“Can I Talk To You?”
An Access-Centered Case Study on *In the Blood*

By

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Abstract

Considering the historical development of Western theatre audience spaces, this paper examines the barriers that stand in the way of mounting a university theatre production which utilizes a Disability Justice framework, as articulated by scholar, performer and activist Patty Berne. Utilizing practice-as-research, the author/director uses their production of Suzan-Lori Parks' *In the Blood* to explore the question: How and who do audience spaces as constructed in Western university theaters exclude on, behind and in front of the stage, and what can be done to change this? This paper examines the ways in which the production's centering concepts of consent, trauma-informed methods, and responsiveness generated a series of best practice strategies, as well as open questions, for producing a show that realizes both an on stage, and an audience space that values and caters to a celebration of mental, physical, and cultural difference. Data used in this analysis was collected through story-telling, surveys and interactive dramaturgy pre, during and post-production, from both audience and theatre practitioners on the effects of the directing and dramaturgical choices designed to enable inclusivity. This paper intends to contribute to theatre discourses that disrupt ubiquitous repetitive exclusions that pathologize certain identities and abilities from and in audience spaces.

Acknowledgments

I would like to first thank the University of Kansas Department of Theatre and Dance's University Theatre for selecting me to direct a production of *In the Blood* by Suzan-Lori Parks, which was part of the fall 2019 theatre season. Entrusting me with this task was a beautiful gift and provided the space I needed to be able to conduct the research which is discussed in the following pages. I would also like to thank my production faculty advisor, Dr. Nicole Hodges Persley, for supporting my work throughout the production period, and my thesis advisor, Dr. Jane Barnette, for jumping in half-way through this project, and guiding me through the thesis process, I could not have done it without you.. I would additionally like to acknowledge Dr. Peter Zazzali, former Artistic Director of the University Theatre, for believing in my abilities as a director even though he had never seen any of my work. Though I talk about their work extensively in the following pages, I would like to acknowledge that none of this work would have been possible without me following in the footsteps of groundbreaking scholars of Disability Justice, who live this work every day: including Patty Berne, Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha, and Mia Mingus. Finally, I would like to thank my partner, Pere DeRoy, for encouraging me throughout this process, for providing not only countless hours of advice and space to talk everything through, but always pushing me to expand my goals.

Dedication

The thesis is dedicated to Anthony “Tony” Hall (July 16th, 1948 - April 27th, 2020).

As a mentor, friend, and collaborator, Tony’s work inspired me, challenged me, and transformed both me and my work. He was one of the kindest people I have ever met. Persistent in his determination to do the work that “needed to be done.” Without his guidance and words of inspiration, I would not have landed on this path.

Table of Contents

Introduction: My Journey to Disability Justice

I was in my first year of graduate school when it was announced that *In the Blood* by Suzan-Lori Parks might be one of the shows chosen for the upcoming theatre season. I had been trying to convince a theatre producer or theatre company to let me direct that show for seven years, and was thrilled that it might finally become a reality. I set about encouraging all the people I knew in our department with voting power to select the play, and let it be known far and wide that I was interested in directing it. At home, I told my partner about the play, explaining how excited I was about the prospect of getting to direct it. She asked me what it was about. Before the words could leave my mouth, I paused. My partner suffers with Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) related to tenuous housing and living situations she experienced years before we met. She was in therapy and on medication to help her unpack and recover from her experiences, as she had been hospitalized some years earlier and was still in recovery. Instead of telling her what the show is about, I said, "Oh… if we do it, you probably can't come." Knowing that I know her triggers, she did not ask more and we moved onto a different topic.

But the moment sat with me. I was initially drawn to the script of *In the Blood* because of the powerful work it does unpacking systematic poverty and the feminization and radicalization of that poverty here in the United States. I felt that *In the Blood* showed what generations of American theatre often overlooked: that people living within generational and systematic poverty are humans, as complex, as good, as bad, as difficult, and as lovable as those whose jobs keep them in that place. *In the Blood* shows that the doctors, social workers and preachers who exploit the most vulnerable are also complex, good, bad, difficult, lovable and, most importantly, fully formed people. The same is true for those who give to charity, and the children who live on the street. The play shows that while all individual people are a mix of positive and negative, it is the

larger systems in which all these people exist which create the class hierarchy of which Parks writes. Parks contends that "Theatre is the place that best allows me to figure out how the world works" (Parks, "Elements" 11). *In the Blood* provides a vehicle through which a theatrical team and their audiences can collectively learn and process the realities of systematic, racialized, and gendered poverty. Only through the process of understanding how the "world works," I felt, could any of us ever consciously push for changes, and new realities, to be born. Otherwise we walk forward blindly.

Parks' plays "revisit, deconstruct, resurrect, and reconstruct" history (Schafer 181), and through this process, I believe, provide sites for transformation. For Parks, according to Carol Schafer, the ephemeral nature of theatre gives it the "ability to bring the past and possible futures to life in the present, thereby reconstructing our perception of who we were, who we are, and who we wish to be. This, in turn, potentially alters who we may become" (Schafer 182). It is this altering of the future, this *becoming*, that drew me to Parks initially. Yet, in the decade since first encountering *In the Blood*, I had never before considered the psychological effect the play might have on audience members who suffered with PTSD related to homelessness and sexual violence. In fact, it was not until my late twenties that I learned about the many forms and realities of people with PTSD. Growing up the only people I knew about with PTSD were military veterans. Other causes of PTSD were not discussed. The realities of people living with mental illness were not ones that I had understood or put much time into thinking about until the

years directly leading up to becoming a graduate student at KU.[1] Though the majority of shows I had directed before *In the Blood* dealt with traumatic subject matter,[2] I had never specifically considered how to make my audience spaces safe for people living with trauma. I have always seen theatre as a healing space, and had often used my theatre practice to facilitate growth and healing for actors and myself. I had engaged in training practices that centered the emotional safety of the actors, but my focus on audiences had always related to making them "feel," not keeping them safe. Rather than leaving the conversation about *In the Blood* and my partner's potential attendance in the past, I set out to figure out how I could direct such a production in a way that my partner, and others with PTSD, would be able to attend. Instead of thinking about what I wanted to *do to* my audiences, I started thinking about how to make sure my audiences were safe.

The only technique I knew about at that time that was specifically designed to protect audience members was that of the Trigger Warning, and it is a technique that is currently being hotly debated among American theatre makers.[3] What exactly a Trigger Warning is, what its purpose is, and who it serves, are all held in question by many. For example, in November 2018, the *New York Times*' Michael Paulson wrote: "some argue that theatre should be challenging,

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[1] Despite the fact that I have been surrounded with mental illness my entire life, and was even encouraged to go to therapy as a child, what mental illness was, and its effects and realities, were not clear to me. Despite the fact that I have lived with mental illness on and off since twelve, conversations around mental illness never extended beyond the limited narrative of "getting better." It was not until I entered a relationship with the woman who I later married, that I started to think about mental illness both holistically, and non-judgmentally. I learned to stop thinking about it as something to try and "recover" from, as a part of you to get rid of or hide, and began to understand the concept of neuro-divergence.

[2] Few shows do not if you take the time to examine them.

[3] Here I specify American theatre makers simply because I will only be discussing theatre makers located and practicing their craft in North America. I have not done research on these topics in other geographical locations, though such studies would no doubt be illuminating and useful.

while others argue that warnings are a valuable customer service."[4] Paulson positions Trigger Warnings as a potentially useful "service," while also describing them to decrease the theatre's ability to be "challenging." He is not alone. Many people do not know, or chose to ignore, the fact that a "trigger" is a medical term that defines a sensory stimulus that leads to a physically harmful result (Sexual Assault Centre). Triggers can be physical or mental. A trigger can cause people to have flashbacks, to experience extreme anxiety, to have panic attacks, have seizures or other physiological responses to trauma or other stimuli. Trigger Warnings are supposed to help people who have such mental and physical conditions avoid or prepare to negate the effects of their triggers. Trigger Warnings can include "this show will contain flashing lights," because people may experience seizures as a result, as well as "this show contains sexual violence," because people may experience flashbacks and resulting increased trauma. Many people seem to be under the impression that "triggers" are simply ideas, or events that make people feel uncomfortable, and arguments against trigger warnings explain that putting them on will prevent people from being moved and changed in their opinions.

While Trigger Warnings are able to help people avoid content or sensory stimulus that can be harmful to them, I did not see them as the solution to my problem. I was not interested in creating a show that had to be avoided by people with PTSD, or indeed with sensory sensitivity, or for any reason. I began to realize that what I was looking for was a framework that would help me to change the nature of the space that was being created by the show. I wanted to create a space, a moment in history, an exploration of how the world works, which would be a site of

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[4] Paulson sits within a framework of understanding theatre as a "commodity", a capitalist product for sale. This thinking about theatre dates back to the establishment of private theatre inn seventeenth century Europe (Bennett 3). I will explore this more thoroughly in Section 2.

healing, not trauma porn.[5] My question was: how can a director direct a piece of theatre that deals directly with traumatic subject matter in a way that fosters inclusivity and healing? I set off to find tools to help me achieve this goal. I began by searching for frameworks created by scholars and artists who themselves experienced exclusion from theatre spaces based on ability. I firmly believe in "leadership of the most impacted."[6] As a theatre practitioner whose body and mind are able to conform,[7] I knew that I am not the person to "discover" or "lead" the movement towards inclusive audience spaces. I see my role as that of a follower, a supporter, and a cheerleader for those who are most impacted. While I exist along the spectrum of what Therí Alyce Pickens refers to as "madness,"[8] my diagnosable "disability" is only slightly outside the

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[5] The term "trauma porn" is widely used in both traditional and social media to describe the consumption of traumatic material in an insensitive way that focuses on the dramatization of this trauma and not the effects or on addressing the issue. The use of "porn" as a suffix to another word, whether "food," "trauma," "disaster" or "word," has been described by sociologist Timothy Recuber as "an excessive, overly aestheticized focus on a single topic" (Recuber 29).

[6] Disability Justice scholar/activist Patty Berne states that the second principal of Disability Justice, as spelled out in this self-titled "working draft" is: "Leadership of Those Most Impacted. It reflects our understanding of ableism in the context of other historical systemic oppressions, thus we are led by those who most know these systems." Before I had read this document, I knew it was critical to follow the work of those most impacted by ableist structures. This working draft was one of the early critical documents I encountered, and became a guide for much of my work.

[7] Here my description of myself is based on a quotation by Disability Justice scholar/activist Patty Berne. She articulates the practice of Disability Justice as "an honoring of the longstanding legacies of resilience and resistance which are the inheritance of all of us whose bodies or minds will not conform" (Berne, 2015). I find Berne's description of disability far more accurate and decolonial than any other. Instead of defining specific bodies as someone "disabled" she articulates that there are systems which determine which bodies and minds are labeled as "able" and which "disabled." I find that, in fighting for inclusivity, we have to decolonize our understanding of the nature of ability - and come to understand that it is a practice of conformity.

[8] In the introduction to her ground-breaking text, Pickens states: "When madness does not solely refer to the experiences of a mad person but rather pans outward as a larger discourse, it challenges how "the psychic, cognitive, and affective dimensions of experience are parceled out into categories … all under the supposedly 'empirical' authority of medical scent and psychiatric expertise as much as through the exercise of legal and juridical powers. In other words, it is everywhere and affects everything. Maddeningly so." I believe that most of us identify along this continuum of madness, and as a person who has struggled with self-harm and other "diagnosable" mental "disorders", I certainly have interacted and existed within a space of "madness."

box of conformity. I am not among the most impacted regarding theatrical exclusion that has become unquestioned within the majority of Western theatre institutions.

I found answers to my questions about ways to lift barriers for people whose minds and bodies are not able to conform not primarily within theatre and performance studies literature, but instead within Disability Studies, Women Gender and Sexuality Studies, and the intersections of race and disability scholarship. This is not surprising, as the history of Western theatre is deeply embedded within histories of colonialism. As Edward Said stated that, "stories are at the heart" of colonialism (Said xii). Western theatre practices have been used since the earliest colonial periods to "consolidate peripheral territories to a central node and to totalize imperialism" (Davis & Balme 465). From Colonial India, to the British colonies in the Americas, to the Caribbean island of Trinidad and Tobago British theatre was used as part of colonial expansion (Singh 446; Johnson 40; Hill). British theatre was performed in segregated white-only spaces by primarily British actors to keep the colonial rulers entertained and invested in their motherland, as well as being performed for colonial subjects and the decedents of British-born colonials who had never seen the "motherland" in order to enforce English cultural superiority. Even in post-colonial times, once British rulers had been pushed out of governments, British cultural colonialism remained in classrooms and cultural centers. One of places such cultural colonialism remained was theatre. Up to today "Educational theatre programs in 'at risk' or 'underdeveloped' neighborhoods" (Dias & Sayet 3) as well as in jails and across formerly colonized countries, promote the idea that (primarily) British, and more recently American, plays have transformational power, while generally ignoring non-Western theatre texts, and even more-

so non-Western theatrical forms.[9] These impositions of Western theatre legitimize certain forms of theatre, and delegitimize non-Western theatre forms, from Carnival, to puppet theatre, and beyond.

Even as colonial narratives and theatre forms were used, and continue to be used, for cultural control, movements of emancipation, decolonization and resistance have also used narrative, as well as new and old forms of theatrical performance, to disrupt colonial practices. I position *disruption* as the aim of my theatre practice — disruption of Western models of production, power and value. Cultural scholar Fred Moten stated that "Black Studies is the critique of Western Civilization."[10] I situate my work within Black Studies, no matter the subject matter I am approaching. From the choice of scripts that I direct, to the actors I cast, to the way in which I create audience space, I have come to strive for disruption as I have followed the frameworks, footsteps, and art work of those who could not conform, and those who, like myself, could only conform through denial of self.

My claiming of "non-conformity" has been a decades long journey, that spans the majority of my life. I am one of those people who "passes," in a number of ways. Passing is the process of being able to conform, to hide ones own reality in order to benefit from an exclusionary power structure, such as whiteness, heterosexuality, cisgender-ness, or "ability." First, and most visibly, I pass for white, despite being of mixed European, Asian and African ancestry. Additionally, I pass for straight, though I am queer. I also pass for "sane," despite having experiences of diagnosable mental illness. I started claiming visibility as a person of color

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[9] The program Shakespeare Behind Bars, founded 1991, holds the belief that teaching Shakespeare plays to, and having them performed by, incarcerated individuals, allows "them to develop life skills that will ensure their successful integration into society" (Mission & Vision).

[10] Dr. Fred Moten in the documentary *Dreams Are Colder Than Death*, directed by Arthur Jafa (2014).

in high school, inspired by the work of Harriet Jacobs, after doing a research project on her and performing a one-woman show as her. My identity of queerness emerged half a decade later in my final year in college. Another half-decade later, I began learning to deconstruct the casual ableism in which I dwelt. I have struggled with my own silent history of self-harm and generational trauma, and only in these last few years have I acknowledged this enough to start seeking both help and to align my work with practices that seek to deconstruct structures that perpetuate this violence. I bring up these personal and ongoing journeys because I believe that the positionality of the writer/director is critical context for any research being presented. I understand the importance of my own positionality, and want to explain from where I am coming. I acknowledge in all my work, written, staged and otherwise, that all knowledge, truth, facts and understandings of the world around us are socially constructed, and influenced by where we exist in relation to our lived experiences, which are influenced by our identities. Centering positionality situates the knowledge I am able to produce within the context of my experiences and consequentially my thoughts and actions (Given 98; Conrad).

As I unlock and acknowledge my own truths, I position myself and my work as following a line of activists and artists before me, women who could have passed, who chose not to pass, and whose life work centered around empowerment of the marginalized communities to which they belonged. Inspired by and following the work of Harriet Jacobs, Fredi Washington and Adrian Piper, I acknowledge my ability to pass, and I pivot away from the power structures to which conforming would be possible, at the expense of embodiment of my true self. For, as Washington said:

> Frankly, I do not ascribe to the stupid theory of white supremacy, and to try to hide the fact that I am a Negro…would be agreeing that to be a Negro makes me inferior and that I have swallowed whole hog all of the propaganda dished out by our fascist-minded white citizens. (Aron)

I proudly follow the footsteps of women who have inspired me and ground myself in the intersectionality of anti-racist work, Disability Justice, and queer/trans rights. For many people who belong to marginalized communities, belonging is visible and automatically endowed. For me, I constantly have to assert my identities in order to be seen. Sometimes I call my unintentional passing an "invisibility cloak" that hides me from those around me, at times giving me increased access to power structures, and at times hiding me from the very communities to which I belong. Unlike Piper, I do not carry a calling card to alert people to my identity.[11] Instead, my calling card is my work, in the theatre, in the classroom, and on the page. I try to use my work first to pull whoever is in the audience into a conversation — to seduce them, so to speak, into engaging, then to ask difficult questions, call out racism, sexism, ableism, and hope to leave them feeling either seen, or seeing in a new way.

I saw *In the Blood* as a play that allowed me to do just that. I believe that it can work on multiple levels — that it can simultaneously provide a sense of being seen, heard, listened to, and appreciated to those whose lived experiences that echo and resonate with those of Hester and her children, and to challenge, pull up, and question everyone else. The collective, not individual, culpability of Americans is what I wanted to draw attention to by directing this production, especially as the country moves towards what many people see as the most important election of our life-times (at least, so far). So, even before *In the Blood* was chosen for the official 2019/2020 KU theatre season, and before I submitted a proposal and was eventually selected as

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[11] *My Calling (Card) #1* was a work of performance art which Adrian Pipper created and performed from 1986-1990. She could carry a small note-card that said: "Dear Friend, / I am black. / I am sure you did not realize this when you made/laughed at/agreed with that racist remark. In the past, I have attempted to alert white people to my racial identity in advance. unfortunately, this invariably causes them to react to me as pushy, manipulative, or socially inappropriate. Therefore, my policy is to assume that white people do not make these remarks, even when they believe there are no black people present, and to distribute this card when they do. / I regret any discomfort my presence is causing you, just as I am sure you regret the discomfort your racism is causing me."

director, I faced, head on, with all my doubts, the question of how to direct *In the Blood* in an inclusive and healing manner.

As I began to self-assess the techniques and practices that I had been using in my decade of directing plays, I learned just how much conformity I had been practicing. I learned that I had never questioned a large number of practices that are accepted across Western theatre institutions, and that have been designed to keep a wide range of people out of theatre spaces. I specifically choose here to use the language "designed to keep people out," instead of the more passive and justifying language of "designed without certain needs in mind." I do this because practices of exclusion are curated. As activist/scholar/artist Aurora Morales attests, "There is no neutral body from which our bodies deviate" (Morales 2013). The exclusion of certain bodies is an active practice, not a passive one. Choices have been made at every stage of the development of Western theatrical institutions of who to include, and who not to include. Choices are made regarding the design of theatrical buildings, the price-point to enter, the kind of stories told on stages, the level of graphic violence that is depicted on stage, the kind of sounds, lights and smells that are in the theatre, the methods of communication (i.e., kinds of verbal and non-verbal communication) that are provided, the kind of space audience members are provided with, and so on.

There is not a great deal of scholarly literature specifically on audience spaces, but Susan Bennett's seminal book, *Theatre Audiences*, first published in 1997, and republished in second edition in 2013, breaks down the development of the Western theatre, and the dramatic shift that took place from the Medieval into the Industrial era. She notes that audience spaces shrank dramatically. Ancient Greeks audiences were massive, open to the public and designed for "the majority, rather than the 'educated' (and other) minorities of more recent years" (Bennett 3).

Centuries brought change, specifically in the transition from the Medieval to the Industrial eras, that brought the small(er) exclusive audiences with the development of private theatre in the seventeenth century. Today, across the Western world, theatrical spaces exist almost exclusively in educational institutions and private theatres, a mix of "high art" with astronomical prices, and "non-profit" theatre which totes its status as a creator of social change. In order to direct the kind of show I wanted to create, I would have to actively work against centuries of colonial investment in the theatrical institution. Luckily, there are centuries of protest against colonialism from which to draw. Grounding myself in deconstructive, decolonial work, I began to unpack both the theatrical form I planned to engage with, and, later, the text with which I would be working. In her short essay "Elements of Style," Parks argues that form and content are inseparable from each other. I accept this premise and applied it to the style of production itself — one cannot separate the idea of wanting to create sites of healing and uncovering the truth without inclusion. My search for frameworks that would allow me to deconstruct what existed, and restructure an inclusive audience space, led my to the work of scholar, artist, and activist Patty Berne, and her game-changing definition of Disability Justice.

"[D]isability justice asserts that ableism helps make racism, christian supremacy, sexism, and queer- and transphobia possible, and that all those systems of oppression are locked up tight" (Piepzna-Samarasinha 22). It is a movement that was birthed out of necessity as the Disability Rights movement, that lead to the 1990 passage of the Americans With Disabilities Act, failed to include an intersectional approach to ability and disability. Disability Justice birthed "itself as a movement" (Piepzna-Samarasinha 15) in the aughts, led and articulated by disabled black and brown mostly queer and trans artists and activists. In 2005 Patty Berne, Mia Mingus, Leroy

Moore, Eli Clare, and Sebastian Margaret founded the Disability Justice Collective. Sins Invalid was co-created by Patty Berne and Leroy Moore a few years later. Sins Invalid is a:

> [D]isability justice based performance project that incubates and celebrates artists with disabilities, centralizing artists of color and LGBTQ / gender-variant artists as communities who have been historically marginalized. Led by disabled people of color, Sins Invalid's performance work explores the themes of sexuality, embodiment and the disabled body, developing provocative work where paradigms of "normal" and "sexy" are challenged, offering instead a vision of beauty and sexuality inclusive of all bodies and communities.[12]

Like the Reproductive Justice Movement, founded a decade earlier, which I will discuss later, Disability Justice centers the lives, needs, and organizing strategies of people marginalized from mainstream white-dominated, single-issue focus movements such as Disability Rights and Reproductive Rights. Those whose bodies, lives, voices and realities were and continue to be the most impacted by the results of white supremacy, capitalism and colonialism articulated and defined their own needs, and came together to push for transformational change.

Here were artists and activists doing the kind of transformational work I had not previously even been able to imagine. I dug into their work, learning as much as I could, and following steps set out by them in order to create the framework that I would end up using to direct *In the Blood*. As Disability Justice scholar/activist Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasingha articulates, "one quality of disability justice culture is that it is simultaneously beautiful and practical" (Piepzna-Samarasinha 23). This is how I created the framework for *In the Blood*. I grounded the artistic vision within a practical understanding of what it would take to transform the theatrical space, including the audience space, into one that operated along the principals of Disability Justice. Sometimes it became difficult to articulate why it was artistically important to the piece to have access worked into the framework of a play that did not deal explicitly with

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[12] From Sins Invalid's Mission Statement on their website.

ability. I received pushback from many sides, from my advisors, to the designers and theatre management. Yet, I persisted. University spaces are not known for inclusivity. Though much work has been done in the last half century towards creating more inclusive university spaces, like the theatre itself, so much undoing of active exclusion must take place just to get to a position of neutrality, by which I mean: no one is excluded.

As laid out by Patty Berne, the fundamental principles of Disability justice are: 1) Intersectionality—the understanding that "each person has multiple community identifications, and that each identity can be a site of privilege or oppression," and that "disability experience itself" is shaped by "race, gender, class, gender expression, historical moment, relationship to colonization and more"; 2) Leadership of Those Most Impacted - understanding that those who are most impacted by historical systematic oppression, best understand the systems and thus must lead; 3) An "anti-Capitalist Politic" grounded in anti-colonialism; 4) "A Commitment to Cross-Movement Organizing"; 5) Valuing people as they are, and for their inherent worth "outside of commodity relations"; 6) Valuing teachings by people with disabilities to "understand that our embodied experience as a critical guide and reference pointing us towards justice and liberation"; 7) Commitment to Cross Disability Solidarity; 8) Awareness of Interdependence -- a development from the need for independence -- a movement towards meeting different needs and working together within the disability community; 9) Collective Access - "exploring and creating new ways of doing things that go beyond able-bodied/minded normatively; and 10) Collective Liberation—where "no body/mind is left behind" (Berne 2015). These principals became the guide for the more "practical" side of my directing framework. I learned that many of my directing instincts were already in line with these practices, and just needed a more contentious approach and honing.

My directing toolkit had been developed over a decade of work primarily in educational settings in the United States and professional settings in Trinidad and Tobago.[13] Notably, during that time, I positioned myself as a disruptor, and as a decolonial director. I situated my own theatrical practice within frameworks provided by Bertolt Brecht, Augusto Boal, Richard Schechner, and Tony Hall. In college I was inspired by Brecht's focus on creating an engaged, thinking, audience, and Augusto Boal's use of theatre to create change, to disrupt systems, and to claim power in the post-colonial world. I felt that Schechner's performance studies frameworks provided a useful anthropological approach to theatre, and heavily utilized his Rasabox acting techniques. But I felt that something was missing. When I started working in Trinidad and Tobago I was lucky enough to encounter the groundbreaking work of Tony Hall — who writes about and practices theatre as an emancipatory process.[14] Additionally, I learned about and participated in Trinbagonian Carnival. I began incorporating these anti-colonial/post-colonial practices into my Western theatre practice. My initial attraction to Parks was tied to post-coloniality. Theatre scholar Philip Kolin says, "With postcolonial fervor, Parks portrays blackness as a symbol of subjugation, but even as she deconstructs the fantasies of white power, she converts the black body into a theatre of trauma" (Kolin 10). My own needs to understand racism and racialized poverty in the States, especially as the child of immigrants, whose African ancestors had never set foot in the States, but instead had suffered enslavement in the Caribbean

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[13] My mother's side of the family is from Trinidad and Tobago. In an attempt to reconnect with my "roots," I moved to Trinidad and Tobago after graduating college. There I worked for three years at the Trinidad Theatre Workshop, the longest-running Western-style theatre company in the Caribbean. I served throughout that time as the director in residence, the Director of the School for the arts and the Associate Artistic Director.

[14] Hall writes about the emancipation that is experienced during the celebration of Jouvay, where masqueraders dance, covered in mud, or oil, or paint, to rhythm and music as the sun rises, and through his Jouvay Popular Theatre Process (JPTP) has designed a method through which performers can experience their own work as a constant emancipation (Hall; Hall).

after being abducted from Africa, was part of what drew me to Parks' work. Ten years later, it was the "theatre of trauma" that I was trying to figure out how to address.

The idea that Parks' plays are sites of trauma, in full witness of the subjugation experienced by people of African ancestry, was both the critical importance of the texts, and the dramaturgical problem I needed to solve if I was to create an inclusive audience space. The theatre of trauma gave me particular pause because Parks has seen incredible success in historically white spaces — from the New York Public Theatre, to the Pulitzer Prize, to Broadway, to the Obie Awards, Time Magazine, California Institute of the Arts, MacArthur Genius Grant, the Guggenheim Fellowship, and many more. I did not want to create a show that was simply the embodiment of black trauma. Especially considering that *In the Blood* has primarily been produced in historically white spaces,[15] and KU's production was to be no different. Once the show was actually selected, and I was chosen to direct it, I had to ask myself over and over: why this play? Why now? Why here?

The answer to this question came to me when I returned to the script. Parks places the script: HERE and NOW. Even though it was written in 1999 in New York City, the "HERE and NOW" reminded me that she wrote it for everyone, everywhere, every-time. The assumption of this simple statement is a tragedy in itself — the tragedy that Parks did not expect the situation Hester and her children find themselves in to be solved. Instead she seems to say: this situation, these people, they are HERE and they are NOW. HERE is everywhere. NOW is every time. I have lived in the United States for a total of twenty-three years, in Trinidad and Tobago for four years, and for two sets of two years (one as a baby) in Toronto, Canada. I also have visited Israel frequently, and once lived there for three months, and spent periods of two summers doing

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[15] See Appendix A for *In the Blood* Production History

research and teaching acting in Godavari and Kathmandu, Nepal, during my undergraduate years. During those years in the United States I lived primarily Kansas and secondarily Connecticut, as well as short periods in Michigan and New Jersey. In my (somewhat limited) experience, Hester and her children *are* everywhere. I have never lived in a place where crushing racialized and gendered poverty, where systematic racism, and sexism, do not exist. I have never lived in a place where doctors and social workers and religious leaders do not use their power to continue cycles of oppression and elevate themselves over those they are supposed to help. I have never lived in a place where men did not abandon the women who carry their unborn children, or their young children, where fathers do not deny "inconveniently" conceived children, or where homelessness does not exist. Parks' text brings us all in. Whatever our position in life, wherever we sit in the social hierarchy — this is a story of our world. Especially in a town like Lawrence, KS, a small town which prides itself greatly on being progressive, liberal, and full of social good, it is important to draw attention to the realities that surround us — which are not all stories of comfort and fulfillment.

But how could I communicate these messages in a way that did not re-traumatize my audiences? Despite extensive directions and suggestions on how to provide access to audience spaces provided by the scholars and activists from whom I was learning, I was not finding directives on how to deal with traumatic subject matter. So I turned to studies and guidelines for trauma-informed services, and worked to apply them to the theatre. Being trauma-informed combines acknowledgement of the need to warn and prepare trauma survivors with content that might be triggering to them (Trigger Warnings), with the need to be able to discuss this content in ways that are validating and healing, instead of traumatizing. It all comes down to consent.

The practice of creating spaces for trauma survivors is a process of ensuring that consent exists at each level.

Theatre spaces often demand that audiences sit quietly, in dark spaces. If audience members leave, they are not allowed to come back. They are not prepared for what is going to come. All of these factors can contribute to trauma. This is also relevant for those with anxiety, autism spectrum disorder (ASD), and other sensory sensitivity. From the Sins Invalid's *Disability Justice Primer* I found instructions on use of lights and providing audience members with the freedom to come and go as they need. I will expand on the practical ways I incorporated these into my artistic design later. However, I still struggled with how to approach the explicit portrayals of sexual violence, poverty, and the death of a child present in *In the Blood*. Again, I returned to the text. The other aspect of Parks' work that deeply appealed to me was its ways of breaking Western theatre conventions of mimesis and linear time. As Kolin states, "Unwaveringly anti-mimetic, Parks's theatre is postmodern, self reflexive, and unstable, a theatre full of black holes" (Kolin 3). The main issue I was facing was the way in which I was thinking about staging the story. I was thinking mimetically, as though I had to create literal portrayals of Parks' story.

Parks' work disrupts Western theatrical mimesis. Mimesis can be viewed as an as-accurate-as-possible representation, or as a manner of reading that can generate a dialogue between reality and interpretation (Diamond ii). Either way, mimetic representation presumes the reality of objectivity, or Truth, in a Platonic sense. Instead of re-creating any concept of objective reality or truths, Parks creates subjectivity that slides and changes and transforms before our eyes. Combined with her disposal of linearity and mimetic re-creation, she mocks the very concept of objectivity and static reality. It was in this mockery that I found what I believed to the

solution to the problem I faced. I had been looking at it wrong. Parks' *In the Blood* does not ask us to display trauma porn. There is no need for realism on stage, or for brutal portrayal. Instead she illustrates the subjective thoughts of her characters, creates situations where actors can *perform* transformation from adulthood to childhood, where time is malleable, and where audiences receive the darkest and deepest confessions from each character in turn, though these accounts, like the rest of the play, have an edge of absurdity. Much has been written about the musicality of Parks' plays, about her dancing as she writes, and the jazz-like cantor of her written words. The humor in her work has also been explored, though to a lesser extent. I began to contextualize Parks' work within the broader context of theatre across the African diaspora, which brought me back to my own personal and technical groundings: Trinidad and Tobago Carnival.

Philip Kolin argues that "The matter of acting — pretending, assuming a role, adopting multiple identities, donning costumes, engaging with an audience — is at the heart of Parks's canon" (Kolin 7). I embraced this idea when approaching the script. The changing of costumes, putting on a *Show*, which Kolin argues is Parks' "shibboleth" (Kolin 7) was my way into telling this story in a manner that would break up the often-harmful repetition of mimesis. I wanted to explode the performances — to move away from realism/naturalism, and dive into the rhythm and music of Parks' work. I also wanted costumes that were exaggerations — that play on, around, above, and through stereotype, with the aim of unpacking stereotype. Carnival is about the absurd, about taking real life and poking fun of it, claiming it, making it your own. In her plays, Parks elicits "laughter with their broad comedy, but also sting with their nightmarish

shapes and sights" (Kolin 7). With the picong[16] of good Old Mas,[17] Parks creates characters who are larger than life, but who are real and strike notes of familiarity. She grounds her text in lived experiences of those about whom she is writing for.

Using the inspiration of Calypso music,[18] I found a way I was comfortable directing a Parks play at yet another historically white theatre. I started to understand her work as a mocking protest. As a laugh at her audiences, a way to unpack the trauma she experienced and saw around her, in front of the very people whose power was wrapped up in the oppression of others. Why else would she chose as sites of story-telling the works of Nathaniel Hawthorne, and histories of torment, like Sarah Baartman, and the histories of white men, like Lincoln and Booth? Her plays speak directly to the specter of whiteness that surrounds our existence in this post-colonial reality. Her characters are constructed from phantoms or racist ideations, combined with the fully formed humans on whom these stereotypes are forced. *In the Blood*'s Hester is a perfect example. The stereotype that her character, to some, at first seems to embody is the Reagan-inspired Welfare Queen who is ungrateful and does not work hard and has too many children, all out of wed-lock, and is provided with social-services but refuses them. But as the play goes along, we can see that Hester is surrounded by absurd cruelty. At each point in the play, her

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[16] A Trinbagonian Creole word meaning "making fun of" with both bite and humor.

[17] Defined by Carol Martin in her *Trinidad Carnival Glossary* as: "old style of satiric masquerade involving visualizing and acting out puns" (177). Old Mas includes all the "traditional" Carnival characters, developed since the early days of Carnival. These characters are often played by people over an entire lifetime, and can even be passed down through family lineage.

[18] Calypso is the national music of Trinidad and Tobago. There have been many speculations on the origin of the word, but a number of scholars, including Errol Hill, hold that it is likely from the Hausa work kaiso or caiso, "a praise/critical singer of West Africa" (Martin 223). The name "Calypso" references the Greek muse of music, and has elements of call-and-response. Calypso was exported to Europe and America, where it gained world fame and attention. Like the work of Suzan-Lori Parks, Calypso has elements of the mixed histories of the country in which it developed. Calypso music generally has a political and satirical tone.

attempts to "get a leg up" are. It is a circus of cruelty, and the assault on her freedom and independence continues. Anyone who has experiences the loss of personal agency to make the most important choices in life will see themselves in Hester, I did not need to hit them over the head. What I wanted to create was a *Play*.[19]

Once I gave myself the freedom to play with the play, I centered my design concepts around the playing of different Mases. "Mas" is a Caribbean Creolization of the concept of "Masquerade," influenced by the Masquerade of Colonial France from which Trinidadian Carnival took its earliest influences. With the coming of Emancipation in 1834, the Carnival in Trinidad began to change. It "already exhibits signs of a takeover by working-class elements that had previously been restricted from joining the celebrations" (Hill 13). In these earliest days of post-emancipation Carnival Mas players mocked the colonial powers, developing a series of Carnival characters, known as "Old Mas Characters," many of which are still played today. Over the years newer Old Mas characters have been developed, always in relationship to the political happenings of the day. "To play a Mas" has cultural and performative stylistic reference to African rituals of performing "Masks," which are spiritual rituals that connect the human performers to the spirit world (Okafor). This was a distinct break from the French Masqueraders, who were landed and slave-owning French white and free "colored" people, dressing up, often as enslaved persons, and celebrating in the form of balls.

One of the key aspects of Mas playing was the mockery of the white colonial slave-owning class. Even after emancipation, Old Mas characters and Kaiso[20] continued to mock the rich, the white, and the colonial, often to their faces (Ramm). Playing Mas and singing Calypso

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[19] I capitalize and italicize here to draw attention to my double meaning. I mean simultaneously a theatre play (a production) and to play, the way children do — to create a make-believe and fun world.

[20] Another term for Calypso music.

were some of the few ways that formerly enslaved Afro-Trinidadians were able to assert their power over the white colonials. Similar traditions of subversion and power through story telling exist in the States, though, of course, in dramatically different ways. I realized that, each character in *IN the Blood* was a Mas. Through playing these Mases, actors who played the characters would be able to lift off the more visceral aspects of the play, letting us know what was happening, but with warning, and without the shock value that mimesis would create.

In January of 2019 I was officially selected to direct *In the Blood* by Suzan-Lori Parks for KU's 2019/2020 theatre season. Armed with the frameworks provided by brilliant scholars and artists before me whose bodies and minds were unable and/or refused to conform to ableist and white supremacist systems, I set out to direct an inclusive, empowering production that would be simultaneously a site of healing and a way to raise awareness about social inequality. In the following three chapters, I describe and analyze the efficacy of these efforts, investigate the difficulties and resistances I encountered, and analyze data collected from audience members during the production. I also provide suggestions for my future self and other directors who are committed to Disability Justice within a institution of higher learning.

I follow in the footsteps of Patty Berne, Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha and other activist/artists whose work blends theory and practical tools. As Piepzna-Smarasinha states, "Serious cultural work isn't supposed to include lists of fragrance-free curly hair products or instructions about how to tour while sick and hurt less, right? But — *fuck that*. The making of disability justice lives in the realm of thinking and talking and knowledge making, in art and sky"[21] (Piepzna-Samarasinha 23). This thesis exists in the space between the Disability Justice texts mentioned above, and *Mad at school: Rhetorics of mental disability and academic life* by

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[21] Emphasis in original text.

Margaret Price and *Theatre Audiences* by Susan Bennette. Using a black feminist disability justice approach, over three chapters, I explore the institutional barriers to accessibility within a University Theatre setting, and, through this case-study, propose institutional changes which can be made, and where more research needs to be done.

Chapter One: Building the Framework

In this chapter I break down the processes, conversations, and literature that created the theoretical and practical foundation of this production, before any work on design or casting took place. Weaving together literature review with description of the practical steps taken, I use practice as research to answer theoretical and practical questions. The foundation building for the production officially began after KU's 2019/2020 season was announced and our department put out a call for faculty, staff and graduate students interested in directing a show to send in an application. My application to direct *In the Blood* centered Disability Justice, with an emphasis on following the points laid out in the Disability Justice Primer *Skin, Tooth and Bone*, created and self-published by Sins Invalid. I made it clear in my application that creating an accessible space was of primary importance to me. This, I explained, was not just part of my artistic vision, but part of my research proposal. In my application I explained that I wanted to create a "fully accessible" production and that, along with having an "open door" policy which would allow audience members to come and go as they wished, I would ask the lighting designer to keep the house lights partially up throughout the show.[22] I additionally stated that I would include ASL versions of the text in the choreography of the show in order to provide access for those who are hearing impaired.[23]

Another key element of my application was a justification for why I wanted to direct *In the Blood* at the college level. For me, one of the most exciting parts of directing *In the Blood* within a college was the opportunity for these young actors to play Age. I find few theatrical

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[22] Leaving house lights up provides a more comfortable space for people with sensory sensitivity as well as PTSD. A completely dark theatre can increase people's anxiety, among other concerns.

[23] I will explain later why this plan changed in technicality, but not substance.

conventions more frustrating than actors playing characters who are far outside their age range without an acknowledgement of this difference. This happens most frequently in high school and college theatre, where young people play older adults for most of their high-school/college careers.[24] These young actors lack the life experience to portray the adults with honesty. Additionally they have to spend lots of time creating a physical embodiment of an older person, it often does not work, and, perhaps most importantly, it does not train them for work after college. I believe that the best way to train young actors is to let them play the roles that they would be cast in out of college. There are enough plays that demand primarily young casts to fill university seasons.[25] Instead, season after season are filled with plays full of characters written for grown adults. I did not want this to be the way *In the Blood* was done. I wanted it to be clear from the beginning that the students playing the roles would be *Performing* age, playing Age, so to speak. The exciting opportunity in *In the Blood* is the double casting. The performance of Age is worked into the script. Actors of the right age are never able to play the children characters, because they have to double as adults. This provides script-based justification for having a company of young actors, who are in-between the ages of the adults they play and the children they play. While these choices are not fundamentally tied to Disability Justice, they are about access for students. These decisions were based on a combination of my commitment to

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[24] It also happens frequently in the professional world where adult actors play teen roles, and stars play characters far their junior. Recent film and television examples include *The Irishman* starring Robert DeNiro, whose character starts out as a young man, and *All American,* a Netflix series about high school students starring a cast between 32 and 21 years of age.

[25] Plays filled with at least close to age appropriate characters include: *RENT* by Jonathan Larson, *Blacktop Sky* by Christina Anderson*, Dog Sees God: Confessions of a Teenage Blockhead* by Burt V. Royal*, Juvie* by Jerome McDonough, *Yen* by Anna Jordan, *Spring Awakening* by Steven Sater*, This is Our Youth* by Kenneth Lonnergan*, The History Boys* by Alan Bennett*, Stop Kiss* by Diana Son*, A Solider's Play* by Charles Fuller*, A Midsummer Night's Dream* by William Shakespeare, *Ti-Jean and His Brothers* by Derek Walcott and so many more scripts have primarily characters under twenty-five, roles appropriate for college students. Even if a college student or two plays an older role, the majority of the roles are in their age range.

educating students in the craft of acting, and on my artistic commitment to putting on a show that was exactly what it was intended to be, and not a compromise.

Before the directors for the season were announced I received a call from the Artistic Director of the University Theatre. He said he had a few last questions for me. One of these questions was if I was flexible on the house lights being left partially on. He indicated that, if I were to become the director, I would need to leave "artistic freedom" to the lighting designer who might want the house lights to be all the way down. I remember standing in my back yard, phone pressed to my ear, thinking about how to answer this question. I wanted to direct this show badly, but I was not willing to "compromise" on house lights. Accessibility starts and ends with conversations about prioritization. What is worth it. Safety from possible fires, for example, is not a debatable topic, however unlikely a fire is to occur. There is (presumably) no theatre in the country that would ignore a fire marshal's directives in order to provide greater artistic freedom. However, when it comes to conversations about audience members who may have seizures, or who have PTSD, and for whom flashing lights or complete darkness can cause harm, artistic freedom is frequently prioritized. In order for work to be transformational and challenge power structures that exist and exclude, an understanding of the history of that exclusion is necessary. The prioritization of artistic freedom above the safety of certain people is part of the hegemonic

power structure that Patty Berne calls conformity. To understand what it means to conform, however, first we must understand what that "norm" looks like and how it was constructed. [26]

The construction of disability, according to the cultural model of disability, is "contingent upon and determined by hegemonic discourses," furthermore: "both disability and ability relate to prevailing symbolic orders and institutional practices of producing normality and deviance, the self and the other, familiarity and alterity" (Waldschmidt 20). The social model of disability, that originated in the 1970s, is based on three assumptions: 1) "disability is a form of social inequality and disabled persons" are a discriminated against minority; 2) disability and impairment are not the same, that it is "societal practices of 'disablement' which result in disability" and; 3) that society is responsible for removing obstacles that people with disabilities face (Waldschmidt 20-21). A cultural model of disability sees the construction of the identity of "disability" versus "ability" as generated by a combination of academic knowledge, mass media, and everyday discourse. Attribution theory, which explains how and why meanings are attributed to events and behaviors, shows us that everyday occurrences have knowledge-generating

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[26] It is noteworthy that as I write this thesis, I am sitting in semi-isolation at home, due to the global pandemic of the virus known as COVID-19. Before this global pandemic, work and school places overwhelming had mandatory attendance policies that prevented a great many people, especially people with disabilities, from attending school and work. Since the global pandemic, we are all collectively trying to make sure that we can all still access what we need, despite all being at risk. As Sins Invalid wrote on their blog: "In some ways, it isn't so different from how many of us live our lives every day as crips, with long stretches of time at home, limited access to community or touch or social engagement, engaging in mutual aid, sharing meds & home remedies. Many of us who are immunocompromised/ suppressed or chemically injured have had to think about how many people we will encounter on any given day, what that will expose us to, and how it could impact our health. It's an irony that the whole world is talking about and problem solving with us now. It's painful that able bodied/minded people evidence their ableist privilege with frustration that air travel is inaccessible, that their schedules are impacted by others' schedules, that they can't do their normal social routines… Welcome to our world!" (Sins Invalid, "Social Distancing")

implications.[27] Throughout this paper I use the terms "able to conform" to describe those who are referred to as "able-bodied" and "neuro-typical," and "unable to conform" for those who are often described as "disabled" or "non-neuro-typical." I prefer these terms as they emphasize that ability and disability are social constructs.

The reality that a majority of contemporary American Theatre spaces are not accessible for people with a range of invisible disabilities creates a paradigm that assigns value to some while devaluing others. This is the nature of discrimination. As stated in the Americans with Disabilities Act, Section 2(a(3)):

> Individuals with disabilities continually encounter various forms of discrimination, including outright intentional exclusion, the discriminatory effects of architectural, transportation, and communication barriers, overprotective rules and policies, failure to make modifications to existing facilities and practices, exclusionary qualification standards and criteria, segregation, and relegation to lesser services, programs, activities, benefits, jobs, or other opportunities.

A socio-political orientation of disability shows that the perceived limitations of a "person with a disability" is not a result of the individual's shortcomings, but of the social (Eisenhauer 8). This failure of social systems asks one to reconsider a framing that looks at the need of accessibility as a need to do "more" to include "more" people, but instead to look at accessibility within the framework of what is actively being done to exclude people.

Operating with this understanding of disability and exclusion, but knowing that such a framework was not in place at the University Theatre, in my response to the Artistic Director, I talked around the truth. I told him that if the lighting designer really wanted the house lights down, we could "talk about it." It told him that I deeply respect the artistic integrity of designers,

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[27] Attribution theory deals with how individual people come to understand events around them, and how this understanding relates to their ways of thinking and behaving. Attribution specifically breaks down the ways in which people perceive the observed behavior of others, the belief that people hold in the intentionality or unintentionallity of other's behavior. Attribution theory explains who and what individuals *attribute* the behavior of others to: themselves, or that which is external to them (Culatta).

and that designers having ownership over their designs was important to me. I said that, if I was chosen to direct, I would explain to the designer why I want lights to be partially up on the house throughout the show, and hope that they would also value creating an inclusive space. But, I told him, I would, "of course," make sure the lighting designer had full artistic freedom. In my mind, I believed that I would manage to convince any lighting designer I was assigned of the importance of access.

The attitude exhibited by the Artistic Director towards accessibility is a textbook example of casual ableism. As activist/scholar Mia Mingus declared in her 2017 Paul K. Longmore Lecture on Disability Studies at San Francisco State University:

> Disability and ableism are **not** secondary issues, though they continually get treated as such. …. Understanding disability and ableism is the work of every revolutionary, activist and organizer — *of every human being*. Disability is one of the most organic and human experiences on the planet. We are all aging, we are all living in polluted and toxic conditions and the level of violence currently in the world should be enough for all of us to care more about disability and ableism. [Emphasis in original.]

To many people whose bodies and minds are able to conform, the idea of compromising even the smallest amount of "artistic freedom" in order to provide access and safety for those whose bodies and minds are not is unthinkable. This is discrimination. As Margaret Price argues in her seminal book *Mad at school: Rhetorics of mental disability and academic life*, "although the ADA was constructed on a civil rights model, and was intended to bring about broad change, the very broadness of its language has made way for ongoing discrimination" (Price 110). Price is here referring to judicial rulings against extending accommodations and employment to academics whose minds are unable to conform, but the principal can be applied to audience members. The ADA was designed to protect people from experiencing discrimination in the work place and to prevent discrimination against individual's ability to participate in community and cultural activities. Leaving house lights up may not seem like a big deal, and so thought of as

unnecessary. But, to some people, it is a big deal. Specifically, people who have Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) or anxiety can find it almost impossible, as well as detrimental to their health, to sit still in a dark room for extended periods of time. Raising the lights can provide a safer space for these individuals (Corbett 1234-1235).

The fact that I made it sound like I was willing to "give up" creating an accessible space in order to be selected to direct *In the Blood* was only possible because of my positionality. Only because I am viewed as someone who is able to conform was this conversation even possible. I put my figurative calling card away and played the game in order to advance my own interests. This is a privilege that folks whose bodies and minds are visibly unable to conform do not have. This is when passing gives you power. I justified this exchange as my way to get the chance to embark on a practice as research project that, I hoped, would demonstrate the kind of transformation needed to include disability/ability in systematic work towards Diversity Equity and Inclusion (DEI). Reflecting on this after the fact I believe that I contributed to ableism by not sticking to my insistence and explaining, again, why this was important. I wonder, still, if I would have been eventually chosen to direct had I refused to compromise on this.

Once director selections were made, the department began buzzing about casting. Half of the shows in the season were written by marginalized people, all of whom are cis-gendered women: Suzan-Lori Parks, who is black and heterosexual, Paula Vogel, who is gay and half Jewish, and Sarah DeLappe, who is heterosexual and white.[28] Rumors about concerned students fearing that "only black students" and "only Jewish students" would be cast respectively in *In the Blood* and *Indecent* began making their way around the department. Concern being raised within universities around casting choices for traditionally non-white shows is not new. The question

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[28] The other playwrights — Lucas Hnath, William Shakespeare, and Greg Kotis & Mark Hollmann — were all white cis-gender men.

"But do we have the actors for that?" when considering plays that demand non-white casts, can be "at once a preemptive strike and a self-fulfilling prophecy, surreptitious self-censorship clad in the language of prudent practicality" (Herrera 23). There was a time in the KU department where putting on a play like *In the Blood* would have been unthinkable, partly due to the "do we have the actors for that" question, and partly because of the content, which might not sit well with the more socially conservative audience expected.[29]

The question of what kinds of casts are required, and how casting should take place, is an issue of disability justice. Disability is intersectional in nature, and the leadership of the most impacted means for-fronting the experience and putting in leadership positions those whose identities exist at intersections of marginalization. There is a significant and visible lack of students in the theatre department whose bodies are unable to conform. There are, however, a number of students who live with various invisible disabilities, though the department does not document this. Some of these students ended up in my cast, and the work of disability justice is to follow them, celebrate them, and ensure that the production process is not harmful to them.[30] I decided even before students began asking about the racial make-up of my cast, that my approach to casting was to be race, gender and dis/ability conscious, though not essentializing. I will talk about my actual casting process in Chapter Two.

As a result of the student concern, the department called a "town hall" meeting, attended by the directors who were on campus, staff and students. In that meeting, the only two plays that

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[29] I had this conversation with a number of people in the KU department, including Chair Dr. Henry Bial and Director of Theatre Kathy Pryor. Both emphasized the desires of current staff and faculty at KU to push for a more diverse and inclusive season and the changes that had happened under the leadership of various Chairs and Artistic Directors over the last decade.

[30] There is another paper in this discussion, based on my experiences with actors who have invisible disabilities. However, this paper is not the place to tell these stories. Suffice it to say that the cast we ended up with was not only racially diverse, but neurologically diverse, and the work impacted people in vastly different ways based on their positionality across identity.

were discussed regarding casting choices were *In the Blood* and *Indecent*. Dr. Henry Bial, who was to direct *Indecent*, and I were asked if "only black" and "only Jewish" students would be cast in our respective productions. No one asked if "only women" would be cast in *The Wolves*, or if race-conscious casting would be used for *The Wolves*, The *Christians, As You Like It*, and *Urinetown (the musical)*, or if only white actors would be cast in those shows. Bial stated that there is a dangerous history around asking Jews to identify themselves and insisting that only Jews be present, and that he would be casting anyone. I stated that I would cast the "best actors" for the roles. I said that I was not committed to casting an all-black or even all-people of color cast, but that either was possible. I said that I would be casting a black actor for Hester, but all the other roles were up for grabs regarding race, gender, and dis/ability. This seemed to assuage some of the student's fears.

Non-black and non-Jewish students may have left the town hall feeling comfortable and as though they had not been excluded, but I left frustrated. I had felt pressured, as I had when talking earlier to the Artistic Director, to sound accommodating of the wishes of the non-marginazlied. Instead of bringing up the fact that when white students are cast in historically white productions, no one questions whether they "deserved" the role or not, but when black students are cast in historically black productions, others are quick to ask if they got the role "just because" they are black, I had assured non-black students that they would be given equal consideration. No one gave the students of color assurance that they would be given equal consideration in the plays written by white playwrights. I did not bring up the fact that the inherent assumption behind this idea is that the white students are more talented and/or skilled, and that the students of color have no talent and will only get cast for "diversity" reasons. It was my opportunity to point out the way in which *Indecent* and *In the Blood* were being othered and

that whiteness was being assumed to be "normal" and acceptable. It was an opportunity to bring up racialized and ableized casting norms, and instead I deferred to them. It was my second time slipping under my invisibility cloak and playing lip service to conformity and to structures of white/ableist-supremacy. I had lost an opportunity to show my calling card and challenge structures of exclusion that exist.

I was, however, the only director who made any reference to casting against gender, even though no questions regarding gender, or roles for non-binary or trans actors were asked. No questions were asked regarding dis/ability either, and I was the only director to mention this. This failure to ask about dis/ability was particularly glaring considering the previous season (2018/2019) KU had put on *The Curious Incident of the Dog In the Night-time* by Simon Stephens based on the novel by Mark Haddon, and the department had decided and made sure that the actor selected to play the lead, Christopher, identified on the Autism Spectrum, to reflect the reality of the character and avoid "playing disability." For the 2019/2020 season, there were no characters who were specifically identified in the scripts as "disabled," and so no emphasis was put on making sure that actors whose bodies and/or minds cannot conform knew they were welcome.[31]

The "self-fulfilling prophecy" within the KU University Theatre was around the content of plays. Once specific content was going to be staged, there were conversations around that positionality. But, unless specific content was on stage, the status quo was accepted. Additionally, the conversations that did happen around access happened almost exclusively around onstage

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[31] The character of Jabber in *In the Blood* is likely on the spectrum, as he is described repeatedly in the script as "slow," but, because the actor who plays Jabber also plays Chilli, who is likely not on the spectrum, the assumption is usually that an "able-bodied/minded" actor should be chosen to play both. I personally did not want to specify either way, but put work into providing space for and reaching out to students whose bodies/minds are unable to conform and let it be known that they were welcome and desired by this production.

access. Standard audience accessibility is in practice, meaning that barriers to theatre attendance do not include racial segregation, or physical inaccessibility, as they once did. When discussing access, it is critical to remember the history of exclusion. Many barriers that prevent people whose bodies and/or minds are unable to conform from attending the theatre have been lowered since the 1990s passage of the Americans With Disabilities Act (ADA), but many continue to exist today. With the birth of the disability rights movement of the 1970s-1990s, heavily influenced by the 1960s Civil Rights Movement, the unquestioning exclusion of people whose bodies and/or minds are unable to conform from all aspects of public life began to be called into question and eventually to change. In 1990, the ADA was signed into law. It states in Section 2(a(1)) that:

> Physical or mental disabilities in no way diminish a person's right to fully participate in all aspects of society, yet many people with physical or mental disabilities have been precluded from doing so because of discrimination; others who have a record of a disability or are regarded as having a disability also have been subjected to discrimination.

Since the passage of the ADA, theaters, along with many other cultural institutions, have been compelled to provide greater accessibility for people whose bodies are unable to conform.

However, despite the passage of the ADA, it was not until a $45,000 lawsuit in 2014 that the wealthiest of theatre districts, Broadway as a whole, started putting consistent work into accessibility. The suit was filed against the owners and operators of nine historic Broadway Theatres for violating the Americans With Disabilities Act.[32] A similar lawsuit had been filed against the Shubert Theaters in 2003.[33] In addition to the penalty, these organizations were required to improve accessibility to their theater spaces in a number of ways to follow the

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[32] The nine historic theaters were owned by Nederlander Organization.

[33] Both of these cases were filed by the United States Attorney for the Southern District of New York.

principals of the ADA. This came mainly in the form of providing physical accessibility, as well as consistent provision of hearing aids, and audio-reader versions of productions for the visually impaired. However, these services are often provided on a request-only basis.

Attribution theory helps explain the reasons why theatre-makers often exclude entire sections of the population from attending their venues without consideration. This framework shows how "causal attributions" are based on whether behaviors are perceived as in the control of the person. If people believe another's behavior to be the fault of that individual and that the person has no desire to change, "they might be less sympathetic to the person" (Corbett 1235). Attribution theory can "also explain how the public selectively includes or excludes people from aspects of society, because the public may make attributions about the cause of the difference" (Corbett 1235). Attribution theory "has far-reaching implications not only for explaining stigma, but also explaining how to bring about societal change by increasing knowledge of, and changing emotional reactions and behavioral responses to, persons with mental illness" (Corbett 1235-1236). The more familiarity that people have with a situation, the more acceptance and sympathy they tend to have for it. This understanding can be applied to theatre audience construction. When audiences are expected to behave in specific ways, for example, culture develops over time that excludes those unable to participate in the cultural norms of the space. The attributional effect of othering people whose bodies and minds are unable to conform from the theatre space implies that they *should not* be provided with access, or that to provide them with access is unnecessary.

Even as people whose bodies are unable to conform are increasingly provided with access to theatre audience spaces, those whose minds cannot conform are often ignored in discourses about inclusivity in the theatre. The one major exception to this pattern has come in

the last decade, where theaters across the country have been providing increasing access to certain audience spaces for people with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). Lisa Carling, director of accessibility programs Theatre Development Fund in New York, has pointed out that, "one in 88 children in the United States are diagnosed in the autism spectrum." She said that it "is too big a community to ignore," and consequentially performances catering to people with autism are "one of the two fastest-growing services for people with communication barriers" (Mandell 3). Shows that construct audience spaces to include people with ASD either craft performances that are specifically designed for people with ASD, or stage specific, limited, "sensory-friendly" or "relaxed" productions once or twice a run that feature softened lighting and sound cues, house lights partially up, a "relaxed" audience environment where patrons are not penalized or judged for moving around or making noise, and an open-door policy. ASD friendly productions often also provide sensory trigger information, and may even provide full plot summaries so that there are no surprises.

Despite lowering barriers for people with impaired hearing and ASD to access audience spaces, most theaters only provide these "services" once during the run due to "expense and the assumption that it will disturb much of the audience" (Mandell 4). Audience attitudes, and the desires of what is considered "the theatre-going public" stand in the way of providing access to certain groups. In fact, in recent years, "audience attitudes have also changed in the direction of greater intolerance towards any distraction in the theatergoing experience—an attitude likely brought on in part by the steep rise in ticket prices" (Mandell 5). This trend echoes Bennett's explanation of the changing nature of theatre audiences in Europe in the 1700s. This kind of ASD-friendly work tends to follow a "separate-but-equal" framework. This separates audiences comprised of people who do not have ASD from audiences with ASD. Some theaters even state

that their sensory-friendly productions are intended *only* for patrons with ASD and their families or caretakers.[34] This trend upholds the othering of audiences with ASD and other disabilities.

Other theaters approach creating ASD-friendly work by generating material from the ground up which focuses on stories that appeal to people who have ASD.[35] This kind of work is generally geared towards children with ASD and their families, but there is no rule that excludes anyone from attending (Mandell 2013). This work has no barriers to attendance, and welcomes all audiences. The key to creating theatre that is accessible is not to demand that every show fit every need, but to change the way that "typical theatergoing audiences" are constructed. Theatre-makers must consider who can and who cannot attend their shows in order to provide accessibility, instead of making subconscious assumptions about who deserves to be able to attend. Arguments against change to create greater accessibility are often met with arguments about "artistic freedom" and technical practicality. These conversations are critical to have within the context of conversations about accessibility, as structural change is often necessary.

Removing restrictions creates more inclusive spaces, which fosters interaction among people with differences. For example, the end of segregation in theaters across the country, which was not achieved until the 1964 Civil Rights Act demanded that all public spaces be desegregated, created environments where black and white patrons shared space (Garcia 70). The

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[34] One such example is Goodspeed Musicals, a theatre based in East Haddam, Connecticut, specializing in Musical Theatre. On their website, Goodspeed specifically states that their sensory-friendly productions are for people with ASD and other sensory input sensitivity, and that "*Regular* Goodspeed patrons should book into other performances so we can keep seats available for this special population and their families" [emphasis added].

[35] One example is the Big Umbrella Festival, an international "gathering of arts professionals offering performances across New York City for children on the autism spectrum" (Patterson). This festival, founded in 2015, provides productions specifically crafted to cater to people with "complex, often multiple disabilities and their families". The festival is led by Russell Granet, who became the Lincoln center's acting president in 2018, who works hard to live by the Lincoln Center's mission statement to perform for the "broadest possible audience." Granet's work has focused on creating accessible productions for specifically children with autism and their guardians.

end of segregation changed the way in which black and white people interacted with each other, accepted each other, and treated each other. Lifting restrictions that exclude persons whose bodies and minds are unable to conform will change the way in which people interact across differences of ability. As Corbett explains, "As children with autism gain greater access to theater, with opportunities for reciprocal social communication, the community gains greater awareness of autism, thereby reducing the barrier of stigma" (Corbett 1236). To extend Corbett's argument, this thesis holds that transforming cultural institutions to be accessible for people whose minds are unable to conform is part of changing broader culture. Such transformation will create changes to currently-accepted cultural norms, greater acceptance of difference among people, increase awareness of different invisible disabilities, and provide structures that can help engender a more tolerant and compassionate wider society.

The conversation that I was interested in having with *In the Blood* mirrored the slow but growing awareness of the need to make theatres accessible that is ongoing in the world of Broadway and other theaters. BroadwayCon, a convention meant for fans and industry professionals held annually since 2015, featured its second annual disability panel in 2017. According to a *Playbill* publication in 2017, panel members discussed "new developments in making theatre accessible to those who are differently-abled, and asked members of the community what further accommodations they would like to see made" (Gambino 2017). JW Guido, artistic director for the New York Deaf Theatre, argued on the panel that less accessibility equals overall "less opportunity and … consequently, less love in the theatre." Others on the panel agreed that there are accessibility boosters that help people without disabilities as well, such as open captions in Shakespeare performances. The audience was "interested to know what steps theatre owners are taking to address theatergoers who live with 'invisible' disabilities, such

as PTSD, depression, and anxiety" and there was a discussion of the use of trigger warnings for both subject matter and technical features like loud noises and flashing lights.

While the ADA calls for provision of "reasonable accommodation" for Americans who have disabilities, it also states that employers should not have to undergo "undue hardship" in creating facilities for people whose minds and/or bodies are unable to conform. This results in many theatres, specifically regional and university theatres, providing accessibility on a request-only basis. The University of Kansas, for example, does provide infrared hearing devices and/or ASL interpreters for those who are hard of hearing, as well as audio-reader descriptions for those who are visually impaired (though the latter is only available in the proscenium Crafton-Preyer Theatre), but in all of these cases, patrons must request these services in advance. Additionally, this information is only available on the website on a page called "Accessibility," which is not easy to find unless you know what you are looking for. In conversations with the staff at the University Theatre, I was specifically informed that KU is does not hire full-time ASL interpretation, or create audio-reader descriptors of all of their shows as a result of a seeming lack of need, and a tight budget. While KU is legally and morally bound to provide access for those who actively seek it out, they do not ensure accessibility for those who do not.

My goal was to move beyond the most basic access that the ADA dictated, and also move away from the "separate but equal" method of accommodating different abilities. Instead, I wanted to create a theatrical space, both on stage and in the audience, of *access intimacy*, a term coined by activist Mia Mingus. Mingus explains that:

> Access intimacy is that elusive, hard to describe feeling when someone else ‚gets' your access needs. The kind of eerie comfort that your disabled self feels with someone on a purely access level. Sometimes it can happen with complete strangers, disabled or not, or sometimes it can be built over years. It could also be the way your body relaxes and opens up with someone when all your access needs are being met. (Mingus, "Access intimacy")

There is a clear and critical distinction between "making accommodation for" people whose bodies and/or minds are unable to conform, and building a structure that provides access intimacy. It is parallel to being seen and heard as a full human who is not an inconvenience. I wanted to ensure that no one who attended *In the Blood* felt like an inconvenience. It was paramount that we ensured that people whose lived experiences mirrored those of Hester and her children were heard and seen, and not put on display for the sake of entertainment.

The area of access that I did the most work on was access for those with PTSD around any of the many violent behaviors about which the play speaks. Considering that this was the access issue that had brought me to this entire conversation in the first place, it is understandably the area where I pushed the hardest and gained the most information. Understanding that all conversations around which stories we tell and why start with our positionality and the context into which we tell the stories, I started thinking a lot about the historically white space of the theatre we would be performing in: the William Inge Memorial Blackbox Theatre.[36] While I could see the fullness of the character of Hester and her children, I knew well the danger of sensationalizing her story in a way that would horrify or anger an outsider audience, and humiliate and traumatize an insider audience. I did not want to do either. Trauma can be explained as a "fissure in experience which introduces the subject (and vicariously the observer/ society) to something unknowable, intolerable, and incomprehensible" (Nguyen 28). As argued by psychologist Dr. Leanh Nguyen, trauma is "[m]ore than just a blow to affect and body, it also inflicts a wound to meaning" (Nguyen 28). Trauma-informed services and psychologists alike tell us that, in order to deal with trauma, narrative is critical. This meant that, if I was to avoid re-

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[36] Named for Pulitzer-Prize winning playwright William Inge, who graduated KU in 1935. http://kutheatre.com/inge-theatre. According to all public knowledge Inge was a white cis-gender man.

traumatizing/traumatizing my audience, I needed to find a narrative structure that would allow me to tell a story that was healing and honest.

As I was researching these topics, a couple of friends of mine introduced me to the work of Dorothy Roberts and the SisterSong Women of Color Reproductive Justice Collective. SisterSong historicizes itself on its website as a collective that "was formed in 1997 by 16 organizations of women of color from four mini-communities (Native American, African American, Latina, and Asian American) who recognized that we have the right and responsibility to represent ourselves and our communities, and the equally compelling need to advance the perspectives and needs of women of color." SisterStrong works to change the conversation around reproductive rights away from the singular discussion about abortion access, to a more nuanced conversation around the right to reproductive freedom, from the right to have children, to the rights to raise them in a safe environment, to keep custody of them, and to provide them with education and food. *In the Blood* fits exactly within the conversation being held by reproductive justice scholars and activists.

In the Blood demonstrates, in visceral poetry, how the questions about the right to reproduce and to have control over one's body does not begin or end at a conversation about abortion rights. Hester has chosen to have each of her children. But she did not necessarily choose to conceive them. She did not choose for their fathers to not be involved and not provide her or her children with money. Not only that, but people around her constantly pressure her to have abortions. Chilli, her first child's absentee father, says "and she had to keep it, and I needed to get out of town. / People get old that way" (Parks, "In the Blood" 61). It is clear that he did not want Hester to have their child. But she did — so he left. Hester wanted to have the baby, for what reason we do not know. The only thing we know is that, in Hester's words, "My kids is

mine. I get rid of em what do I got? Nothing. I got nothing now, but if they go I got less than nothing" (Parks, "In the Blood" 17). They are her "treasures" as she repeats throughout the play. Her children have value to her, for a range of reasons that can be assumed. The right to an abortion is not Hester's fight. Instead her fight is the right to *have* children, the right to raise those children with meals of "meat and salad and bread" (Parks, "In the Blood" 30), and for the right not to have those children taken away.

Understanding *In the Blood* as a work of reproductive justice empowered me to engage with the long history of black women having all of these rights taken away from them. The core of reproductive justice, as I see it, is a fight for consent, a fight for women to be able to choose. Choose to have children, not to have children, and to raise those children in a healthy environment, and to be healthy themselves. These are choices that, historically, black mothers have not been able to make. Black women throughout American history have been stripped of all right to consent — not given the right to consent to having or not having children during enslavement, or with whom to have those children, or if to keep and raise their children. This continued after emancipation with Jim Crow laws and segregation.

One of the founders of SisterSong, Dorothy Roberts, says, "Myths are more than made-up stories" (Roberts 8). She explains that mythologies come to be understood and treated as truths. Myths take control of societal minds and behaviors. I position Parks' work in the realm of myth interrogation. She shines a bright light into the dusty corners of the mythologies created around American history. Her pieces focus on racial tension, yes, but one cannot honestly explore honestly American history without looking at racial tension. In fact, one powerful American myth is that the history of America is not the history of racism. Black mothers have been positioned within American political and social discourses as having "bad blood" and

passing on their "degeneracy" to their children, both in their genetics and their behavior. As Roberts puts it, American mythology suggests, "damaging behavior on the part of Back mothers — not arrangements of power — explains the persistence of Black poverty and marginality" (Roberts 9). It is to this point that Parks speaks when she has Hester say, "My life's my own fault, I know that. But the world don't help, ma'am" (Parks, "In the Blood" 34). Lisa Panzer, who reviewed Allens Lane Theater's 2010 production of *In the Blood* for Stage Magazine, defines this textual moment as "enigmatic." Panzer, among other reviewers, has framed productions of *In the Blood* as chances for audiences to "decide" which character is telling the truth, and what the truth is. These reviews miss the point that the play is not a cautionary or morality tale, but instead an interrogation of American mythology. The idea that Hester's life is her "own fault" is at the center of the American mythology around meritocracy and every individual's ability to pull themselves up by their bootstraps. There is a play on words that Parks engages in when she has Amiga Gringa's say, "The old woman and the shoe. That's who you are" (Parks, "In the Blood" 15).[37] I interpreted this line as a reference to American mythology. Nursery rhymes, harmless though they may seem, are often part of a child's first socialization. They, like commercials, are bricks in American myth-building. Parks, the poet, the lyricist, the myth-buster, creates a dual play on words. Amiga Gringa encourages Hester to sell at least a few of her children to a richest buyer, and, in her confession, talks about the opportunistic and brutal nature of capitalism. For our production, we foregrounded the mythology that American capitalism allows anyone to pull themselves up by their bootstraps, by having the

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[37] "There was an old woman who lived in a shoe" is a nursery rhyme attributed to "Mother Goose" in *The Dorling Kindersley Book of Nursery Rhymes* (2000). The text goes: "There was an old woman who lived in a shoe. / She had so many children, she didn't know what to do. / She gave them some broth without any bread; And whipped them all soundly and put them to bed."

bridge under which Hester lived be in the shape of a literal shoe, for, after all, a boot is a kind of shoe.[38]

Roberts' seminal book *Killing the Black Body* explains how laws and policies across America have targeted (and continue to target) black women, their bodies, their right to motherhood, and their reproductive choices. She explains:

> The belief that Black procreation is the problem remains a major barrier to radical change in America. It is my hope that by exposing its multiple reincarnations, this book will help to put this dangerous fallacy to rest. I also want this book to convince readers to think about reproduction in a new way. These policies affect not only Black Americans but also the very meaning of reproductive freedom. (Roberts 5)

I took this intention as the guide for our production of *In the Blood*. Parks' play references the mythologies of passing down degeneracy from mother to children. Parks asks her audience to come face to face with the mythologies that surround them; she makes fun of us all for believing them; she tenderly, harshly, musically, metaphorically, reminding us that these concepts are nothing more than mythologies. The stereotype of the "Welfare Queen" is placed on the body of Hester by those around her, even as she strives to fulfill the American Dream. Parks provides a narrative through which a production can show audiences that the mythology of the Welfare Queen is obscene and absurd. I used the framework of Carnival characters to create, and then break down, these stereotypes. Parks' work specifically takes the stereotypes that have been used throughout American history to justify white supremacy, and makes each one a character. Stereotypical characteristics such as lazy, ignorant, shiftless, as well as characters such as the Jezebel, Mammy, Tragic Mulatto are all fair game—and more. The beauty of *In the Blood* is the way that it addresses these stereotypes head on, bursting them open in an explosion of color and

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[38] The idea architect behind that shoe-bridge was my partner, Pere DeRoy. Once I figured out how to frame the play within Reproductive Justice, I was able to tell her the story in a way that was not triggering, but instead exciting and interesting, and she came up with the idea of having Hester live in a literal shoe. I proposed this concept to scenic designer Kate Smeltzer, who ran with it.

nuance. Hester, at different points in the script, has these stereotypes projected by those around her, as well as herself at times, onto her being. Hester seems at first to be the embodiment of ignorance. She can not “even” read. Her “slow” son has to teach her. Welfare also implies that Hester is shiftless when she talks about Hester’s lack of ambition. She says, “We put you in a job and you quit. We put you in the shelter and you walk. We put you in school and you drop out. Yr children are also truant” (Parks, "In the Blood" 32). Parks’ play, and my direction of it, looked to bring these stereotypes on stage, scrutinize them, unpack them, and, ultimately, kick them to the curb, destroyed and lifeless. Like Roberts, I wanted to contribute to transforming people’s understanding of single motherhood, of poverty, and of ignorance.

It was important not to depict Hester as helpless or passive within her story. It was also critical to not see her as either Saint-like or ignorant. These shallow images would obscure the reality of Hester as a complicated person. Roberts states in the introduction to *Killing the Black Body*: “I hope to show that, while racism has perverted dominant notions of reproductive freedom, the quest to secure Black women’s reproductive autonomy can transform the meaning of liberty for everyone” (Roberts 7). I took this as the narrative that we would use for the basis of our show. Through such a narrative we would be able to push for empowerment and transformation.

Chapter 2: Building the show from design to production

With my framework and approach to the script established, I moved into the production stage with excitement. In this chapter I discuss the design process, casting, and rehearsals. I examine communications that took place throughout this process, and break down the ways in which I went about attempting to answer my research question. I explain how the principals I discuss in Chapter One were practically manifested during the process of creating this play. The chapter contains three sections: Design, Casting, and Rehearsal. In each section, I discuss how to apply a feminist and disability justice framework to the process of directing. As a feminist disability justice-oriented director, I see my work as that of excavation, social transformation for the marginalized, to minimize harm, and to provide opportunities for leadership of the most impacted. Additionally, I understand truth to be socially constructed and partial, and strive to show this through my work.

I am trained in and have taught acting techniques including Stanislavsky, Meisner, Boal's Theatre of the Oppressed, Brecht, and Jouvay Popular Theatre Process (JPTP). For this production of *In the Blood*, I worked to marry the emancipatory process of JPTP with the politically minded focus of Brecht, in order to hold a conversation with the long and beautiful/ dangerous history of African American humor. As Glenda R Carpio states in her introduction to *Laughing Fit to Kill: Black Humor in the Fictions of Slavery*, "Black American humor began as a wrested freedom, the freedom to laugh at that which was unjust and cruel in order to create distance from what would otherwise obliterate a sense of self and community" (Carpio 4).[39] While acknowledging that Western theatrical traditions have influenced Parks' writing, I position

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[39] Carpio is a Professor of African and African American Studies at Harvard University.

the text and our performance of it within a post-colonial discourse, which draws aesthetically as much or more from African and Afro-diaspora practices and traditions as European.

For descendants of enslaved people of African descent, there is no direct lineage to follow. Colonialism stripped inherited identity, and post-colonial work strives to build new ones. As Ousmane Diakhaté, Hansel Ndumbe Eyoh, and Don Rubin articulate, "African tradition has not handed down to us a specific theatrical system; rather, it has handed down to us a series of functions, which themselves were modified under colonial influence and which gradually moved away from their roots, though they were never eliminated completely" (Diakhaté et al 5). Parks inherited these discordant strands of performance traditions interrupted and those enforced. She utilizes a tragicomic narrative structure that is as much music and oral tradition as it is narrative theatre. In Parks' poetic piece "New Black Math," which discusses the question "what is a black play," she states:

> A black play gives us a role to play and, when someone steps into that role, the rest of us got someone like us to look at. Seeing yrself mirrored is a basic component of healthy psychological development. Im not talking about creating a series of model behaviors, but roles, like the roles in the passion play—you know what a passion play is—like when they reenact the journey of Christ on easter and the town gathers to watch an actor go through his moments as he carries his cross up the hill & c. So the black playwright gives us a role. Because it is in having a role that we have an opportunity to imaginatively participate. And it is through participation that we work out the demons. (Parks "New" 582)

Parks also likens her plays to the ancient medicinal treatment of "bleeding" people to release "bad blood." "The play," she says of *In the Blood*, "creates a wound that is actually the first stage in the healing process" (Kolin & Young 17). I wanted to ensure that we allowed healing to take place.

Black performance theory has been described as, "oppositional because it honors the subaltern, rhetorical roots of black symbolism that survive and breath through the timeworn

death wish cast against black expression" (DeFrantz & Gonzalez viii). Though it is creative in nature, Parks' work is all part of black performance theory. Even as she pushes back against colonial mythologies, she has learned to explain her work through a European theatrical lens. In a 2002 interview with the *New York Times* regarding her Pulitzer Prize winning play *Topdog/ Underdog*, Parks explained that, "To me, Lincoln is the closest thing we have to a mythic figure. In days of great Greek drama, they had Apollo and Medea and Oedipus -- these larger-than-life figures that walked the earth and spoke -- and they turned them into plays. Shakespeare had kings and queens that he fashioned into his stories. Lincoln, to me, is one of those" (Shenk 2002). She positions her own stage characters as similarly exaggerated renditions of reality. Her chorus has been seen as a Greek-styled one (Young 2007); however, it can also be seen as existing within the African tradition of Possession (Carpio 199). Parks summons ghosts, not to haunt, but to purge anger, pain, and sorrow with the audience as witnesses, calls us into a collective "cognitive catharsis" (Carpio 198) through which a healing can begin taking place.[40] Parks utilizes theories and structures across history to create her work. She is a post-colonial playwright in that she seeks to decolonize the bodies and stories of African Americans and American society (Wilmer 442). It is tempting for scholars of Western theatre to position Parks within the Western canon, and, on one hand, there is legitimacy to this: she is one of the greatest American playwrights. However, instead of fitting neatly within the power structures created by Western theatre, she breaks down, reclaims, and reforms her own narrative.

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[40] With this term, Carpio references R. Darren Gobert's paper "Cognitive Catharsis in the *Caucasian Chalk Circle*." Gobert, and Carpio in turn, discuss Brecht's relationship with the Aristotelian catharsis. According to Gobert, as explained by Carpio, though Brecht initially rejected catharsis as emotional output which "ensnares" the audience, he later came to understand that emotions "might play in ethical ddecision making" and therefore let emotional effect play a part in his work (Carpio 260-261). While Brechtian Verfrungsteneffect has been positioned as in direct opposition to Aristotle, it is important to understand that while they advocated the use of theatrical spectacle for different purposes, their techniques were not always as diametrically opposed to each other as has been argued.

Schafer argues, and Kolin & Young repeat, that *In the Blood* "observes the so-called Aristotelian unities found in the classical Greek theatre — the play is set in one place, on one day and dramatizes one key action" (Kolin & Young 17). However, reading or watching the play reveals that this interpretation is incorrect. The play takes place over a series of days. In the first scene it is evening, and night falls during that same scene. Scene Two takes place on the second day. Hester sees the Reverend who tells her to come back in two days. By the time Scene Eight comes around, two days have passed. In total three days pass throughout the play.[41] Reading a wide range of scholarship on Parks' work, and specifically *In the Blood* convinced me that there are many ways to interpret the play, and all of them relate back to the interpreters personal positionality and education. I was most interested in exploring the social commentary and post-colonial narrative structure of the play, and so grounded myself in the work of black female scholars telling their own stories. While I believe this decision was the right one for the kind of work I was interested in doing, I learned through the process of working with the design team, that it was not the right decision for everyone.

The Design Process

The design team was selected for the show by the end of the spring 2019 semester. Other than some basic design concepts that I had submitted in the application phase, I had no power to contribute to the selection of designers. The team assembled comprised of undergraduate theatre majors and an MFA student within our department, all of whom were white cis-gender women.[42]

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[41] There is a great deal more that should be written on various contradictory analyses of Parks' plays by a wide range of scholars, the roots of these contradictions and what they say about the conflicts within American cultural understandings, however, that is not the purpose of this paper.

[42] I asked if anyone identified in any other way, and everyone shook their heads.

I had specified that, if possible, I would like to work with designers who were people of color, but this did not pan out. The results were not unexpected considering that the majority of the design side of our department is white. In fact, in KU's last five seasons, totaling thirty-eight shows, only eleven of them have had a designer (or two) of color. Out of those eleven shows, there were eight individual designers of color, several of whom worked on a number of shows.[43] Only one of the designers of color was still going to be part of our department by Fall 2019 when *In the Blood* was to go up, and no new designers of color were joining.

Despite the homogeneous look of the selected design team, there was some diversity within the group as some of the designers had minds that were unable to confirm even though they, like me, were able to pass for able to conform. I bring up the demographics of the design team because leadership of the most impacted should be applied on every level. Of course, having a diverse design team does not mean that everyone would automatically be on the same page, or interpret the story the same way. We have all been socialized within the same dominant system and being a person of marginalized identity does not necessitate familiarity with theoretical frameworks such as Disability Justice or Critical Race Theory. However, lived experiences are valuable ways of knowing. Having a diverse design team would lead to different experiences being considered and a range of perspectives being part of the design process.

Our first design meeting was held in May 2019. I began that meeting by addressing the gender and race of everyone in the room, as being inclusive of broad perspectives involves starting from one's own positionality, thus allowing for reflexivity and the multiplicity of truths

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[43] The list of shows and designer of color are as follows: *Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time* (Rana Esfandiary and Iman Hinton), *Sycorax* (Rana Esfandiary), *She Kills Monsters* (Liz Mitts), *Ashes to Ashes* (Iman Hinton and Soroush Rezvanbehbahani), *Henry's Law* (Iman Hinton), *Late, A Cowboy Song* (Timothy Andris Sella & Liz Mitts), *Anony(mous)* (Iman Hinton), *Johanna Facing Forward* (Pamela Rodríguez-Montero),*The Big Meal* (Pamela Rodríguez-Montero), *Flora, The Red Menace* (Pamela Rodríguez-Montero), and *The Last Cyclist* (Nannan Gu).

that exist. I told the designers that the foundations of this production would be Critical Race Theory, Reproductive Justice, and Disability Justice, and provided definitions of each. I asked them all to take time over the summer to read *Killing the Black Body* by Dorothy Roberts, and *Evicted: Poverty and Profit in the American City* by Matthew Desmond. Both books, I felt, were information-packed but accessible reads, that would help the team investigate their own positionality and beliefs regarding race, poverty, single motherhood and the mythology around the Welfare Queen. I also suggested that they watch Ava Duvernay's documentary *13th*, to gain familiarity with the history of the carceral state and its effect on black America.

We went on to discuss the importance of acknowledging that there are students on campus who have previously, or are currently, experiencing homelessness, eviction, and/or extreme poverty. I introduced the guiding principal of archetype, stereotype, and the breaking of those stereotypes that we were going to use to create the world of the play. We also discussed Parks' statement that the play takes place "Here and Now," and so our play would take place in Lawrence, 2019. I additionally introduced the concept of creating a Sensory Friendly run, including principals of Universal Access such as house-lights being half up, an open-door policy where audience members can come and go as they please, relaxed seating where people with different sizes and seating-abilities are welcome, and either ASL on stage from the actors, or projections of all the lines for those with hearing loss, explaining that it would likely be a combination of the two.[44]

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[44] Originally, as I explain in Chapter 1, I wanted all lines to be signed by actors on stage, but I had come to realize just how much work it would take to translate the show into ASL and teach it to the actors, or, even if they actors knew ASL, for them to memorize in two languages. At this point I still hoped to incorporate some ASL into the production, but knew that some projections would be needed. I specifically asked for a projection designer for this reason.

After that, I asked everyone in the room if and why they were excited about this project and asked them that, if they wanted, they could share what spoke to them about the script. I wanted to understand their perspectives on the script so that we could apply a reflexive gaze to our work. Emily Hunsucker, an undergraduate theatre major who was the lighting designer, talked about her personal connections to the text and how thrilled she was to be working on a production that centered Disability Justice. Other designers expressed interest in learning more about the material and the Carnival aesthetic. It seemed as though a number of the other designers had not read the script, as their answers lacked specificity and script-related subject matter. I emphasized the necessity of reading the full script as well as assigned reading material and was met with nods of agreement. Despite the general positivity at that first meeting, and my belief that the readings would help the designers understand what story they were telling, in retrospect I realize that giving pep talks and assigning reading was not enough to encourage the designers to actually do the reflexive work necessary. I realize, in retrospect, that I did not ask them if they were interested in learning about reproductive justice, the carceral state, or poverty in America. I assumed that, because they were designers on this production, that they would be interested. This resulted in a number of disruptions in the process that could have been avoided with more knowledge and open communication.

I spent summer 2019 going back and forth with the scenic designer, MFA student Kate Smeltzer, about the look and feel of the show. We talked about the mythology around the Welfare Queen, the ways in which I was interested in utilizing this stereotype and how we could disrupt it. We worked on creating a visual landscape for the show that would be carnivalesque in nature — both over the top, and full of social commentary. Carnival, like Parks' work, draws from a smorgasbord of influences — from West African mask practice, to ancient Greek festivals.

Trinidadian traditional Mas characters are larger-than-life caricatures, critiques, and celebrations of people who walk the earth, used to critique, comment on, and question what is happening in the world around them. Undergraduate theatre major, Harlan Shoemaker, was assigned to assist Smeltzer, and was given the responsibility of designing a few of the costumes and the makeup. Since different people were doing different parts of the design, and consistency was important, we spent significant time exploring visual options. We started with the Bridge under which Hester and her children are said to live. It was important for the visuals to be as abstract, as anti-mimetic, and as bright, visceral, and musical as the words Parks wrote. In order to emphasize the puppet-like nature of the people around Hester, all beholden to systems larger than themselves, we looked into clown and puppet-like make-up designs that were both strange and familiar. We created a make-up design that felt clown-like for all the actors except Hester. I originally had the idea that they would paint layers of make-up onto their faces, a new layer each time they changed characters, until their faces were distorted, caked with make-up, and disturbing in the way that dolls from the 1950s can be.[45] Additionally, in order to ground the set in "Here and Now," we decided to create a wall of graffiti that was inspired by actual graffiti found around Lawrence. Another scenic design assistant, Brooke Metz, a junior in liberal arts & sciences, created this design.[46] The graffiti element spoke of protest and the underbellies of spaces. Historically, Parks' work has been set on more sparse stages (Carpio 196); however, for this production, I wanted to create visual overstimulation for audiences. This decision was grounded

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[45] We ended up scrapping the idea of layers of make-up for the practical reason of not having enough time to practice this effect enough that the actors would be able to perform it in the right amount of time. We stuck with the doll-like or clown-like look for the performers, but they only added minimal layers. They did perform the make-up smear at the end, causing them to look as though tears were running down their faces for the final moments of the play.

[46] The major stated here is the information that Metz herself provided for publicity.

in the idea of mockery, of *performativity*, combined with Brechtian *Verfrendugseffekt*, which Brecht describes as, "a technique which confers on the human events to be presented the stamp of the conspicuous, of something requiring an explanation, something not obvious, not simply natural … to make of the spectator an active critic of society" (Brecht 432). I wanted to create a cartoon-esque feel to the stage, which would engage the audience in critical thought and make them question what they were seeing. Considering the historically white space in which we were working (see Chapter One), I felt it was important to start with the stereotypes and mythologies embedded in American consciousness. Our goal was to look at histories of American theatrical traditions, using a diaspora consciousness to make them strange.

Parks' work "engineers a major reversal of expectations" in that she reveals the "respectable" among us to be the true freaks, the predators, the users (Carpio 193). In *In the Blood* I chose to manifest this by pointing out that Hester is the only *real* person in the play. Everyone else is a clown, a buffoon, a puppet to the exploitative systems that make up American society. The performativity of the transformation between children and adults is at the center of making the familiar strange. Shoemaker designed the clown-like make-up that othered and de-familiarized characters who otherwise are comfortable parts of American life, mythologized as safe and "upstanding citizens" — Doctors, Social Welfare Workers, and Reverends. The other two, also in clown/puppet make-up, Amiga Gringa, and Chilli, are also mythologized. Gringia, the "white friend," is a woman who uses her "money maker" (referring to her body) to survive. Her whiteness, emphasized by her name, is central to her character. This character reflects a history of the difference in ways that white and black women are treated regarding motherhood, and labor. While black and brown women have been forced into sterilization, white women were often refused this service, as white children continue to be prized (Roberts 95). Chilli is built up

as Hester's possible savior, his presence is dangled from the first scene in front of Hester. He is "doing well, and looking for you" Amiga Gringa tells her (Parks, "In the Blood" 15). Patriarchy tells us that it is the man's job to save the woman, and that a woman without a man is nothing. I saw it as our job to make it clear to the audience that all of these ideas were absurd and ludicrous.

Despite my plans to take into consideration the positionality of all designers, and help them to develop reflexivity and cultural sensitivity through readings and conversation, a number of fundamentally different understandings led to clashes throughout the production period. It became clear to me that the Scenic Designer and myself were not on the same page when, in a production conference, she called Hester "A Welfare Queen" without talking about breaking down that stereotype. We had already had numerous discussions about "Welfare Queen" being a derogatory stereotype. We had also discussed that Hester did not have to look ugly or trashy just because she was poor, and that she should be able to look attractive, though it should be clear that the nicer clothes she might be wearing were either quite old, or had been bought/found already used. Despite the design itself being approved, when I first saw the actor in Hester's full costume, I did not know what to say. Hester was wearing so much jewelry it looked like she had just robbed a Claire's.[47] The jewelry was clearly cheap, but so copious that Hester appeared decadent and careless. I asked the designer to take away most of the jewelry, and she did.

We ran into another disagreement about meaning when the set was dressed. So much "trash" was put around the stage that it looked like the dirtiest back alley in a big city. In the script Hester claims that "I like my place clean" (Parks, "In the Blood" 8) and when newspaper, used condoms and other garbage was scattered everywhere in her home, I felt that it undermined

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[47] Claire's is a low-cost costume jewelry store frequented by teens.

her. Some trash around the space was welcome, but it should be in line with the trash that existed around Lawrence. Smeltzer did not agree with my argument, instead saying that it was "metaphorical trash" and informing me that she had done research and that was the "normal amount" of trash under bridges. I grew up in Lawrence and have spent many an afternoon by the Kaw river under the bridge, and walking down back allies across town. I am familiar with areas populated by homeless individuals. There is not near the level of trash that was originally on our stage. Eventually the set dressing was changed, but what I analyzed in that situation was an inability, or perhaps unwillingness, to look beyond a preconceived notion of homeless individuals as unclean and untrustworthy. For me, the most important aspect of our storytelling had to be to create trust for and love of Hester. She was our heroine, our anchor. Yet this designer routinely failed to ask questions like: where did Hester get all that jewelry from? Why would she say she likes to keep her place clean if she has trash everywhere? I had tried to differentiate the way in which we were to treat the adult aggressors in her life and Hester, but this had not apparently been fully understood.

Another issue that arose in the design was the designers lack of training in design for diverse skin tones and hair textures. Even though Smeltzer and Shoemaker emphasized from early on in their designs that they had not colored in the figures drawn under the clothes because they did not yet know the skin-color of the actors, they did not subsequently adjust make-up design once the actors were cast. One of the black actors in the cast looked almost as though he was wearing the blackface of early minstrel shows because of the white around his eyes. I had to step in and ask the designers to adjust the designs as a result. A culturally sensitive designer with knowledge of the history of blackface would not have gone in that direction in the first place without consultation. Additionally, the actors were left to style their own hair and various

requests I made for specific hair styles were not executed due to a clear lack of competence with non-European hair textures. These issues were not, in my opinion, the fault of the designers, but instead an institutional lack of support for actors of color, and race-conscious designs.

In addition to some designers not being on the same page as I was about the theoretical framework of what we were doing and the story we were telling, there was also fear of appropriating black culture. The sound designer, KayLee Mitchell, a sophomore physics major who is also passionate about sound design, felt specifically uncomfortable about including songs that had "the N-word" in them. This is at the heart of the concern that I had in having an all-white design team: they did not have the cultural knowledge and sensitivity to engage with black culture in a grounded manner. People who grew up around black culture, or who have studied and acquired deep knowledge that way, are able to understand that culture, and utilize it in ways to tell a story that is respectful and appreciative. Mitchell was completely unfamiliar with African-American music. I gave her a long list of artists to get acquainted with, but soon realized that there just was not enough time for her to learn even a cursory history of African American music, let alone be able to choose songs that were relevant to the story we were telling.

In order to solve this issue, I brought in a recent graduate, Allison Lewis (MFA African and African-American Studies) to work as the "Music Consultant." Allison was able to put together a beautiful, moving, dynamic selection of songs to speak to the text and the reality of African-American life and narrative. This musical storyline was interwoven with the landscape created by Mitchell, who recorded sounds from around Lawrence to create an ambient background for the entire show. Lewis's selections stretched from spirituals that were sung during times of enslavement, to early independence, the Harlem Renaissance, all the way up into

contemporary hip hop.[48] This aural landscape contributed to creating familiarity to a black audience, while introducing a non-black audience to sounds and words that were not familiar to them. There was no way to do this without having an expert on the ground who *knew* black music. I was deeply grateful to Lewis for helping with this, for no compensation other than credit in the production program, despite having graduated KU the previous semester.

While the visual world has significant aspects of the figurative, it was important that the sound design had a hyper-realistic feel to remind the audiences that they were, actually, looking at a take on the real world. Mitchell recorded the background noise under the bridge down by the Kaw River off Massachusetts Street (the main street) in Lawrence, and the sound played underneath all the action of the play. The goal was to create a cinematic sound design because we live in a world where film and TV is part of our everyday experience, and a cinematic sound design would feel familiar to our audiences. Additionally, in order to bring the play into the current moment, we also had a soundscape that preceded the production that included President Donald Trump talking about welfare in the contemporary moment. This created a bridge between the Reaganomics of the era in which Parks was writing, and SisterSong was founded, and the moment we exist in today, when SisterSong is still hard at work and *In the Blood* remains relevant.

As I stated above, in the initial design meeting, I explained that having either open captions, or ASL interpretation, or a combination of the two was critical to my vision for the production. However, as I started learning more about ASL, I found out that there is significant linguistic variation within ASL, including a variation called Black ASL, which has been influenced by African-American Vernacular English (AAVE) (Toliver-Smith). This complicated a

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[48] See Appendix B for a list of songs used in the sound design.

simple translation into ASL, specifically because *In the Blood* is written in something more similar to AAVE than to Standard American English. There was not enough time or resources to investigate this fully and deliver the appropriate training, so it became clear that only open captions would be used to create accessibility for those with hearing loss. The projection design would also have to work with the lights. The process of creating the projections is a key demonstration of the ways in which creating access for people whose minds and bodies are unable to conform cannot be fully solved without structural and cultural shifts larger than those I was able to facilitate.

Open captions are common practice at KU for opera performances; however, this service has never before (to my knowledge) been used for a non-opera production at KU. When closed captions are not possible, having open captions is an essential practice in accessibility.[49] However, getting the projection design accomplished, became the most challenging part of the design. Even though I had brought it up at the first meeting, it was something that was not internalized or prioritized by the design team. I believed that saying that open captions would be necessary to create access, that it was understood that this was not "just" a "design choice" that, like too much jewelry, could be kept or left. Nearly a month into rehearsal I asked how the projections were going and received a panicked answer of "what projections?" An emergency production conference was called to figure this out. During the conference I was asked by a professor in our department if I was willing to "give up" the Open Caption aspect of the production. The question appeared to stem from the understanding that having Open Captions was merely a stylistic choice. I felt the familiar moment of panic, the pressure to not "be a

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[49] Closed captions are personal captions, for example, placed at the back of the seat in front of one, with the option to turn on or off, or projected into a headset the audience member wears. Open captions are those publicly available to everyone that cannot be turned off.

problem." But this time, I stood firm and insisted. I could not change the system that failed to consider the needs of these individuals on a regular basis, but I could demand that my production take another.

My unwillingness to"compromise" on this issue brings up the casual ableism that permeates theatre culture within university spaces. Having a production that does not have captions or any other way to follow along with the story other than hearing is as good as saying: "We do not want people who are deaf or hard of hearing to come." In some cases, such as at KU, deaf people interested in theatre have to call ten days in advance to ask for "accommodation." This kind of extra work demanded on the part of individuals with disabilities is discriminatory. The arguments against using Open Captioning centered around the "impracticality" of putting in the extra labor to create this projection design. No one on the design team had experience creating that many projections through QLab, the program used to run lights, and it was Ann Sitzman, KU Theatre's Technical Coordinator, who pointed out that we could use PowerPoint the way the Operas do. She said she would be happy to teach the designer and projection operator to use it. The next task was finding a projection operator. I took that task on myself and was grateful that an undergraduate student, Andrew Schum, I had worked with on a dramaturgy project for another play, volunteered.

What I realize upon looking back on this process was that the real issue was that executing accessibility should not be the job of the designers. As Sins Invalid suggest in *Skin, Tooth, and Bone*, events should "Have an access committee for planning purposes and a person or two from that committee in the role of "access coordinator(s)" on the day of the event if you anticipate the gathering to be more than 15 people" (Berne, "Skin, Tooth" 26). While KU and other University theatre programs may not have the resources for an entire committee and two

coordinators, there is still a clear need for at least one person whose job is to focus on accessibility. A person in such a position could interact with director, front of house, stage manager, tech crew, and design team to coordinate accessibility needs with the specificity of each production in mind. What is critical is that this person would not be a designer, thus making clear that accessibility is not a "design choice" that can be discarded.

The smoothest part of the design process was working with the lighting designer. Hunsucker understood from the beginning and was committed to creating a dynamic world, cinematic in scope, that would be simultaneously sensory-friendly and visually bold. She focused on creating a space that felt inclusive, inviting, and also alienating. The lighting design ended up winning an award at the Kennedy Center American College Theatre Festival, where Hunsucker was roundly applauded for her work on inclusivity and access. I was incredibly proud of what was achieved with the design. It was beautiful, creative, and emotionally stirring, at the same time as never bringing the lights down below 25%, and allowing the open captions to be visible the entire time.

There was a point in the process where I fully realized that there was a lack of alignment between my vision and the vision of at least a number of the designers. We were in tech week and several of the designers were talking about the scene where Jabber dies. Hunsucker referred to it as "the murder scene." I balked. To me it is clear that Hester does not "murder" Jabber, but instead accidentally kills him in a moment of being overwhelmed. He has become, in that moment, his father and Reverend D and all those who have called Hester a "slut" before. In an expression of sudden violence, Hester snaps. This is a crime of hunger, of desperation, and temporary insanity. Hester does not know what she is doing, and, more importantly, she did not decide to do it, she is, instead, pushed to a point of snapping. From my perspective, this is

Hester's moment of Losing It. The world in which she lives in has driven her to this act that is neither pre-meditated nor chosen. I contextualized this within conversations around people being pushed to breaking points.[50] However, as I discuss in the first part of this chapter, there is a well-published stream of thought that positions *In the Blood* as a Medea play.[51] While both Hester and Medea kill at least one of their children, that is where the similarities in the stories end. Medea, and other Greek heroes who murder their children, do so to get revenge on those who have wronged them, or to appease the Gods. These characters, additionally, make these choices on their own. The world depicted in *In the Blood* strips Hester of her ability to make choices. The entire point of the play is Hester cannot consent—she is not given that right. This comment by Hunsucker made it clear to me that, like a good number of scholars, my designers saw Hester as the one responsible for her son's death, which was a completely different take on the story than the way I saw it. It was at this point that I came to understand the depth of the communication problems I was having with the majority of my design team.

What I came to understand late in the design process was that I had not practiced enough cultural sensitivity. I was invested in getting the designers on the same page with me, from encouraging them to note their own positionality, to assigning them texts to read, but I failed to engage with their way of seeing the script outside of my vision. This meant that, at five days to opening, there were disagreements about the message of the play. These disagreements undermined our ability to tell a cohesive story. I realized, albeit too late, that I had not managed

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[50] The theatre and cinema are rife with stories of people being pushed to the breaking point and committing acts of violence, where the audience empathizes and even identifies with them. Recent examples include the character of Killmonger in *Black Panther* (2018), and the character of the Joker in *The Joker* (2019). Both of these male characters are ostracized by the world, and hurt until their pain and anger explodes into incredible violence. Women are not given this freedom or humanity to loose it.

[51] Scholars who follow this line of thought include Carol Schaffer, Phillip Kolin and Harvey Young. Additionally, Parks was quoted discussing her love of Greek drama in the New York Times in 2002 and this has been subsequently written about by the above scholars.

to find a way to bridge the gap between the positionality-influenced concepts of the designers, and the conclusions that I had reached, in collaboration with the cast. I will explore, in Chapter Three, ways in which I might have solved this problem.

The Casting Process

When casting came, I tried to focus completely on finding the best young actors to fill these difficult, draining, and complex roles. The other play that was casting alongside *In the Blood* was *The Wolves* by Sarah DeLappe, directed by guest artist Susan Kerner. *The Wolves* requires a cast of nine women, and one adult, who was already pre-cast to be played by Laura Kirk, a lecture in our department. Both the director and playwright are white. While no roles are written with a specific race stated or even implied, since the play's publication in 2015, casts have ranged in racial make-up but have usually included majority of white actors. I noticed that few white male students signed up to audition and that a good number of the white female students stated on their audition forms that they wanted to be first considered for *The Wolves*. I did not call anyone back who stated that *The Wolves* was their first choice. I was not interested in casting anyone for whom this play was a second choice, or a compromise. This decision was based on the reflexivity of consent-based choice. I hold that "desire is genius" (as one of my undergraduate mentors Deborah Margolin used to say, staring around at her students with her peculiar intensity). To me this means that one is always better at and more invested in something that they desire than something chosen for them. Part of foregrounding consent in my practice was ensuring that the actors cast *wanted* to be in this show.

Before the audition process began, I undertook two negotiations with the University staff: to allow me to audition two young black women actors with whose work I was familiar. One of

them would not be able to make the first round of auditions, and the other was taking a leave of absence as a KU student due to financial difficulties, but working to make enough money to continue as a student, and living in Lawrence, despite being from out of town. I had been interested in working with the second actor since the previous year when I had seen her audition for open call in the fall semester of 2018.[52] When I learned of her situation, I reached out to the University Theatre on her behalf and asked if, as she was on a leave of absence through an issue that was neither her choice nor her fault, she might be allowed to audition for the season. My argument was that she was still part of the KU community, and was a committed to returning to school. I felt that, if she were allowed to be included in extracurricular activities, she would be more likely to actually return to school, as re-enrollment rates for students who drop out due to finances are not high. This particular student had caught my eye due to her skills in acting, but overall this was an issue of accessibility. As I have previously discussed, institutions of higher learning are not historically known for their great accessibility, particularly for working class and lower-income students. While some students' parents are able to afford tuition, this student's parents were not. Additionally, this student had received a bad reputation within the department due to her poor attendance in rehearsals and classes. I had had conversations with this individual about her personal and mental health situation, and knew that a large part of her frequent absence in her first year had had to do with struggles adjusting to college and dealing with mental health.

After numerous conversations with the Director of Theatre and the Chair of the Department, it was decided that we should "err on the side of inclusivity" and allow this student to attend callbacks only if I felt that I needed more black actors. This decision is multi-layered, and I want to break down a few parts of it. Firstly, there are few black actors in our department,

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[52] For that season I was serving as dramaturg for *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time* and was not in a position to make casting choices, or even recommendations.

and so it was highly possible that I would not have enough options for Hester. Secondly, this student's ability to partake in auditions was predicated on our need for diversity and options, not on her rights as someone working to become a student again and her own ability to continue learning. Third, she was only being allowed to come to callbacks and be considered by me, not by Kerner for *The Wolves*, as there was not a perceived need for her there. This choice feeds directly into the feelings expressed by students in the department that certain students only get cast for "diversity reasons." The department's decision contributed to the persistence of this idea within our department, as well as the othering of students of color and those without financial means.[53] The other actor on whose behalf I negotiated was unable to attend auditions, and was also unable to be in *The Wolves,* but was interested in being part of *In the Blood*. She was an enrolled student and was approved, without conditions, to attend callbacks for *In the Blood*.

For day one of call-backs, out of the forty-five students who auditioned for open call, I called back one young (black) woman I thought might be able to play Hester, along with the two actors mentioned above, and four young men (two black, and two Latinx) who I wanted to read for Reverend D/Baby. I felt that I needed to know who was playing those two roles before I could cast the rest. I went into day two relatively sure who was playing those roles, but with some flexibility between two actors, and two actors. I called back an additional twelve young performers (five young women, and seven young men, with a racial mix of black, white, Asian, and Latinx). My callback list differed greatly from the callback list for *The Wolves*. While I

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[53] The term "othering" was coined by Gayatri Spivak in her 1985 titled "The Rani of Sirmur: An Essay in Reading the Archives." The term, drawing on Edward Said's examination of the ways in which Orientalism positions Europe as the power, and "the Orient" as "the other," and Simone de Bouvouir's exploration of patriarchy as constructing male as "main" and female as "other," refers to a de-centering and diminishing of a people, a concept, or culture (Jensen 64). I use it here because the decision to allow this actor to audition only if there was a "lack" of other actors of her "type," positions her as an "other," someone only necessary in certain circumstances.

called back a total of thirteen actors of color from the original pool, only one non-white actor had made *The Wolves* cut. I did not feel that I was in a position to discuss this with anyone in a management position. Additionally, because there is no institutional mandate for any kind of diversity in casts, I had no formal routes of address.

After two days of auditions, the directors of the shows got together with the Chair and the Director of Theatre to choose casts. Because rehearsal periods overlapped, no actor could be cast in both shows. I walked into the room with my choice made for Hester and Reverend D/Baby and I knew that I wanted to cast another actor as either Amiga Gringa/Beauty or Welfare/Bully—but that decision would depend on who I cast in the other female role. First, I listened to who Kerner wanted for *The Wolves* cast. One of the young actors was the same person I was considering casting for Amiga Gringa/Beauty. She was a first year student, slender, white, and massively talented. I had absolutely no doubts in my mind that this young woman would have not only have a successful career at KU, but beyond. The other actor I was considering, who I was considering casting as Welfare/Bully, was also a first year student. She is also massively talented. She is an Asian woman, of medium-build, and had an unusual-sounding voice.

Based on the cultural power within the theatre industry of Western beauty standards, I knew that the latter actor would have a much more difficult time being cast in a major role in another production at KU, as so many of our directors frequently choose slim white leads. First-year students who play major roles tend to have more successful subsequent acting careers in college, and if students do not get to hone their craft by playing lead roles in college, their ability to get lead roles after my become more difficult. With all this in mind, I chose to let Kerner have the actor she and I were both interested in, and cast the other actor. This also gave me the ability to play with Welfare's line "Im a woman too! And a black woman too just like you" (Parks, "In

the Blood" 35) in an uncomfortable way, pointing to the way that some non-black people of color like to claim blackness when convenient, but then reject it other times. This decision made my choice for Amiga Gringa/Beauty for me—this role was given to a young black actress who I felt could have played either that role or Welfare/Bully.

This left me with two male roles to fill. There were a few different young men who I thought could play either role. I wanted to cast one actor, who was both talented and wanted to be in the show, but he wanted to be Reverend D/Baby, and I already had the best actor for that role. I had another actor who wanted first to play Doctor/Trouble, but was also interested in Chilli/Jabber. He was a sophomore who was white, and a theatre major, and had been cast in shows his first year, but had not yet played a leading role. Then I had a young actor who, in my opinion, had the strongest first audition out of everyone. He was another first-year student, without much acting experience, but a declared theatre major, and an ability I had already seen to command a stage. He was really interested in Doctor/Trouble, and though I knew it would be push, I felt it was a challenge that was worth it. So, I decided to cast the young man interested in both roles as Chilli/Jabber, and wrote him an email explaining that while I felt he could play either role, I believe that was the right role for him.

Another reason I chose this young man to play the role of Chilli/Jabber is that I did not want a black or brown body to be the one to die on stage. I felt that the trauma of a mother killing her own son was enough, and that, for black and brown audience members, I did not want to add to the media-perpetuated stream of black men dying on camera, and black and brown boys

being killed.[54] Additionally, having a white actor play Chilli created a layer of meaning in his relationship to Hester — as the abuse of black women at the hands of white men has a long and harrowing history in America, from the "sexual exploitation of black women who were perceived as byproducts of manifest destiny" starting in the colonial period, through contemporary sexual abuse, exploitation and fetishization of black women today (Holmes 1).[55] Chilli being white also avoided having two stereotypes of the black deadbeat dad on stage, as well as creating the opportunity to look critically at the White Savior narrative. Chilli is dangled as Hester's great (white) hope to get off the streets, but like white saviors throughout history, Chilli is only interested in "saving" her on his terms, which involve Hester's subjugation. Thus, my cast was complete: three female actors (two black, one Asian), and three male actors (one black, one Latinx and one white). All were theatre majors. I felt that I had simultaneously managed to create a diverse and dynamic cast, and cast the actual best actors for each role. It is one of the more diverse casts to grace the KU stage, and one of the few with all theatre majors. In Chapter Three

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[54] I believe strongly in performing for the audiences you have, and also emphasize that audience members will take away different stories when presented with the same performance. I was questioned about the choice to make Jabber white. Knowing that the audience that attends KU productions is largely white, I felt an additional need not to make a spectacle of black death. Some production which deal with black pain, such as *Slave Play* by Jeremy O. Harris, and *mouth // full*, created and performed by Gabriel Christian and Chibueze Crouch, have made choices to create safe spaces for black and African American viewers to engage with their content (Peck; Harshaw). While creating black-only audience spaces for full performances (*Slave Play*) or specific sections of a performance piece (*mouth // full*) can provide powerful opportunities for healing, this was not the way in which we chose to engage with healing in this production of *In the Blood*. Utilizing traditions of humor, mockery, and the absurd we focused on our ability to tell different stories to different audiences who shared space. We sought to create sites of healing within the familiarity of the story that was reserved and could only be engaged with by those who shared cultural knowledge with music, vocal techniques, and scenarios depicted. Simultaneously, we sought to challenge audiences who lacked personal familiarity to learn, grow, and recognize themselves within power structures.

[55] There was also a personal connection for me in having Chilli played as a white man, an abusive partner and absentee father. It hit home for me through my mom's side of the family.

I will discuss which demographic groups did not audition at all, and pose suggestions of what could have been done differently to change this.

I would not have made the decisions that I made if I had not been centering inclusion and empowerment, and decentering normativity. I was aware at every point of the auditions that the students I would be casting would have to deal with subject matter mature far beyond their years. Part of my audition process was asking actors to fill out a note-card and specifying which characters they would like to play. I did not want to give anyone a role they did not deeply want. If I wanted the best actors for the roles, I needed the actors who wanted the roles the most, as well as those with skills. I believe that almost everyone I called back had the skills; the question was how they would fit together, what story we would be telling, and did they have the desire? By considering desire as part of the casting process, I foregrounded consent and inclusion. Additionally, I talked with all the students in the callback about the content of the play, about the sexual and other violence, about the explicit anti-black racism, and the chronic poverty that the play depicts. I also talked to the students about being able to have honest and open conversations about race and racism that exist in the world and pertains to them, and held specific one-on-one conversations with the actors to whom I wanted to give leading roles.

Before I cast Gabrielle Smith as Hester, I called her into the room and asked her if she would be willing to play the lead, knowing what a huge role it is, knowing that she would be at every single rehearsal, and knowing that she would be dealing with a narrative of trauma. She said she was not sure she could carry a show, and that she had been hoping to get the role of Amiga Gringa/Beauty. I asked her if she had ever led a show before. She had not. She was a junior theatre major, with Broadway ambitions. I asked her if she wanted to lead a show—she said she did, but she was afraid. I told her that I would be there to support her and we would do a

lot of de-roling work to support her the heavy content. She had practiced de-roling previously with Dr. Jane Barnette, and so knew what it was. She confessed that she very much wanted to lead a show, but was scared she could not pull it off.

With the actor I cast as Reverend D/Baby, I had a similar discussion. It is such a huge and pivotal role, and the only one who, other than Hester, has to embody actual violence on stage. Tinashe Mukoyi was a senior, who had not received a leading role during his time at KU. He had one of the strongest auditions and it was a no-brainer to cast him as the largest role. I was surprised he had not held a lead role before, though, as he and I discussed at length during the rehearsal process, all it took was a hard look in the face of anti-black racism and Western beauty standards to posit why he may have been overlooked before. Mukoyi is a self-claimed comedian, and I wanted a Reverend D who could pull on stand-up comedy performativity, and let jokes hit some audience members, while shocking others. During his callback we discussed the fact that his character would explicitly be dealing with racism and misogyny in his performance, and discussed in what ways he would be willing to address these issues directly and indirectly. I found during this conversation that our interests in exploring these topics aligned, and that he liked my suggestions for some of the methods I was hoping the actor who played Reverend D would employ.

The Rehearsal Process

The cast list went out on a Friday, and the following Monday was our first rehearsal, so there was really no time for the cast to prepare their scripts. My rehearsal process centers the actor's desires and understandings of and choices around their character(s). Directing is a delicate balance of crafting the overall vision, and providing a structure in which actors can find

their own voices. I reject a Stanislavsky-based directorial framework, despite my training in these practices as an undergraduate. Stanislavsky and his disciples tend to position "no" as a bad word, a resistant word, one that does not allow for the best acting. These methods are in direct contradiction to contemporary concepts of consent-based acting instruction and directing (Barclay 2019). Instead, I embrace directing as an emancipatory practice. Providing space and time and place for actors to practice rebirth, growth, and development, and to find these qualities within performance, through the practice of character and development. I foregrounded both physical and mental consent, never asking the actors to do, think about, or embody anything with which they were not comfortable.

I ground my daily rehearsal practice in physical play, improvisation, discussion, and repetition. The first rehearsal we read through the play together, to familiarize ourselves collectively with the script. I set a few ground-rules for rehearsal even before this reading began. One of the key ones is a process called "tapping out," where the actor, at any point, can tap out of the rehearsal room (letting someone know they are leaving) to collect themselves if they feel overwhelmed, triggered, or vulnerable and need some alone time. I also let them know that saying "no" to suggestions or directions by me was not only acceptable, but encouraged, if the actors ever felt uncomfortable. By setting these rules from the beginning, I prioritized actors' health and wellbeing, showing a clean break from traditions which prioritize the importance of the show over the actor. It is absolutely critical that mental and emotional consent be treated on the same level of importance as physical consent.

One of the most striking elements of this first read-through was the laughter. There was shocked laughter, horrified laughter, and laughter at absurdity. Out of the laughter, a particular instance bothered me. It was Amiga Gringa's line to Hester, "He ain't bad looking, Hester. A

little slow but, some women like that" (Parks, "In the Blood" 20). The laughter responding to that line is part of rape culture. Rape culture frequently positions the sexual assault of men and/or boys, or threats thereof, particularly by women, as jokes (Doyle 2019). The idea that a grown-up sexualizing a little boy is funny showed how deeply rape culture affects us all. I was prepared for instances like this, considering the content matter with which we were dealing. Younger performers often react to difficult conversations with laughter. Laughter can have a distancing effect (Carpio 4) and can alleviate awkwardness. Laughter is often a response to hearing disturbing or shocking information in either a person who has not had personal experience with the pain which the shocking event is referencing, or from someone who has had all too much experience and who has developed a sense of humor around this topic as a means of escape.

At this moment during our first read-through I did not point out my analysis of the laughter. I did note it, after the read-through was finished, to Jenny Sledge, our dramaturg, and asked her to prepare a conversation to have with the actors specifically regarding early childhood sexualization, sexual curiosity, and the effects of child sexual abuse on children's sexual maturity. At our next rehearsal I brought up the said moment and the laughter it received, and, together with the actors, unpacked it. We collectively considered what our laughter meant and faced the sobering reality of our complacency in rape culture through honest discussion. It was during this discussion that we decided that that moment sets up the ending when Jabber comes home, having spent time with Gringa, and repeats the word "slut" over and over. Actor Chris Pendry, who played Chilli/Jabber, and I decided that Gringa has indeed made good on her earlier threats — and that Jabber is trying to deal with his own feelings of being a "slut" and his anger at his mother for not protecting him. He is unable to express that in any other way, and Hester, in

her starving, sleep-deprived and traumatized state, is unable to notice that her son has been through something that has hurt and changed him.

After the first rehearsal, we moved into building the physical world of the play. I set up ground-rules from the beginning. The first rule was that actors can not touch others without permission. For the purpose of *In the Blood*, because they all play family members, having a certain level of loving touch was necessary, and, to develop this, consent and comfort were paramount. We spent hours in early rehearsals walking, playing, and getting to know each other as the characters developed. The children all needed to be able to embody youthfulness. Because the children are being played by adults, it is important for their innocence to be maintained. This was especially pertinent, since children who live in poverty and specifically children of color tend to be seen as more mature (Goff et. al 527). When working to develop the child characters, I focused on us as a team having as much fun as possible. It was equally important for the actors to understand the story we were telling, *and* to have fun telling it.

We held discussions each rehearsal about reproductive justice, about race in America, and about patriarchy. They were heavy conversations, and so we always ended the rehearsal with fun. Over time we developed ways of being and celebrating each other that included actors randomly breaking into song and dance during breaks and even during rehearsal. I never stopped them. These kind of rituals of selfhood and joy are critical to actors self-actualizing, and finding the emancipation in the work. I followed their lead in conversations about race and gender. We talked about how these issues impacted their lives. A number of the actors throughout the process expressed how freeing it was to be able to have honest conversations about these topics without constantly worrying about offending white students. Pendry, the one white student in the show,

overwhelmingly listened more than he spoke, exhibiting both respect and camaraderie with his fellow actors.

Part of the building of the adult characters was with practice adapted from JPTP. JPTP "assumes" Old Mas characters "as archetypes of human behavior defined within the evolving context of the survival systems of the emancipation tradition in Trinidad" (Hall 164-5). For the purpose of *In the Blood*, we looked around us for archetypal characters in our culture and literature, and examined them through the eyes of Parks' re-creation of them. One of the key aspects of Mas playing was the mockery of the white colonial slave-owning class. Even after emancipation, Old Mas characters and Kaiso continued to mock the rich, the white, the colonial, often to their faces (Ramm, 2017). Playing Mas and singing Kaiso (Calypso) were some of the few ways that formerly enslaved Afro-Trinidadians were able to assert their power over the white colonials. Similar traditions of subversion and power through story telling exist in the States, though, of course, in dramatically different ways. Laughter and performance in times of enslavement in America for African Americans "developed a Janus-face identity: on the one hand, it was a fairly nonthreatening form that catered to whites' belief in the inferiority of blacks but that usually masked aggression; on the other, it was a more assertive and acerbic humor that often targeted racial injustice but that was generally reserved for in-group interactions" (Carpio 5). It was this acerbic humor that I wanted to explore and embrace. We discussed at length which stereotypes each character fit into, when they broke the stereotypes, and how to create full humans, even as we played the various "mases" that we created. Each actor started out the play as themselves in order to break conventional theatre-going expectations of only seeing actors in character until the end of the play. I wanted to ensure that the audience never suspended disbelief. At the beginning of the show, actors milled around on stage, putting on makeup,

greeting patrons, and chatting among themselves, just a group of college students. This distancing device took away some of the "theatre magic" that can be used for shock and awe factor, and for the suspension of disbelief. I wanted the audience to question and disbelieve all they can. The goal of the production was to encourage "cognitive catharsis" —to cause some people to consider the world differently than they had before, and to give voice and validation to those who feel the way the characters do, or identify with situations.

The performance of caricature and mockery was also a tool utilized for what can be seen as emotional intimacy choreography.[56] For example, Diego Rivera, who played Doctor/Trouble, struggled a great deal to find a way to play the Doctor. It was (thankfully) not a character he identified with, and finding a performance that worked for him only came through mockery. We worked together on finding characters who existed in real life that he could mock in his performance of Doctor. This layer allowed him to engage in active political commentary, to give a powerful performance, and to maintain a safe distance between himself and his character. Throughout the rehearsal process, I worked with actors to find their own ways to portray the most difficult parts of their performances. Another example is the physical choreography used by actors Mukoyi and Smith during the scene where Reverend D pressures Hester into oral sex. After the first read-through Mukoyi came up to me and asked how we were going to do that

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[56] The idea to frame this kind of consent-based rehearsal practice within the framework of Intimacy Choreography was provided by undergraduate theatre major Katelynn Schultz during a Mental Health Panel held by the KU Department of Theatre and Dance on March 2, 2020. She talked about the need to treat thoughts and emotions with the same care as we treat physical intimacy, and called for a "kind of intimacy choreography" to be used in the theatre to support actors. I realized that this is the exact work that we had accomplished throughout our rehearsal process and am here utilizing her framework, as I believe it is accurate and a powerful way to understand what this kind of work does. Any kind of intimacy that is engaged in, whether physical or mental, must be approached with the practice of consent. It is just as important to practice consent related to thoughts and emotions as to touch. Intimacy choreographers have tools for generating consent and trust between directors, choreographers, and actors. The kind of work which provides the same kind of structures for mental and emotional work should also be invested in.

scene. I told him that we would be coming up with an answer to that question together to make sure that it was not triggering for either actors or audience members. The next day Mukoyi came to rehearsal with the idea of blowing up a balloon during Hester's monologue, and then letting the air out where the stage directions read, "He cumms. Mildly" (Parks, "In the Blood" 47). We all loved the idea, and worked on the details. The moment became grotesque and absurd—no one was confused about what was going on, but the actors felt safe each night.

As always with a rehearsal process based on principals of give and take, some of the most important elements of the production developed in the rehearsal room. One of them is what I consider our most important "research discovery"—the creation of audience consent. A major issue I was having with the framework of consent was that I did not know how to create consent between the audience and performers, especially within the Confession scenes. No matter what trigger warnings are provided for an audience, they do not know what is to unfold before them, and, specifically with a play like *In the Blood*, much of what they are to witness contains violence and uncomfortably/possibly triggering content. Since the world of the play reveals the tragedy of lack of consent, I felt it was critically important for our theatre space to demonstrate consent at every point. I also wanted to include the audience in the action, showing that they were not just bystanders, but participants, in this story. With this in mind, I had decided to have the actors perform their "Confessions" directly to audience members. However, I remembered a specific performance where I was playing the role of Juliet in a production of *Romeo and Juliet*, and I decided on a whim to deliver one of my monologues to a friend who was sitting in the audience. He told me after the show that while he enjoyed the show, when I spoke directly to him, he completely froze up and could not understand anything I was saying. I did not want this to happen to any of our audience members, especially considering the content matter. I always

had a feeling that I had taken away that friend's ability to enjoy the play because I had not asked for his consent. He had been put on the spot without warning or the ability to say Yes or No. During one of our rehearsals of a Confession scene, we came up with the idea of, instead of just talking to the audience, to first ask them.

The actors would walk up to an audience member before a confession and say: "Can I talk to you?" They would then wait for a response. We practiced being turned down. I held an "open-door" rehearsal process and sometimes we would have visitors. When that happened, the actors got to practice with audience members. We would always warn the audience members before rehearsal started by saying: "If one of the actors walks up to you and asks if they can talk to you, please feel free to say yes or no." We would also clarify that they could change their mind and tell the actors to "go away" at any point if they started feeling uncomfortable, overwhelmed, or just did not want to be in the spotlight anymore. For repeat visitors, or people who stayed for long periods of rehearsal, they would often change their answers. When crew members came to rehearsal, we would give them the same warning and they would also help the actors practice being told yes, or no. As we moved towards opening, we discovered that the "Can I talk to you?" moment did not work for all the actors. Once we started doing full runs of the show, Mukoyi started to find the emotional intimacy of speaking directly to an audience member during Reverend D's Confession triggering for him. Because keeping all actors safe, and respecting their boundaries is of paramount importance, there was never a question of if he would have to find a way to perform something that was not comfortable for him. We decided that he would perform the monologue without the question, instead playing it like a stand-up comedy routine on stage.

Another adjustment to the confessions that came late in the rehearsal process, was when we were advised not to add to the text of the show, and instead decided to have prop cards that could be held up. This provided a distancing from the characters themselves. The cards became indications of the director's hand, or of the play's message. Instead of the characters valuing consent, which they clearly did not, it was the play itself that came to value consent. We also developed a curtain speech that contextualized the various elements of the play that we wanted to make explicit—the fact that the young actors were Players telling a story, the framework of Consent, and the fact that the actors diverse bodies on stage had different relationships to the stories being told, but that all of us are involved.[57]

In order to keep the actors safe throughout this process, it was important to go beyond "tapping out" and to utilize a process known as "de-roling" which allows actors to get out of character, and understands that this process is just as important as getting into character. I learned this technique from my advisor, Dr. Jane Barnette. The process has been contextualized in drama therapy as "a set of techniques meant to assist an actor in 'disrobing' oneself from a character" (Gualieni 2). Such techniques can include stating the difference between oneself and the character, stating what you are doing, as in, "my character attacks your character, I perform choreography." While this process of de-roling can become "just another routine" (Barnette et al 117), I wanted to ensure that the process was real and authentic each and every time, and so our processes changed with individual's needs. Depending on the day we had of rehearsal, we would end the rehearsals with a check-in. We would dance, we would sing sometimes, and we would always hug. Hugging became a huge part of our routine at the end of rehearsals. It developed naturally and felt safe. We decided that it had become such a part of our routine that we wanted

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[57] See Appendix C for full text of the curtain speech, written collectively by the actors and director.

to show it to the audience. We felt that, at the end of the show, in order to move forward with consent and love and growth, bowing was not enough. At the end of the show, all the actors would take a deep breath, and then come together and hug. This hug would last until they were ready, and until they had all fully "de-roled," at which point they would face the audience, and take a bow. Because there was no blackout at the end of the show, this hug also served to give the audience a moment to process and to realize that the show was over.

Chapter Three: Research Findings and Conclusion

This chapter discusses the findings of my research and strives to answer both the question that I set out to ask and the broader questions that developed throughout the process. My initial question was: how can one direct a production that contains traumatic subject matter in a way that individuals living with PTSD can safely attend? The broader questions were: what barriers prevent people from attending theatre productions? And how can those barriers be removed? I summarize which barriers this project identified, and whether we succeeded or failed in bringing them down. I also propose additional research which I believe will help bring down barriers which I failed to remove, and suggestions for what I, and other directors, can do differently in future productions to bring down still other barriers. This chapter is broken into four sections: Getting to the Theatre, The Audience Space, Production Dramaturgy, and, finally, the Conclusion. Using an Oral History method, I mostly recount primary research, and analysis of this data.

Getting to the Theatre

The first main failure to lower barriers to access involves an issue that I was not in a position to solve: ticket prices. Tickets at KU theatre are $20 for adults, $10 for children, and $15 for seniors, KU Faculty/Staff and KU students, ($10 for students if purchased in advance). For many people, even these relatively low prices are prohibitive. I made an argument for at least one night of "pay-what-you-can" tickets to be sold. I know that KU theatre relies at least partially on ticket sales to keep doing all its work; however, I also have experience running pay-what-you-can shows, and I have found that set ticket prices keep people unable to pay out, while pay-what-

you-can allows those individuals to come. Those who can pay less almost always pay something, and those who can afford more often pay higher that what the price would be set at otherwise.

Overall, in my experience, the result of pay-what-you-can houses is that more people come, and you make the same or more money than you would otherwise. However, the KU theatre production/management team, after considering my argument, turned it down. They did allow me to give away twenty tickets to the Lawrence Homeless Shelter. I had wanted to provide unlimited tickets to the Homeless Shelter and the Willow Domestic Violence shelter in Lawrence, for staff, service providers, board members, as well as clients—however, I was told that I could have a maximum of twenty tickets. I offered them to the shelter, which responded enthusiastically that they would like the tickets. I organized for the tickets to be available for pick-up at the front desk, but, according to Dick, none of these tickets were ever used.

I never found out why the tickets were not utilized. I could have reached out to Renee Kuhl, the executive director of the Homeless Shelter with whom I had been communicating and asked her why, but I felt as though I had already pressured her enough. During our back and forth emails, once she had expressed that she would like tickets, I sent her *eight* reminder emails. Though I do not have an answer, I would like to mention a few factors that may have contributed to the lack of attendance. First and foremost is advertisement. I worked for two years as the marketing manager of an international film company, where I learned one hard and fast truth about marketing: no one even *considers* going to an event, let alone decides to go, unless they have heard about it without effort ten times, *or* unless it has personal relevance to them, in which case they will put in great effort to attend. The population that works at and receives services from the homeless shelter is not (generally) one that overlaps with the KU theatre-going audience. In order to tap into a new audience base, it is necessary to accomplish one of two ways

of accessing said community. Either marketing could put up so much advertisement in places that this population frequents (online spaces, physical spaces, social spaces, and so on) that people will encounter information about the event at least ten times without personal effort. Or marketing could bring into their advertising team someone from within the target community who has personal connections and can give people a personal reason to attend.

The KU marketing department consists of Marketing Coordinator Lisa Coble-Krings and her assistant, an undergraduate student who works fifteen hours a week. Coble-Krings not only has to oversee the creation of all marketing materials, including providing copy, edits and coordinating collecting all information from designers, directors and others who have input, but she is also charged with creating the programs and managing all social media accounts. She does not have the time to create show-specific partnerships with organizations around Lawrence in order to attract new audiences. When she does put effort into courting audiences, she has to be strategic and target those that will appreciate a larger majority of our shows. Unfortunately, this means (as I discussed in Chapter Two) that consideration to underrepresented populations who might be interested in getting involved, either on- or offstage, is only given when that population is actually to be represented onstage.

Because KU has historically embraced the Western theatre canon, the steady theatre-going audience for KU productions mirrors the representation within this canon. As discussed in the Introduction, this canon was molded during the colonial period in Europe and its conquered territory, and therefore it was *designed* to create class and race hierarchies. Consequentially, it is not surprising that the theatre-going audience at KU is comprised largely of middle- to upper-

class white folks, who are often older in age and whose bodies and minds are able to conform.[58] As KU has started incorporating plays with a broader perspective, subject matter, and audience, alongside works from said canon, its houses have suffered. If the KU theatre department was able to invest in community partnerships, flexible ticket pricing, and reliable outreach to communities who do not regularly attend the theatre, I believe that we would see a shift in and expansion of our audience.

The second factor that may have contributed the failure to use the tickets provided by people associated with the Lawrence Homeless Shelter is our location. KU theatre department's productions take place on the campus, which is relatively inaccessible to those who do not have cars and are not KU students. KU students can take buses from the edges of campus to buildings within campus, and there are easy-to-drive roads throughout campus. For individuals with neither a car nor a student ID, attendance at a show would involve a not-insignificant walk or money for a car service. This then becomes an issue of money, or of time and physical accessibility. The KU campus is full of hills and for those whose bodies are unable to conform, getting around on campus can be challenging to impossible. Additionally, for those who are not familiar with it, the campus can be incredibly challenging to navigate. Again, this is an issue of advertisement and access. Without easily available directions and transportation, many people who might otherwise be interested will not be able to attend even shows that are of personal interest to them.

This brings me to another population that does not attend KU productions at least partially as a result of prohibitive ticket pricing and relevant content matter: the majority of the

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[58] I am continuing here to use the term "able to conform" as a more accurate way to describe what people often refer to as "able-bodied" or "neuro-typical." By emphasizing conformity, as Patty Berne does, I am able to point out that "ability" and "disability" are both constructs meant to maintain structures of privilege and access.

KU student body. As previously mentioned, several classes in the Theatre and Dance Department make attendance at productions mandatory for students, and assign papers and reflections based on the shows. However, there is not an active culture on KU campus as a whole of students attending theatre productions. At many universities across the country, including my alma mater Yale University, there is such a culture. Again, I did not collect data on this and it is beyond the scope of this current project, but I recommend that a study on why KU students do not attend KU theatre productions in significant numbers would be a productive way to begin a campaign to change that. In informal conversations I have held with students outside our department, which I recommend as a jumping off point for such a study, two themes have emerged. One is prohibitive ticket prices, and the other is content. I have been told that, due to the content KU theatre is known to put on, even in recent years, many students, specifically minoritized students, do not think that there is a place for them, either onstage or in the audience.

This leads me to the additional issue that there is not significant engagement with and advertisement around auditions or productions across campus. When I was preparing for auditions, I knew that the student body within the theatre department and among those who regularly audition was not representative of the cast that I was interested in putting together. As I stated in Chapter One, I was interested in a cast that would include trans- and cis-gender individuals, racial diversity, and people whose bodies and minds were unable to conform. Though I was incredibly pleased with the cast I chose, and impressed by their performances, there was not as much diversity as I had hoped. Not one individual who was transgender auditioned. Nor did anyone whose body or mind visibly did not conform. Additionally, there were no auditionees who were Native American Indian or other First Nations. I had shared with the Office of Multiculturalism, the Center for Indigenous Studies, in addition to the African and

African American Studies, Women Gender and Sexuality Studies, and Special Education departments a casting notice that I had specifically prepared for this production.[59] I tried to appeal to people with certain sensibilities, but not explicitly state exactly for who I was looking. However, my research since that point has illustrated that *when exclusion has been the norm, inclusion must explicitly be stated*. I believe that a more effective audition poster would have included a statement about interest in seeing auditions for people with "both physical and mental dis/ability," as well as "trans and cis-gendered people," as well as explicitly stating that I was interested in Native American Indian and other First Nation actors. These groups have had little to no representation on the KU mainstage and so, without explicit statement of inclusion, the assumption of exclusion remains. Consent works both ways. People have to know that when they want to participate, they will be welcome, just as they have to know that participation is not forced. This was the purpose of the Curtain Speech — to emphasize that consent was part of our framework. In the speech the actors talked about the open door policy, instead of leaving it for people to assume, and also discussed the fact that audience members had the right to reject actors *at any point* in the performance of the Confessions.

The Audience Space

A diverse and accessible audience space had been, as I discussed in Chapter Two, my goal from the beginning of the process, but there were many barriers standing in the way. In addition to previously-discussed complex issues such as re-traumatization, which we worked on throughout the production period, and barriers for those with hearing loss or lack of hearing, other barriers to accessing the audience space itself included: lack of audio descriptors for those

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[59] See Appendix G.

with blindness or lack of sight, lack of chemical sensitivity preparedness, and homogenous theatre seating which only caters to one body type.

In order to create an accessible physical audience space, Hunsucker's lighting design left house-lights 25% up at all times, had no sharp transitions or flashing lights, and was never overwhelmingly bright. Additionally, we provided open captions, and flexible seating. A flexible seating arrangement understands that people have a range of different kinds of bodies. While most theatres accommodate wheelchairs, for people who have a hard time being near to other bodies, the close quarters of the theatre can be highly stressful. Additionally, people with larger body sizes often find theatre seats to be too small, and people with a range of mobility impairments, also find such seating constricting and uncomfortable. We provided a selection of comfortable couches and arm-chairs in the first row of the theatre. These provided space for individuals who wanted to be farther away from others on either side, as there were arm-chairs with wide arm-rests which only fit one person, for people with larger body size, and for those who needed more cushioning for comfortable seating.

In order to analyze our success with providing accessibility, I prepared a short optional survey that the audience could fill out.[60] I asked the front of house manager, Jim Dick, if his ushers would be able to hand out the survey. He expressed frustration at the additional labor that this would create for his ushers. I clarified that I would print out and bring the surveys to the house manager each night, I would set up the box for their collection and I would take them at the end of every night—all the ushers would have to do was let audience members know what they were and distribute them. I have received surveys at a KU production previously and was

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[60] See example and full data collected in Appendix F

confused by the hesitancy.[61] Perhaps because of lack of desire to participate by front-of-house-staff, or because the audience was uninterested, out of a total of 515 individuals who saw *In the Blood* over our six-performance run, only twenty-five completed surveys were collected, which accounts for just under 5% of the audience.

These surveys showed that, out of the section of the audience who submitted them, 88% felt that our production of *In the Blood* differed significantly from other shows they had seen (92% of respondents had attended previous productions and about half of those were regular theatre-goers). The noted differences included the language used, the intimacy of the space, the subject matter, alleyway seating, the level of audience interaction, actors changing costume onstage, closed captioning, the use of stage doors, the "informal" feel, that our show was "more inclusive," and the fact that the "audience was part of story." 52% of audience members surveyed reported that they could relate to the content of the show. Out of those, 61% said the show was "triggering or overwhelming to watch/experience," while 30% reported that it was not, and one person circled "overwhelming" but did not report it to be triggering.

I realize upon reviewing this data that because of the way the question regarding "triggering or overwhelming" content was written on the survey, the answers tell us almost nothing regarding if we succeeded in making the show safe for people who have personal experience with the content of the play. By putting these two words interchangeably in a sentence, we contributed to the concept that they are one and the same, thus, completely undercutting the data's usefulness. However, because we also provided a safe room outside the theatre, where patrons were able to go if they felt triggered in any way and needed to calm down, and not one patron used this throughout the production, we do have some inclination of which

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[61] A Kansas Repertory Theatre (KU's summer theatre) production's performance of *Chasing Gods* by Paris Crayton III, directed by Markus Potter, featured a survey distributed to audience members.

word audience members were likely referring in their answers. One of the respondents who answered that "Yes" they found the show "triggering or overwhelming to watch/experience," put a note at the bottom that said: "Triggering b/c black trauma sucks, BUT we need to discuss it." It appears that this individual felt that the show was not re-traumatizing, but did discuss traumatic subject matter.

The survey also asked if the show was "easy to access" and then clarified, "were there technical and physical elements of the theatre, or performance, that got in your way of being able to take in the show?" As several of the audience members pointed out, this question could be read as a contradiction. This error got past me and, as I was late in creating these surveys I did not have time to run them by my advisor, Dr. Nicole Hodges-Persley, before I released it. Despite the confusion of the question, some clear responses were given. Eight individuals answered "Yes," four of whom clarified that Yes it was easy to access, and one of whom clarified that Yes technical elements got in the way, including actors diction and the font used in the open caption. Eight people answered No, two of whom clarified that there were No barriers to access. Eight people did not fill out a bubble, three of whom clarified in writing that the show was easy to access, two of whom pointed out that the question is a contradiction, and three whom did non answer at all.

Following up to that question, the survey asked, "If yes, what were they?" Answers included: Easy to access, "no elements got in the way, however, it was simultaneously realistic and unrealistic. The unrealistic got in the way of the realistic," that they "appreciated [the] closed captioning," that it was "perfectly easy and engaging," and that the "diction was an issue at first, and the font in the captioning was hard to read." It was in this section that the individual quoted in the previous section put their note about black trauma "sucking." Additionally, patrons wrote

the following comments on their sheets without prompting: “This was incredible. Thank you for creating this work of reproductive justice making abstract concepts intimate,” “Great performances by ALL! I was surprised to know this was done by college students,” “This show is amazing! 30+ years ago I was a young single mother trying to make ends meet… the character of Hester touches on all races.” Because no one talked about the content being emotionally or mentally detrimental to them, despite half of the surveyed individuals saying they could relate to the content, I believe that, at least for those surveyed, we succeeded in our mission to tell the story in a non-triggering way.

Each of the successes mentioned above have, at their core, the concept of consent. Consent is all about getting to determine the parameters of one’s own actions and experiences. Usually, if an audience member leaves the theatre, they are not allowed back in until/unless there is a scene change. Because we had no scene changes in *In the Blood*, this would have resulted in audience members who left not being allowed to return for the rest of the act. This would mean that the “choice” to leave would have consequences that could include: embarrassment, missing the opportunity to support a loved one, or being unable to complete an assignment (as a number of KU classes require students to watch shows and write about them). By making sure that each audience member had the option to go and come, we attempted to ensure that they were consenting to being in the room and taking in the content, and that they were not being pressured. In addition to the open-door policy, our curtain speech explained to people that they could leave for any reason, decreasing social pressure to stay put.

By keeping house lights up 25% up at all times we also lifted mandatory darkness. Being plunged into the dark may not affect many people, but it does affect some, and leaving house-lights partially up returns consent to the audience members by ensuring that they have control

over when they enter darkness and when they do not. Clearly, there are a great many theatrical productions that depend on quick transitions in the dark, but there are ways to work around that. These include closing a curtain, bringing a scrim down which can be made opaque or see-through depending on the light, bringing stage lights down and not audience lights, and others. Providing open captions, of course, gives audience members the choice to read them or not and flexible seating gives audiences the chance to consent to the kind of seating the are in. As discussed in the introduction, theatre spaces often do not leave room for audience members to set boundaries. Our production did. Audience members could sit where they chose, remain or leave as they chose, accept or reject offers by the cast to have monologues delivered to them, at one point they could accept or reject food offered by Amiga Gringa, and determine whether reading or listening was better for them, or a combination of both.

There were other areas, however, where the audience was not given a choice. For example, even though I asked early on about our ability to have audio-descriptors available for the production for those who have loss of sight, the William Inge Memorial Theatre did not have the technology for them. I had the idea of having a student live describing the play so as to minimize technology, but there was still no way to connect that person to anyone who would need audio descriptors. Though I tried to find resources or other suggestions for how to create this accessibility, I could not find anything. I look forward to exploring this area of accessibility more in the future and hope to learn about options that are easy to access for low-resource theatres.

Another area where the production did not provide enough access was in regards to chemical sensitivity. Though the Inge does have an open “choose any seat” policy, which does allow for people with chemical or smell sensitivities not to sit near people who wear heavy

perfume, it is still not a foolproof plan. In *Skin, Tooth and Bone* the authors say that, in order to provide a safe space for people with Multiple Chemical Sensitivities (MCS), an event space must avoid "all scented products, including commercial detergents, shampoo, soap, perfume, deodorants, lotions, fabric softeners, etc., before the event" (Berne et al 36). Additionally, they suggest that, "it can be helpful to create a scent-free area with hepa filters and fans helping to clear the area of scents, and then don't let people sit there if they are not scent-free. There are a number of online guides to help people become scent-free. Know that it is a process that takes some work before-hand, and offer as much education as possible" (Berne et al 36). We did not do this for *In the Blood*. No one mentioned this on their feedback sheets, which was either because no one with MCS came, or because audience members with MCS managed to find a scent-free space in the theatre. Whether or not there were strong scents in the theatre or washrooms, we did nothing to tell people with MCS that they could attend, and when exclusion has been the norm, inclusion must be stated. Even a small bit of education around the importance of this could have gone a long way to let people with MCS know that they were, in fact, welcomed.

Production Dramaturgy

The answer to my original research question centers around creating a narrative which provides space for witnessing, healing from, and acting to address trauma. This section discusses the ways in which our play dramaturgy succeeded and failed to provide such a framework, and what lead to these successes and failures. As articulated by Katalin Trencsényi in *Dramaturgy in the Making*, dramaturgy is not one well-defined job. It can take many different forms, with the three main branches being "institutional dramaturgy, production dramaturgy, and new dramaturgy" (Trencsényi xx). At KU, dramaturgy consists mostly of creating dramaturgical

lobby displays, organizing talk-backs, creating glossaries of less-common words used in the script, and providing support and knowledge during rehearsal and in one-on-one sessions with the director. Historically at KU, dramaturgy has been positioned as secondary. As recently as the 2017/2018 theatre season at KU, one of the mainstage productions lacked a dramaturg.[62] Dramaturgy assignments are not done at the same time as other designer assignments, and dramaturgs are often excluded from casting rooms, rehearsals, and production conferences. This is a result of KU's lack on institutionalized structure for dramaturgs, and many directors having little experience working with dramaturgs and failing to see the value in their contributions. I find that working closely with a dramaturg is invaluable, and so I asked Jenny Sledge, our dramaturg, to be intimately involved from the time she was assigned to the production. As Sledge and I are the only two members of our year in our graduate program, we had already had a number of classes together, including Black Dramatic Theory, and so knew each other's work well. We hold similar beliefs regarding the import of dramaturgs, and she expressed excitement from the time of being assigned to the project to be as involved as I wanted her to be. She was not at the first design meeting because no dramaturg had yet been selected, but once it was decided, she was invited to every subsequent meeting, as well as having individual meetings with me, and being encouraged to attend casting and rehearsals.

Through the dramaturgical structure of *In the Blood,* Sledge and I hoped to contribute to shifting the conversation around reproductive rights to Reproductive Justice, highlighting the mythology of the Welfare Queen, and situating poverty within a structure of inequality instead of the bootstrap mythology of the "self-made" individual. From the beginning we decided that dramaturgy for *In the Blood* would include a lobby display, a series of talkbacks, and regular

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[62] *Rhinoceros* by Eugene Ionesco, directed by Ric Avrill.

work in rehearsals with the director and cast. Sledge and I agreed that a dramaturgical display that started outside the theatre and was tied to what was going on in the theatre was the best option the lobby display. Our initial dramaturgical display vision was to create an under-the-bridge feel to the hallway leading to the William Inge Memorial Theatre, which would have graffiti and posters containing information that would help to contextualize the play within conversations around structural inequality in America.

However, shortly after being assigned to dramaturg *In the Blood*, Sledge was also assigned to become the assistant director for *The Wolves*, cutting deeply into the time she was able to devote to *In the Blood*. This was a particular institutional aberration, as no other individual has been cross-scheduled like that in the last five seasons of KU productions. Just as actors are not cross-cast in productions, dramaturgs, directors, and lead designers are also rarely cross-scheduled. Not cross-listing people makes sense as we saw first-hand. Sledge's assignment to, and all the extra work she ended up doing for, *The Wolves* was a significant detriment to *In the Blood*'s dramaturgical structure and display. As a result, Sledge was unable to perform jobs that we had agreed she would perform for *In the Blood*. She was unable to attend our auditions, at least two rehearsals a week, put together talk-backs, or create part of the lobby display. Because there is no formal faculty supervisor for the position of dramaturg, I did not know who to talk to about this, and I did not want to perceived to be blaming Sledge by complaining either to my faculty advisor or to someone on the production side, as none of this was Sledge's fault. This was not the only area where *In the Blood* lacked support in institutional ways.

In the Blood was assigned a Stage Manager, undergraduate theatre major Bailey Dobbins, who could not come to rehearsal on Tuesday nights due to a class conflict. Though Dobbins did everything in her power to continue to complete her job, she was obviously not able to be in two

places at the same time. KU currently has a lack of stage managers. This issue, along with the lack of structure around dramaturgy, was treated differently for *In the Blood* and *The Wolves*. *In the Blood* was not assigned an assistant dramaturg or an assistant stage manager, despite the two primary individuals being unable to perform their duties fully. *The Wolves* hired a professional stage manager from outside the department, and had Sledge, assisted by an undergrad dramaturgy student, become the de-facto dramaturg for that production. To try and solve these issues within the production of *In the Blood*, I took it upon myself to try and find an assistant stage manager. Metz, from assistant design, agreed to fill the position, but after a few days decided that she had other priorities. I pulled in a friend of mine who was not a member of KU theatre, Tori Smith, to assist, but she ended up getting cast in a non-KU production and was not able to give the time. As a result, every Tuesday, I had to be director and stage manager, until Dobbins came by after her class to get the notes. I also created a portion of the dramaturgical lobby display, due to Sledge's time constraints.

I ask the following questions because I believe that the answers would help lower institutional barriers for stories to be told by, about, and directed by individuals from groups which continue to be marginalized. My questions are: why were these decisions made by KU theatre? Why was the production dramaturg assigned to *In the Blood* given another role in a show that rehearsed at the same time? Why was this allowed against the history of not cross-scheduling production and design members or actors? Did a value-judgment related to the relative importance of *In the Blood* versus *The Wolves* take place either consciously or unconsciously by the department? If so, what caused this value judgment? Are such value judgments common? Though I have no answers to these questions I will comment on the following differences, which have traditionally been given different amounts of institutional

privilege and importance: *In the Blood* was directed by a graduate student of color; *The Wolves* was directed by a white professional guest director. *In the Blood* was written by a black playwright; *The Wolves* was written by a white playwright. *In the Blood* tells a story of structural racism, sexism and marginalization of a single mother; *The Wolves* tells the story of high school students who go to a private school and play indoor soccer.

Unconscious bias and institutional privileging of certain bodies and stories is well-documented. There is an irony to the fact that the production with content about the way in which systems provide different resources to people through value-laden judgements about their worth, and then proceed to blame individuals for their misfortune, was met with suspicion over the fairness of future casting choices and provided with different resources than other productions. Though individual decisions in the case of *In the Blood* may have been made for any number of reasons, I believe it is worth studying whether KU and similar institutions allocate resources differently to shows that have similar structures to *In the Blood* than they do for those with structures like *The Wolves*. Such a study would need to look at resources such as who is assigned or hired to serve in the design and production teams, as well as the more obvious resources like baseline budget.

Before *The Wolves* took over her time, Sledge read *Killing the Black Body* and attended an art exhibit that I also went to and encouraged her to attend for research purposes, titled *30 Americans* at the Nelson Atkins Museum of Art.[63] One of the pieces of art in *30 Americans* was

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[63] The *30 Americans* exhibit contained more than eighty works for art, from paintings, to sculpture, drawing and prints, from the Rubell Family Collection. Thirty African American artists including Jean-Michel Basquiat, Rashid Johnson, Kara Walker, Hank Willis Thomas, and Kehinde Wiley contributed to the exhibit. The exhibit has been traveling around the United States for a decade in different iterations, each designed to provide a unique experience in collaboration with different venues.

called “Duck, Duck, Noose” created by Gary Simmons.[64] This instillation piece depicts a circle of benches on which sit Ku Klux Klan (KKK)- style pointed white hat/hoods. In the center of the circle hangs a noose made of rope. This blood-chilling installation was in a room sectioned off from the rest of the exhibit, and to go inside, you had to go through an iron gate flanked by mini KKK statues standing on brick columns. On one of the walls were neat rows of thick long nails, on which hung square white pieces of paper with the writing of people who had come through this installation. There were blank piece of this paper and pencils on a low table. On the wall was lettering that encouraged viewers to share their responses to the piece. The art description on the wall stated:

> Gary Simmons’s disturbing installation puts a sinister spin on the children’s chase-and-catch game Duck, Duck, Goose. With its circle of Ku Klux Klan hoods perched atop small stools and surrounding a dangling noose, the innocuous amusement becomes threatening, even deadly. Is racism and racially motivated violence innate, or is it taught? Is it passed down through generations like a favorite game? (*30 Americans*).

This installation became part of the inspiration for our planned dramaturgical display. The question that the exhibit curator asked reflected those asked by *In the Blood*, about what is passed down through culture and heredity.

Inspired by Simmons’s work, Sledge designed a lobby display that consisted of two pillars made of cardboard, paint and tape, forming a bridge, between which hung red yarn creating the visual of a chain-link fence, on which audience members could hang, with clothes-pins and note-cards, responses to questions placed on the wall behind. Unfortunately, the bridge was not structurally sound, and I had to make the last-minute decision to get rid of it after part of it collapsed. Instead I re-hung the chain-link-fence inspired red yarn on the wall, and placed a short table under it on which sat note cards, pens, and small clips which the audience could write

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[64] See Appendix D for pictures, taken by myself, at the *30 Americans* exhibit at the Nelson Atkins Museum of Art on August 18, 2019.

on and hang up. On the top of the yarn a sign read: "Share your thoughts." On the wall were pasted questions including, "What did you think of seeing *In the Blood?"* and "What moment was the most impactful for you?" Sledge additionally created a poll-taking display that consisted of small pompoms in trays of different colors, with a chart stating their meaning. There were two clear plastic containers set up and each had a question: "Do you know where you will sleep tonight?" and "How stable is your current living situation?" Audience members would anonymously place pompoms in the container that fit for them—the idea being to show that there are a range of living security experiences among the theatre-going community that are invisible.

Sledge was able to create these two displays in between daily rehearsals for *The Wolves*; however, she was unable to complete the rest of the lobby display about which we had discussed. The concept was that images, memes and articles would line the walls of the hallway as audience members approached the show. This would make apparent the landscape of poverty, homelessness and reproductive injustice under which so many Americans live, preparing the audience to enter the soundscape in the theatre which situated them firmly in the here and now. Sledge was able to find and send me a selection of relevant articles, two of which I used, but ultimately I was the one who pulled together images, memes and information, printed it all out, and hung it on the wall. I was not able to execute our full vision, and so I decided to stick to the themes of homelessness and black motherhood.[65]

Part of the wall display I created included maps depicting the number of homeless individuals across America, emphasizing Kansas. I felt that this was especially critical as, in Lawrence, known to be a liberal mecca within a Red State, there is an oft-repeated idea among many Lawrencians that homelessness, poverty, and racial disparity are not significant problems

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[65] You can see pictures of the full lobby display in Appendix E.

here. Additionally, on a campus where privilege is in the foundation of the institution, I felt that it was crucial to remind all audience members that the story they were about to see is *here* and *now*, not only in America, but in Kansas, in Lawrence, on campus, and in the audience. I also included anti-welfare and pro-bootstraps-narrative images taken from bumper stickers and memes, with the goal of prompting audience members think about these ideas. Within this section spectators found ideas such as: "If you can't count, don't multiply!" and "The government is not your baby's daddy." For people who hold such opinions, this was meant to encourage them to nod their heads, or internally agree, and then get to see the ramifications of such thoughts through the story of *In the Blood*. For people who do not agree with, or even more for those who are offended by these statements, it provided a warning of the kind of content that would be discussed in the play. These statements, for certain audiences, have the potential to be violent, however, my theory was that, printed out no bigger than they would be on cars, and taken out of their natural environment, put up next to other images which provided a critical response to their hatred, that these images would not be triggering, though they might well be uncomfortable.

To counter these narratives, I printed out and included, long form on the walls, two articles from the perspective of black mothers that countered Welfare Queen narratives.[66] Part of the purpose of displaying full-length articles to bust myths, while featuring memes and images that expressed pro-myth points of view was that in order to combat myths, one needs nuance,

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[66] These articles were: a *HuffPost* article from 2017 entitled "In The Tradition Of Our Ancestors, This Mother's Day We're Bailing Out Our Mamas" by Mary Hooks and Marbre Stahly-Butts, and *The Nation*'s "As a Black Mother, My Parenting Is Always Political" by Dani McClain, published in March 2019. The first article talks about the history of incarceration among black mothers, talking with nuance about the very situations that Hester faces during *In the Blood*. McClain's piece is more personal, and discusses choices that she feels she has to make as a black mother, describing the history of violence enacted against her and her children.

empathy, and large-system thinking, while myths are designed to be easy to hold onto. Reminiscent of Simmons's "Duck, Duck, Noose," myths exist in fairy tales and children's games, in snarky comments, and cartoons. Part of the job of the dramaturgical display of images was to show these mythologies to the audience in easy-to-consume ways. Then, through watching the play, participating in talkbacks, encountering the contrast between the memes and the articles, these mythologies would be burst wide open, and replaced by questions, by empathy, and, hopefully, a desire to do something different. While I did consider putting up more empowering memes and anti-Regan and Trump sentiments, I felt that would create a visual sense that these two different kinds of memes were just two sides to the same story. I felt it was paramount for the presentation of the mythologies, and the presentation of the myth-busting to be presented in visually contrasting manners. This paralleled the make-up and costume decisions made for the characters in the play. Hester had to have elements of realism to her, she did not wear thick make-up or gaudy clothes. Instead, her narrative was complex and nuanced. There was no glib or one-note way to view her, or view the reality of the situation that she represented. Reverend D, Doctor, Welfare, Amiga Gringa, and Chilli were all clowns, puppets, Masquerades — and so to were the views that their characters espoused placed in meme form on the walls of the lobby. Hester's side of the story was represented in the audience themselves — in the complex reality of the feedback wall, the pompoms representing people's housing situation, in the numbers showing the homeless populations of the United States, and in the articles, telling heart-wrenching stories of incarceration and historic oppression.

For the dual purpose of providing people with a space to unpack and decompress what they had just seen, and to direct the post-show conversation in the direction that we felt was

important, I did manage to organize a series of post-show talkbacks.[67] Opening night featured Dr. Ayesha Hardison and Dr. Alesha Doan, both associate professors in the department of Women Gender and Sexuality Studies.[68] Hardison was also cross-listed with African and African American Studies and English, and specializes in African American literature, culture, and black feminist practice. Doan's research includes reproductive justice, and it was through having friends in a class of hers that focused on reproductive justice that I was exposed to this terminology and framework. It was during this talkback that one of the possible failures of the production was illuminated. The second audience question that was asked that night, taken from the transcript, was the following:

> I keep thinking about the title of the play, "In the Blood," and I'm wondering if it's in the blood, in her blood, what possibilities are there of change, if it's in her nature and not in the nurturing, then, it's a very pessimistic, it's hereditary. Is that what we're supposed to take from the title?

Hardison provided an answer that helped this audience member, and the rest of the audience, contextualize and reposition this question. She explained that she "would read the play as challenging that idea." She went on to say that the play critiques prevalent stereotypes about black women. She said that she thinks:

> Parks is challenging that it is actually not in the blood –that that is the way to deny accountability and the violence that happens to her by the doctor and the pastor and our friend or Welfare, who are all social systems that she has to engage with and navigate and who exploit her in various ways. [….] So, it is in fact NOT in the blood. Parks suggests that it's in our blood, not impressed with blood and there's something about that is very American, because it's very capitalist. And so, it's on the level of making videos, and how the health care system treats you and how well for treats you, but also the community institutions that are supposed to help you—that, if we're claiming that it's something intrinsic that it is really intrinsic to our American culture.

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[67] Sledge did offer to help with these, put due to her limited time, I asked her to focus on the lobby display and undertook this myself.

[68] Doan has since been promoted to full professor.

At this point the audience member cut her off and asked, “So it's in our blood, not her blood?” and Hardison confirmed that that was her argument. The reason that I position this exchange as revealing a key failure of the performance of the play, is that a large part of our goal was to transform the way in which people thought about poverty. While the talkback provided the space for that transformation, it was clear that the way in which we told the story itself was not enough.

This audience member’s perspective was reflected in one of the cards left in the lobby, which read, “WHY DID IT FEEL LIKE THERE WAS NO SYMPATHY FOR HESTER…? SEEMED LIKE SHE IS TO BLAME FOR STUFF…. is that a direction thing?” Because there was no way to answer these audience comments, we know that this audience member left the space with this thought. This difference between this thought and the audience member quoted above is that this card implies that there should be sympathy for Hester, which was what we wanted the production to show. While the spectator questioned if the show itself put blame on Hester, I see that their comment positioned them as having such sympathy. I wonder: did the person leave with an understanding of how the world shows no sympathy for women in Hester’s situation? And did they leave with such sympathy themselves, and, more importantly, did they leave more or less likely to act to change this situation?

It was clear from another card that Hardison’s comment hit home with other audience members as well, it read: “Hardison’s comment during the Talk Back about the title was very moving. ‘In the Blood.’ It’s not in Hester’s blood; it’s in ours. I don’t want it in my blood. I want to change myself so as to not play into such a shitty system which does such shitty things to people.” Other note-cards left in the lobby contained a combination of comments on the play that expressed anger, sympathy, and an expansion of thought, some frustration with the second act,

one particularly mentioned the tap dance, and a few comments written as jokes to cast members.[69]

Another critical moment in a talkback came following our matinee performance. This talkback featured Dr. Nicole Hodges-Persley, who was my faculty advisor for the production part of this process, and was the Associate Dean of Diversity Equity and Inclusion and an Associate Professor in Theatre who was cross-listed in African and African American Studies, along with Dr. Cécile Accilien, Acting Chair of the department of African and African-American Studies, Director of the Institute of Haitian Studies and Associate Professor of African and African-American Studies and Haitian Creole. During this talk-back, an audience member referenced the line where Welfare says to Hester, "We put you in a job and you quit. We put you in a shelter and you walk. We put you in school and you drop out" (Parks, "In the Blood" 32). The audience member said, "[Hester] obviously wanted to be a really good mother to these children, [so ….] Why do you think it was that she didn't want to try and follow through with these if she wanted a better life for her children?" Similar to the previous question, this one operates within the context of dominant cultural understandings, and illustrates the audience member's complacency and adherence to the mythologies that we were working to dispel. Again, I was glad that we had a talkback that day.

Accilien, Hodges-Persley, and myself, who was moderating the talk-back, all contributed to the answer. They each expertly explained, from personal and professional experience, all the barriers that stand in the way of Hester being able to do as Welfare asks. They framed the ways in which welfare and other social services are denied to people once they start making money, how single parents who have to pick children up from school or care for children who are too

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[69] The full text (with the exception of the jokes for cast members) of each card has been written out and included in Appendix F.

young to attend school prevent them from attending jobs and school. Not only does Hester have Baby to watch, but she has to make sure to provide supervision for her children after school, as they have no home to keep them safe. Additionally, as I pointed out, Hester's inability to read prevents her from being able to attend school, or work a job. Hodges-Persley pointed out that the perception that black women are not trying hard enough is deeply engrained in American culture. She talked about being the child of a single black mother who was attending college. She shared that "I experienced assumptions based on who I was in relationship to my family being from a single parent home and growing up in the '80s, that somehow my mother wasn't doing enough." This experience that Hodges-Persley references was magnified for Hester and her children. Hodges-Persley and her family experienced assumptions of her mother's "lack" and degeneracy *despite* doing everything "right." Hester was not even able to do everything "right," due to exhaustion, illiteracy, and a life full of the trauma of everyone around her telling her she was not enough.

I argue that this audience question and these cards show the critical importance of community-based feedback sessions when staging a production with political intent. I echo Toni Morrison in saying, "It seems to me that the best art is political and you ought to be able to make it unquestionably political and irrevocably beautiful at the same time" (Morrison 345). I argue that all art is political, but that art gets labeled "political" only when it challenges the status quo. Despite Parks' claim that she does not write with an "idea" in mind (Cleave), her work challenges the status quo, and my direction of it challenged not just the status quo regarding American history and mythology, but the status quo of the theatre. I argue that *Verfremdungseffekt* alone is often not enough to be a catalyst for transformation. Audience engagement is a critical step of creating such transformation. The play leaves audience with a lot

to consider, and through conversation people are able to unpack their thoughts and feelings and draw conclusions. It is not a linear process, but an ongoing one. This is especially important considering that this play leads to different conversations for different groups of people, and is designed to affect them in different ways. We wanted to provide *witness* to those whose stories echoed the ones told in this show. We wanted to unsettle and upset those who support systems of oppression, and we wanted to provide audience members with feel of access, intimacy, and consent.

Conclusion

With this project having come to an end, I have to consider the impact of this research. The research demonstrates that it is possible to lift barriers to attendance for a wide range of people, and that more research and conversation is needed to raise still other barriers. As Mia Mingus iterates, access for people whose bodies and minds are unable to conform is often a second thought when creating events, performances and other shared spaces. After seeing first hand all of the push-back to even the least-disruptive change, I ask: is it possible for institutions such as the University of Kansas' Department of Theatre and Dance, to put resources into making changes that will be able to put Access Intimacy as a priority? I argue that while it is possible for the University of Kansas theatre, and other theaters like it, to create dynamic, inclusive spaces which tell stories and build communities that push for social transformation and are entertaining and artistic, creating such a movement will require a great deal more pressure than my thesis alone can deliver. Like any change that seeks to undo centuries of colonial power, change is slow and systematic and an incredibly amount of research such as this project, and

pressure by those receiving services and being involved in projects, is essential to moving the needle forward.

My main findings, and consequent recommendations to my future self and others interested in doing this work, are two-fold. First, while it is critical to explicitly state the ways in historical exclusions are being undone, the process of creating access must, in the words of disability studies scholar Petra Kuppets, "not begin at non-disabled embodiment" (Lair & Mog 31). This is illustrated in this study by our attempt to create Access Intimacy.[70] Instead of positioning bodies and minds that are unable to conform as outsiders, or "others," we strove to create an environment that positioned ability and access as critical for all bodies and minds. Essentially, instead of supporting the cultural construction of "normativity," we strove to change what "conformity" might look like — instead of just creating different rules, we strove to cater for and celebrate diversity, believing that more participation was the point. Our second finding was: **Consent is key**. The question to ask at every single point of a theatrical process is: do the people involved in this part of the process have the power to consent? This should start with the selection of individuals taking part in the project. Do the designers working on the show *want* to work on it? Are they *interested* in doing the work required? The work must be clearly laid out and transparent.

I believe the troubles in the design process would have been far fewer if consent had been on the table in a more concrete way. I do not know how KU selects designers, but I know that at least two of the designers specifically requested to work on this production. However, I believe that because there was a lack of consideration on the part of those who selected the design team, and on the part of the designers themselves, of what cultural knowledge would be necessary to

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[70] Mingus, Mia. "Access intimacy, interdependence and disability justice." *Leaving Evidence* 12 (2017).

pull off *In the Blood,* the designers were not able to fully consent to the process of what designing this show would be. Additionally, I operated from the premise that as the director, I was the "captain of the ship" and that my vision was paramount. I assigned readings with the understanding that many of the designers did not have the cultural understanding necessary to create the designs needed; however, the designers never consented to reading this material and, in fact, I am quite sure that most of them never did read it. I am not sure all of them even read the full play. In the future, I plan to work to create a kind of Intimacy Choreography in my process of interacting with designers, where their consent is given as much emphasis as the actor's.

Next, the actors should have the opportunity to consent. We cannot assume that just because an actor is auditioning for a show, they want to take part in conversations that a show will be having. By asking explicitly at each stage of an audition, and providing content information, warnings, and information about the physical requirements of the roles, actors are able to understand what they are getting into. The director or casting director must ensure that actors do not feel pressure to agree to whatever is being asked, but instead are given options and allowed to choose. It is paramount that questions in auditions about actor's interest in engaging in certain actions and conversations is framed as a choice, not a test with a correct answer. This must translate into the rehearsal room as well. The rise of Intimacy Choreography shows that the theatre is putting more effort into making sure that actors feel safe and supported physically; however, there is a need for such effort to address mental and emotional work as well. Tools such as tapping out, and discussions of actors' desires throughout rehearsals are critical here.

As I have discussed at length, the audience must then be given the option of consent, must have freedom to say Yes or No, or Sometimes at each point. Transforming people's opinions, pushing for social change, and telling moving stories cannot be accomplished for a

broad audience without consent. Buying a ticket is not consent. Coming to a theatre is not consent. Being able to chart your own experience, that is consent. When consent is not possible, acknowledgement of this is critical. This is, for example, how land acknowledgement works. Land acknowledgements state that a particular show is happening on land historically occupied by the indigenous population who lived there before colonialism. Because of structures of power, the Indigenous people whose ancestors occupied this land cannot consent to its use, and so, the least we can do is acknowledge it. Consent in a society controlled by capitalism is an uphill battle when, as Suzan-Lori Parks shows us, inequality is built into our systems, and consent is systematically denied to so many (if not all) of us. However, it is a worthwhile battle. I hope that this research can encourage others to engage in this work, and will provide a platform on which I can continue the fight for Consent to become a central tenet of all aspects of the theatre.

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Appendix A: *In the Blood* Production History

1999 - Opened November 2nd, at the Public Theatre, Off Broadway, NY

2003 - at the Emerson Theatre, Los Angeles

2010 - at Western Michigan University

2010 - CalArts Coffeehouse Theater, Valencia, April 15-17

2010 - Allens Lane Theater, Philadelphia, PA

2011 - Loyala University of New Orleans

2016 - DePaul University

2017 - May, at The Weekend Theater, Little Rock, Arkansas

2017 - Open September 17th, at the Signature Theater Center, Off Broadway, NY

2018 - May 18-Jun 9, at Convergence-continuum's Liminis Theater, Cleveland, OH

2018 - October 17-21, 2018 Kennedy-McIlwee Studio Theatre, North Carolina State University

2019 - Opened Feb 15th at University of Georgia, Atlanta

2019 - Julliard, NY

2019 - Nov 6-9, Columbia University School of the Arts MFA Acting Class of 2020's thesis production, The Lenfest Center for the Arts, NY

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Appendix B: Songs Used in Sound Design

Selections of the following songs were used in the sound design. This list was put together by Music Consultant Alison Lewis, MFA African and African American Studies.

Four Women by Nina Simone

Every Nigger is a Star by Boris Gardiner

Fate by H.E.R.

Velvet Handcuffs by Nicolas Payton

Money by Cardi B

Bitch Better Have My Money by Rhianna

U.N.I.T.Y. by Queen Latifah

She Bad by Cardi B and YG

Money in the Grave by Drake

Keep Ya Head Up by Tupac

Motherless Child as performed by Bessie Griffin

Star Spangled Banner by Jimi Hendrix

Appendix C:

Curtain Speech for *In the Blood* written in collaboration between director and actors

On behalf of the University Theatre, we welcome you! We would like to take this time to thank our Presenting Sponsor: Truity Credit Union. Without you, none of this would be possible.

Thank you also to FROTH, Friends of the Theatre, for their unwavering support! If you are interested in joining FROTH, please go to kutheatre.com/froth!

Up next in the University Theatre, next up on the Crafton-Preyer Stage is the University Dance Company's Fall Concert, November 15, 16 and 17.

Allow us to introduce ourselves!

We are students here at KU,

All undergrads

All theatre majors.

We are seniors, juniors, freshmen, sophomores, Japanese and African immigrants. Black, white, mixed, Asian, Latinx. Some of us have a hard time focusing, others are empaths.

Today we will be telling you a story: An American Story.

For some of us, this story is all too familiar, for some, it is unfamiliar. To all of us, it is important.

There are a few rules you should know before we start our story.

During the show some of our characters might walk up to you and hand you a card. The card will say, "Can I talk to you?" If you get this card you can say YES, or NO. We will not be offended if

you say NO. Some of us play unpleasant characters who you might not want to talk to you. Even if you say yes, and you decide part way through that you don't feel comfortable, you can flip the card around, and our characters will go away. We will not be offended if you do this.

If our characters offer you food during the show, it is safe to eat. Even if our characters say it isn't - we promise it is.

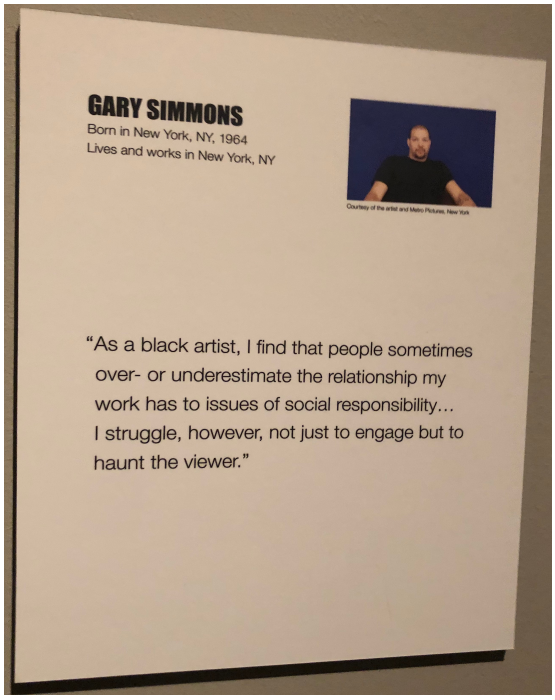
If you want to leave the theatre at any point. If you feel overwhelmed, triggered, or you need to use the bathroom. You can leave, take a moment to collect or relieve yourself, and then come back in. We have an open door policy. There is a quiet room across the hall, you can ask the ushers, where you can go to chill out if you want.

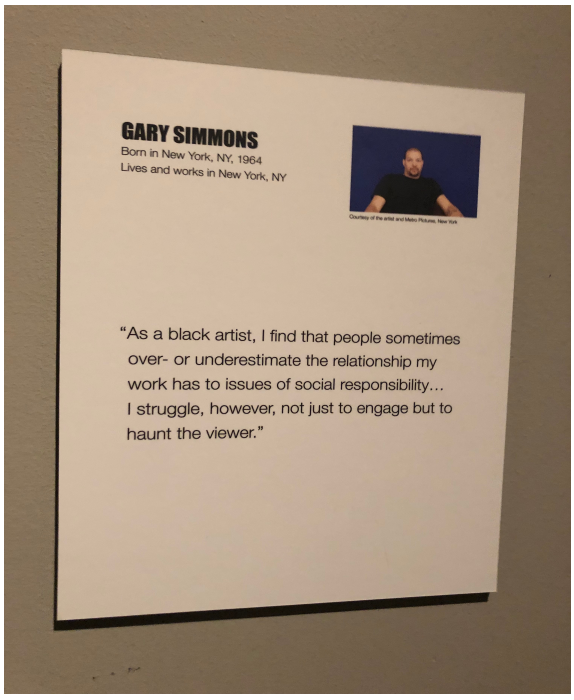
Please be encouraged to provide feedback on the surveys handed out by the ushers and by interacting with the lobby display.

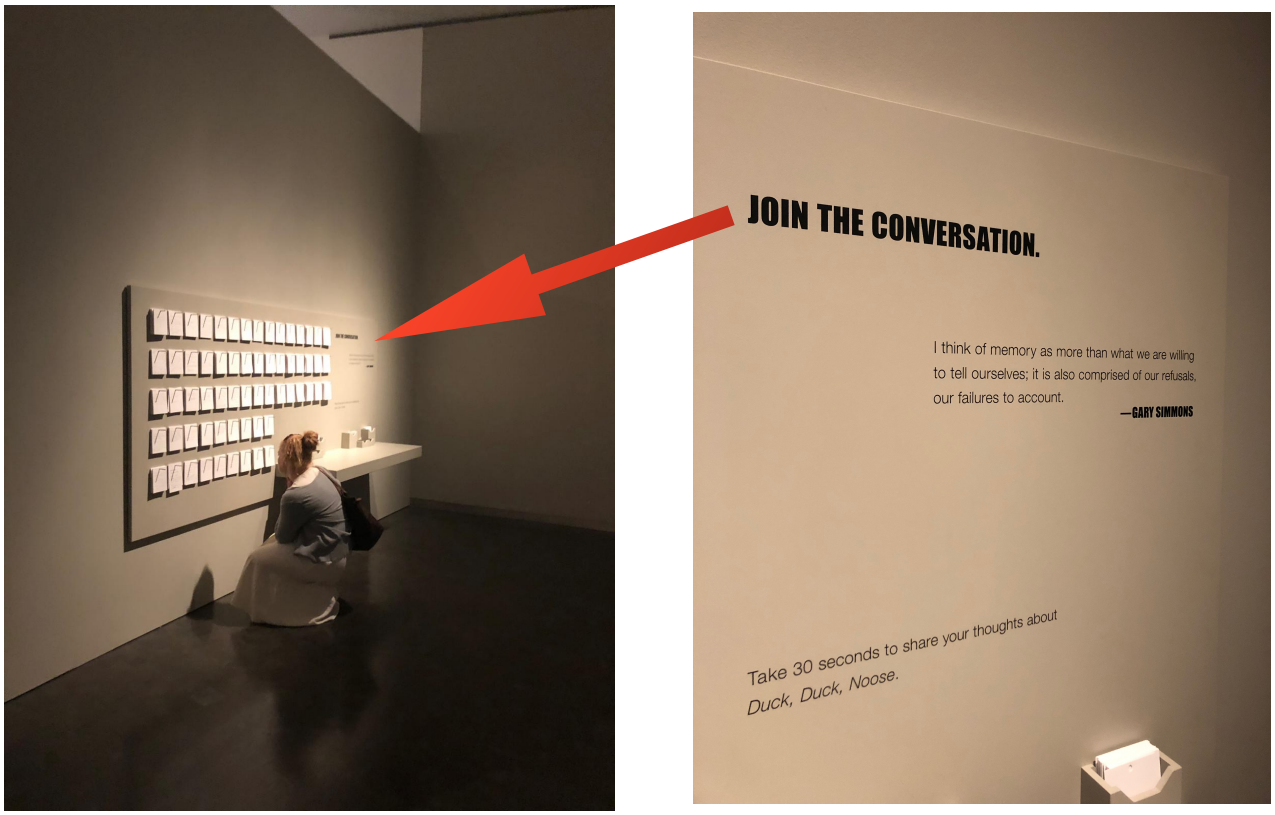
The show runs about an hour and 45 minutes with a 15 minute intermission.

NOW LET US TELL YOU A STORY. IN THE BLOOD, by SUZAN-LORI PARKS.

Appendix D: "Duck, Duck, Noose" by Gary Simmons at the Nelson Atkins Museum
Pictures by: Timmia Hearn-Feldman

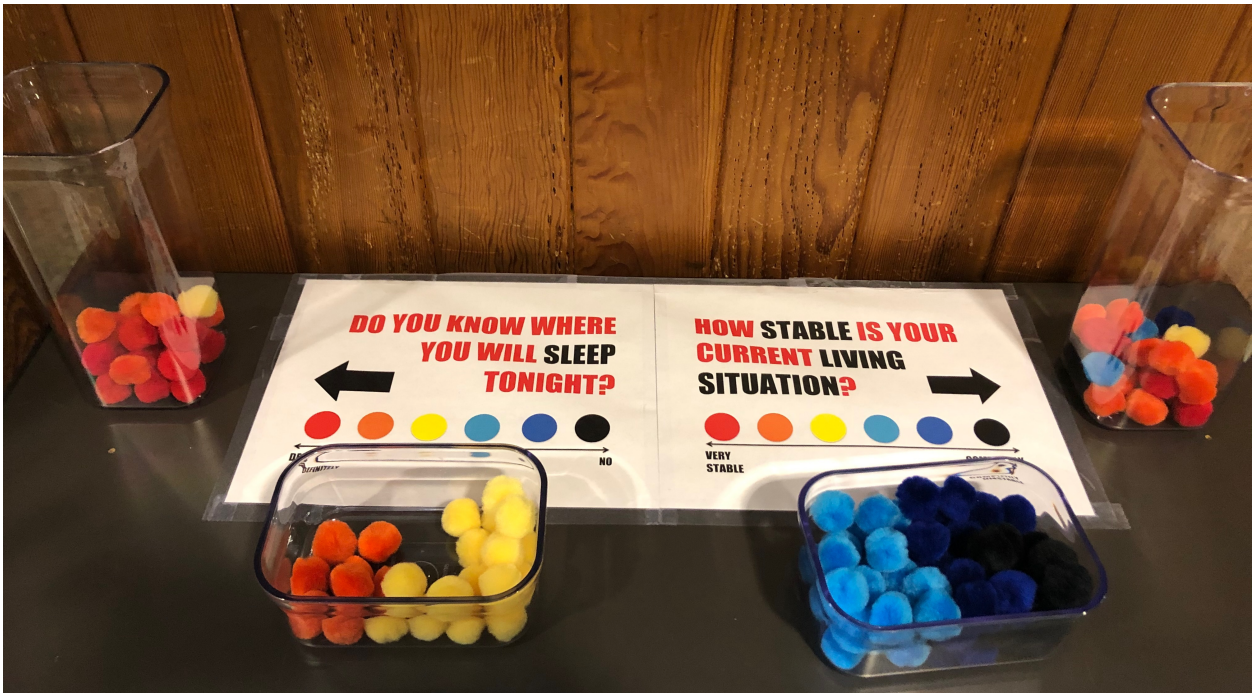





JOIN THE CONVERSATION.
I think of memory as more than what we are willing to tell ourselves; it is also comprised of our refusals, our failures to account.
—GARY SIMMONS
Take 30 seconds to share your thoughts about Duck, Duck, Noose.

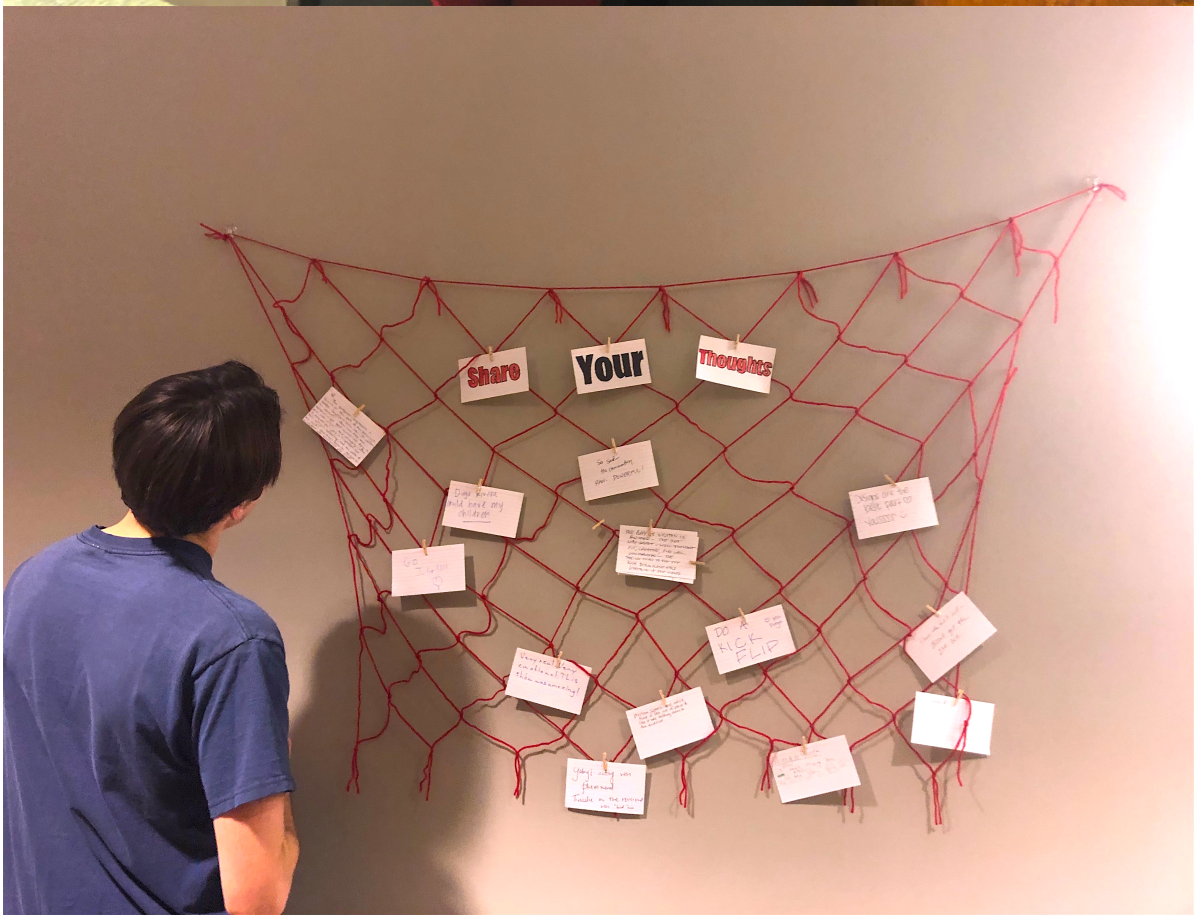

STAND FOR SOMETHING OR FALL FOR ANYTHING
UNAPOLOGETICALLY BLACK

Appendix E: Lobby Display



These two images each show part of the lobby display which polled the audience members about their living situation. Each image has a picture containing two bowls of pom poms in colors red, orange, yellow, light blue, medium blue, and dark blue, two clear plastic contains with a mixture of pompoms on either side of two questions. The question on left the text reads: "Do you know where you will sleep tonight?" and shows a chart from red (yes) to dark blue (no), and the one on the right it reads "How stable is your current living situation?" with a chart below showing from red (very stable) to dark blue (very unstable). In both images the left clear container is filled with mostly red and orange pompoms and one yellow, and on the right there is a mix. In the above image there are more oranges and reds and in the bottom image there are more blues.


Please return surveys here. Thank you!


Share
Your
Thoughts

Below see write-ups of all the responses from the three panels of audience responses left throughout the six shows.

“AMAZING show! I can’t imagine how emotional it was being in the show. Don’t let the show get you down!”

“Gaby’s acting was phenomenal. Tinashe as the reverend was ‘bad’ ass.”

“Preshow speech was weird. Kind of felt out of place & like it was talking down to the audience.”

“So sad - the commentary. RAW. POWERFUL!”

“The program represents a failure on the part of the American people. Questions arise like, ‘Is welfare the solution?’ ‘What role does the religious right AND secular left play in this clear crisis?’ And ultimately, ‘who is responsible? Who is responsible for this woman’s suffering, and the death of the child?’ Christians have an obligation to respond with heartbreak, and grace.”

“The play as written is awesome - the set was great - well thought out, creative, and well constructed - the seeing thro to see the kids during scene very effective and the lights. Actors for the most part were terrific - the second act could have been much more powerful. Overall I enjoyed. I thought the first act effective! Well acted - the second act was a struggle for me - sloooow - tap dance not (illegible word) - didn’t care of the direction during that part.”

“Designs are the best part (heart) Yasssss (smiley face).”

“Liked the first act - didn’t get the 2nd act.”

“The delivery of the play was phenomenal for the content and emotions the play engages with. KU student.”

“Between the lighting, and how open the characters are, this show held me on emotional edge.”

“I was not sure how to take in this production. It was rather hard to understand. Not sure if it was diction, or volume but it was a bit hard to understand.”

“Wow. A lot to think about.”

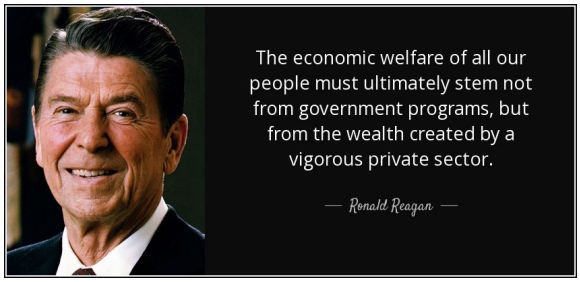
“WHY DID IT FEEL LIKE THERE WAS NO SYMPATHY FOR HESTER…? SEEMED LIKE SHE IS TO BLAME FOR STUFF…. is that a direction thing?”

“Hardison’s comment during the Talk Back about the title was very moving. ‘In the Blood.’ It’s not in Hester’s blood; it’s in ours. I don’t want it in my blood. I want to change myself so as to not play into such a shitty system which does such shitty things to people.”

“I am mad. Dylan”

“Very real. Very emotional. This show was amazing!”

“Wack”



The Chutzpa Queen
Sepcial to The Washington PostBy Dan Miller
The Washington Post (1974-Current file); Mar 13, 1977; ProQuest Historical Newspapers The Washington Post (1877 - 1 pg. 3

The Chutzpa Queen

Favorite Reagan Target as Welfare Cheat Remains Unflappable at Trial in Chicago

By Dan Miller
Special to The Washington Post

CHICAGO—In this city, Linda Taylor is known as the Welfare Queen, for she is credited with taking in more than $150,000 a year in welfare benefits. Officials of the Illinois Department of Public Aid say that if the total isn't a record, the rightful claimant has yet to step forward—or be caught.

But Chutzpa Queen may be a more apt title for the 40-year-old Taylor, judging from the tale that has been unfolding in Cook County Circuit Court here for more than a week. According to testimony from state witnesses, all Taylor had to do was ask for the money and it started rolling in, courtesy of an anesthetized bureaucracy.

making a false report to police—a minor crime with a light penalty—but they were intrigued with something else found in the apartment: welfare checks made out to different people at different Chicago addresses and food stamps and rent receipts and Social Security cards as well as other identification.

Sherwin and Kush spent more than two weeks attempting to trace Taylor's life-style from the Southside slums to Loop banks to travel bureaus and through the labyrinth of the Illinois Public Aid Department.

They allege that the evidence they turned up showed that Taylor:

- Had at least 25 aliases, with identifications to match.
- Was listed at more than a score of telephone numbers.

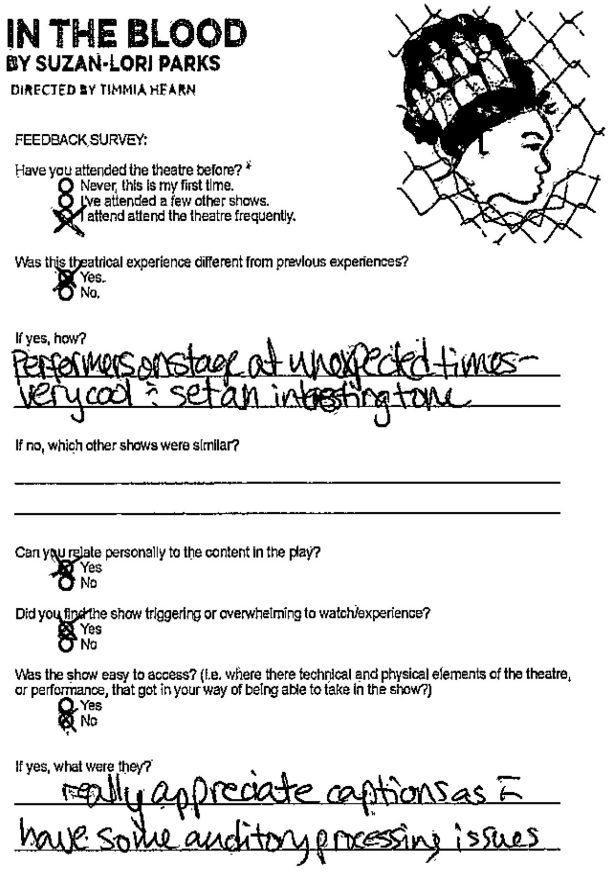
Three of the images on the wall depicted the United States' current and two former presidents signing legislature specifically aimed to benefit those who were living in poverty. I felt that the three images were revealing of American mentality towards blood, and who should be in photo opportunities related to poverty relief. Even America's first black president, Barak Obama, had a young black man in his image, like the rest, as though to say: look who I'm helping. This paternalism is inherent in the narrative pushed by the Doctor, Amiga Gringa, Welfare, Chilli and Reverend in their relationship towards Hester.

President William Clinton signs the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act into law (August 22, 1996). This created a work requirement to receive welfare.

President Obama signed major health care legislation into law on March 16, 2010.

Alveda King, niece of Rev. Martin Luther King Jr., speaks to President Donald Trump during a signing ceremony for criminal justice reform in the Oval Office of the White House, Friday, Dec. 21, 2018, in Washington. Sen. Chuck Grassley, R-Iowa, watches at center. (AP Photo/Evan Vucci)

Appendix F: Sample Audience Survey and Data



IN THE BLOOD
BY SUZAN-LORI PARKS
DIRECTED BY TIMMIA HEARN

FEEDBACK SURVEY:

Have you attended the theatre before? *
- [ ] Never, this is my first time.
- [x] I've attended a few other shows.
- [x] I attend attend the theatre frequently.

Was this theatrical experience different from previous experiences?
- [x] Yes.
- [ ] No.

If yes, how?
Performers on stage at unexpected times - very cool ; set an interesting tone.

If no, which other shows were similar?

Can you relate personally to the content in the play?
- [x] Yes
- [ ] No

Did you find the show triggering or overwhelming to watch/experience?
- [x] Yes
- [ ] No

Was the show easy to access? (i.e. where there technical and physical elements of the theatre, or performance, that got in your way of being able to take in the show?)
- [ ] Yes
- [x] No

If yes, what were they?
really appreciate captions as I have some auditory processing issues

Questions on the survey, with aggregated data included were as follows:

Have you attended the theatre before?
Answers:

Never, this is my first time: 2
I've attended a few other shows: 13
I attend the theatre frequently: 10

What this theatrical experience different from previous experiences?
Answers:
Yes: 22
No: 2, but one of them still filled out the "If yes, how?" section below.
One respondent checked both boxes, and commented under Yes: "closer to action, very personable" and under No: "Carousel-KCRep" without further explanation.

If yes, how?
Answers included: language, more intimate space, content, split stage, more audience interaction, actors changed costume on stage, different kind of space, "a strong show w/ very strong themes", "EVERYTHING", closed captioning, use of stage doors, informal, more inclusive, actors on stage at "interesting times", more casual/informal, interactive monologues, character nuance, accessibility and inclusion, playfulness of audience interaction, audience was part of story, "VERY immersive".

If no, which other shows were similar?
Carousel - KCRep, She Kills Monsters, Spring Awakening, Detroit 67, Welcome to Arroyos (in terms of designs).

Can you relate personally to the content in the play?
Answers:

Yes: 13
No: 10
2 people wrote in answers: "kind of" and "somewhat"

Did you find the show triggering or overwhelming to watch/experience?

Answers:

Yes: 12 (8 who said they can personally relate)

No: 11 (4 who said they can personally relate)

One person (who said they can personally relate) drew a line between the boxes, one person (who said they cannot personally relate) circled "overwhelming" and didn't fill out a box

Was the show easy to access? (i.e. where there technical and physical elements of the theatre, or performance, that got in your way of being able to take in the show?)

This question was poorly put together, and, as many survey respondents pointed out, it was a contradiction.

Answers:

Yes: 8 (4 of which clarified that YES it was easy to access, and 1 of which clarified that YES technical elements got in the way - which were diction and the open caption font)

No: 8 (2 of which clarified that there were NO barriers to access)

8 additional people didn't fill out a bubble, 3 of which clarified in writing that the show was easy to access, 2 who pointed out that the question is a contradiction, and 3 who didn't answer at all

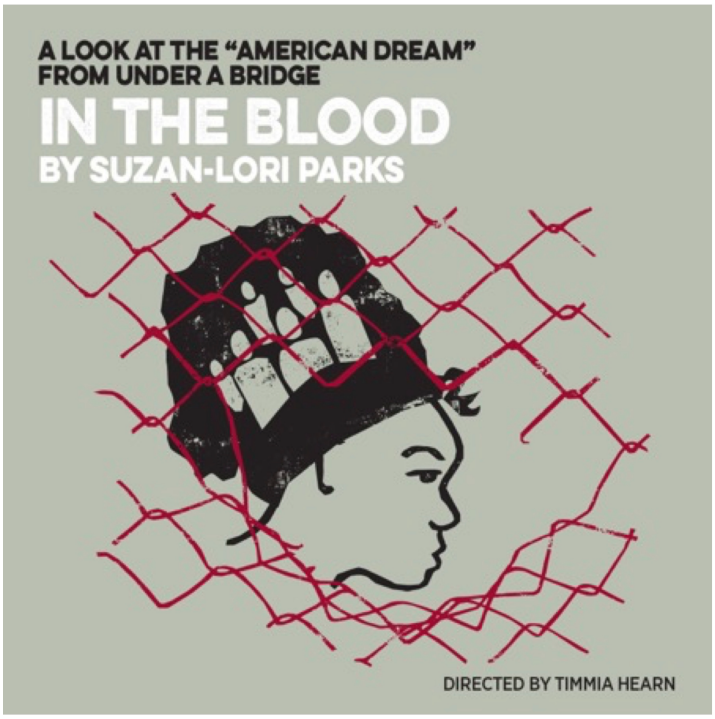
If yes, what were they?

Answers included: Easy to access, "no elements got in the way, however, it was simultaneously realistic and unrealistic. The unrealistic got in the way of the realistic", appreciated closed captioning, "Triggering b/c black trauma sucks, BUT we need to discuss it", "perfectly easy and engaging", "diction was an issue at first, and the font in the captioning was hard to read"

Additionally, patrons wrote the following comments on their sheets without prompting: "This was incredible. Thank you for creating this work of reproductive justice making abstract concepts intimate", "Great performances by ALL! I was surprised to know this was done by college students", "As a white woman with a Black partner, on different levels" (in response to "can you relate personally), "The acting an intention the portrayal of their characters [sic]", "This show is amazing! 30+ years ago I was a young single mother trying to make ends meet… the character of Hester touches on all races".

Appendix G: Audition Notice

AUDITION NOTICE



September 3rd

Sign up to audition at: http://kutheatre.ku.edu/auditions

Play Synopsis:

In this dark and twisted take on the so-called "American Dream," Pulitzer Prize-winner Suzan-Lori Parks tells the story of Hester, a mother of five who lives with her children in destitute poverty beneath a bridge.

Directed by Timmia Hearn, this production is bringing an ABSURD and CARNIVALESQUE angle to ask the question: what is really going on in this place some people call "land of the free"?

Casting breakdown:
3 "women", 3 "men".
POC/BIPOC

Hester - a mother who lives under a bridge. She is just trying to get a leg up in this world.

Bully/Baby/Beauty/Jabber/Trouble - her children. Just being kids in a world that has criminalized them since birth.

The children are double cast with:

Chilli - Hester's first love.
The Welfare Lady - Hester's social worker.
Reverend D - Baby's absentee father.
Amiga Gringa - Hester's "friend" and a wanna-be adult movie actress.
The Doctor - a street doctor