Theatre as Resistance: Application of Queer and Feminist Theories to Theatrical Practice and Pedagogy

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THEATRE AS RESISTANCE: APPLICATION OF QUEER AND FEMINIST THEORIES TO THEATRICAL PRACTICE AND PEDAGOGY

by

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ABSTRACT

Throughout my time at UCF, I have committed my studies to better understanding my positionality as someone who both benefits and suffers from systems of oppression. I have dedicated my pedagogy and artistry to questioning how I can apply theatre as a tool to resist these systems through my work, as well as wondering how I may communicate my thoughts and concerns to the colleagues I collaborate with as I am to hold myself accountable for my involvement in works that I recognize as being in need of revision in order to resist systems of oppression. I conceptualize that to resist means to intentionally take accountability for one’s implicit biases, in order to actively identify how the work we create may resist those biases rather than uphold the oppressions that supports them. In my thesis, I will reflect on how I have applied feminist and queer theories to my work as a director, playwright, and dramaturg, in order to develop a methodology for fostering resistance in the kind of theatre that I partake in. I ask how applying these theories may help me to expand my understanding of what the shows I participate in can accomplish, and what advice theory has to offer about introducing the concept of resistance to rehearsal spaces. My background as an Egyptian American Muslim cisgendered queer woman influences much of the perspective I bring into rehearsal rooms, production meetings, and to my writing as a poet and a playwright. Therefore, this thesis also aims to examine how my lived experiences intersect with the queer and feminist theories I employ in my theatrical practices. I will do this by sharing details about my upbringing, and including poetry related to multiple themes related to the shows reflected on in the following chapters.
This thesis is dedicated to me. This is for my inner child reclaiming all of her stolen time. This is the beginning of her redemption story, and the beginning of mine.
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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Resistance has always been an ongoing theme in my life. Early on I was taught by my father to resist Western customs such as casual dating and underage drinking, substance use, sneaking out of my bedroom window to meet up with friends at a nearby park or hideout. Things I saw in nearly every television show, and read in nearly every Young Adult novel that centered young girls my age. I was taught to resist the romanticized ideals of freedom and individuality presented in the media as teenage rebellion, and to turn instead towards following the path set before me by my father’s interpretations of the teachings of the Quran. Even the ways I expressed my commitment to my faith was dictated by my father, leaving me with no room to personalize my life but only to reflect his expectations of it for the entirety of my youth and early adulthood. Resistance was fasting for Ramadan and still running laps at soccer practice, and not swallowing when my friends tried to hold me down and force chicken nuggets and french fries between my mouthful of braces at lunch. Resistance was being Muslim and a girl and alive at the same time.

Today I am still a girl, and alive, but resistance looks different.

I have since stopped practicing Islam, and embraced a more spiritual view of existence and humanity rather than one influenced by the beliefs of organized religion. I first found myself questioning my commitment to my faith in Islam after I graduated high school. Beyond being insistent that I memorize and study surrhas of the Quran in order to better understand the teachings of Allah, I realized that my father had relied on his own understanding and interpretation of these teachings to dictate his parenting style. Coming home late, considering going on a date without the intention of marrying the man in question, attending a party or
gathering where alcohol may be present (even after I was of legal drinking age) all became reasons for my father and by extension for me to question my viability as a good Muslim, a good daughter, or even a good potential wife for some imaginary man I was raised to aspire to impress one day. Whenever he showed up to claim me.

My journey and fascination with resistance began when I started resisting the concept that my purpose in life was to live in accordance with my father’s, or Allah’s, or this imaginary husband’s, perception of whom I should be in order to please them. I moved out of my parent’s house at the end of 2020 when I was 23 years old. Months went by before I realized that although I had packed multiple hijabs and a prayer rug, I hadn’t felt compelled to use either. The Ramadan of 2021 was the first in 18 years that I didn’t fast during. I started dating, started drinking (that’s a whole other paper), and stopped questioning whether I was allowed to pursue things simply because they bring me pleasure. Soon after I moved out, I severed contact with my parents, came out as Queer to myself and the small sphere of the world I am connected to on social media, and applied to graduate school.

This is to say my emotional and mental state at the beginning of my grad school experience was not ideal for the huge undertaking of committing to three years of study. I was angry, hurting, depleted, confused, mourning my relationship with my parents as well as my relationship with Islam and the person I had been for the majority of my life until then, plus working multiple part-time jobs in order to afford my own bills and to save enough money to help my younger sister move in with me. I was a wreck. But still I was more fulfilled and at peace than I ever was as a child or young adult living with my parents. Theatre and poetry had become outlets for me in high school and pursuing them in undergrad provided me comfort that I
wasn’t able to get from the family dynamic I went home to every day. Pursuing children’s theatre appealed to me as I started reflecting on how having the opportunity to participate in things like annual school high school musicals and the Florida State Thespian competition offered freedom in my adolescence when I was craving it most and had access to none. Learning how to provide opportunities for youths like my former self and how to make a career out of it was extremely appealing. I pursued this desire, which unknowingly at the time led me to pursuing my own inner child’s still unfulfilled desires for freedom and autonomy as well.

When I started my studies in the MFA in Theatre for Young Audiences (TYA) program, I was teaching remotely for the Seattle Children’s Theatre as well as for the Orlando Family Stage (formerly known as the Orlando Repertory Theatre). Both theatres provided the opportunity to teach story drama through an online platform when COVID-19 first forced everyone to transition to online learning and activities. Even after we were able to reconnect for in person lessons, the Seattle Children’s Theatre (SCT) continued to offer online learning opportunities for schools in Washington. Eventually I was introduced to the concept of theatre for social change by way of these online lessons, and later in grad school by a course on the topic taught by UCF alum and theatre practitioner Nick Bazo. These experiences changed the trajectory of my career, and laid the foundation for my research as well as my pedagogical approach. These events also inspired me to reflect on examples of theatre for social change that I had already been part of, but hadn’t thought to categorize as such.

During my undergrad years, also at the University of Central Florida, I competed in spoken word poetry slams where I performed on teams that co-wrote and choreographed poems about xenophobia and violences we’d experienced in our own lives. Being surrounded by artists
performing their lived experiences on stages with the goal of creating community with likeminded people, and fostering empathy in others taught me that performance art could have the power to inspire change in people. Later I started following these poets on social media and saw how many of them posted poetry content in order to raise awareness, and even fundraise for people in need. This was another example of social change being pursued through art that I hadn’t been exposed to until joining the poetry scene. When I was accepted into the TYA program, I was fueled by my experiences seeing SCT pursue social change through their online learning environments, and by seeing poets from across the nation pursue social change with their words. It quickly became clear to me that I also wanted to explore ways to integrate social change into youth theatre and into my pedagogy as a teaching artist.

Immediately, I found myself in classes where my professors were encouraging me to apply theoretical lenses to plays and performances. I hadn’t been introduced to theory in an academic setting before, and learning to frame theatre in this new way was frightening as much as it was enlightening. feminist criticism theory quickly became of interest to me as I started reading about the work of Judith Fetterley who posits that “the first act of the feminist critic must be to become a resisting rather than an assenting reader” (Austin 26). This explanation of feminist criticism made me think about acts of social resistance I had read about in the The Art of Protest, a book written by sociologist and professor T.V. Reed. Reed recounts in detail American movements that utilized the arts in order to spread awareness and resist social injustices from the 1960’s to the mid-2000’s. This account of the sit-ins orchestrated during the Civil Rights movement in the 60’s, which later inspired the organization ACT UP that fought for AIDS awareness and Queer rights in the 80’s to host die-ins and kiss-ins, and are still inspiring young activists today showed me the early theatrics that have always been present in making noise and
making change. I started looking for that kind of activism in my studies, which brought me to feminist criticism and queer theory, both of which informed the ways I approached the projects I will be reflecting on in this thesis.

These theories act as a microscope studying society as if it were in a petri dish, seeking to view it as a point of departure for the kind of society we’d like to create. Where in academic literature are there gaps about how theatre has historically upheld oppression? How can theatre instead resist oppressions like heteronormativity, White supremacy, misogyny, ableism, and mental health stigma? How can feminist criticism theory and queer theory be applied to address and eventually fill these gaps? How can theatre be used as a vehicle for people to resist the violence (both real and symbolic) these systems enforce? These are the questions I have been exploring through my creative practice and I will be reflecting on them in the following chapters.

My first chapter explores ways that applying feminist criticism, queer theory, and resistance into my practice as a director may influence and affect the rehearsal process and final production. Specifically, I will reflect on a youth production of Canadian playwright Michaela Jeffery’s play *WROL (Without Rule of Law)* at the Orlando Family Stage. During this show’s rehearsal process, I regularly engaged with theory as I discussed the show’s content with the actors and production team. We incorporated theory into our table work and interpretations of the characters’ intentions. During this rehearsal process I wondered how theory could be introduced to and utilized in conversation with young actors between the ages of 13 and 15. Also, how can we include the audience in the activism that we believed Jeffery’s script was a cry for? In chapter one I identify the specific theories we utilized as well as the creative decisions that came from them.
The second chapter dictates my process of engaging with resistance as a playwright. As a writer I began to ask myself: how can I critique and resist my own implicit biases and learned normativity in my writing? In this chapter I will share some potential answers to this question by reflecting on my experiences writing a TYA show that was written with the intention of engaging with feminist criticism theory as well as visionary fiction. Visionary fiction is a term coined by author and scholar Walidah Imarisha to describe “fantastical writing that helps us imagine new just worlds. Visionary fiction encompasses science fiction, fantasy, horror, magical realism, alternative timelines, and more. It is fantastical literature that helps us to understand existing power dynamics, and helps us imagine paths to creating more just futures” (Exangel). During the script writing process I intended to resist mental health stigma, envisioning what I believe a just world without the stereotyping of people with varying mental health issues would look like, and writing that world into existence. Resisting mental health stigma also allowed me to write a script that I feel would have served me when I was a child, and is in line with scripts like WROL and the work done at the Seattle Children’s Theatre that I would describe as theatre for social change.

The third and final chapter discusses my work as a dramaturg. I am privileged to have had multiple opportunities to serve as a dramaturg over the years and used these opportunities to apply feminist criticism and queer theory to the shows I worked on. In this chapter I will discuss my work on two musicals, both at UCF. The first one I’ll discuss is a TYA musical workshopped as part of UCF’s new play development opportunity called Pegasus Playlab. The second one is UCF’s mainstage production of The Prom that took place during the Fall 2023 season. As I worked on these productions, I asked how each show’s language and story might reinforce systems of oppression, and how we might adjust our production concept to resist these systems
and minimize potential harm to the audience and the creative team. I have come to wonder what role personal accountability has in the theatre, and will explore this question throughout my reflections of the projects in the following chapters.

I eventually found that poetry and theatre can be cathartic tools to aid me in healing from many experiences in my life, but only once I started applying my own resistance within them. Contemplating how we as educators and teaching artists may show young people how to apply theatre to resist what systems of oppression affect them and their peers has inspired me to embark on my journey these last three years. The following chapters will describe my practice as a director, dramaturg, and playwright applying theory to resist societal violence. I also explore how theory in the theatre has assisted me on my journey to learn how to resist my own implicit biases, and practice holding myself accountable for the stories I’ve staged.
CHAPTER TWO: APPLYING FEMINIST AND QUEER THEORIES TO DIRECTING

FOR THE STAGE

*This chapter is a continuation of a paper presented at the Comparative Drama Conference in Orlando Florida in 2023.

_I don’t think I’ll ever not be one… Say ‘girl’ I think / I’ll never die / I’ll never stop running through sprinklers or climbing out of open windows / I’ll never pass up a jar of free dumdums / I’ll never stop ripping out the hangnail with my teeth…_ (Gatwood, 1)

In October of 2022, I directed _WROL_ at the Orlando Family Stage. I grounded my practice in feminist criticism theory, specifically Judith Fetterley’s assertion that “...the first act of the feminist critic must be to become a resisting…reader” (Austin 26). I also engaged with queer theory. Specifically I applied José Muñoz’s theory of queer futurity. In his book _Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity_ Muñoz defines queer futurity as the practice of being “attentive to the past for the purposes of critiquing a present” (18). _WROL_ critiques society’s patriarchal history, and invites the audience to imagine a world beyond its patriarchal present. Will Davis’s method of queering a rehearsal space, as described in his essay “Queering the Room” was essential to my directing practice. Davis expresses that “turning a generative hierarchy on its side” is an extension of “a queer aesthetic.” He continues: “If you grow up knowing that there are ‘right’ and ‘wrong’ ways to be and somewhere inside you it is alarmingly apparent that you are an example of the ‘wrong’ thing, then the moment you can let go of that ‘right’ and ‘wrong’ binary is the moment you are free” (Davis). Capitalizing on the opportunity to direct _WROL_, I aimed to queer my directing experience by resisting the hierarchical binary of power belonging to either a director or an actor, and wondered if forgetting this “right” way of
directing would lead to the whole creative team finding more freedom to make choices and voice their ideas. I was interested in exploring how these three theories invited more perspectives into the play, and how doing so would impact the creative process. Each of these theories utilizes the concept of queerness as being indicative of more than sexuality, making it possible to treat queering as an action that can be implemented in rehearsals to deviate from normative practices. In this chapter I share my findings through personal anecdotes about the ways I intentionally applied these theories in rehearsal, and in my analysis of the play. I will also share the work of other artists, theorists, and scholars, who I find to be in conversation with these theories and discuss how their work impacted my process as well. This chapter is divided into sections, each emphasizing how the concept of queering was utilized differently throughout the rehearsal process.

About the Play

_WROL (Without Rule of Law)_ by Canadian playwright Michaela Jeffrey amplifies the voices of four girls as they critique these structures in order to defiantly survive. Giving them the common interest of doomsday prepping, Jeffrey illuminates how every day has the potential to be doomsday for girls, women, and AFAB (assigned female at birth) people. We see examples of this timely message in the revolution started in 2022 led by Iranian women and girls, the recent overturning of _Roe v. Wade_, the continued relevance of “the hashtag #SayHerName… used to bring much-needed attention to the extrajudicial killings of Black cis and trans women” (Bailey 6) and more. Each of these contemporary examples of erasure have inspired and resulted in practices of resistance by the masses in ways such as protests, community organizing, and the arts. Being extremely relevant in 2022 when we staged the show, these movements also inspired
imagery and metaphors we as a creative team chose to interpret in our performance of the script. These ideas came through in our lobby display designed by our dramaturg Gabby Lawlor, in personal and self-made art that the cast contributed, and in partnerships we cultivated with our community in order to extend the show’s reach beyond the stage and theatre space. In order to discover these opportunities, we collectively analyzed the script and looked to the text for ideas and inspirations.

The acronym W.R.O.L stands for the phrase Without Rule of Law. When the director of education at the Orlando Family Stage first asked me to read Jeffery’s script of the same title, I had no idea what it meant. I didn’t do any research before reading the play, letting Jeffery’s words and the knowledge of her characters fill in the blanks in my mind. After falling in love with this story about four young guides turned doomsday preppers, I referred back to the dramaturg’s note. Laurel Green titles her note “Radical Friends,” and writes about her childhood as a guide, a term used to describe a global network of girls and women who belong to either the Girl Guide or Girl Scout association that first began in 1909 in response to there not being any opportunities for girls to participate in the already established Boy Scouts association (Wagggs). In her note Jeffery writes:

I learned how to build a snow shelter in -40 degree winters, lead a mass evacuation in a hurricane, perform CPR, bandage a wound…But I also remember struggling to earn badges awarded for hostessing, elocution, makeup, hairstyling, housekeeping, and how to set a table. Survival skills came alongside a host of gendered expectations. As a young woman, achieving these seemed to be rewarded disproportionately more than asking tough questions, asserting myself, and advocating for change. So what were we preparing for? (Jeffery vii).
Green’s experience is echoed in the script, when a girl named Maureen expresses her frustration with being a guide and receiving badges “for being nice” when “the boys would do, like, rafting trips and knot-tying and get pocket knives…No one was interested in giving us any real skills. No one cared about us ‘being prepared’ for anything real” (Jeffery 32, 34). A former guide as well, Jeffery weaves her lived experience into the conversations between her characters inviting the audience who may not have grown up within the institutions of Guides or Scouts to acknowledge the blatant reliance on the gender binary within their practices. This merging of one’s lived experience with her storytelling is an example of theory in practice that I recognized and was inspired by before starting my journey directing the show.

**Theoretical Approach**

As someone who is an artist as well as an educator, I root my pedagogy in the lessons I learned from the artists and educators I aspire towards. Author and educator bell hooks encourages teachers to invite their students' lived experiences into the classroom. She argues that one’s experience is just as valuable and worthy of consideration as any academic argument or theory. She explains this further in her book *Teaching to Transgress*, which influenced my directing practice greatly. Her assertion that “any radical pedagogy must insist that everyone’s presence is acknowledged” contributed to my decision to invite the actors to freely share their thoughts and ideas about the work we did (hooks 8). In order to invite this type of collaboration, I spent time sharing my directing style with the actors at our first rehearsal insisting that blocking would be a collaborative effort.
I am inspired also by professor and theorist Barbara Christian’s argument in her essay “The Race for Theory.” She states that “theorizing…is often in narrative forms, in the stories we create” (52). I want to acknowledge that Christian is speaking specifically about stories told by “people of color, feminists, radical critics, creative writers, who have struggled… to make their voices, their various voices, heard” (53). Published in 1987, her article was seeking to reevaluate the purpose of literary criticism by people who may identify as theorists but don’t identify as creatives, and to promote stories and theories that exist and thrive in resistance to a White colonial assumption of what theory should be. I see a relation in this argument to Zarretta Hammond’s claim that “the brain is wired for stories” (135). She specifically praises the abilities of spoken word poetry, saying that it is an artform “that mixes social awareness, music, and language…Spoken word topics can cover large socio-political themes that lend themselves to the cognitive routines such as perspective taking: Love, Racism, Hometown Pride, Politics, and Self-Realization” (Hammond 134). Prior to 2020 I performed spoken word poetry regularly and competed in multiple national competitions. I am now able to reflect on those experiences and realize the theorizing I witnessed while watching poets perform, share, and critique their lived experiences on stage. Not only does WROL address the topics Hammond mentions, but there are moments of poetry readings in the script that remind us that although “it is not easy to name our pain, to make it a location for theorizing…to theorize from that location” (hooks 74) it is a worthwhile practice to engage in and poetry can be a meaningful vehicle to do so.

While blocking WROL, Davis’s directing technique inspired me to queer my own process. His commitment to “build a rehearsal room where there is a rigorous invitation to show up inside
the work” was reflected in the ways we blocked moments catering to the actors needs and personalities, instead of only blocking for the purpose of creating interesting stage pictures for the audience’s benefit (Davis). This translated to the show in many ways. For instance, there were moments I had planned for the actors to sit kneeling on the floor or on one bended knee. Asking the actors if they were comfortable sitting in these positions before instructing them to do so revealed that one actor found kneeling for long periods of time uncomfortable. We worked together to find different options that would work better for them, and as a result created great stage pictures together. By asking questions like this throughout the blocking process, I was able to incorporate the ideas and needs of the actors as much as I incorporated my own directorial vision. One actor decided to channel her character’s anxiety in a way that was familiar, making her into a nervous eater. She enjoyed eating chips during breaks at rehearsals, and realized that eating snacks was as comforting as it was a necessary part of her break routine. When discussing what we could add to her character to give her some individuality, the actor suggested that having her character eat when she gets nervous, which creates a way to show the audience her emotional state throughout the play. Instead of offering her solutions or ideas I again left the decision up to the actor and she found something that worked best. My hope was that by asking questions in lieu of giving predetermined orders, the actors would have autonomy over their characters as well as their own bodies and actions. By offering this autonomy to the actors, I was trying to employ Davis’s practice of inviting collaboration and breaking down the hierarchy that generally exists between directors and actors.
**Theory in Practice**

During rehearsal breaks actors regularly played with sensory items, and we noticed that sometimes even after the breaks actors would make their way back onto the stage space unknowingly still playing with the items. We agreed that the material in the show has the potential to trigger intense emotional and physical reactions and decided to incorporate the items as they were providing comfort. The actors then continued to have fidget toys with them at all times. This created an environment that acknowledged the ways these young people self-regulate on a daily basis, and also allowed for further character development and opportunities to connect with each other and the audience. During opening night, a rainbow pop-it style toy fell out of an actor’s backpack, and remained center stage for the rest of the performance. Instead of feeling regretful that something unplanned happened, I thought the mistake made the environment even more believable. Of course this character would have a pop-it in her bag. Of course, it might fall out when she excitedly swings her bag onto her back in a moment of joy. The prop became a representation of what a young person planning for doom in 2022 might consider a necessity, and I was grateful to it. The needs of the actors were at the forefront of my mind as well as our dramaturg’s, and we worked together to honor their needs while encouraging them to think creatively about their character choices and expressions to the best of our abilities.

In response to a moment of tension among the characters in the play, a girl named Vic performs a poem about being on the road with her mom. She performs for the audience as the rest of the cast stands in a frozen tableau, still existing within the moment of tension that Vic’s poem takes her out of. In this moment the audience is perhaps hearing what’s going on in Vic’s head, or her heart, while her friends are fighting around her. She invites us into her relationship with her mom, who we’ve learned earlier is her only present parent. She recites her poem:
Things I Know to be True:

Things people say when they think you’re asleep.

Things they say when they are crying.

Things said on the highway.

Things said in the starlight, and in the trees.

Things said at rest stops and on the walk to the bathroom at the campsite.

Things they don’t say at all.

We are not our parents (Jeffery 64-5)

The characters in this show critique their parents as well as the other adults in their lives for a plethora of reasons. Their refusal to live by the expectations set for them by these adults creates dialogue in which the audience gets to witness these young people experience “self-realization,” like Vic does as she manifests a future for herself in which she will not repeat her parents’ mistakes. Where we will not repeat our parents’ mistakes. Shortly after this scene, another character engages with the audience through a poem of her own. Jo is a youtuber who creates content documenting her doomsday prepping. In this scene she abandons her usual structure of taping a Youtube video filled with survival tips for global collapse, and discusses a different kind of survival instead:

Once upon a time…

In the big bad woods…

There’s a girl…

A girl

Who doesn’t EVER go anywhere
Without mace
Who knows that’s illegal
But doesn’t care
Because she’d rather be fined than dead
And she bought it off the Internet
And no one stopped it at customs
(so it can’t really be that illegal)…
Who keeps her house keys between her knuckles, even sleeping
So that maybe nothing horrible happens to her.
A girl
Who refuses to tell
At sleepovers, camping trips
Stories about other girls murdered, terrorized
By shitty things that go bump in the night
Who says instead
\textit{Fuck you, bump}

If you want to get to them, you come through me (Jeffery 68-9)

Here Jo challenges the audience to acknowledge the ever-present anxiety of experiencing violence that girls carry living in a patriarchal society. In their co-authored book \textit{Burnout} Dr. Emily Nagoski and professor Amelia Nagoski describe the experience of being raised in a patriarchy as one where “being raised as a boy makes it easier for boys to grow up and take on positions of power and authority” and where “women and girls - especially girls of color - are
systematically excluded from government and other systems of power” (82, 102). Girls are not offered the same assumptions that they are capable of being in positions of power. Jo experiences this patriarchal effect firsthand in the script when she attempts to speak over a gaggle of adults who are yelling over her about an event she hosted that went wrong, and instead of listening once she climbs onto a table demanding to be heard a police officer grabs her to try and get her to come down. She is unprepared for the physical advance and tries to shove the officer away from her, which he reacts to by dragging her off the table until she falls on the floor. She hits her head hard on the way down and begins to bleed. All the adults just stare down at her. No one questions the officer for feeling entitled to grabbing her body, inflicting violence and pain onto her simply because she wanted to be heard. In her poem Jo also theorizes a future for herself in which this horrible violence would not have happened, a future where “nothing horrible happens to her.” One where she can believe that it won’t.

During rehearsals I referenced theorist and scholar José Muñoz often, referring to his theory of queer futurity in relation to our play. Muñoz stated that “Queerness’s form is utopian. Ultimately, we must insist on a queer futurity because the present is so poisonous and insolvent” (15). In her poem, Jo is actively resisting her own “poisonous and insolvent” reality as a young girl in the 21st century who must live in fear of becoming like other “girls murdered, terrorized.” Instead she envisions herself standing up to these “shitty things” that threaten her so she and her friends can live outside of the deadly fear that is living within a patriarchy. We concluded in rehearsal that what Jo is doing in this scene is envisioning a reality in which she does not live in the fear that misogyny and the patriarchy pass on to young girls, and is trying to describe this wish through poetry. We referred to this moment and other moments like it in the script as though
the characters were “queering” their experience or understanding of something in order to resist the oppression this script critiques. By queering her reality, Jo invited her audience to take a look into “queer futurity” and wish for it along with her.

Olivia Gatwood is someone else I talked about in rehearsals. An author, poet and performer, Gatwood’s work is largely rooted in the complexities of girlhood similar to WROL. Specifically, I referenced her book of poetry called Life of the Party, which was inspired by true crime podcasts and media Gatwood had been consuming while writing. It was also inspired by the violence she experienced herself, and watched her loved ones’ experience, by the hands of men as a result of misogyny in her lifetime. In her author’s note Gatwood writes, “This is a book of poems about true crime. It is also a book of poems about how many small violences a person can withstand. It is a book about memory and girlhood” (xiv). I want to send a copy of this book to Laurel Green and Michaela Jeffery and I want to send Olivia Gatwood the script of WROL.

Jo’s determination to protect herself and her friends from “shitty things that go bump in the night” mirrors Gatwood’s purpose in publishing these poems. Gatwood investigates this determination. She states, “the fear inside me is a product of simply being alive. Yes, I am terrified of being murdered…I am not terrified because true crime told me to be, I am terrified because I have been here long enough to know that I should be. This feeling dictates the way I move: in parking garages, at bars, in my own house” (Gatwood xiv).

In rehearsals we discussed this fear that Jo and Gatwood share, that most women, girls, and AFAB people share with each other. We discussed the ways we can empathize with the characters in the play, as well as with the women and girls included in the slideshow and those we included in our lobby display. Gatwood closes her author’s note by questioning “what stake
poetry has in this conversation” by writing, “The only answer I have is this: to help us feel less alone in the dark” (Gatwood xv). I find that poetry and theatre both have this effect. In a letter one of the actors gave me after our closing performance, they wrote, “You attacked this show with pure passion and made it a symbol of everything we should be fighting for. And after this experience I without a doubt ‘feel better equipped to survive the world’” (Jeffery 62). Poetry like Gatwood’s, scripts like Jeffery’s, and the work of the people I include in this paper and who were in my mind throughout the rehearsal process make me feel better equipped to survive myself.

The characters of WROL are concerned with what became of a community called the Shelton Commune that “vanished.” The commune members were known to have “identified as ‘resisters to the modern doctrine’ and as would-be ‘survivors’ of what they believed to be an impending cataclysmic global collapse” (Jeffery 22). In one scene a character named Sarah gives an oral presentation about the commune. She starts the presentation by first teaching her classmates about various historic mass disappearances, which “include politically motivated disappearances of activists or agitators under hostile regimes. This is an intimidation tactic that was (and continues to be) employed all over the world” (Jeffery 21). We decided to present a powerpoint on a television screen that Sarah referred to throughout her presentation. During this line, a slide titled “Politically Motivated Disappearances” showed the names and faces of five women who are victims to violence like this between the years 2020 and 2022. The production’s dramaturg Gabby Lawlor created the presentation and researched the women shown. She thoughtfully included: Oluwatoyin Salau, a Black nineteen year-old high school student who went missing and was found deceased in Tallahassee in 2020 (Cineas); Irma Galindo Barrios, a Mexican environmental activist who was a “member of the indigenous Mixtec (ñuù savi) people” and went missing in 2021 (Agren); Nika Shahkarami, a sixteen year old Iranian girl living in
Tehran who went missing and was murdered during the current uprising of Iranian women and girls that was sparked after another woman, Mahsa Amini, was murdered by Iranian authorities. Amini was twenty-two when she was murdered in 2022 (Mannie); Finally, Parwana Ibrahimkhel and Tamana Zaryabi Paryani, who were both arrested in 2022 as well for protesting the mistreatment of women in Afghanistan after the Taliban took over control of their government and reversed many women’s rights (Sommerville). These young women were all met with horrific violence as a response to their activism and advocacy for their communities. The girls in *WROL* are fearful of experiencing violences like these women did, and Jo actually does experience physical violence for advocating for herself and her community. Including these women in our telling of *WROL* was a subtle attempt at breaking the fourth wall, urging audiences to realize the validity and immediacy of Jo, Maureen, Vic, and Sarah’s fears.

In rehearsal we made sure to share these women’s stories with the cast. The irony of having the freedom to perform a show critiquing the structures in place that made the violence against these women and girls possible was not lost on us, which was another reason we decided to include real people in the presentation instead of remaining in the world of the fictional characters in *WROL*. Reflecting now on the production, this gesture could be expanded upon. While we shared these women’s stories in the rehearsal space, we failed to share them with the audience either in the lobby display, where we did put up a banner of other women and people whose stories and missions we felt personally inspired by and wanted to honor. Unless the audience members were familiar with these women’s names and faces, they wouldn’t have known they were actual women who were missing, arrested, and/or murdered. This particular oversight is one I will remember when referencing real materials in shows in the future, and also
influenced work I did on the lobby display of UCF’s production of The Prom that I will discuss in Chapter 3. However, I also remember the gasps and sighs I heard in the audience when the slideshow was revealed, as some people did recognize the girls and women’s faces looking back at them. Their audible reaction let me know that in some small way we did succeed in reminding the audience of the reality that shaped the fears and resiliency of the characters.

One night, an actor asked if we could pause while we were rehearsing Sarah’s monologue about the Shelton Commune. The actor said “this sounds exactly like what happened to the Natives.” They went on to share that their dad is Indigenous, and that their culture is very important to them. We had a discussion about how the displacement and abuse of Indigenous peoples and communities are absolutely reflected in the script, and decided as a group to start looking at the Shelton Commune as another metaphor. Just as doomsday prepping works as a metaphor for gender disparities and the excessive violence that girls and women are subjected to in comparison to their male peers, what happened to the commune may act as a metaphor for colonization. That actor then asked if they could read the land acknowledgement that OFS had recently begun sharing before their shows. I immediately connected with the education department about this request, and they were happy to allow it. This moment of pause and conversation serves as another honest and specific example of one’s lived experience affecting the rehearsal process and performance. The teachings of hooks and Davis were certainly in the room with us as this was happening. This moment in particular also reminded me about the work of theatre practitioner Lavina Jadhwani, and her method of identity-conscious work. In a shared google document about her method, Jadhwani writes:
“Identity is complex and identity can be fluid — when it comes to age, gender, and sexual orientation for example. I prefer the term ‘identity conscious’ because it allows for multiple identities to exist at once. I try to avoid either/or (or ‘binary’) thinking in my work these days, as it is a characteristic of white supremacy culture…Pluralism is powerful too!” (Jadhwani).

Queering my practice is one way I actively stepped away from binary thinking in rehearsals, refusing to make final decisions alone as the director and instead making every decision as a group. This moment of honoring the actor’s request to read the land acknowledgment and including information about their background in our lobby by displaying a pair of moccasins they wore as a baby, and a printed note they wrote about their heritage per their request is an example of identity-conscious work that Jadhwani inspired.

Throughout the rehearsal process we continued to be identity-conscious by finding ways to incorporate personal characteristics into the characters. I found this to be a helpful tool in many ways. Not only did it help the actors connect to their characters and put on authentic performances, but it also helped us add texture and timely themes to an already timely script. For example, one of the actors would regularly wear a bracelet to rehearsal with the colors of the trans flag on it. Once they mentioned that they’d have to bring a different bracelet to wear for the show, and I asked them why. They said that since their character isn’t written to be trans, they didn’t think it would be appropriate to wear their trans pride bracelet. The character breakdown in the script offered by Jeffery doesn’t specify whether the characters are trans, cis, gender nonconforming, or otherwise. However, each character does use she/her pronouns and is referred to as a girl, aside from Robbie who is referred to as a boy and uses the pronouns he/him. This conversation moment reminded me of artist and scholar Alok Vaid-Menon’s explanation of what
is viewed as normal versus normative in a gendered society. In their book *Beyond The Gender Binary* they write that “being normal means that a numerically significant amount of something is found in a group…Being *normative* is about what gets elevated by society to a position of power…It’s not that gender non-conforming people aren’t normal, it’s that we aren’t considered normative” (Vaid-Menon 40-41). Cisgendered identity having a position of power over trans identity leads us to assume that a character who is not specified to be gender non-conforming is automatically a cis character. Employing Fetterley’s practice of being a resisting reader, we chose to resist this normalization of the gender binary and expand our assumptions about the character’s gender identity. I offered the option to wear whatever bracelet or accessories they’d like, according to however they feel their character would accessorize in the world of the show. This moment of practicing feminist criticism theory allowed us as an ensemble to resist the gender binary while also honoring the comfort and opinions of the actor. With this decision we also stepped together into the fourth wave of feminism currently being defined by feminist theorists as “queer, sex-positive, trans-inclusive, body-positive, and digitally driven…Fourth wavers believe there is no feminism without an understanding of comprehensive justice that deconstructs systems of power and includes emphasis on racial justice as well as examinations of class, disability, and other issues” (Delao). By expanding our understanding of the characters to include the possibility of them being gender non-conforming, Trans, allies, queer, we embrace a feminism that is inclusive of and aimed at empowering people of all identities. We also open another opportunity to be identity-conscious, inviting the actors to choose how and when they incorporate their own personalities and interests into their characters and how. This continued to be an important way of developing the world of the play, especially when discussing how we wanted to interpret the play’s ending.
A Queer Futurity

At the end of the play the girls must make a decision. Do they climb down into a tunnel they’ve found below the home of an alleged former Shelton Commune member, or do they stay above ground and forget their discovery altogether? Applying queer theory to this decision, I think what they are actually deciding between is their current reality or a chance at Muñoz’s formerly mentioned “queer futurity” (30). Muñoz theorizes the potential of a utopia that is rooted in queerness, using an expansive definition of the term that relates to more than just sexual orientation or gender. According to Muñoz “Queerness is essentially about rejection of a here and now and an insistence on potentiality or concrete possibility for a new world…queerness is primarily about futurity and hope. That is to say that queerness is always in the horizon. I contend that if queerness is to have any value whatsoever, it must be viewed as being visible only in the horizon” (1, 30). This definition of queerness was a useful tool in the rehearsal space.

When trying to sympathize with the characters as they contemplate whether or not to abandon their sense of safety for an unknown underground, imagining their journey as being in resistance to the oppression they experience quickly justifies their decision to “descend down the hole” (Jeffery 84). Yes, the girls are searching for answers to what happened to the people of the Shelton Commune. But with Muñoz in mind we can assume that they are also searching for something more. Muñoz writes that “utopianism can only exist via a critique of the dominant order” (39) putting his theory in direct conversation with feminist criticism. WROL is a script that exists as a critique of a “repressive heteronormative present” (Muñoz 64). In response to being told by a boy named Robbie that people would take her more seriously if she didn’t “behave like a maniac,” Jo answers “I behave like a human being, who is so exhausted by being told that if I just behave better I’ll earn the right to the kind of audience you already have before you ever
open your mouth” (Jeffery 77). This exchange is a direct reflection of Muñoz’s concept of queerness as resistance. The audience watches Robbie talk down to Jo, who queers their exchange by immediately pointing out that he wouldn’t be speaking to her in this manner if it weren’t for the power his gender affords him over her own. She goes on to say, “Behave. YOU DON’T THINK I’VE TRIED THAT? For years and years. Waited my turn and raised my hand and it doesn’t CHANGE ANYTHING – behaving- just makes me easier to ignore” (Jeffery 77). Robbie does not respond.

Robbie does however, have his own decision to make at the end of the show. As Jo, Sarah, and Vic start packing to go underground, Maureen hands Robbie a flashlight and asks him to “Please keep watch” (Jeffery 84). After the others exit, Maureen and Robbie share “a long tight hug” (Jeffery 84). Maureen then follows her friends underground, leaving Robbie alone.

Working with the actor who played Robbie was an especially fruitful practice in queering the power dynamic between an actor and director. I had only worked with him once before when I assistant directed a production he participated in, and I had little opportunity to interact directly with the actors during that process. By the time WROL opened I was referring to him as the assistant director, and so was the rest of the cast. He helped me plan a moment that had been eluding me since the beginning of the rehearsal process, and justified another that wasn’t making sense in my mind until he shared his perspective of it with me. We talked a lot about Robbie’s purpose in the show, and were guided as a cast by Sara Ahmed’s theory of complaint activism. She writes at length in her book Complaint! about the nature of complaining, and how it is a method of self-advocacy that unfortunately often turns the complainer into a pariah by the people being complained to. Ahmed states: “To become a complainer is to become a location of a
problem” (3). Maureen, Sarah, Vic, and Jo complain to Robbie about their experiences, and instead of offering validation he first offers criticisms and disbelief. Instead of trying to understand their fears he belittles them, acting as an authority on their girlhood which he has never experienced. In the first scene we meet him in, Robbie judges Maureen for her fear.

**ROBBIE:** I don’t think this is good for you

**MAUREEN:** What?

**ROBBIE:** This whole thing. You and Sarah and Jo and all your gear and preparation and paranoia. You should be, I don’t know, going to movies and trying on lipstick at the mall or something.

*Pause.*

**MAUREEN:** Malls are everything that is wrong with the world.

**ROBBIE:** See? That. Saying stuff like that makes you sound like an idiot (Jeffery 17).

Instead of engaging Maureen in conversation about what she means by her statement(s), Robbie quickly denies that they could have any justification at all.

Something we all found interesting about the character Robbie is that he has multiple chances to leave Maureen and the other girls who join them in the home of the person they believe to have belonged to the commune, but he never does. He stays with the girls despite disagreeing with them, and even possesses a protective quality that comes out at different moments in the script. The cast and I discussed Robbie’s purpose in the show regularly, and our view of him changed over the course of the rehearsal process. At first, we were viewing Robbie
as a physical manifestation of the ignorance that girls suffer from every day. But we kept coming back to the fact that Robbie stays with his friends throughout the show. Despite every disagreement, he stays. The girls even tell him to go home multiple times, and he still proclaims “No. I’m not going to do that. I’m not going to leave you all out here” (Jeffery 63). In his determination to not leave without them, Robbie acknowledges the violence in the world that the girls fear. We decided to look at him as a representation of what Ahmed refers to as a feminist ear. “To become a feminist ear is not only to be willing to receive complaints but to make use of them, to do something with them, to make them work or to make them part of our work” (Ahmed 43). Robbie’s resistance to listening to his friends' complaints falters as he continues to stay and support their determination, and by the end of this show we agreed that he had become a feminist ear himself. Instead of taking it upon himself to “call the police” like he threatens to many times, he lets his friends talk him out of doing so (Jeffery 56). Even after they’ve all gone underground, Robbie doesn’t call anyone. He stays and keeps watch like Maureen asked him to.

When it was time to block the moment of Robbie remaining on stage alone, deciding whether to stay or leave, I had a very specific idea in mind of what I wanted him to do that I’d been thinking of since the first rehearsal. Before I could say a word of it, the actor playing Robbie looked at me and said “I actually had an idea for this part. Can we try it?” Days before, he mentioned that Robbie’s silence in the last scene as he decides whether or not to stay is as impactful as the monologues the four girls have during the show. Robbie spends a lot of the show yelling, going on tangents and speaking in long unbroken sentences. But as he watches the girls all leave and hugs Maureen goodbye, he is completely silent. Then he silently decides to stay, protecting his friends like he’s been yearning to do the whole time. But now, in a way that they’ve specifically asked him to. This is where the audience gets to see his transformation into a
feminist ear. He has chosen to listen to rather than reject the complaints of his friends, and is choosing to take action in solidarity with them instead of in opposition of. When the actor playing Robbie asked to show me his idea for the blocking of this scene, I knew immediately that we would do whatever he wanted. I closed the door on my original thought and understood that he had a firm grasp on what we were trying to accomplish, and I trusted him to give it movement. I said “yes” and watched him look between the open window Robbie could escape through, and the open tunnel the girls had disappeared in. He then walked towards the tunnel, sat with his back to it, knees drawn to his chest, and aimed Maureen’s flashlight towards the window ready to catch the first sign of any intruders. We all gasped. I teared up. And made the decision as the director not to direct him to do a single thing differently. He staged Robbie’s own rejection of the ignorance that propels him through so much of the show, and I was proud to support the actor’s vision in what that rejection should look like.

Egyptian American author and journalist Mona Eltahawy writes in her book *Headscarves and Hymens* that “words are important - to fight silence, alienation, and violence. Words are flags planted on the planets of our beings; they say this is mine, I have fought for it and despite your attempts to silence me, I am still here” (22). In *WROL*, Sarah imitates this sentiment, telling Maureen that “stories are important,” when she criticizes Sarah for having too many novels in her bag instead of more practical survival tools like “water-filtration tablets and matches” (Jeffery 37, 34). Throughout this rehearsal process, we as a cast and creative team waved the flags of ourselves in protest, in resistance, in solidarity. Eltahawy’s book critiques the oppression of women that persists in the practice of Islam and in Muslim nations. As an Egyptian American woman who was raised in a conservative Muslim household, reading about Eltahawy’s journalism and scholarship as her personal resistance to patriarchal cultural norms I recognized
and had begun to critique myself was especially motivating for me. We honored her in our lobby display, and I shared her commitment to storytelling with the cast as well. I saw her words come to life in rehearsals. She writes, “We will have a reckoning with our culture and religion…Such a reckoning is essentially a feminist one. And it is what will eventually free us. Women - our rage, our tenacity, our daring and audacity- will free our countries” (Eltahawy 238; ). I am aware that we didn’t free any countries by doing this play. But I am also aware that there were days our rage spoke for us, and through us, into a performance that was undoubtedly a reckoning. As the “Don’t Say Gay” bill and “Stop W.O.K.E.” Act loomed over our heads, we cultivated an environment where we were able to channel our frustrations over our present society into a show that looks forward to what Muñoz calls “concrete utopias…they are the hopes of a collective, an emergent group, or even the solitary oddball who is the one who dreams for many” (3).

The week before our rehearsals started, Hurricane Ian swept through Florida. Immediately afterwards, Florida representative Anna Eskamani started accepting donations for communities in Fort Myers which in many areas was completely obliterated. My family and I brought what we could to her office, which is when I learned that it’s only a few minutes away from the Orlando Family Stage. It wasn’t until later in the process, when I had students of mine from the class I was teaching at UCF reaching out and asking for extensions on homework because they were displaced and/or otherwise affected, that I realized how much of an impact Ian had here in Orlando as well. I decided to capitalize on our privilege to be able to still do a show in a theatre that suffered little damage, and asked the education department if we could collect donations for people in need in Orlando at WROL’s performances. At the time of this production, Emily Freeman worked in the education department as the director of community partnerships.
She reached out to Eskamani’s team to ask if they were taking and distributing supplies or knew of anyone locally who was. Eskamani responded immediately and put us in contact with her team. We received a list of supplies that were needed, and I posted that list to my Facebook page and my Instagram account whenever I promoted the show. When the show closed, I had nearly a trunk full of supplies that I drove to Eskamani’s office and left with her team.

Additionally, OFS collects non-perishable food items year-round for “Conway Cares, an initiative that provides food for 150+ schoolchildren each week that are struggling with food insecurity,” which was founded by the Rep’s artistic director, Jeff Revels (Orlando Rep). Our show’s prop list called for multiple canned food items, which we donated to Conway Cares after the production. These acts were attempts at moving the conversations had in this show beyond the fourth wall of the stage space and into our community. Our cast members started coming to rehearsal asking questions about what their families could bring to donate, and if they could bring items from friends and teachers who couldn’t come to the show but still wanted to help. I shared with my UCF students that our show didn’t have a budget, so if any of them had any canned food items they could spare we would love to have them and would donate them later. And students brought cans.

These actions were theory in practice. We queered our understanding of what a show is capable of achieving, thinking outside the parameters of a binary “good show” or “bad show” and instead asked what we could offer our community with the platform we had at the Orlando Family stage. OFS also achieved a new partnership with Anna Eskamani. Introducing them to a Florida politician who is a climate activist, an ally to the LGBTQIA2S+ (lesbian, trans, bisexual, queer, intersex, asexual, two-spirit, plus) community, and the first Iranian American woman to
hold her title (Anna V. Eskamani). In one monologue, Maureen says “it’s terrifying to not know what’s happening all around you. When some crisis breaks. To not know – not trust – That the people to be trusted will know. Will act. Because what if they don’t? Or can’t?... I can tell you for a fact that whoever you think has ‘got this,’ doesn’t got this!” (Jeffery 40,41). In one rehearsal Lawlor asked the cast who inspires them. She noted their answers, and later put together a banner full of pictures and quotes from both their role models and ours that we hung up as part of our lobby display. We took time to introduce each other, and later our audience, to the people who we do think “has got this.” Anna Eskamani was on that banner. It was exciting to get to build a personal connection to the mission of someone I look up to. What’s more, discussing Eskamani and her work in rehearsal was a chance to humanize a politician to the youth ensemble who are all currently in high school and not yet of voting age.

My Personal Connection

Before engaging with theory, I experienced violence as an attack on my gender, my religion, my ethnicity, my mental health, and my sexuality, which caused distress in me that I didn’t have language to understand. Or to heal from. Jeffery’s play gives these wounds language, specifically the wounds inflicted by a society whose binary assumptions of gender result in heightened violence and sexism towards girls. In addition, feminist criticism theory, queering our rehearsal space, and applying Muñoz’s theory of queer futurity to the script, process, and production of WROL gave us language to describe the harm these characters experience as we were experiencing similar harm ourselves. It inspired us to engage with complaint activism, to reach out to our own communities, and to express ourselves fully to each other. Muñoz writes that “Concrete utopias are the realm of educated hope” (3). Through this process, I believe we
brushed up against what a concrete utopia may look like, and were only successful in doing so because of the education we engaged with from hooks, Muñoz, Ahmed, hooks, Gatwood, Jeffery, Green, Fetterley, Christian, Hammond, Eltahawy, Davis, each other, and the many more minds and voices that supported us in supporting each other through this process.

At the talk back for the closing performance, my sister raised her hand to ask the cast a question. She asked them, “do you feel more likely to start a social movement after having been in this show?” They all looked at one another, looked at Gabby, looked at me, and then responded with a resounding “Yes!” Later, my sister congratulated me saying “that means that you did your job.” Next time, I want to build on the foundation of this utopia we’ve just broken ground on.

Queering our space, applying queer and feminist theory and engaging in “consciousness-raising” (Shalson 50) around the oppressive forces resisted in the script succeeded in creating a more honest and collaborative rehearsal process than I had ever experienced before. Now I am curious to know how we can take this formula even farther past the fourth wall. Our cast was ready to start a social movement. A concrete utopia. A queer future. I’d like to continue to try my hand at directing it so that next time we’ll start one.
CHAPTER THREE: NOTES FROM A QUEER FEMINIST APPROACH TO

PLAYWRITNG

In the summer of 2023, I completed a residency as a teaching artist at the New London Barn Playhouse in New London, New Hampshire. While I was there I had the opportunity to write an adaption of the classic fairy tale *The Princess and the Pea*. Sage Tokach, the director of education and a good friend, specifically requested that I write her a “feminist version” of the beloved story. I wanted to take a dramaturgical approach, and learn first about the history of the story before trying to create my own. In comparing multiple versions, I found many similarities that emphasized oppressive normative plot points that made me wonder how I might use the traditional story to achieve the goal Sage set for me.

Traditionally *The Princess and the Pea* includes a prince whose mother the Queen wants to see him married, though he is not interested in the idea. She throws an overnight ball and invites unmarried princesses from neighboring kingdoms to participate and meet her son. The Queen also hosts a talent show, asking the princesses to showcase skills to attract the prince’s attention. However, he starts pining after the one princess the Queen isn’t excited about. She shows up late during a storm, dripping in rainwater, from a kingdom no one at the party has heard of. Immediately the Queen is put off by her but the prince is charmed.

My favorite version of this story is one told in an animated show I grew up watching called *Happily Ever After*. The HBO series “retells the world's most famous fairy tales with a multi-ethnic cast of animated characters” (HBO). The episode called *The Princess and the Pea* is based in Korea. The princess the prince eventually falls in love with sings a song during the talent show, about the order of the planets in reference to their proximity to the sun. The prince greatly
appreciates this, as he is also fascinated by science and space. The Queen is unimpressed, wishing her son would pay more attention to any of the other princesses she prefers for him. This is another commonality among the stories. The Queen routinely prefers her son be enamored by a princess who she approves of, instead of the one princess who is generally more awkward, comedic, and aloof than the others. This inspires the Queen to place a pea underneath a stack of mattresses in each princess’s bedroom. Her idea is that the princess who can feel the pea beneath the stack is the most sensitive and delicate, making her the most feminine and therefore worthy of her son’s hand in marriage. The only princess who can feel the pea turns out to be the one the prince admired all along, and the story ends in their marriage. A royal, heterosexual, heteronormative marriage. Like a fairy tale usually ends. And here is where my reimagining of the story began. Immediately I knew that in a “feminist” retelling of this tale, I wanted to resist reinstating the lesson that a woman’s worth is dependent upon her being compared to other women in the hopes of being chosen for marriage by a man.

While devising a plot for my adaptation, I remembered how many fairy tales I was exposed to in my youth, and how many ended in a heterosexual relationship or marriage. Cinderella, Snow White, The Princess and the Pea, Sleeping Beauty, The Frog Princess, The Little Mermaid, Beauty and the Beast: the list goes on. As a young girl I used to imagine the kind of man I’d marry. Would he be as caring as Cinderella’s prince, who searched an entire kingdom just to find her? Or as compassionate as Ariel’s, who desperately tried to communicate with her when she lost her voice? Would my white dress be a ball gown or something more contemporary? Sleeves or no sleeves? Would I wear a hijab, or wait until after the wedding to begin that journey for myself? Today in this moment I identify as someone who is not attracted
in a romantic or sexual way to the male gender. I’ve also grown increasingly uninterested in participating in the institution of marriage. If I were to, there definitely would not be a white gown, since I don’t wear white because I inevitably spill something on myself every time that I do. There would be no question of wearing a hijab or not, as I don’t practice Islam anymore. Traditionally a Muslim wedding might not include a white gown or walking down a long aisle in front of friends and family, or rice being thrown, or a flower girl or wedding vows being shared. But growing up, these things were a part of my wedding fantasies as they were showcased most in mainstream media, including popular fairy tales.

It took me well into my adulthood to realize these dreams of mine were direct results of the media I was exposed to and I wondered how to resist creating another outlet of the same messaging for this production. Educator and scholar Zaretta Hammond discusses the ways we learn, and how our brains process information in her book *Culturally Responsive Teaching & The Brain*. In a section called “The Power of Active Processing,” she states that “processing is the act of taking in information with intent to understand it, relate it to what you already know, and store it in a way so that you can easily retrieve it…new understanding is now permanently connected to your old knowledge and stored in your memory ready to be used when you need it” (Hammond 124). If our brains process and store new information by relating it to what we already know, then every time a new fairy tale ends in a woman marrying a man, I wonder if that means we also learn the lesson again that heterosexual (and monogamous) marriage is the key to living happily ever after. I decided to resist this narrative by honoring the ages of the students performing the piece. This led to an adaptation of the story that didn’t result in a marriage and allowed more age appropriate conflicts and resolutions to take place. This decision disrupted the
many youth productions that ask youths to portray characters who engage in mature romantic relationships, and rely on these relationships to move a plot forward.

Resisting heteronormativity as a normative romantic structure is an important step in normalizing queer identities. Legislation that seeks to limit the freedoms and rights of Trans and LGBTQIA2S+ peoples is continuously being debated and passed. In 2022 the state of Florida passed HB1557. This bill is more commonly known as the Don’t Say Gay bill. According to the NEA, “The Don’t Say Gay law stated that its purpose was to ‘prohibit classroom discussion about sexual orientation or gender identity in certain grade levels or in a specified manner’” (NEA). In 2023 another bill called HB1069 passed, which added legislation complementary to the goals of HB1557. This bill “adds sweeping new provisions prohibiting the use of pronouns consistent with one’s gender identity, expands book banning procedures, and censors health curriculum and instruction” (NEA). The bill also restricts access to sexual health education, asserting that “schools must ‘teach that biological males impregnate biological females by fertilizing the female egg with male sperm; that the female then gestate the offspring; and that these reproductive roles are binary, stable and unchangeable.’” Parents are also given the opportunity to demand their kids be excused from lessons they don’t agree their kids should be exposed to regarding sexual health and anything else they personally feel is “inappropriate.” Additionally these laws specifically target and affect queer young people, as well as queer educators whose self-expression in their own classrooms is limited by HB1069. In other states, similar laws are being passed as well. These regulations paired with the majority heteronormative media that many young people are regularly exposed to re-enforce the narrative that heteronormative people are more deserving of visibility, individuality, and basic human rights.
They also enforce that exposure to sexual health, sexual freedom, and relationships or identities that exist outside heteronormativity are inappropriate for kids to be exposed to, limiting their autonomy over their self-discovery. I wondered how I could create an adaptation of *The Princess and the Pea* that offers autonomy of self to the actors in ways that the “Don’t Say Gay” bill seeks to limit. The Don’t Say Gay bill has sought to limit teachers' abilities to share their pronouns in their classrooms as well as limiting students' abilities to share their pronouns and preferred names. The bill has also aimed to make it mandatory for teachers to contact students' parents if they come out or present themselves as queer or trans, making school and school classrooms unsafe places to be oneself. These goals install the idea that identifying outside of the normative heterosexual and cisgendered venn diagram that has become standard in society today is wrong or harmful. I wondered how I could use this play to resist these ideas, instead focusing on the identities of the youths I was working with and circumstances they may be experiencing besides regulations about their genders and sexualities. My first idea was to honor the ages and experiences of the actors involved, taking away the standard marriage between a male and female character and pursuing strong friendships formed between characters instead.

I was also interested in setting the story in a time period and location that would be familiar to the youth performers. Many adaptations of this story take place in a castle and kingdom, like the Broadway musical adaptation *Once Upon a Mattress* (1959). The adapted youth edition of *Mattress* also ends in a marriage (technically a child marriage, since it is performed by children). The young people of New London, New Hampshire who I was working with had never lived in a castle or kingdom, and frankly neither have I. Period dramas and tales of historical fiction have never been my style, and I found trying to imagine a kingdom and palace to set our story in was difficult and unfulfilling. Instead of trying to create a feminist
version of the familiar world of the story, I decided first to modernize our setting. My writing is continuously inspired by the idea of “visionary fiction,” a term and genre coined by artist, author and educator Walidah Imarisha (EAP). In an interview Imarisha once defined visionary fiction as “fantastical writing that helps us imagine new just worlds” (EAP). Here Imarisha is referring specifically to science fiction. However, I think her insistence that incorporating an author’s desire for the world to change in ways that bring about justice is applicable to playwriting. I decided to apply the idea of visionary fiction to a modern adaptation of The Princess and the Pea, and started to wonder what kind of world I’d like to see come to fruition in my lifetime that I could start to create in this production. Beyond ridding the story of a marriage, and perpetuating the notion that a girl or woman’s worth is dependent on a boy or man deeming her valuable, what kind of world did I want to dramaturgically create? This question brought me back to an experience that I had prior to grad school and has informed much of my practice since.

The summer of 2020 I was hired to work remotely by the Seattle Children’s Theatre. They first offered me a position as their Poet in Residence to design a curriculum for a poetry class they were launching with their students. Unfortunately due to low registration the course was canceled. However, they invited me to continue with their company as a teaching artist instead. At this time the COVID-19 epidemic was forcing educational institutions to move their programming from in person classrooms to online platforms like Zoom. Before the pandemic, The Seattle Children’s Theatre toured shows to different schools that covered an array of topics. One show they adapted to be a Zoom performance was called Ghosted, which sought to educate young people on mental health terminology and the dangers of mental health stigma. After a recorded video performance of a show that follows the story of four teenagers struggling with
their own mental health before coming together to support each other, teaching artists would lead a workshop offering information about minimizing mental health stigma, and emotional and physical self-regulation tools. I had the privilege to be trained as a teaching artist for this program, and the experience inspired me to continue resisting mental health stigma in my career moving forward. This cause was a personal one for me: I developed an eating disorder when I was in sixth grade, and have been on a constant journey of relapse and recovery ever since. At the time, I had no idea that the “diets” I went on were really a cycle of disordered eating that would follow me into adulthood. The Ghosted program discussed mental health conditions and resources without shame, or judgment, and I realized how revolutionary a program like that could have been for me when I was younger. While writing The Princess and the Pea for the New London Barn Playhouse, I was reminded of the lessons I learned from my time with SCT and had them in mind while trying to come up with a plotline. If a show that shared regulation techniques and signs of dysregulation would have been beneficial to me in my youth, I wondered if I could adapt my own version of The Princess and the Pea that would have a similar effect. I have become passionate about including messages about mental health into my writing, and used the opportunity presented by the New London Barn Playhouse to practice.

Even after deciding to include themes of wellness into the script, I knew I didn’t want to come up with the whole story on my own, opting instead to apply Will Davis’s idea of “queering” a rehearsal room to my writing practice (Davis). I wanted to challenge my own ego, and open my mind to ideas and suggestions from others. When I was first tasked with writing the script, I was co-teaching a Theatre Survey class for non-majors. I asked my co-teacher if she’d be comfortable with me using a class period to do a bit of brainstorming with our students for the
show. She agreed, and the imagining of the piece’s plot began in that classroom. First I asked our students to define the following terms collectively.

What is Theatre for Young Audiences (TYA)?

What is dramaturgy?

My co-teacher and I had covered the topics of TYA and dramaturgy before, sharing our own definitions for each topic, and exposing our students to what excited us about them. Before getting their input on the script I was writing, I wanted us all to start from a shared understanding of what I was asking them to do. We were working collectively to think dramaturgically about a script that would live under the umbrella of Theatre for Young Audiences. The definitions our students came up with were:

- What is TYA?
  - Theatre that is designed with young people in mind

- What is Dramaturgy?
  - Research that goes into a theme or title of a work
  - Looking at a show in today’s context/ looking for relevance and appropriateness of age group
  - Plot design of a piece and the research that informs it
  - Looking into a show’s original context to make sure the origins of the story are respected

Once we were all satisfied with these definitions, I asked another question. What is feminism?

This question caused a quick hush to fall over our students. I shared that, of course, there is no one true definition of this term, and our goal was to find language that we could all agree on as we worked to rethink *The Princess and the Pea* in a feminist way. How could we apply feminism
to the story we were familiar with? I thought that first, we at least needed a common
understanding of what “it” is. The definition agreed upon was the following.

● What is Feminism?

• Social strive for equity for women and all genders

• Empowering women to the same level and standard that men are viewed as

• Highlighting issues that women face as a social group

These definitions were completely created, voiced, and agreed upon by students. They became
the definitions that I would later refer to while writing. Our class went on to brainstorm possible
characters and storylines, which led to an infinite number of directions the script could have
come to light. The idea that stuck with me most for the purposes of this adaptation, was that the
pea in this version didn’t need to be an actual pea at all. What if “Pea” was the name of an
animal? Of a pet? This approach to the pea in the story completely avoided the test of femininity
that the Queen generally gives, resisting the narrative that a girl’s sensitivity is equated to her
worth. But what kind of animal should Pea be? Who’s pet? And how would the story work
without an actual pea at all?

After thinking back to Ghosted, I decided later that Pea would be a service animal. A
young girl’s service animal that she brings with her on her first day at a new school. The
education I received about the importance of mental health and wellness information being
formative for youths inspired me to apply some of this information to The Princess and the Pea.
Making Pea a service animal that aids a character who has anxiety takes the power of the pea to
decipher a girl’s worth away, and instead replaces this object with a living and breathing being
that offers support to her regardless of how sensitive or traditionally feminine she may or may not be. Turning Pea into a service animal made me wonder how I could create a setting where this animal would also be able to speak. Writing a show for a specific summer camp at the New London Barn Playhouse, I didn’t want to limit whoever played Pea to only lines that resembled barking. I needed to find a way to justify Pea speaking to the other characters to ensure that every character had a speaking role. It was important to me that each character had as equal a number of lines as possible (to limit jealousy and hard feelings among the cast). Each of the summer students were signed up for the same camp and were interested in being in a show. I wanted them all to shine equally, and tried to write a script that would allow for that as much as possible. As I continued queering my writing process, I tried to write a show without one clear main character or protagonist. The general hierarchy that is created when a show includes a main character who may have more lines and more character development than others was a hierarchy I wanted to queer, removing the binary of most prominent to least prominent character. Each of the summer students were signed up for the same camp, and were interested in being in a show. I wanted them all to shine equally, and tried to write a script that would allow for that as much as possible. This meant, Pea needed to talk, which in turn meant we needed some fairy tale magic after all.

This is what I came up with: A girl named Winny – a name inspired by Princess Winnifred in *Once Upon a Mattress* – starts attending a new school with her service dog Pea. When she gets to school, her classmates have already been invited to a girl named Ayanna’s birthday party. Ayanna claims that she doesn’t have any more invitations, leaving Winny without one. When another friend confronts Ayanna, she says that she can’t invite Winny because her
party is “full. Maybe next year.” The next day, Ayanna is surprised to see that Winny attends her party anyway. Ayanna’s mom had run into Winny’s the day before, and invited her. What a coincidence! Of course, Winny also brings Pea along.

Once all the guests arrive, it is revealed that Ayanna’s mom is actually Queen of a magical kingdom, and she uses her magic to transport the party to her castle. Although I was originally hesitant to set the show in a kingdom, I had become more worried that straying so far from the source material may cause the actors to lose interest in participating in the production. I started to worry that my desire to apply visionary friction to the story and write a world where youths' mental health is highly regarded started to overshadow the responsibility I had to write a show that the youths signed up for the camp would actually want to be in. I understood that the actors who signed up were expecting to be a part of The Princess and the Pea, a well known fairy tale that families would surely have expectations of. Having it start in a modern classroom, and be void of the traditional pea-as-legume femininity marker was already a lot of change. I actually missed the glamor of the kingdom and palace setting myself, and found that positioning Ayanna’s mom as a connection to that familiar setting worked for many reasons. First, it would remind the audience of the fairy tale they already knew and expected to see in this production. Also, it gave me an excuse to get Pea talking. Once the party goers travel to the kingdom, they meet magical creatures like a Dragon and Unicorn who can speak to them too. Pea speaks in this world, giving the actor playing her the chance to perform as vibrantlly (and understandably) as her peers.

The kingdom also allowed me to create more characters that could stand apart from each other. One of the comments that came from the brainstorming session with my Theatre Survey
students was that, generally, the princesses in the original story all have similar personalities except for the princess who is eventually chosen for marriage. The others aren’t heard from much, except for when they are trying to woo the prince, which only annoys him. My students suggested that I try to give any princesses in my adaptation as different and individual personalities as possible. In making this request, my students were unknowingly engaging with feminist criticism theory, and demanding that I do as well. In 1975 film theorist Laura Mulvey coined the term “male gaze,” referring to her observation that films were generally being created to adhere to the desires of male audiences (Mulvey). She states that “The determining male gaze projects its fantasy onto the female figure…women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact” (Mulvey). Although Mulvey is talking specifically about the film industry, I believe there is a strong correlation between the male gaze in film and theatre alike. There is also a correlation between the male gaze and the classic telling of *The Princess and the Pea*. The audience is set up to see the princess through the eyes of the prince while he’s falling in love with her, sympathizing with his desire to choose her despite his mother’s disapproval. Her personality is a direct reflection of his preferred qualities in a wife, making her a personification of the male gaze in action. We can even contribute a known contemporary figure in literature, film, and theatre to the male gaze: The Manic Pixie Dream Girl.

This phrase Manic Pixie Dream Girl was coined in 2007 by film critic Nathan Rabin, referring to a female character who “exists solely… to teach broodingly soulful young men to embrace life and its infinite mysteries and adventures…” (Rabin *AV Club*). Like Mulvey, Rabin is offering language here to describe the ongoing idolization of manhood in the arts and how
womanhood is often depicted as a simple steppingstone for male characters to squash underfoot before taking their places upon the pedestal patriarchy offers them. The Manic Pixie Dream Girl has become a popular description, one that remains under scrutiny of women and female artists. Poet Olivia Gatwood critiques the character type in a poem that gives examples of a Manic Pixie Dream Girl’s purpose, sarcastically describing what this character’s inner monologue may be as she helps the man or boy she is acting as a mirror for develop into someone worthy of being a main character. Gatwood writes:

*Have you heard this record?* Manic Pixie Dream Girl says,

*Let me save you with this record.*

*Let me put the headphones on for you and smile while you listen. Hear that?*

*That’s the sound of you becoming a better person. (New American Best Friend 34).*

In the original story of *The Princess and the Pea*, the princess can be easily viewed as fitting this Manic Pixie Dream Girl trope. She arrives uninvited and mysterious, belittled by all the princesses around her and the Queen. Only the prince takes interest in her, intrigued by how she stands out and how much she needs assistance when she arrives. The audience is smitten by how he makes sure she gets into something dry after coming in from a storm, how he listens enchantedly to her speak, and how he appreciates what she performs for the talent show. We watch him “becoming a better person” than his judgmental Mother and the other princesses, because of the way he treats this quirky and curious princess with basic human decency.

Gatwood goes on:

Manic Pixie Dream Girl talks too much says bad words out loud and cries at the commercials.

*That makes me a funny woman, right? The kind people like to laugh at... and when you are a*
whole person for the first time, the movie is over

Manic Pixie Dream Girl doesn’t go on, there’s no need for her anymore (New American Best Friend 35-36)

The Princess and the Pea traditionally ends in a marriage, which was always the goal of the Queen, and becomes the goal of the prince once he meets his Manic Pixie Dream Girl princess. We watch him fall for her, we watch the Queen judge her, and we watch her just try and make it through the night without any sleep. Thinking of the Manic Pixie Dream Girl as a projection of the male gaze offers a concrete stereotype to critique and resist in the writing of female characters moving forward.

Giving Winny a personality of her own that wasn’t developed in service to a male counterpart was one way I rejected the Manic Pixie Dream Girl character as well as the male gaze, which allowed me to approach the tale with a feminist perspective. This approach was also influenced by applying feminist criticism. Critiquing the stereotypical Princess and the Pea characters led me to make the decision to resist the cliche boy meets girl narrative that included a princess as being in service to a prince’s character development instead of her own. Ayanna being a girl as well as Winny meant that the two characters whose actions would inform the show were both female. This did make me question however, how I would be sure to honor the young boys in our class who also deserved to perform and shine in roles they could be excited about receiving.

I believe that feminism does not exist solely to serve women and AFAB people, but it is a movement that encompasses men and people of genders as well. In the words of comedian Hannah Gadsby, “I don’t assume bald babies are boys. I assume they’re angry feminists, and I
treat them with respect!” (Gadsby, Nanette). In order to write a feminist version of *Princess and the Pea*, it was important to me that the feminist approach I take be conscious of the boys and gender-neutral students participating, allowing for and encouraging every student to play a part they could feel proud of. To do this, I tried writing the script originally with gender neutral pronouns for all characters besides Ayanna, Winny, and Ayanna’s mom The Queen. It was important to me that the Queen remain her original gender identity. I also opted to not include a King, as he is generally a quiet side character in the story and unnecessary to the plotline. Instead of writing a King who could be a prominent character for one of the boys to play, I decided to instead honor the Queen’s purpose in pushing the plot forward, and did not add a King or romantic partner for her at all. There is no question of where her husband or Ayanna’s dad is in the script either. The Queen simply rules and parents on her own and it is accepted in this world by everyone. Even our students never questioned the Queen’s sole ruling, or her being a single parent. In reference to the female characters in Arthur Miller’s *Death of a Salesman* Gayle Austin wrote that “the problem is that this play has become a paradigm for what the ‘serious American play’ should be… and the continuation of its centrality effectively cuts women’s experience out of consideration for ‘serious’ drama. Some of the old patterns must be changed to allow for woman-as-subject, not traded object, to be seen on stage” (50). In the classic telling of the fairy tale the princess is objectified by the prince and queen. To the prince she is a prize to be won and for the queen she is a tarnished thing to be discarded. By writing the queen’s character not to wish to see her son married by the end of the production we avoid the narrative that the queen will perpetuate misogyny by objectifying the princess. Austin continues, “feminist criticism can begin to point out and criticize these dominant patterns. Awareness can lead to innovations in production that undercut the unthinking acceptance of canonical
scripts…Awareness of the damaging images and lack of active female subjects in plays in the
canon may also lead to the writing of plays in which women’s roles are not so restricted” (50-
51). The queen in this play is a powerful magical matriarch who throws a wonderful birthday
party and leads her magical staff with compassion and grace. She is listened to, she is respected,
and she doesn’t have to demand to be or overcome being silenced first in order to be so. No one
calls her bossy, or aggressive, or angry, or a bitch. Adding a lens of visionary fiction over
Austin’s feminist criticism led to the staging of a woman in power whose independence is never
questioned or criticized, and whose singleness is never mistaken for unfulfillment.

Other characters were given they/them pronouns in the first draft of the script, and they
were also given numbers instead of names. I thought that doing this would help teaching artists
working on the production keep an open mind about which students they cast in each role. I also
hoped it would help us cast with intention, making sure each student’s performance was suited
for their character rather than casting based on matching their genders to the potentially gendered
names and assumed pronouns of the names specified in the script. I was afraid that by assigning
names, whether gender neutral-names or not, I’d be inviting the teaching artists to imagine the
characters as any gender they personally associated with the names leading to a gender-biased
casting process.

This became complicated when I was asked instead to assign names to each character,
rather than just numbers. I did not put thought into naming the students, and was having trouble
coming up with any. At the time I received this note, we were meant to start rehearsing the
following week. I wanted to be finished writing the script, so I could start focusing on my roles
as choreographer and assistant director of the piece. Frustrated by not being able to think of
twenty or so gender-neutral names that I was confident enough to use in the piece, I decided instead to use names of all the teaching artists’ and some staff at the theatre. I felt that the students would enjoy having their teaching artist’s names in the script, and the teaching artists and staff appreciated the recognition and were happy to be referenced when I asked permission to name characters after them. What I regret is the fact that this decision also informed the genders of the characters who were at first genderless. Using the names of female and male staff inherently invited the teaching artists to imagine each character as the gender of the person their character was named after. To combat this, I made sure that none of the students were referred to as a specific gender throughout the script (except for Winny, Ayanna’s Mom, and Ayanna). I did refer to Pea with he/him pronouns, and I can’t say I know why I did. Both groups of teaching artists cast young girls to play Pea and changed the pronouns for the characters from he/him to she/her. I was happy to see they took the liberty to do so, and was confident that they cast based on students’ personalities rather than character names for every other role as well. I should have had more faith in the teaching artists I was working with from the beginning, instead of trying to control their casting process. Upon reflection I agree that giving each character a name was an important and necessary adjustment to the script. Giving any students a character with just a number distinguishing them, when a select few would have actual names, would result in the exact dynamic of there being leads and then side characters that I was hoping to avoid. I’m grateful I was given the note to change this, and the students were elated to be cast with names of people they had met and admired all summer long whether they identified with the pronouns of the staff member whose name their character had.

In addition to discussing the concept of the show dramaturgically with my Theatre
Survey students, I had the opportunity to workshop the script with another theatre troupe at the New London Barn before sharing it with our students. The troupe called Junior Interns (JIs) are performers and stage technicians between the ages of twelve and eighteen. Sage offered some of their summer program time to me so I could hear the script for *The Princess and the Pea* out loud, and make edits based on what I thought of the dialogue when it wasn’t just on a page or in my head. I also took this time with the JIs to ask their opinions on the script. Continuing to queer my process, I wanted to invite as many voices and opinions into the process as possible.

Specifically, I was interested in inviting young people to comment on a show written for youth performers to experience. I didn’t want to spend my time with the JI’s simply listening to them read the words I had written and not being able to contribute to the show’s narrative past that. It was important to me that the JI’s volunteering their time to help me in my process were “invited to generate material and treated like authentic collaborators” (Davis). It would be naive to deny that a twenty-six-year old woman might be out of touch with how youth speak to each other, the popular vernacular they use, and how they may react to things that happen in the plot. It’s important to me that as I continue writing for youth audiences I am able to include their perspectives in as much of the process as possible.

The JI’s suggested that I make many valuable changes to the script, and I am confident that each suggestion made the final product better than I would have been able to on my own. One of their suggestions was that some of the characters needed a bit more to say or do to feel as integral to the story as their peers. Trying to remain aware of this was one of the most difficult parts of writing *The Princess and the Pea*. Since this show was being done for a summer camp production, it was imperative that every camper be assigned a role that would help them develop
their theatrical skills and invite them to have a fun and fulfilling camp week. There were about twenty students in both camps that would be performing this piece, meaning there had to be twenty roles suitable for the students we’d be working with. Knowing that reading levels would vary among students in both groups, I tried to use language that was as minimally advanced as possible. The JI’s offered notes on where there may be language that was still more advanced than the campers performing the show could or should be expected to perform. Especially since they were being expected to memorize their lines, and only after one week’s worth of rehearsal time.

Another incredibly valuable note I was given was that I referred to Pea as a service animal throughout the script, but in actuality, Pea came across as more of an Emotional Support Animal. Admittedly, I did not know the difference between a service and emotional support animal when I first wrote the script. I didn’t even think to look it up. This was a huge misstep in my dramaturgical process, and I am grateful for Davis’s assertion that as artists we resist our own egos and invite others to open our minds to details we may not realize by ourselves. Author and educator adrienne maree brown wrote that, in life, there are “no failures, just data” (118). This has been an important phrase for me to remember as I have committed countless mistakes and shortcomings over the last few years, my lifetime, and will undoubtedly continue to commit in the future. This reminder that each one has the potential to teach me a lesson or uncover something new allows me to grow towards the artist and educator I aspire to be, rather than be stunted by being ashamed of who I’ve been.

After I was informed by one of the JI’s that the title of emotional support animal seemed better suited to Pea’s purpose, I made a note to research the difference between support animals
and service animals more myself. I learned that “emotional support animals provide companionship, relieve loneliness, and sometimes help with depression, anxiety, and certain phobias, but do not have special training to perform tasks that assist people with disabilities” whereas “a service animal means any dog that is individually trained to do work or perform tasks for the benefit of an individual with a disability, including a physical, sensory, psychiatric, intellectual, or other mental disability” (ADA). Since Winny was only written to experience anxiety and the goal of the story was to destigmatize mental health conditions specifically, I am grateful to the JI’s for informing me that I should consider Pea to be an emotional support animal instead.

Another note they offered was that a monologue I wrote for Winny to perform was too advanced for students who were in grades three through eight. They were also concerned that the monologue would be difficult for any student who might be cast as Winny to memorize by the show’s opening. Regrettably I do not have the original monologue in my files anymore, since I took the JIs advice and decided to simplify it. Sage suggested that the wording was too clinical to be believable at a children’s birthday party. Hearing this same critique from both Sage and the JIs was very telling, and I decided to adjust it right away. The new dialogue was without a monologue at all and flowed much more like we all agreed a conversation between friends would. It came after Ayanna stormed out of her own birthday party, after experiencing heightened levels of stress and overwhelm. Her party guests go looking for her, wanting to offer her their support and compassion. Eventually, they find her in a garden outside of the palace. The following is a snippet of their conversation:

PEA: It was pretty obvious how uncomfortable you were tonight.
AYANNA: It was?

WINNY: Pea!

PEA: But it’s my job to notice stuff like that.

AYANNA: How does your job work Pea?

PEA: I hang out with Winny a lot, and I help her when she needs it. AYANNA: But how?

WINNY: Well, my old school was really big, and I was overwhelmed all the time. There were so many kids, and the teachers were always loud to try and be heard. I was stressed out. Then one day I had an anxiety attack in gym class.

AYANNA: What’s an anxiety attack?

PEA: It’s a physical response to stress or anxiety.

AYANNA: It’s a…what?

WINNY: It’s something that happens sometimes when I get overwhelmed. But Pea helps me stop them and feel better.

AYANNA: Can all dogs do that?

PEA: If they’re trained to. I graduated top of my class.

AYANNA: And now you don’t have them anymore?

WINNY: I still do, but it’s easier. Your school is a lot smaller than my old one. And I have Pea.

AYANNA: I think I’ve been feeling stressed tonight. I shouldn’t have yelled at you all though.
Princesses shouldn’t act that way.

SONIA: You were upset.

MIGUEL: Yeah. We get it.

AYANNA: Thanks. Ok. Can we go back to the party now?

WINNY: Are you ready to?

* takes a deep breath. Everyone takes a second deep breath with her. *

AYANNA: Yes.

Talking with Sage and the JI’s helped the dialogue above come together, and the students who were cast as these characters handled it wonderfully. They memorized their lines quickly and delivered them well. Defining terms like stress and anxiety were key points in the *Ghosted* programming I was a part of with the Seattle Children’s Theatre, and learning definitions for those terms and what specific reactions to them may look like could have helped me feel much more aware of the validity of my feelings and experiences when I was growing up. I wanted to offer these actors and their families the opportunity to experience what conversations could be like if we all had this knowledge available to us. In the script Winny taught Ayanna and their classmates a breathing technique called square breathing that I learned from SCT. This technique includes drawing a square with your finger, breathing in as you draw the first side and holding your breath as you draw the next. The next side you draw is when you let the breath go, and then you repeat the cycle as many times as you want. Winny teaches Ayann this tool and they practice it together with their classmates, until Ayanna feels ready to return to her party. Staging this tool is one way I hope to send audiences and students home with a grounding technique they may not
have been familiar with, but can encourage each other to use moving forward when needed. We defined terms like stress and anxiety in rehearsals, so the students were able to identify and discuss the things their characters were experiencing and maybe relate them to their own experiences as well. I aspire to continue educating myself on matters like mental health stigma and familial relationships so that I may write more work that is even more accurate and helpful moving forward.

Writing work that shares awareness and knowledge of how stress and anxiety can affect us is one way theatre can be used as an educational tool, and as a tool to resist mental health stigma. As I continue writing youth theatre, I will continue questioning how I can implement education and advocacy about mental health into storylines, as well as continuing to include multiple voices and opinions in my writing as much as possible. Receiving notes and criticisms from multiple sources can be overwhelming, and at first always feels like a blunder to my ego. Through queering the writing process and seeking various criticisms, I was able to write a script that was age appropriate and accurate, which I must acknowledge would not have happened had Sage and the JI’s and the Theatre Survey students not offered me their insight. Additionally, throughout the writing process I remembered the work of author and educator bell hooks, and how her approach to pedagogy also invites multiple perspectives to work together. In her book *Teaching to Transgress*, hooks states that “the classroom remains the most radical space of opportunity in the academy” (12). I agree, and I believe that replacing the word *classroom* with *rehearsal room* and the word *academy* with *theatre industry* is also an accurate phrase. By engaging with queer and feminist theory in my writing, I aim to create as much opportunity for growth, education, and collaboration as I can even before a script meets a stage.

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CHAPTER FOUR: RESISTANT-ACCOUNTABLE DRAMATURGY

In this chapter I will be reflecting on two separate productions, giving specific examples of my dramaturgical approaches to each. Prior to entering graduate school, I hadn’t been introduced to dramaturgy as a practice or profession. I directed and wrote shows before that I would do research on to better understand and present the material, but I didn’t realize I engaged with dramaturgy until it was defined to me in a classroom years later. Since then I have been privileged enough to practice dramaturgy professionally and in academic settings. For me as a dramaturg, the responsibilities for resistance expand from questioning my own biases and perceptions to questioning those of the playwrights I’m working with. My focus on practicing resistance and personal accountability while creating theatre influenced the ways I approached the following shows, and the conversations I had with my colleagues along the way.

The biggest questions I find myself asking during dramaturgical research are related to the language utilized in the scripts I encounter. What social structures are being upheld by the words cycled through us and our art? Are there oppressive themes being reinforced? Slurs? Stereotypes? How can we hold ourselves accountable for the repeating of historical violence and transform the ways we communicate to be a form of resistance itself? These are some of the questions I ask of the scripts and the playwrights I come across as a dramaturg. I have found myself hesitant to question some terms and themes out loud to the playwright and/or production team I am working with, and have been asking myself why. Why am I anxious to inquire with my colleagues about the history of terminologies, and whether their history makes them necessary to include in the current story we are trying to tell? When does language push a story forward, and when does it risk doing unnecessary harm? This is one of the questions I have
asked myself while working as a dramaturg over the last three years, and is one I will be reflecting on in this chapter.

First, I’d like to discuss a new TYA musical I had the opportunity to work on during UCF’s Pegasus PlayLab during the summer of 2022. Pegasus PlayLab is an annual new play development workshop hosted by UCF every summer, which invites four playwrights to workshop their scripts with a cast who will perform for audiences at the end of the process. Three playwrights see their work as staged readings in blackbox or studio theatre, and one playwright sees their work fully realized as a complete production. My TYA class collaborated with the TYA class of the University of Texas on a script written by two of their students. The show titled *Spells of the Sea* was originally written and composed by Guinevere Govea with her co-writer Anna Pickett, while they quarantined during the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020. Originally the script was written and performed as a podcast musical, which theatre practitioner Sam Norman defines: “a musical designed to exist only for the ears. They’re usually episodic, but don’t need to be. They’re usually limited (i.e. not open-ended), but don’t need to be. There’s usually dialogue in between songs, but hey, there are no rules” (Norman). Since 2020 the theatre industry has experienced a makeover in many regards, including the rise of virtual theatre. Children’s theatres started offering classes over platforms like Zoom, and theatre companies offered shows that colloquially have become known as Zoom theatre. Additionally, podcast musicals emerged as another innovative form of theatre that has reached a wide audience.

On the *Spells of the Sea* website, one will find information about their production that was produced at Metro theatre in St. Louis Missouri plus information about the original podcast that started the stage show’s journey. Links to all five episodes are available as well as a script,
animation video, and multiple at home activities related to each episode. The creators of the original website and podcast clearly took care to make the story as accessible as possible during a time of great uncertainty for the entertainment industry, and I was honored to be able to work alongside them when they brought their work to UCF for a workshop and staged reading. This show was also the first piece that I found myself practicing resistant dramaturgy on which later informed much of my dramaturgical practice moving forward.

Technically my role on Spells of the Sea was as the staged reading’s Assistant Director. I was excited to be working alongside Julia Flood, who would be directing the full production at the Metro Theatre Company the following Spring. I realized soon, though, that with so many people working on the staged reading at once, it would be hard to be heard. Dr. Megan Alrutz also joined us to guide the show’s dramaturg. After a read through of the show, I noticed some language and themes that could be deemed problematic, and wondered how I could resist them as an AD, especially when I wasn’t being offered much say during rehearsals. I want to acknowledge my own contribution to fading into the background as an AD. I felt that, in order to share ideas, I had to wait for the director to invite me to do so, which meant holding my tongue until being offered the chance to share my thoughts. As if Flood would have been able to read my mind and know I had something to say. Since then, I have taken this experience as a lesson in the importance of self-advocacy and have been much more vocal in other projects. An unexpected benefit of not being needed much in the rehearsal room was my being able to take part in the dramaturgical process, which was an incredibly valuable experience.

For example, while Flood was blocking stage pictures for the reading, Alrutz would pull the dramaturg Gabby Lawlor into the hall to discuss the script. One day I asked to join their
conversation and was welcomed to, so I continued joining these meetings regularly. These meetings were rich with ideas and laughter. We were often joined by the show’s designers, and sometimes by Flood as well when the cast was working on music with the music director Deborah Wicks La Puma. One of the most defining conversations we had together was about a song in the show that was sung by pirates who intercept the main characters while they are on a sea voyage. The pirates sing a song about how none of them feel like they’re able to feel or regulate their emotions well, and this sets up the main characters to sing and dance to a piece that promotes the pirates and audience to all “feel” their “feelings fully feel ‘em free” (Govea 34). Something that struck many of us during our dramaturgical discussions was that the pirates’ song had lines in it that supported a message of misogyny. In one verse in particular, the lead pirate comments that he “hates women” (Govea 28). We felt that this language was cruel and unnecessary, especially considering the lead of the show was a fifteen-year-old girl. To undermine the protagonist as well as every other woman and girl in the show could potentially send a message to young women and girls watching that no matter what they do or what adventures they go on, they are still only ever going to be subjects of hate and ridicule by the men and boys in their own stories. We suggested to Govea that this line be cut, and that the pirate’s song lose any anti-women messaging. The changes were made, and in just that small change the song underwent a huge transformation from one that promotes misogyny to one that does not. This is an example of resistant dramaturgy in action. In just one edit we were able to turn this song into one that resists the oppression of women, by omitting it from the piece. We realized too that omitting the pirate’s hatred for women did not compromise his role as a villain in the story. His aim was to capture Finley Frankfurter, a fifteen year old girl on a sea quest to save her dad, and her crewmate Captain Crank in order to bottle up their feelings as a token for
his former wife, who left him because he didn’t express his emotions to her. The pirate still
captures Finley and Captain Crank, causing them to fear for their safety and fear that their
journey to rescuing Finley’s father is over. The pirate’s quest is for love, not for hate, and
allowing him to learn to feel his feelings without expressing a hatred for women that ultimately is
a lie also tells a story of how men and boys can be inspired by women and girls to learn to
express themselves in ways the patriarchy does not invite them to, without having to hate them
first. Relating back to Imarish’s idea of visionary fiction, we all agreed that a show that doesn’t
enforce a binary between men and women where one has the power to oppress the other is a
world we would all like to live in one day. This choice also invites us to refer back to Muñoz’s
queer futurity. He states: “Utopia lets us imagine a space outside of heteronormativity… casting a
picture of what can and perhaps will be” (35). We imagined a space outside of a violent
heteronormative binary, and brought it to life on stage.

I had a similar experience as the dramaturg for UCF’s Fall 2023 production of The Prom. Admittedly, I suggested to the student selection committee that UCF do The Prom as part of their
mainstage season without having seen the show before. I hadn’t even seen the movie. Once I was
assigned the role as the show’s dramaturg and was given a copy of the script to read, I realized
that pitching the show without reading or seeing it first was a serious misstep. I was inspired to
suggest The Prom because I felt it would be a way for UCF to stand in resistance to the recent
“Don’t Say Gay” bill passed and implemented in academia. For this reason the committee agreed
to support doing the show, and I applied to be its dramaturg. Once I read the script, I realized that
there were extremely problematic lines that I wanted to ensure the cast and creative team were
aware of. I was also curious to know if we had any power over omitting some of these lines
altogether.

One line that struck me as particularly offensive is said right before the song Zazz in Act I (Beguelin et al. 79). The song is sung by a character named Angie, who is a seasoned Broadway performer. In this number she is speaking to Emma, the teenage protagonist who is ostracized from her peers for wanting to bring her girlfriend to Prom. Angie is encouraging Emma to tell her story to the press, despite her hesitancy to be in any kind of spotlight. Before performing her piece, Angie encourages Emma by telling her “You got to do it for all us people who used to be called ‘gypsies’” (Beguelin et al. 79). American slang has appropriated the term “gypsy” to refer to performers and artists who may travel as they work, however historically it is also known to be a racial slur used to disrespectfully refer to people of Roma descent. In an article posted in 2017 to the National Organization for Women website, we learn that “When folks unknowingly or knowingly profit off of the word ‘gypsy,’ claim they have a ‘gypsy soul,’ or use ‘gypsy aesthetic’ for a day at Coachella, they are reinforcing racist stereotypes of Romani women and dehumanizing... People in the US must recognize the link between the language we use and how cultural depictions inform public policy for marginalized groups” (NOW).

In order to resist oppression as a dramaturg, I’ve found myself questioning a script’s language more than anything. We received two versions of The Prom script, one edited a bit after the other. In the most recent script, the line “You got to do it for all us people who used to be called gypsies” (Beguelin et al.79) is updated to “You got to do it for all us people waiting for our moment” (Beguelin et al.79). After switching to this version, I was surprised to see that the actress playing Angie still used the original line during a rehearsal of the scene where Zazz is performed. When another less harmful option is presented, why not take it? In her book Feminist
Theories for Dramatic Criticism Gayle Austin states, “There is little reason to hope that representations will improve unless feminist women themselves criticize the existing structures and counter them… Through pointing out that theatre is a frame, not a mirror, and through using theatre as a laboratory for deconstructing the old and constructing new…theatre can be changed” (95). By borrowing her metaphor of theatre being a frame, and applying the assertion that a feminist’s responsibility is to critique systems in place that uphold oppressive systems, we can stage performances that are framed with compassion and historical accuracy rather than the language of appropriation and violence.

Later I suggested to the director that we use the phrasing from the second iteration of the script instead of the racist phrasing of the first. He explained to me that he liked the phrasing of the first, because it was heavily related to New York theatre history. At first I didn’t know what he was talking about. He went on to tell me that there is a tradition among Broadway theatre performers. On opening night of a show, they pass a robe that has been known as the Gypsy Robe since 1950 on to the chorus member who has the most Broadway credits on their resume. That person then gets to add a panel of their own to the robe, and it is passed on to the next cast. Our director wanted to keep the original line because he felt it was a nod to this tradition. After learning about the tradition of the robe, I understood why our director would want to keep the line and honor Broadway and its traditions in a musical that references the work and lifestyles of professional musical theatre artists. However, I still felt the keeping of a slur in the performance was a poor and racist choice. I also argued that the line Angie says doesn’t directly reference the robe tradition, and the reference would be lost on an audience that may not have any musical theatre experience or knowledge of Broadway theatre. I thought that if pointing out a racial slur wouldn’t deter our director from sticking with the original line, then maybe pointing out the fact
that the traditional reference would be lost on his audience would be appealing. He decided to go on with the line though, at least for the rest of that rehearsal. But then when I attended opening night, I noticed that Angie said “waiting for our moment” instead of the original phrase. I was thrilled and grateful.

One small change resulted in a small act of resistance that I was proud to see on the UCF mainstage. And I learned later that the Actor’s Equity Association would agree. On their website, an update to members states that “Actors’ Equity Association has announced that Equity's National Council has voted to retire the name ‘Gypsy Robe’” (Actor’s Equity). R. Kim Jordan, a member of The Chair of Equity's Advisory Committee on Chorus Affairs, commented that “the words we use have an impact beyond their intent, and we cannot appropriate someone else's identity without their voice attached to it” (Actor’s Equity). The reason the Actor’s Equity Association is changing the name of their decades long tradition is the same reason it was important to me that we as a cast and creative team omit “gypsy” from our production. Acknowledging the weight and history that language carries is one way we can resist the continual oppression of peoples who have been historically harmed, stereotyped, and stigmatized in the theatre that we create.

While researching the production history of The Prom, I learned that its plot is loosely based on a real young woman’s story. In 2010 Constance McMillen was turned down by her school principal when she asked if she could wear a suit and bring her girlfriend to Prom. She sued her school with the help of the ACLU and was awarded 35,000 dollars. The school then decided to cancel its prom, and host another event instead at a local country club. Constance attended with her girlfriend, and found that they were two of only seven people at that event.
while another Prom for all other students was hosted in secret at another location (The Young Turks). Celebrities supported Constance by pitching in funds to support an annual prom organized by the Mississippi Safe Schools Coalition. Ellen invited Constance to be on her talk show and awarded her with a 30,000 dollar check towards her college education (TheEllenShow). Similar to Constance’s story, Emma in *The Prom* is alienated when her school’s PTA throws a secret prom and she finds out that her peers kept it from her. Her girlfriend is also tricked into going to the secret prom, which Emma thinks is a betrayal until she learns that it wasn’t intentional. At the end of *The Prom*, the Broadway starlets who learned about Emma’s story through social media put their minimal funds together to “build a prom” (Beguelin et al. 117) that has a wide open invitation list in order to be inclusive to youth from Emma’s school as well as youth from schools across the country.

This prom that is thrown at the end of the show reminded me of one I had read about that was hosted in Washington DC at the US Supreme Court Building. First imagined by 13 year old Libby Gonzales along with “Daniel Trujillo, 15; Grayson McFerrin, 12; and Hobbes Chukumba, 16,” the prom was thrown in resistance to the anti-trans legislation being passed at that time as well as in celebration of Trans joy and life (Burga). Over 200 prom goers from across the nation were present. The premise of *The Prom* was heavily inspired by Constance McMillon’s experience, but also by many other experiences like these of young adults and adolescents wanting to celebrate their youth and joy at an event that historically has barred their attendance. The director of *The Prom* asked me to put together a presentation for the cast summarizing my dramaturgical research about the show, and asked me to specifically research the parallels between McMillon’s story and Emma’s. Additionally, I felt it was important to include details about the prom hosted at the capitol and the history of how the tradition of proms originated in
America in the first place. In my presentation to the cast, I discussed the Trans youth and their families who organized the prom at the capitol, as well as the story of Aaron Fricke who was turned away from his own prom in 1980 when he requested permission from his school principal to bring his boyfriend as his date. Fricke, like McMillon, sued his principal with the help of GLAD or Gay and Lesbian Advocates and Defenders organization which had only just been founded two years earlier in 1978. Fricke also won his case, and attended prom with his boyfriend. Fricke was initially inspired to sue his school principal after a friend of his was denied the right to bring his boyfriend to prom a year earlier than Fricke’s (GLAD).

The history of queer erasure at high school proms is long and unbroken. Though Emma’s story mirrors McMillon’s most specifically, “Broadway producer Jack Viertel came up with the concept for the Broadway show after seeing news reports about gay students not being allowed to go to their proms” (Gutterman). The production team had the stories of many queer youths experiencing similar violences and took into consideration the homophobic history of proms when imagining their production. I wanted the cast and creative team of UCF’s production to be aware of the cultural and historical significance of the show they were participating in. It was also important to me that the audience have access to the same information. At UCF it is customary for the dramaturg to create a slideshow that will play for audiences to engage with before and after the show as well as at intermission. In the slideshow I created for The Prom, I included information about McMillon’s history, Fricke’s win against his school principal, and the recent prom at the capitol. I hoped that audience members who took the time to look at the slideshow would then experience the show for the revolutionary piece that it is.
It also seemed like a great time to offer audiences a chance to relive and recreate their own prom experiences by way of a decorated and prom themed lobby area. Proms in America have a history of not being inclusive of queer students, disabled students, and people of the global majority. Today proms are still resistant to allowing queer students to attend, which is the premise of *The Prom*’s plotline. Creating a prom like environment in the lobby In collaboration with the performing arts center’s Marketing and Communications manager McKenzie Lakey, a purple balloon arch with hanging silver moon and star streamers was set up along with props borrowed from the Orlando Family Stage and UCF’s prop collections as a photo opportunity for audience members to pose with for their own prom pictures. We also provided flyers with information about resources and programs offered by Pride Commons and the Lavender Council, two student-led initiatives aiming to support queer students and allies. A new fraternity started by performing arts students called Alpha Psi Omega sold flowers in the lobby as well, earning funding for their upcoming events and adding to the prom theme we were hoping the lobby could fulfill. Offering the audience a prom experience as well as a crash course in prom history merged aesthetic with activism in a way I’d like to continue exploring in my dramaturgical practice as I continue my efforts to push theatre as an artform that can always educate as it entertains.
CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION

This thesis has served as a reflection on how I have grown to conduct myself as a theatre practitioner, whose interests are rooted in the resistance of systems of oppression that affect artists and audiences who experience the performing arts in America. As a director, playwright, and dramaturg, I’ve come to understand resistance in the theatre as an ongoing action, just as the work of educating oneself on the various ways our biases influence the ways we conduct ourselves in life outside of the rehearsal room is always ongoing.

I was drawn to feminist criticism and to queer theories at a crucial time in my life. In her book *We Want to do More than Survive* author and educator Bettina L. Love writes: “theory is my north star” (132). The theories I reflected on in these chapters have become my “north star,” giving me ways to revolutionize my perception of myself when it shattered. Queer and feminist theory gave me language to identify the erasure and violence I’ve experienced by my parents, teachers, coaches, and bosses, and was expected to silently endure. bell hooks writes at length in her book *Teaching to Transgress* about her experience as a student before becoming a scholar and professor. She states that she “wanted to become a critical thinker. Yet that longing was often seen as a threat to authority” (5). I resonate deeply with this reflection. I remember growing up in a home where questions were viewed as defiance. Discipline was a way to teach me to remain silent, and to be as stagnant in my thinking as the adults around me. Had I been encouraged to think critically about the world and my role in it, would I have come to conclusions about my identity and beliefs sooner? Would I be more secure in those identities and beliefs now? These are questions that inspire me and will continue to inspire my work, as I aspire towards a “queer futurity” that is so inclusive of all identities that they one day aren’t questions at all.
I am privileged to have met people who have poured their knowledge into me like light pouring into a piece of crystal, reflecting back beams that are ideas I can only have because of the people who first told me theirs. These people engaged with me when I questioned them, and questioned me, instead of disciplining me into pedestalizing their words and ideas. Feminist criticism demands that we question and criticize the world around us, the world within us, and the states of both endlessly. Queer theory asks us to consider perspectives outside our own lived experiences, aspiring towards a future that is void of societal normativity that supports some peoples livelihoods over others. Muñoz writes that “hope is spawned by a critical investment in utopia…profoundly resistant to the stultifying temporal logic of a broken-down present” (12). The projects I’ve reflected on in this thesis have given me opportunities to visualize a queer futurity with students and colleagues. I’ve been challenged to consider when my ego has gotten in the way of my being open to considering opinions other than my own, and to advocate for myself and the needs of people I’ve worked with. In doing so, it’s also become important for me to think about how I can hold myself accountable for the choices I make, and what accountability looks like in a rehearsal setting. Continuing to queer my approach to directing, dramaturgy, and playwriting by resisting the notion that whatever title I have directly relates to how much authority I have in any process has been foundational to my practice. Continuing to share creative control with production team members, and seeking out people who may be interested in providing their ideas whether they are part of the process or not will allow me to keep developing ways to incorporate perspectives other than my own into the work that I am a part of.

Working on WROL, The Princess and the Pea, Spells of the Sea, and The Prom has allowed me to start forming a methodology of self-advocacy, introspection, and collaboration in
order to question how every piece of theatre I create may offer myself and the creative team a platform to invite the audience to question how the art they are perceiving relates to the state of the world around them. My goals moving forward with my post-graduate career include expanding my study of feminist and queer theories, finding more ways that they intersect, and designing assignments that can be used in rehearsal spaces to promote discussions about how our art can promote a “new just world.” Theorist and theatre practitioner Gayle Austin writes that “through pointing out that theater is a frame, not a mirror, and through using theater as a laboratory for deconstructing the old and constructing new…theatre can be changed ” (95). I like to apply this idea of theatre being a space for change not just by framing new methods of theatre and performance, but also by staging new methods of interacting with the world. Staging breathing techniques for youths to incorporate into their daily lives - staging the possibility of women and girls having full lives aside from the presence of men and boys - staging women who experience character development of their own and don’t exist solely as a foil for the development of a male character - questioning language that upholds oppressive systems and listening to the opinions of the people who are affected by those systems accordingly - all these methods of resistance are methods that I have employed in the projects I’ve reflected on in this thesis. They are methods that I will expand upon for the rest of my career.
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