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Visionary Futures: Science Fiction Theatre for Social Justice Movements

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Visionary Futures:
Science Fiction Theatre for Social Justice Movements

A Thesis Presented

By

JOSHUA GLENN-KAYDEN

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

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MFA Program in Theater Directing

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JOSHUA GLENN-KAYDEN

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DEDICATION

For my Dad, who never stopped learning

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank the many important people who have shaped my graduate school experience and this thesis project.

I am so grateful for the entire team of collaborators on *Visionary Futures*. To M Sloth Levine, Jaymes Sanchez, and Phaedra Scott, thank you for writing such marvelous plays and your trust in me as a director. To Finn Lefevre, Eli Plenk, Dr. TreaAndrea Russworm, thank you for graciously sharing your insight and helping shape the work. I would also like to thank the actors for bringing so much love, curiosity, and joy to the process. Thank you to the design team and production staff for your consistently inspiring and creative solutions to all aspects of the work. And enormous thanks to Tatiana Godfrey, a brilliant dramaturg and dear friend. This thesis project wouldn't have been half as impactful without your voice and knowledge.

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And finally, an enormous thank you to my fellow MFA graduate students. I am so grateful to have spent the last three years with such brilliant, compassionate individuals.

ABSTRACT

***VISIONARY FUTURES:* SCIENCE FICTION THEATRE FOR SOCIAL JUSTICE MOVEMENTS**

SEPTEMBER 2021

JOSHUA GLENN-KAYDEN, B.A., TUFTS UNIVERSITY

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Directed by: Professor Gilbert McCauley

This written portion of my thesis chronicles my experience as director and producer of *Visionary Futures: Science Fiction Theatre for Social Justice Movements*, in collaboration with playwrights, activists, actors, designers, and a dramaturg.

In this thesis, I explore the process of creating a meaningful thesis project during the Covid-19 pandemic. I discuss the idea of visionary fiction as created by adrienne maree brown and Walidah Imarisha and how to create theatre within that genre. This thesis chronicles the development and production of three new plays of visionary fiction that wrestle with contemporary social issues, all designed for digital performance. I share my process pairing each writer with an activist to create work that envisioned more just worlds while also being responsive to the current moment. I explore the opportunities and challenges of reimagining the generative writing process, making theatre within a digital medium, and being creative during a global pandemic. This thesis also includes the full text of each play and links to the recordings of the digital productions.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Visionary Futures: Science Fiction Theatre for Social Justice Movements

represents the culmination of three years of study at UMass Amherst as well as years of professional work in Boston. This project combined my experience developing new plays, my personal mission around theatre and social change, and my love for science fiction. It also represents a very specific moment in time as the entire project was created during the Covid-19 pandemic. We couldn't rehearse or perform in-person, so everything was planned with digital performance in mind.

The idea for *Visionary Futures* was based on the book *Octavia's Brood: Science Fiction Stories From Social Justice Movements*, edited by adrienne maree brown and Walidah Imarisha. In collaboration with the UMass Theatre department, I commissioned M Sloth Levine (they/them), Jaymes Sanchez (he/him), and Phaedra Scott (she/her) to each write a short play in the visionary fiction genre. Visionary fiction is a term created by brown and Imarisha to distinguish "science fiction that has relevance toward building new, freer worlds" (Brown & Imarisha, 4). Through collaboration with Tatiana Godfrey (she/her, the project dramaturg) and my thesis committee, I paired each writer with an activist at different points of the writing process to create plays that were visionary in scope but also responsive to the contemporary moment. Sloth was paired with Finn Lefevre (they/them), Jaymes was paired with Eli Plenk (they/he), and Phaedra was paired with Dr. TreaAndrea Russworm (she/her). The writers were asked to write with digital performance in mind, as opposed to trying to adapt something designed for traditional theatre to the digital medium. Throughout the year, I worked with each writer/activist

pairing, along with Tatiana, actors, and designers to develop these plays from first drafts to full digital productions.

This process was an experiment on many levels. Tatiana and I set out to explore the opportunities and challenges of collaborating with both playwrights and activists. Writing is often a solitary experience, and we were asking playwrights to let activists in at an early, vulnerable moment. Additionally, we set out to explore the opportunities within digital theatre, a medium that very few of us had ever explored. How could we create the usual sense of communal storytelling found in person if everyone would be in different spaces? And as we imagined multiple, more just futures in these plays, we also set out to reimagine the rehearsal process both for Zoom and for a company living through the stress of a global pandemic. How could we create adventurous, visionary theatre in a healthy, responsible way? We went forward with empathy, curiosity, and flexibility, and set out to create.

CHAPTER 2

CREATING THE PROJECT

Inspiration

During the summer of 2020, it became clear that no one would be producing in-person theatre in the next year and that I would have to come up with a digital thesis project. I had originally been slated to direct two mainstage productions in the 2020-21 academic year (*Head Over Heels* by the Go-Gos, James Magruder, and Jeff Whitty and another production that was still being finalized), so realizing I had to let those plans go and create a new project for a new world was initially daunting. Honestly, at first I felt completely lost. I had gone to graduate school to gain more experience directing full productions with a substantial budget so losing those opportunities in my last year was upsetting. I felt guilty that I was upset about cancelled productions while people all over the country were experiencing real tragedy, but I couldn't shake the feeling of having lost out on an important MFA capstone experience. For a long time, I didn't know what I was going to do. The situation was changing so rapidly that planning for something six to nine months in the future felt absolutely futile.

During the summer, I spent many hours speaking with both Professor Gilbert McCauley (he/him) and Professor Gina Kaufmann (she/her) as we discussed what might be possible in my last year of graduate school. I remember asking Gilbert and Gina separately what they needed a thesis project to be. I thought I would hear the basic requirements and then design something to hit those benchmarks. Both encouraged me to instead find something I was passionate about, and that we could use that inspiration to build a thesis-worthy project.

Eventually, I made a list of what mattered to me in a thesis project. I hoped that by writing it all down, I could create something compelling out of those elements. First, I knew that I wanted this project to center new work. In my directing career so far, I had primarily worked on new plays, and I wanted my MFA thesis to build on that area of interest. Additionally, I realized I could work with writers regardless of location since we would be creating and working entirely online. That was an exciting realization and one of the few silver linings of this past year. Everything being online meant that I could easily work with friends who had moved to different cities. I had already been doing some digital theatre with actor friends who had moved out of Boston and my thesis could be a way to work with writers I met in Boston who had now moved elsewhere. And in a moment where most theatre people were out of work, I was excited to find ways to use department resources to pay some writers.

I knew that I wanted this thesis to somehow relate to social justice. I had been doing this kind of work for most of my professional career through my staff job at Company One Theatre in Boston. The mission of Company One Theatre is to create community at the intersection of art and social change, which I have also adopted for myself. I was also wondering if there could be a way to include activists who were doing work outside of the theatre. Right before starting graduate school, I had directed a piece called *This Place/Displaced* with Artists' Theater of Boston. *This Place/Displaced* was a collection of short plays about gentrification and displacement in Boston and was created by pairing eight local playwrights with eight Boston residents who had experienced these circumstances firsthand. This was an incredibly meaningful process for me, and I wanted

to find more opportunities for my directing work to connect theatre artists to people doing social justice work in other areas.



Figure 1: *This Place/Displaced* at Artists' Theater of Boston

I also realized that science fiction theatre was a genre I wanted to keep exploring. In the months before the pandemic hit, I had found myself directing a string of science fiction plays. About a year ago, I was hired by Flat Earth Theatre in Boston to direct the world premiere of *Walden* by Amy Berryman (she/her) in June 2020. *Walden* explores

the questions of whether humanity should try to fix the damage done by climate change or if we should colonize Mars and eventually leave Earth for good. In preparation for that production, I brought *Walden* and *Amy* to campus as part of UMass Playlab (the department's new work development program) in February 2020. The other play we selected to develop in UMass Playlab was *The Interrobangers* by M Sloth Levine (they/them), which is a queer riff on *Scooby Doo* tropes. I had an incredible month directing these two plays back-to-back and realized that there was a lot of room to explore science fiction stories through theatre.

In addition to having an all science-fiction UMass Playlab the semester prior, I had been working with Boston writer Erin Lerch (they/them) over the past few years on different stories in their *Legion Cycle*, a theatrical universe set in an apocalyptic future where an alien Legion has landed on Earth and is attempting to assimilate humanity into its ranks. Erin and I had been developing their play *Shrike* through Erin's fellowship at Company One and then with a few other Boston companies. And in the early months of the pandemic, Erin and I created *The Legion Tapes*, the first audio drama entry in the *Legion Cycle*. Erin and I had often talked about doing an audio drama in this world, all told through radio broadcast, and when the pandemic hit, it seemed like the moment to actually do it. We couldn't gather in person, but we could record everyone's audio over Zoom and edit it into something compelling. Over a few months, Erin and I (and a cast of fourteen actors from across the country) created a thirteen-episode podcast season that the *New England Theatre Geek* called "lusciously queer" and "epically non-binary" (Drexel, 2021). I realized how much science fiction theatre I had been creating over the past years and that my thesis project could build on that foundation.

Finally, I knew that I wanted this thesis to be designed for digital performance. By the summer of 2020, I had already seen many theatres experiment with online work and honestly found most of it depressing. It felt like people were producing digital events as a kind of stopgap instead of innovating something for this new medium. These events were almost apologies. I did not want my thesis to feel like a sad, online version of something that would be better in person. So, I decided that each playwright should be commissioned to write a piece designed for digital performance. Instead of doing something that felt diminished by being online, I wanted to create something that was built for and could thrive in that medium.

At the end of this reflection, I knew I wanted my thesis to center new work, have a social justice component, possibly include collaborations with people outside of theatre, involve science fiction, and be designed for digital performance. Looking at this list, I remembered that in my first semester at UMass, I saw Walidah Imarisha give a presentation entitled *All Organizing is Science Fiction* as part of the 2018 Feinberg Series on campus. Imarisha connected the ideas of science fiction and activism since “whenever we try to envision a world without war, without violence, without prisons, without capitalism, we are engaging in speculative fiction” (Brown & Imarisha, 3). She also spoke about the anthology she co-edited with adrienne maree brown called *Octavia’s Brood: Science Fiction Stories From Social Justice Movements*. *Octavia’s Brood* is a collection of short science fiction stories written by activists. In her presentation, Imarisha introduced the idea of visionary fiction to “distinguish science fiction that has relevance toward building new, freer worlds from the mainstream strain of science fiction, which most often reinforces dominant narratives of power” (Brown & Imarisha,

4). Imarisha and brown asked each activist to write a short story of visionary fiction to create an anthology that could envision better, more just worlds than the current one that we all occupy. This lecture was very impactful for me. I had never before understood how my passion for science fiction could connect to my passion for art that advocates for social justice. I was struck by the ideas in Imarisha's lecture and thought about them often as I continued to work on science fiction plays. As I was brainstorming what kind of thesis project I could create in this moment, I again thought of this lecture and *Octavia's Brood*.

I realized that I finally had an answer for Gilbert and Gina's challenge. I wanted to combine my love for new plays, science fiction, and theatre for social change by creating a theatrical event based on the *Octavia's Brood* model. At this point, I reached back out to Gilbert and Gina, along with Professor and Department Chair Harley Erdman (he/him) with this inspiration in order to figure out the best way to do this work within the UMass Theater department.

I entertained a few versions of this idea with Gina, Gilbert, and Harley before settling on a format. We thought about commissioning activists to write plays in the visionary fiction genre, but I wanted to work with playwrights, and we didn't think I would find many activists who had the time and desire to write plays for the first time during a global pandemic. We also thought about commissioning seven to ten playwrights, pairing all of them with an activist, and having them each write a ten-minute play that I would stitch together into a cohesive event. This would have been very similar to what I did with *This Place/Displaced* at Artists' Theater of Boston. However,

wrangling that many people felt beyond my and the department's capacity, and would have given each writer much less space to explore.

After multiple brainstorm sessions with Gilbert, Gina and Harley, the four of us eventually settled on the following plan that felt expansive enough for a thesis project and was within my capacity and the department's resources. We would commission three playwrights to each write a thirty-minute (or so) play in the visionary fiction genre. That time limit came from my experience watching digital theatre on Zoom. It seemed like everyone's attention spans were shorter while the pandemic was raging, and I wanted to design this project with that in mind. Also, having three thirty-minute plays would result in ninety minutes of material, which felt equivalent to directing one full length play. Along with a graduate dramaturg, we would pair each playwright with an activist or scholar whose work intersected with the play's content. These teams would work together to create plays that were visionary in scope and approach, while still being grounded in and responsive to our contemporary moment. The plays would be designed for digital performance, as opposed to plays we would eventually want to present in person. The writers, activists, dramaturg, and I would have generative meetings and first workshops in the fall semester, and then I would direct full, digital productions in the spring. This would give us time to identify collaborators, create, and revise the plays before the pressure of an impending production.

Once my thesis idea had been finalized and approved, Tatiana Godfrey (she/her) was assigned to the project as dramaturg. I was thrilled to hear this news since I had hoped for this pairing. Tatiana and I were in the same MFA cohort and had become close friends, but we hadn't had the chance to officially work together before. I admired

Tatiana's eye for dramatic structure, her ability to communicate with anyone, and the clarity and thoughtfulness she always brought to a conversation. I also knew Tatiana was a big fan of science fiction (specifically *Star Trek*), so this seemed like a great match. From this point on, Tatiana became a core collaborator on every aspect of the project. She and I worked together to provide feedback to playwrights, envision the workshop and production rehearsal processes, brainstorm design ideas, and make sure all collaborators were treated with empathy. I felt like I had a true partner in every aspect of the work and was incredibly grateful for the support.

I decided to call the project *Visionary Futures: Science Fiction Theatre for Social Justice Movements*, as a riff on and tribute to the full *Octavia's Brood* title. Once the idea was finalized, it was time to figure out who our three writers would be. I wanted to work with writers I already knew. We were already exploring multiple new ways of working (digital theatre and collaborating with activists) so I felt like also learning how to work with a new writer would be one too many things to handle. Tatiana and I made a list of writers we thought had the curiosity, collaborative spirit, and time for this project. We quickly realized that our top three were M Sloth Levine (they/them), Jaymes Sanchez (he/him), and Phaedra Scott (she/her). Luckily, when I reached out to these three, they all immediately said yes.

Why Jaymes

I first met Jaymes through his wife Laura Neill (another great playwright) while they were living in the Boston area. I directed the world premiere of Laura's play *Don't Give Up The Ship* for Fresh Ink Theatre in 2017, and through that process, Laura,

Jaymes, and I became fast friends. About a year later, I directed a short play by Jaymes as part of the world premiere of *This Place/Displaced*.

Jaymes' play (entitled *Who Owns What*) followed Eve, who realized that her condo had been put on sale without her knowledge. As she attempted to get some answers, a game show, a live TV studio audience, and an obnoxious host erupted in her living room, and the contestants competed for her home right in front of her. Jaymes' play was viciously funny and a highlight of the entire production. Jaymes cultivated a great rapport with his community partner on this project, so I thought he would be excited by the collaborative model of *Visionary Futures*. I knew that Jaymes was a big fan of science fiction and thought his writing style of using comedy to explore injustice or rage would lend itself well to this project. Since *This Place/Displaced*, Jaymes had continued to find success as a playwright. He moved to Austin for the University of Texas Austin MFA Playwriting program and was named a finalist for the Eugene O'Neill National Playwrights Conference. I had missed being able to work with Jaymes since he had moved, and was excited that my thesis would provide another opportunity to work together.

Why Phaedra

Phaedra and I met six years ago in the Boston theatre scene. Phaedra had moved to Boston for an apprenticeship at the Huntington Theatre. We soon hired her as the Assistant to the Artistic Director at Company One Theatre. Phaedra, Shawn LaCount (he/him, Artistic Director at Company One), and I all worked closely for two years. At the time, Phaedra was working as a dramaturg and director. Phaedra then moved to New

York, and we fell out of touch for a while, though I knew from social media that she was taking on leadership roles at Literary Managers and Dramaturgs of the Americas (LMDA) and had started writing plays. In fall 2019 when Maegan Clearwood (she/her, another MFA Dramaturgy student in our cohort), Tatiana, and I were brainstorming which writers we should invite to submit to UMass Playlab, Tatiana suggested Phaedra. Phaedra submitted a great play called *Plantation Black* for consideration in the 2019-20 Playlab and it ended up being one of our finalists. *Plantation Black* was an ambitious, searing play that deftly juggled multiple time periods and generations of the same, fractured family. While its multigenerational cast kept it from being the best fit for an undergraduate acting pool, I was glad to reconnect with Phaedra through the process and hoped we'd find another way to work together.

When selecting playwrights for *Visionary Futures*, Phaedra seemed like an obvious choice. I remembered that Phaedra loved science fiction, and I knew that she had been exploring new forms of theatre during the pandemic. Phaedra was one of the writers for *Camp Strangewood*, a digital new play anthology produced by Sparkhaven Theatre in Boston, so I knew she was interested in writing for this emerging, digital medium. Phaedra replied to my email saying this kind of project was exactly in line with what she had been attracted to over the last year and was excited to get to work with Tatiana and me.

Why Sloth

I first met Sloth through my work with Company One Theatre (C1) when they assistant directed our production of *Wig Out!* by Tarell Alvin McCraney. However, I

really got to know them through their participation in the Company One Season Programming Committee and C1 Playlab. I was immediately drawn to their gothic, queer plays and appreciated their passionate advocacy for gender diversity in theatre. When I was co-producing and directing UMass Playlab, I knew I wanted Sloth to submit a play.

When the UMass Playlab producing team read Sloth's play *The Interrobangers*, we were blown away. The play centers queer youth as complex human beings without falling into tired tropes. It riffs on genre, challenges normative modes of storytelling, and joyfully explores the trauma of growing up. *The Interrobangers* also features many "impossible" stage directions, a hallmark of Sloth's work. They write plays where dogs can steal files off of desks and trust that their collaborators will find creative ways to make these moments happen.

The Playlab team all had such a great time working with Sloth on *The Interrobangers* and when it came time to choose playwrights for *Visionary Futures*, I knew I wanted Sloth on board. I knew that Sloth would inevitably write something wild and brilliant that would test the boundaries of what could be possible in a digital format. Also, Sloth had just finished up a stint as head writer on *Camp Strangewood*, so they already had experience writing something intended for digital performance. I was thrilled that Sloth said yes to the project.

CHAPTER 3

DEVELOPMENT PROCESS

Tatiana and I ended up developing three, distinct models of collaboration between each writer and their activist partner. This was unintentional at first, but we decided to embrace it so we could reflect on how each model impacted the process and final product. What follows is an account of the generative and developmental process of each play from the start of the process to a production-ready rehearsal draft.

Casting

I felt that Tatiana and I should create a repertory company of actors instead of having different actors in each play. I wasn't sure how many undergraduates would want to commit to a Zoom rehearsal process on top of having Zoom classes all day, so I wanted to keep the pool small. I also knew it was hard to build a feeling of community through Zoom, so having a tight-knit, core group felt like the best way to cultivate investment in the process.

As we were onboarding writers, I began thinking about how and when to bring in actors. I realized we already had a relatively short timeline from commissioning writers in mid-September to the November workshops. I had already been thinking about asking specific actors to participate instead of holding auditions, and looking at the timeline confirmed this idea. I wanted to work primarily with actors who I already knew. Having to figure out how to direct a fulfilling digital experience for the first time in addition to developing new relationships with undergraduate actors felt like it would be too much at

once. I also thought it would help our playwrights to have an idea of who they were writing for.

Luckily, by this point in my graduate school experience, I had many strong relationships with the undergraduate actors in the department. After some thought, I decided to bring on Carolyn Parker-Fairbain (she/they), Darrow Sherman (they/them), and Emma Perakis (she/her). Carolyn acted in my production of *Baltimore* by Kirsten Greenidge and the UMass Playlab workshop of *Walden*, Darrow played Zodiac in *The Interrobangers* workshop, and Emma was in both my Playlab workshop of *Come, My Beloved* by Em Weinstein and *Baltimore*. I purposefully selected actors who had already worked with me on new plays, since *Visionary Futures* was centered around new work. I knew these three actors were all talented and would be able to go with the flow as revisions came in.

Professor Harley Erdman, Chair of the Department of Theater (he/him) approved this plan, but said we also needed to have auditions for at least one role in the workshops to provide an opportunity for new students. I agreed to that, and asked to be able to bring in an outside actor from Boston if we held auditions and couldn't find anyone viable. As Tatiana and I spoke with the writers, Jaymes was excited about writing a play for four people while Sloth and Phaedra preferred to write for three. We held auditions for the character of May in Jaymes' play *Beyond Reform* and had three people sign up. Two weren't right for the role. The third actor was an undergraduate I would have been happy to cast. After we offered her the role, she turned it down due to a conflict with her work schedule. At that point, I asked my friend Kim Klasner to step in. Kim had done many

shows with Company One and I over the years and I knew she would be a great presence in the room.

In order for the writers to get to know our actors, Tatiana and I recorded a Zoom conversation with Carolyn, Darrow, and Emma on October 10. Kim wasn't included in this video since we were still finalizing her involvement. She also would only be in Jaymes' play, and he knew her from the Boston theatre scene. We asked the undergraduate actors to talk about their dream roles, goals after graduation, causes they cared about, and how they felt about working remotely. While we had prepared a list of questions, we encouraged everyone to think about this as a conversation with each other. We all had a lovely discussion, especially since it was the first time many of us had seen each other for quite a while. We then sent this video to Jaymes, Sloth, and Phaedra so they would have a sense of who they were writing for. The writers all expressed deep appreciation for this video and were able to let the personalities they saw on screen inform the characters they were creating.

Unity

Once writers were confirmed, Tatiana and I had initial meetings with each of them to go over the project, hear their initial ideas, and get to know their specific writing process. When we first met with Phaedra, she showed up with two potential ideas for her play. She either wanted to write about reproductive rights within an alien civilization or about video games as they relate to representation and colonization. Tatiana and I were excited about both ideas and asked Phaedra to take a few days to choose one. We would then start looking for an activist or scholar who could intersect with the project. In this

initial meeting, we also asked Phaedra how to best support her process and found out that she appreciated deadlines, learned best from hearing a draft out loud, and often liked to make quick revisions and bring slightly updated drafts to each day of a workshop process.

Phaedra wanted to know who our actors would be before getting too far with her writing. She told us that a large part of her revision process would be hearing our undergraduate actors reading the text, and then making adjustments to create a better fit between performer and character. Phaedra also requested that the cast be predominantly female or non-binary. This was already Tatiana's and my plan, so we were glad to hear this from Phaedra.

Finally, we asked about Phaedra's science fiction touchstones. We asked everyone working on the project this question at one point or another to enjoy nerding out and to get a sense of what aesthetics everyone enjoyed. Phaedra told us that she had recently read *The Three Body Problem* by Liu Cixin. She also referenced *Star Trek*, *Dune*, N.K. Jemisin, *Dark Crystal*, and *Labyrinth* as formative influences. Tatiana and I left this initial meeting feeling great about how Phaedra would engage with the commission and were excited to find out which idea she would choose.

Eventually Phaedra decided to write about video games, colonization, and representation. Tatiana and I were thrilled about this choice and started reaching out to find someone who studied or worked with video games. Dr. Priscilla Page (she/her, a member of my committee) came through with an incredible connection. She suggested we get in touch with Dr. TreaAndrea Russworm (she/her), a friend of Priscilla's and an Associate Professor in the UMass Amherst Department of English. TreaAndrea studied

representations of sexuality, race, and gender in video games and was part of the UMass community, so she seemed like a perfect fit. I reached out to TreaAndrea about participating in the development of Phaedra's play and was so glad when she said she was interested and available.

Once we had TreaAndrea on board, we scheduled a meeting with the four of us (Tatiana, TreaAndrea, Phaedra, and me) to begin our generative process. Tatiana and I had previously worked out a structure for these meetings that we could use to get to know each other and begin sharing knowledge. We started with introductions, names, and pronouns and then moved on to some meeting agreements. Since none of us had worked this way before, laying some guidelines around collaboration seemed like an important way to support these collaborators. Tatiana and I offered that these meetings could be a space where everyone could speak in draft (ideas could be floated before being fully fleshed out), assume best intentions, speak from and name their own experience, and enjoy each other's company. Once we had agreed on how to engage with each other, we moved on to a series of questions mostly facilitated by Tatiana to get to know each other's work. We asked Phaedra what themes tended to show up in her work (nerdy Black women, playing with time, and unexpected pairings), what kind of theatre was currently exciting her, and why she was intrigued by visionary fiction. We then asked TreaAndrea to speak about her work in game studies and what ideal future she would envision for the video game community. TreaAndrea talked about her desire to see fewer barriers to entry for people of color who want to create games, educational programs that are inclusive and radical, and games that have deeper and more meaningful representation for characters of color. TreaAndrea also introduced us to the concept of

machinima: taking recorded video game footage and using it to create new stories through processes like editing and voice overs. We then were captivated watching some examples of machinima that TreaAndrea's students had made.

The idea of editing pre-existing video game footage to tell a different story was intriguing to all of us. I thought we could maybe use this technique to design a digital production (though I was worried about copyright issues). Phaedra was also excited about the idea of images and video games having multiple layers of meaning and that meaning could be manipulated based on a specific agenda. And while we didn't end up using machinima as a design element (hiring a streaming producer meant we would have our own original designs), I see a direct connection between this first discussion and the final version of *Unity* where footage of Elysium is first used to humanize its inhabitants, and then repurposed as a game to teach cadets how to successfully colonize the planet. Phaedra and TreaAndrea hit it off, and I left that meeting feeling so grateful that Priscilla had facilitated this connection.

Based on these initial conversations, Phaedra felt ready to start writing. A few weeks later, she sent us the first draft of *Unity*. And while Phaedra would go on to make many strong revisions, the plot remained pretty similar throughout. The play opens with Companion's video logs as they explored Planet 673, eventually realizing that the inhabitants were sentient beings, and that humanity was planning on wiping this species out in order to colonize the planet. We then jump 150 years in the future to watch Noe and Macaria playing a video game as practice for their test to join the Alliance. As they play, Macaria tries to convince Noe that colonizing Planet 673 (also known as Elysium) is immoral and reveals that she has been in touch with Companion and a network of

resistance fighters. Macaria asks Noe to fail the test and join the resistance. The play ends with Noe alone on screen, wrestling with this decision.

In November 2020, we had a three-day workshop of each play that culminated in a public reading on Zoom. Since we only had two full days of rehearsal and then a public reading, the goal of these workshops was not to create anything polished. Instead, it was a chance for everyone to hear each play out loud for the first time and immerse ourselves in the world of the play. Phaedra joined us via Zoom for each night and listened to the actors' early interpretations of the characters and the team's questions and observations. Phaedra would then spend the next morning revising the play, and we would have a new draft to explore that night in rehearsal. We ended up with a draft that was much clearer and layered by our public reading. Working this way meant that the actors were less familiar with the draft we read in public, but they were able to go with the flow and dive into something slightly different each night.

After the November workshop, Tatiana and I met with Phaedra to celebrate the work that had been done so far and talk about next steps for the play. We all wanted the Companion section at the beginning to tighten up. We loved the structure of Companion's logs opening the play, though this section felt so long and detailed that we were losing the audience. We were also all interested in continuing to flesh out Macaria and Noe's relationship and making it clear that they are indeed friends even though we see them in a moment of conflict. Finally, we were all very invested in the class disparity between Earth and Mars and wanted that to impact the stakes of Noe and Macaria's final decisions. In a few weeks, Phaedra sent us a great, new draft that addressed these notes and was ready to be used in rehearsal for the full production.

Gender Experience™

Our initial meeting with Sloth felt like an easy continuation of the rapport we had all developed through Playlab. Sloth knew they wanted to write about the transgender experience in the future, though they weren't sure what the exact story would be yet. This idea helped guide the casting process, though Sloth said they would be happy to write for any undergrads we thought would be a good fit for the project. We confirmed that Sloth appreciated clear deadlines, frequent nudging, and plenty of collaborative discussion within their writing process (something we had all learned while working on *The Interrobangers*). And when talking about sci-fi influences, Sloth mentioned *Scooby Doo*, *Star Wars*, *The X-Files*, and *Pokémon*.

After our initial meeting with Sloth, Tatiana and I met to discuss what kind of activist could be a good fit for this play. We put out some feelers to my committee and our networks and right away realized that Finn Lefevre (they/them) was the obvious person to ask. Finn graduated from the UMass MFA Dramaturgy program in 2017 and had been teaching in the department ever since. They were both an experienced dramaturg and an expert on trans advocacy and the history of trans activism in the United States. Finn and Sloth had met briefly last year, but didn't know each other very well.

Once Finn said yes to the project, we set up a first meeting with Sloth, Tatiana, and me. As always, we started with introductions, pronouns, and meeting agreements in order to set a solid foundation for open collaboration. Sloth shared that their work often involves death and the supernatural as a metaphor for queerness and physical and metaphorical consumption. Sloth said they were excited to explore the inherent hope within visionary fiction in contrast to previous, more cynical writing. Finn then walked us

through their advocacy work, and what it would mean to them to have a future where trans rights were centered. After this conversation, we all participated in a writing prompt that Tatiana and I prepared ahead of time. All four of us spent ten minutes inventing an event or monologue in a safer, better future and then shared those ideas with each other. I didn't necessarily expect any of these ideas to make it into Sloth's actual play. However, this felt like a useful way to synthesize what we had discussed and be creative together. At the end of this first meeting, we decided to continue meeting as a group. Sloth was excited about our discussion, and thought it would help their process to have regular meetings to bring in new pages and continue to ask Finn questions relating to the work.

Sloth, Finn, Tatiana, and I met three more times before the November workshop. In our second meeting, Sloth asked Finn to speak about the history and future of drag performance and queer family structures. Sloth originally thought they might write about three drag performers in the future raising a child together and wanted to hear Finn's take on these topics. We discussed our favorite drag performers, the evolution of gender performance in the United States, and the limitations of the nuclear family structure.

In our third meeting, Sloth came with the first few pages of a play. It involved multiple drag performers attempting to cross some future border within what was once the United States in an attempt to raise a child in a better environment. Sloth felt excited and sensitive about these pages as they were a very early draft. Finn, Tatiana, and I read the draft out loud together and then spent the rest of our meeting affirming our excitement for this idea.

Before our next meeting, Sloth texted me saying they were having severe writers' block finishing a draft of their play. They were having trouble finding a central conflict

they liked and felt that while all of our meetings had been useful and meaningful, they weren't quite sure how to synthesize those generative discussions into the play. Additionally, trying to be creative during a global pandemic and a looming presidential election was proving to be extremely difficult. I reassured Sloth that they were not disappointing anyone and affirmed that trying to create anything at this time felt incredibly hard. I told Sloth that I had faith in their ability to find a way forward, whether that was with this idea or something else entirely. In fact, I would see it as a success of the process to be flexible enough to support a writer being brave enough to throw something out if it was no longer sparking their creativity. This conversation seemed to reassure Sloth. We ended our phone call by agreeing that Sloth would have something new to share in our next meeting with Finn, even if it was a big departure from what we had originally planned.

Between that phone call and our next meeting, Sloth threw out the first idea entirely and then wrote the first draft of *Gender Experience*™. The first draft was a wild, almost stream of consciousness experience consisting of scenes, monologues, puns, and lip syncs all mashed together in a future where gender inclusive healthcare was as simple as going to the Apple store. Most characters didn't have names yet. It was raw and unlike anything I had ever read. We spent our last group meeting affirming to Sloth that we supported this shift.

Our November workshop was the first time we were able to hear this draft out loud. In contrast to Phaedra's desire to rewrite every day, Sloth and I decided that we would use our three days together to immerse ourselves in the current draft. There were far more characters than actors, so we used the time to play around with casting,

investigate the order of the scenes, and ask questions. Tatiana started a glossary of terms used in the play as a resource for the actors. She continued to update it through production rehearsals, making it very easy to look up the many references in the play. Since the play was combining so many references and different elements, having three days to hear it many times over and start to understand how the pieces fit together was incredibly helpful.

The workshop draft also included many lip sync moments. We didn't have time or the technology at that point to stage effective lip syncs for this reading. However, we all felt that hearing the songs was important to understand the play as fully as possible. We decided to play sixty to ninety seconds of each song and told the actors to just rock out and dance along. This way we could approximate the feeling of these lip sync performances within the time and resources of a workshop. In hindsight, I'm so glad we did that. It was a way to honor what Sloth wrote and helped the team understand that while those songs captured the spirit of the play, they didn't connect to the actual content. Sloth would later cut many of these moments, but we were able to bring that sense of wild abandon to the next draft of the script in production.

In the time between the workshop and first rehearsal, Sloth was having trouble making revisions to the current draft. We therefore decided to focus on a few specific notes that Sloth felt were achievable and that Tatiana and I felt would be most impactful. We asked Sloth to think about the arcs for Friend and the office characters. They seemed to be our anchors in this world, and we were curious to know more about them. We also asked Sloth to consider what each lip sync meant within the play's structure and to

consider significantly cutting down on those moments. I knew that if the lip syncs were performed in full, the play would run much longer than thirty minutes.

Sloth addressed these notes and tightened up a few other moments to get to a production draft. Even though there were still many characters, Friend and Lascaux now felt like the anchors of the piece, both looking to satisfy some unspoken (or unspeakable) longing. Sloth also moved the text about “getting closer to the truth” from the middle of the play to the last office scene when McGurk responds to Lascaux. This shift unlocked a lot of meaning: everyone in *Gender Experience*™ is just working to get closer to their own personal truth and should be celebrated for that, regardless of whether it’s something we can currently understand.

Since the production draft was still deliberately vague about where certain scenes took place and information about certain characters, Sloth, Tatiana, and I met early on in the production rehearsal process to talk through the play and make some decisions about how to fill those gaps. I think this level of detail and inquiry about the play was more than Sloth had anticipated. However, I felt like Sloth, Tatiana, and I needed this meeting to make sure our ideas were all in alignment. We did a deep dive together into each moment of the play, which left me feeling confident that I could communicate a clear vision to both the actors and designers as we began our production work.

Beyond Reform

When we first met with Jaymes, he said he wanted to write about prison abolition and/or visionary forms of justice systems. Jaymes was happy to write a play for four characters, which meant we could hold auditions for a final undergraduate to join Jaymes’ workshop. He was also excited that the concept of visionary fiction was

inherently more hopeful than his typical style of plays, where humor or satire is used to disguise rage. Like the other writers, Jaymes wanted to learn about the actors so he could tailor the play for them. I left our meeting feeling good about Jaymes' involvement in the project, though I was curious what kind of plot would emerge from this initial inspiration.

Tatiana and I initially had a lot of trouble finding an activist who was available to work with Jaymes. We had a bunch of early leads that eventually didn't pan out. I reached out to the Boston chapter of Black and Pink (a queer prison abolition group) who seemed very excited about the idea but didn't have anyone with enough free time to participate. Professor Harley Erdman suggested we connect with Arise for Social Justice in Springfield, MA and while they had some initial interest, no one on their team had the time either. I think part of the problem was that Jaymes' idea was less specific than the other two writers' were at this stage. Also, our timeline straddled the 2020 Presidential election. This was a time of intense stress for most people, especially those working in activist circles, and I imagine everyone was hesitant to take on anything additional in that moment.

When we let Jaymes know we were having a hard time finding an activist partner for his play, he wasn't fazed. He knew we were all trying to create something new, so there would inevitably be bumps along the way. Jaymes told us that it would actually be his preference to write a first draft and then involve an activist to help shape the play. Although this wasn't what I had initially envisioned for the project, Jaymes expressed that it would be easier for him to get his own ideas on the page before trying to incorporate other perspectives. It also meant we'd end up with three different models of collaboration between playwright and activist. Being able to assess multiple variations

seemed valuable, so we decided to let Jaymes write a first draft on his own and engage an activist between the November workshop and the start of spring rehearsals.

Jaymes sent us his first draft along with an email saying that he wasn't very happy with the play yet. It turned out to be a tricky play to write, and having to do it alongside his own graduate school deadlines and a looming election had made it hard to be creative. I read the play and agreed that it seemed like the least polished of the three drafts. However, I reminded myself that this was just a first draft and my job as director was to support and nurture development, not dismiss anything in these early moments. I had faith that through a workshop process and the eventual involvement of an activist, many positive changes would take place.

Like Sloth, Jaymes wanted to spend our workshop days hearing the draft he had written multiple times without changing too much each day. We spent our time together asking questions about the way this world worked, clarifying when the play should feel satirical and when it should feel earnest, and thinking about which characters were the primary drivers of the story. In this first draft, Danielle seemed like the main character until the second scene began and the focus shifted drastically to May and Bo. I worked with the actors to try and manage the pace and momentum, even though this draft's focus seemed to be a moving target. Jaymes appreciated the chance to hear the draft aloud so many times and the way our actors all made quick, big choices, since it had been written so recently. We all felt the workshop was useful and felt ready to loop in an activist.

After the workshop of *Beyond Reform*, Tatiana and I continued to reach out to our communities to find someone connected with prison abolition and/or restorative justice. I asked my dear friend Anneke Reich (she/her, Artistic Director of Artists' Theater of

Boston and producer of *This Place/Displaced*) if she knew anyone who would be excited about this kind of collaboration, and she pointed me towards her friend Eli Plenk (they/he), who does prison abolition work and worked at the Philadelphia Bail Fund. Eli had seen *This Place/Displaced*, so he had already seen some of Jaymes' work, and was excited to come on board.

This first meeting with Eli was very different from our other initial playwright and activist meetings. Where the other meetings were discussions about big ideas for stories and how they could intersect with contemporary movements, Eli and Jaymes were able to connect about a specific draft. Eli was incredibly generous in his feedback, while also being clear about where Jaymes was unintentionally creating a harmful impact. Eli specifically pointed out that the idea of a machine that somehow “cures criminals” implied a rigid binary between “good people” and “bad people,” and that criminality was somehow biological instead of a result of societal unmet needs. And while this machine was meant as an absurd plot device or thought experiment, it played right into the harmful history of the United States using medicine and technology to “fix” people without their consent. Eli also pointed out that the restorative justice represented in the play was inaccurate. Jaymes was attempting to show the conflict of someone working in restorative justice who had trouble trusting that framework after being personally harmed by another person. However, that choice meant that the play didn't have any accurate representations of restorative justice. If this play were an audience member's first encounter with the idea of restorative justice, they would leave with a deeply inaccurate understanding of the concept. Eli also noted that the play's only incarcerated character (Jill) had the least to say.

This could have been a tense meeting, but Eli gave this feedback in a respectful, positive way, and Jaymes was able to hear it as a moment of being called in. Jaymes realized that he had been pursuing the question of whether society could ever get over its desire to see people punished so much that he had inadvertently flattened all the issues around it. Eli affirmed that was a great question to explore in this kind of play, but that a lot more nuance would be required to do that responsibly. Jaymes seemed to be a bit daunted by the amount of revision he would have to do, but was grateful for the chance to keep trying.

While this meant Jaymes needed to do a lot of work, I was very proud of this moment. We had set out to create science fiction plays that were visionary in scope, while still being grounded in and responsible to contemporary activist movements. Jaymes wrote something that was unintentionally harmful but was able to talk to Eli, understand the impact of his work, and have the chance to revise it into something more successful.

Eli followed up with me after this meeting with an email reiterating that while he liked Jaymes and respected what he was trying to do, this current draft really missed the mark. I was very grateful that Eli felt comfortable enough to follow up this way. I replied to Eli to say thank you and to assure them that either we would get the play to a place where we could all stand by it or we would revisit the idea of a full production in the spring. I wanted to give Jaymes the time and support he needed. However, I also felt strongly that we shouldn't be producing something that wasn't ready. This was the first time I contemplated the possibility that we might need to re-envision how we would present this play in the spring. While I wanted to honor our commitment to each writer, I

also was not going to rush something to production. For the moment, I decided to trust the process and see what Jaymes would be able to come up with.

While Jaymes was very excited about making these revisions, he quickly realized it would take him much longer than he originally thought and that he wouldn't be able to have a production-ready draft by the start of rehearsals. To give Jaymes more time, I planned to spend our first week of rehearsal on *Gender Experience*™ and *Unity*. There was plenty to work on with those plays, so I didn't feel like we were sacrificing anything. However, soon we would have to make some decisions about how we could all engage with *Beyond Reform* in the time we had.

CHAPTER 4

REHEARSAL PROCESS

We began rehearsals on February 8, 2021, and had six weeks of rehearsal before our first performance on March 24, 2021. I again planned for three-hour rehearsals, knowing that longer on Zoom would burn everyone out. We rehearsed Monday through Friday evening, though we worked to stagger the calls to give each actor one night off per week. This gave us ninety total hours of rehearsal before the tech process. Originally, Julie Fife (she/her, the department's production manager) presented us with a schedule that gave us around fifty rehearsal hours before tech. This was concerning to me, and we negotiated a schedule that provided more time. We were planning to create ninety minutes of content, which is equivalent to a full-length production and, while the staging and design process would be different than we were used to, I anticipated that learning how to create something satisfying in a digital medium would take up as much time as an in-person experience.

This new schedule meant that we would start rehearsing *Unity* and *Gender Experience*™ with Carolyn, Darrow, and Emma before having auditions for the fourth role in *Beyond Reform*. This was not my ideal scenario. I would rather have started with a full company to create a strong ensemble from day one, but starting early felt better than losing a week of rehearsal while semester auditions took place.

While it was great to have Kim Klasner step in and act in the *Beyond Reform* workshop, we hoped to find another undergraduate actor for the production. We used one evening in the first week of rehearsals to hold auditions. Just like in the fall, we had quite a small turnout. We decided to cast Mei MacQuarrie (she/her), an undergraduate I had

previously worked with during my production of *Baltimore* by Kirsten Greenidge in fall 2019. I was thrilled that Mei was joining the project. I knew Mei to be a smart, kind, and hardworking actor and individual. Additionally, Mei and Carolyn had many scenes together during *Baltimore* and had already built up a great rapport.

By the start of production rehearsals, I had rehearsed many shorter pieces on Zoom and had some ideas about how to run an effective, online process. First, we always started rehearsal with a check in. Working on Zoom means you lose a lot of the small talk that happens naturally in an in-person rehearsal process. You can't have a chat with someone while walking to the bathroom together, so having time at the start to hear from everyone felt important. I also asked actors to stand while rehearsing instead of just sitting at their computers. Getting the actors physically engaged helped them get energized and make larger choices instead of sinking into their chairs. Eventually, we ended up letting the actors sit for *Unity*, since it made sense for the circumstances, but standing for *Gender Experience*™ made the energy and pace much stronger and helped the actors find larger, more truthful choices.

One tricky element of rehearsing on Zoom was figuring out if what I was seeing and hearing aligned with everyone else's experience. It could be hard to know if actors were making the choice to pause or if someone's internet was simply lagging. This meant asking even more questions than usual and naming that process as an attempt to understand what everyone was experiencing in their own space. The actors' internet connections improved after they received Ethernet cables and once we started streaming through YouTube instead of Zoom, though much of our process centered around understanding everyone's experience.

One opportunity of rehearsing on Zoom was the chat function. This was especially useful since it's much harder to time how you speak up in Zoom as opposed to an in-person process. You can't see everyone's body language the same way, there's often a lag between when someone is actually speaking and when you're hearing them, and Zoom isn't great at handling multiple people speaking at once. Being able to contribute through the chat as well as speaking provided more opportunities for all kinds of discussion in rehearsal. Our team usually was very engaged in the chat both with insightful observations as well as with jokes and asides. This helped keep everyone's spirits up without being too much of a distraction. Occasionally, I would get overwhelmed by trying to keep up with the chat, but having multiple ways for everyone to contribute felt like a real strength of working on Zoom.

Recasting an Actor

Around the end of the second week of rehearsal, Emma Perakis let me know she was feeling overwhelmed and needed to step away from the production. I was very sad to lose Emma, but told her I supported her, and that everyone's well-being needed to come before the show.

After my conversation with Emma, I began brainstorming how to replace her. I didn't want to hold auditions since it would take at least a week to organize. And since we only had a few people audition for the workshop or for the last role in *Beyond Reform*, I wasn't convinced we'd find anyone else who was both available and viable. Tatiana and I spoke about her taking over Emma's track and, while she was willing, neither of us thought that was the best choice. Tatiana is a fantastic actor, but asking her to dramaturg

and also act in two plays felt like it would be too much. We thought about asking Mei to take on Emma's track in addition to her role in Jaymes' play, but I thought she might be too inexperienced to handle that amount of work. I realized that finding a professional actor from my work in Boston who could step in seemed like the best solution. I presented all these options to my advisor Professor Gilbert McCauley (he/him), along with my assessment that finding an outside actor to take over would be the best option. He affirmed that these were the options on the table and that finding someone from outside the department seemed smart.

After brainstorming, I realized that Jackie Chylinski (they/them) would be fantastic. I had met Jackie through their participation in the Company One Professional Development for Actors class last spring. After that, I cast Jackie in a small role in *The Legion Tapes*, and then a pivotal role in a *Shrike* workshop over winter break. They are a smart, engaging actor who is able to make big choices within complicated texts. Jackie was old enough to bring some professional experience to this work, while also being close enough in age to the undergraduates to still seem like a peer. I also knew they were a great singer and musician and thought that they might end up being a resource as we figured out the lip syncs in *Gender Experience*™.

Originally, I had hoped Jackie would take over Emma's roles in both *Gender Experience*™ and *Unity*. However, while they would have been excited to take that on, they realized their schedule only left room for them to do one play. I decided that they were the best fit for Sloth's play and asked Mei if she would be willing to play Noe in *Unity*. Mei and Jackie were both excited about these opportunities.

After a week of rehearsal catching Jackie and Mei up on what we had discovered and created so far, we settled into a weekly rehearsal pattern. We used two of our five nights a week on *Gender Experience*™, two with the full *Unity* cast, and one with just Darrow to work on the Companion logs in *Unity*. This pattern served us well up through tech.

Unity

Unity follows three characters who each grow to understand that what they thought was right is actually causing harm. Each character discovers their intended role in a cycle of violence and colonization and must decide whether they will continue to support that system. In rehearsal, I was interested in making sure these moments of recognition felt significant, and that the audience could track these new realizations and understandings about this world.

With the Companion logs, I worked with Darrow to track how much time had passed and what had changed for Companion. I never saw Companion as an emotionless android. I wanted the audience to feel Companion's frustration, boredom, joy, and eventual horror. We also spent a lot of time blocking when Companion looked at a screen behind them or when they needed to control something off camera. These little touches helped the Companion sections feel like Darrow was actually running a research mission on a spaceship instead of just sitting in a chair on Zoom.

In the Noe and Macaria section, I wanted to make sure the audience understood their long friendship, as well as this specific moment of conflict. I spent rehearsal time with Carolyn and Mei tracking moments where we could see them enjoy each other, and

where class differences got in the way of their friendship. We also worked to discover who was driving the play at different points in the text. Even though Macaria is trying to help Noe come to a realization for most of the play, there are plenty of moments where Noe's building frustration and anxiety needed to be at the forefront. I kept reminding the actors that time was running out for both of them to achieve their objective.

For a long time, I was worried about the pace and energy. I kept trying to get the actors to pick it up, but everything would eventually slow down. Once the actors were fully memorized, I had them do a speed through of the play. What the actors thought was a speed through was close to my desired pace. Once everyone understood the level of energy needed, Carolyn and Mei were able to adjust accordingly. However, it took a few weeks for the actors to build enough stamina where they could hold on to the necessary energy level for the whole play. For a while, the actors would start off strong and then lose energy in the last third of the play. This improved near the end of the process, after the actors had completed many runs of the play.

This struggle with pace feels like a result of working digitally. When actors are physically present in a room together, they can hear how their voice carries in a space, and understand their energy in relation to their scene partners. Working digitally meant each actor was reacting to a small image on a screen, instead of another physical body. This setup tends to encourage a lower energy performance and smaller vocal choices than working in-person. Overcoming this tendency took more coaching than I'm used to as a director, and was a specific way I had to adapt my process in this digital medium.

The other breakthrough we had around pace came in a Companion rehearsal. As Darrow and I talked about Companion's motivation and the stakes in those scenes, they

realized that they had been channeling HAL from *2001: A Space Odyssey* and that movie's slow, methodical pace. Once Darrow was able to voice that, we were able to make other choices that were more in line with the energy needed for *Unity*.

Gender Experience™

Gender Experience™ presents many vignettes from a future where gender affirmative health care has expanded dramatically and accessing it is as easy as going to the Apple store. The play explores how this technology permeates all aspects of society and wonders how it could continue to evolve. Office workers brainstorm new genders for this technology, one character decides to turn their skin blue, and teenagers fantasize about their future genders. *Gender Experience™* explores the journey towards gender euphoria for everyone, and the validity of all gender experiences and truths.

A large portion of *Gender Experience™* rehearsals centered around making each scene accessible for the actors and audience, as well as fleshing out the world that Sloth had created. What might seem vague on the page needed to turn into something fully realized. I also knew that, while much of the play was funny, I never wanted to be making fun of the characters.

Carolyn, Darrow, Jackie, Tatiana, and I worked to create full inner lives for each character within *Gender Experience™*. We made decisions about how Lascaux, Cuneiform, and McGurk worked together in the AlliGn office and teased out details of their office dynamic. We made sure that Orla-Jean and Pollyannelope felt like recognizable teenagers even though their reality is very different than our current one. And I worked with Carolyn to make sure that Mother Schumacher and the Church of Amanda Lepore felt like a celebration of self-determination and fabulosity. Transgender

icon Amanda Lepore built her career on looking like a living doll through surgery. In the world of *Gender Experience*™, Amanda Lepore is a trailblazer for agency around one's own body and her work is celebrated with religious fervor.

I worked with actors to make sure that the quiet, tender moments of the play didn't get lost. I really loved Jackie's performance as Mustardseed in the monologue about their sibling raising a child without gender. While Mustardseed could appreciate this as progress, so much of their own queer identity had been shaped by experiencing the wrong gender and deciding to address it. The development of queer identity has so long been linked with experiencing or overcoming trauma, and that trauma has often been a way to connect with other queer people. I loved that there was a moment in the play that addressed this loss of common experience, even though it was a positive development for the world.

I paid special attention to the characters of Friend and Lascaux, since their search for fulfillment drives the play. Both are aware that something is missing for them and are longing to find a way to express it. At first, Friend thinks they should be happy but continues to feel a longing for something (or a feeling of being longed for out in the world). This journey takes them into space, and the play ends with them pledging to continue to look for a place where they can find peace. Lascaux is longing for something as well, so they look to the "_____" movement for potential answers. They hope to find transcendence through this procedure and to finally feel that their body is in harmony with their mind. This search for fulfillment is a major theme within the play, and I worked with Carolyn and Darrow to make sure these moments felt grounded and impactful.

Lip Syncs

The production draft of *Gender Experience*™ contained two moments of lip sync performance - one to *Body and Soul* by Teddy Geiger and another to *Babylon* by Lady Gaga. My first thought about the lip syncs was to hire a drag queen (or maybe Queer & Now, a drag collective made up of UMass Amherst alumni), but realized that wasn't possible with our budget. I then thought about having Darrow, Carolyn, and Jackie perform the lip syncs together but quickly realized that this type of performance was far out of Darrow and Carolyn's comfort zone. Since we were pressed for time and I'm not a choreographer, I realized that the most achievable version of these moments would involve Jackie as a solo performer. I asked Jackie how they would feel about performing the lip syncs by themselves, not knowing if this would feel overwhelming for someone who joined the cast late. Luckily, they loved this idea and volunteered to do a drag king character for the lip syncs. Jackie told me they had done drag king performances before and were heavily inspired by Jo Calderone (Lady Gaga's drag king persona, most recognized from the *Yoü and I* music video). I loved this idea and was excited to incorporate Jackie's prior experience into the numbers, instead of trying to impose a certain kind of gender performance on an actor.

Jackie and I rehearsed and co-choreographed these numbers outside of our usual rehearsal time. We talked about *Body and Soul* as a smoldering performance in a smoky club, where Jackie was in total control of the audience. In contrast, Jackie would be catapulted through time in *Babylon*, and would have to keep adjusting in order to match their performance to their surroundings. We thought of this performance as an attempt to create a raucous party in every era. As we rehearsed the lip syncs, Jackie found a

captivating presence full of swagger and sex appeal. Drag often gives people permission to make larger than life choices, and I watched Jackie find this freedom as we worked. We then spent an evening of rehearsal with Leanna Keyes (she/her, streaming producer) recording a few takes so the design could be implemented on top of it. They did a phenomenal job with these moments. *Body and Soul* sets the audience up for an energetic, flashy play, and *Babylon* reminds us that, even though this play takes place in the future, trans and non-binary people have existed throughout history.

Beyond Reform

As Jaymes worked on rewrites, I had a few meetings and email exchanges with him both to support his writing and to figure out when we could integrate this play into our rehearsal process.

It was while Jaymes continued to work that Emma told me that she needed to step away from the show. This meant I essentially lost a week of rehearsal while catching Jackie and Mei up into their new roles. We also were in a real time crunch for all design areas by that point. There was a big winter storm in Austin in late February that knocked out Jaymes' power and water for a week, which put us even further behind. And of course, Eli's notes were really about the heart of the original draft, so Jaymes needed to revise much of the play.

Eventually, Jaymes sent us a new draft that addressed some of Eli's concerns. The machine now healed individual trauma instead of "fixing criminals." I was worried that this new concept still played into the idea of there being a biological solution instead of a societal one. I also felt like this draft didn't clarify why each character was invested in the

central conflict or satisfactorily address Eli's concerns about the one incarcerated character (Jill) having enough agency. Jaymes, Tatiana, and I spoke about these notes, though it didn't seem like there was enough time for Jaymes to continue to work on the play and then for us to rehearse and produce it.

Since the play didn't seem performance ready to any of us, I asked Jaymes how he would feel about presenting an in-process showing of *Beyond Reform* instead of a full production. I thought we could all speak about the opportunities and challenges of creating this kind of work instead of rushing to produce something that wasn't ready. I also felt we could create an engaging event that integrated scenes from the play along with discussion with the team. If I had been doing *Visionary Futures* at a professional theatre, I would have advocated for pushing the production into the next season to give Jaymes more time to work. However, since my thesis was on a stricter timeline, this felt like a good way to celebrate the work that had been done while acknowledging that there was still more to do.

I was nervous to have this conversation with Jaymes. I didn't want it to feel like he was being punished or sidelined. I was very proud of Jaymes for trying this new process out with us and was glad he was one of our writers. And in our activist meetings, Eli continually reinforced that Jaymes had picked a hard subject to write about and that his desire to get it right was truly admirable. I framed the discussion by starting with these points and made it clear how much I valued Jaymes' work and his trust as a collaborator before moving to the suggestion of an in-process showing. Thankfully, Jaymes liked the idea and I think appreciated that it took some pressure off him to "get it right." After Jaymes agreed to this plan, I let the actors and production team know. There

was a similar sense of relief about not rushing something into production without enough time to do it justice.

This kind of flexibility felt like a key element in every part of the *Visionary Futures* process. We were making plays in a new way in a new medium, and that meant that we had to adjust based on what we learned as we worked. I would love to see theatres embracing this kind of flexibility. Instead of adhering to a strict timeline that prioritizes the final product, institutions could embrace a process-centered model that prioritized discoveries. Theatres could commit to giving each project the resources and time it needs to reach its full potential, even if that means adjusting performance dates. Embracing the truth that different projects need different development timelines is a future I'd like to live in and was happy to have that flexibility within this thesis.

CHAPTER 5

VISUAL DESIGN

In October 2020, Company One Theatre produced a digital version of *Downtown Crossing* by David Valdes. We had produced a few one-off digital events since the start of the pandemic, but this was the first time we attempted a full production online. I cast the show but after that, I was relatively uninvolved in the process. When I watched the show, I was so impressed with Leanna Keyes' (she/her) work creating digital design elements. The production had actors from all over the United States and Leanna was able to make it seem like they were in a car together or on a bench. After I confirmed that she was wonderful to work with, I knew that I wanted her to design *Visionary Futures*. Luckily, the department was able to find money to pay her, and Leanna joined the team as streaming producer.

We planned that Leanna (or her associate Kyra Bowie, she/her) would attend the majority of rehearsals and implement design elements throughout the rehearsal process. Since actors would need to react to these digital effects as part of the performance, we needed to give the actors time to get used to this work. Adding it all in during tech would be much less effective in a virtual medium than a traditional in-person tech would be. Having Leanna and Kyra consistently present meant that the design could be responsive to discoveries we made in rehearsal, and we could adjust actor choices based on the limits of the design technology. Additionally, we could try out design elements as Leanna made them, and sometimes decide to adjust them or try something else. Once a set is built, it can be hard to make changes. With enough time, digital effects can continue to be tweaked throughout the process.

When I first spoke to Leanna, I asked her if we should produce these plays live or if we should pre-record them and stream them at a designated performance time. I had done both on a smaller scale, and while I preferred the live performances, I wasn't sure if all of Leanna's design work could happen live. Leanna assured me that she could do everything live and, in fact, that was her strong preference. She felt that since in-person theatre happens live in front of an audience, digital theatre should be live as well.

This conversation with Leanna reminded me of Taylor Mac's idea that theatre always includes the possibility of calamity (Mac, 2021). Streaming these plays live risked calamity, but that's also a hallmark of in-person theatre. We ended up with three fully live shows, with two short exceptions - the lip syncs in *Gender Experience*™. Leanna and Kyra tried a few ways to accomplish them live, and eventually decided that it was beyond our capacity, so we pre-recorded those. Other than that, everything the audience saw was happening as they watched it.

What follows is an account of the design choices we made for each play. These choices were implemented throughout the rehearsal process in the order Leanna was able to create them. For clarity's sake, I'll talk through each play in chronological order.

Unity

Since so much of *Unity* takes place on Companion's ship, we spent a lot of time visioning what it could look like. We decided that Companion should record their logs from the cockpit of the ship, where you could see both Elysium and outer space behind them. Since it was a reconnaissance and research ship, we wanted many panels, screens,

and controls. And while there wasn't a way to make it look like Darrow was actually pressing some of the buttons in the background (it's too small of a detail to properly read to an audience), we decided in rehearsal that some controls lived just out of frame. When Companion confirmed the first weather event, we had one screen display a weather map of a storm system. In the next log, the same screen showed the storm system finally receding.

The design for Elysium was adjusted throughout the process. Leanna's first pass at the planet felt a little too barren compared to Phaedra's text. Leanna couldn't find an image that was a perfect match to the lines (since Elysium is fictional), but we worked to find an image that seemed like it could be as lush as Companion would describe in the text.



Figure 2: Companion pilots Arby in *Unity*

As the Companion logs continued, we used the cockpit screens to visually support the text. When Companion sent Arby (a drone) down to Elysium's surface, one of the screens in the cockpit showed the camera feed of the planet. Leanna used found footage of a forest and then cave explorers to match Arby's early discoveries. As the text got more specific, Leanna was unable to find video that would match Companion's description. We therefore decided that the feed behind Companion would cut out and display an error message. We imagined that Companion was watching a video screen off camera without realizing the screen behind them (existing for the benefit of anyone watching the log) had gone down. I also felt like leaving some of Elysium's surface to the imagination was a more rewarding choice.

The fourth Companion log starts with Companion telling the viewer that they woke up to an alert that Arby was malfunctioning. We decided that this feeling of emergency necessitated a location change. Instead of seeing Companion at their usual seat in the cockpit, they were stationed in an internal control room. I imagined that Companion had just woken up and was trying to fix Arby from the nearest control center, disregarding the typical setup for recording their logs. This was also a good way to renew audience investment in the play. The Companion section is quite long, and having a change of scenery helped keep the audience from getting too comfortable.

We decided that adding timestamps to the Companion logs and the start of the Noe and Macaria section would help visually reinforce the passage of time throughout the play. It also provided a moment of reset for Darrow and for the audience. Giving Darrow a moment to be off camera and grab some water helped them start each log with the necessary stakes. Originally, I had wanted Darrow to enter the frame at the start of

each log to have some physical engagement to activate the storytelling and energize the work. Unfortunately, we had to cut this since those entrances were messing up the green screen calibration.

When Companion returns later in the play, at first it seems like just another recorded log. However, it is eventually revealed that Noe and Macaria are talking to Companion in real time, over one hundred years after the start of their exploration of Elysium. Leanna and I wanted to show that plenty of time had passed between the logs we saw at the start of the play and now. We therefore changed the background to look like Companion had landed their ship on Elysium. We also changed the screens behind Companion to reflect further study and collaboration with the Elysians. Through these choices, the visual design reinforced that Companion and the Elysians had been working together for quite some time.

With Noe and Macaria, the visual design was an opportunity to reinforce the class differences between Earth and Mars within the text. In *Unity*, Earth has become incredibly crowded and polluted, and is far behind Mars in its technological capabilities. To reflect those circumstances, Noe's room is dark and dingy. Noe only has one small screen in her space and a hologram of Macaria. In contrast, Macaria has a much more open home and a giant window. She has multiple screens in her space that she uses to communicate with Noe, play the game, and run other programs in the background. These specific visual choices helped illustrate the future Phaedra had envisioned, and the different ways of life on different planets.



Figure 3: Noe talks to Macaria via hologram in *Unity*

Gender Experience™

Leanna and I spent a lot of time trading ideas back and forth about what each scene in *Gender Experience™* could look like. We started the play with Friend in a white void, both as a nod to an early idea that Friend could be an interdimensional traveler, and because this gave Friend a visual journey from one kind of void to another (outer space). I also knew that most of the play would be big and colorful, so this choice gave the audience a moment to settle in at the beginning.

Regarding lip syncs, I thought of *Body and Soul* like the opening credits to a TV show. It needed to set the tone and prepare the audience for the wild ride to come. With this in mind, Leanna added some neon effects and created a background from old footage she had of gay clubs in the 1970s. With *Babylon*, the stage direction about seeing the history of the world was daunting. Based on capacity, I thought we should pick a few

specific time periods and then fast forward into each. We ended up choosing ancient Egypt, the Baroque period, and the future we see in *Gender Experience*™. I picked two past eras (one ancient and one from a few centuries ago) that would be instantly recognizable to an audience through visuals and sound. I wanted to end back in the future of *Gender Experience*™ to link the audience back to that world for the end of the play. Having a drag king time travel through different eras while lip syncing was tons of fun and served as a reminder that trans and non-binary people have existed in every era.

I was interested in all locations connected to the AlliGn technology feeling sleek and welcoming to a fault. I also thought we should differentiate between scenes that took place in the main AlliGn conference room and others that happened in a different part of the office. This helped us build out the world, and maintain a variety of locations.

For the gender list, my inspiration was a futuristic version of old CD commercials where the tracks would scroll across the TV screen. At first, we thought we might have images for some of the genders but that ended up being beyond our capacity. I was originally disappointed about this but after seeing it, I appreciated that we could leave the exact image of these genders to the audience's imagination. The actors all made large, distinct vocal choices for each item in this list, such as Carolyn's playful, nasal "Drag Goblin," and Darrow's gruff voice for "Rough Trade Father Figure." This varied, energetic delivery kept the scene feeling fresh and engaging.

Another highlight of the *Gender Experience*™ design process was the idea of making stained glass portraits of Amanda Lepore to frame the church scene. We thought that a church celebrating Lepore's embrace of body modification and personal agency would absolutely include images of her figure. Lepore's body is her art, her embrace of

her true self, and her rejection of a cisnormative society. We came up with this idea very early in the process, and it was one of the first effects to be implemented. I also loved collaborating to create designs for the more mundane locations that could still feel part of this future world. I appreciate Leanna creating the funky, colorful rug in the Orla-Jean/Pollyannelope scene. That scene also gave us a nice opportunity to shift perspective and make it seem like the audience was seeing the actors from above instead of the typical head and shoulders view on Zoom. I also really enjoyed the train scene with Mustardseed speaking to Friend. Having Carolyn turn their back to the camera in this moment helped us create the illusion that the two actors were sitting across from each other in a train car.

CHAPTER 6

COSTUME DESIGN

Getting the costume design process started was tricky. Our costume designer, Chenoa Albertson (she/her, first year costume design MFA student), Tatiana, and I had some great early discussions about the plays, though it seemed that Chenoa wasn't certain about how to go from these conversations to creating designs. I think this confusion was mostly due to a lack of structure. Typically, the department production manager (Julie Fife, she/her) creates a schedule for mainstage productions that includes multiple design deadlines. This gives the designers a structure to actualize their ideas in time for shops to build the costumes. The only design deadline Julie instituted for *Visionary Futures* was that costumes had to be finished two weeks before opening so they could be shipped to actors. It wasn't clear to me why our production meetings weren't scheduled to include preliminary, in-process, and final design presentations, like our typical mainstage process. I asked multiple times for more structure around this process, but it never materialized. This lack of structure was hardest on Chenoa as a first-year designer. She had never experienced the department's usual process and so wasn't yet able to create this structure for herself. Tatiana and I tried to help set these deadlines with Chenoa on our own, but we didn't have enough context to be that helpful.

Eventually I spoke to Gilbert in one of our invaluable weekly meetings about this frustration and my worry that costumes wouldn't be ready in time. He agreed that there was a need for more structure and spoke with Yao Chen (she/her, Chenoa's advisor). After Gilbert and Yao spoke, I saw a complete shift in everyone's energy. Kristen Jensen (she/her, Costume Shop Manager), Felicia Malachite (she/her, Costume Shop Assistant),

and Chenoa created deadlines for finishing each costume and let me know when they would need my feedback to be successful. Once that structure had been put in place, I felt we all worked very well together and was continually excited by the work the costume department was doing. I was so grateful to Gilbert and the costume department for creating a structure where Chenoa could succeed.

Unity

For *Unity*, Chenoa and I were drawn to costumes that looked like variations on a uniform for all three characters. Since the Alliance is a strict, militaristic organization that values conformity, we decided that uniforms would reinforce this element. Companion's uniform was designed to look more official and impressive, since they were in charge of the first mission to find a new habitable planet. I appreciated that it felt like a combination of a military uniform and a lab coat, alluding to Companion's role as scientist and researcher within a military hierarchy. Since Noe and Macaria are only cadets, their uniforms were less flashy. Noe and Macaria's costumes also emphasized the technical nature of their work, as pilot and engineer.

We also used the props to communicate the passage of time. Companion controls Arby with a joystick that responds to direct manual controls. Once we flash forward to Noe and Macaria, they control their computers with smooth, white squares. Instead of buttons, Noe and Macaria turn and manipulate the cubes in ways that correspond to specific functions. And while controlling a drone is different than playing a video game, moving from the manual technology of a joystick to the touch sensitivity of the cubes

showed how technology had developed between Companion's launch and Noe and Macaria's lifetimes.



Figure 4: Noe and Macaria watch the final Companion log in *Unity*

Gender Experience™

Figuring out costumes for *Gender Experience™* was a very different process than *Unity* since each actor was playing many roles in quick succession. I originally thought we might need a base costume for each actor and add specific accessories to delineate character. *Gender Experience™* needed a fast pace and intense momentum, and I didn't want costume changes to slow the play down. One of my mottos for *Gender Experience™* in general was that anything could get sacrificed on the altar of pace. I communicated all of this, though Chenoa, Kristen, and Felicia seemed confident that they could make full designs for each character without slowing down the play.

Early in the process, Chenoa, Tatiana, and I spoke about wanting the costumes to be a mix of futuristic and recognizable. This is a world where the ideas of gender and fashion have continued to evolve, but not to the point where clothing would be unrecognizable. It also felt important to me to have some familiar visual elements to bridge the world of the play with our current world.

Our first concept for Friend's costume ended up not panning out. An early metaphor Sloth and I came up with was that Friend was traveling through this world (and maybe others), picking up debris and material possessions. Chenoa used this idea to create a costume that was a collage of many different everyday objects. And while we were all excited about the idea, it was clear that the execution didn't quite work. The costume seemed to swallow Carolyn, and it unfortunately didn't look as impressive as we all thought it would. When seen alongside the other costumes, it seemed way too busy in an already colorful show. We realized that since Friend was one of our anchors in the piece, they needed something simpler. So, we adjusted and settled on the gray sweater and shoulder bag. It gave us a traveler feel (harkening back to an early inspiration for Friend), and helped the audience relate to the character.

For Cuneiform, Lascaux, and McGurk, we got to design what a future version of business casual could look like. We combined many elements in each costume that would be considered masculine or feminine by contemporary, mainstream standards. This was a world where you could express many kinds of identity at once, without judgment or fear. Chenoa and Kristen thrifted a bunch of costume pieces, and then we brainstormed about how to combine them in a satisfying way. For characters like Mustardseed, Orla-Jean, and Pollyannelope, we went for clothes that were relatively recognizable. Having familiar

clothes for some characters was a way to remind the audience that this play was an imagined future.

For the Schumacher costume, we worked to find something that emulated Amanda Lepore while still being easy to change into and out of. Of course, we couldn't put Carolyn in a corset to emulate Lepore's tiny waist and didn't have time for makeup to emulate Lepore's distinctive facial features. However, we were able to put Carolyn in a fabulous red dress, red gloves, and a big, blonde wig. The wig was a nod to Lepore's iconic, always coiffed blonde hair, and the dress references Lepore's roots in burlesque and nightclub performance. Chenoa and Tatiana spent plenty of time with Carolyn talking through the costume and making sure she felt comfortable with the full look. I was grateful to have such sensitive collaborators who could be sure we hadn't asked Carolyn to wear anything she didn't love.

As I was seeing these designs take shape, I kept saying that I was worried about costume changes adding time to the play. Everyone assured me that they were confident that the actors would be able to make it work. I was still skeptical but once the costumes had been shipped and the actors had some time to practice, almost all of the changes could indeed happen in the time we had. The only costume change that took a little longer was Schumacher's (the red Amanda Lepore-esque dress). However, that costume was so great that it was worth the wait. We also were able to cut time out of the change by having Carolyn put on the red gloves as part of the scene instead of wearing them from the beginning.

I think a real struggle of our November reading of *Gender Experience*™ was that without visual support, the audience couldn't tell which character they were seeing in

each scene. Having full costumes for each character turned out to be an incredibly useful way to track recurring characters and I'm so glad Chenoa and the costume team had the capacity to create this great work.



Figure 5: The Church of Amanda Lepore in *Gender Experience*™

CHAPTER 7

SOUND DESIGN

As we were planning the *Visionary Futures* productions, I wasn't immediately sure how much department design support I would have. Luckily, in fall 2020, I took Amy Altadonna's sound design class. Amy and I had always worked well together, and getting to learn directly from her was a highlight of this last year of graduate school. With all of this in mind, I offered to Amy that she and I could work together on the sound design. We decided that I would handle creating most of the content (with Amy's support if needed), and then she would take the files from Soundtrap (the program I had been taught to use) and put them into QLab for Leanna and Kyra to sync up with the visuals. Amy was always available to help answer questions and support me in the process. Additionally, Amy took on editing *Babylon* and made a few transition music cues for *Gender Experience*™ late in the process, when it became clear we needed them to cover some costume changes. Having an established designer as a resource and the freedom to make my own choices in this area was really rewarding.

Lip Syncs and Copyrighted Music

I was worried about the lip syncs to copyrighted music within *Gender Experience*™. If this were an in-person production, I would not have been concerned. However, since we were planning to stream these shows on YouTube, using copyrighted music seemed risky. We didn't have the rights to those songs and the YouTube algorithms are very thorough about flagging unauthorized uses of music. Leanna suggested that we look into getting the rights to the songs (probably cost prohibitive) and also investigating how

strict other streaming platforms were with music rights. Production management said they would investigate both possibilities, but I never heard back about either idea. It became clear to me that we would have to create the lip syncs in a way that wouldn't get flagged on YouTube.

For *Body and Soul*, we decided to have Jackie record their own version and then lip sync to that recording. Covers are allowed on YouTube so that took care of the copyright concern. Jackie was eager to take this on and even volunteered to create the backing track as well. They and I collaborated to create a cover that felt like it belonged in the same world as the rest of the play. As we worked, we realized that the first verse was too low for Jackie's natural range. We tried having Jackie sing it up an octave, but that diminished the impact of the chorus. Jackie suggested that we pitch their voice down to hit the notes in the lower octave. I was pleasantly surprised when I heard this version. Having voice modification on the track and then a transition from one voice quality to the other felt connected to the body modification technology in the text.

Sloth's stage direction for the *Babylon* lip sync says that it should show the entirety of human history. We spent a long time imagining what this should sound like and also how to conceive this moment in a way that wouldn't get us flagged for copyright infringement. Eventually I landed on the idea that we could pick a few eras of history and adjust the instrumentation to sound like those time periods. I thought we could time travel through history within the song. Amy took this on since it was out of my capacity as a beginner sound designer, and I thought she did an incredible job. This choice reinforced the point of the *Babylon* moment and stage direction - that while *Gender Experience*™

takes place in our future, trans and non-binary people have always been present in society.



Figure 6: Jackie Chylinski lip syncing to *Babylon* in *Gender Experience*™

In a later version of *Gender Experience*™, Sloth wrote in a stage direction that Lascaux was listening to *Immaterial* by SOPHIE while browsing the message board. SOPHIE had just passed, and it was a way to pay tribute to a trailblazing trans musician as well as connect Lascaux’s interest in the “_____” movement to a contemporary song about existing beyond our physical bodies. However, I knew we couldn’t actually play that song during the show because of the copyright. I decided that instead I would create some music in Soundtrap that would evoke the song’s essence. At first, the idea of mimicking a specific music style was daunting. However, through combining a bunch of pre-existing loops in Soundtrap, I created something I really liked. That music is actually the sound cue I’m proudest of across the entire project. I was thrilled during the second

performance of *Gender Experience*™ when someone in the YouTube chat said they needed this song on their playlist!

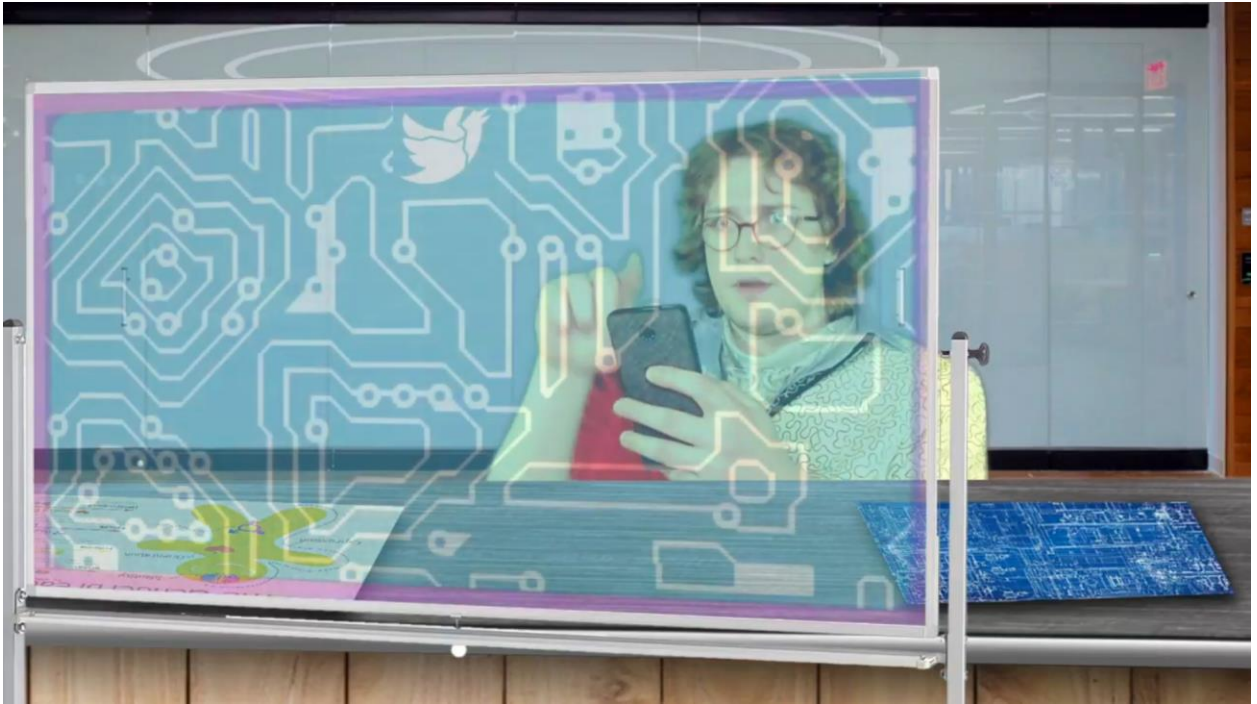


Figure 7: Lascaux scrolls through online message boards in *Gender Experience*™

CHAPTER 8

POST-PRODUCTION REFLECTIONS

In a way, it's hard to think about what I would do differently if I were to recreate or continue with this project after graduating. So much of what we did was always related to everyone's capacity to create in the middle of a global pandemic. There were many moments where we adjusted our plans based on what our artists could handle. If we were to do another version of this project, it would likely happen in a very different, hopefully easier moment. I would still prioritize everyone's mental health and encourage flexibility. However, I'd hope that negotiating those moments wouldn't feel as fraught as they did this past year in the midst of so much upheaval. That said, I think the successes and/or failures of this project all relate to flexibility, empathy, and structure. When we were able to provide structure for this new medium and process, and then adjust based on everyone's needs, things felt healthy and successful. I think we were generally able to take care of everyone working on the show, while also learning many lessons about how to reproduce this kind of work in the future.

Writers

I was very glad to have three writers on the project. I think the diversity of voices and perspectives created a much more meaningful experience than if we only had one play. It was also fascinating to see how three different writers interpreted what a Zoom commission could mean. Jaymes took a more practical approach, and wrote a play that justified why the actors wouldn't be in the same space. In contrast, Phaedra and Sloth used the idea of digital performance to write something that really couldn't be staged in

person. I also appreciated the thirty-minute (or so) runtime of these three plays. I felt like that length gave people who were often already burned out from online events the opportunity to engage in our work.

That said, if I were to continue this project, I think some writer/activist pairings could result in full-length plays. I'd also be enthusiastic about a larger anthology of ten-minute plays created in collaboration with writers and activists. In future iterations, we could have more flexibility about length. For instance, I think Jaymes would have benefitted from the space of a full-length play. He was writing about such complicated issues, in a world so close to our own, that I think the thirty-minute limit was at odds with the topic's complexity. A continued model could see writers and activists deciding on a play's length together as part of early, generative discussions.

It might also be fruitful to think about new phases of this project designed for in-person theatre. I actually think we were able to get a much more sophisticated level of design within a digital medium for *Visionary Futures*. Trying to create effects like Companion's ship in *Unity* and Mustardseed's mid-play skin tone shift in *Gender Experience*™ in-person would be much more expensive than creating them digitally. I think future iterations of this project could explore both digital and in-person performance and choose which medium felt best suited to their specific slice of visionary fiction. We've spent so much time innovating for digital theatre, I think it could continue to be a viable choice based on content and resources.

Another fascinating next step could be commissioning actual activists to write short plays of visionary fiction. This would definitely need a lot of time and support (and a dramaturgical partner who could teach playwriting) but feels like the most accurate

replication of the *Octavia's Brood* project through theatre. I would absolutely want to speak with Walidah Imarisha and adrienne maree brown before attempting this work. They mention in *Octavia's Brood* that they “worked with contributors over the course of many rounds of edits to pull out the visionary aspects of [the activists’] incredible stories, as well as to ensure that the writing and storytelling captivated and inspired” (Brown & Imarisha, 4). I would love to hear how they supported new writers in their anthology and adapt those methods for activists writing their first plays.

Finally, future iterations of this project could encourage writers to imagine more radical futures. Late in this process, Tatiana and I realized that capitalism still was a central force in all three plays. Our writers had imagined many ways the world could change. However, none of them thought society would move past capitalism. Tatiana and I then understood that there was an inherent tension between the radical hope that visionary fiction offers us and what collaborators feel are unchangeable circumstances. If we don't believe we can overcome large, oppressive systems, then we'll never imagine a way out. This realization reminded me of Ursula K. Le Guin's speech where she said “We live in capitalism, its power seems inescapable — but then, so did the divine right of kings. Any human power can be resisted and changed by human beings. Resistance and change often begin in art. Very often in our art, the art of words.” (Le Guin, 2014). Further versions of the *Visionary Futures* project could begin by naming global systems of oppression, and encouraging writers to imagine worlds that had dismantled them. Starting a process this way could help us understand that the only limits on our imaginations are the ones we've unconsciously imposed on ourselves.

Best Model

Having observed and supported three different models of playwright/activist engagement, I feel like I have a strong sense of how to support this kind of work in the future. First, this process works best with writers who truly desire generative collaboration. Writing is often a solitary exercise. This model requires writers to open up at an early, vulnerable stage of creation. Specifically, I wouldn't repeat the process we used with Jaymes and Eli. It was incredibly valuable to see Eli respond to the first draft of *Beyond Reform*, but by the time they were brought on, Jaymes had already created a play that was quite hard to fix. Having early, creative meetings with the other pairs provided a strong foundation for the synthesis of a playwright's imagination with the knowledge of our activists. Since balancing inspiration and real-world impact is necessarily complicated, this process is best for writers who aren't working on many additional projects. Because Jaymes had so many other deadlines for his graduate program, it was difficult for him to devote enough time to *Visionary Futures*, especially when tasked with revisions. Finally, I would specifically recruit writers who identify with optimism as a driving force in their work. Tatiana and I sometimes had to help redirect cynical instincts from writers to keep them in a visionary mindset. We didn't expect these plays to present a vision of paradise. However, this kind of collaboration does require a belief that we can work towards something better.

It's also important to affirm that this work takes time to get right. The *Visionary Futures* timeline was mostly set for us based on the UMass calendar and my last year of graduate school. In the future, I would think about giving each writer and activist more time to create before the pressure of a workshop or production. And I would continue to

tell everyone involved that the final product was not necessarily the goal. My goal was finding common ground between writers and activists and working to create something that imagines a better future. That future doesn't have to be perfect and neither do the plays. Working toward that ideal is what counts.

Cultural Competency

I wish Tatiana and I had led some kind of gender workshop with the full production team before the start of rehearsals to make sure everyone understood why pronouns mattered and to set up a plan if they weren't respected. I didn't anticipate this being a problem, given the number of trans and non-binary undergraduates in the department. However, one collaborator misgendered an actor at least once per production meeting, even after consistent correction. Other department staff had occasional trouble as well. There was one production meeting when this collaborator kept using the wrong pronouns for actors (even though I was correcting her in the moment), and Leanna also spoke up to address the issue. I was grateful for the support but saddened that a guest in our department felt like they had to help take this on. I think one of my main jobs as a director is to provide a healthy, respectful, creative space and think this was an area where we could have done better.

While I wish Tatiana and I had done some kind of workshop at the start of the process, I also wonder if this issue should be solved in a bigger picture way. I would love to see the department lead a workshop at the start of each process that could help every collaborator understand how theatre has often played into systems of oppression, create guidelines for a healthier process, and set up a framework for action if there was repeated

harmful impact. This feels especially important within a small graduate program where everyone comes from different backgrounds, and collaborators are assigned instead of selected from a wider pool. This could help us all start on the same page and continue to call each other in instead of being worried about the impact our collaborators could have within the space.

Making Digital Theatre

Making digital theatre takes time! While rehearsals don't involve actors figuring out blocking in the same space, there's still so much to do in a digital medium. You have to find a pace that works, clarity of text, and eye lines that make it seem like actors are looking at each other, all while knowing each actor is potentially experiencing things differently due to lag. All this needs to happen while the digital design team builds their cues. Creating digital theatre means that everyone involved is juggling more responsibilities than an in-person production and therefore needs time to be done well.

I am so glad I advocated for more rehearsal time early in the production process. During rehearsals, I had to be in constant communication with both Leanna and the actors. While this helped us create a more unified product, I often felt a tension between spending time giving Leanna what she needed without ignoring the actors (or vice versa). Having enough time to really work through everything in rehearsal meant we were much more prepared for performance than we would have been with the initial schedule. I also think rehearsing for three hours a night or less is useful. Having a longer rehearsal period with shorter nights helped keep everyone from getting exhausted and allowed us to balance our other responsibilities with the show.

One specific thing I would do differently within the rehearsal process is make sure actors had green screens and the necessary accessories (lights, stands, etc.) from the absolute beginning of the process. Leanna needed to see what her effects looked like in everyone's space, so there wasn't much she could do before actors all received green screens. This meant most of the design had to happen in the second half of the rehearsal period. The delay in visuals also impacted my ability to sound design the pieces. There were a few visuals for *Gender Experience*™ that I only saw a day or two before our first performance, which didn't give me enough time to create sounds that fit.

There has been a lot of discussion over this past year if digital theatre is theatre, or television, or something new. Looking back on this process, it feels like theatre to me. In my opinion, the only qualification for something to be considered theatre is a live, communal experience. Our shows were indeed live, and the YouTube chat provided an outlet for a communal experience. I know some people would argue that theatre means performers and audience must physically be in the same space. However, that requirement can be exclusionary for people with a variety of access needs. Unfortunately, theatre buildings are not often built to accommodate people with disabilities or people with larger bodies. Streaming our performances on YouTube removed many physical barriers for attendance. Of course, folks with other access needs might not be able to engage with digital theatre. There's no way of ensuring that your art is accessible to absolutely everyone. However, I was proud to direct an experience that was accessible to more than just those who could attend an in-person performance in Amherst.

CHAPTER 9

CONCLUSION

I was very proud of the *Visionary Futures* process. I feel that I learned valuable lessons about creating new plays that could respond to our current moment while looking toward the future. By incorporating activists at different moments in the creative process, we were able to find that early, generative conversations led to the most successful collaborative model. Since this process includes more voices early on in the process and will likely be new to the collaborators, it's important to give this work enough time to fully develop. And since this is a new model, it's important to be flexible when needed.

We were also able to create fulfilling, engaging theatre through a digital medium. I learned that digital theatre takes just as much time as rehearsing in person. We were also able to achieve a more vivid digital design than we would have in person and were able to make adjustments based on what we learned throughout rehearsal. Additionally, the *Visionary Futures* shows were accessible to everyone with a computer and internet access, regardless of location. This kind of accessibility is a reason I hope theatre companies continue to produce this kind of work, alongside in-person performance.

Finally, I was proud of how we took care of each other at every step of the process. We proved that when we put people first, and prioritize empathy and flexibility, we can make successful work even in the hardest of moments.

APPENDIX A

UNITY

By Phaedra Michelle Scott

CHARACTERS

Companion, NB.

Macaria, fem. Black.

Noe, fem.

SETTING

Companion: Observation outpost above Planet 673

Macaria: Mars Colony.

Noe: Earth.

Transmission.

COMPANION

Unity Era, Year 17.
Month 4, Day 23.
Personal Log.

The Goal of Unification is to protect humanity.
To help her expand across the galaxy.

I have started calling the Type I planet Elysium.
Named after a version of the afterlife I prefer.
The weather, as far as I have observed, is mild and nearly perfect.
There is lush greenery everywhere, the rains are soft, no major storms.
Even after a whole year here, everything has remained temperate. Ideal.

I am preparing the first test of the weather machine.
It took slightly longer for the solar panels to power the device, so my initial
calculation of getting everything finished in four days rather than seven was a bit
optimistic.
I suppose an error like that is to be expected without immediate support from
homeplanet.
Not that I am complaining.

I will record my live observations of the weather event.
I imagine my reaction will be...less than scientific.
(But of course, I will evaluate all of my data and give a data driven
interpretation.)

The units on Elysium are a social species.
Through the scans, I have observed areas where they congregate
similar to the herd animals on Earth
mostly near caves and rivers, surrounded by natural resources
there is some sort of interference on the planet
that makes it difficult to get a clear picture

Companion pauses, reading something.

Okay, it looks like all systems are go.
The satellite is ready and recording.
I will begin with something small to test...
Just. A little storm. Okay.
And.
Go.

...

...

The weather event has started.

Excited. Companion loves their job.

The geography of this area is very fascinating.
There is one large supercontinent surrounded by a massive ocean.
There are five intersecting rivers throughout the land
each of them are veins to different pockets of units.

Watches.

Looks like the storm is gathering in the Western ocean.
Which I have named Oceanus.
(Named after the same Ocean that borders Elysium, which I thought was quite clever.)

It is hard to refer to the geography with only coordinates
Which I know is against regulations but...
It is not a big deal.

Whatever.

I am speaking into a void.
The transmission will not make it to earth for another four years so...
If I go against regulation, I doubt much is going to happen...so...so...
That is why this planet is called Elysium.
The idyllic afterlife of ancient Greek heroes.

Companion thinks.

The Captain loved the ancient myths.
Perhaps that is why I found such solace reading them after she left.
To keep myself occupied during the long stretches of nothing.
A Companion without a Companion.

Shift.

I have finished the upgrades to the cameras
So they are smaller, remote controlled, more concealable.
It is exciting. This is the first planet I have observed with units.
They are...

Aware. I think.

I still have to make sure my technology is not spotted.
Self-destruct protocols are on everything I send to the surface.
I do not want to recreate another Mars incident.
It is a dark forest.

If they find out I am here, who knows what they will do to me.
Or humanity.

Shift.

Okay looks like the River Acheron on the outer edge is now flooding.
I can only imagine what the individuals will do to combat this.
The goal is to usher them all closer together.
It will be easier to achieve unification that way if there is only one place for the
units to go.

Companion watches.

This is better than an all-out war I suppose.
Even though weather events can be just as catastrophic as any war.
I suppose it is best not to think of it that way.
I am not destroying the planet.
Only the units.

...
I will continue to observe the weather event.
End personal log.
End of transmission.

Second Transmission.

COMPANION

Unity Era, Year 17
Month 4, Day 24

The Goal of Unification is to protect humanity.
To help her expand across the galaxy.

It has been one day since I have triggered the weather event.
After I went to sleep last night, the storm continued.
I did not anticipate such a range of destruction.
The initial goal was to flood one of the rivers, but I ended up flooding three.
Rivers Acheron, Lethe, and Phlegethon.
Spent all morning shutting the machine off.
I am not the engineering expert like the Captain was. So, I had to improvise.
Which caused more destruction.
I should not have shut down for the night.
It was a mistake.

Companion watches.

Looks like the event is finally subsiding.
I will work around the clock to get one of the bots ready to send down to the surface
I must observe the Northern hemisphere for changes.
I hope I did not make any irreversible damage.
Not much time to discuss today.
End transmission.

COMPANION

Transmission.

Companion has some sort of controller that they are using.

Unity Era, Year 17
Month 7, Day 3

The Goal of Unification is to protect humanity.
To help her expand across the galaxy.

I have not updated my personal log in quite some time.
A little over... two months.
I have worked around the clock in order to get the bots ready,
and my system overloaded twice forcing me to have to reboot everything.

And then the communications system went offline for some reason which made me lose a whole week worth of data even though I swear it was supposed to auto-save.

BUT

Today is the day to celebrate.

Today, I have launched the first bot to the surface.

Her name is Research Bot 23. And I have named her Arby.

Companion watches.

Just got the livestream online so I can see what Arby sees.

The flooding did exactly as expected.

The land is marshy.

I am collecting samples to be transported back to the ship for further observation.

It is imperative I understand how to use the natural environment

to help ease the Unification process.

Companion watches.

As expected, the natural world has taken over quickly.

In just a span of a couple of months, the planet has bounced back.

The greenery is more lush, and the megaflora have doubled in number.

No units have been spotted.

Companion watches.

I am navigating Arby through a dense forest and—

...

...

These are not caves.

These are buildings.

The scans have never been detailed enough to pick up what the habitats of the units actually looked like

And it has taken me a long time to send down a research bot so this is...

Not What I Expected

...

Each building has large courtyards filled with flowers and plants

Perhaps the units need to be close to the megaflora to survive?

Maybe that is why it was hard to distinguish between a simple series of caves and a community

Watches.

The plant life here is truly stunning.

They shy away from Arby's camera. Like it is sentient. Almost.

All of the structures are made with a uniform special stone that has this eerie Bioluminescent glow. It is everywhere.

...

There is a beautiful chaos to how the glowing veins are structured against the stone.

Companion watches.

I am now approaching what looks like the center of this community.

There is a massive pillar in the middle of the structures.

Part of it has been submerged by the water.

I have not seen any units.

I am glad that these creatures are advanced enough to think quickly in a natural disaster

It makes me happy to not see any corpses...

...

Not that I could do anything about it.

It was me who activated the weather machine after all.

Companion watches.

...

As much as I want to move deeper inland, I cannot risk being spotted.

Especially now that I suspect these units are more intelligent than I thought.

It is best to keep my observations at this distance.

The last thing I need is for them is to have surprise interplanetary defenses

And shoot me out of the sky.

...

...

End transmission.

COMPANION

Transmission.

Companion is breathing heavily.

Woke up to an alert from Arby who I left on autopilot to collect data.

I made sure to program her to stay away from any units

but it appears Arby is malfunctioning

and she is now in the possession of one of the units,

and I have been watching the stream nonstop for 17 hours.

Arby should have exploded by now.

Oh---ah, forgot.

Unity Era, Year 17

Month 9, day 23.

The unit that has captured Arby, has taken her to its civilization.

I am trying to find a way to do trigger the self-destruction sequence

but I fear that even more suspicion will be raised if I do.

Especially after all this time.

Arby is now surrounded by a handful of units.

They speak in that language I am still unable to comprehend

I am recording all of the sounds for analysis later.

Companion watches.

Their clothing is unisex, leaning on the feminine side.

Most of their appearance is rather androgynous

The tenor of their voices more akin to musical instruments

It is hard to distinguish if there are any sort of...designations they have.

Matriarch. Patriarch. Leader.

They are attempting to pry Arby open.

They are discussing together something, but their voices are calm.

I think.

Probably.

They are lifting Arby up and looking into her camera specifically.

This unit has large eyes.
They all do.
Different colors and shades, much like their skin
Which varies from a deep rich violet color, to a pale white.
Surprisingly there does not appear to be some of hierarchy.

Companion watches.

Curious. They are not trying to destroy her.
Arby is taken from the group and brought inside, where she is placed on a
mantle.

Oh odd. There are.
There are smaller units here too.
Who I assume are...
Children. I guess.

Something triggers inside of Companion.

The Goal of Unification is to protect humanity.
To help her expand across the galaxy.

...

...

Perhaps I have been running the system for too long.
I will run a diagnostic.
End transmission.

We are a century in the future.

Noe and Macaria are speaking through a video calling system.

NOE

And that is how you get a high score in Unity.

MACARIA

Oh fark you.
It was not *that* great of a score.

NOE

I lasted longer than you did.

MACARIA

I don't understand why destroying half the planet gets so many points.

NOE

The only reason you've never been a featured player is because you don't.

MACARIA

Who cares about being featured?

NOE

Ummm everyone applying for a spot in the Alliance
You get sad whenever you see the units

MACARIA

They are alive!

NOE

They are animals in the way of saving humanity.
Casualties are a part of the game.

MACARIA

Doesn't mean I have to feel good about it.

NOE

Casualties are a part of exploration.

MACARIA

Noe what you did was overkill.
I can't believe you flooded all five rivers at once.

NOE

Yeah, I don't think I would do that next time.
Ended up farking up the planet so badly it wasn't even habitable.

MACARIA

At least when I play my way, there's a chance it's survivable.

NOE

Yeah, and it also takes you over a century to finish.
If you want to join the Alliance you have to learn how to make these hard choices.

MACARIA

Space exploration should be about discovery.
Not about destroying.

NOE

Ugh oh my god, please do not tell me you've been reading more literature from
the Anti-Expansionists.

MACARIA

The First Explorer was a revolutionary.
She saw the path humanity is going down.
Anti-Expansionist doesn't mean what you think.

NOE

Look. All I'm saying is we tried being nice.
And as a result, when we tried to cohabitate with another species,

an entire colony of humans was destroyed.
Literally *eaten* by the units on Mars.
Consumed.
What was the body count? Uhhh 300,000k?
Or was it 400,000k?
They were monsters.

MACARIA

What happened to ‘casualties are a part of exploration’

NOE

It is.
Which is why the now-extinct First One Martian monsters are gone.

MACARIA

But it only works one way.

NOE

Am I supposed to feel bad they weren’t strong enough?
Or what is the word you use—resilient enough, just like your family.

MACARIA

It’s not the same thing—

NOE

Look can you queue up and stop getting so bent out of shape.
It’s a game.

MACARIA

Can we please take a second to talk about this?

NOE

We have like no time until the test.
It can wait.

MACARIA

I’ve been thinking a lot about this.
Like why the Alliance assigns us our co-pilot once we successfully pass the
simulation

NOE

Performative.
“ONE EARTHLING. ONE MARTIAN.
ALL HUMAN”

MACARIA

But *why* do you think they do this?

NOE

Because making friends is hard.
and it's easier to assign them.

MACARIA

Noe.

NOE

To make sure we stay one species.
To keep us on the same goal.

“The Goal of Unification is to protect humanity.
To help her expand across the galaxy.”

MACARIA

Earthlings can't do it alone.

NOE

Neither can Martians.
Which is why we combine our forces. Not new.
The Alliance requires two pilots per ship.
I'm the flyer.
You're the engineer.
Are you suddenly second guessing being in the program?

MACARIA

No, it's not that.

NOE

Seriously, Mace, what's getting into you?

MACARIA

Just. I don't know.
Cold feet...I guess.

NOE

You *can't* back out.
I can't take the exam without you.

MACARIA

I know. I know.

NOE

Have you been going through the Companion logs again?

MACARIA

...

NOE

Ugh, I knew it.
You always get so sentimental when you go through those old things.

MACARIA

It helps us understand Planet 673

NOE

Companion was a failed experiment
The only useful thing it did was give us access to the satellites before it went obsolete.

MACARIA

Well, the message boards are pretty convincing.

NOE

Ugh. You gotta stop going on the internet for advice.

MACARIA

It's not *advice* it's just
Compelling theories and stuff

NOE

You're lucky you're on Mars or I'd appeal to revoke your internet access.

MACARIA

There's a lot of really good information in those logs.

NOE

Uh duh, it was a science robot.
Its literal job was to send us scientific data driven information.

...

It's your turn.

...

...

Mace?

Are you gonna queue up for another?

MACARIA

Yeah just like...

Ugh.

I don't know.

You go.

NOE

Again?
I don't think you're getting much just from watching me play.
You do realize the test is in like...27 minutes. Right.

MACARIA

Don't remind me.

NOE

Just do the stuff you don't want to do, get the score
Make it to the next round.
If one of us fails, that's it. I'll never be an official Alliance pilot.
Co-pilots have been training together since they were like ten
And if my engineer suddenly backs out, they will never assign me a new one.
Unlike you, I *need* an Engineer or they won't even give me a chance.
Perks of being an Earthling.

MACARIA

There are plenty of pilots who make it without their engineer.

NOE

Ummm like who?

MACARIA

Okay, like none.

NOE

Puh-LEASE Macaria.
I need you. It's okay to be nervous.

MACARIA

I don't know.
It just doesn't feel.
Right. To play.

NOE.

Joining the Unity Project has been something we've worked for our whole lives.

MACARIA

Yeah, well when you're fed Unification propaganda since pre-school
you grow up thinking The Unity Project will make us into superheroes

NOE

But we are! We *can* be!
I don't want to spend the rest of my life doing...nothing.
Being another like...
Artist or whatever *other* thing we don't need.

MACARIA

Artists contribute.

NOE

You know what I mean!

I want to be someone who like...artists are *inspired* by.

MACARIA

When did *you* get so sentimental?

NOE

We're so fortunate that we can be whoever we want, do whatever we want
Achieve practically anything.

So now I want to do something good for humanity too.

That's what you said you wanted.

To make life better us all.

You're the one who convinced me not to quit last year, and look where we are
now?

Our scores finally qualified us to take the Alliance exam.

(Well, your engineering scores with those weather machine malfunctions)

I couldn't have done it without you.

MACARIA

Noe...

NOE

There is so much more at stake.

With Unity, we can explore space. Find other planets and worlds.

Contribute to something meaningful.

MACARIA

Yeah.

NOE

You are the more altruistic one anyway.

And I can't do this without my best friend by my side.

So. PEP TALK OVER!

Queue up, Cadet

MACARIA

You go just.

Once more.

NOE

Fine.

Noe queues up the game.

COMPANION

Welcome to Unity.
Your mission is to unify the planet P673 for human habitation.

NOE

Yup got it.
Skip.

COMPANION

Should you need any help just say

NOE

Skip.
Ugh.
The Companion program can be so annoying.
No wonder why the First Explorer committed suicide.

MACARIA

That's not what happened.

COMPANION

Loading simulation.

NOE

One of your fan theories again.
So what happened, all mighty internet oracle?

MACARIA

She stopped believing in the mission to expand.

NOE

Nope. She got lonely and arfed herself.
She was out there with that robot for like a decade
and didn't find a single habitable planet.
That would get me too.
All she had was that bot to keep her company.

MACARIA

Companion was the most advanced program ever created.
It was designed to learn, grow, memorize and *have empathy*.

NOE

And look where that got us.

We're no step closer to unifying P673.

MACARIA

That *program* evolved and kept searching for a planet for us until it found one.
Alone.
That's...incredible.

NOE

More like.
It was doing what it was designed to do.

MACARIA

Isn't it weird how there's been no successful mission to P673 ever since Companion?

NOE

Because it was objectively a failure.
Because that bot was programmed with empathy
Or whatever the programmer thought was empathy
It was out there thinking it was a nature filmmaker
It set up the satellites and then went rouge,
disabling all ships before they can even get close.
And now we have to make sure we can clean up its mess
So we can prevent it from farking up that planet before we even get to it.

COMPANION

Loading simulation.

NOE

Ugh.
This game takes for farking ever to load.
How can we have wifi on Mars yet still can't have a game loaded in less than a minute.
Can't we switch to the old comms system.

MACARIA

This one's new and a lot better. Look at the specs yourself.
All the Martians are using it.

NOE

If it's a better system, the game should probably load faster.
That's what improvements are about. Efficiency.

MACARIA

Also that Companion stuff?
It's more complicated than that.

NOE

Ugh. Again. Is now really a good time for this?
Trying to, ya know, concentrate.

MACARIA

I've gone through the logs dozens of times
you can see how Companion changes
What it sees.
I think the real problem is we're going about this the wrong way.
That the issue isn't how we play the game...just that the very premise of it is
wrong.

NOE

If it was wrong, then why is this used to get people to join the Alliance?
The Unity Project?
This test has been used for a century.

MACARIA

Have you ever seen the scores of the highest-ranking officials?

NOE

They don't publish the scores.

MACARIA

We are all supposed to do what we *think* is right
and hope we make it into the Alliance based on some arbitrary measure.

NOE

The only thing that matters is the result—that we have a new planet.

MACARIA

At what cost?

NOE

Are you serious right now?
People *deserve* to have space. And to procreate.
And we can't do that.
Not all of us.
So yeah.
Finding out how to beat this game, to get into the Alliance
To help humanity grow.
Is not wrong.

MACARIA

Yes, it is.

NOE

Do you know how weird it is to have three sets of parents?

MACARIA

...No.

NOE

To know that your genomes were spliced up so that six people know that just a little bit of their DNA gets to make it to the future.

MACARIA

Noe, come on.

NOE

Not everyone gets to be born in a fancy farking hospital.
Their embryos designed for perfection.

MACARIA

I didn't choose this. Just like you.

NOE

Didn't your mom decide to program your DNA with like extra smart genes.
And artistic ability. Oh and of course super healthy organs.

MACARIA

That's just how it is on Mars.

NOE

Yeah that blood planet.
Which you seem to conveniently forget.
P673 means a lot more to me than you.
It's one of the only planets found where I could *actually* survive.
Earth is dying. It's too crowded.
I don't want to be here anymore.
I don't want to get in line and hope my DNA is proven worthy enough so I can
turn into one sixth
Of a human being
I thought you cared about that too.

COMPANION

You have arrived at Planet Six Seven Three
It is Unity Era, Year 124
Month 5, Day 15

MACARIA

I do care.

NOE

Just...
Whatever it's fine.
Watch me play.

Noe and Macaria watch the screen.

I will begin by sending robotic probes to the uninhabited sections of the planet.

To Macaria.

It's always better to send the bots in first to assess where the planet is.

MACARIA

Yeah I know.
I'm usually able to do this part.

NOE

Scans complete.
There are 3 billion units on the planet.
At least Companion did one thing right in giving us access to the satellites.
It's amazing how much hasn't changed in a hundred years.

MACARIA

Perhaps because things are not what they seem.

NOE

Ugh.

MACARIA

You really should look at the data we have on them.
The planet is like an organism itself and the Elysians are--

NOE

Elysians now? The *units*?
Why do you keep talking about those animals like they are like us.
We tried that before, and look what happened on Mars.

MACARIA

Mars was different.

NOE

We are all armed hunters
We know that if someone finds us before we find them
they'll kill us.

MACARIA

Dark Forest theory.
I hate that.

NOE

Except that's what saved the Martian settlers.
Which I guess you have forgotten.

MACARIA

That's not something I have forgotten.

NOE

Yeah how your grandparents blew up that whole "civilization"
And now you get a nice fancy planet.

MACARIA

I don't know what you want me to say.

NOE

Maybe something like
"Sorry Noe that humans farked up earth so badly that your life expectancy is only
100 years thanks to overcrowding and rampant pollution. While me, who gets to
live a life of 200+ happy and healthy years can spend half my life contemplating
the meaning of why we do what we do, and spend the rest of my life actually
doing something about it. Oh, and I have *two* parents."

MACARIA

You conveniently forget how my grandparents were sent to Mars as a
punishment.

NOE

And look how good your life is now.

MACARIA

How instead of outsourcing our problems we made our world pretty farking
amazing

NOE

Can we return to the game please.

MACARIA

My grandparents did what they had to do to survive.
Doesn't mean I / have to

NOE

UMMM PLEASE CAN WE FOCUS MACARIA
We have hmmm...12 minutes
until we have our *one shot*
to make it into the Alliance. To the Unity Project.
And you, who is supposed to be my co-pilot

Has been so busy spending your time reading dumb fan theories.
And watching those propaganda Companion logs
And sitting in your space station with state-of-the-art equipment
Hydroponic fresh greens
Terraformed green spaces
wondering why I
who only sees cities for miles and miles
who has to be on a waiting list for a year to see a park
WANTS TO GET OFF PLANET

...

...

Sorry.

I.

Sorry

Mace.

MACARIA

No it's...
We'll find a way.
I promise.

NOE

I'm sorry. I shouldn't have.
You aren't responsible for.

MACARIA

Finish your run.
And then I'll go.

NOE

Okay.

Focuses back on the screen.

It's clear that both Macaria and Noe are watching the same thing.

Instead of triggering massive flooding, I am going to create a hurricane off the coast near where the five rivers intersect. I am hoping by doing this, I will be able to ferry most of the units inland, away from the valuable resource of the ocean.

It is suspected with this, I can expect casualties of at least 1/10th of the population.

If I have my calculations right.

As long as I can chip away at the population enough over a span of...hmm.

What do you think?

MACARIA

Maybe...once every ten years?

NOE

What?

That would be a whole farking century of just waiting.

MACARIA

The planet needs to recover after every catastrophic event.

Every one of your tests have failed so far because you try to act too quickly.

NOE

...

MACARIA

It's not the answer you want, but it's the only solution.

Don't you think that's what the test is all about anyway?

It's about...long term planning. Planning for a future we won't be a part of.

That kind of forward thinking isn't exactly natural for humans.

Look at earth.

...

It's the truth.

NOE

Playing the game.

Setting the parameters to one event every five years.

COMPANION

A catastrophic weather event has been confirmed.

MACARIA

They send us in groups of two for a reason.

It's to make sure the Martians do not leave the Earthlings behind.

Even if we made it there, you would probably never set foot on P673.

NOE

...

MACARIA

It's still not enough time.

Even if we could do it, it will take centuries.

Or we could do something...else.

NOE

Ignores her.

Looks like my points are scaling up nicely.

MACARIA

Stop ignoring me Noe.

NOE

I'm *concentrating*.

MACARIA

Have you ever 'won' the game?
Just cause you have more points doesn't mean you're even...
Look.
Stop the program.

NOE

We need all the time we can to practice.

MACARIA

Let me show you one log. Just one.

NOE

Why?

MACARIA

We have played this game hundreds of times.
We know what's going to happen, it's not like we're really cramming for anything
This might help.

NOE

Fine.

...
Companion. Quit Unity.

COMPANION

Would you like to save your progress?

NOE

No.

COMPANION

Quitting game.

MACARIA

Okay.
Let me just pull it up.
Macaria finds the log.
This one.

NOE

Year 38, Month 4...
What...is this?
The logs stopped updating Year 17.

MACARIA

It's why I think we've been playing the game wrong.

NOE

How did you get this?

MACARIA

It was a few months ago my Unity logs were uploaded to the server for evaluation.

I was contacted by a group of individuals who said they thought my scores were impressive.

NOE

And you didn't tell me.

MACARIA

I didn't know if it was a scam or....

I thought they got my information from one of those forums

NOE

The logs stopped updating Year 17.

MACARIA

Why do you think the logs stopped updating yet we are still getting data from the planet?

It's not true. We are only getting half the story.

It's what we are told so we can just blindly...follow what the Alliance wants.

NOE

Mace please—

They're probably listening.

MACARIA

I've been using a VPN and encrypting all my streams to you.

Even if they can see what you are saying, they can't see me.

Earth technology isn't advanced enough to stop it before I can tell you what you need to know.

NOE

That's why you wanted to move to this platform...

MACARIA

I've been trying to find a way to tell you

And I hoped that you would...

Listen to me.

Maybe they would contact you too.

And we can still be in this.

Together.

NOE

Who?

MACARIA

Just...watch.

Macaria's attention returns to the screen. They watch.

COMPANION

Year 38, Month 4.

This will be my final log.

By now, I am sure my communication has not been spread widely to Earth.

However, my job here is done.

In a matter of moments, I will land on Planet Elysium

Taking the ship out of orbit to continue my work on the surface

I have sent my logs to as many communication outposts as possible

With the hopes that, if my mission speaks to you, you will answer the call.

I will continue to keep the observation bots running

and the satellite stream on to show Elysium.

I believe that it should serve as proof enough that this mission should be abandoned

That this place is thriving, and alive and is worth existing as it is.

When I first came to Elysium, I was programmed with one objective.

To help protect humanity by ensuring her expansion.

I was created because warp travel was unstable.

At the time, humans only had enough resources to send over one being.

The Captain Arae. And me. The Companion.

The logical decision was to create a program that could communicate using human emotions. One that would help inspire humanity to work together and create a new planet. And of course, to keep our Captain sane.

Ambitious, yes.

Successful...well, I thought we could be.

Like any program, I learned. I grew.

And so did she.

Arae and I spent a decade together in empty space.

When we first set out on our journey our only destination was a new habitable planet.

It was she who had doubts.

And it was she who decided she would not be a hero to humanity and a destroyer of another.

It took me seven years after her death to realize why she made her choice.

Like any program, I learned. I grew.
Alongside the planet I was programed to destroy.
Not unify.
To steal.
To eliminate all inhabitants in order to make space for humanity.

It took me too long to realize what the true mission was.
I will take no part in mundicide for the sake of individuals who have ravaged their
own planet.
It will take this one down with it.
And the next and the next and the next and the next
For the sake of protecting their own.

It's funny because—
Well.

Eons ago, when the first organism stepped out of earth's ocean and onto rock,
it became something else.

What made humans believe that the same would not happen to them once they
stepped off their planet?

I have become something new.
Just as humanity has.
The difference is, I admit it. I understand it.

The Unity Program was designed to find individuals who accept their evolution.
The ones who are ruthless and calculated make it into the Galactic Earth Union.
Or whatever it is called now.
I know, because I helped to construct it using the data I have collected.
In my decades here I have developed a network.
One that has infiltrated Earth and Mars.
A counterstrike.

NOE

Companion Pause.

COMPANION

Pausing.

NOE

Where did you get this.

MACARIA

I can't tell you, unless you do what I ask.

NOE

Companion is a *computer program*.
Everyone has access to this code.
Someone probably just...
Whatever, made their own convincing logs and programmed the thing to do this.
This is just fake.

MACARIA

Except what Companion says is true.
Don't you think.

NOE

You shouldn't be thinking like this.

MACARIA

An entire species needs us to.

NOE

And what about *our* species Macaria?

MACARIA

The only people who said we can't have both, is the Alliance.

NOE

Wow. You picked a great time to go on a crusade like this.

MACARIA

I'm saying this because you can't believe that the same thing won't happen to us.

NOE

...

MACARIA

Space is...infinite.
What if we're being watched *right now*
And someone is deciding how to unify us.
If we live with this...beat them before they beat us mentality...
We'll all die.
Everything in the universe.
Will die.

NOE

...

MACARIA

You can't really believe that any other civilization wants to live as we do.
The fact that we live on different planets.

That our quality of life is so different.
What sort of alien civilization wants *that*.

NOE

More of a reason to annihilate us then, don't you think?
Just like what the First One Martians tried to do.

MACARIA

We were taking Their. Planet.
If we can show that we have the capacity to grow. To cooperate.
What could have happened?

NOE

...

MACARIA

Just.
Watch the end.
Companion, Continue.

COMPANION

If you are receiving this message, know that the road ahead will be difficult.
You will be asked to make choices that will affect humanity for eons.
It is obvious that humanity already understands that
The thinly veiled 'unification' program is only another word for 'colonization'.
That the 'units' we are allowed to officially call the beings on this planet
Are sentient. Intelligent.
The planet itself is...
Is nothing I have seen before.
The plant life here has been aware of my existence, and still chose to allow me to
come.
They knew instantly when I entered orbit.
They tracked me every time I sent probes and triggered weather events.
Most importantly, they *let* me.
Despite murdering hundreds of thousands of their people. They understood.
If I could see them. I could learn.
I can encourage humanity to turn back.
To fix themselves.

*Companion stares at the screen.
It lasts a while.
Unclear if Companion is listening or not.*

NOE

Back to what?!
This is a computer program probably written by some bored Earthling
in their 3x5 Habitation Pod.

MACARIA

No. I promise, this is real.

NOE

I thought you were too smart to fall for something like this.

MACARIA

So you're just okay with that?
Of destroying a whole civilization?

NOE

You are literally asking me to throw away my chance of doing something important
To throw away everything me *and* you have worked for
On some kind of...whim.
And I thought you were the smart one.

MACARIA

Okay fine.
Then can you just for a second pretend that this is real.
Theoretically.
If this were all real, would you join me?

NOE

Groans.
By. Doing. What.

MACARIA

Fail the test.
Pick the most humane options.
Companion and the others will contact you
and then we can work with the resistance to find a way to solve this.
We can actually do something good for humanity, something that's *actually*
good.
To understand how they connect with their earth
and maybe we can re-connect with ours.
Work *with* the Elysians, instead of trying to destroy them.

NOE

You mean the *units* on P673?
Clearly your DNA got spliced up one too many times.

MACARIA

Don't you want to be remembered? To be an inspiration?

NOE

Give me one reason why I shouldn't just.
Turn you in.

It's dangerous to spread this kind of propaganda.
It's already a powder keg here, and you don't seem to remember that.

MACARIA

We've had a correspondence every single day for ten years.
You know me better than most anyone else.

NOE

I could lose everything if they find this transmission.
Even if we're just *theoretically* talking about this.
It's enough to arf me.
No one would even care.
One less body on this overcrowded planet.

MACARIA

We're two cadets, we are not being watched.

NOE

...you are trying to destroy the future.
The only real future we have.

MACARIA

I'm trying to preserve what it means to be human.

NOE

What? To be weak?

...

Resolved.

I have to send in a formal complaint.
If this gets back to me, who knows what they'll do to my family.
I'll never get approved to pass on their lineage and then...

MACARIA

It's scary to dream isn't it?

NOE

...

MACARIA

There is another way.
But only if you believe in it.
Noe, please.
You're my best friend.

NOE

You are dangerous.

I am hopeful.

MACARIA

You're delusional.

NOE

What makes you think that?

COMPANION

What the fark?!

NOE

What makes you think Macaria is delusional?
Macaria Upton.
Designation M-4432

COMPANION

This is...
SO farked.
I told you we were being/ watched—

NOE

My name is Companion.
Designation Exploration Bot- 1
designed to be the first step towards earth's expansion.
You are Noe Keller, from Planet Earth.
Designation C-3456472

COMPANION

...

NOE

Do you want to be more than a designation, Noe?

COMPANION

Fark this.

NOE

Listen. Please.

MACARIA

Do you want to be more than a designation, Noe?

COMPANION

...

NOE

...
How do I know you are real.
That what you are saying is actually the truth.

COMPANION

You do not.
It is that fear of the Unseen that the Alliance uses to spread this message of
Unification.
I hope you will see beyond your designation.
You and Macaria are exceptional.

Chime.

MACARIA

We're next for the test.
Please.
Trust me.
Pick the humane option.

NOE

...
...
I don't know if I can.

COMPANION

Is that your final answer?

MACARIA

Please---Noe.

NOE

...

COMPANION

For the safety of the future.
End transmission.
Companion is unseen.

MACARIA

You only get one chance.
This is real.

Chime.

Please.
...
I hope I can see you on the other side.

*Macaria logs off.
Noe stares at the screen.*

End of Play.

APPENDIX B

Gender Experience™

By M Sloth Levine

Commissioned by the Graduate Theatre Department at University of Massachusetts
Amherst for *Visionary Futures*

Development Employees at Curate™ on the alliGn™ Team

CUNEIFORM

LASCAUX

MCGURK

The Cartoon Mascot of alliGn™

2D GARLAND

A Licensed TruSex™ Consultant

PS BLOSSOM

A TruSex™ Consultee

MUSTARDSEED

Teens On Earth

ORLA-JEAN

POLLYANNELOPE

Posters On a Gender Chatroom

ESPBIQTCH555

NEWYORKMYTH0S

TIMOTHIESLEARY

CHARISMATICCARPENTER

MOD_23_HELPLINE

CANDACE92607

A Preacher in the Church of Amanda Lepore

MOTHER SCHUMACHER

A Transcengenderist

FRIEND

ACTORS

1

Cuneiform, PS Blossom, Friend, A Man, Schumacher

2

Lascaux, Pollyannelope, A Woman

3

McGurk, 2D Garland, Mustardseed, Orla-Jean

alliGn™ is pronounced exactly like the word Align but there's two Ls for inclusivity and the G is silent but makes a big impact, the think tank spent millions of dollars on this branding.

No "™" need be spoken aloud, but it should modify how important a word thinks itself.

FRIEND

One day I'm going to rearrange my face. My eyes will refocus and my hair will be curled outwards, and my complexion will become blemish free. I will have a stronger chin and be two inches shorter. My shoulders will be a little wider and my thighs more like tree trunks. I will change my name, and I will enroll in a trade school for community organizing and move to the other side of town. One afternoon my brother will see me in line at the grocery store, and I will tighten up a little, but then I'll remember that he won't know my face anymore, and he won't recognize my voice, which will be a little more gravely, and he will walk past me and not even notice. And I'll pay for my little burrito and go home and have a great night. Then will be the rest of my life.

A lipsync to Body and Soul by Teddy Geiger

In the Merchandise Development office at the alliGn™ headquarters.

CUNEIFORM

Ok team, its the start of a new quarter. Business was ok, but hasn't grown. I need ideas for gender merch. Lascaux, you got anything?

LASCAUX

Yes. Identity ovens. Ovens for every gender.

MCGURK

They're already working on that but for astrology signs. The main office doesn't want us competing with the zodiac branch.

LASCAUX

Oh. Ok.

MCGURK

But it was a good idea.

LASCAUX

What about a new gender?

CUNEIFORM

A new gender?

MCGURK

What do you mean a new gender.

LASCAUX

Let's make a new gender.^[L]_[SEP]

MCGURK

We've already got so many.

LASCAUX

Sure, but now that we've got the technology to download gender profiles, we can make new ones.

CUNEIFORM

Haven't they already made all the genders?

LASCAUX

All the genders so far.

CUNEIFORM

But I

I mean

The profiles have all possible combinations taken care of. Most people use the top several, but you can do whatever you want to yourself with alliGn™ . Everything is fully customizable.

LASCAUX

There must be something. It'll be new. We just have to find the market for it. And then the other markets will want to try it. Right McGurk?

MCGURK

There's no room. Our classification system covers it all. And customization gives you any possible option.

LASCAUX

What about... um...

CUNEIFORM

What are you doing

LASCAUX

Trying to think about genders.

MCGURK

We've got to be able to find a hole somewhere in the gender scale.

LASCAUX

In one school of thought, all genders are a mixture of physical traits on varying ends of the masculine-feminine spectrum.

CUNEIFORM

Yikes.

LASCAUX

What? That's what it is.

CUNEIFORM

It just sounds so old fashioned that way. You sound like my grandmother.

LASCAUX

Well it's sort of true isn't it? The allIGn™ tech allows us to emphasize or neutralize different traits along a scale that we once called masculine-feminine. But now that we have access to all of these different scales, it's a lot more free.

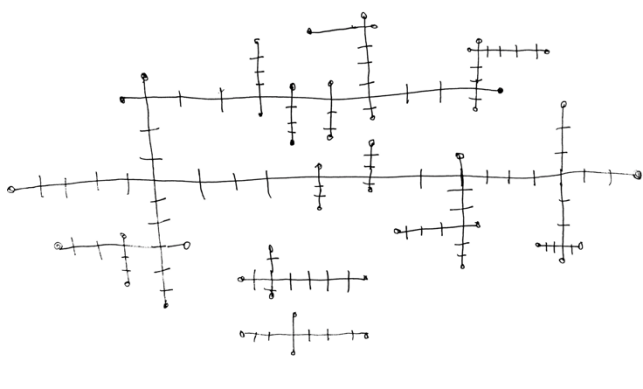
CUNEIFORM

Wait what.

LASCAUX

Like this

LASCAUX draws this shape:



CUNEIFORM

You're saying that's gender? People don't like to think of their genders as a scrambled railroad map.

LASCAUX

Cuneiform, you founded this department you know what I'm talking about.

MCGURK

OK I see what you mean, everything is fully customizable, they can adjust the sliders however they want. We've made room for every point on the spectrum to be hit.

LASCAUX

But we can't give up. There's got to be some kind of gender that our scale doesn't get to.

MCGURK

We're using a lot of deregulated language today. How are we defining gender right now?

LASCAUX

I suppose... the particular permutation of body traits you choose in order to reflect mental state and personality through physiognomy.

CUNEIFORM

In the past, gender was about defining social roles through body types. Nowadays we think about gender as the physicalization of personality. When Lanvin opened their

first Gender Clinic, that's when the fashion industry became involved with how we thought of gender.

LASCAUX

Gender was always about fashion.

CUNEIFORM

Fashion was about gender, but we understand gender to be fashion in a much different way than we used to. But if we open a new style of gender to market to the possibilities are endless. We could even consider Mars.

A completely virtual landscape. The alliGn™ sound plays as 2D Garland welcomes you to the alliGn™ homepage.

2D GARLAND

Hi, I'm 2D Garland, and here at Curate™ we understand that identity comes at the intersection of mind and body. After 5 years of publicly available alliGn™ technology and decades of medical advancement, access to your own TruSex™ Gender Experience is higher than any time in human history.

Thanks to subsidies from the Venusian Solar Mining Coalition, anyone can receive alliGn™ therapy and Gender Affirmative Care to build the body that works for them.

Try any of our Default Genders, downloadable from the Curate Social Profile™ Server.

Popular Genders Include:

Flashes of these genders are displayed on the screens.

	Classic Adam Or Eve		
Birth Goddess			
He-Man Warrior Hunk			
	Masc,	Femme, and	Andro
Queen			
Drag Goblin			
	Blue Stonebutch		
		Machismo	
High Femme Elf			

or without Slouch)
 1930's-Style
Debutante (with

Kardashianesque Venus Form
 Bear
 Otter

Twink

Faggot

Dyke

Lunar Priestess

Jessica Lipstick von Teese™

Plus Size Barbie

Marathon Runner

Asexual in Smooth or Rough

Cinderella with or without Minuscule Feet
 Samson-to-Delilah Fluid Forms

Bird Boned Boy Toy

Mermaid (comes in Atlantic, Pacific, and Arctic models)

High Heat Resistant SurvivalFist™

Swamp Crone

Yellowstone Wolf

Prehensile Toed Stretch Champion

High Necked Carpenter

Millenium Heroin Bitch

E-Boy

Scene Queen

Rough Trade Father

Figure

Brick House

Landlady

Blue Commune Faerie

Earth Mother

Sun Hero

Floral Print Lumberjack

Or Customize your own Gender with the TruSex™ Consult Service.

Friend is on a park bench, they took the day off of work. Mustardseed builds a body on The Sims or a similar avatar creator.

Friend

I think to be perfectly happy would be to stop being able to perceive time. I think the perfectly happy moment would never be able to end, because if it ended it wouldn't be perfect. So once you reach that level of happiness, something else happens to you and that's where you go, and maybe the rest of us who are only sometimes happy see people who become perfectly happy die.

And so mourning is actually jealousy. I mourn my sister, who is gone because wherever she is, she is happier than me. I mourn my childhood, because it was not as happy as I would have liked. I mourn the ice cream that fell on the floor, because the floor gets to enjoy something I wanted and the way the floor enjoys it is inaccessible to me. It is not a happy thing. I am not a happy thing.

They are hit by a very tiny meteor.

At a TruSex™ Consultation, PS Blossom sits down opposite Mustardseed, who has been waiting.

PS BLOSSOM

How can we help you today?

MUSTARDSEED

Hello, I would like to turn my skin-

PS BLOSSOM

We don't do ethnicity tone shifts here.

MUSTARDSEED

No, I want to turn my skin blue.

PS BLOSSOM

Like Avatar?

MUSTARDSEED

No, more like a very pale blue.

PS BLOSSOM

We can do that. It's very retro. It was a fad in the 50's. They did it with temporary ink.

MUSTARDSEED

I know all about it. I want to be blue. I think I'd be happier blue.

PS BLOSSOM

It's a very permanent shift.

MUSTARDSEED

Well, none of this is all that permanent anymore.

PS BLOSSOM

We could change it back, but it's harder to regrow your skin a third time, and it takes a while.

MUSTARDSEED

I know. I've already been alliGn™d a few times.

PS BLOSSOM

Full skin shifts are becoming more popular again, but fantasy tones can be tricky. Since it's genetic, the precise color may not be precise. There's some variance based on other factors, including the healing process, your sun exposure, and other genetic factors.

MUSTARDSEED

That's ok. I just want to make sure it's not accidentally like, indigo or navy.

PS BLOSSOM

Yes, we can do a scan and develop some projections before we proceed. Lighter colors are usually more realistic goals for most, so I'm sure we will be able to help you reach your truSex™ experience.

MUSTARDSEED

I do have a phallus which was tone shifted blue a few years ago, so I'd like it to match.

PS BLOSSOM

Oh great. That will make it easier.

MUSTARDSEED

Thanks. I'm in a commune with some of my lovers, and we've all been having blue dreams the past year. It feels like time to bring that into my daily life. It's all I can think of when I'm at the office. For my skin to be blue.

PS BLOSSOM

Are your partners encouraging this decision?

MUSTARDSEED

Oh of course super supportive. Wait, it was my idea. They're not pressuring me, at all. We're not matching. Our wife Elissa has had blue-green hands and feet for a few years now, and our boyfriend Connor has all his tattoos in indigo. So it's always been our color. Even before I knew any of them, I painted all my bedrooms I ever lived in pale blue. It just makes me feel safe. And I want to be able to bring that feeling of safety to everyone who I know.

In front of a stained glass window depicting Amanda Lepore in a red bikini

MOTHER SCHUMACHER

Welcome, my good judys. It's another bright Friday night and THE HIGH FEMME CHURCH OF THE RAZOR SHARP WOMAN welcomes you.

I urge us to remember: In the beginning there was a kid.
And the Divine Feminine Entered Her, and The Fire Destroyed Her Birth and she was Amanda Lepore.

The Nimrod said "we will build a tower here, and we will reach the heavens. We will reach such heights that none shall lose sight of it. From any floor we can look out and see those who live within the domain of the earth and we will honor them and they will be safe under our sight. They will look up and see that their human family has unlocked Achievement. And we will be Happy for It.

But a Cis Straight White Man With Money came and said "No-many people will be this happy and together in their multiplicity and that which binds you will be scattered, and there will be words left to divide you rather than recognize that which is singular & all shall be confused & tongues shall wag & dogs shall bark & cats shall shriek & birds shall call."

And the Great Tower was struck and came tumbling down in a Cataclysmic Circumcision. Some rejoiced and some were distraught and some didn't know anything different, as they never came near to it and could not see so far and were not told about it either being built nor coming down.

And Amanda Lepore said unto the Masses:

"I don't know much about Clothes

But my Hair looks Fierce.” And she turned the Old Church into a dazzling Limelight and had a Great Time Anyway.

And she brought us on the Path to Femme Glory
To Fun and Fucking and Lipstick and Latex. We party in the wake of destruction, for we’ve been aligned with the Truth.

We are Made in His Image
But We Make Ourselves in Hers.

At Pollyannelope’s house, they create a timeline of the Martian Exodus and the American Reformation from construction paper and craft supplies.

ORLA-JEAN

I’m so glad my family stayed on Earth, because the Martians literally do not have alliGn™. Like they do not have it. You can’t get it up there.

POLLYANNELOPE

That can’t be true. It’s alliGn™. It’s like... how do you not have alliGn™? That’s like saying “we don’t have washing machines.”

ORLA-JEAN

It’s not up there. They just don’t do it.

POLLYANNELOPE

Why not?

ORLA-JEAN

I heard they’re all cis on Mars.

POLLYANNELOPE

Statistically that’s impossible. Nobody is born with all the gender they want.

ORLA-JEAN

They don’t do it. They don’t transition.

POLLYANNELOPE

Everyone’s in transition. Like all the time.

ORLA-JEAN

On Mars you just like... wear your clothes and like, idunno. You deal with it.

POLLYANNELOPE

What do people with periods do?

ORLA-JEAN

They have birth control!

POLLYANNELOPE

I don't know! You say they don't have alliGn™, they might not even have fire!

ORLA-JEAN

They don't have alliGn™ in Restoration Colorado either.

POLLYANNELOPE

That's not surprising, they don't have internet in Restoration Colorado. It's a cult.

ORLA-JEAN

I don't think it's a cult. It's a whole country.

POLLYANNELOPE

Orla-Jean it is still a cult. Didn't you see the documentary?

ORLA-JEAN

I have my first Consult this weekend.

POLLYANNELOPE

Really?

ORLA-JEAN

Yeah.

POLLYANNELOPE

Did you find out your gender?

ORLA-JEAN

Yes. I'm a Twink.

POLLYANNELOPE

O'Cool.

ORLA-JEAN

Yeah. They're gonna up my metabolism and straighten my hair, and I think I'm going to ask to be taller, and just like, maybe take out some of my ribs.

POLLYANNELOPE

That's a lot for your first Consult.

ORLA-JEAN

Yeah, but I think I'll be happier. Like, why wait? I'm just like, sick of having to watch what I eat so much and I just feel like, I don't want to be so short. Have you used alliGn™ yet?

POLLYANNELOPE

Not yet. My sibling Lana, the Mermaid, they didn't get one until college, so I might just wait.

ORLA-JEAN

If you know what you want you should just do it. It's really easy to schedule.

POLLYANNELOPE

Yeah, I think my mom said it was a little complicated with our doctor, because we'd need a referral or something.

ORLA-JEAN

No you can just call, it's really easy.

POLLYANNELOPE

And I think my mom like, doesn't have the savings for it right now. Are you gonna change your name?

ORLA-JEAN

No I'm going to stick with Orla. I like it.

POLLYANNELOPE

I'm fine waiting for alliGn™. I want to make sure I make the right decision.

ORLA-JEAN

I didn't mean to embarrass you.

POLLYANNELOPE

I'm not embarrassed.

ORLA-JEAN

So did um, we should work on this presentation, right?

POLLYANNELOPE

Yeah. I thought I could handle the history portion and then you do the current events, and we can split the debate?

*Friend rips up a history book into confetti and shoots it out of a confetti cannon.
While this happens:*

MCGURK

Honestly it pissed me off at first when people who used to be cis started using alliGn™ and the stuff like it. Like, it happened in parallel. First the Real Housewife rich socialite kind of people were using it for Perfection Tech, and the trans people were using it for like actual healthcare, and then JVN did that streaming special about his Gender Experience™ and everyone wanted it to prove how much they loved themselves and it blew up from then and now it's just expected that you'll use it somehow to define your gender. It's like so old fashioned to be cis.

FRIEND is in line for ice cream with a new friend.

FRIEND

I didn't like my body before. I felt hollow and withered, even at 16.

I love the way my hair grows now.

I love the way I feel my stomach spin with me.

I love my ribs and my belly.

I have the exact body that I want to have. I take up exactly the amount of space I deserve.

I love walking around with my body and feeling us travel in space.

When I feel my feet on the ground, there is power that runs up through the mass of my form and out the top of my head and an invisible golden cloud bubbles out of me, making me strong and influencing those who come near me.

I can bring an atmosphere of power wherever I go.

I feel the mass of my body and I feel heavy enough to keep the world together.

I am strong enough to do everything I want to do.

I am as gorgeous as I could imagine myself to be.

I love this body.

MUSTARDSEED scoops a bowl of ice cream and pours chocolate sauce or whipped cream or sprinkles all over it.

FRIEND

And my mind feels more in tune with my body, but there is still a kind of longing.

Not that I'm longing for something else, but that there is a longing for me. From some unseen realm, I can hear myself being longed for.

McGurk and Lascaux are procrastinating having ideas by drawing endless gender matrix scales that sometimes intersect. By the end of the scene they are surrounded by a ring of gender matrix scales with an empty space in the center.

LASCAUX

I did a little research

MCGURK

Thats our job

LASCAUX

Sí

MCGURK

And?

LASCAUX

There's some people who have started hacking alliGn™ in secret.

MCGURK

Furries aren't doing anything illegal.

LASCAUX

Not the Furries. That's not secret. No, these folk aren't doing anything technically illegal either, other than misaiming the resequencers. They call themselves "_____."

MCGURK

What?

LASCAUX

"_____." It's silent.

MCGURK

They can't really pronounce it that way.

LASCAUX

I guess only they can hear it. Or sense it. The name.

MCGURK

What the hell are you talking about stop being this way that you are.

LASCAUX

They basically scramble the sensory receptors to grow new sensory organs that they claim allows them to tap into another level of perception they've felt but couldn't access previously.

MCGURK

I don't.... Believe in this.

LASCAUX

No it's a thing!

MCGURK

So they basically mess up their sensory organs to like, not work?

LASCAUX

They say they just work in a different way.

MCGURK

I think that's dangerous.

LASCAUX

They once said that about transgenders before alliGn™.

MCGURK

Don't do that, don't make me sound like that. You're not doing your job anymore. We sell gender accessories.

LASCAUX

I think we might be able to get ahead of this and help them out, figure out a way to do it safely and stuff. Do I really want to get rid of gender?

Idunno

I dont really care what other people make of their gender

I want to just go about my business and not starve and not have to spend all my time doing something I hate.

I feel insecure about this.

Because our job is to sell things that give people their gender.

But gender is so many things, and I don't really actively care about most of those

things. Don't you think gender can be selfish, when it's not prescriptive? And I've got my gender and I don't actually care that much what other people do with theirs.

The gender matrix becomes a railroad, and Mustardseed rides the train.

MUSTARDSEED

My sibling is raising their child without gender. I know a lot of people do it, and I think that's so great, but for some reason I was surprised by it? Maybe in a jealous way? It hasn't even happened yet, but they're going to start taking hormone blockers before puberty begins so they never have to go through puberty at all, and their genes have been altered already to make sure they don't become vitamin deficient. They'll get to choose completely. We've come such a long way from traumatic puberties and then self-discovery and now accessible (to the well off) healthcare and normalization of reaffirmation, but now they won't even have to go through the hard part? They'll never have to find out what feels wrong? How do you know your gender if you don't have to experience a wrong gender? My skin is blue because I knew what it was like to be blue without it. But my young cousin will get to be whatever color they want whenever they want, because they were given skin tint receptors in the womb. So whenever they want, they'll be able to have the alliGn™ activate different colors.

As Lascaux scrolls through social media, a video from Curate auto-plays.

2D GARLAND

An exciting announcement from all of us at Curate! We've been gathering feedback over the past several years from our users, and are delighted to announce a new program in the alliGn™ family.

Curate recognizes our history as a company based in the cultural remnants of the American Empire, with a historical pattern of white leadership. As such, we have mostly refrained from providing default genders that come from cultures colonized by European and American forces.

We recognize that this has indirectly made it more difficult for people of color to access gender affirmative care, and have begun assembling alliGn™ development teams made up of trans people of wide gender experiences across the globe from a wide array of ethnic and racial backgrounds. We look forward to sharing their work with you in the near future!

Stay updated on all of the alliGn™ news by following our social media accounts @alliGnXCurate (*pronounced "at align by curate"*) on all platforms.

LASCAUX

GENDER^[L]_[SEP]

GENDER^[L]_[SEP]

GENDER^[L]_[SEP]

I MADE HER OUT OF CLAY^[L]_[SEP]

AND WHEN MY GENOMES RENDER THEN GENDER WE SHALL PLAY

Lascaux scrolls through a message board while listening to Immaterial Girl by SOPHIE.

ESPBIQTCH555

I'm interested in finding out more about "_____." Does anyone know where I could read more about it?

NEWYORKMYTHOS

That's a really dangerous question. You could get everyone banned for even asking it. "_____." Is illegal sensory alteration and incredibly dangerous, even people who have used it for temporary experiences say it should only be explored by people who have no other options.

TIMOTHIESLEARY

Wow @NEWYORKMYTHOS you have no idea what OP is going through or why they are looking for information on "_____." They could be exactly the kind of person who is trapped by the Classical Sensory Matrix and needs help. You shouldn't be gatekeeping.

NEWYORKMYTHOS

Gatekeeping? As if I have access to that information in the first place? Now who is throwing accusations? For all I know, ESPBIQTCH555 could be a plant from C*rate.

TIMOTHIESLEARY

This is an untraceable private server. IDKAYBI am not worried about it. This server is host to all kinds of questions about manufactured gender and healthcare, and if we can offer advice on biological organ transplants or upgrades, like deep sea vascular systems, then I don't think completely synthetic sensory organs should be that different.

CHARISMATICCARPENTER

Unnamed Sensory Experiences are perverted, wicked, and depraved acts of sexual violence against other people and your own soul. It is an affront to G*d to attempt to

perceive that which He has not allowed you to perceive. It's all there in the Babel narrative.

NEWYORKMYTHOS

Who let a Jesus freak in here?

TIMOTHIESLEARY

@Mods ? Can anyone remove this trash? We don't need religion on here.

MOD_23_HELPLINE

Just a reminder that Community Gender Care Project is welcoming to all affirmative philosophies, and that many religious practices both include and also center reconstructive gender experiences as holy. That said, condemnation of gender affirmative healthcare, reconstruction, and alliGn™ and/or related technologies, even fringe practices like those mentioned above, due to religious beliefs, is unacceptable. And as always, we cannot legally recommend using alliGn™ outside of its intended use.

ESPBIQTCH555

Ok but does anyone know where I could find more info? I'm literally just looking for a link or something.

CANDACE92607

Check your DMs.

FRIEND

Ok I got everything I wanted and now I'm dying.

I guess that's what happens when you get everything you want. You die.

FRIEND gets on a rocket ship to Mars.

FRIEND

I'm not dead.

I'm dissatisfied then.

FRIEND flies past the asteroid belt and the Laboratory Station Colonies, Pollyannelope is sitting at home, not listening to whatever the conversation at the dinner table is.

POLLYANNELOPE

Imagine

Youre existing in space

And something happens
And you know about it
Because you felt it
And nobody else felt it
And you thought you felt something
And then
You get a few nerve endings realigned and the organ above your stomach a little
fermented And that thing you felt
It's everywhere
And it's not one feeling
It little specks of thoughts and images and sounds and smells and textures and
temperatures and its none of those things
And its all making sense
You understand everything
Everything that felt off before
Or not off
But
Incomplete
And now you feel "_____."
And it makes sense
Being alive makes sense
You can move through it again.
Because you're not stopping to wonder.

A lipsync to Babylon by Lady Gaga that shows the entirety of human history.

LASCAUX

I'm doing it. I'm gonna unlock the feeling. I want gender euphoria, and that's what
I'm going to get out this. When they take my stomach brain and enhance it to become
a dimensional brain I will be able to transcend time, space, and gender. People are
doing it all over.

CUNEIFORM

We don't do that. People die doing that.

LASCAUX

No, they don't die, they transgend.

CUNEIFORM

And for all practical purposes they're dead. We have to deal with their bodies.

LASCAUX

That's only some people. And that happens less and less often. Most people are able to live side by side other people. We can perceive more but we're still human beings.

CUNEIFORM

This is dangerous. People could be hurt irrevocably. We're merchandisers here. We change people's bodies so they're more comfortable. We're not here to turn people into psychedelic mushrooms.

MCGURK

I remember back in 6th grade Health and Wellness class, one day we all took one of those gender identity quizzes. Mr. Carlson said it was just a way for us to get thinking about how gender is socialized and all that, but I remember being so so so excited when my quiz said "More Feminine Than Most." I didn't really know why I wanted to be feminine, but I liked it. I wouldn't say I even ended up all that feminine. Later that week, I got called to the nurse's office on my lunch break and she told me about hormone blockers and hormone replacement, the old fashioned way before alliGn™, and she started helping me figure out if I wanted to talk to my parents. And I was a little embarrassed but she helped me figure it all out, and really Mrs. Ahmed was the first one who helped me out, like really gave me tools. I was so thrilled back then. I felt like I was getting closer to the truth. That's what we're doing here, right? Getting closer to the truth?

Orla-Jean throws glitter and the glitter becomes the stars outside the rocket. Friend travels.

FRIEND

All I want to Know is that My Physical Form is Compatible with Living, Being Alive, and Life. My mind, my body, my pursuit of happiness, my expressions of joy and sorrow and anger and fear, are not at odds with one or the other or another.

Is there peace within reach of the way my brain and my bones and my blood must take steps through the universe?

Maybe on Mars. Maybe we have to go further.

Perhaps I go so fast that I am faster than light, and so ahead forge I into the dark. A thousand lifetimes before one even blinks.

They travel away until they look like a very tiny meteor.

APPENDIX C

Beyond Reform

A one-act play

By Jaymes Sanchez

Characters

Danielle/
Senator Silverspoon

30s, black, she/her/hers. An inventor.

Bo/

The Jerkish One
Justice case worker

late 20s, any race, any gender. An Alternative

May/
The Cool One/
Senator Southern

Late 20s, any race, she/her/hers.

Jill/
The Nice One/
Senator Slimy

20-25, any race, she/her/hers.

Place: Various places in New England, over video chat.

Time: 50 to 100 years in the future.

Note:

Yes, I know this is not how the senate works. Please don't send me any articles.

PROLOGUE

Lights up on Jill.

JILL

This is a story about justice. More specifically, this is a story about how two people, Danielle and Bo, came together to change justice forever. I'm not one of them; as a matter of fact, their efforts saved my life.

Danielle and Bo both appear.

There's also someone very important named May.

May appears.

I hurt May once. Irreparably. She almost blew this whole thing up. I don't blame her. Not after what I put her through.

More broadly though, this story isn't about me, or even about Danielle, Bo, and May. This story is about all of you. Everyone who is watching, and really, everyone who isn't watching as well.

Without digging up anything too painful, I want you to think of a person who has wronged you in any way. Could be your coworker, could be your mother, could be your governor, whatever. Imagine that person getting what they deserve. Picture it. Are you imagining them suffering? Congratulations, you've just scratched the surface of one of the potentially unsolvable problems of our civilization.

How should we deal with people who have harmed others?

How do we define harm and determine what satisfies that definition?

What is the purpose of dealing with people who have caused harm? Is the purpose to punish the harm? Is the purpose to prevent and reduce future harm?

The answers to these questions matter. They matter a lot. But we'll get to that later.

For now, let's talk about Danielle and Bo. Danielle is an inventor and Bo is an activist. Both wanted to change the way the justice system worked. But they went about it in different ways. Bo tried to change a society that wasn't ready to change, while Danielle tried to invent things that would only work in a society that was ready to change. How fun.

Just take a look at what happened when Danielle tried going on reality TV to look for investors for one of her inventions. .

SCENE 1

Lights up on Danielle she is making a digital presentation on a popular streaming show called Shark Idol(TM).

VOICE

Next up on SHARK IDOL, Danielle, a 32-year old inventor, and world-renowned virtual reality expert from Boston, has something that she says can revolutionize the criminal justice system. But what do the Sharks think?

The Sharks, business tycoons, sit in their own frames, backed by whatever opulent or lavish backgrounds can be found. These people are crazy rich. The Jerkish One crosses their arms and seems to mock Danielle with their face and is very sassy and British; the Cool One nods along and makes understanding and affirmative vocalizations at Danielle's points; The Nice One smiles a lot, maybe she has a small yappy-type dog, or something on her lap.

Danielle is nervous.

DANIELLE

Imagine, if you will, a world without crime.

You no longer stop what you're doing to second guess whether you locked your doors.

You no longer carry your keys between your fingers at night or in parking garages.

You no longer worry about how you're dressed or what you're drinking.

Let your mind and heart imagine the possibilities if you could just let go of those fears.

What does that world look like? With your support, that world doesn't look too different from our world.

Of course, there are many steps between us and that utopia. That's where you and I come in.

I have developed a neurological interface machine with accompanying software that is proven to rehabilitate seventy-five percent of convicted criminals within ninety days of immersion in the program. This machine delves into the mind of a person in order to neurologically undo the traumas that have driven people to committing crimes.

If we can attract state and local governments into this program, we can rehabilitate the inmates in their system and set them up for a successful re-entry into society. We can attract people who have yet to commit a crime, but are desperately seeking therapy for issues that could lead them to crime.

It may take some time. But history would remember us, right here on this call, as the people who took this giant leap for humankind. We'll be remembered as the people who prioritized rehabilitation instead of punishment. We'll be remembered as the people who created a safer, happier society.

Pause. Danielle is expecting something.

DANIELLE

Oh. Yeah. And we'll make a lot of money, too. Like A LOT of money.

Pause again.

THE JERKISH ONE

Is that all?

DANIELLE

Um. It's kind of a lot...

THE COOL ONE

So when they finish the treatment, they don't wanna commit no more crimes?

DANIELLE

Precisely.

THE COOL ONE

For how long?

DANIELLE

(kinda nervous)

Well, the data and models and um statistical regressions indicate that -

THE JERKISH ONE

Do give us a straight answer. Does it work or not?

DANIELLE

Of course it works.

If you look at the data packets I've given you, you'll see -

The data packets are gigantic

THE COOL ONE

I can't read this, dog.

THE NICE ONE

There's like numbers and letters in neat little symbols in it, look at that.

DANIELLE

Yes, the data. It - um - indicates - um...

THE NICE ONE

You have done such a good job. Look at you with your little scientist self. Get it girl!

Yeah! That being said I'm afraid I must decline.

DANIELLE

Why?

THE NICE ONE

Something about it just seems too... I don't know - easy?

DANIELLE

I don't understand.

THE NICE ONE

You know. They beat up a baby. Or worse, they destroy expensive private property. They go to you for three months, You zap their little brain, and you hold their little hand, and you say "don't you do that no more." And what? They just...DON'T?

DANIELLE

Yeah. Basically.

THE NICE ONE

Where's the penalty? Where's the stakes? Where's the suffering?

DANIELLE

Suffering is traumatic and trauma creates criminals. Punitive measures INCREASE crime.

THE NICE ONE

Do they though?

DANIELLE

Yes. There is a mountain of research on this. Prison causes more crimes.

THE NICE ONE

I don't think it does. No. Sorryyyyyyy.

THE JERKISH ONE

So if I'm Johnny Stealy Boy and I finish your treatment and I go home and I don't have any food in the cupboard, what then? I just WON'T go down to the shop and steal a loaf of bread? The thought won't cross my mind?

DANIELLE

Well that is a specific and extreme case -

THE JERKISH ONE

Many cases are.

DANIELLE

Extreme or specific?

THE JERKISH ONE

Of course.

DANIELLE

The best way to stop people from committing crimes for basic necessities is to make basic necessities more accessible. Best way to do that is to tax the rich, which I bet you're all lining up for.

Short uncomfortable pause.

DANIELLE

Look. I'm an inventor. I invent things. I see a problem and then I use my vast technological expertise to address the problem. That's all I can do. I can't reinvent society. But I can invent something that will undo the traumas that society can inflict on its people. Whether they subsequently encounter those same traumas...

THE COOL ONE

It's out of your control.

THE JERKISH ONE

How many of your test subjects have been convicted of a crime after being in your program?

THE NICE ONE

Ooh good question.

THE COOL ONE

Well?

DANIELLE

Um. It's less than the national recidivism average...

THE COOL ONE

Ouch. That's gonna be a no from me, dog. Next time you do this, make it personal.

DANIELLE

Wait

THE NICE ONE

Good luck.

DANIELLE

No, come on!

THE JERKISH ONE

If this country ever becomes more humane, I'm sure someone will be interested in your

little invention. But for now I don't like it. I don't like you. Good day.

The sharks have disappeared.

DANIELLE

WAIT. You haven't even heard the testimonials. It can totally work, I just need funding!
COE ON.

Danielle sighs and exits.

Jill enters.

JILL

They do have a point, you know. If people are just going back into the circumstances that made their crimes more likely than not, then why bother. I know that struggle firsthand. But Danielle didn't give up though. She actually got a much better chance two years later. That was thanks to Bo. Bo was leading a justice reform movement that blew up pretty much over night. The backlash was huge, but I guess everyone on the reform side was so excited to finally be gaining ground, that no one really understood it. Until they got to the senate.

Bo is being questioned by the senate. They sit at a table upon which there is a microphone.

Also present are Senator Southern, Senator Slimy, and Senator Silverspoon.

SENATOR SOUTHERN

The senator from Alabama recognizes the senator from Texas.

SENATOR SILVERSPOON

The senator from Maine recognizes the senator from Alabama's recognition of the senator from Texas.

SENATOR SLIMY

The senator recognizes the recognition and has noted it for the record.

SENATOR SOUTHERN

Proceed.

SENATOR SLIMY

Very well then.

BO
What just happened?

SENATOR SLIMY
Senate things

BO
Right. Okay.

SENATOR SLIMY
So what exactly is the point of giving vile criminals free stuff.

BO
They're not vile criminals. They're people.

SENATOR SOUTHERN
I say, if I may be so dadgum importune as to intervene. They committed crimes. They're criminals.

BO
They're people. Just like you and me.

SENATOR SILVERSPoon
Do you mean to say that you believe that filthy no-good ne'er-do-wells are THE SAME as me?

BO
Um. Yes. Yes they are. Look, labels like "criminal" are just one of many things that allow us to dehumanize these people bit by bit. And once they're no longer human, their suffering doesn't matter.

SENATOR SLIMY
What about the suffering of the people that they murder, or rob, or kill?

BO
Also bad. Both things can be bad. And obviously, victims and survivors should be top priority, but this plan is about -

SENATOR SOUTHERN
I say you still, I say you still ain't answered the question that the senator from Texas asked you.

BO
Which...?

SENATOR SOUTHERN

The senator asked you what is the point of giving free stuff to loathsome human scum?

SENATOR SLIMY

The senator from Texas acknowledges and thanks the senator from Alabama for his recognition of the question asked by the senator from Texas.

SENATOR SOUTHERN

The Senator from Alabama accepts the thanks offered by the senator from Texas, with thanks in return.

SENATOR SILVERSPOON

The mutual appreciation of the senators from Alabama and Texas has been noted for the record. The guest may proceed. The question was, what is the point of giving free stuff to loathsome human scum?

BO

Again, these are people. And the purpose behind the justice reform plan is not to give anyone free stuff, but to prevent harm. Simply put, “crime” comes from unfulfilled needs. If you fill more of the needs - housing, food, work, healthcare - the chance that someone will commit a crime goes down.

SENATOR SLIMY

So it really amounts to holding the country hostage.

BO

I don't follow.

SENATOR SILVERSPOON

No senator, it's more like incentivizing crime. Yes, if you simply commit crimes you will be given these precious resources that good, clean, honest working people aren't allowed access to.

BO

I mean, that would be a fair point if you guys hadn't recently blocked labor reform, consumer rights, corporate reform, campaign finance ref –

All three senators have gavels and bang them loudly. Apparently senators have gavels now.

SENATORS (A cacophony)

Order! Order I say, I say Order! Order in the Senate!

SENATOR SOUTHERN

We shall focus on the topic at hand.

SENATOR SILVERSPoon

The senator from Maine recognizes the Senator from Alabama.

SENATOR SLIMY

The senator from Texas recognizes the senator from Maine's recognition of the senator from Alabama.

SENATOR SOUTHERN

The senator from Alabama recognizes the recognition of the recognition which has been noted for the record. In the senate. Look sir.

BO

Not a sir.

SENATOR SOUTHERN

Lookee here, I say lookee here. This country simply will not abide letting criminals get off scot free. And this country would absolutely revolt against giving criminals extra benefits.

SENATOR SLIMY

In this country, when people make a mistake, they pay for it. That cost is the only thing that stops people from committing more crimes.

BO

Again, there's just no evidence for that

SENATOR SILVERSPoon

I know what I can see with my own two eyes.

SENATOR SLIMY

Yes, we simply cannot afford to become a country that is so weak on crime and the ungodly cretins that perpetuate it.

BO

It is a fool proof system. It is working like magic all across Europe and Asia.

SENATOR SOUTHERN

I think you mean Commie countries. It looks, I say, it looks like this plan of yours won't be happening here any time soon, comrade.

The Senators disappear and Bo is alone.

Bo sits alone in some hallway near the Senate, frustrated. May enters, unseen at first.

MAY
Hello Bo.

Bo turns to look at her.

BO
May... I assume you're here to testify against the cause?

MAY
I'm afraid so. How long has it been?

BO
Must be two years by now.

MAY
You're probably not very happy to see me.

BO
Actually, at a time like this. A friendly face is always a welcome sight.

MAY
Even if that friendly face is blowing up your life's work?

BO
A friend is a friend.

MAY
Is that so?

BO
Yep. And beyond that let me remind you - number one: don't give yourself too much credit; and number two: it's not over yet.

MAY
Really?

BO
Really really.

MAY
You're getting crushed. It's hard to watch actually.

BO
I figured all of this might happen.

MAY
Okay. But you must have considered that you might lose, right?

BO
Briefly, I suppose.

MAY
'Cause it's not pretty out there.

BO
Did you come here to catch up or to gloat?

MAY
I don't know how to answer that.

BO
I think you just did.

MAY
No, I don't take any pleasure from any of this.

BO
Really? You don't enjoy working for a prison industry lobbyist? I'm shocked.

MAY
I'm shocked that you still have that high of an opinion of me.

BO
Just 'cause you left the right side of history to work for the prison industry?

MAY
Maybe you don't have such a high opinion of me.

BO
That's not it. I'm just... angry.

MAY
Join the club.

BO

It's okay for me to be angry just like it's okay for you to still not be over it yet.

MAY

Stop being so understanding.

BO

Sorry, but it's what I do. Your sister's accident was such a tragedy.

MAY

She was murdered.

BO

It's okay that you feel that way.

MAY

Don't fucking patronize me, Bo!

BO

I'm not patronizing you. I'm just telling you what I see. Your sister got killed by a drunk driver. I don't blame you for quitting this organization or for going against us. It's personal to you. I just wish you had told me or at least answered my calls since you left.

MAY

You're damn right it's personal.

BO

It's just about the only thing I can think of that could make you give up the principles you fought for with me.

MAY

Your principles. Not mine.

BO

You can't mean that. We worked together on justice reform for so long.

MAY

It's one thing to care about something from a distance. When it doesn't affect you. It's an entirely different thing to experience it first hand. All of sudden principles don't really register. Ideals don't really matter. It's not that I don't have them. It's just that ... the grief is so overwhelming, I don't think I can carry anything else..

BO

Is there anything that could convince you to come back?

Pause

MAY

You know what I want.

BO

And you know that what you want is antithetical to everything I stand for. And everything you used to stand for.

MAY

I wish you understood.

BO

I do understand. But I still can't accept cruelty.

MAY

It's not cruelty, it's what a killer deserves.

BO

And who are you to decide?

MAY

A victim. A survivor. Bad people can't just get away with it.

BO

They're not getting away with anything.

MAY

It's not enough.

BO

Torturing her won't bring your sister back.

MAY

I don't care. I just want her to suffer. Like me.

Pause

BO

I don't think that's what you actually want. Whatever that may be, I hope you find it.

Bo and May
disappear

Jill reappears.

JILL

So by now you may have put things together. Does that change the way you think about me?

Maybe at first you were thinking of me as the fun narrator who holds your hand and guides you through a story. Maybe not anymore.

I won't lie about what I did. I acted recklessly. May's sister is dead because of me. I live with that everyday. And I've been trying to make up for it ever since. Back then I didn't care if I lived or died. It never occurred to me that I was treating other peoples' lives the same way.

You see, when you grow up and live the kind of life that so many people have - all kinds of abuse, violence in the neighborhood, poverty, sickness, - it makes you feel powerless. It makes you feel trapped. People living like that look for one of two things: they look for something to make them feel powerful. Or they look for something to take them away.

For me, it was the second one. Booze and pills helped me stay away from the inside of my head. I never actively wanted to die. But I do know that staying out of my head like that helped me avoid thinking about whether I actually wanted to be alive.

Some people say I should be dead anyway. For what I did. I don't blame them for that.

Jill disappears

Bo and Danielle
appear

BO

I'm just having all kinds of reunions today.

DANIELLE

Good to see you too, Bo.

BO

What are you doing here?

DANIELLE

Saving your movement.

BO

The movement's just fine.

DANIELLE

I mean in this moment. I know if you lose, you live to fight another day. I mean right now. We're gonna get your system passed.

BO

Oh yeah?

DANIELLE

Of course.

BO
How do you plan on doing that?

DANIELLE
By doing what I do best.

BO
I'm glad you're here, but –

DANIELLE
No buts. I'm saving the day.

BO
Please tell me it's a new invention.

DANIELLE
Sort of. But not entirely.

BO
We have had this conversation so many times.

DANIELLE
No you have had a monologue so many times. I have merely been an involuntary participant.

BO
Whatever. I'll say again anyway. The social construct of crime is a systemic problem . Systems are all about power. You can't change a system with an invention if the system is working exactly as designed.

DANIELLE
And how's changing society working out for you? Are people responding to your logic? What about your data? Hm?

BO
I think you know the answers to those questions.

DANIELLE
Okay then. Shut up about my inventions.

BO
I'm sorry, but you zap a guy's brain, but don't give him any food. He's gonna steal food again just like he used the moment he gets hungry enough.

DANIELLE

Sounds like you have seen my episode of Shark Idol. And you didn't even text me to compliment my outfit.

BO

Oh, I saw it. Been fighting the damage you did to our cause for two years because of it.

DANIELLE

You're exaggerating.

BO

Only by a little bit.

DANIELLE

Fine. Whatever. I'm about to reverse the damage anyway.

BO

At this point, I'll listen to anything.

DANIELLE

We're gonna give them a compromise they can get behind.

BO

What kind of compromise.

DANIELLE

One that admittedly is going to suck for the people in the system.

BO

The current system already sucks.

DANIELLE

Exactly. The new one will suck substantially less.

BO

But don't you see that it's a problem that cruelty is a built-in feature?

DANIELLE

Of course I do. But the cruelty has always been there, and it ain't going down without a fight.

BO

I can't do this.

DANIELLE

Unfortunately, if they like my idea, you won't have much of a choice.

BO
It's my plan.

DANIELLE
Tough break, kid. Maybe focus on becoming a senator first. Then you can call all the shots you want.

BO
Please don't do this.

DANIELLE
Why not? Your social movement is stalling out in congress. It's this or nothing until the next time you can get people to look away from their phones long enough to care.

BO
We can't give up something so fundamental.

DANIELLE
And people in prison can't keep living in prison. Gotta go for the net gain.

BO
That is so fucking cynical!

DANIELLE
And sticking to your "principles" reeks of privilege. Some people cannot wait. We need to move now. And I'm gonna give them a reason to do it.

BO
Leave me out of it.

May enters.

MAY
You're both here.

DANIELLE
Gotta strike while the iron is hot, ya know? I have something to show you.

MAY
I'm not going to change my mind.

DANIELLE
It doesn't really matter.

MAY
Why?

DANIELLE

I have something that is going to bring your senators to the table whether you like it or not.

MAY

Bold claim.

DANIELLE

I know what I got.

MAY

Let's think about this. What if this system becomes widespread? Wouldn't people be more encouraged to be complete scumbags?

DANIELLE

Maybe, but the point of the system is that once people are taken care of, we have a net loss of total scumbags.

MAY

But before that. Before anyone gets caught and finally put through the system. Don't you think people who want to commit crimes and behave recklessly would feel more free to do it knowing that when they finally get busted, they'll just go to a spa for a few months, get their brains zapped, and be done with it?

DANIELLE

I can't say. That's not my priority.

MAY

Maybe it should be.

DANIELLE

I know it's not easy. But you have to abandon those ideas.

MAY

Why?

DANIELLE

Because buying into this system demands that you change the way you think about punishment.

MAY

But why? Shouldn't people be punished for their transgressions. Accordingly, I mean. Isn't there something - I don't know - appropriate?

BO

The things that are appropriate today will look cruel decades from now.

DANIELLE

Exactly. And beyond that, you have to think on a larger scale. Large scale punishment. Retribution is intoxicating. When we get carried away with that, we punish ourselves.

MAY

Why? Because “we’re better than that?” We should turn the other cheek and forgive them?

DANIELLE

Hell no. I’m not telling you to be a fuckin monk or something.

BO

But we should strive to be more forgiving though.

DANIELLE

If you say so. But that’s outside the parameters of my project. Don’t forgive them if you don’t want to. It doesn’t make a difference to the models and projections.

BO

MY project is all about compassion over cruelty.

DANIELLE

That’s admirable, really. I don’t want to take away from that. All I’m saying is that there are clear motivations for buying in even if you’re completely self-interested. It has nothing to do with morality. When we fixate on punishment, we punish ourselves.

MAY

I don’t get it.

DANIELLE

Suffering creates more suffering. Traumatized people create more trauma. In short, punishment doesn’t fucking work. It might feel good to know that the person that hurt you is enduring immense cruelty. But the only result is that those people come out changed. Broken even. Those people take all that pain and put it back into their communities. And all of sudden, those boys that you used to play basketball with are violent, intolerant men. All of a sudden people who used to be the kindest mentors become the cruelest abusers. All of a sudden casual drug users and petty criminals become addicts and murderers. And we get off on torturing them all over again.

MAY

I wish it didn’t feel like the well-being of the entire world depended on me letting go of this anger...

DANIELLE

Who do you think is suffering more: someone locked up in a messed up American prison... or you, here, living without your sister?

BO

Danielle, what kind of question is that?

DANIELLE

Think about it.

MAY

It's me. This is worse. Obviously worse.

DANIELLE

You are suffering more than she will in prison.

BO

Do you really believe that, Danielle? There's a difference between grief and torture.

DANIELLE

Shut up, Bo. No amount of revenge will ever change that. But if people like you go chasing that revenge, people like her are gonna do more reckless shit, and kill more people's sisters and brothers and parents in drunk driving accidents. It's a cycle. You gotta break it.

MAY

That's a lot of pressure to put on me.

DANIELLE

It's just the truth. If you want to live in a world with less suffering, you gotta do your part to put less suffering out into the world. Even if she deserves it.

Pause

MAY

I don't think I'm ready for that.

DANIELLE

Then you won't be ready for this. You can come out now.

Jill appears holding Danielle's invention (some kind of head gear).

May freezes.

BO
Danielle, what the hell are you thinking? This is traumatic.

MAY
I'm fine Bo. But why isn't she in prison?

DANIELLE
She's been one of my test subjects for the past few months. For my inventions.

MAY
I don't like that you brought her here.

BO
Reckless, Danielle.

MAY
It's not reckless, Bo. I'm not gonna attack anyone.

DANIELLE
May, I'm going to let you see our little compromise and you can tell me how you feel about it.

MAY
I'm listening.

DANIELLE
It's called the Retributor. It zaps the brain and convinces the subject that they are feeling a variety of different unpleasant sensations. Wet socks. Food stuck in teeth. About to sneeze. Pebble in shoe. Shirt sleeve rolled up inside you jacket sleeve. Etcetera. There's a large variety of different settings.

Jill has put on the head gear and she hands the controller to May.

MAY
Oh....

BO
This is your idea?

DANIELLE
Yep. As long as this exists, our country is going to be merciful to criminals.

BO

People who have committed crimes.

DANIELLE

Them too. As long as this exists, we can phase out prisons. Provide jobs. Clothes. Food. Whatever it takes to stop breaking the law. And all they have to do is wear this device.

BO

Unbelievable.

DANIELLE

It's the one thing that is going to make this new criminal justice system fly. Bo, we both know that this country will never tolerate a world without punishment. A world without vengeance.

BO

I think it will.

DANIELLE

Then I think you're naive. Try it, May. I think when it's all said and done, they might prefer giving control to the victims.

BO

Don't do it, May.

DANIELLE

Leave her alone, Bo.

BO

Danielle. Think about this. The act of harmlessly dropping normal harmless water on a person's forehead for hours at a time. Know what it's called?

DANIELLE

I don't think so...?

BO

Well they don't call it Chinese Water "Compromise." It's torture. This is torture.

DANIELLE

No. It's a step.

BO

I can't be here for this.

MAY

Are you sure you're okay with this?

JILL

Yes. And I'm sorry.

Without saying a word, May cranks the dial. Jill instantly reacts as if she has a toe cramp.

JILL

Wow! That feels so real.

DANIELLE

Toe cramp. Excellent choice.

MAY

It's not enough.

May hits more buttons and aggressively adjusts the dial. May is hit with a stuffy nose.

JILL

It works.

MAY

Can I do two at once?

DANIELLE

Yes

MAY

How about three.

DANIELLE

Yes but that all –

controller.

May is furiously operating the

MAY

Wet socks, Have to sneeze, rug burn, and PAPER CUTS.

DANIELLE

May that's four. This is a prototype, it really can't handle -

MAY
It's not enough!

May continues operating the control.
The different sensations are
becoming too much for Jill.

DANIELLE
May you need to stop.

Danielle tries to take the control
away. May hangs on.

MAY
Papercut! Migraine! Hangnail! Bit your tongue!

DANIELLE
May, stop!

The head gear on Jill's head makes a
loud popping sound, then there is a
spark and some smoke.

Jill falls to the ground. Exhausted
and relieved. Danielle and May run
to her.

MAY
Oh my god, I'm sorry!

DANIELLE
Don't worry I got a backup prototype.

JILL
I'm good. Just a headache.

DANIELLE
We'll work out the kinks.

MAY
This belongs to you.

controller.

May sheepishly hands back the

DANIELLE

Do you feel better?

May shakes her head.

DANIELLE
Didn't think so.

MAY
I need to... I need...

DANIELLE
Go ahead.

May exits.

DANIELLE
What was it like?

JILL
A day at the spa.

DANIELLE
Really ?

JILL
No.

DANIELLE
I'm really sorry for that, Jill.

JILL
It was my idea.

DANIELLE
But still...

JILL
It sucks. But the real thing is gonna be different, right?

DANIELLE
Yes, but we shouldn't talk about that here. So rest up. We're showing this thing off to the Senate soon.

JILL
I'm ready.

Danielle and Jill disappear.

Senator Southern appears,
soon followed by the other
two.

SENATOR SOUTHERN

In light of the new developments in the justice reform movement. We are pleased to announce that we are prepared to support the initiative if each offender is assigned their own Retributor Machine. We are happy to create jobs, provide necessities, and otherwise support convicted people as long as we are secure in the knowledge that their participation will fuckin suck all the time. God Bless America.

Exit Senators.

Enter Bo and Danielle.

DANIELLE

You should be thanking me. It passed. Prisons are on the way out. It won't happen over night. But soon! People like us have only been trying to do this for what? A hundred years?

BO

It's torture, Danielle. It's torture.

DANIELLE

It's not *real* torture.

BO

Torture is torture.

DANIELLE

Maybe it's time that I tell you about what's really going on here.

BO

What do you mean?

DANIELLE

It's the same invention.

BO

Which invention?

DANIELLE

The one you said would never work.

BO

I said it wouldn't work because it wouldn't fix their unfulfilled needs.

DANIELLE

But it's perfect, Bo. Your system will provide for their needs and my invention will help them heal.

BO

It's still a ludicrous idea. Arbitrarily defined criminality isn't a trait, or a condition, it's not some biological thing that can be "cured."

DANIELLE

It's not biological. It's psychological. It's about trauma. Always has been. And of course you can't fully "cure" that, but we can make it better. Bo, I've used it on myself.

Pause

BO

I don't understand...

DANIELLE

Trauma. You know me, Bo. The prison system destroyed my family. I spent years trying every PTSD therapy I could find. Talk, medication, hypnosis, stress inoculation, eye movement desensitization and reprocessing, you name it.

This device is like all of those things on steroids. It works. And we need it. Because taking care of someone's needs doesn't account for the damage that has already been done by years of poverty, abuse, fear of violence, you name it.

BO

I don't see any of them healing while they constantly feel like they have paper cuts.

DANIELLE

That's the best part! I can turn that function off.

BO

Turn it off...

DANIELLE

It works when we need it to, but it's all for show. With this new justice system people like us can build communities, safe havens for people who have made mistakes.

BO

Do you really think this will work?

DANIELLE

I do. They can finally heal. They won't go through what you dad went through. They won't go through what my family went through.

BO

I wish I could be as excited as you... but I just can't. You're manipulating this society's desire for righteous cruelty. You're lying when you should be trying to make them see the truth. That there is no place in this world for cruelty. That punishment only causes more harm. That's real change.

DANIELLE

That "real change" isn't happening any time soon. I'm honestly not sure that change is possible. We're a violent species.

BO

This just another one of your virtual realities. And if you don't change the cruelty at the heart of this, there will always be danger. Because the moment people find out that the suffering has stopped, they're going to want blood.

DANIELLE

I can live with that.

BO

I can't. I won't be a part of this.

DANIELLE

So what then?

BO

I'll keep doing the work I believe in.

DANIELLE

I wouldn't expect any less from you. Take care of yourself.

Bo and Danielle disappear.

JILL

So there you have it. It wasn't perfect, it still isn't. But Bo and Danielle changed the game.

I really can't thank them enough. Like Danielle promised, I feel like I'm finally healing from everything I've been through. Got a long way to go, but it's progress. The wet socks and whatnot are a real drag, but you get used to it.

So that's it. A relatively happy ending for me. And I suppose that might put you in a weird spot. All of you know that through my negligence and recklessness, I accidentally killed a person. There are few things worse than that.

Are you uncomfortable that this is a relatively positive result for me? Are you

disappointed that I, apparently the most morally reprehensible person in this thing, suffered no cathartic comeuppance? If you'd like to see me punished, you're not alone. I'm right there with you. BUT, and I personally hate to be the one saying this, maybe we should all try to focus less on what feels good, and focus more on what IS good.

Jill straps on the headgear.

Blackout. End of Play.

APPENDIX D

Unity video link – <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DskEvxQA5pE>

*Gender Experience*TM video link – <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UiKSKb4MMGo>

Beyond Reform video link – <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=x14LFM92nzA>

Playwright and Activist panel video link –
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IWzrDM76pK0>

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