

***PWLies*: Presence and Ensemble Performance in Times of Crisis**

Evan Schares

From September 2020 to January 2021, I directed a two-tiered version of an ensemble performance titled *PWLies*. P-W-Lies. Do you hear the turn of phrase? It was our rallying cry. Our wink to each other and a call to action to anyone who would listen. It was something fugitive we spoke underground in the basement behind a closed door. It was a way for each performer to speak on their own terms and through their own bodies. Our titular argument resonates on one hand to invoke the institutional classification of a “PWI,” shorthand for a primarily white institution. On the other, we sought to undo the perpetuation of racist and anti-queer violence via the lies we are routinely fed within educational institutions.

In its first iteration – a chamber theatre performance staged in October 2020 – a graduating senior, and first-time performer, assumes her position downstage center. She looks resolutely into the camera, “Diversity and inclusion,” she sighs, “The lies the PWI tells. Whose side are they really on? Perpetrating the lies that they are for us. Being lied to sucks.”¹ God. Ain’t that the truth? Of course, I have heard her poem before. I workshopped it with her for weeks. Her poem lands and falls differently each time she performs it, but there’s something that regularly shapes her performance, and it’s her confession before one of our prior rehearsals that she has pinballed from department to department since arriving at this university. This student, a Black Afro-Caribbean woman, tells me late one night that her degree is patchworked, off-centered, and stitched together from semesters in various departments before the hostility forced her elsewhere. While others benefit from privileged professional and academic networks, others like her are forced to pick up and leave out of self-preservation. The rehearsals, stories, and performances were a sober reminder that as bell hooks says, “we must envision the university as a central site for revolutionary struggle, a site where we can work to educate for critical

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¹“PWLies” original poem, 2020.

consciousness, where we can have a pedagogy of liberation.”² “Diversity and inclusion,” she sighs. The lies the I tells.

In the fall of 2020, I arrived as a visiting faculty member of performance studies hoping to build an undergraduate justice-based performance ensemble, despite the global Covid-19 pandemic. Notwithstanding the crises³, uncertainties⁴, and challenges, I believed performance ensemble work was possible and in the words of Mary Frances HopKins, “worth the burden.”⁵ The extracurricular ensemble I eventually built was actively anti-racist and intentionally diverse. It was an ensemble that accurately reflected the major city in which we lived, but not the university in which we taught and studied. In its final version, the ensemble was brought forth into being by eight undergraduate women, many of whom had never performed on stage before. Six identified as Black or Afro-Caribbean. Two identified as Asian. One was White. Two identified as queer.

PWLies was the first production featuring undergraduate student performers in the Communication Department Studio and the first ensemble showing from the performance studies area in several years. In its first iteration in October 2020, *PWLies* was a chamber theatre performance of collectively written poetry, prose, and manifesto narrating, speaking truth to, and consciousness-raising about the myriad racist injustices surrounding systemic police brutality against Black and Brown people in the United States along with growing anti-Asian American and Pacific Islander sentiment in the ongoing global Covid-19 pandemic. As we sought audiences for our work, the production evolved into its second performance form, a digital bricolage storytelling performance that ultimately screened at two performance venues in February 2021: The Freedom School’s annual celebration honoring the legacy and struggle of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. in Villanova, PA and The Patricia Pace Performance Festival, one of the premier national performance festivals within performance studies in communication.

Our experience in ensemble performance practice was a kaleidoscope of performance theory. Our performance process was what Moraga calls a “theory of the flesh,” which is “where the physical realities of our lives – our skin color, the land or concrete we grew up on, our sexual longings – all fuse to create a

² bell hooks, *Talking Back: Thinking Feminist, Thinking Black*, (Boston: South End Press, 1989), 31.

³ Andrea Baldwin, “Eyas on the Prize: Remapping the Relaunch of Performance at the University of Houston-Clear Lake,” in *Communication Research on Expressive Arts and Narrative as Forms of Healing*, ed. Kamran Afary and Alice Marianne Fritz (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2020), 105.

⁴ Gregory J. Langner, “Cast Harmony and Performance Through Uncertainty: Learning to Achieve Dance at a Distance,” *Text and Performance Quarterly*, 39, no. 2, (2019): 135.

⁵ Mary Frances HopKins, “From page to stage: The burden of proof,” *Southern Speech Communication Journal*, 47, no. 1, (1981): 1.

politic born out of necessity.”⁶ Our devising processes were a “labor of reflexivity” which is what Madison calls the “embrac[ing of] a purpose toward a greater material freedom for others.”⁷ Our performance showings were what Freire calls “praxis,” which is “reflection and *action* upon the world in order to change it” (emphasis my own).⁸ Our performance showings were also mobilized by what Brouwer calls “visibility politics,” which refers to the beneficial and crucial necessity of the most marginalized of us being both seen and heard.⁹ And finally, our performance praxis was what Muñoz calls the enactment of “educated hope,” which is the critique of the here-and-now while holding onto hope as the necessary condition for imagining what could be.¹⁰

In this essay, I employ critical autoethnography as a method of documenting¹¹ the performance process of recruiting, devising, staging, and screening *PWLies*. I explore what it means to not only be a pandemic era performance maker but also the contingencies and representational politics within the rapidly evolving nature of showcasing and counting undergraduate anti-racist justice-based performance ensemble work. I engage the ever-evolving nature of the devising processes of *PWLies* to highlight the contingent nature of present mentorship, performance practice, and local and global crises. In what follows, I introduce autoethnography as my guiding method. I then briefly survey the tenets of critical performance pedagogy in and out of the classroom before I historicize the two forms *PWLies* took: a staged choral reading and a digital bricolage performance.

Autoethnography as Documentarian

Autoethnography – as a critically reflexive method – is a useful way to engage my experience in building an extra-curricular performance ensemble troupe. “Autoethnography,” Adams explains, “uses personal experience in order to

⁶ Cherríe Moraga, “Entering the Lives of Others: Theory in the Flesh,” in *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color*, ed. Cherríe Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa. (Berkeley: Third Women Press, 2002), p. 21

⁷ D. Soyini Madison, “The Labor of Reflexivity,” *Cultural Studies ↔ Critical Methodologies*, 11, no. 2 (2011): 136.

⁸ Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, (New York: The Continuum International Publishing Group, 2005), 51

⁹ Daniel C. Brouwer, “The Precarious Visibility Politics of Self-Stigmatization: The Case of HIV/AIDS Tattoos,” *Text and Performance Quarterly*, 18 (1998): 118.

¹⁰ José Esteban Muñoz in Lisa Duggan and José Esteban Muñoz, “Hope and Hopelessness: A Dialogue,” *Women & Performance: A Journal of Feminist Theory*, 19, no. 2, (2009): 277.

¹¹ Philip Auslander, *Reactivations: Essays on Performance and Its Documentation* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2018), 1.

understand and critique cultural experience.”¹² Autoethnography is, for Pelias, a reflexive scholarship that “comes back around, points to itself in order to say this is where it stands, at least at this moment, with these qualifiers and with these questions.”¹³ Autoethnography is also well suited to excavate the challenges I faced in my program building efforts alongside the affective and deeply personal labor demanded by the second shift.¹⁴ I especially recognize how autoethnography speaks back against taken-for-granted and harmful cultural scripts while also capturing experience that evade other scholarly methods and institutional matrices of “what counts.”¹⁵ And finally, the power of stories and storytelling – which is an embodied kinesthetic and visceral shared act – is central not only to autoethnographic methods but also performance practice more broadly. Holman Jones explains that “stories are our way in to understanding – to theorizing, and thus to knowing and working to change – our culture and ourselves.”¹⁶ On the page, on the stage, or on the screen, the sharing of stories – either conspicuously staged or quotidian – is central to performance studies in communication and how we make our wounds heal faster in times of crisis.

I couple my methodological engagement with autoethnography with Auslander’s conceptualization of performance documentation. Performance documentation in image or in text is an act of devotion. “Document[ing] a performance does not simply freeze the event in its past moment,” says Auslander, “The very act of [documentation] is undertaken at a specific point in time as a gesture toward a future audience, so that the ‘now’ of the moment at which the [record] was taken is also a future ‘then.’”¹⁷ The twin methods of autoethnography and performance documentation mirror the commitments of dialogic performance. So, in what follows, I hope to “speak to and with,” the processes of ensemble generation, performance creation, and present pedagogy.¹⁸ Auslander continues, “To the extent that a text from the past engages us, we dialogue with it in a way that enables us to understand both the text and its pastness from the

¹² Tony E. Adams, “The Joys of Autoethnography,” *Qualitative Communication Research*, 1, no. 2, (2012): 181.

¹³ Ronald J. Pelias, *A Methodology of the Heart: Evoking Academic and Daily Life* (Walnut Creek: AltaMira Press, 2004): 12.

¹⁴ Bryan J. McCann, Serap Erincin, Ashley Noel Mack, and William O. Saas, “When We Come Together, We Build Theory: Working the Second Shift in the Undercommon Enclave,” *Journal of Autoethnography*, 2, no. 1, (2021): 113.

¹⁵ Tony Adams, Carolyn Ellis, and Stacy Holman Hones, “Autoethnography,” *The International Encyclopedia of Communication Research Methods*, 3.

¹⁶ Stacy Holman Jones, “Living Bodies of Thought: The ‘Critical’ in Critical Autoethnography,” *Qualitative Inquiry*, 22, no. 4, (2016): 230.

¹⁷ Philip Auslander, *Reactivations: Essays on Performance and Its Documentation*, (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2018), 9.

¹⁸ Dwight Conquergood, “Performing as a Moral Act: Ethnical Dimensions of the Ethnography of Performance,” *Literature in Performance*, no. 5, 2, (1985), 10.

perspective of the present.”¹⁹ I keep going back to the archive of memories generated from the performance process and dialogue with them here in this essay but also in my daily life. Found space rehearsals. Feeling fugitive in the basement as we critique people who would rather our voices not be heard. Autoethnographically documenting my process doesn’t concretize these histories and ephemera. It evinces them like a kaleidoscope. It shares them while also letting them change and seep into one another.

Moments in Time

“We live in a world in crisis,” bell hooks reminds us.²⁰ And upon reflection, crisis has undeniably seeped into my personal embodied archives as a pedagogue and performer. The first black box theatre show I was in was a performance ethnography of Guatemalan women trafficked into the United States who ultimately fell victim to Immigration and Customs Enforcement largest single raid of a workplace in U.S. history. The first performance essay I wrote as a graduate student was about Mexican feminist protest against *desaparecidos* in Chihuahua, Mexico. Not long after I started my doctoral coursework, I was adjuncting at a predominantly Black institution in the Deep South down the street from where white city police officers murdered an unarmed Black man in 2016. My first original show I devised and directed was about police entrapment of sexual minorities in the South. My first semester as a faculty member started with me hiding under my desk when the university that employed me took over my desktop screen and flashed the message “Armed intruder in Coates Hall. Run, hide, or fight.” Each of these – thousands of miles apart on the cultural map – diverge and converge into one another and have had a profound influence on the way I approach my pedagogy in the classroom and my justice-based performance work. I struggle to even make sense of how inhumane and unjust migration policies, feminist and queer protest tactics, unending anti-Black white supremacy within law enforcement, insistent anti-queer violence, and the omnipresent threat of gun massacres all connect. But I know that they do. I think about them when I talk to my students about performance for social change and when I talk about performing literature and the “art of interpretation.”²¹ I am always intimately aware that the institution one walks across and teaches at shapes how issues of justice, race, and violence are, or even can be, talked about.²²

¹⁹ Philip Auslander, *Reactivations: Essays on Performance and Its Documentation*, (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2018), 17.

²⁰ Bell hooks, *Talking Back: Thinking Feminist, Thinking Black*, (Boston: South End Press, 1989), 19.

²¹ Wallace Bacon, *The Art of Interpretation* (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1966), 1.

²² Jade Huell, “On Bridges, Bravery, and Blackness; or, Black/Woman/Academic,” *Liminalities: A Journal of Performance Studies*, 14, no. 4 (2020), 1.

I'm sitting alone because when you're the new person, you're usually alone. Almost every single other faculty member is teaching remotely. And I'm wondering how I ended up as the only one in the building most days. So, most days I sit alone brainstorming how to possibly breathe life into the *doing of performance* in times of COVID-19, quarantine, and online presence. One day in September, I get an email soliciting calls for participation in the virtual Patti Pace Performance Festival wherein the theme was described as "Meeting the Movement." The call read:

People from all walks of life are braving the COVID-19 pandemic, spilling into the streets across the country and the world demanding racial, gender, economic, and environmental justice! They protest, they march, they agitate for the dignity of Black life, and for freedom from police violence and other legacies of white supremacy embedded in the fabric of U.S. culture. In the midst of the coronavirus, and with an imperative to participate in the global dialogue around justice, Patti Pace Performance Festival presents its first virtual gathering. This year's theme, "Meeting the Movement," reflects performance studies' engagement with performance as protest and performance for social justice.²³

This was it. Not only did this virtual performance conference embody my own commitments to performance studies practice, but it was something concrete. It was an objective I could organize around and offer to potential students. There was a goal of sorts that a potential ensemble could see, touch, envision and work toward. I had an outlet that I could offer, something I was lacking in the present moment due to covid-restrictions.

Present Pedagogy

At that moment in September when the call for virtual performance submissions came out, I had only four weeks of relationship building with my students. But like other performance practitioners before me have noted, recruitment starts in the classroom. Baldwin describes it as an enactment of "embodied pedagogy"²⁴ which emphasizes "mentorship through embodiment." That is to say, *being there* and *being present* matters. Creating an intentionally diverse and actively anti-racist ensemble required more than what Sirma Bilge terms "ornamental

²³ "Patti Pace Performance Festival Presents: Meeting the Movement," Call for Submissions.

²⁴ Andrea Baldwin, "Eyas on the Prize: Remapping the Relaunch of Performance at the University of Houston-Clear Lake," in *Communication Research on Expressive Arts and Narrative as Forms of Healing*, ed. Kamran Afary and Alice Marianne Fritz (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2020), 109.

intersectionality.”²⁵ Ornamental intersectionality is the opportunistic compartmentalization and disarticulation of intersectional politics from every other aspect of social justice. It wouldn’t have been possible for me to create *PWLies* with my cast had I not shown up for them in my in-person pedagogy first. And for this reason, intersectional performance pedagogy and intersectional performance practice are inextricably linked together. For example, in my Public Speaking course – from which came some of my ensemble members – I teach using source texts from bell hooks, Audre Lore, James Baldwin, Gloria Anzaldúa, and Amy Tan. I approach general education classes like Public Speaking as an opportunity to practice and embody anti-racist pedagogy which centers, celebrates, and engages epistemologies once decentered.²⁶ In addition to undoing what the discipline imagines to be canonical texts of “public speech,” I also assign speeches that allow all students to play, flex their creative and poetic muscles, and experiment with their own civic voice.

That fall semester, I had 80 students across four sections and three different courses: two sections of public speaking, one section of theories of performance studies, and one section of storytelling. All of them in some degrees were present at some point in the week, alternating between distance-learning and an in-person component. I radically realtered my in-class performance assignments while holding on to the defining ethos of performance studies in communication – the embodied corporeal relationship between text, performer, and audience. Once known as oral interpretation, our predecessor’s defining ethos is that the text “must be worked into your muscles” and its embodiment is in effect an embodied and relational “conversation” with the audience.²⁷ Something arguably not possible – or at least seriously disturbed – while technologically mediated. The live and immediate human body was and still is the bases of performance as aesthetic art form.

I identified and recruited students from my courses that were confident in their voice, showed an interest in performance studies in communication, and who were physically, creatively, and emotionally present. I am inspired by performance pedagogue Baldwin who makes her classroom a performance well-spring of possibilities and invitations. In describing the importance of “the ask” – the immediate and consequential act of asking a student to trust you and trust the performance process widely unknown to them at the moment – she recruits with “I see your energy. I see your passion. I have a place for that.”²⁸ I can’t

²⁵ Sirma Bilge, “Intersectionality Undone: Saving Intersectionality from Feminist Intersectionality Studies,” *W. E. B. Du Bois Institute for African and African American Research*, 10, no. 2, (2013), 408.

²⁶ Ibram Kendi, *How to Be an Antiracist*. (New York: One World, 2019), 13.

²⁷ Wallace Bacon, *The Art of Interpretation* (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1966), 48, 53.

²⁸ Baldwin, “Eyas on the Prize,” 110.

remember what I said exactly in my own ask. But it was something like, “Game recognizes game and I’m working on a performance project that speaks to the shitstorm happening right now. Are you interested?” Every single person I asked said yes. I let them know that it would require in-person rehearsals probably late into the evening. Everyone still showed up. My recruitment efforts were intentional and bilaterally cooperative because I don’t trust teachers who talk about “giving students a voice.” It feels possessive and assumes a power imbalance, like Ursula the sea witch who makes a hobby of giving, taking, and bartering the voices of others. As a white queer effeminate male, I recognized the amorphous privilege I occupy and sought to establish an actively anti-racist and intentionally racially diverse ensemble because I believe that all of our emancipations are intimately bound up in one another. That is to say, for me, queer liberation is nothing without intersectionality.

Inspired by Pineau’s suggestion that critical performance pedagogy offers a way to link performance praxis with educational critique, I sought to connect performance – as a form of artistry, advocacy, and activism²⁹ – with the myriad institutional structures in which my students and I found ourselves. Central to Pineau’s conceptualization of critical performance pedagogy are the ideological body, ethnographic body, and performing body, all of which marshal a creative ethos to mobilize “the schooled body” to study, critique, and dismantle educational violence.³⁰ Crucial to a critical communication pedagogy is a presence that must be continuously nourished, practiced, and “watered” in and out of the classroom. I intentionally use the term presence to describe by own performance pedagogy so as to invoke two deeply embodied twin connotations. First, I echo Coonfield and Rose who write that “what is called presence comes to be, emerges from, lives, and thrives in the energy generated among performer, text, and audience.”³¹ I also use it to invoke Thich Nhat Hanh who suggests that being physically present and mindful is the first step in establishing not only effective pedagogy but also generally compassionate relationships.³² I believe that through loving listening, compassionate communication, and embodied presence, we can attend to the things that concern us while setting ourselves materially free.³³

I wonder what all these people would say about performance pedagogy and presence during a global pandemic and teaching in weird complicated “hybrid”

²⁹ Dwight Conquergood, “Performance Studies: Interventions and Radical Research,” *The Drama Review*, 46, no. 2, (2002): 152.

³⁰ Elyse Pineau, “Critical Performance Pedagogy: Fleshing Out the Politics,” in *Teaching Performance Studies*, ed. Nathan Stucky and Cynthia Wimmer (Carbondale: Southern Illinois Press, 2002), 42.

³¹ Gordon Coonfield and Heidi Rose, “What is Called Presence,” *Text and Performance Quarterly*, 32, no. 3, (2012), 204.

³² Thich Nhat Hanh, *The Art of Communication* (New York: HarperOne, 2013), 42.

³³ Thich Nhat Hanh, *The Art of Communication* (New York: HarperOne, 2013), 19.

formats. Some days I don't want to admit that I'm bitter and other days I'm inspired. I wonder how I am so present and yet so isolated. I toggle between taking joy in my in-class interactions and dreading them. It's nice to smile and laugh and talk about performance and storytelling with new students. But other days, the weight of being the only faculty member in the building weighs on me. Walking to class, again, I notice I'm the only faculty member I see. I wonder how the other two dozen faculty members in my department, most of whom are teaching online, are doing. I always checked in with my classes before we start. I ask if they're burned out like I am. I wonder if they imagine me crying while I drive home from campus because that is what I did yesterday. One student tells me – aloud in front of everyone else in class – that this is her only in-person class and it is the highlight of her week otherwise spent alone in her dorm room. The chorus starts and I soon realize this is the only guaranteed human interaction many have. I smile but also feel burdened. I don't know how to be everything that they need.

On Stage: The Challenges of a Chamber Theatre³⁴

Our first in-person meeting happened in September 2020 in a multipurpose room in the basement of our building that is sometimes a classroom and sometimes an event center. It was a found space that does not exhibit much creative energy. I was exhausted but excited. At a time when classes were going from in-person to online, we were going the opposite direction. Convening in the basement we moved from partly in-person, to seeking out each other's presence outside of class, outside of theory, and outside of, yet intimately embedded within, the global order of things. It immediately became an intimate enclave that practiced consciousness raising. I was humbled that these students were interested enough in performance studies to trust me and meet me in a difficult to find basement room in the middle of a global pandemic. 6 women were there that night. Four students identified as Black or Afro-Caribbean, one identified as Chinese-American, and one was white, and they all ranged from first semester freshmen to graduating seniors. Of the original cast of six, one identified as queer, and one identified as bisexual.

As director, I generated our eventual script through a chain of writing prompts. After a series of consciousness raising groups, it was evident that the experiences of all these women who started as strangers were intimately connected within the local and global structures of racism, white supremacy, homophobia, and violent educational structures. I asked each of them to take the time to reflect on what their story was and to consider what events and

³⁴ The title of this section echoes Roy B. Tabor's *Performing Literary Texts: The Challenge of Chamber Theatre*.

experiences were convicting moments that speak – and talk back³⁵ to – to the current moment. Bogart argues that “the most significant human exchanges occur through narrative.”³⁶ Through writing, sharing, and workshopping each narrative, the ensemble was able to form a collective predicated upon solidarity-in-difference. bell hooks maintains that “working collectively to confront difference, to expand our awareness of sex, race, and class as interlocking systems of domination, of the ways we reinforce and perpetuate these structures, is the context in which we learn the true meaning of solidarity.”³⁷

Narratives, poems, and manifestos were drafted and redrafted that spoke of police murders of innocent Black youth; micro-aggressive racist behaviors to Black and Brown athletes on white campuses; the racialized division of labor in service industries; explicit white supremacist action in Greek life on U.S. American campuses; and the meteoric rise in anti-Asian sentiment during the global Covid-19 pandemic. In the grand scheme of performance making, the workshopping, sharing, and honoring the stories of each ensemble member was the part most profoundly worldmaking. We swam through the process and then I began to brainstorm of the product. In other words, we were confronted, like every other pandemic era performance practitioner, with the obstacle of sharing our live performance through remote and digital means.



³⁵ Bell hooks, *Talking Back: Thinking Feminist, Thinking Black*, (Boston: South End Press, 1989), 1.

³⁶ Anne Bogart, *What's the Story: Essays about Art, Theatre, and Storytelling*, (New York: Routledge, 2014), 5.

³⁷ Bell hooks, *Talking Back: Thinking Feminist, Thinking Black*, (Boston: South End Press, 1989), 25.

The first iteration of *PWLies* sutured together the forms of the group performance of literature, chamber theatre, and choral reading. As director, I embraced the elasticity of the methods to suture together the stories, narratives, manifestos, and collectively written poetry. Tabor defines chamber theatre as a method of adaptation utilizing minimal suggestive settings and the maximal amount of the original text.³⁸ Long, Hudson, and Jeffrey locate group performance centrally within what was once known as oral interpretation but is now performance studies in communication. They write that “group performance refers to two or more individuals *doing, realizing, actualizing*...the vast storehouse of materials classified as poetry, stories, novels, plays, and nonfictional literature.”³⁹ The viscosity and deeply embodied nature of live performing bodies bolsters the affective nature of this particular performing art this method. Long, Hudson, and Jeffrey describe the group embodiment as the “restorat[ion] of oral-aural-physical dimensions of literary texts for which words on a page are symbols and notations for fuller performances.”⁴⁰

Six women stand on stage in the Communication Department Studio black box theatre. Again, they are the first ensemble to do so in the space. Each woman stands behind by a black portable sheet music stand I had to beg the music department to lend me. A synchronized in-breath pulls the women together and launches the performance into being. A synchronized out-breathe reads as contentment but probably also exhaustion. In the moment between the ensemble’s synchronized breathing, I think of Malhotra and Carrillo Rowe who ask, “what forms of resistance and healing does silence make possible?”⁴¹ The choice to have a collective breath inaugurate the show was a profound decision that asked one to consider the relationships among breath, survival, and institutional violence.

“Hello! And welcome to a place like this,” the ensemble proclaims. The women hail their audience through twin tactics. At first, a familiar friendly greeting followed at once by a veiled “double speak” euphemism. The politics and performances of the doubleness of minoritized speech in hostile places emerged slowly during the devising process. I remember a convicting moment in the collective writing process when two women separately in their own writings used “a place like this” to describe the suffocating nature of predominantly white places. The fear of saying what one actually felt was something shared by each of us (myself included), albeit in different keyways. I remember asking, “well

³⁸ Roy B Tabor, *Performing Literary Texts: The Challenge of Chamber Theatre* (London: Tansfield House, 2013), 26.

³⁹ Beverly Whitaker Long, Lee Hudson, Phillis Rienstra Jeffrey, *Group Performance of Literature* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1977), 4.

⁴⁰ Beverly Whitaker Long, Lee Hudson, Phillis Rienstra Jeffrey, *Group Performance of Literature* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1977), 5.

⁴¹ Sheena Malhotra and Aimee Carrillo Rowe, “Still the Silence: Feminist Reflections at the Edges of Sound” in *Silence, Feminism, Power: Reflections at the Edges of Sound*, eds. Sheena Malhotra and Aimee Carrillo Rowe (New York: Palgrave, 2013), 2.

what is a ‘place like this? Can you say what you mean?’ What followed was an insurgent devising process wherein each talked back against anti-queer violence, anti-Black, and Anti-Asian sentiment. In what followed, each woman spoke about their personal archive of survival and the quotidian challenges they faced in every corner of their lives.

We film and stage our performance before we are ready. We have to. Covid cases are skyrocketing. We think everyone is going to be sent home. None of the students I talk to want that to happen. I empathize knowing that “homes” for many are not actually welcoming. I also know that universities are not homes. Colleges are not homes. Departments are not homes. And performance studies as a discipline is not a home. I do not intend to overstate the value of what performance studies is or can be. But through the collective act of coming together using our voices to speak as a poetic act of resistance against the lies we are fed; we arguably laid the foundational bricks of what bell hooks calls a homeplace. Homeplaces are, for hooks, “feelings of safety, of arrival, of homecoming when we finally reach [its] edges.”⁴² In our first meeting, one of the ensemble members welcomed another member, a first-semester freshmen, into a university-wide group message with every other Black student. The group chat, I’m told, has many functions, one of them being a place to share which white faculty to avoid. We’ve been consciousness-raising, workshopping, and rehearsing for about five weeks and we all agreed that we have to film soon if we want to turn our process into a product. While we were blessed to have a black box theatre within our academic department, we couldn’t have an in-person audience. So, we filmed our chamber theatre reading twice on one night in October 2020.

Immediately after filming, we experienced regular lockdowns and quarantines which prevented further ensemble work. I repeatedly checked in with my ensemble and let them know that with their own demanding schedules and the uncertainties of whether we would ever be able to reconvene, our work may be stopped. Every single student said that no matter what, this was a priority for them personally and that as a collective, they would find a way to “make it work.” It was during that time that I sent a file of the performance to be reviewed for potential showing at two performance venues: The Freedom School’s annual celebration honoring the legacy and struggle of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. in Villanova, PA and the national Patricia Pace Performance Festival.

On Screen: Stacking Stones as a Present Performance Pedagogy

At the time, I was re-reading Taylor’s *Presente! The Politics of Presence* and struggling to handle the twin pressures of two upcoming showings while also trying to reimagine our performance to highlight the affective and personal processes

⁴² Bell hooks, *Yearning: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics*, (Boston: South End Press, 1990), 42.

we as an ensemble underwent in consciousness-raising and performing justice-based narratives. The compositional grouping, varied level of staging, and choral turn-taking was true to readers theatre,⁴³ but I worried it wouldn't successfully translate to the demands and expectations of the contemporary screen we would be forced onto in our two performance showings. The synchronized in breaths, the electricity in the narrative rotations, the flicker and sparks of dialogue and interjections within their stories were unfortunately flattened on the screen. The individual narratives were reworked and re-filmed as each performer now either addressed the camera individually in what I and the ensemble agreed was a more intimate, direct, and devotional method while others chose to document their narratives using only their voice.

As I brainstormed our path forward, I found the poorest theatre to be the most flexible and elastic given the myriad Covid-19 restrictions we as an ensemble faced. According to Jerzy, the possibilities of a poor theatre are myriad as it is a theatre liberated from the demands of costumes, sets, accompaniment, lighting effects, and even a physical theatre stage.⁴⁴ Unlike other highly technical iterations of performance art (e.g., cinema), a poor theatre embraces the analog and prioritizes the live body. "The theatre must recognize its own limitations," notes Grotowski, "If it cannot be richer than the cinema, then let it be poor. If it cannot be as lavish as television, let it be ascetic. If it cannot be a technical attraction, let it renounce all outward technique."⁴⁵ We were not technically skilled and classically trained performance actors. We did not know how to use, nor even had access to, industry equipment. But we had our stories and a drive to share them.

As I reread *Presente*, I was inspired by Taylor's own treatment of Rodríguez's decolonial pedagogy of stones. This particular exercise of performance pedagogy involves the collective attempt to stack a pile of stones as high as possible with "the fate of the world" hanging in the balance.⁴⁶ As our ensemble practiced Rodríguez's pedagogy of stones, I found it to be a perfect embodiment of what Grotowski refers to as the "holiness" of poor theatre. He explains, "let the most drastic scenes happen face to face with the spectator so that it is within arm's reach of the actor, can feel his breathing and smell the perspiration."⁴⁷ This pedagogy is not premediated but as Rodríguez explains, "it helps to see how much risk we are willing to assume, to what degree we are capable of patience and collaboration, how we facilitate or complicate the work of others, and what

⁴³ See Leslie Irene Coger and Melvin R. White, *Readers Theatre Handbook: A Dramatic Approach to Literature* (Glenview: Scott, Foresman and Company, 1982).

⁴⁴ Jerzy Grotowski, *Towards a Poor Theatre*, (New York: Routledge, 2002), 32.

⁴⁵ Jerzy Grotowski, *Towards a Poor Theatre*, (New York: Routledge, 2002), 41.

⁴⁶ Jesusa Rodríguez cited in Diana Taylor, *¡Presente! The Politics of Presence*. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2020), 81.

⁴⁷ Jerzy Grotowski, *Towards a Poor Theatre*, (New York: Routledge, 2002), 41-42.

kinds of world we might be capable of building together.”⁴⁸ Our stacking of our stones was our homecoming and rejoinder as an ensemble after a three month pause. We caught up, laughed, invited two new ensemble members into our ranks, and communed over the balancing of our stones. We sat on the floor of the black box studio, came home to each other and our bodies and found again the community we created the semester prior. Through documenting the embodied and relational act of purposeful problem solving, I attempted to avoid the artificiality of performance on the screen and sought instead to document the volcanic labor and power of justice-based performance practice as it happened in the hands, fingers, arms, and bodies of the performers.



“The gods had condemned Sisyphus to ceaselessly rolling a rock to the top of a mountain, whence the stone would fall back of its own weight,”⁴⁹ explains Camus. Is that, though, how justice is achieved? We are, arguably, not Sisyphus. If micro-level problem solving can be embodied in Rodriguez’s pedagogy of stones, perhaps justice-based performance practice is more like the collective stacking of stones as opposed to the isolated rolling of one. One woman places her stone in the center. She turns the stone over in her hands many times so she can survey its terrain, studying its curves and jagged edges. Voice over. “Scary is when there are 6,000 people on campus and roughly 150 people show up to a Black Lives Matter protest and the majority of protestors are Black.” Another woman’s hands enter the center space and she begins to study the other’s stone.

⁴⁸ Jesusa Rodríguez cited in Diana Taylor, *¡Presente! The Politics of Presence*. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2020), 83.

⁴⁹ Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, (New York: Vintage Books, 1995), 119.

She brings her own rock forward. She tests her own choices against the choice of the woman before her. She tries first to touch only her own stone but soon realizes she must physically embrace what's been done before her if she hopes to contribute to the stone infrastructure. Voice over. "Scary is tiptoeing around the word 'Black,' as if it is a slur but being quick to defend white supremacy with a bold chest." The second woman eventually finds a spot that is safe where her stone can rest comfortably. Another woman joins. She places her stone 6 inches away from the structure. Another woman picks the stone up and does the work to bring it into the pile. Voice over. "Scary is not knowing if anyone's actions are genuine or if it's all fake." The stone sequence runs for five and a half minutes and comprises a third of the entire length of the digital performance. The stones continue to fall, and the women continue to adapt and become intimate with how each stone's side, texture, and weight impact the desire infrastructure.

In February 2021 at the Freedom School, our first public showing streamed via Zoom a widely used video telephony software during the pandemic, a male student's voice arises from the virtual audience of eighty in the talkback. He shares that he is the only indigenous student on campus, and he shares how the stone sequence moved him. He comments that it is not possible to build the most sound and safe structure by adding forgotten stones atop of the structure at the last minute. His is a critique of settler liberal politics predicated upon an "add and stir" modus operandi. Similarly, he shares, it is not possible to superficially add indigenous communities into existing structures that were not designed to accommodate them. The structure will fail, and all stones will topple over lest each stone is surveyed in its entirety and placed among that which will support it. I see names of administrators on campus in the virtual audience. I notice that they remain quiet.

Presence

"The miracle of mindfulness," writes Thich Nhat Hanh, "is first of all, that you are here. Being truly here is very important."⁵⁰ During the 2020-2021 academic year, I was consumed by my anxieties about being present. They were flames that lapped at me. My husband and I ripped ourselves away from our family and friends to move 1,000 miles away in the middle of a global pandemic. That year, we experienced three sudden and unexpected deaths in our immediate family. The flames are back. Burned again. I know we must always be practicing our own resurrection, but no one gave me or us an instruction manual. I'm here to do performance and teach, not constantly be at war with myself, I whisper regularly out loud.

⁵⁰ Thich Nhat Hanh, *You are Here*, (Boston: Shambhala Publications, 2001), 8.

I stack my own stones to remind myself to return to my body. I sit quietly alone to find again the connection between mind and muscle. And it is when I am truly present to myself, I remember that sometimes all I am able to offer to others is my own presence and voice. Performance practice, in addition to being a form of scholarship and community engagement, also holds the potential to be a radical form of allyship and a chance to be an accomplice in imagining a more radically just educational environment. Hernández explains that white allyship “means not centering one’s self to position one for an award or for recognition; rather, white allyship means moving beyond awareness or privilege to take risks, call out inequalities, and dismantle systems of exclusion and oppression that marginalize and disadvantage non-white individuals.”⁵¹ I wonder regularly how the ethos of performance studies and performance practice can be used to enact a radical allyship.

I find that for me ensemble performance is refreshing and generating. Orchestrating the bringing together of voices is volcanic and worthwhile. As many of us likely know, articulating “worth” is difficult. But for me, justice-based ensemble generation is in the words of Mary Frances HopKins, “worth the burden.”⁵² On one level, it is morally imperative that performance makers and directors intentionally practice the presence and mentorship necessary to center on the stage the experiences of those most marginalized. Pedagogy and performance practice must be actively anti-racist and intentionally culturally diverse. There is a volcanic power in the ensemble and student voices have weight. And finally, given that the *doing of* performance remains arguably the cornerstone of performance studies in communication, those of us concerned with performance practice must practice a justice-based pedagogy that recruits and trains the next generation of disciplinary scholars that reflects the world in which we all live.

⁵¹ Leandra Hernández, “Silence, (In)Action, and the Downfalls of White Allyship,” *Women & Language*, 43, no. 1, (2020), 150.

⁵² Mary Frances HopKins, “From page to stage: The burden of proof,” *Southern Speech Communication Journal*, 47, no. 1, (1981): 1.



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