

Winter 2021

Review: The Journal of Dramaturgy, volume 27, issue 1

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Review

The Journal of Dramaturgy

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- 3 **Lindsey R. Barr**
The Making of a Conference: Practices in
Transnational Planning, Programming, and Translation
- 9 **Karen Jean Martinson & Nicola Olsen**
Tripped Up by the Small Things: Dramaturging
Institutional Processes in DEI Work*
- 19 **Joan Lipkin & Walter Byongsok Chon**
The New Colossus Project: A Model for Rapid
Response Theatre Around Immigration
- 30 **Sarah Johnson & Rachel Hirshorn-Johnston**
Pregnant and Performing: Embodied
Dramaturgical Methodologies

*Peer-reviewed



LITERARY MANAGERS
& DRAMATURGS
OF THE AMERICAS

Review

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Editors' Note:

In 2020, amidst the uncertainty of the COVID-19 pandemic, arts and academic institutions closed their doors and numerous theatre practitioners lost their jobs. 2021 will certainly be remembered as a year of inestimable loss. And yet, as we hope to demonstrate in this issue, 2021 should also be remembered as a period of reflection and transformation. Dramaturgs reflected on the inherited traditions of the industry and asked: Who is included in theatrical spaces and who has historically been excluded? Is it possible to dismantle old paradigms of production to realize new ones? Despite the trials of the year, members of LMDA and the larger artistic community have been active. The writers in this issue of *Review* give us pause to reflect on the events of the past and think toward the future.

Lindsey R. Barr's interview with Brenda Muñoz and Lourdes Guzmán González documents the incredible complexities of forging a successful transnational partnership in launching LMDA Mexico and the 2021 conference in Mexico City. Reflecting on a process dating back to 2018, the three converse about the joys of coming together in service to the organization as well as the challenges they faced along the way. In their article "Tripped Up by the Small Things: Dramaturging Institutional Processes in DEI Work," Assistant Professor/Dramaturg Karen Jean Martinson and Scholar/Director/Dramaturg Nicola Olsen discuss their dramaturgical contributions to Esther Almazán's play *Indian School*, which premiered at Arizona State University (ASU) in 2020. Their progressive practice generated a model for a dramaturgy program at ASU and their analysis of the production process in this issue of *Review* serves as an excellent case study of DEI work within university theatre departments. Artist/Activist/Educator Joan Lipkin's and Dramaturg/Scholar/Educator Walter Byongsok Chon's piece "The New Colossus Project: A Model for Rapid Response Theatre Around Immigration" explores a collaborative method for devising circa the issue of immigration. The genesis of the program was shaped by The New Colossus Project, a workshop created by Lipkin and developed with Chon. In "Pregnant and Performing: Embodied Dramaturgical Methodologies," dramaturg Sarah Johnson talks with actor Rachel Hirschorn-Johnston about their collaborations on two plays that address pregnancy and motherhood at Outpost Repertory Theatre in Lubbock, Texas. Their discussion examines how the very personal experience of becoming a parent can intersect with artistic creation.

Through these dynamic and varied projects — often explored through dramaturgical collaborations — art and scholarship merged, theory and practice conjoined, and pedagogy and performance fused. We anticipate to experience the impact of these projects in many years to come.

Kristin Leahey & Elizabeth Coen

The Making of a Conference: Practices in Transnational Planning, Programming, and Translation

by Lindsey R. Barr

On March 30, 2020, leaders from LMDA's executive gathered on a Zoom call to discuss the fate of that year's annual conference, "Crossing Borders: Dramaturgy Around the World." In the midst of uncertainty and global lockdowns, LMDA chose to cancel the in-person gathering, deciding instead to host a virtual conference. Intense planning, programming, and transnational collaboration — led by then president Martine Kei Green-Rogers, board chair Brian Quirt, and conference coordinator Brenda Muñoz — filled the following three months. Hosted on WebEx, the 2020 conference exceeded all expectations. LMDA welcomed almost 300 dramaturgs from across the globe while providing simultaneous oral interpretation in both Spanish and English, a critical step in crossing borders with conference programming.

After the 2020 conference, newly-elected president Bryan Moore and the team forged ahead, adding to Brenda's expertise that of Lourdes Guzmán González. Acknowledging the importance of accessibility that the virtual conference offered attendees, the LMDA conference team chose to include both virtual and in-person components to the 2021 annual gathering. The process was daunting. In essence, the team was taking on two conferences and livestreaming full time, with the LMDA team spread across four locations in North America.

As a member of the conference committee, I was in awe of the fortitude and resilience Brenda and Lourdes displayed while guiding our team through one of the most complicated conferences the organization has ever seen. Having worked closely with both of these women, I can attest to their incredible work ethic, attention to detail, and deep care for the organization that made this year's conference a success. If given the opportunity, I could write a novel about how Brenda and Lourdes picked up pillars of dramaturgical integrity to keep alive the promise from 2015 that we would, indeed, hold a conference south of the United States border.

But, instead of writing ad nauseum about the conference from my perspective as LMDA's Administrative Director, I think it will have more significance coming from them.

Below are excerpts from my interview with Brenda and Lourdes held on July 26, 2021, less than three weeks after the conclusion of the conference(s). Now serving on the Executive Committee for LMDA Mexico, they shared their

“...I could write a novel about how Brenda and Lourdes picked up the pillars of dramaturgical integrity...”

insights, challenges, and hopes as we move forward into this new phase of dramaturgy throughout North America.

LINDSEY:

How did you come to be involved with planning the 2020 LMDA conference?

BRENDA:

I had the luck to go to Chicago in 2019, after I started collaborating with Bernardo [Mazón Daher] to perform translations for LMDA's grant calls. His vision was to have submissions in both languages. My mentor Rachel Ditor put me in touch, so when the Chicago conference was announced she said “this would be a great opportunity for you to come and meet the people I'm working with.” And that's where I met Martine, Brian Quirt, Bryan Moore, and Ken [Cerniglia]. They already had the idea of doing a conference in Mexico, so when I, a Mexican, appeared and was interested, they were like, “let's talk!” I joined LMDA as conference coordinator because I was based in Mexico and it was easier for me to do things on the ground. I knew there was going to be a lot of work to do and I didn't fully understand LMDA as much as I needed to. Emilio Mendez got in touch with me because he knew that I was working with LMDA and he recommended that I contact Lourdes. So, I gave her a call and was like, “I'm doing this with LMDA. I don't know what it's going to look like. I have no idea, but if you want to join in, you are very welcome.” She said, yes.

LOURDES:

In 2018, a group of classmates of mine and Emilio Mendez, my teacher, were meeting with Bernardo. So, Bernardo came to Mexico City and said he wanted to have dinner and to meet dramaturgs in Mexico. During that meeting, he mentioned LMDA's interest in coming to Mexico in 2020, and he asked if we wanted to be part of the organization of the conference. We lost a bit of contact, so it wasn't until 2019, that Emilio reached out to me again and said that Brenda would be in charge of the conference, and that she was looking for volunteers. I was very excited to know that the project was still going on so I said, yes. After that, Brenda and I met and started planning.

BRENDA:

[Laughs] Yes, that's the short version. “Started planning.”

LINDSEY:

When you heard that LMDA was coming to Mexico for the 2020 conference and they wanted you to be a part of the process, what were your thoughts?

BRENDA:

I had just taken a dramaturgy lab in Vancouver, and I completely fell in love. I think that when really pushed, I could understand what dramaturgy was even though it's complicated. I felt that I understood it and loved it. When I was in Chicago something really weird happened. I was working very closely with dramaturgs back in Canada but not in Mexico. That's when I started to realize it's not such a popular profession, even less in Mexico. I had very little experience, so I knew it would be a challenge to coordinate a conference for dramaturgs knowing very little about dramaturgy and knowing even less about it in Mexico. It felt exciting because I knew we were going to find what [dramaturgy] was in Mexico together. And I was able to be the bridge between the languages and the distance. It felt like a great opportunity for everyone but also very risky. Meeting Lourdes and seeing that there were people motivated by dramaturgy was good because I thought, even if there are five of us, there is going to be someone to talk to. I felt that was the start of thinking that we could actually do the conference here in Mexico. I wanted to do it because I feel dramaturgy serves the performing arts everywhere. It's very good practice and I want that for my career and for my country. It felt like a no-brainer.

LOURDES:

When I first heard that the conference was happening here I was excited and I was very eager to see what would happen because I had already heard about LMDA in class and it was the only organization I had heard about that had “dramaturgs” in its name. Because there are other organizations in several places that involve theatre, research, and outreach; but, specifically dramaturgy, it was the only one I heard of. I was very happy to know that we were finally going to be in touch with people I had only read about. And when I went to my first committee meeting, I recognized a couple of names. It’s so different when you get to see people who are alive and doing this now — actually working on dramaturgy. I felt very proud and very honored to have the chance to be part of this, but I didn’t really know what would be expected of me and what I had to contribute. As the meetings kept happening, I felt a bit more confident and I had the chance to start sharing my voice and giving a couple of opinions. I realized that even if I didn’t really know about the field or much about LMDA, or about the specific project of the conference, what I did know about was what my classmates and I had experienced: What we wished for, what we thought would be useful, all the connections that we thought were required. So, I simply shared my experience and my perspective and tried to make it useful. It felt like we were making history.

BRENDA:

It felt like a great opportunity for two young women in Mexico to do dramaturgy. We’ll do whatever we can to make it work, and that’s how we took it. The weird thing was, in Chicago, it was all English speakers. Some people knew how to speak Spanish, but the POV [point of view] was very centered on the United States and Canada. Since I wasn’t living in Canada anymore, I felt like this was a thing only for English-speaking America. But, when Martine and Ken talked to me about what they wanted to do, I thought there may be a way to do it in [Mexico] and they made me feel hopeful about the future. I knew I didn’t quite fit in there, in that community, but they were super open. Just the context and perspectives weren’t the same.

LINDSEY:

Bringing in any new branch of an organization comes with challenges. Before we discuss all the amazing things LMDA Mexico is doing, can you talk about the challenges that come with planning a conference where there are so many people across different cultures and regions. How did you navigate that programmatically?

BRENDA:

Oh, the practical challenges. [Laughs] I think we have them all written down somewhere. A thick book. Do you want to say something, Lou?

LOURDES:

Specifically, about the challenges? I was thinking about the previous question as well because it’s also kind of linked. It’s true, that in Mexico, we didn’t even know who the dramaturgs were. That was the first challenge we faced. Linking us was not always easy. Even if we knew there were a couple of dramaturgs, we were very distant between generations. We weren’t used to working together. So, getting together was the first step. There were some colleagues of mine who didn’t agree with Mexico being the first option to host a conference. Some people said that there are other countries in South America that have way more trajectory, that have more things to offer, more things to say. I disagreed. I thought that this was a chance we should harness. This is something we can use in our favor. It will not only help tell everyone outside Mexico what we are doing, but ourselves, too. The first challenge had already been overcome by the time the organization of the conference started because there were little groups coming together. After that, of course, there was the pandemic, which was the biggest challenge of all; not losing our heads, and figuring out things that we hadn’t done before. But Brenda was always in control. For quite a long time, I simply followed her lead. Later on I felt confident enough to make suggestions.

BRENDA:

May I take it from here?

LOURDES:

Yes, of course.

BRENDA:

I think it all comes down to language. It was language in many layers and in many ways. Different contexts. First, we want to do a conference in Mexico and we need a venue. How do I tell the venue who we are? Because Literary Managers and Dramaturgs of the Americas could mean something in English, but in Spanish? It’s a different language when you translate it. It doesn’t make any sense to anything we do here. Learning to explain what LMDA is, made it clearer for me how the institutional structure was built and how the organization works. It was more of

transmitting the feeling and the work we do, instead of this academic thing where we explain what a Literary Manager is. Once we had an answer to that, “What is LMDA?” “Well, we’re a group of dramaturgs.” “Okay, well what is a dramaturg?” So, that was another bullet language from LMDA could help to answer; but, a translation isn’t always enough. I felt like I needed to adapt some things. Thankfully, I was already in touch with Lourdes, Emilio, and Gabriela Aparicio, who has a great thesis about dramaturgy in Mexico. It was only us, but it was never really just us. Once we had built all the language and we could start making those connections, the next challenge was formatting LMDA and the organization in the US and Canada. You [in the US and Canada] use gender pronouns. You ask gender pronouns. We don’t do that yet. You do land acknowledgements. We

“It became a parallel goal of building a community so that we had an audience here to give us feedback...”

didn’t do that then. There were a lot of things that were happening, but we couldn’t just do the same or replicate it exactly as it was, because it meant different things. The land acknowledgement means very different things for one country that has been colonized against a country that has been conquered. Those are the kind of conversations we had to start doing dramaturgy in, so people also in Mexico and Spanish speakers didn’t feel like we were bringing knowledge from somewhere else and telling them how it has to be done. It was that back and forth that illuminated that we needed to build a community in Mexico so that we could best serve our members south of the US border.

When we were realizing that need, that’s when the pandemic hit. We knew we needed to make it virtual. That came to be the next language challenge. We were planning to be in Mexico. We had already invited people from Mexico. So, we had to figure out how to make that happen, which brought up the simultaneous oral interpretation. This is the second year we’ve done that and I think it is one of the highlights of our conferences. That challenge became a door to a lot of possibilities and 2020, looking back,

really felt like a half step. We knew we would connect across countries, languages, and contexts and still talk about dramaturgy as a community that was dealing with a lot of things. Humanity was dealing with a lot of things. After that half step in 2020, 2021 was again a different language because we were in the virtual realm and coming back together. That extra year gave us time to look for more people who were doing dramaturgy in Mexico. It made us notice that even though we had the oral simultaneous interpretation before we weren’t fully bilingual. Most of the documents were still in English. The extra year gave us a chance to build a community, and work in our newsletter and great programs. It became a parallel goal of building a community so that we had an audience here to give us feedback on how we were going to present dramaturgy in Mexico. I think that needing to understand each other, no matter what languages we speak, and needing to understand it all to really get a broad idea of what dramaturgy is, made both of our brains expand a little bit. I don’t think I can think of dramaturgy fully in Spanish. I don’t think I can think of dramaturgy fully in English. I gotta go both ways because each one, when you connect them, becomes something great. That’s the goal: To take and borrow so that we can evolve what the field is; how our professions work; and how we work within and across borders, and with other dramaturgs.

LINDSEY:

I find one of the great things about LMDA is when the Executive Committee gets on one of these massive phone calls; the geographic reach of the people who work with LMDA is incredible. That makes it a challenge, too. It’s one of the biggest things to overcome when there are such differences in lifestyles, availability of resources, culture. It’s something LMDA has to navigate, that we come up against time and time again. I certainly am not aware of the intricacies of life in Mexico.

BRENDA:

Yet!

LINDSEY:

Yet! [Laughs]

BRENDA:

I think that keeps us in check. We never get involved in our own point of view. There’s always a feeling of looking around and acknowledging that we all want the same

thing. And, the difficulties of time zones and languages and stuff, it only brings attention to the highest. I find that's when people work best. At least I do, under pressure.

LINDSEY:

Let's talk about LMDA Mexico. It's a part of LMDA thanks to the hard work of you both and many others. What programs are coming out of LMDA Mexico? Where is it headed? What are your aspirations? What are you thinking this could look like in the future?

BRENDA:

I don't think we're prepared to answer that yet. We have Puentes, which is a duet of dramaturgs interviewing a professional from the field in Mexico who may work as a director, a photographer, designer, actor. Just to be a bridge in between that [profession] and dramaturgy. We've interviewed a lot of people. We've found that this program has really sexy legs. It can run to a lot of places with the two dramaturgs and the openness of interviews for people who may or may not have heard of dramaturgy.

I won't get into this too much because Lourdes will tell you, but the Wiki project will have an entry for Mexico, which Lou and Gabirela will initiate and run with. I think the next step for LMDA Mexico is an advisory board, because we're seasoned now. But we need help from our mentors. We decided to bring on Emilio Mendez, Rocio Galicia who calls herself a social dramaturg, and Martha Herrera-Lasso who is also a fantastic dramaturg in Mexico. When we're able to meet and talk about what happened in the conference and dramaturg that, we'll be able to find out what our next step is as LMDA Mexico. I think one of our big goals is to make LMDA Mexico a kind of professionalization program for students who are just out of dramaturgy school interested in dramaturgy. I think that the conference was a huge inscription. I see it as a rock, and we put a little mark on it, and that is just a mark now. But in ten years, we'll be able to see what that mark meant. For now, we're cavemen painting the walls and showing people what we're doing. That's exciting. There's no pressure of looking one way or another. We need to find it, and let it exist.

LOURDES:

The Wiki project is something I'm going to be working on with Gabriela, and with as many who want to contribute, because it's going to be a huge thing. This week we are

having meetings to start planning what the Wiki project might look like in Mexico. We're going to follow the steps of Sara Freeman, Geoff Proehl, and Anne Cattaneo. We plan to at least do what they have already done. We feel confident and free enough to contribute the particular requirements in Mexico and to speak about what Mexican dramaturgs are doing. Things might look very similar in some ways, but we are also sure that there will be several differences that will have to be addressed.

“For now, we're cavemen painting the walls and showing people what we're doing. That's exciting.”

BRENDA:

We started so well gathering in person in a huge theatre and a really nice community. I feel like we're wanting to meet in person again. I feel like our presence, even though we're a small group, it helps to just spend time meeting these people. We need to remember how great it was and how helpful it was to meet in person and exchange ideas there. I want that for Mexico, another official meeting. The virtual part can always lift us and take us further, when we exchange conversations with the US and Canada.

LINDSEY:

I'm hopeful that the pandemic will have eased by July, but I think that's the next big question mark. How do we translate the incredible success you all have created for us moving forward?

BRENDA:

[Laughs] I don't know! I'm pretty sure it will. It's like taking the paste out of the tube. You can't put it back once it's out there.

LINDSEY:

I agree! Do you have any final thoughts that you want to share?

BRENDA:

I think one of the other goals for LMDA Mexico is that we want to stay pretty close with our partners from Canada

and the US. Even though we're adapting the organization to work in Mexico, I also feel that's a two way street. We need to adapt the other branches so we can flow together. As I've said, "Language and context." There's a lot to do. Lots of communication. That's key. We have to keep evolving and that one part, can't get static. The whole thing has to move together.

LINDSEY:

One of the things that makes LMDA so great is because, relatively, we're still a small organization. We can adapt quickly and I do think that adaptability is one of our strengths, but it's always good to pause and acknowledge that it goes both ways.

LOURDES:

I'm very hopeful and feel very motivated to keep working and to keep contacting people. Because everytime we do, we find out that they are doing some amazing work, and it's always worth it; knowing about it, sharing it, and learning from it. I think that's the most exciting part of this. That we're growing and that this will simply expand. That's awesome. ◆

LINDSEY R. BARR is a PhD candidate in Theatre and Performance Studies at the University of Maryland, College Park. Her dissertation *Making Madness on Stage: American Musical Theatre Since the Americans with Disabilities Act* focuses on representations of madness on stage after the passage of the ADA and illustrates how madness as an operative dramaturgical construct drives the dramatic action of the American musical. She has published work in *Studies in Musical Theatre*, *The Routledge Companion to Musical Theatre*, and *Staging Motherhood: Representations of the Maternal in 21st Century North American Theatre and Performance*. A professional dramaturg and director, her work has been seen throughout the Washington DC and Baltimore region at Everyman Theatre, Baltimore Center Stage, Single Carrot Theatre, the Capital Fringe Festival, and the Goethe Institut, among others. As an arts administrator with a masters in nonprofit management, Lindsey has led organizations of all sizes. Previously a managing director, Lindsey is currently the Administrative Director for the Literary Managers and Dramaturgs of the Americas (LMDA).

Tripped Up by the Small Things: Dramaturging Institutional Processes in DEI Work

by Karen Jean Martinson & Nicola Olsen

“I am learning new ways.
Maybe they are the old
ways, really, but we are
lucky to have them.”

— Charlie's letter, *Indian School*

In February 2020, Esther Almazán's play *Indian School*, which she wrote over three years in her MFA Dramatic Writers program, premiered at Arizona State University (ASU). *Indian School* asks its audience to bear witness to the traumas of the Indian Industrial Boarding School System as they play out within one Yoeme family.¹ It is a difficult, heartbreaking story to share with an audience, one that confronts a dark history during which racist federal policy forcibly removed Native children from their families and sent them to schools far from home to have their language, culture, and spiritual practices literally beaten out of them. Like Charlie, the play's main character, children taken to the schools endured physical, sexual, and psychological abuse; many did not survive. The play makes clear how the legacy of this cultural genocide continues to harm Native communities today.

ASU made the powerful choice to select *Indian School* as part of its theatre season. Not only did it signal a commitment to using theatre to interrogate horrific moments of our shared national history from an Indigenous perspective, but also it revealed deep trust in the artistry of Almazán, committing the resources of a full production to her thesis work. We sincerely applaud ASU's good intentions in producing *Indian School*. Yet even as we acknowledge the genuine investment made to the piece, we also seek to consider how institutions might improve processes when engaging with the work of BIPOC artists. As dramaturgs, our first priority was to support Almazán as she developed the script and to advocate for cultural competency in the production. Additionally, we sought to broaden our audience by contacting Native faculty

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¹ The Yoeme people are also known as Yaqui, and the two terms are used interchangeably in the play, as are the terms Native, Indian, and Indigenous. We follow that practice here.

members affiliated with the American Indian Studies program to inform them of the production and to invite them and their students to attend.² We hoped such personalized contact would make Indigenous audience members feel welcome in the space. Finally, we used our dramaturgical skills and research to craft an impactful lobby experience for the audience. These, of course, are not unique to *Indian School*; rather, they are business-as-usual for dramaturgs. Much like the “old ways” that Charlie references, these are the well-trod paths of dramaturgical engagement.

However, at ASU, these dramaturgical “old ways” simply did not exist prior to our work on *Indian School*. Dramaturgy largely occurred in name only; it was unsupported, and therefore minimal in both practice and impact.³ Integrating dramaturgy as a recognized artistic component into well-established institutional production processes meant that everything that we did was new, and by its newness, disruptive. Yet we ardently believed that bringing a dramaturgical sensibility to our processes, and refining them to work even more in service to the storytelling, was an important “new way” for the institution to learn.

University theatre programs must balance producing artistically and intellectually innovative work and training student artists as future professionals in the field. When Indigenous scripts like *Indian School* are added to the season, aesthetic choices, which promote vital storytelling and engagement, can come into conflict with production processes that emulate those of the professional theatre. Unfortunately, the good intentions that prompt Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) work at institutions do not guarantee a positive impact for the marginalized communities they hope to celebrate. Indeed, process itself must be dramaturged. In this article, we use *Indian School* as a case study to consider how institutions might also amend their processes to better support the storytelling needs of BIPOC works. Such pieces require that extra resources and care be put toward development and cultural competency. They also require institutional flexibility. Too often, the storytelling collides with institutional practices to inhibit felt experiences and to negatively impact audiences,

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2 The playwright, cultural consultant, and dramaturg attended one class to discuss the play, its themes, and the production process with students.
3 Dramaturgy at ASU operated on an ad hoc basis. Martinson was hired specifically to build up dramaturgy as an area of specialization. As part of that work, she advocated for dramaturgs to be visible in the rehearsal space and in production meetings, and to create lobbies and participate in engagement activities in support of the season.

particularly members of BIPOC communities. Despite warm welcomes and excited invitations, institutional processes, policies, and regulations often become a hindrance to DEI work in theatre production on campuses today.

A NEED FOR NEW STRUCTURES

Arizona State University, like many predominantly white institutions (PWI), has recognized that its historical practices have perpetuated inequity, and has committed to working to “advance meaningful change in the fight for equality and social justice at ASU and beyond.”⁴ Indeed, the University charter, adopted in 2014, commits to access and inclusion at the institutional level, boldly asserting, “ASU is a comprehensive public research university, measured not by whom it excludes, but by whom it includes and how they succeed.” To say that ASU believes in its charter is an understatement — it is literally etched in granite at the campus entrance, prominently displayed in its buildings, and, most importantly, upheld by faculty and staff in their daily work. However, as we realized through dramaturging *Indian School*, agreeing to include and not to exclude, while a necessary beginning, does not guarantee success; processes must also evolve.

The urgency of this need to examine and refine our processes was brought into focus by the racial reckoning that marked 2020, when protests demanding racial justice occurred across the nation and the world. This work continues today, and within the fields of theatre and higher education, a “calling in” is underway.⁵ Popularized by Black feminist activist, public intellectual, and professor Loretta J. Ross, “calling in” refers to generously addressing, discussing, and correcting harmful, problematic behaviors and processes within a community. Notes Ross, calling in seeks “to hold people [and institutions] accountable for the potential harm that they cause,” without losing sight of our shared humanity in the process (Scheimer and Chakrabarti). The publication of the *We See You White American Theatre* letter and its subsequent document of demands sounded a clarion call within the professional field, offering detailed diagnoses of how racism persists in theatrical practice as well as potential remedies that will create greater equity. Students at many universities, ASU included, submitted similar

.....
4 As emphasized by ASU President Michael Crow in an email to the ASU community, 26 October 2020.
5 We thank Lynde Rosario for introducing us to this term, for sharing the work of Loretta J. Ross with us, and for bringing these practices to LMDA as part of her work on its Anti-Racist Task Force.

letters of demands. These documents offer clarity in thinking through how upholding set processes can unintentionally aid white supremacy. As noted in the *We See You W.A.T.* document under Working Conditions and Hiring Practices, “Creating one structure for every project does not allow for the specific exigencies that each project needs and taxes artists needlessly, creating a potentially hazardous and less humane work environment” (5). Rather than continue to uphold processes in the name of professional development, universities should instead innovate by training students to think more deeply about how they can create equity through new pathways of production.

DEVELOPING A VITAL STORY

Early in the development phase, questions around the ethics of storytelling took on paramount importance. In agreeing to have *Indian School* staged at Arizona State University, Almazán carefully considered how much of the story must be molded to fit the expectations of a predominantly white audience alongside the risks that Indigenous storytelling carries for the people it depicts, especially when presented at a PWI. Both of these issues were clarified during a development trip to the Institute of American Indian Arts (IAIA) in Santa Fe, NM for a staged reading and workshop discussion, directed by Dr. Jonah Winn-Lenetsky.⁶ This trip allowed Almazán to interface with Indigenous artists navigating the tensions surrounding the creation of art about Native culture that will also be in conversation with dominant white culture.

The experience at the IAIA prompted Almazán to “do some deep soul searching about *Indian School*” as two “Indigenous students ... were in distress after reading [the] script” (Written Exam 11). The first student could not participate because of the abuse depicted in the script. His grandfather had cautioned him against performing violence; Diné (Navajo) spiritual practice suggests that embodying brutality invites it to occur in real life. The second student returned the script sobbing and shaking. Her grandparents had gone to an Indian Boarding School, and it was too painful for her to perform. Right before

⁶ Almazán wrote about the serendipity that surrounded this trip in her MFA Written Exam. It was in New Mexico that Almazán became a theatre major, when she attended the College of Santa Fe, which then shared a campus with IAIA. On the trip, we stayed at an Airbnb that paid homage to the owner’s curandero abuelo and was overseen by a wolf dog, who watched over us as we sat by a fire in the backyard. An Indian flute, an object of much significance within the play, was displayed in the bedroom. Almazán situates the events of the trip as little bits of magic that contributed to *Indian School* and reflected back the play’s reverence for Indigenous knowledge.

our eyes, she exhibited symptoms of intergenerational trauma. As Denise K. Lajimodiere, an Indigenous educational scholar whose research focuses on intergenerational trauma resulting from Indian Boarding Schools, explains, “historically traumatic events are transmitted intergenerationally as descendants continue to identify emotionally with ancestral suffering” (266). After these two meetings, Almazán states, “I had a terrible internal battle. *If I were to put Native people in a place where they relived the horrors of the boarding schools, was this play worth it at all?*” (Written Exam 15, italics in original). Yet we asked her to consider another question: What are the risks of not telling this story? This, declares Almazán, flipped her perspective, especially when it was seconded by IAIA Performing Arts department chair and Indigenous performing arts scholar Dr. Sheila Rocha, who commended the courage of the playwright and the performers for taking on this story.

To not engage with the history of the Indian Industrial Boarding School System is to allow it to remain hidden and its traumas to continue to do harm. Almazán recognizes,



Figure 1: Charlie (Claude Jackson, Jr.) lashes out at Sonny (Eleanor Field) in a depiction of verbal and physical abuse while (Matthew Venrick) looks on from the storytelling circle. Photo by Tim Trumble.

“People do not know this history. I didn’t learn this history before.” It was only through conducting her own research, which was indisputably “horrific,” that Almazán was able to confront the atrocities committed (Personal Interview). Scholars, along with organizations such as the National Native American Boarding School Healing Coalition, stress

that the Indian Boarding Schools functioned as a mechanism of cultural genocide, though they were rationalized as “help” and “civilization.” Continued silence allows the effects of this cultural genocide to persist, thus the sharing of survivor stories provides a necessary step to healing.

Furthermore, the erasure of this history shifts blame from the colonizers who created it to the survivors who endured it. Roland Chrisjohn and Sherri Young, social scientists and authors of a Canadian government report on the ongoing effects of the Indian Boarding School System, discuss how survivor symptoms represent rational responses to oppression and trauma.⁷ Put simply, the pathologizing of survivors allows the colonizers to evade accountability. This motivated Almazán as she developed the play. She states, “The colonizers created tropes about a drunken Indian, or a violent Indian, but I don’t believe them. I strongly suspect that instances of alcoholism or violence within Native communities come from the abuse that they learned at the hands of the colonizers. It isn’t something that comes from Native culture” (Personal Interview). Ultimately, the trip to IAIA distilled Almazán’s purpose in writing *Indian School*. “I realized that I really wrote this play to hold the colonizers accountable. That’s why I wrote it,” she stresses (Personal Interview).

A CULTURALLY COMPETENT APPROACH

Being willing to produce Indigenous work is an important first step. Yet, as performance scholar Brian Eugenio Herrera notes in his article, “‘But Do We Have the Actors for That?’ Some Principles for Staging Latinx Plays in a University Context,” institutions must work to ensure that cultural competency is seeded in all areas of production, lest they “place an unfairly presumptuous burden” on minoritized actors by expecting them not only to possess cultural expertise, but also to “perform as an authorizing presence” (28). It is crucial that cultural expertise be embedded throughout the production team, so that multiple experts ensure authenticity in storytelling. Therefore, cultural competency often requires extra resources. Notes *Indian School* director Michael Scholar, Jr., “It’s important that institutions realize that there is an extra amount of time, and effort, and energy, and resources that are needed in order to respectfully and appropriately approach the work. Often, more than anything, it’s the resource of time; and if you don’t have the resource of time, then it’s the resource of money” (Personal Interview). In order to ensure

7 In Canada, Indian Boarding Schools were called Residential Schools.

cultural competency, institutions must be willing to free up resources for this additional labor.

With *Indian School*, cultural expertise began with the playwright. Almazán credits her family elders as her most important influences, including her Tata, who “gifted me my storytelling skills,” her Nana, a *curandera* who “always described, with delectable detail, the disgusting probable results of our careless behavior,” and her Tia Babuna who “is the greatest example of brilliance in storytelling” (Written Exam 3-5). Almazán’s original inspiration for the play, which later prompted the extensive research that informs it, came from a song written and performed by her uncle, Ted Ramirez.⁸ His “Look to Baboquivari” tells the story of a child taken from his mother’s arms to an Indian Boarding School. Though far from home, the young boy knows to look to the Baboquivari mountains to feel connected to his family. This image is central in the play and featured prominently in the staging. Informed by both the song and her upbringing in the culture of the Sonoran Desert Region, Almazán’s engagement with the topic of the Indian Industrial Boarding School System was deeply personal and authentic to her.

As director, Scholar pushed to place Indigenous artists in leadership roles.⁹ In part, this began with Scholar himself; a Canadian of Mexican descent, he had discovered that he may have Yaqui ancestry.¹⁰ Thus, working on *Indian School* offered a way to connect with his past. However, Scholar also recognized that he did not have the requisite cultural knowledge to effectively shape the production. As a result, he brought in several cultural consultants, including Nora Cherry, Zarco Guerrero, Celia and Michael Jose, and Ted Ramirez.

The contributions of Cherry were invaluable. Rather serendipitously, she took a position as Coordinator of Recruitment and Admissions for ASU’s then-School of Film, Dance and Theatre as Almazán began working on

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- 8 Ramirez was named the 2001 Official Troubadour of the City of Tucson and is a 2004 recipient of the Arizona Culture Keeper Award.
 - 9 ASU Theatre Artistic Director Bill Partlan has collaborated with several Indigenous artists in the development of their craft and worked diligently to bring artists in to assist with *Indian School*.
 - 10 Scholar’s abuelo was perhaps Yaqui, though he could not publicly claim this heritage as a professional in Mexico. Scholar’s bisabuela (his abuelo’s mother) attended a boarding school in Arizona; it is unknown if this school was an Indian Industrial Boarding School or not.



Figure II: The family performs a theatricalized healing ritual in the shadow of the Baboquivari mountains, their ancestral land. Charlie (Claude Jackson, Jr.) sits in the center of the circle, as his childhood spirit (Eleanor Field) joins with Martha (Rebecca Marwig, seated stage left) and Helen (Sara Garcia, standing stage right) in the ritual. Photo by Tim Trumble, scenic design by Julia Rogge, costume design by Alexa Marron, and lighting design by Ian Irizarry.

her initial draft of the play.¹¹ Cherry, who is of Payómkawichum (Luiseño) descent, also had a personal connection to the play; her mother had attended the Phoenix Indian School. As Cherry sought to obtain her mother’s school records, she fostered valuable connections that benefitted the production. She also shared her mother’s records, and her story, with the dramaturgical team for use in our lobby materials. Additionally, Cherry assisted with locating Indigenous actors. She credits her participation in *Native Nation*, a collaboration led by playwright Larissa FastHorse and Cornerstone Theater that premiered in 2019 at the Salt River Pima-Maricopa Indian Community with forging inroads into the local community of Indigenous performers.¹² Cherry states, “*Native Nation* actually opened up the entire world of things, not only to me, but to a lot of Natives in the community” (Personal Interview). Claude Jackson, Jr., who played Charlie, was one of Cherry’s fellow collaborators. Cherry generously devoted her time and energy to *Indian School*; her cultural consultancy was done on top of her regular workload.

¹¹ Almazán was working part-time in the department admissions office when Cherry was hired on as her boss. Almazán notes in her written exam that Cherry “kept me excited about writing the script and was a constant support up to, and including, the postmortem” (10).

¹² The play focused on the contemporary Native American lived experience, and was created by, for, and with Indigenous communities. It featured a cast of approximately forty Indigenous actors from across the state (Garcia).

Though she stresses that her work on the production was a “transformative event” (Personal Interview), to allow such vital cultural consultancy to go uncompensated risks minimizing the importance of that work.

Four other cultural consultants were invited into the rehearsal space. Guerrero, who self-identifies as Chicano, is an artist deeply connected to local Indigenous communities and well-versed in their cultures and traditions. As part of his work, he crafted the smudging rituals vital to rehearsals and the performance. Because music features heavily in the script, the Joses, Native musicians who specialize in Indigenous instruments and forms, provided basic training to the actors and helped them craft a simple melody that became Charlie’s conduit to his past and present community. Finally, Ramirez provided insights into the chanting that occurs during a healing ritual.¹³ Scholar notes: “I talked to Ted about what he did in creating the song and creating the chanting and he gave me some really good advice about where chanting comes from, and how it can heal both yourself and others. [...] And I was like, “[...] I need you in the room and you will be the voice of authority that is gifting us this song”” (Personal Interview). Bringing in expert consultants added authenticity to the storytelling, and ensured that the production would accurately represent and appreciate, but not appropriate, Native culture.

STORYTELLING AND INSTITUTIONAL PROCESSES COLLIDE

There were many moments during which the storytelling needs of *Indian School* collided with institutional processes. It is worth noting that such collisions seemed to occur around mundane concerns: casting calls, fire alarms, chairs, and tickets. Though the artistic team grappled with intellectual and aesthetic issues surrounding the ethical production of minoritized work, we were often tripped up by the small things. As institutions consider the systematic nature of oppression, they must look holistically for the many ways that white supremacy embeds itself in standard operations. As we saw with *Indian School*, progressive thinking and ethical engagement must be paired with institutional troubleshooting.

¹³ The cast invented the healing ritual depicted on stage, which strove to represent without actually embodying a sacred act. During the opening to the performance, the cast made clear that it was not an actual ritual. The script also reinforces this; the sisters note that they are listening to the grandparents as they help Charlie. At one point, Helen asks, “Are you and I qualified?” to which Martha responds, “Probably not, but we’re doing it anyway” (74).

Herrera notes that the challenge surrounding casting plays by minoritized artists can lead university selection committees to censor already marginalized works in the guise of efficiency and practicality by choosing to serve the mostly white students enrolled (23). It is commendable that Arizona State University, whose Indigenous theatre students number in the single digits and therefore clearly does not “have the actors for that,” resolved to produce *Indian School*. Though the play centers around a Yaqui family, Almazán felt comfortable casting Latinx and Indigenous actors in these roles, especially because most local students trace their Latinx descent to Southern Arizona/Northern Mexico and therefore likely share Indigenous ancestry. However, the regular departmental call for actors did not connect to the needed communities. States Scholar, “I think it is a huge mistake, giving up too early and saying, well, these are the people that showed up at the audition. So, we have the cast from this pool” (Personal Interview). The director, playwright, and cultural consultants had to devote extra time and work to find actors. Almazán recruited her two cousins to play the sisters, and an actor from *Native Nation* was also cast. A call for an Indigenous child actor was also sent out to local arts schools and children’s theatre groups.¹⁴ The final cast included three Native and one Chicano adult; two students, one of Latinx heritage and one white; and a 10-year-old girl who identifies as Latina with Andean/Amerind roots. That the casting burden fell largely to key individuals of the artistic team is an area in which theatre department leadership could offer more active support. For instance, upon *Indian School*’s selection for the season, the recruitment of artists within Indigenous communities could have begun immediately, instead of letting it fall to the usual audition timelines.

The rehearsal schedule was more challenging with actors of a variety of age ranges and experience levels. The adult actors each lived full lives and worked in demanding fields outside of theatre, while the child actor was subject to labor laws that limited her availability. It was also necessary to integrate some basic actor training into the rehearsal process. However, the production timeline for *Indian School* conformed to ASU’s standard process: approximately 20 hours per week for five weeks. Choosing to produce an Indigenous play requires an extended rehearsal period that reflects the reality of working with adult actors of various

14 The call officially stated, “Priority will be given to performers who self-identify as Indigenous, Native American and/or Nativos Mexicanos.”

experience levels effectively volunteering their time to a production.¹⁵ Challenging as it is, institutions must find ways to allow for flexibility in their production timelines.

One highlight of *Indian School* was that Scholar’s leadership allowed the entire artistic team to take a coalitional approach to the staging, one that, as Herrera, following theatre scholar Patricia Ybarra, states, “insists on a principle of ally-ship to guide the work of performance, leveraging privilege to amplify awareness of racial and ethnic inequity rather than efface it” (32).¹⁶ Specific rehearsal practices, such as the smudging of the space, worked to solidify this coalition as they also foregrounded Indigenous culture and storytelling. Smudging — an Indigenous practice of burning dried plants or plant resins to spiritually cleanse, purify, and bless the air and those within it — took place once weekly during rehearsal, and every night of performance. Guerrero led the team by burning copal, offering a land acknowledgement paired with words of gratitude, and then asking each person present to breathe in the good energy and expel the negative, leaving peace and harmony.

The opportunity to build this coalitional approach through smudging was nearly disrupted early on. The director outlined the practice at a production meeting; several members of the production team soundly rejected the idea on grounds of potentially setting off the fire alarms and sprinklers. Noting the importance of telling Indigenous stories bolstered by Indigenous culture to build coalition, Scholar pressed the point and stated that he was willing to accept any responsibility (administrative and financial) if the fire alarms were activated. Perhaps because it was clear that Scholar would conduct smudgings with or without permission, the production team shifted their position, conducting tests and organizing protocols that supported smudging in the space while still maintaining fire safety rules. This paved the way to build smudging into a powerful collective moment in performance.

Before each show, the smudging ceremony invited the performers and audience to forge communal bonds. Guerrero offered a land acknowledgement, with a particular focus on the pre-colonial society that created

15 Partlan worked very hard to secure budgetary resources to offer the adult actors small stipends and parking passes.

16 This coalitional approach was vital. While the cast was composed of predominantly BIPOC artists, the artistic team included many white artists, and all were welcomed into the storytelling.

the canal system that continues to bring life to the desert valley today. Centering Indigeneity, the cast introduced themselves, sharing personal details about their lives with the audience: tribal affiliation or other identity-based markers, professions, or hobbies. The interaction forged a non-traditional connection between actors and audience and actively allied everyone into the storytelling.



Figure III: Zarco Guerrero leads the audience in a smudging ceremony and land acknowledgment with Sara Garcia and Eleanor Field. Photo by Tim Trumble.

Within the physical confines of the performance space, storytelling needs created institutional challenges from the start. *Indian School* was performed in a small fifty-seat theatre space, affectionately known as Room 133 (referring to the room number on the door). Though nominally a black box, the flexibility of the space is severely limited. The chairs, on sets of risers, are zip-tied together. An assortment of blocks, mats, rolling doors, and mismatched furniture used in classes rest behind the black curtains in a cluttered heap.¹⁷ Scholar hoped to transform Room 133 into a space that felt Indigenous. His director’s concept emphasized the storytelling circle, which he envisioned as a means to decolonize the space and decenter whiteness. Cherry asserts “one of the most spiritual elements of Native spirituality is keeping it in a circle” (Personal Interview). The stage area, with a beautiful curved backdrop image of the Baboquivari Mountains, formed one half of the circle.¹⁸ Yet

¹⁷ The area behind the curtains is so disorganized that unhoused individuals have been able to sleep in the space for days before being discovered.

¹⁸ As is visible in Figure 1, the actors remained onstage throughout the show. When not performing, they sat on benches that created the upstage edge of the storytelling circle, bearing witness to the performance.

the request to extend the circle into the audience seating was denied; department policy dictated that the chairs were not to be moved.¹⁹ To gesture toward the circle, the director asked that benches and pillows for floor seating be placed at the front of the stage, and that the first row of chairs — which were not secured — be angled slightly. Still, the rows of zip-tied chairs rigidly enforced the colonial structure the performance sought to upturn. As Cherry frankly remarks, “that space . . . it did not lend itself to anything Indigenous” (Personal Interview). It could have been transformed if the zip-tied chairs had not been viewed as necessary and had instead been a subject “called in” for disrupting the Indigenous, spiritual circle design.

Space concerns bled directly into ticketing issues. Scholar notes, “We created these seats up front for the audience to be more immersed in the project, but they’re not comfortable seats” (Personal Interview). Because the added seating was uncomfortable, the box office differentiated between purchased tickets and comped tickets. As the show began to sell out, the box office directed comped tickets to the bench and floor seats, reserving the soft chairs for the paying customers. On the surface (and reliant on capitalist structures of knowledge) this idea might make sense. However, with a mostly Indigenous cast, it led to Indigenous family and community members, who were often elders, being directed to sit in the most uncomfortable seats in the house. To truly welcome and venerate an Indigenous audience, ticketing and seating policies must reflect communal norms. The best seats in the house should have been reserved for Indigenous family and friends who should have been celebrated as revered guests.

Further issues with comped tickets also led to the exclusion of Indigenous people who were unfamiliar with institutional practices. Lead actor Jackson shared that his mother and son were turned away from the show; they were told that there were no tickets left for them when they arrived for the final performance. Scholar remembers, “There were empty seats in the House because of tickets being held for reservations. This held up our show as we were desperately trying to get people in there. And eventually, I just went out there. I said ‘I don’t care what the policy is,

¹⁹ Throughout this article, we have made a conscious choice to present these decisions as they often came to us: framed in passive voice where people seemed to use “policy” or “regulations” as the basis for saying no, thereby distancing themselves of responsibility in denying these requests.

the show needs to start, you need to see this. There are empty seats in here” (Personal Interview). Due to unclear communications with the box office, Indigenous family and community members were marginalized from a production that should have honored them.

The intentions of the storytelling were to include and celebrate, however the impact of casting choices, fire alarms, zip-ties, and ticketing processes served to restrict DEI efforts. Universities can expand the impact of DEI work by examining small, mundane processes, policies, and regulations for their unintended negative impacts. Fortunately, at ASU, some of this work is underway. A Safe Set Committee was created to evaluate our rehearsal and production protocols. Beginning in the 2021-2022 season, new guidelines will be integrated into our production work with the specific intent to address negative impacts and improve positive outcomes of DEI work. Though this is just a first step, it grew out of a recognition of how our processes were doing unintentional harm.

FELT THEORY AND DRAMATURGY

We wanted our audience to not only learn about the history of the Indian Industrial Boarding School System but also feel connected to that history on an emotional level. Since it has been largely erased from public school history courses and powerfully stigmatized for Native peoples, few realize or talk about what happened in those spaces. The benign title of “boarding school” hides the deep secrets of abuse, neglect, and trauma experienced by the Native children forced to attend. “Felt theory,” articulated by Indigenous feminist scholar Dian Million, creates a context for “a more complex telling” because it is “rich with emotional knowledges, of what pain and grief and hope meant or mean now” (54). We believed that experiencing this emotional knowledge would help the audience connect to and empathize with the life experiences and choices of the characters in *Indian School*, who were deeply rooted in this traumatic history.

We introduced an engagement with felt theory through dramaturgy in various ways. An 8'x8' board paired Louise Erdrich’s evocative poem “Indian Boarding School: The Runaways” with over forty historical images of Indigenous children sitting at desks, working in industrial arts, eating, marching, waiting in lines, cleaning, and praying before bed. The display allowed audience members to contemplate the homesickness, punishment, and shame described in the

poem alongside of the array of pictures that make painfully clear the militarized and dehumanizing practices of Indian Boarding School life. Three listening stations with headphones, photos, and QR codes invited the audience to hear personal stories of the boarding school experience told by Indigenous voices. Inside the theatre space, we presented detailed information that conformed to more traditional dramaturgical practice; three boards documented the history and deleterious health impacts of the boarding schools and offered information about intergenerational trauma. We also tried to bring a bit of felt theory to this display as well. We included a historical timeline entitled “Assimilation Education,” which documented the cultural genocide that had occurred at the Phoenix Indian School, literally in our own backyard.²⁰ We also included an interactive display where audience members could write a letter responding to the themes of the play, which allowed them to share their own felt experiences with the performance.

Yet again, policies and space regulations minimized the impact of our work, limiting audience engagement both outside and inside of the theatre space. Fire safety codes for the narrow hallway that functions as a lobby for Room 133 dictated that the boards had to be placed in an open space approximately fifty feet down the hall. Because this area could not be locked or monitored during the school day, we made the decision to cover the boards after each performance to keep them safe. While this protected the boards from potential harm, it also limited the reach of our dramaturgical materials among Arizona State University students. Moreover, not all of the dramaturgical displays fit into the hallway, which is why several boards were moved inside Room 133, again restricting access to the lobby materials. Ticketing policies further diminished audience engagement with the dramaturgical materials. Because of general admission seating, people tended to find a seat and remain sitting.

Similarly, playbill design and specifications hindered engagement. ASU Theatre programs look like a text document in book form; they are neither designed nor organized to facilitate interaction with the dramaturgical materials. Most likely, this lack of design stems from the limited practice of dramaturgy that predated our work on

²⁰ This history is at once startlingly present and virtually unknown. Indian School Road is a major thoroughfare in Phoenix, yet many Phoenixians know it only as a place name, not realizing the trauma that the site holds.



Figures IV–IX: The dramaturgy boards and listening stations in the lobby and inside Room 133. Photos by author.

Indian School. Simply put, no one had authored program content before. Initially, we were given no page restrictions, so we crafted additional material to supplement the lobby display, including a critical interview with the playwright and additional resources about intergenerational trauma and healing. These evidently increased the program printing costs. As a result, the decision was made to restrict program materials to a 500-word “Dramaturg’s Note” going forward.

Other processes that constricted the potency of DEI work involved talkbacks. Originally, Scholar had hoped to include talkbacks following every performance, and worked diligently to invite various stakeholders from local Native communities to participate in these dialogues. As the performance dates grew closer, we were notified that talkbacks could not be held in Room 133; they imposed an undue burden on the

student workers, who would be delayed by approximately 20 minutes before striking for the evening. The director was instead told to hold talkbacks in the hallway outside the theatre, though there was no seating available there. Scholar notes, “It was just an insult ... to disrespect our guests in that way” (Personal Interview). After some time and persuasion, we were allowed to hold just one talkback, with the director of the Phoenix Indian School Visitor Center.

SHIFTING TO “NEW WAYS”

Dramaturgically analyzing the processes, policies and regulations surrounding the Arizona State University production of *Indian School* helps to identify unnoticed barriers that hinder DEI work. Inflexible institutional practices — the “old ways” of doing things — can complicate the best of intentions and instead cause harm. Simple, often unnoticed norms worked to exclude audience access to photos, stories, and songs by Yaqui culture-keepers, hindered robust discussions with Indigenous guests, and even barred Native family members from seeing a story about them and intended for them. Welcoming DEI work is necessary, and institutions often have the best intentions around that work. However, intention is not the same as impact. Instead of celebrating our good intentions while relying on rigid “old ways,” institutions must imagine “new ways” by ruthlessly examining processes, policies, and regulations. DEI work necessitates that resources be put towards development and cultural competency so that a coalitional approach to the work can emerge. It requires that institutions support the unique storytelling needs of each production, and make space for dramaturgical engagements that allow audiences to connect with the production emotionally and intellectually. To truly create equity, we must forge new pathways of production. ♦



Figure X: Young Charlie (Eleanor Field) plays in the shadow of the Baboquivari mountains before being taken to the boarding school. Photo by Tim Trumble.

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The New Colossus Project: A Model for Rapid Response Theatre Around Immigration

by Joan Lipkin & Walter Byongsok Chon



Figure 1: The Statue of Liberty. Photo by Istvan Kadar Photography/Getty Images.

THE NEW COLOSSUS, BY EMMA LAZARUS

Not like the brazen giant of Greek fame,
With conquering limbs astride from land to land;
Here at our sea-washed, sunset gates shall stand
A mighty woman with a torch, whose flame
Is the imprisoned lightning, and her name
Mother of Exiles. From her beacon-hand
Glow world-wide welcome; her mild eyes command
The air-bridged harbor that twin cities frame.
“Keep, ancient lands, your storied pomp!” cries she
With silent lips. “Give me your tired, your poor,
Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,
The wretched refuse of your teeming shore.
Send these, the homeless, tempest-tost to me,
I lift my lamp beside the golden door!”

Around the 2016 US Presidential election, when the issue of immigration became a hot political topic, I (Walter Chon) was an international artist/scholar/educator from South Korea, with a working visa that allowed me to stay and work in the US for a specified period. As the hateful rhetoric against immigrants, propagated by Donald Trump, spread across the country, I found my anxiety growing. The suffering was felt by many, from asylum seeking refugees to anybody with foreign ties. I saw some international colleagues and students returning to their countries either because of fear or because of the US Department of Homeland Security’s changing policy on issuing visas. I was in fear of having to give up what I had built in the US. Fortunately, I could stay.¹ But the fear I experienced and the dreadful impact I witnessed pushed me to further examine my relationship

¹ Right after the election of Donald Trump, I expedited the application for a working visa and received it slightly before the inauguration of Trump. Since then, I obtained a green card to continue my residency and work in the United States.

with immigration and inspired me to collaborate on The New Colossus Project. Currently, I am an Assistant Professor of Dramaturgy and Theatre Studies at Ithaca College, with over a decade of professional experience in numerous dramaturgical functions, from production dramaturgy to new play and new musical development, dance dramaturgy, devised theatre, adaptation, and translation. In the context of my bodies of work, the New Colossus Project exists at the intersection of my work as an artist, scholar, and educator. This project embraces dramaturgy by exploring methodologies of creating and telling stories, scholarship by finding connection between socio-political issues and artistic expressions, and education by involving students as participants and integral parts of storytelling.

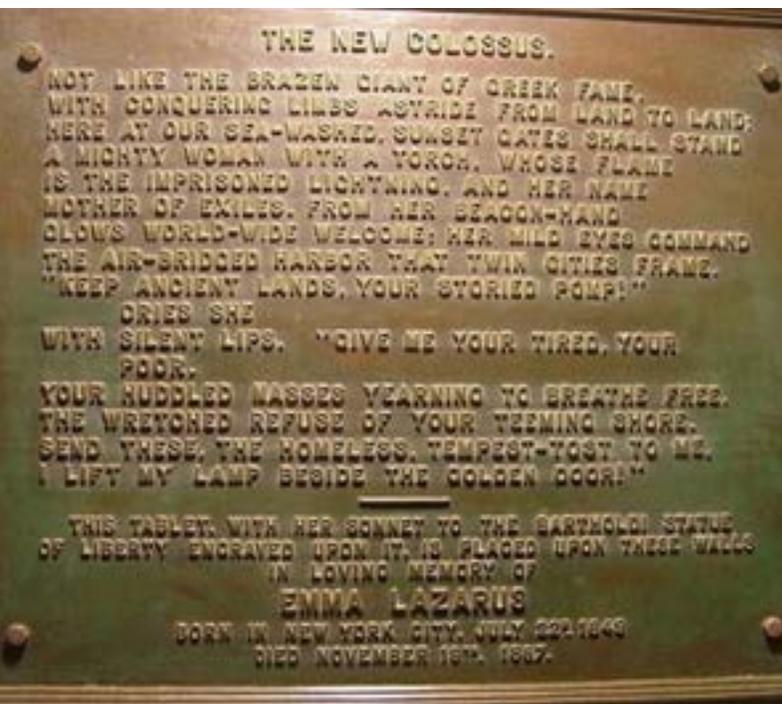


Figure II: *The New Colossus* on the 1903 bronze plaque located in pedestal of the Statue of Liberty. Photo as featured on the US National Park Service [website](#).

I (Joan Lipkin) also felt a strong affiliation with this issue. I grew up hearing stories about how my mother had been born on the boat into a poor non-English speaking family, headed to the US to escape religious persecution and economic deprivation. Although she encountered anti-Semitism into her adult life, my mother remained grateful for the opportunities this country then afforded her, including free or low-cost education. She became a social worker and did a lot of work with immigrant communities in New York and later with youth of color on the Southside of Chicago where I grew up. Discussions of immigration and human rights permeated our

household much of my life. I founded a theatre company based in St. Louis in 1989 to put the principles of cultural diversity into innovative theatrical practice and to promote civic engagement and related activities. My company has engaged with some of the most significant issues of our time including gender representation, sexual orientation, reproductive choice, racial justice, immigration, disability, gun sense, climate change, voting rights, and more. Early on, it became clear that presenting work was only part of the equation, and we needed to give audience members, and later students as well, opportunities to create their own work and responses. While based in St. Louis and also working in New York, I began to do residencies at schools throughout the country as well as in Eastern Europe, often designing curriculum to address issues and facilitate work around whatever the particular class and instructors wanted to focus. My techniques drew from the work of Augusto Boal, Jonathan Fox and Jo Salas of Playback Theatre, Michael Rohd, as well as my own techniques and other sources.² The New Colossus Project continues my practice of civic engagement with student participants.

This article presents a collaborative method for devising around the issue of immigration, based on The New Colossus Project, a workshop created by Joan Lipkin and developed with Walter Byongsok Chon, which we offered at Ithaca College in March 2017.³ The project uses the Statue of Liberty in New York and the poem *The New Colossus* (1883), the Petrarchan sonnet by American poet Emma Lazarus at the base of the Statue of Liberty, as primary source material and inspiration for devising. It is designed for students as well as community groups to create image work with their bodies, interweave their family's immigration stories if applicable, and devise original pieces that ask questions about the past, present, and future of immigration in the United States as well as about the participants' relationship with the land on which they stand. While we explore immigration broadly, we are increasingly mindful that any questions of citizenship or how someone lives in the country commonly recognized as the United States is very charged.

² My practice is well summarized in my article "On the Case for Devising Theatre for Social Justice on College Campuses," published in *Theatre Topics*, vol. 26, no. 2, 2016.

³ Joan also offered this workshop to educators at the 6th annual "Teaching Social Activism Conference: Intersections" at the Museum of the City of New York on May 20, 2018.

We designed and continued to develop this project so that it can be done in short timeframes: A 50-90 minute class period, in two to four class sessions, or for longer durations, if possible. The project is adaptable to various age groups and levels of experience: Kindergarten through twelfth graders, undergraduate and graduate students, adults with little or no theatre experience, or seasoned artists. As this project continues to be relevant, we are happy to provide a model that can be adapted for the specific needs of students, communities, and institutions.

The seed of this project goes back to our first meeting at the ATHE (Association for Theatre in Higher Education) conference in Scottsdale, Arizona in 2014. We participated in the panel “Embodied Dramaturgy as Compassionate Action in *Women of Lockerbie*, *Eclipsed*, and *The Lonely Soldier Monologues*” (organized by Milbre Burch) as presenter (Walter, with the paper “Intercultural Dramaturgy for Compassionate Action through Danaï Gurira’s *Eclipsed*”) and respondent (Joan). Our common interest in exploring the intersection between dramaturgy and social activism planted the idea of a collaboration. We connected again at the “Good to Go Summit,”⁴ on November 18, 2015, and recognized our passion for gender parity and supporting underrepresented voices. The desire to do a project together grew through our respect for each other’s work and the synergy we felt during our encounters.

When the political circumstances of 2016 raised the issue of immigration, more specifically the treatment of immigrants and refugees, to a degree that was impossible to ignore around the 2016 Presidential election, and when Walter could acquire institutional support from Ithaca College’s Department of Theatre Arts to invite Joan to campus in March 2017, we realized the moment could not be more timely. Under the drastic and divisive transition of the US government in 2017, we felt a pressing need to create a space to process and address these issues. Since the project’s inception, we found that it had become even more significant and urgent as discrimination and government sanctioned actions against potential immigrants and refugees from other countries accelerated. Trump’s

4 The “Good to Go Summit” was a day of panel discussions at the Theater Center in New York City on the topic of gender parity, launching the Good to Go Festival, a “platform that features plays, musicals and songs written by women that are ‘good to go’ and ready for full production” in 2015. The festival’s Good to Go Songwriters’ Showcase is committed to “actively putting women’s work in front of audiences and industry professionals.” For more information visit their [website](#).

Executive Order 13769 (otherwise known as the “Muslim ban”), the plan to build a wall on the border of the US and Mexico, the Syrian refugee crisis, and the US border crisis, just to name a few, amounted to a humanitarian crisis, causing social and civic unrest across the globe.

In 2019 and 2020, as COVID-19 put the world on hold and as the US went through a series of reckonings, we found ourselves connecting with our project in a different way from 2017, and felt an even stronger need for hope in these times of despair. As we are writing this article and revisiting our project in 2021, on the heels of a pandemic that has not gone away, our concerns have deepened. As artists and educators, we have seen additional ideas emerging that underscore the continued relevancy of our work. We acknowledge the global trauma caused by the illness, economic devastation, and millions of deaths from COVID-19, the systemic discrimination against minorities and underrepresented identities (e.g., the continuing police brutality against African Americans, the resurgent wave of violence against Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders, the increasing mass shootings, and the still unresolved immigration issues) as well as the devastating effects of climate change. During the pandemic, most theatres halted live performances, leaving numerous artists scrambling for alternative means to earn a living and to provide creative expression. The US theatre scene also faced a reckoning of the systemic oppression of BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and People of Color) theatre workers.⁵ Most educational institutions adopted remote learning, coining the term “Zoom University,” and students and educators were isolated and deprived of the human connection and the collective live experience of learning, which mirrors the essence of theatre.

Dealing with these unprecedented challenges, we found ourselves asking what hope meant to us in the present moment, and how we could explore it further through our project. We have realized that, for us, perhaps more

5 *We See You, White American Theatre* is a movement founded by a “collective of multi-generational, multi-disciplinary, early career, emerging and established artists, theater managers, executives, students, administrators, dramaturgs and producers, to address the scope and pervasiveness of anti-Blackness and racism in the American theater.” Launching a call to action in the form of a testimonial letter on June 8, 2020, this movement presents the “principles for building anti-racist theatre systems” through equity and equality for BIPOC theatre-workers and protection of BIPOC theatre-workers in practice and education as well as transformative practices leading to the dismantling of white supremacy embedded in the American theatre.

than ever, hope is a necessity, a purpose, a goal, and a commitment. We asked ourselves, “How can this project help plan and work for a hopeful future?” By raising questions about the foundation, present, and future of the United States with regard to immigration and by embodying a democratic creative process, our project envisions hope for the near future of theatre-making, as it seeks to restore human connections, release collective creativity, and find joy in the process. In her book, *Utopia in Performance: Finding Hope at the Theater*, Jill Dolan describes live performance as “a place where people come together, embodied and passionate, to share experiences of meaning making and imagination that can describe or capture fleeting intimations of a better world” (2). We find Dolan’s words to be particularly informative and inspiring, as we continue to find new resonance, new possibilities, and new hope in our project. Making our project accessible and available marks the first step of hopeful action.

The following describes our preparation, observations, and the specific activities we did in each session during Joan’s visit to Ithaca College from March 20 to 22, 2017. In preparing for this workshop, there were a number of logistical, practical, and material concerns. First and foremost, we considered “time” as a resource that was integral to the method of devising. However, given the scheduling of many colleges and universities, we believed it was necessary to challenge the idea that spending several weeks of uninterrupted time to develop and rehearse a project — the model for most conventional theatre-making — was the only viable method.

Regarding and respecting time as a limited resource, we explored how we could create a meaningful experience within compressed time, which coincided with the duration of Joan’s visit. To prioritize time as a primary factor for the completion of this project, we adopted Joan’s frequent practice of “rapid response” theatre, which uses “short-form drama to respond to the breakneck speed of the news cycle and construct a space for both a deep and wide community conversation.”⁶

6 For more information on rapid response theatre, see Armstrong, Ann Elizabeth, and Joan Lipkin. “‘The Every 28 Hours Plays’ and ‘After Orlando’: Networked, Rapid-Response, Collective Theatre Action – New Forms for a New Age.” “In the tradition of the Federal Theatre Project’s (FTP) Living Newspapers, plays are created quickly with minimal production values in order to disseminate a story, often literally ripped from the headlines. However, more than simply capturing a contemporary moment, now artists are also enacting mobilizing strategies, community-building, and collaborative methods that constitute an innovative form of networked, collective theatre action” (159).



Figure III: Program for Joan Lipkin’s Workshop at the Museum of the City of New York.

Not only does compressed time enable an immediate and rapid response to urgent issues but it also enhances the inclusivity and accessibility for those pressed for time. We envisioned this project to be practiced in classes (as opposed to separate rehearsal spaces, often in short supply) and adaptable to multiple classes of various subjects, such as English, history, political science, and expressive arts. Additionally, it would be manageable for students with many other responsibilities and available for communities with limited resources for producing theatre. For the project’s adaptability, we designed it so it could be a finite experience, with accomplishable learning objectives, or serve as a foundation for a longer project.

While broadly exploring the issues and experiences of immigration, Joan recalled the verse “Give me your tired, your poor, / Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free, / The wretched refuse of your teeming shore. / Send these, the homeless, tempest-tost to me, / I lift my lamp beside the golden door!” from Lazarus’s poem. We



Figure IV: Three images of the past, present, and future of the Statue of Liberty and The New Colossus. Photo by Walter Byongsok Chon.

decided on the Statue of Liberty and Lazarus's poem because they were sufficiently recognizable to college students in the US but not as divisive as a recent news headline. We acknowledged that, even in the emotionally charged environment around the issue of immigration, the workshop participants would have different relationships with immigration, depending on their nationality, race, ethnicity, ancestry, politics, and other factors. It was crucial to be mindful of various personal experiences and to be open to multiple viewpoints. We also considered it essential to account for the history of colonialism and the experience of Indigenous peoples and the US history of enslavement. We believed that engaging critically, creatively, and collaboratively with these topics — signifying immigrants as integral in both the history and modern iteration of the United States — would help the students form more informed, comprehensive, and compassionate responses and views on the contemporary issues regarding immigration.

For the devising exercises, we consulted a variety of sources including Joan's "On the Case for Devising Theatre for Social Justice on College Campuses," Augusto Boal's *Games for Actors and Non-Actors*, and Alison Oddey's *Devising Theater: A Practical and Theoretical Handbook*, among others. However, we also customized our exercises so that they could be completed in a couple of class sessions and that, from warmup to final manifestation, the students could develop a trusting, supportive, and intimate class community. Prior to Joan's arrival, we spent time designing substantial foundational work for the students to engage so that we could use all of our in-person time optimally. This included first assigning students to familiarize themselves with the poem

and the statue, reflect on their meanings, and learn about their own family's relationship with immigration, if they had one. Starting with this research and personal associations, the workshop was designed to generate synergy through sharing and lead to collaboration.

We held two fifty-minute sessions in classes for Dramaturgy (11 students) and Theories of Performance (16 and 20 students, respectively), each class a mixture of acting and theatre studies majors. While the acting majors had more experience performing, this workshop was the first for many in devising and collaborating on such a project. This workshop complemented the classes by directly engaging with the core questions explored in each class, "Why (this project) here? Why now? Why us?" (Dramaturgy) and "What is the relationship between theory and practice? How can theory be applied to and enrich practice?" (Theory of Performance).

At the beginning, we introduced the workshop as an exploration of a different kind of learning, focusing on physical embodiment rather than strictly theorizing through more conventional means. Joan led the students in a physical warmup for around 10 minutes, which included walking around and saying hello to each other with elbow, hips, and knees, saying "I'm glad to see you again." This unorthodox form of greeting prompted much laughter together. This warmup released the students' tension and self-consciousness by shifting their focus from the brain to the body, specifically to body parts not frequently used in a classroom, and by encouraging them to acknowledge each other as fully embodied people whose presence was significant.

Next, we shared why we chose the statue and the poem — for their relevance, embedded history, the poem’s lyrical quality, and the statue’s visual potency — and asked students for their responses to the material (10 minutes). To encourage participation from as many students as possible, we used “popcorning.” This is an applied theatre technique in which people quickly share without raising their hands, in a kind of collective brainstorming that mitigates self-consciousness

we next led the students in image work. In groups of three or four, we asked them to create images solely with their bodies, without using words. We checked to make sure everyone felt comfortable and safe doing physical group work because this ethically requires consent. Fortunately, everyone did. But it is important to check in with students prior to, or at the beginning of, the first meeting and acknowledge the need to be sensitive to those with



Figure V: Three images of the past, present, and future of the Statue of Liberty and The New Colossus. Photo by Walter Byongsok Chon.

and diminishes the hierarchy between instructor and student. Without the need for acknowledgment by the instructors, we could see the less vocal students gradually gaining confidence in participating. All of the students were familiar with the statue, but for several, this was the first time thinking deeply about it.

The students showed different levels of familiarity with *The New Colossus*, depending on where they grew up. Yet they all recognized that the poem was iconic and spoke strongly to the present. The value of such a resonant statue and poem, both recognizable yet arguably not overused, created a common point of reference, while still leaving space for individual responses through different associations. We also gave the students room to share their feelings about immigration issues. We found most students strongly engaged in, and were enraged at, the political climate around immigration. While we encouraged their uninhibited responses, we refrained from sharing our own views, mindful of the inherent hierarchy between instructor and students and wanting to maintain neutrality as much as possible.

Once we began to establish an open and trusting space,

differing levels of physical comfort and accessibility. The images we asked them to create were:

- The past of the statue and the poem (2–3 minutes)
- The present moment of the statue and the poem (2–3 minutes)
- The imagined future of the statue and the poem (2–3 minutes)

The tight timeframe for each image helped the students get moving and work together immediately. When they had finished creating all three images, we asked each group to show these images in a sequence. The three images, depicted by three or four bodies at a time, displayed clear and distinctive narratives, and the variety of the images and sequences marked numerous artistic possibilities with this short exercise. After sharing each group’s image work, the students responded how emotionally powerful it was to both create and watch these images. Several students said how struck they were by the power of images without words. Many primarily self-identified as liberal or progressive in their politics and were interested to know



Figure VI: Three images of the past, present, and future of the Statue of Liberty and The New Colossus. Photo by Walter Byongsok Chon.

what it would be like to have conservative perspectives participate in this exercise as well.

The last activity for the first session was an individual writing exercise (5 minutes), which was meant as reflection and could optionally be shared. We started with the initial prompts: Complete the sentence, “When I think about my country, I...” and “When I think about my life, I...” Then, to encourage a deeper level of reflection, we added, “What are you concerned about?” We also offered as a final prompt, “Identify three things that give you pleasure.” The sequence of reflection prompts, we observed, helped the students further connect their experience of the day’s workshop with their individual fears and desires. Several students shared that they felt supported by the process and that the workshop made them feel optimistic.

At the second session, we gave the students the specific task of putting together a rudimentary performance of about two to three minutes with the same group from the image work. We gave them fifteen minutes to prepare, with the instructions to use as many of these elements as possible:

- Use at least one image from the image exercise.
- Use at least five lines from *The New Colossus*.
- Use at least two of the writing prompts from day one. Responses could be from one person or selected from all the group members.
- Insert some part of your family’s immigration story or ancestral history, if comfortable sharing. This could be from one person or selected from all the group members.

- Something should be sung.
- The piece should have a beginning, middle, and end.

The two-to-three-minute length was specified so that each group could share their piece and that there would be enough time for discussion and reflection. Also, the short length encouraged students to choose the necessary material for a coherent narrative. Going forward, the length of the performances can be adjusted for time and participant availability.

In one session, some students got anxious about including all of the elements, so we emphasized again that they should choose what most spoke to them. But we found that giving some guidelines helped them to anchor and focus their creative processes. Another option, if there is time, is to provide half of the instructions first, and ask them to prepare a short piece. Then, after sharing what they have created, offer the rest of the instructions as ways to deepen and build upon what they have begun to create.

The final pieces varied greatly, embodying powerful images, touching personal narratives, and closely-knit ensembles, especially given the compressed time frame. The poetic texts, personal stories, and physical movements resulted in distinctive and original pieces, which the students said they enjoyed creating and watching. Several students appreciated that the pieces were both personal and political, emotional and intellectual, and literary and theatrical. Some expressed the desire to have more time to develop their pieces more fully.

For the last activity of the workshop, we assigned a “reflection paper” (5 minutes) to the students, so that they could privately reflect on their experiences.

1. What did you learn or relearn about yourself regarding performance in this process?
2. What did you learn about the work and creative capacity of your classmates?
3. What did you find most interesting about this process? Name 2–3 things.
4. How did you feel about the subject matter?
5. How might you use what you learned in your other work or in the future?

Joan uses versions of this reflection process in most of her projects as it is mutually beneficial for both teachers and participants. The reflection paper gave them an opportunity to contemplate building a community through ensemble work and to think in more innovative terms about what kind of new work they could create using devising techniques. By the end, we observed a great sense of camaraderie, with the students feeling pride in the work they accomplished in such short time and expressing appreciation of each other’s contributions and respect for the artistry they all brought. Some of the student reflections include: “I learned that although I don’t necessarily love performing, I loved the act of devising and creating these images on the spot”; And “I learned how much I appreciate the opinions of my classmates and my friends.”

While pleased with the work and the commitment from the students, we felt that the workshop could benefit from additional sessions. For example, students could bring in their own research, which could be integrated into their performances. More time for discussing audience reception could help the students refine their pieces and, if possible, prepare them for a wider public presentation. Through their research and collaboration, the students already performed as dramaturgs within their own groups. With watching each other’s performances and offering constructive feedback, their dramaturgical role can expand to the whole project beyond their group.

Still, we found great value in introducing this method of embodied learning, which involves every participant, and planting seeds for the students to be motivated and hopefully continue this process on their own. As one

student put it, “The subject matter is increasingly and scarily relevant in this day and age and art desperately needs to be created about it.” The inquiry into the topic of immigration can accordingly enrich the students’ learning in other classes, deepen their engagement with social issues, and promote thoughtful citizenship.

The students, all theatre majors, shared that they found the process stimulating and enjoyable: “This experience showcased that devising is possible with open-minded colleagues.” This feedback helped us see the possibility of extending this workshop to non-theatre students. The design of this workshop considers each participant’s experience, background, and comfort level with performance and devising. Through the exercises, we are able to build a supportive environment in which every participant is recognized as significant. Furthermore, virtually any class can adapt it to explore their subject matter with a creative approach, perhaps even with one or two sessions.

This embodied and collaborative learning can offer a refreshing addition to analytical and cerebral pedagogy. Additionally, this kind of work offers possibilities for students to synthesize the many aspects of a pressing contemporary issue, including legal, empirical, anecdotal, cultural, historical, socio-political, and personal, through their creative responses. Each participant’s recognition of their contribution can lead to improved confidence and, collectively, generate a lively class atmosphere. With the appropriate increasing advocacy and mandates for diversity, equity, inclusion, and accessibility in educational institutions, this project, or ones like it, can offer an opportunity for students to artistically represent their communities as well as a means to foster collaboration and to learn in a more inclusive manner.

Examining this workshop now, in 2021, we are struck by how resonant the topic still is and what new possibilities there are for updates. When we initiated this project in 2017, we focused on the issue of immigration because of the horrific treatment of immigrants and refugees. Now, under a new executive administration, the government’s official stance toward immigrants is shifting toward one of more acceptance and protection. However, the divisive political environment, the political and diplomatic ramifications around immigration policies, and strict travel regulations due to the pandemic present persisting and new difficulties for immigrants and refugees. Furthermore,



Figure VII: Three images of the past, present, and future of the Statue of Liberty and The New Colossus. Photo by Walter Byongsok Chon.

new issues and discourses pertaining to the treatment of marginalized identities, including non-binary, LGBTQ+, and people with disabilities, among others, heightened by climate crisis expands the issue of immigration to broader humanitarian concerns. Additionally, more recent critiques of the US's colonial history and the concerted efforts to acknowledge the land as originally belonging to Indigenous peoples call for a more rigorous interrogation of the foundation and present of the US, as well as more rigorous imagining of a future that embraces equality and shared humanity.

With in-person theatre-making and classes slowly returning with safety guidelines, and with theatre artists finding new innovative ways of collaboration during the pandemic, we envision that The New Colossus Project might provide educational institutions and communities with opportunities to explore and respond to topical issues and discourses rapidly, collaboratively, and creatively. We also envision more inclusivity and accessibility in future iterations of this project, so that it could be offered across a broad spectrum of demographics with differing levels of physical ability and accessibility and even in a virtual space.

Our project, as offered over a few sessions at Ithaca College, helped us recognize what we could expand and amplify with additional sessions. Nevertheless, it is thrilling to see what can be accomplished inside a few sessions with significant preparation and scaffolding of ideas and considerations. And this is an important factor in an increasingly time-limited world. The adjustable period of the workshop, the openness to all levels and experiences, and the adaptable and expandable topic present numerous opportunities for embodied learning. The broadening landscape of

possibilities for this project and others like it offers a much needed progressive and transformative model of theatre-making. With our belief that an essential function of art and education is to promote civic dialogue and activity, cultivate artistry, and enrich communities, we are happy to share this project and consult with educators, practitioners, and institutions. ♦

JOAN LIPKIN is an internationally recognized as a groundbreaking theatre artist, educator and social activist. She works at the intersection of performance and civic engagement, creating events and dialogues about the most pressing issues of our time including climate change, voting advocacy, disability, racial justice, gender equality, LGBTQ+ experience, gun sense, reproductive choice, and immigration reform.

She regularly creates work with diverse populations, is an expert on rapid response theatre, and has contributed to or produced national projects including *Every 28 Hours*, *After Orlando* and *Climate Change Theatre Action*. In 2016, Joan founded *Dance the Vote* in the belief that voting is our most precious right and that the arts are a pivotal, non-partisan way to engage the community.

Joan has received numerous awards including a Visionary, Ethical Humanist of the Year, Leadership for Community-based Theatre and Civic Engagement, Woman of Achievement, What's Right with the Region, and an IDEA.

Her work is included or referenced in *Scenes from a Diverse World*, *Best American Short Plays*, *Amazon All Stars*, *Upstaging Big Daddy: Directing as if Race and Gender Matter*, *Radical Acts: Theater, Feminist Pedagogies of Change*, *HowlRound*, *American Theatre*, *Theatre Topics*, *New Theatre Quarterly*, *Dramatists Guild*, *National Women's Studies Association*, and *The Journal of Literary & Cultural Disability Studies*, among others.

WALTER BYONGSOK CHON is a dramaturg, critic, translator, educator, and theatre scholar from South Korea. He is an Assistant Professor of Dramaturgy and Theatre Studies at Ithaca College. He served as dramaturg at the Yale Repertory Theatre, Yale School of Drama, the Eugene O'Neill Theatre Center, the Great Plains Theater Conference, the Hangar Theatre, the Civic Ensemble, and the New York Musical Festival. His writings appeared in *Theater*, *Praxis*, *The Korean National Theatre Magazine*, *The Korean Theatre Review*, *Asymptote*, *The Mercurian*, *The Routledge Companion to Dramaturgy*, *Diversity, Inclusion, and Representation in Contemporary Dramaturgy: Case Studies from the Field*, and the online magazine *The Theatre Times*, for which he is serving as a co-managing editor for South Korea. His produced theatrical translations include Sam-Shik Pai's *Inching Towards Yeolha* (Korean to English) and Charles Mee's *True Love* (English to Korean). He has presented at various conferences, including ALTA, ASTR, ATHE, GSA, LMDA, MATC, NeMLA, and PTRS. Walter received his B.A. in English from Sungkyunkwan University in Korea, M.A. in theatre studies from Washington University in St. Louis, M.F.A. in dramaturgy and dramatic criticism from Yale School of Drama, and D.F.A from Yale School of Drama.

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Pregnant and Performing: Embodied Dramaturgical Methodologies

by Sarah Johnson in conversation with Rachel Hirshorn-Johnston

My artistic practice as a dramaturg often collides with my lived experience. If I start working on an actor packet for a play set in London, a travel documentary is sure to be recommended in my next binge-watching session. If I am working with a playwright on developing a piece about an astronaut, NASA will report the success of a mission started years ago. If I am working on a program note about grief, an anniversary of a loved one's passing will come and go. Some of these occurrences can be easily explained, a corporation using my internet search history to sell me products or a heightened awareness of a subject making certain news stories stand out of the never-ending stream of information we encounter each day. Some are the work of coincidence that feels more poignant given the context. These interactions between my lived experiences and my artistic practice (and vice versa) help me work more effectively as a dramaturg. As a temporary expert on a topic providing contextual understanding on the world of the play, my trustworthiness increases when I can speak from personal knowledge. I believe that a well-trained and experienced dramaturg can effectively serve a production without direct experience in the subject matter of the play. Certainly, the inverse — dramaturgs with a deep knowledge of the subject matter of the play but little to no understanding of the art of dramaturgy — has done no favors for the reputation of the practice at large. The synergy of embodied knowledge and dramaturgical skill creates the most effective, efficient, and potent pairing of a dramaturg with a production.

In my career, this synergy has never coalesced more than during my service as dramaturg for two plays in consecutive seasons for Outpost Repertory Theatre. In 2019, I served as dramaturg for a production of Branden-Jacobs Jenkins'

Gloria.¹ Rachel Hirshorn-Johnston played the title role and therefore also played the role of Nan, as indicated in the script. Nan is eight months pregnant with twins in the second act of the play. In 2020, I served as dramaturg for Outpost's production of George Brant's *Grounded*.² Rachel portrayed The Pilot and I once again found myself dramaturging a play where Rachel's character becomes pregnant, births a child, and experiences a transformation into motherhood. In my work with Rachel for *Gloria*, I referenced the experience of my own pregnancy and transformation into motherhood. My oldest child was thirteen months during our

“My lived experience of pregnancy and motherhood became an asset in my work as a dramaturg...”

rehearsal process for the show. A year later, I discovered I was pregnant with my second child a week before rehearsals began for *Grounded* and lived the early days of pregnancy as I described them to Rachel. Rachel had never been pregnant and was not a mother during the rehearsal and performance of these shows and did not have any lived experience of this particular aspect of the lives of characters she played. As dramaturg for *Gloria* and *Grounded*, I set out to provide Rachel with useable information about the experience of discovering and living through a pregnancy, birth, and the transformation into motherhood. My lived experience of pregnancy and motherhood became an asset in my work as dramaturg and gave me heightened awareness of the effect of staging motherhood in the plays. Not long after *Grounded* closed, Rachel herself discovered that she was pregnant with her first child and our relationship as dramaturg and actor shifted to peer support. As I empathized and offered advice to Rachel through her first pregnancy, we joked that I was once again her “pregnancy dramaturg,” but this time not in

1 *Gloria*. By Branden Jacobs-Jenkins, directed by Ronald Dean Nolen, Outpost Repertory Theatre, 30 Jan.-10 Feb. 2019, Louise Hopkins Underwood Center for the Arts Firehouse Theatre, Lubbock, TX.

2 *Grounded*. By George Brant, directed by Patrick Pearson, Outpost Repertory Theatre, 24 Jan.- 2 Feb. 2019, Louise Hopkins Underwood Center for the Arts Firehouse Theatre, Lubbock, TX.

preparation for a theatrical production. This time she was preparing for a shift in her real life, outside of the theatre, and all the information I shared in our work for *Gloria* and *Grounded* took on a new purpose. It seems the adage of “art imitating life” and vice versa works reflexively in time, too. Dramaturgical research served the actor not only during the creative process but also as a reference during her real-life experience of the plays' content — in this case, pregnancy and early motherhood — post-curtain.

Given our current discourse around the importance of racial and gender identity in collaborators for productions, my experience serving as dramaturg for these plays made me examine the intersection of my identity with my work. The value of my embodied knowledge of pregnancy and motherhood comes to fruition in plays including pregnant characters and stories of motherhood.

The following is a transcribed conversation between me and Rachel about how our experience as both mother and artist, informed our relationship as actor and dramaturg.

SARAH:

We are both company members of Outpost Repertory Theatre, so we work with each other frequently, right? A playwright and dramaturg that work together frequently is pretty common, but an actor who regularly works with the same dramaturg is not common at all.

RACHEL:

Honestly, it's very rare for me. I remember my first real appreciation for dramaturgy: I was doing Sheridan's *School for Scandal* in like 2000, maybe 2002, and I remember, receiving this packet of information, this thick packet on “the language of the fan.” I nerded out right? “Oh my God, it means all this!” Wow, there's so much we can do here, and yet I don't remember the dramaturg ever opening her mouth. I don't think she was given time. It is hard to give time to the dramaturg, and also as a vocal coach, I'm highly aware of stepping on director's toes. So, I get not always hearing the dramaturg's voice. I think a reason why our personal relationship as dramaturg and actor is unique in its realization, is because dramaturgs, in my experience, often aren't given the time or they don't take the time to connect with the actors. Or there's a fear of stepping on the toes of the director. You, Sarah, were able to collaborate more fully in the creative process. We happened to be working with Dean and Patrick, neither of whom have children.

SARAH:

Right, and they wanted me to jump in. They said, “oh, this is a thing that I can’t talk about. And I want you to.” I mean, Patrick specifically said he was thrilled to find out I was working on the show because he needed to make sure there were other female voices in the room. He felt like there was not enough female representation in the room for a one-woman show.

RACHEL:

The character of *The Pilot* goes through experiences like pregnancy, childbirth, and workplace sexism, that women, naturally, are apt to have a different perspective on. Having a dramaturg who had experienced these things was helpful, especially when your director doesn’t have that lived experience. I feel like I’ve done a wide variety of professional contracts. Working with you was one of the first times where I thought, I’m getting a lot of real-time contextual information here in addition to all of the literature that you pulled for us. It’s a great question though: What is the role of the dramaturg in the context of the actor? There are real possibilities there, I think. But it’s been actually quite limited in my experience.

SARAH:

I mean, in part, our ability to work as dramaturg and actor in rehearsals, engaging with useful information in the moment, was because we were working with directors who were open to that. Not all directors are open to on-the-spot in-the-moment feedback or information from a dramaturg.

RACHEL:

But as an actor when you work off impulse, that’s great. Assuming you’ve done enough prep work, your ability to integrate additional and pertinent character research from a dramaturg is actually happening in real time, which can make for a palpable moment in performance. I guess the question is: What were we able to accomplish as an actor and dramaturg? Should it be relegated to our particular circumstances? Did it occur as a result of our unique situation? Women talking about pregnancy in a male-led environment with a male playwright and male director. This synergy of a relationship can be possible between dramaturg and actor if the director’s open and intentional about that. I just think that’s liquid gold.

SARAH:

I do think there was something special about the

relationship in our context; having lived things that were infiltrating the world of the play and vice versa. But yes, in an ideal situation that dramaturgical work happening in the moment is when that relationship with an actor can be generated. There are directors that feel like that’s an encroachment on their territory.

RACHEL:

And I get that. I mean, I remember working with a director on a Shakespeare play as a vocal coach and this director saying, “You just focus on their accents.” It was a Shakespeare play that had accents. Don’t get me started. But he was like, don’t veer into the world of acting notes. Don’t give them any language, right? But here’s the thing, and this is what I tell my students, you cannot separate vocal notes from acting notes. You can’t just be like, here’s your mouth posture. You have to talk about integration. Otherwise, it’s going to sound artificial — a voice disembodied. You can hear this in actors where yeah, this is phonetically accurate, but you have not put it into yourself. You’re not using dialect as action. You can’t just go talk about the language of the fan without —

SARAH:

When are you using it? How are we using it?

RACHEL:

How are you using it? Why are you using it? And I think that’s a conversation. I think the director is in charge of vision and the creative team is in charge of supporting that vision and, therefore, all voices must have a platform in making that vision happen. Anyway, I wax poetic a little bit. So, does this kind of synergy demand that one of the dramaturg’s qualifications is lived experience?

SARAH:

I think it’s more about an awareness of the impact of your identity and lived experience (or lack thereof) on your work as a dramaturg. There is definitely a synergy if you have lived experience that connects with the show. I think you can dramaturg a show with information about things you’re not an expert in, that you become an expert in temporarily. But there’s a magic that happens when you get to do both. When the content of the play is something I know about, because I live it. But I’m also a dramaturg, so I can use my skillset to do the research and bring things up and think about things that are beyond my lived experience. I do think that I talked more and thought more and created more material about motherhood and

pregnancy for those two shows because I was a mother. If I had not been, I also could have seen it just as a plot point, but because I had a lived experience, it was the thing I hooked into.

RACHEL:

Do you think that's the case for any play that you do?

SARAH:

Yeah, I mean, I'm going to see it through my lens, right? I can't stop myself. It's about recognizing your expertise and then also recognizing where that leads you in a play. Ten years from now, if I think about those plays, I am going to think about the fact that I was pregnant, the fact that you were about to be pregnant, but we didn't know. Because of their proximity to each other, one year after the next, and that you were playing a pregnant character, and I was the dramaturg.

RACHEL:

I will remember using a palette of actions that come from my un-lived but imaginary experience of being pregnant.

SARAH:

So, you got to do a run through!

RACHEL:

One thing that you said to me that I'll never forget — you said a lot of things I'll never forget — but one of them was, “No, when you're pregnant you just cry.” The hormones are going, you just cry and you can't necessarily trace back to why you are crying. It's just, I'm crying. It's happened to me a few times while I've breastfed my son. It's a fine day, there's nothing wrong.

SARAH:

Do you, in that moment, do you remember? Like, “Sarah said...”

RACHEL:

That's exactly what I think and then I just cry.

SARAH:

Just like the characters!

RACHEL:

And I think those notes you gave me during the show — “You just cry” and “This is what my hormones were doing that week in the pregnancy,” being good examples — are indicative of a conversation that doesn't or rarely happens so

openly in real life, let alone in the world of a play, unless it's to joke about or minimize. Because the dramaturg uncovers the facts of the story, you get the whole picture, you know? The stuff that is socially not often spoken about in a factual

“...as a dramaturg, you did not dismiss the cold, hard realities of pregnancy and motherhood.”

way, the “here's some shit you're going to go through, and it sucks” kind of way, though it desperately needs to be. And that's a game-changer. Because dramaturgical research doesn't lie, minimize or misrepresent, or it shouldn't. I think about how, as dramaturg, you did not minimize or dismiss the cold, hard realities of pregnancy and motherhood. You got specific about the physical discomfort of the third trimester in *Gloria* and you were honest about the ambivalence of discovering a pregnancy in *Grounded*.

SARAH:

Yes! In this process, it felt like advocating for the characters. We talk about advocacy in dramaturgy, and it is often in reference to advocating for the playwright, the production, or the audience, which are, of course, important aspects of the role. But sometimes we have to advocate for a character by sharing the larger context of the character's experience. As a mother, I felt compelled to advocate for an accurate representation of pregnancy and motherhood. The characters deserved to have creative teams with an understanding of their whole lived experience.

RACHEL:

If I were doing these shows now, after living through a pregnancy and as a mother, I would dive into postpartum anxiety more now. Particularly with *The Pilot*, but maybe also with the character of Nan, because she's so good at denying and numbing. *Pilot*, not so much. I would definitely experiment a lot more with that. It's almost like this was reverse applied theatre.

SARAH:

What do you mean by reverse applied theatre?

RACHEL:

The stuff I learned from the synergistic relationship, which ultimately went on stage, between you and me, which wasn't in my learned experience. I eventually went through it and that, coupled with our conversations, gave me an understanding.

SARAH:

So, you used what you had experienced in the theatre. And it actually came up in your real life.

RACHEL:

Right, whereas sometimes in applied theatre, the piece is about either a current situation or a reflection or a way to work through the past.

SARAH:

We often use applied theatre, the term, to talk about transferable skills. An applied theatre practitioner going to a community that would benefit from, let's say vocal training to amplify their voices because they're going to go talk to politicians. That's applied theatre. It's applied theatre training, maybe versus an applied theatre performance. But this is so interesting because in this situation this was an applied theatre benefit maybe? From a performance that was not intended in that way. It was a professional show. We were just telling a story.

“The applicable part was very personal and small. It was the two of us talking about motherhood.”

RACHEL:

It was your run of the mill professional contract.

SARAH:

Right, and it ended up teaching us something for our real life. I think that happens sometimes. I mean, this is not the only time that that has happened for me. When I work on a show, it feels like the material is everywhere.

RACHEL:

Art imitates life.

SARAH:

It's not anything supernatural. You just notice the things that you're talking about, and hopefully you've chosen a script talking about things that are current; to address the “why this play, now” question. You're doing a play that's talking about the current moment in an interesting way, and therefore you're going to see it everywhere.

RACHEL:

Is that to be counted on? I've also done shows where I thought, this is wildly inappropriate for the time.

SARAH:

The applicable part was very personal and small. It was the two of us talking about motherhood. It's a fairly universal thing, right? There are many mothers in the world, there are many people with children. Pregnancy and childbirth happen in both the plays but these experiences are not the focus.

RACHEL:

Yeah, they were aspects of the play that raised the stakes, because the characters have either a child on the way or a child in existence.

SARAH:

Pregnancy is used as a plot point. It's also used as character in the plays; it tells us about who these women are and how other people react to them. And it's used as a device of time too. It's a ticking clock. It indicates time has passed. Nan's belly showing after the act break. We know exactly how much time has passed between Act 1 and Act 2 of *Gloria* because Nan went from discovering she was pregnant to being eight months pregnant on stage. We had theatre magic. You put on a belly and time sped forward. There is a physical manifestation of time moving forward.

RACHEL:

Wouldn't it be nice to fast forward through pregnancy in real life?

SARAH:

Oh, definitely. Pregnancy and motherhood make us think about time differently. And that happens in these plays.

RACHEL:

Yes, time — and what happens when your mind and body completely change and become out of your control. It

was super scary for me. But this fact offers a whole new palette of actions to play with. When you cannot trust your mind or body anymore because they've been taken over by this baby-parasite-thing who is changing the chemical composition in your body to affect your brain. It is fantastical realism meets science. And I only could glimpse this through your eyes before getting pregnant myself. Had you not had a voice in the space, I'm not sure I would have been able to get a glimpse of this concept, let alone embody it.

SARAH:

This experience, and this conversation about it, has reinvigorated my belief that dramaturgs can and should find their voice in a rehearsal room. The value of contributing, especially in those early rehearsals, to give actors real-time information is not to be underestimated. Also, the value of making professional theatre accessible to parent artists. It's hard. The need for flexibility and resources to support parent artists isn't prioritized in the professional theatre landscape. But, when space is made for us in the room, unexpected magic can happen. ♦

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About the Editors

ELIZABETH COEN is the VP of Publications for LMDA's Executive Committee and serves as the School Programs and Partnerships Manager at Seattle Children's Theatre (SCT). As a specialist in theatre pedagogy, Coen plays an integral role in developing arts programming at SCT that focuses on teenagers' social-emotional growth. Relevant work includes productions of Ramón Esquivel's *Above Between Below* and Trista Baldwin's *Ghosted* as well as the school residency program Creative Drama for Mental Wellness. Coen is also a scholar of theatre history and a professional dramaturg. Her articles can be found in *Theatre History Studies*, the *Journal of Dramatic Theory and Criticism*, and the forthcoming anthology *Teaching Performance Practices in Remote and Hybrid Spaces* edited by Jeanmarie Higgins and Elisha Clark Halpin. Additionally, she has written educational material for *The Norton Anthology of Drama* and reviews for *The Village Voice* and *Off Off Online*. Staunchly committed to achieving educational equity in the US, Coen worked as an AmeriCorps tutor for Northwest Education Access in 2018-2019 and continues to serve organizations that help students from low-income backgrounds thrive in higher education. Prior to pursuing her doctorate, she worked at Samuel French, Inc. and Premiere Stages at Kean University. She received her PhD from the University of Washington and MFA in Dramaturgy from Brooklyn College.

KRISTIN LEAHEY (she/her) served as the Director of New Works at Seattle Repertory Theatre, the Resident Dramaturg at Northlight Theatre, and, prior to that post, the Literary Manager at Woolly Mammoth Theatre Company. She has freelanced as an artist with the O'Neill Theater Center, Oregon Shakespeare Festival, Play On Shakespeare!, Arizona Theatre Company, Orlando Shakes, LA's Ammo Theatre Company, Providence's Trinity Repertory Theatre, NY's Primary Stages, NY's Classical Stage Company, Playwrights' Center, Dallas Theater Center, Denver Center for the Performing Arts, Guthrie Theater, MN's Jungle Theater, WA's Village Theatre, Steppenwolf Theatre, The Goodman Theatre, The Lark, The Kennedy Center, The Old Globe, the Indiana Repertory Theatre, Cleveland Play House, Victory Gardens Theater, American Theatre Company, Collaboraction, Rivendell Theatre Ensemble, Redmoon, Boston's New Repertory Theatre, Actors' Shakespeare Project, Ireland's Galway Arts Festival, Teatro Luna, Teatro Vista (artistic associate), and A Red Orchid Theatre, among others. She is an Assistant Professor, Dramatic Literature & Dramaturgy at Boston University and holds a Ph.D. from The University of Texas at Austin, earned her MA in Theatre from Northwestern University, and her BA from Tufts University. She's served as a scholar/artist-in-residence at Weber State University, Walla Walla University, and the Provincetown Tennessee Williams Festival. Her publications include articles in *Theatre Topics*, *Theatre History*, and *Theatre Studies*, and she has taught at Cornish College, DePaul University, the University of Chicago, Columbia College, Loyola University Chicago, The University of Texas at Austin, and Lake Michigan College. Leahey is a board member at Seattle's Intiman Theatre. She is a Producer with the WP 2020-22 Lab in New York City and is a 2021 recipient of a Fulbright.

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LMDA's journal *Review* is currently accepting submissions for the 2022 issue.

The mission of the journal is to provide a venue for exploration of dramaturgy, and for ongoing conversation about the work of the dramaturg and the literary manager and their relationship to all aspects of theatre-making. *Review* publishes peer-reviewed scholarly articles, along with work in other formats such as expanded essays and interviews from the LMDA Newsletter, conference presentations, manifestos, and book reviews. *Review* welcomes submissions by all writers regardless of professional affiliation, as well as submissions on topics at some remove from the primary mission.

Review is an annual publication. This year's deadline for paper submissions and proposals is February 14, 2022.

To submit an article for peer review, please email the following as two separate documents:

1. The full paper submission, double-spaced 4,000-5,000 words as a MS Word file (No PDFs please!), formatted according to MLA style guidelines. Articles can contain footnotes and should include a Works Cited page. To ensure a fair blind-review process, the author's name should be omitted from this document.
2. A title page that includes the author's name, email address, telephone, and institutional affiliation (if applicable), as well as a brief biography.

For alternative submissions:

Please submit a proposal of approximately 500 words as a MS Word file. This document should include the author's name, email address, telephone, and institutional affiliation (if applicable), as well as a brief biography. The editors welcome proposals that engage with practice, process, and scholarship in a variety of formats including but not limited to:

- Excerpts from production archives and rehearsal notebooks
- Travelogues
- Visual forms of storytelling
- Conversations and interviews
- Reflections on cross-disciplinary topics related to the field
- Collaborative methods and other dramaturgical processes

Please send submissions to editor@lmda.org. Editors Kristin Leahey and Elizabeth Coen will directly receive inquiries and submissions from this address. *Review* acknowledges receipt of submission via email in 1 to 2 weeks and response time is 2 to 3 months from the submission deadline.

Previous issues of *Review* can be found [here](#).

Review, la revista de LMDA está aceptando propuestas para su edición 2022.

La misión de *Review* es proporcionar un lugar para la exploración y conversación acerca del trabajo de dramaturgistas (dramaturgs), asesores literarios (literary managers) y su relación con todas las etapas de creación y realización de teatro y artes escénicas.

Review publica artículos académicos arbitrados, junto con trabajos en otros formatos que incluyen ensayos ampliados y entrevistas del LMDA Newsletter, manifiestos, reseñas de libros y una variedad de presentaciones, que se alinean con y expanden la misión actual de *Review*. *Review* agradece las propuestas de escritores independientes, profesionales y afiliados, así como propuestas sobre temas que se desvían de la misión principal de la revista.

Review es una publicación anual. La fecha límite para recibir propuestas para la edición de este año es el 14 de febrero de 2022.

Para enviar un artículo, por favor envía por correo electrónico los siguientes dos documentos en formatos separados:

1. La propuesta del artículo completo, escrito a doble espacio entre 4.000 y 5.000 palabras como un archivo de MS Word (¡No PDF, por favor!), formateados de acuerdo al estilo de MLA. Los artículos pueden contener notas con pie de página y deben incluir una página de obras citadas. Para garantizar un proceso justo de revisión anónima, nombres de autores deben omitirse de este documento.
2. Una página con título que incluya el nombre del autor, dirección de correo electrónico, teléfono y afiliación institucional (si es aplicable), así como una breve biografía.

Para propuestas alternativas:

Envíe una propuesta de no más de 250 palabras como un archivo de MS Word. Este documento debe incluir

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- Extractos de archivos de producción y cuadernos de ensayo
- Documentales de viaje
- Formas visuales de narración
- Conversaciones y entrevistas
- Reflexiones críticas sobre temas relacionados con el dramaturgismo
- Métodos de colaboración y otros procesos de dramaturgismo

Por favor envía tu propuesta a editor@lmda.org. Kristin Leahey y Elizabeth Coen, editoras de *Review*, recibirán propuestas y resolverán preguntas directamente en este e-mail. *Review* confirmará la recepción de las propuestas vía e-mail a 1 ó 2 semanas de haberlas recibido y una respuesta definitiva a 2 ó 3 meses a partir de la fecha límite de la convocatoria.

Puedes encontrar las ediciones anteriores de *Review* [aquí](#).