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MASTER'S PROJECT: STORY-DWELLING: AN EXPLORATION OF RELATIONAL HEALING, COMMUNITY, AND SELF LIBERATION, IN RESPONSE TO THE COVID - 19 PANDEMIC.

Cassondra Opal Klepzig

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MASTER'S PROJECT: STORY-DWELLING:
AN EXPLORATION OF RELATIONAL HEALING, COMMUNITY, AND SELF
LIBERATION, IN RESPONSE TO THE COVID - 19 PANDEMIC.

A Capstone Project Presented

by

Cassandra Klepzig

to

The Faculty of the Graduate College

of

The University of Vermont

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of Master of Professional Studies
Specializing in Leadership for Sustainability

October, 2021

Defense Date: 08/23/2021

Committee:

Ramsey Champagne, LMHC, M.A., M.Ed., Coach
Matt Kolan, Ph.D., Capstone Leadership Team

ABSTRACT

The Covid 19 pandemic has led to significant changes within the theatre industry. During this time, many of my colleagues and I committed to a process of assessing and attending to some of the harmful practices that have permeated our systems and the culture of our venues. This capstone project emerged from this process and focused on the questions: What harm and healing is currently happening in our community? How might we honor the wisdom that is emerging to support liberation, healing, and deepened accountability practices? Throughout this project I engaged with a suite of methods that focused on my own internal conditions while simultaneously attending to my role, responsibilities, leadership, and relationships within the theatre industry. This project led me to realize the personal and collective reflection necessary to create the future we were envisioning. I explored parallels between natural ecosystems and community, tended to a relationship with my own grief and identity, and created accountability structures around the ways that my foundational values show up in my work. As I return to leadership roles and imagine the future of the theatrical artform, I am committed to creating space for storytelling that amplifies the complexity of the human experience, celebrates difference, and centers empathy as a tool for cultural healing and reform.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Immense appreciation for the land of the Catawba and Cherokee people, the mountains, and their inhabitants that have been my collaborators and teachers throughout this process.

Extreme gratitude for the generosity of Matt Kolan for his dedication to this unique program and the spacious container that he has curated for growth and liberation throughout this process.

Likewise, I would like to extend my appreciation for Dr. Sayra Pinto and Alexandra Valladares for sharing the generous gifts of story and perspective and creating a welcoming atmosphere during our residency experiences.

Gratitude to Ramsey Champagne LMHC, M.A., M.Ed., for her patience, inquiry, and insight as my coach while I navigated the curiosities that came with my research and the brave space that we created together.

Gratitude to Heather Talley, Marie Veal, Jennifer Lentfer, and Tom Wessels for curating educational environments to explore deeper channels of inquiry and ways of knowing.

Gratitude to Quinn Karley and Lauren Akin for working behind the scenes to ensure my safety and understanding throughout the entirety of this MLS journey.

Gratitude to all of the amazing and extremely generous affiliates of the MLS program and the gifts that they so graciously shared with us along the way.

Last but certainly not least, immense love and gratitude to my MLS cohort who have become my chosen family. The love, support, vulnerability, and compassion that we have all shared over the past two years has been a humbling and incredible experience that I will cherish for the rest of my life. To learn alongside such a beautiful group of humans has helped me center in joy and liberation in a way I am certain I would not have otherwise been able to.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	ii
CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION	1
CHAPTER 2: METHODS	3
CHAPTER 3: RESULTS	7
CHAPTER 4: EVALUATION & ASSESSMENT	9
CHAPTER 5: KEY LEARNINGS	10
REFERENCES	12
APPENDIX A: REPLANTING VIDEO	16
APPENDIX B: SYLLABUS	17
APPENDIX C: ACCOUNTABILITY STRUCTURE	18
APPENDIX D: ANNOTATED BIBLIOGRAPHY	21

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Guiding Curiosities

I grew up in the theatre. For me, the “Family Playhouse” community theatre was my first introduction to a community that celebrates authenticity and difference. Growing with and alongside the artform, I’ve come to realize that the stories we tell revolve around relationships and the complexity of the human experience. As I began my capstone journey, I sat with the following questions: What is the scope of the relationships that we foster within the medium of theatrical storytelling? What harm and healing is currently happening in our community? How might we honor the wisdom that is emerging to curate and maintain a container for liberation, healing, and deepened accountability practices?

As the circumstances of my community evolved in the face of the pandemic, the inquiry turned inward and challenged me to assess my own practices, values, and ways that I show up in the world. As the questions ended up adapting into a more introspective tone, I tangled with the edges of community and self liberation and asked myself how I might use this pause to cultivate a better community within myself. How might this research and deepened relationship inform the future of my own leadership practices?

Pandemic as Pause

In March of 2020, I landed at JFK after celebrating the life of my Grandfather, to two voicemails and three emails cancelling all of the work that I had lined up for the rest of the year. As I grappled with the grief of my grandfather’s passing, this news landed harshly on my already vulnerable consciousness. The “sorry for your loss” comments suddenly extended to the loss of my job. In my newfound free time, I felt my passion tugging at me to make something of this pause that seemed to be both a blessing and a curse. In her essay *The Pandemic is a Portal*

Arundhati Roy states: “Historically, pandemics have forced humans to break with the past and imagine their world anew. This one is no different. It is a portal, a gateway between one world and the next” (Roy, 2020, Chapter 9, 20:49). I was able to see this “forced spaciousness” as I liked to call it, as an opportunity for me to slow down and take stock of the unintentional harm that has permeated my industry’s systems. Once the initial shock settled, insights, discussion, and opinion articles started popping up all over. After all, this pause was a privilege for me in such a hectic and uncertain time. These conversations and ideas were loud and passionate, with articles, groups, and gatherings emerging every day around evaluating and reforming the systems of oppression that our venues house. Genevive Beller published an essay to Howlround Theatre Commons, an online forum that has been a major hub for these inquiries, that inspired a call to action for accountability. Beller exclaims “It is time for the whispers of wage and labor equity to become shouts for transparency. For the tenuous plans of diversity and inclusion to become substantial actions. For the progressive steps toward environmental sustainability to become definitive actions” (Beller, 2020, para. 3). With each discussion, my vision became clearer: to explore the depths of these relationships, the unintentional harm that has permeated them, and the ways that our artform might collaborate to reduce harm and encourage shared healing from this crisis.

CHAPTER 2: METHODS

“Calling In” and “Calling Out”

In response, my colleagues and I created a Facebook group, with the intention to collect, distribute, and further reflect upon the information that was rapidly emerging. As I felt the fire being fanned, I tried to notice the kindling. Was this passion coming from love or anger, community or castigation? The moment clearly needed to be met with some accountability structures, but my empathetic instincts were causing me to be very cautious. I felt that this “call out” culture was seemingly contributing to the divide and the anger instead of inviting people into the conversation. “In many ways, holding each other accountable has come to mean punishing each other. Sometimes it feels like we’re all competing on a hardcore game show, trying to knock each other down to be crowned the movement’s Best Activist” (Johnson, 2021, para.7). This act of “calling out” surfaced a lot of discomfort and defensiveness for me, which I eventually realized was a reactionary manifestation of my own “right to comfort,” listed in Tema Okun’s characteristics of white supremacy culture. In this document she also states there is a “tendency to identify what’s wrong; little ability to identify, name, and appreciate what’s right” (Okun, 2003, p.8). As I revisited Okun’s words, I was able to name a lot of the defenses that I was feeling and consider whether they were serving my own foundational values of love and empathy. It was here that the words of Alicia A. Wallace found me, “No matter how privileged we are, we still need human connection. We still need to give and receive love” (Wallace, 2020, para. 2). Andréa Ranae Johnson echoes this idea by stating “Social change and transformation requires an uprooting of what’s not working and space to cultivate ways of relating to ourselves and each other that are sustainable and humanizing” (Johnson, 2020, para. 3). To me “calling in” feels like a more gentle form of accountability that stems from patience and empathy while still

creating space for difference and deepened accountability. I imagined this as a relational practice and found myself trying to discern the edges and intersections of these two approaches. Where in my own tracking had I called in or called out my own conditioning and what values, defenses, or curiosities came from that? Often, this looked like tapping into my own conditioning and sifting through the perfectionism and survivalism that was creeping into my own processing. I realized that these approaches are not in opposition with each other, but in fact can collaborate toward reform and accountability. Where some moments might invite opportunity for “calling in” to deeper discussion, sometimes “calling out” is necessary in order to stop or alleviate immediate harm. As I continue to navigate where and when it is appropriate for me to engage with these practices, it feels very important to use my own privilege and positionality with much caution and intention (remaining mindful of my own white saviorism tendencies).

Loss as Gain

In the year and a half leading up to the pandemic, I was thrust into a very intense and committed relationship with my grief that I had never been challenged to tend to before. As I held onto the heartache of lost loved ones, and now the identity crisis that came from losing my career, I started to recognize how much my grief was touching every part of my being. As I prioritized getting to know my grief, I wrote a poem about the turmoil and emotions that accompany this feeling. (see Appendix A) This pain became part of my metacognitive processing. As I explored my newly discovered “five bodied” metacognition, I found that I could invite my grief as a collaborator while I built a relationship with the validity of my own data collection of self. I felt a call to re center, to again re-visit some words from early on in my MLS journey "Before I could de-center myself, there had to be a self to de-center" (Syedullah, 2019,

Chapter 4, 3:26). It felt overwhelmingly important to take this moment of pause that I had been gifted, to evaluate the harms and healings that were happening in my work, and do the same for the relationships that I house internally. Here I was with an amazing opportunity to start fresh, to literally uproot and redefine my own community of self.

Radical Exploration of Fundamental Self

I was comforted by the words of Mia Birdsong, “The work of dismantling systems of oppression that you benefit from isn’t altruistic work that just helps others, it is about your own liberation as well” (Birdsong, 2020, Chapter 2, 5:07). As I moved from NYC back to the mountains of the Catawba and Cherokee people in Asheville North Carolina, I found an opportunity to replant myself and acknowledge that I had outgrown the pot that I was raised in. Curating my new environment took the form of emergent tracking of growth and themes that were evident in my daily journal entries, class assignments, and peer conversations and turning them into a visual representation of my own replanting process (see Appendix B). Some of these themes included loss as gain, discomfort as digestion (silence was not a weakness), and relationship to nature (as a spiritual outlet). As I embarked on this journey of self liberation, I felt myself releasing my ties to competition and comparison that were distracting me from allowing my own authentic selves to reach their full potential. Emma Seppälä Ph.D. explains that “The primary goal of our desire for success is to be successful, to belong, and to be loved yet ironically self-criticism and competition end up having the reverse effect” (Seppälä, 2012, para. 2). As I entered this territory of unlearning my own people-pleasing and competitive tendencies, one of the most prominent threads that emerged was around abundance and scarcity which resurfaced throughout my exploration of the wisdom of nature.

Wisdom of Nature

As I nested into new definitions of home and community, I found great company in the mountains, the trees, and all of their companions in the natural world. These beings became intimate collaborators in my learning and unlearning journey. As I tuned into the parallels of sustainable community practices and ecosystems rooted in abundance and collaboration, my eyes were opened to the beauty, love, and joy that is a natural side effect of collaborative community. Not only can we learn from the wonders of our natural world, but as storytellers we have the opportunity to reflect this brilliance. As we continue to mimic the gorgeous sunsets on our stages, or build new structures from the mighty trees of our forests, it feels important to hold space and credit for the contribution of the land that we reside on and the inhabitants that cared for it before us. Tony Birch remarks on the importance of cultivating joy within this relationship in his essay, "...we must listen to those who have lived with country for thousands of years without killing it, and in order to live with a healthy planet we need to tell stories of our experience with it, and our love for it. Stories that speak of a love of place encourage us to act ethically towards it. We must share our stories, and we must grant equal voice to the stories of others" (Birch, 2020, para.6). This comes with tremendous responsibility as it can be uncomfortable to discern what stories are ours to tell and how we might serve the complexity of human experience in a loving and conscientious way.

CHAPTER 3: RESULTS

Replanting and Residing

As the pandemic neared a year in length and the conversations slowed down, I reflected on the relational aspect of the work I was doing and felt discouraged. How could I relate this to a community from which I felt so much physical distance? I recognized that my distaste for the industry that had caused me to burnout was surfacing as discomfort with the community that came with it, and I began to feel like the support system that I had when the quarantine started wasn't there anymore. Entertaining the grief that arose from this distance led me through emotions of loneliness, exhaustion, and anger towards hierarchy (I wondered if the movement had outgrown the bottom tier of the hierarchy of our industry). Admittedly, it's quite possible that this feeling sprouted from my privileged position of having the resources to leave the city and plant new roots around the mountains that I grew up with. In doing so, I realised that I afforded myself a spaciousness that perhaps my colleagues weren't able to access. I recognized that the grief that attached to this was making it difficult to fully engage with the research I was doing and kept reminding myself that I still had an immense system of love and support through my graduate school cohort, my capstone coach, and the new acquaintances that I had been making around my new home. I also invited one of my cohort members into an "accountabilibuddy" relationship (to be continued after graduation) to provide a touch point for relational practice. Then I remembered the words "If research doesn't change you as a person, then you aren't doing it right" (Wilson, 2004, p. 83). As I struggled with the relational aspect of this project, I acknowledged my urges to fall back into perfectionism, urgency, and tangible outcomes (more characteristics of white supremacy culture that I am trying to unlearn) and leaned into the community of self that I had been deepening relationship with throughout this pause.

Relational Practice

Exploring the potential of doing some adjunct professor work, I began to envision what it would look like to incorporate my learnings and introduce value centering as a core practice of educational storytelling. This vision took on the form of a syllabus. (see appendix C) The intention behind this learning environment is to create a map for continued curiosities that come with the responsibility of this artform and consider the ways that we might integrate reciprocity and gratitude into our practices. By offering young storytellers a container that encourages vulnerability, uncertainty, and discomfort as a collaborator, the hope is to create a safe and brave space to practice the values they wish to embody in their art. Parker J. Palmer sets the scene for this container with the following words. “I believe that it is here, in our modes of knowing, that we shape souls by the shape of our knowledge. It is here that the idea of community must ultimately take root and have impact if it is to reshape the doing of higher education” (Palmer, 2021, para. 10). This type of conversation in an academic setting feels like tending to the soil of our future. My hope is to show up as an affiliate to the curiosity of students, not a facilitator. I intend to offer my own experience of five years in the live events industry of NYC in juxtaposition to my introspective expedition over the past two years to assist others in claiming their own story while holding space for respect and relationship with the stories that they are putting on the stage.

CHAPTER 4: EVALUATION AND ASSESSMENT

Embodiment

Recently, I was presented with my first opportunity to return to work in my field. This chance to practice embodying my values and mindful practices within a work environment proved more difficult than I expected. I continued tracking the urges to return to my old practices and noticed a common impulse to “check out” when the practice became difficult. When this urge shows up I usually combat it with other practices that promote “checking in”. I’ve since found this reminder in this Career Contessa blog stating “This means not throwing up your hands and saying "It's too hard!" It means taking time to identify what your privilege affords you—and how you can use it to lift others up with you” (Jadczak & Murray, 2019, para. 3). As I struggled with these urges, it became clear to me that I would need to develop an accountability structure to help me find center when my cultural conditioning tries to make its way back in. This led to the creation of my accountability practices map (see appendix D). I’m hopeful that these practices will provide a road map as I recognize what these urges and fears look like without falling victim to them again.

CHAPTER 5: KEY LEARNINGS

Theatre as Cultural Catalyst

Since theatre has always provided me with a community of acceptance and a celebration of difference, it feels rich to explore the potential for equity and positive cultural effect. In the article *Practicing Elements of a Liberating Ecosystem* it is stated that “Deep equity is a cultural revolution, one that encompasses honoring differences; recognizing the impact our identities and positions have on our individual and collective experiences; focusing on relationships and whole beings with multiple identities; addressing trauma and healing; and eliminating systemic disparities”(Duncan et al., 2019, para. 3). I feel that theatre has a unique ability to ground in this practice as we create and reflect the human experience. “Narratives use values to establish norms and compel people to either enforce these norms or to change these norms. Narratives shape reasoning and response, common sense and consensus. They shape and reshape the boundaries of what is possible” (Soriano et al., 2019, para. 8).

Solidarity and Reciprocity

As we return to our operations with access to an archive of experience and ideas, we look to those in positions of power who had the privilege of keeping their jobs throughout this time to meet our voices with action and systematic changes. We have already seen an instance in which promises around better practices were broken and the lower positions had to stand up for themselves amidst returning from this crisis.

This resilience and passion that we have had the opportunity to practice over the past two years, has provided an appealing glimpse at what the future of theatrical storytelling could inspire. In the words of Bill English, artistic director of the San Francisco Playhouse, “Theatre is like a gym for empathy. It’s where we go to build up the muscles of compassion, to practice

listening and understanding and engaging with people that are not just like ourselves. We practice sitting down, paying attention and learning from other people's actions. We practice caring" (Gunderson, 2012, para. 7). This is the type of theatre that I hope to produce as we return. By tending to my own liberation and value centering as a leader, I hope to inspire art that is a playground for creativity, a jungle gym for empathy, and a community of solidarity that will not only better prepare our industry for survival in the face of crisis but prepare our minds and our hearts for a better, more sustainable world all together.

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APPENDIX A: “Good Grief”

Good Grief

Who are you?

One of the four family members that have moved on from this physical plain ?
 The mask I used to wear before I met myself?
 The success that I burnt out for?
 Or the uncertainty that has come from this historical moment?

What are you ?

This lump in my throat that no water will clear?
 This suffocating feeling everytime I attempt to tune in?
 Can't you tell I'm trying to listen...
 My **mind** hurts to house you, my **body** too heavy to hold you, my **emotions** too tender
 to speak to you, and my **spirit** too malnourished to honor you.

When are you?

Going to stop sneaking up on me?
 I'm too busy. Too hurt. Not ready to talk to you.
 I'm transitioning. Becoming. And you're not coming.

Where are you?

While I **Mind** my business and reminisce.
 While I **embody** my own authenticity.
 While the **emotions** helps me process
 all that my **spirit** can't put into words.
 It seems you've shown up at the table.
 Grab another chair for **grief**.

How are you?

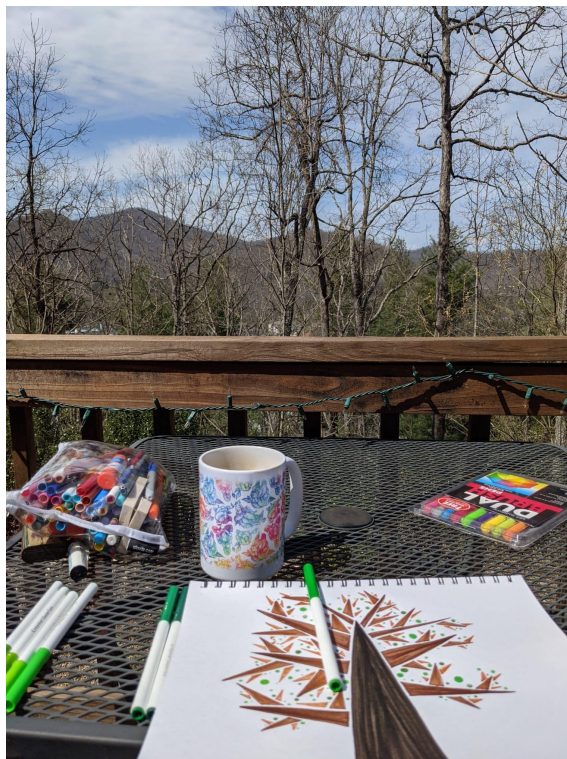
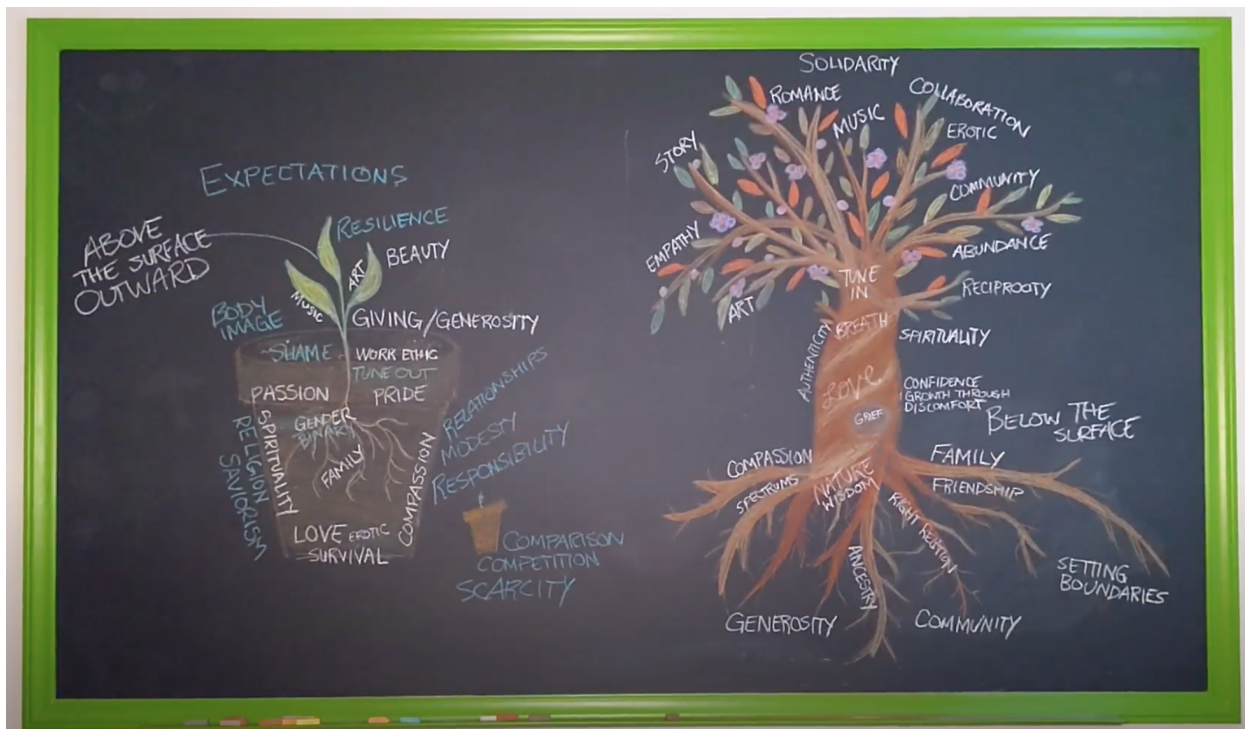
Now that I've invited you in.
 Now that the letters I wrote you arrived.
 Now that I know you don't mean to harm me.
 And in some ways am why I've survived.

Have you settled in? How's the family?

APPENDIX B: REPLANTING VIDEO

Re-planting Self: Video Link

<https://drive.google.com/file/d/1k87h8OcQjenJHrO8qZjbQ2YfR1p6iywM/view>



APPENDIX C: SYLLABUS

Story Dwelling: A Relational Approach to the Art of Storytelling



“We are not the stars, we are the sky” - Mutale Nkonde

Instructor: Cassondra O. Klepzig coklepzig1@gmail.com

*Envisioned to be incorporated into a University or Higher Education setting as an elective course open to general ed. and arts students.

Introduction

This course is an opportunity for young artists who are considering entering the theatrical industry to ground in their own values and explore the cultural and personal responsibility that comes with the artform of theatrical storytelling.

Statement of intent:

It is of the utmost importance that this class environment is built on a foundation of mutual respect, acceptance, and compassion. The space that we create together will be one of fun and creativity but will also enter territory of vulnerability and discomfort. As we build community within this course, I ask that we be intentional about practicing deep listening, respect, honesty, gratitude, and bravery. As curator of this space, I will always invite feedback and collaboration on ways that this atmosphere might improve or reform for the sake of safety and liberation of all participants.

Course Structure:

- **Class Environment:** Participants will collaborate with the instructor to define the shape and atmosphere of this shared educational container while incorporating the following core practices.
- **“Production Meetings”:** Each session will begin with a “production meeting” style gathering, in which we invite time for reflection, check in, and further curiosity to emerge before diving into course offerings.
- **Journaling:** Students will be expected to maintain and utilize a personal journal. Class time will be provided to distribute and decorate these journals to allow for a bit of play and relationship building before diving into the course material.

This exploration will play out in 4 sections (brief descriptions below):

Module #1 Reclaiming Story of Self:

- As a trail head, students will explore the values and lived experiences that have led them to this artform and cultivate curiosity around how they might foresee their future in this industry unfolding. This phase will also include inquiry around centering and decentering in your vision as a revolutionary act.
- **Essential Questions:** What core values are present? What is the driving passion behind your interest in this work? What structures or relationships might you create or cultivate for yourself to remain centered in these values and passions? What curiosities emerge from this exploration?

Module #2 Gratitude and Amplification of Theatre as Cultural Catalyst:

- This section will explore the work that is currently and previously being done with the artform of theatre. In this, we will consider the various ways that this artform has been used to create safe and brave spaces as well as challenging cultural norms and tending to progressive change.
- **Essential Questions:** What harms and healings exist in the practices and structures of our systems? What innovations and creative solutions emerged from the pause of the pandemic and what structures can we amplify to maintain these changes? How might we meet the call for cultural change in our society as storytellers and artists? Whose stories are we telling and how are we involving them in the process?

Module #3 Wisdom of Nature: Exploration of Theatre through Lens of Ecosystem

- This phase will explore the community of theatre through the lens of ecosystems. By practicing deep listening to the wisdoms of natural systems, we can create a deeper understanding around our own hierarchical systems and the power of community centric collaboration.
- **Essential Questions:** What curiosities emerge around abundance and scarcity in symbiotic relationships? How might we honor these gifts of wisdom from nature with reciprocity and assimilate environmental consciousness into our core practices? How

might we cultivate respect and gratitude for the land and the stories that we tell of place and endangered ways of knowing?

Module #4 Value Centering and Intentional Visioning

- In this section, we will revisit the first module and track what values and passions have remained, evolved, and adapted. Centering in gratitude and reciprocity for the curiosities and gifts that have driven our development throughout this course, we might re-imagine how we hope to embody this growth as we move forward in our industry. The “final project” comes from this phase and will be a portfolio / artifact of self reflection and future envisioning.
- **Essential Questions:** In what ways have your values, visions, and passions evolved or adapted throughout this exploration? Where did you feel discomfort and how did you move through or sit with that discomfort? Where did you feel yourself expanding and challenging your learning edges? What do you hope to carry with you into the next phase of your artistic practice? What methods and accountability structures do you foresee incorporating into your work to remain centered in your passions and values?

Assignments/Grading

The timeline of the course work will be ever evolving dependent on the curiosities that unfold from the course materials. The main measurement of participation will be proof of journaling practices. (Students will not be required to share their journaling process with the class, but will be asked to do weekly reflection posts on blackboard around what insights have emerged from their reflections.) All participants will then have the opportunity to review and contribute to these posts throughout the entirety of the course time.

Timeline and Dates

Module #1: Blackboard reflection post due (TBD)

Module #2: Blackboard reflection post due (TBD)

Module #3: Blackboard reflection post due (TBD)

Module #4: Final Reflection & Artifacts due (TBD) (including gratitude, comments, and curiosities on peer postings)

Assessment

Students will receive feedback from the instructors at the end of each phase based on their dialogue posts and self-assessment.

Engagement and Participation	75%
Journaling and Tracking	25%

APPENDIX D: ACCOUNTABILITY

Accountability Structures: Personal guide to mindful practice of community of self.

The intent of this document is to provide a road map back to right relationship with my metacognitive relationships when the urge arises to check-out instead of check-in. As I work towards incorporating these practices into my embodied leadership style, the intention is to tap into one of these sources from each metacognitive category as part of my daily routine.

Alongside these practices, I have reached out to a member of my cohort and cultivated a commitment to build and maintain an “accountabilibuddy” relationship. With this, we intend to have bi-monthly check-ins about the ways in which our capstone work continues to contribute to and collaborate with our leadership styles and daily practices while checking in about the emergent curiosities and learning edges that arise alongside these practices.

