helped them recognize that for some participants, any name that usually belonged to a different gender felt painful. This led us to a discussion on what it means to assign genders to names, as if the names themselves had intrinsic qualities. The conversations were meaningful and directly connected to our experiences of our bodies and names.

Nostalgia and Phantoms

Just as the idea of naming comes up in nearly every set of techniques, so does the idea of the child—particularly a return to a child-like state, which some artists deem necessary to "play." Childhood is also a fraught topic in trans identity, something I've already discussed briefly in my exploration of Lee Edelman's *No Future*, in which he describes the prefigured Child that is always already sexed and gendered. The narratives in this troupe fell into two basic strains, though the actual stories are far more nuanced. In the first camp are the narratives of those participants who knew very young that they were trans, that they identified with a certain gender, or that they were at least not the gender they were told. In the second camp are the narratives of the participants who did not have this knowledge, and have since looked back and either tried to figure out if there were "signs" they would later be trans, or have actually pointed to moments where they "should have known" but did not, due to their circumstances. Despite the differences, nearly all used rhetoric indicative of nostalgia in their accounts.

Nostalgia has often been a dangerous topic in queer and feminist literatures. While some queer and feminist theorists, like Heather Love in *Feeling Backwards*, find nostalgia a useful project, many others associate nostalgia with "a desire for the established order," "conservative impulses," a masculinist project (McDermott 261), a "tranquilizer" (Boym 33), or a "retreat to the past" in which history is glorified and oppressions are erased (Doane and Hodges xiii, 3). While each of these can be true in their contexts, nostalgia is still something that we express and feel, so it is worthy of a documentation that also recognizes its potential. In her text, *The Future of Nostalgia*,

Svetlana Boym offers an alternative approach to understanding nostalgia. She defines

nostalgia as "a longing for a home that no longer exists or has never existed," citing its

etymology as "from *nostos*—return home, and *algia*—longing" (xiii). She splits nostalgia

into two main types, restorative and reflective: "restorative nostalgia puts emphasis on

nostos and proposes to rebuild the lost home and patch up the memory gaps. Reflective

nostalgia dwells in *algia,* in longing and loss, the imperfect process of

remembrance" (41). For the purposes of this chapter, I focus on the reflective nostalgia

she describes. Reflective nostalgia is "a form of deep mourning that performs a labor of

grief both through pondering pain and through play that points to the future" (55). This is

the type of nostalgia I witnessed in the troupe's storytelling. It is important to note that

the nostalgia she describes and that I use here is not always the hopeful and positive

vision of nostalgia referenced by the critics above. She and I are both turning instead to

nostalgia as a sense of being pulled to or by the past, with that pulling marking itself in

the present, whether good or bad.

The nostalgia I saw in the first group of participants was often a wish to return to

a time when their identities were simple—many mentioned just "knowing" they were

trans, without all the complications of understanding what that meant or the

consequences of living as trans. Their nostalgia pointed to a loss of innocence, a loss of

their visions of the future. I found connections here to Boym's description of immigrant

nostalgia, in which a person establishes an idea of what they think it will be like in their

new home, and upon discovering the cold truth, finds themselves wistful for both their

previous home (no matter their previous quality of life) and their previously imagined

sense of this new home (337-343). The trans folks in this group often spoke about wishing they could still think of being trans as this beautiful, hopeful thing that would solve all of their confusion rather than the harsh reality many of them were facing. "When I first came out," one of the participants wrote, "it all just made so much sense it was perfect and I didn't know that like shit would happen to me or if I did know I didn't care…now I have to convince myself that being trans isn't a curse" (Survey, February 2016). This participant spoke about wishing she had that same sense of optimism or ignorance, wishing she could return to being freshly out rather than her current jaded state.

In the second group, there was a different kind of nostalgia. A couple people expressed a wish to re-collect memories from their childhood, trying to sort them into moments they might have recognized as being trans, but most expressed a desire simply to return to a state before gender mattered to them so much. One participant wrote, "it affects everything I do, everything I even try to do, but before I could play with whatever or wear whatever and not think about what it meant or try to analyze myself" (Survey, November 2015). They are marking a distance between their current mental and emotional state and their childhood state. Boym refers to that distance, which is the basis of nostalgia, as the "ache of temporal distance and displacement" (44). They are also reaching into their minds for memories that may not exist, and sometimes that absence is *felt*, in the way one feels a phantom sensation. Just as the sense of absence for a name origin story left a phantom loss in some participants, a few participants noted feeling that phantom loss from a lack of childhood memories associated with their present gender

identity. One participant wrote, "everyone else has these stories, the 'I knew when' or 'it was a sign' and I don't have those…and sometimes I think or I thought that meant I wasn't really meant to be trans" (Survey, October 2016). This participant's nostalgia is also a longing for the recognition of this phantom memory.

I designed these next exercises to examine those questions of childhood, nostalgia, and the possibility of reconciliation with phantom memories. To begin work on this topic, I wanted to start with a simpler exercise that developed our common language around the theme. This preliminary exercise, which I've been calling the "stages of (de)evolution," was developed from Image Theatre, and particularly the dichotomy Boal describes as the difference between the "real" image and the "ideal" image.

Participants take turns being the subject of the image. They are asked to select three to five ages that showed formative times in their identity. Starting with the oldest age, the subject forms an image of their identity and feelings about that identity at the given age. Once the image is frozen, an observer approaches and copies the image. The subject can adjust the copier until the image is as exact as possible. Then, the subject transitions from this age to the next-oldest. Again the subject freezes and an observer copies the image. This process is continued until someone has copied the youngest age designated by the subject. The subject then removes herself from the group and observes the series of images. Looking at the very last image created, the youngest age, she then makes a statement about what she would adjust to shift this image from the "real" into the "ideal" frame. She creates that altered image with her body and is then copied by an observer. She continues to the next image, using this same alteration and copying process.

When the subject is finished with each image, she will stand in the middle of the images, and create an image of where she stands now. On her left will be a series of images stepping down from her current age in her original "real" frame, and on her right will be a series of images stepping down from her current age in her altered or "ideal" frame. This is easiest to view standing in a row in front of a mirror, but could also be done in a circle so all participants can see all images. The image is frozen for a few moments from left to right like the example below:

participant holding image of real subject, age 5

participant holding image of real subject, age 10

participant holding image of real subject, age 15

subject holding image of herself, current age

participant holding image of ideal subject, age 15

participant holding image of ideal subject, age 10

participant holding image of ideal subject, age 5

Depending on the images seen and the distance in the space, at this stage it can also be productive to ask the corresponding ages to move next to one another for closer comparison. Once the subject and all participants have had a chance to view the (de)evolution images, the participants can release and begin debriefing. The participants are then asked several questions, such as:

What did you see in these images?

What did it feel like to embody your image?

What alterations did the subject make in the ideal version? Why?

How did the alterations change the feeling of embodying that image or viewing

that image?

Which evolution felt most connected to the present image?

I think of this exercise as a precursor to the project of identifying and working with

phantom memories and nostalgia. While the "ideal images" are not necessarily reflective

of the imagined phantom memories, they begin to identify the moments of dissonance felt

by the subject, and how those are projected on the body.

From here, I crafted a storytelling exercise called "alternate universe" to begin to

dig into the specifics of the phantom memories each individual held. A participant would

choose one of the ages to start from, and would begin telling and/or performing their

story for the group. The facilitator could yell out one of two commands as the storyteller

performed: "split" or "image." To the first command, another participant would enter the

stage, and make one alteration of their choosing to deviate from the original story. The

two would continue to perform side by side, their simultaneous realties diverging slightly.

The facilitator should consider providing a guideline for what kinds of changes to make

during the splits. I gave them complete freedom during some scenes, and other times

opted to ask each new storyteller to split using a specific tool, such as "what if you had an

extra five minutes?" or "what if you had a little more money?" Sometimes I asked the

original storyteller to choose the guiding question they wanted to explore in their story.

These guides can be selected at the top of the scene, or they can be added to the

command of "split." When split is called, the original storyteller does not deviate from

the true story. If the facilitator yells "image," all storytellers currently performing would

create a frozen image of their present state, continuing a few moments later. This could continue as many times as appropriate to the number of participants and the progress of the story.

The frame of this exercise is simple, but the image it creates is stunning. During one iteration, I asked all of the participants who joined in as alternate universe storytellers to focus around one change: "what if there was a witness?" The story changed dramatically as it branched out, and the differences in the frozen images were stark—in one scene there was a clear difference between a body turning inside itself, and a body sharing itself with the world. In another iteration without a focused "split" command, the participants all independently made their own change, yet they somehow each asked the same question: "what if you stood up for yourself?" Though they used the split to explore the same question, their images differed drastically. They took "standing up for yourself" to mean such different things, particularly in the response they expected to that change.

When the exercise concluded, we were left with a collection of images and stories of possible alternate realities. Some we were able to brush off, but others stuck with us, haunting us with a sense of recognition. We could feel what it was like to exist in that reality, and we often felt called to it like it was supposed to be ours. Yet the distance between our own body and the frozen alternate reality was too large to collapse. This exercise enabled us to examine the memories we are unable to embody yet still feel connected to. I had initially tried another step to this exercise, in which the original storyteller would take the place of one of the alternate storytellers during an "image" freeze, but we found it almost impossible to move forward each time. I instead asked the

storytellers to follow up the original exercise by starting over and telling the story with their chosen alteration already in place. This attempt felt closer, but we were still unable to reconcile the phantom memories. After discussion, I decided this block was because of the focus on identifying rather than healing these memories. These types of nostalgia inch fearfully close to the problematic and debilitating nostalgia described by the above queer and feminist scholars, but Boym insists that they can be trans-mutated to be beneficial. That is the goal of the next phase of work.

Baggage

This set of exercises stems from those same questions of nostalgia and phantom sensations explored in alternate universe and (de)evolution. While I previously examined the way internalized traumas enter the mind as "cops" or "ghosts," here I want to focus more on the way they are written on the body. Bodily trauma is an all-too common experience for trans people. Recent studies list trans people having a 50-80% rate of physical, sexual, and verbal abuse (Carmel, Hopwood, and dickey 310). Using phenomenology, Gayle Salamon offers a theory of "reconfiguring the imaginary topography of the subject" in which "unincorporated traumatic events…find both their retention and expression through a bodily, rather than a psychic, unconscious" (2010, 47). Salamon is describing the nature of lived external traumas, but I am extending this argument to include dysphoria as well. In this section I examine how to make visible the real marks left in the body by these mental and physical traumas. This is not an uncommon question in queer and trans studies. In *Outside Belongings,* Elspeth Probyn

describes a similar question, arguing that one could see the past, and particularly childhood "as a stigmata to be studied on the present body" (101). Using Probyn and Salamon's approaches, I focused on making these internal wounds appear on the skin. I combine dysphoria with the physical traumas above because dysphoria appears to many trans people as a phantom—touching the body and shaping its responses, while invisible and illegible to outsiders. Dysphoria is not something all trans people experience, and every trans experience of dysphoria is different, but to those it affects it can sometimes be as traumatic as physical violence, and definitely have a lasting impact on the body.

The first exercise in this section, which I have been calling "Baggage," is intended to make those traumas visible. The first time we saw the ghosts from Cops in the Head many of us felt like we finally could see what we had only previously felt internally. In this exercise I wanted to produce a similar effect for our traumas, giving them the authority of legibility and the support of witnesses. This exercise is a somatic labor that is like walking through a guided meditation. It is hard to detail the exact steps in writing, as it is more organic than formal, but I will describe the general process.

In a quiet space when all troupe members are sufficiently prepared for the work of reencountering their traumas, participants are asked to find a still spot and calm their bodies and minds. They are walked through a gentle calming meditation, easing the tension out of their muscles and joints until they are relaxed. They are then asked to focus their minds on one moment of trauma. They are then asked to think about the trauma in advance so they would be able to focus closely without searching for which trauma to choose in the moment. They are asked to think of a trauma that pulled them into their

past, either with a longing to reconcile the trauma or a longing to travel back before it. I also asked them in advance to only choose a trauma they felt ready to work on with the troupe, using their own judgement. They are asked to imagine the exact moment of that trauma. I asked them to imagine the smells, the sounds, the sights, and to let their bodies reflect those sensations. They are asked to reflect in their bodies their fear in that moment. Then their physical sensations. Then their emotional sensations. They are asked to be as non-literal as the liked. They are asked to push their energy through each part of their body, examining where they were holding tension and where they felt pain. They are asked to identify one spot where they found a lot of that tension and pain and focus all of their energy on that spot. They are asked to send their loudest scream into that spot, simultaneously pushing their muscles towards it. They are asked to cry if they wanted, to yell, to shake, whatever they needed to create a pulse of all this energy. Using their hands and their breath, they are asked to begin to smooth the tensions from the rest of their body into that one spot. They are asked to feel the heat of that spot, and to pull it out with their hands, and breath it out with their mind and air until the tension was outside their body in a ball of energy. They are asked to examine the ball in their hands, to note its size and weight, its energy and color. They are asked to calm it, to refocus it, to use their bodies and their breath to reshape it. Then, they are asked to replace the ball back into their bodies. They are asked how it felt, the same or different. They are asked to hold it, and to acknowledge it. They are asked to repeat this exercise as many times as necessary as we identified spots of tension from the original trauma. At the end of the exercise, they are

asked to reenter their memory of the trauma and let themselves respect their bodies' responses, noting how they had shifted or not.

When we debriefed after this exercise, the results were surprising. For the participants whose traumas had been physical, nearly all said the places they found the most tension were not necessarily the exact spots on their body related to the traumas. For example, one man whose trauma was being dragged out of a men's restroom, found that he held his trauma in his jaw—tightened and grinding—and his chest. In recognizing those sites of trauma, he was able to recognize how that trauma had actually impacted his body far more than he thought, because he holds those tensions now nearly every time he enters a bathroom, and often in other situations as well. For those whose traumas were emotional rather than physical, the phantoms of words or thoughts had touched their bodies more concretely in the place related to that trauma. One woman, for example, whose trauma had been a deeply-held dysphoria for her hands recounted a moment when she was told people would always know she was trans because of them. She was told once that cis lesbians would never date her because her hands would never feel soft and womanly. In this exercise she had focused almost entirely on the tension in her hands, but when we walked through the reshaping part, she had been unable to "reshape" her hands, so she tried instead to reshape her association with them, thinking instead of all of the incredible things her hands had done and could do. She refocused the energy into her hands instilled with those memories, and though the tension had not vanished, it existed now side by side with the imprint of positive memories.

The aspect of being in the room together was also haunting and affecting. As I facilitated the exercise, I walked softly through a room of contorting bodies, watching them ache, some eyes open and others eyes closed. I watched them tugging at themselves, cringing, sobbing, and screaming. But I also watched them break from their own internal thoughts to acknowledge others, to reach out to the person next to them, to witness another's moment. I watched them giggle when they were "reshaping" their energy balls and one participant was giving hers a firm scolding, wagging a finger at an invisible trauma she held in the other hand. That giggling was so refreshing and so important, that it shifted the way I wanted to approach the next part of this section. Boym argues that reflective nostalgia "can be ironic and humorous. It reveals that longing and critical thinking are not opposed to one another" (49-50). The irony that she notes reminds me of the sense of multiplicity and complexity in my discussion of "integrity" in trans identity. In order to consider healing these memories, I had to work to hold these memories together, juxtaposed and reflected in all of their complexity and contradiction. I also found the power of humor important here, as humor has often been a tool of healing. It is this humor, irony, and critical thinking I wanted to instill in the next game.

This next exercise takes a drastic turn towards the silly and the fun, but remains within the world of bodily phantoms. This game is like charades mixed with duck duck goose, but for trans people, and we have been lovingly calling it "cis cis trans." Participants begin in a circle. One participant thinks of a trans experience (like packing or doing shots or trying to use a bathroom) and enters the circle, acting out that image on their bodies without words. The facilitator moves around the outside of the circle, tapping

each participant along the way. The participants in the circle try to guess the image created by the person inside the circle. The last person tapped when the image is guessed has to create an image of that experience, staying in their spot. The guesser then replaces the person who created the initial image to continue the game. If the guesser is the one tapped, they have to maintain the first image on one part of their body and only use the remaining parts to tell their new story. If someone is already creating an image and enters the circle, they also have to retain their previous image in part of their body. The game continues until everyone is thoroughly mixed up or is so marked by previous images that they can no longer perform the new image.

This game is ridiculous. It is not high brow or emotional, but it was exactly what we needed to start laughing about our shared experiences again. The number of times an image was guessed immediately showed how much we all had come to know about one another and it reminded us how many traumas (small and large) we all shared, simply by being trans. Though it was meant to be an irreverent reversal of tone from the previous exercise, this game also got us talking about how difficult it was to carry more than one of these images at once, to perform a new task while still holding onto a previous one. These phantoms were difficult to carry, they touched our bodies and left marks. Their weight was not sustainable.

<u>Superheroes</u>

Much of the work we do in applied theatre is focused on trauma and oppression. Granted, I chose these sets of techniques for their potential applicability in trans spaces,

but I also found that I wanted to spend a little more of my time in this workshop focused on beauty, on hope, on recognizing the powerful force that is my trans community. Gareth White expresses this same desire, lauding how rare it is to focus on anything but trauma as a site for applied theatre work, looking instead for a "call to beauty" (9). It is that call I turn to here. The techniques I discuss from this point forward are methods of recognizing beauty, rather than pain.

Throughout this process, I have tried to use theatre as a way to empower these incredible people to see the creativity in their own minds and bodies, and this exercise was a goofy and fun way complete that work. I call this exercise "SuperTrans." We started by naming traits specific to ourselves. Some of them were physical traits, others emotional, others experiential. We named things we were comfortable with, happy about, or proud of. Then we chose one to focus on. People chose everything from a beard, to the way they walk, to their maternal instinct. We created an image of that trait with our bodies. Then we pushed it to the extreme. First, we pushed it until the image took over the whole body. Then we gave the trait its own tone of voice, then its own movement. We made the trait so extreme that it was a super power. Once our super powers were established, we named them. Next, I had everyone sit to watch the playing area and asked one person to act out a simple "problem" (such as opening a heavy door). The actor would then get to choose which superhero they wanted by saying something like "If only Bearded Wonder were here" or "Please help me HandyWoman!" and the corresponding SuperTrans would have to join the scene and devise a way to use their superpower to solve the problem. Sometimes I asked them to create more complex or difficult problems,

like a coming-out disaster; other times it was more fun to play silly scenes, like opening a

jar using a lilting voice. After playing this for several scenes, I asked them to regroup and

think about traits that they liked less, or traits that were mocked by others. We went

through the same process of devising a SuperTrans name, power, movement, and voice to

correspond with our new traits and played the game again.

This silly game had its own powers of healing for me personally. When we were

working on *Undesirable Elements* and talking about the inadequacies of temporal

projects like the "It Gets Better" campaign, one of the things I found so moving about our

discussion was that the people in the It Gets Better campaign rarely looked or sounded

like us. Most of the people we saw were affluent, white, wealthy, able-bodied, cis

celebrities. We wanted a representation of our own stories, including that it does not

always get better, but we are still here. We talked about an exercise in which Professor

Judyie Al-Bilali asked me to write a letter to my future self, and how meaningful that

exercise had been for me. Before sending everyone off for winter break in 2015, I asked

them each to write one of these letters. In response, one of the participants wrote in her

survey, "it isn't future me that needs that letter, it was *past* me" (Survey, December 2015,

emphasis mine). In that note, she captured a feeling I've long held: just as the events in

my past are phantoms marking my present body, I always hope the things I do now can

send healing vibrations into my past. For me, SuperTrans was a way of reclaiming these

moments in the present to send healing thoughts back to my past, telling me to stick it

out.

The Naming Ritual

Several months after devising the Nothing Left Deleuze name game, I described
this process to an advisor, Dr. Harley Erdman, whose curiosity spurred a discussion about
another aspect of naming: the naming ritual. He asked if there was some kind of rite of
passage or ceremonial process for naming within the trans community. To my knowledge,
and in the parts of the community I've seen in the US, there is no ritual. Lucas Crawford
writes, "name change is often considered the 'threshold,' signifier, or decisive event of
one's trans narrative" (49) and yet it is not marked in a moment the way one can mark
surgery, birth, or marriage. Many trans people choose to go through the legal process, and
I even stood up in court once to legalize my chosen name. But this does not feel like a
trans ritual; instead, it feels more like what I had to do to protect my trans identity within
cisgender structures of legibility.

Similarly, I encountered another ritual at the time of my name change that was
intended to benefit my parents and their "mourning" the loss of whatever my birth name
meant to them. When I was legally changing my name, though I had transitioned to using
the new name in all aspects of my life for several months, my mother asked if we could
have a small "funeral" to mourn the "death" of the old name and what it represented, and
then a larger celebration of the "birth" of this new name. What was for her a powerful
moment of transition and acceptance felt traumatic for me in ways I could not yet
articulate. Now, many years later, I look at that moment and recognize the many
rhetorical problems that left me feeling uneasy and forced into legibility structures. The
rhetoric of the funeral for my old name was connected to the "death" of whoever she had

thought I might become when she initially named me. To me, that old name had no impact on my choices and identity, and as such, its dissolution did not represent a death of potential or even the loss of that history. Not all trans people ascribe to the "born this way" narrative structure, and I personally found that my name history, including the fact of my name change, is a part of my narrative—I have not always been Finn, Finn was something I came to be. This "death" then felt like my mother was unable to reconcile my complexity and the distance between the label and the truths of my experience, though she has since come to appreciate and affirm this same complexity now. Finally, her attachment to the dead name was reflective of Derrida's theory that, "proper names, property, and propriety—each a derivative of the Latin *proprius*, which means 'own' in the adjective sense—are mutually implicated" (cited in Crawford 51). While this may not have been her intention, by claiming her connection to the dead name, she claimed what potential I held in her eyes. She had been holding onto phantom futures that I was, in effect, destroying. It took us a long time and a good cry in a Ruby Tuesday's to work out our fears and attachments, but now this whole thesis would not exist without her guidance and love.

Ruminating on these experiences and Dr. Erdman's question, I devised a frame in which trans people could develop their own ritual process of naming. Many cultures have naming ceremonies in which a subject selects or is given a name, and through action or language, that name is taken in, embodied, and reflected out to the acceptance of the community.

As per the dramaturgy of my workshops, before I opened a discussion about cultural ceremonies and family rituals, I wanted to start thinking about name origins in a fun, disarming way. I created the following exercise to serve as an introduction to the work of naming rituals:

Each participant wrote the story of their birth name—how the name was chosen, how it was given to them, what the process/ritual/ceremony entailed if there was one. I did not want this to be a traumatic event, haunted by the feeling of loss, so I asked them to write these as MadLibs, removing crucial details as well as their dead names. We then redistributed the MadLibs. One person read the script while two (or more, depending on the needs of the story) participants acted out the scene on the spot. The rest of us would call out words to fill the blanks, and the actors would improvise our story.

The ensuing scenes were more hilarious than haunting, more parody than personal. Though each was borne from one of our true experiences, they were not about us. They were a reflection of our families and our cultures in an irreverent, trans-specific interpretation of what naming feels like.

After we used the introductory exercise to start our conversation into naming rituals, we spoke about what it would mean to name ourselves, and what a trans naming ceremony might be. I felt I could not determine what that process might look like for trans people as a whole, so instead I developed a series of requirements and tasks that each must include. The exercise is as follows:

Each participant must select a name for their naming process. They can use their already-chosen names, or a name they wish to use just in this space. The participant must then answer the following two questions:

1.   What is asked of them in order to take on this new name (do they have to complete a gesture or task, do they have to answer a call and response question, etc.)?

This question helped them determine what it meant to them to take on this new name *beyond* the legal requirements or documentation. Was it an embodied experience they needed to mark with a repeated gesture? Or was it a more intellectual, linguistic choice that required they state their story or define what that name will mean for them? This question builds on the Freirean idea that we "[name] the world so as to transform [our] own lives" (O'Conner and Anderson 21).

2.   What is asked of the community (and which community—their religion, their family, their cultural heritage, the trans community, etc.) in order for us to affirm this new name (do we have to complete a gesture or task, do we have to answer a call and response question, etc.)?

This question was a direct response to the naming ritual I experienced. I wanted the participants to think of what they wanted in response to their new name beyond simply being called by that name. Did they want us to have a celebration of some kind, like the "birth" part of my own experience, or did they want declarations of affirmation? What is the social/community part of the naming ceremony for trans people? This part also connects to the idea of legibility, or how one is understood. In these rituals, what is

asked of the community is often a request of legibility, a recognition, a bearing witness. Queer and trans theorist Gayle Salamon argues,

> This request 'to be seen as' is something other than a lament about invisibility or the impossibility of ever being truly and deeply recognized beneath or beyond the categories and labels where one takes up residence or that take up residence in us. To ask to be seen *as* something asserts both an equivalence and an incommensurability at once, rather than asserting one at the expense of the other. (2010, 124)

Salamon is articulating the distance between what is being asked of the community—that recognition *as* the new embodied name—and the potential impossibility of embodying a name. While grappling with this question, I asked the participants to think past the idea of a witness and instead search for an active participation, a strengthening, an affirmation. We are all here to witness you, but how can we *show* that?

As a group we sat and brainstormed some possibilities—what other naming ceremonies looked like in our communities or cultures, and what we might want to include. Several people mentioned the significance of water, a few people mentioned chants and repetition, and one made a poignant argument about the prevalence of a cultural language in naming rituals, asking what "language" might look like in a trans ritual. I told them that these rituals were their own, and they could include their family or culture's language commingled with their own created call and response, or we could create our own coded language to use. I gave the participants about a week to look into

their own family and cultures and determine what they wanted to keep and what else they felt was missing.

On one of the final workshop days, the troupe came back together and presented our rituals, with each participant one by one telling us what actions and words they chose and what we (the rest of the group) were being asked to do. We performed these rituals together, with each participant taking on their names (most used already chosen names, one retained an original name, and one selected a new name).

In one ritual, a participant finger-painted a self-portrait over a photograph of herself right in front of our eyes. It was messy, colorful, and beautiful, and the craft paint stained her hands and clothes. She signed the portrait in large, sweeping finger paint with her chosen name. When she was finished, she asked each of us to sign the portrait as well. I wonder now if by signing we were acting as co-creators or agreeing to see her as she saw herself.

One participant created a series of "name generators" based on the internet meme in which you use identifiers like the color of your shirt and your month of birth to determine your new name. She gave each of us one of these sheets that generated a letter and asked us to answer questions about her and shout it out when we had the letter. As we called them out, she wrote our letters on a larger sheet, unscrambling them as she went. My sheet asked "favorite ice cream" and "go-to catch phrase." Each of us eventually figured out that using her real biographical stories, the name generators each generated a letter of her chosen name. The activity was comical and irreverent, but it also said something very powerful to me: that she felt like all of these events and passions and

stories she chose added up to create her, and that this name was always meant to be hers
—just by pure math.

In another ritual, a participant stood before us and told a story of the etymology of
his chosen name. He then made three statements about themes from this etymology he
hoped to embody, writing each on his skin. The rest of us were tasked with gently rinsing
the ink from his skin while repeating the affirmation of each of the three goals. "You are
heard, you are heard, you are heard" I chanted, washing "I will be heard" from his arm. I
was almost in tears when he started to giggle from the tickling of someone washing his
side.

Some of these rituals were complex and emotional, others silly and lighthearted.
Several incorporated some form of self-marking, not including one person who told us
that if they were able, they would have performed theirs through a stick-and-poke
tattooing process. Some incorporated their cultural heritage more than others, a couple
sprinkling prayers and one putting on a traditional garment in his ceremony. Others
brought in other communities and spiritualities, including a woman who made a sigil of
her true name, representative of her witch identity. As I thought about my own naming
ceremony, I thought about my experience with my mother and how I would still want her
to be a part of this ritual now—how if I had this tool then, we may have been able to find
each other across our differences much easier.

The pieces were unique, performative, and embodied. They felt as deeply
personal as their choices of names. Crawford writes of choosing a name, "no other
moment, it seems, could be more indicative of one's agency and sovereignty (or

contained self-ownership) than of rewriting the beginning (archive or *arkhē*) of one's

entrance into language," (49) and for us, these ceremonies were our opportunity to

connect our linguistic sovereignty to our body experience, our conception of futurity to

our cultural or community history. There is also something inherent to a cultural lineage

of trans-ness in our process of developing these rituals. Theatre artist and scholar Kate

Bornstein writes:

> [LGBTQIA+ people] trace their roots to early cultures' shamanic rituals of
>
> transformation. They were tricksters, the jokers and jesters and poets; they
>
> were the whores and the priestesses. As whores and poets, they traded in
>
> love. As jesters and priestesses, our queer ancestors traded in the healing
>
> arts. Our ancestors played around with gender, as well as with sexuality.
>
> And their rituals were theater. Our ancestors performed their rituals, their
>
> theater, to heal themselves, and to heal their tribes. (157-158)

Bornstein is speaking of our ritual as a healing effort that works not only on the

individual but on the level of community. For me, these rituals were healing on those

levels, but also healing across temporal planes, connecting us to this lineage of queer

pasts and ritual arts. There had been a phantom pain in some of us that had not been

discovered or articulated until this exercise. These rituals offered us a moment to

materialize, and thus heal, that phantom. In this moment, "I claim my name and am

claimed by it at once" (Salamon 2010, 123).

<u>Conclusions</u>

As broad as this chapter has been, the scope of the techniques we explored in this workshop spanned far beyond what I have written. I devised, scrapped, or adapted so many other games and techniques that never made it into this thesis. Some were too specific; they only spoke to a few of the trans people and left the rest feeling like their experience was non-normative. Others were so broad that they did not actively engage our trans-ness. Some were fun but ultimately left us with messages we did not want to take home. And some were so close to other techniques I have encountered that I did not want to claim them. Many more techniques we started but never quite solidified as something we could pass on to others. Ultimately, the techniques I described in this chapter are those which engaged our bodies and identities in ways that felt useful to us.

Looking across this broad selection of exercises, from those where we played with names to those where we created our own naming ritual—I do feel like this chapter is missing the glue that holds together the techniques of *Undesirable Elements* or Cops in the Head. I entered the project of this troupe without any idea how I could make techniques specifically for my community, and I left this phase wondering how the dozens of ideas I developed could mesh together into one guiding principal. And they don't. They don't fit together like steps in one process. They don't lead towards one performable scene. They don't culminate in a public performance. They don't all build on one another or even flip-flop between ideas that offer two perspectives. They are far messier than that. I don't think of this as a failure, though I do wish I could hand this chapter off like a book to other facilitators who, like me, are searching for themselves in

their field. I don't think of this as scattered thoughts, though they may read like disconnected threads. But what these techniques *do* is create space. They create a way of thinking about trans bodies and identities that allows for breathing room. They let the body define itself and the self remain complex. They create a frame of self-identification but community witnessing. These techniques are a groundwork for a dramaturgy of trans narratives—one that takes into account the contradictory temporalities and the polyvocal community. These techniques are just the beginning of what I know I will someday devise, and for now, they are enough.

Though this is where my work for this thesis ends, it is far from where I want to go. There are so many more questions I want to explore in trans applied theatre. I want to examine the idea of "passing" and what it means to be constantly under scrutiny to identify as yourself. I want to explore techniques that play with the voice, the dysphoria the voice can cause, and the way trans people frequently retrain their voices or hear their voices change from hormones or surgery. I want to expand on Boal's conception of "masks" to explore the idea of "peeling" or living part-time as trans. I want to make visible the moments of conscious performativity and push the limits of what we consider unconscious in trans identity.

This thesis was built on a provocation, but I also want to provoke others. I want trans artists to take up these techniques and adapt them as needed. I want to provoke the artists working in applied theatre now to consider the way their trans identity can inspire new body and narrative dramaturgies. I want to push trans artists to make their own techniques when those they are using don't quite fit. I want them to come up with new

language for this work, like the phantoms I've described here. I want them to fight for connections within the community, even when our narratives are disparate. I want them to build this community up, so we can witness each other.

There is so much pain in the transgender community. But there is also healing, beauty, and power. This work is celebration of those things, and of our creativity. As Rosamund King writes, "imagination [is] a powerful tool that allows us to acknowledge the many creative modes of survival and coexistence that have characterized individuals and communities who identify with transgressive genders, sexualities, and desire" (cited in Martínez-San Miguel and Tobias 240).

For me the imagination of these techniques has been especially powerful. I used these tools to rewrite my own history, and in so doing, wrote a new future. On the day of our naming ceremony, I also created my own naming ritual. It started with a garden. When I was a kid, my mom always had my sister and I garden with her, which we both abhorred as if it were torture. I could not wrap my head around the love she poured into the ground and was only rewarded with flowers. When I was a little older, my mother worked with a man who made her so upset, that she took me outside and asked me to help her make a small garden in his honor. We slammed shovels into the dirt and jumped on the fresh earth, screaming weird little rhymes we made about this awful man. And from this anger, resentment, pain, and headaches, we grew strawberries. Beautiful, plump, red strawberries. It was this experience that grew my lifelong love of gardening. It was this experience that taught me you can pour all of your fear and dread and angst into something beautiful.

161

When I told my mother I was changing my name, her very first reaction was "I hate that name. I knew a guy with that name once, he was a jerk." She didn't mean the comment out of spite or rejection, but out of attachments that name already had in her mind. The two stories remained linked in my memory for years, and it wasn't until I gave my mother a draft of this paper to read that she told me the two were not connected. But what is true and what is real are rarely the same. And for me, they had both been a part of one story, the story of my mother and me.

So when it came time for me to create my own naming ceremony, I poured all of these histories into it, and all the potential futures too. I took a small terra cotta pot and brought a small box of soil and rocks, and a cup of water. The soil was collected spoonfuls from my garden—one from a plant I got for my wedding, one from a plant I inherited from my grandmother (from whom I also chose my last name), one from a plant I brought back from South Africa, one from a plant I potted from my old garden, and so on. As I told my witnesses the story of these soils and my name, I planted tiny seeds in this pot, pressing the soil with my fingertips. I asked my witnesses to choose from the rocks or the water: they could place the pebbles in the soil, as an agreement to protect and strengthen me, or they could spoon a little water on the seeds, as an agreement to nourish and encourage me.

When I told my mother what I had done, I could feel us both aching on either end of the phone, feeling the reopening of wounds and feeling equally the potential for healing. This ritual had offered me a space to reconfigure my memories of my naming, and offered her a place in that ritual.

162

I am overwhelmingly proud of the creative things we have accomplished, the topics we have tackled, and the passion of this troupe to continue making space for ourselves in applied theatre. I fully believe that these techniques could be picked up and used by any troupe wanting to celebrate and serve their trans community, but I also believe these techniques could be adapted for use outside of my community as well. The topics we explored are not the sole property of the trans experience, though they grew out of our specific needs, questions, and stories. But just as we did the labor of making other techniques work for us, it is the job of some other artist to make what we have done accessible to their needs. For now, I am happy that it is just ours.

CHAPTER 8

AFTERWORD

<u>A Letter to My Trans Community</u>

To my trans community,

Being trans is being part of a community. Even though the troupe was unable to craft an *Undesirable Elements* script that produced a meta-narrative of our community, I feel like this project has only encouraged me to believe that each of us exists within an incredible trans lineage. Though the story might be circuitous and out of time, from Marsha P. Johnson to Lou Sullivan, from the trans elder who welcomed me to UniTy to the young trans kid whose parents asked me for advice last month, we are connected. I remember sitting around scattered clippings from script pieces and research and hearing one of us say that a photograph of a trans woman from half a century ago looked just like her. The laughter soon turned somber, as several of us lamented not having the kind of genealogy that people have with their cultural backgrounds. What is most powerful to me about the work of UE is that we were able to find these connections across time and space—even if the strongest connections were our inability to make "rational" sense of our complicated lives. Storytelling offers us a powerful way to connect to a history of performance, of artists speaking truth to power, of stigmatized bodies marking their stories in a collective history. From this work, I see this troupe continuing to ask questions, to interrogate our connections, to reconsider the idea of lineage as one that is not necessarily biological or familial. I see us pushing back when we are not heard.

Being trans is a performative experience. Whether or not you believe your gender is performed, you are performing resilience, you are performing transformation, you are performing multiplicity. In Cops in the Head, this troupe was reminded of theatre's power to make visible these complex lived experiences. I remember one Cops scene, after creating all of the cops, the moment when the protagonist came in with an idea for an antibody that was literally a recreation of another person in the troupe—a friend developed outside the space whose voice inside the room became a voice of protection and empowerment—down to the hands on the hips and the scrunched nose. That moment was powerful not just for the protagonist who had found this support, but also for the person whose body was being imitated, as a representation of that power. From this experience, I see us building solidarity. As the troupe members leave this work, I hope we enter our community better able to *see* one another, including those ghosts which exist only within. I see us working to expel these ghosts from our own minds and sharing these tools to insulate one another from the impact of oppressive forces beyond our community.

Being trans is a creative labor. We craft our own languages and terms for our bodies, our names, and our identities. We deconstruct and rebuild our lives around an internal truth and manifest that truth in our world. In the final chapter of this project, I saw this troupe engage deeply without what it meant when Boal asked us to think not only of what we want to dismantle, but also what we want to create in its place. One day, we had been debriefing a failed exercise, and there were so many loud "what ifs" being thrown at me from all over the circle that I screamed "enough!" I asked them all to *show* me instead. Their games were silly, thoughtful, messy, and impressive, and I hope they

165

continue to build on them. Though I came to this troupe with my own ideas for games

and exercises, they brought me their willingness, their critique, their enthusiasm, their

expertise, and their questions. Together we built so many things I hope to soon share with

the rest of you. I see each of us using our individual skills to continue building spaces for

ourselves and our community.

My skills might be limited to theatre, but in this troupe alone there were scientists,

engineers, artists, performers, musicians, teachers, writers, a mathematician, and more.

Use what you have, make what you don't. You are powerful, you are beautiful, you are

creative. Merriam-Webster defines transgressors as those who "go beyond limits," and

this group has already done that, through a series of small, but TRANSgressive Acts. I

hope we each continue to push ourselves and our world. I am grateful and humbled to be

part of such a history and community.

Yours,

Finn

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