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## Using Applied Theatre for Collective Healing and Grief Processing in the Classroom

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## Using Applied Theatre for Collective Healing and Grief Processing in the Classroom

### Cover Page Footnote

Sarah Fahmy is an Assistant Professor of Theatre at Florida State University. A decolonial scholar-artist, she works at the intersections of Middle East and North African performance, identity, and eco-feminism. She is a co-founder and Chair of the Middle Eastern Theatre focus group at the Association of Theatre in Higher Education. Sarah has devised site-specific, applied performance pieces internationally. Her publications appear in arts and social science journals, like *Theatre Topics* and *PLoS One*. To my Spring 2021 Theatre and Society students, whose beaming smiles, ridiculous puns, and witty intellect, gave me a reason to persevere and continues to shape me as an educator.



*Pedagogy and Theatre of the Oppressed Journal*

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## **Using Applied Theatre for Collective Healing and Grief Processing in the Classroom<sup>1</sup>**

Sarah Fahmy<sup>2</sup>

*At times when our mental health is equally as strained as our students, applied theatre may ground and guide us to support us turn our collective trauma into action and enable students to envision their individual and collective healing. In this article, I reflect on the process of devising C(U)VID-19: Reflections from Students of the Pandemic, a 50-minute, multi-disciplinary virtual performance, conceived and produced in under two weeks by the students in my theatre for non-majors class in 2021. I share examples of how applied theatre enabled students to lead with empathy and develop friendships while authoring their own narratives to process their traumas and envision a way to heal. I also demonstrate how relying on my applied theatre facilitation experience enabled me to enhance the pedagogical experience, while centering the students' needs.*

### **Introduction**

As educators, how do we expect students to learn when they're emotionally distressed and mentally drained? How do we hold space for students while protecting ourselves from compassion

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<sup>1</sup> This article is dedicated to my Spring 2021 Theatre and Society students, whose beaming smiles, ridiculous puns, and witty intellect, gave me a reason to persevere and continue to shape me as an educator: Ahmed Al Anjiri, Abdulrahman Al-Jallal, Nadia Bogusky, Noah-Michael Carlson, Caroline Cheval, Pedro D'avila, Yuli Garcia, Adrian Knappertz, Mo Maguiraga, Miranda Markham, Allison Maxwell, Symphony Nicholson, Maddi Ota, Keith Poletti, Mikaela Schindler, and McKaela Spradlin. All students gave their permission for me to use their names in this essay. I would also like to give a special thanks to CU Boulder musicians who weren't in my class: Eponine Bell, Claire Gunsbury, and Dr. Charles Wetherbee.

<sup>2</sup> Sarah Fahmy is an Assistant Professor of Theatre at Florida State University. A decolonial scholarist, she works at the intersections of Middle East and North African performance, identity, and eco-feminism. She is a co-founder and Chair of the Middle Eastern Theatre focus group at the Association of Theatre in Higher Education. Sarah has devised site-specific, applied performance pieces internationally. Her publications appear in arts and social science journals, like Theatre Topics and PLoS One.

fatigue? Is there a way for our pedagogy to both impact and be impacted by the realities of students' daily lives, and to activate their agency beyond the classroom? At times when our mental health is equally as strained as that of our students, applied theatre may ground and guide us to support communal healing. Applied theatre cultivates participants' agency as they actively "deconstruct the fixed power structure and ideological hierarchies and empowers them to re-construct their own perception and knowledge" (Wang, 2014, p. 44). At the core of applied theatre are "creative practices that engage with the social, educational, and political functions" (Hughes & Nicholson, 2016, p. 3) which allow it "to become a medium for action, for reflection but, most importantly, for transformation" (Prentki & Preston, 2009, p. 14). Applied theatre in the classroom can therefore turn collective trauma into action and enable students to envision their individual and collective healing.

In Spring 2021, I taught Theatre and Society, a lecture-based class for non-majors at the University of Colorado Boulder, on Zoom. Committed to creating living pedagogical spaces of radical change and an environment that was responsive to students' needs, I revised the syllabus to allow my 16 students to devise a public performance as a class for their culminating project. *C(U)VID-19: Reflections from Students of the Pandemic* is a 50-minute, multi-disciplinary, devised performance, conceived and produced in under two weeks. Featuring poetry, music, dance, visual art, and Newspaper Theatre, the performance grappled with students' reflections on grief, trauma, and resilience. The live, virtual, public performance represented the community we had cultivated over the semester—one rooted in empathy, vulnerability, trust, and commitment—wherein the students carved out space to author their own narratives, and to process recent traumas individually and collectively. The performance was recorded, featured in local newspapers, The CU Presents website (Fahmy, 2021) and received an honorable mention for the Center for Humanities and the Arts Hum@Home award. When the semester started, students were contending with pandemic-related isolation and depression; the class also began in the immediate aftermath of the Black Lives Matter

protests and forest fires in Boulder. As the semester continued, the January 6<sup>th</sup> insurrection increased student anxiety. Then, two weeks before the semester ended, our entire world came to a jolting halt when a mass shooting took place at King Soopers, our local grocery store.

In what follows, I reflect on our creative process to offer an example of how applied theatre used in a classroom setting, may support students individual and collective creative authorship to process painful experiences, and reflect on issues they care about. Ultimately, applied theatre may enable students to envision a way to heal and enhance their sense of belonging. Though the events and circumstances leading up to this performance were unprecedented, my experience as an applied theatre facilitator allowed me to blur the lines and deconstruct traditional teacher-student power dynamics at a time when I was as anxious and burnt out as my students. I relied on my applied theatre facilitation experience to anchor and direct us. Leading with empathy, I was willing to expose my vulnerabilities and hold space for students to creatively process our shared trauma. As we created our performance, we leaned into our emotions fully, without jeopardizing the critical pedagogical intentions of the class. The public-facing performance thus allowed students to activate critical theory and performance practices about the correlations between theatre and society that they studied the entire semester. Our experience demonstrates that applied theatre is well-positioned to support students to reflect on their experiences and use their reflections to author their own narratives for individual and collective healing.

## **Background**

Through interactive discussions, creative projects, and performance analysis, we explored the multiplicities of how theatre impacts, interacts, and influences our societies. My transformation

of the syllabus for the Theatre and Society class had recently qualified it as the only theatre class on the CU Boulder College of Arts and Sciences US Diversity General Education Course List. Specifically, the class championed stories by and for Black, Indigenous, People of Color artists and their communities, with the intention that when students of all backgrounds engage with these legacies, everyone benefits as students can visualize a more just and equitable future for all. Reflecting on scripts, performance art, and community-based practices from around the world, students interrogated notions of identity, politics, social structures, and activism. Identifying the western theatre canon as a “false narrative” we approached the content from an Afrocentric pedagogy approach, which, as emphasized by *Black Acting Methods* (Luckett & Shaffer, 2017), is the celebration and recognition of multiple origins of knowledge, rooted specifically in Black and African sensibilities and performance, that predate and go beyond colonial ways of knowing.

For example, the class used the “Dear White American Theatre” statement (2020) to examine historic and contemporary systemic inequities and the principles for building an antiracist theatre future. We read a variety of political plays that are based on real experiences and have an interactive audience component, such as, *Information for Foreigners* by Griselda Gambaro; anti-colonial pieces such as, *Ngaahika Ndeenda (I Will Marry When I Want)* by Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o and Ngũgĩ wa Miri; monographs, like *The Mirror* by Yasmin Emam Shaghaf; and plays about socio-political disparities in the US like *Sweat* by Lynn Nottage and the accompanying site-specific, community piece about the play, *This is Reading*; and plays discussing trauma through humor like *Dead and Breathing* by Chisa Hutchinson. We also examined protest as performance, looking at BLM protests as one of several examples; and even negotiated creative authorship amidst the rise in pandemic-era TikTok influencers. By the close examination of these texts, the students critically interrogated a variety of playwriting techniques and performance aesthetics, practiced listening and voicing their opinions about socio-political issues, and began envisioning themselves as producers

of creative authorship and knowledge. In doing so they envisioned an intersectional anti-ableist, anti-racist, decolonial, queer, and feminist future.

From the first day of the semester, I stressed the importance of leading with humanity and cultivating a supportive class community. I was committed to using this space to support students in developing friendships, given how socially deprived and isolated everyone felt coming into the semester. This encouraged the students to listen attentively and respectfully—which was essential for navigating class content that dealt with issues of race, representation, gender & sexuality, and trauma. We discussed an array of contentious topics by using theatre and performance as both a means of representation and a method of analysis, wherein the students practiced voicing their opinions and listening to their peers. The class consisted of students from a variety of backgrounds, which enhanced our conversations. Seven identified as white, three Latin American, two Black, two Arab, and one Asian American. Most were from out of state, and there were three international students. Seven students were female, six male, and two nonbinary. One student had a physical disability, and two had neurological disabilities (that were disclosed to the class).

Over the semester the students practiced speaking from their own perspectives by using “I” statements and avoiding generalizations about groups of people, including their own. In this environment, students not only felt comfortable being vulnerable and expressing their opinions on class matters, but they also helped each other navigate matters in their personal lives. As we maneuvered the multiple traumas we experienced as a community, while discussing very political and polarizing topics throughout the semester, the benefits of this approach were reinforced, and later proved pivotal for the creation of our final performance.

Prioritizing mental health needs in this class, I welcomed students’ self-expression and check-ins about their feelings—a dire need that the students told me they did not have the space for elsewhere on campus. Previous studies on emotions during the pandemic have reported an increase

in depression, anxiety, general distress, sleep and eating disorders, and advance preexisting symptoms of posttraumatic stress disorders (Schelhorn et al., 2022, p. 1). It is therefore necessary to center cognitive appraisal strategies like practicing self-efficacy and emotion upregulation<sup>3</sup> to support mental health amidst negative events like the pandemic (Schelhorn et al., 2022, p. 16). Psychology scholars recommend that “practicing being present could be a valuable method to upregulate positive emotions during the current or future crises,” specifically with young adults, since they were more susceptible to drastic emotional changes during the pandemic (Schelhorn et al., 2022, p. 16).

In addition to the stress of the pandemic, the students were also navigating multiple traumas related to pleas for civil rights and justice, political turbulence, and a mass shooting in their city. Trauma has the capacity to restructure a person’s sense of self. In addition to its “potential for destruction, it is also important to recognize that, even in the face of tremendous loss and adversity, many people report renewed meaning, connection and an enhanced sense of self following trauma,” from which people may develop a sense of agency to advocate for social change (Muldoon et al., 2019, p. 338). A person’s social identities and their group memberships also play a critical role in a person’s positive and negative trauma trajectories. Groups may offer people a sense of belonging, promote interpersonal relationships, and collective empowerment, which supports them in processing their trauma (Muldoon et al., 2019, p. 339).

With this knowledge, I aimed to cultivate a community in our class where students could openly express their feelings and develop a sense of community. One technique we used at the beginning of every class to acknowledge their emotional distress was The Feelings Wheel, which

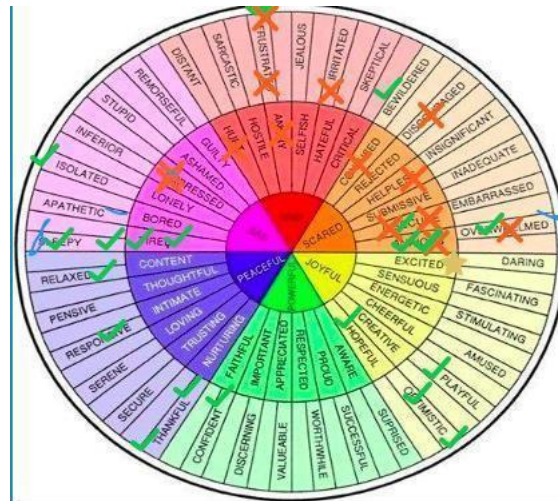
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<sup>3</sup> Emotion regulation is how a person controls their emotions. Upregulation therefore refers to a person’s ability to rethink challenging situations that induce their feelings of anger or anxiety, by elevating (upregulating) pleasant emotions, to help them feel happy or calm (Schelhorn et al., 2022, p. 16)



was shared with me by a therapist to help understand the stages of grief. The Feelings Wheel was created in 1982 by psychologist Gloria Wilcox, who was inspired by Joseph Zinker's conception of the therapist as an artist, and Robert Plutchik's Wheel of Emotions, which split the foundational emotions into polar opposites: joy and sadness, acceptance and disgust, fear and anger, surprise and anticipation (Karimova, 2017; Willcox, 1982). In Wilcox's wheel, the emotions are arranged in concentric circles from basic emotions to more nuanced ones, to help the user (usually in a therapy setting) identify and articulate the complex, multi-dimensional emotions they may be feeling. The Feeling Wheel can therefore encourage participants to explore a wide range of emotions comfortably, freely, and authentically, and help them better communicate their feelings (Willcox, 1982). I explained the importance of approaching the class with empathy towards each other and noted that the things we face in our personal lives beyond the parameters of this class may impact how we show up on any given day.

Split into quadrants: joyful, powerful, peaceful, sad, mad, and scared, with several subcategories, the Feelings Wheel offered students a visual representation of multiple feelings that may be present whilst navigating grief. The Feelings Wheel is particularly helpful for both communicating feelings to others, and for a person to understand their own feelings, from which they may learn how to respond to these emotions (Lin, 2019). Using the annotate tool on Zoom, students and I could anonymously draw a mark on the quadrant that aligned with our feelings in the moment (See Image 1).



**Image 1: Feelings Wheel from the first week of class**

After everyone selected as many emotions as they wanted, we reflected on the patterns that emerged in silence, then students were invited to share their thoughts, state if anything surprised them, and if they wanted to elaborate further on what they selected. As an instructor, this activity allowed me to model how I can also express my own humanity in the class, as I would also share my feelings via the Wheel and verbally with the students. By starting with the Wheel every class, students could name their emotions, and practice leading with compassion and empathy in their interactions as they got a better idea of what everyone else in the class was experiencing. They also got to see how oftentimes they were not the only person feeling a certain way, which helped enhance the sense of belonging and community in the class. As the semester went on, the students grew more comfortable and began sharing more detailed, personal stories behind their feelings. Some of these were about working additional jobs because their parent was laid off during the pandemic, making them tired and behind on their schoolwork; or a student facing a life-altering surgery that would impede upon their senior recital; or another student who lost a friend to suicide midsemester. Doing this simple activity, the students became more invested in one another's wellbeing and lives and formed friendships beyond the class.

We were operating out of a state of survival the entire semester. In April 2021, though, the mass shooting at King Soopers, our local grocery store, left us in a debilitating state. This incident shook our entire city to its core, and there were additional ramifications for our class. One student lived in front of the store, one worked in another branch, one student's family members left the store as it was happening, and I was on my way there when a friend alerted me of the news. Despite being the instructor—the supposed figure of authority in the classroom, the one who is supposed to hold space for students—I genuinely had no idea how to proceed. As the teacher/facilitator I delved into what Paulo Freire calls a “co-intentional” relationship with the students, where we could view ourselves as “permanent re-creators” (Preston, 2009, p. 128), through on-going critical reflection, committed involvement, and supporting one another.

Exposing my own vulnerabilities regarding my feelings of burnout and mental health challenges, I admitted to them that none of my pedagogy trainings prepared me for teaching post-mass shooting, and that I, just like them, was still trying to process my own feelings. I explicitly stated that while I didn't have all the answers, we would not proceed with the semester as ‘business as usual;’ rather, we would intentionally center students' input and remain mindful of our collective mental health. I expressed that I recognize that people process trauma differently, while some may benefit from talking about it during class, others may want to ignore it and focus on other things. A few options that I offered included making room to process emotions collectively during the class time; continue with the schedule as planned and not talking about the shooting; or modify the remaining assignments to allow for creative expression of their feelings. I assured them that whatever the class decision, I would be committed to providing a space for healing. I created a live google document and Canvas page for mental health resources and community hotlines, and shared on-campus resources for offering assignment extensions and locating basic needs. In addition, I reminded them of earlier discussions about consent, vulnerability, and safety in the theatre, as

outlined by Theatrical Intimacy Education (2017). Using the TIE values and terms such as “boundaries” and “fences,” the students could verbally give and receive consent in class when sharing or listening to their stories, to allow students to discuss their trauma in a safe manner. Additionally, I created a Zoom breakout room that students could easily move in and out of, offering them the flexibility of leaving the discussion and returning when they could focus on the content. We decided to modify the original final project plans, to devise a whole class production to help process our trauma and celebrate our resilience as a community.

### **Community-Building for Collective Healing**

Collectively, we decided to create a devised piece as a class that reflected the students’ experiences, that expressed what my students called “a feeling of togetherness” amidst “the overwhelming feeling of chaos.” They wanted to share their honest, unfiltered feelings about their grief, offering the space for each of their individual voices and experiences to be represented, while also depicting their humor and friendship dynamics. For example, many bonded over being musicians, or enjoying Star Wars, and everyone (myself included) competed over who could offer the best “bear pun” in reference to a topic—an inside joke that brightened up our days in the most unexpected way, and subsequently made it into our final performance.<sup>4</sup> Since our decision came in the final two weeks of the semester, and the stakes were heightened with the anticipation of performing in front of local media, we had to work quickly, rely on open communication, and draw upon pre-existing strengths in the group. From that, we created a shared Google Drive folder and a Slack channel for accountability and consistency. In applied theatre, the “process itself [is a] form of

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<sup>4</sup> Bear puns included anything that served as a play on words involving bears, such as: this is *unbearable*, *impawsible*, *pawllution*. This was especially funny since we reside in “black bear country” and bear sightings are common in Boulder’s mountains.

community building” (Prentki & Preston, 2009, p. 12), and is well positioned to ignite participant-led dialogue surrounding social issues to reflect on how their actions impact their communities (Nicholson, 2016, p. 254; Skeiker, 2021, p. 32; Wang, 2014, p. 48).

Recognizing the students’ diverse backgrounds and educational experiences and staying rooted in Afrocentric pedagogical approaches that accentuate and elevate the multiplicities of knowledges, we drew upon students’ pre-existing strengths and interests, such as their music, dance, and visual art skills, as well as new-found skills they developed in this class, such as monologue and playwriting skills. Two particular assignments that they credited as supporting their creative expression were, first, reading the *Gaza Monologues* by Ashtar Theatre, and then authoring their own monologues based on Ashtar’s prompt asking youth to reflect on their experiences in lockdown during the pandemic (Aoun, 2021). The students expressed that this assignment gave them the opportunity to freely write about their feelings, without fear of judgement. Second, they enjoyed experimenting with Theatre of the Oppressed. Creating Image Theatre and Newspaper scenes offered them the agency to discuss societal concerns that they cared about, and experiment with multi-modal creative expressions that Zoom had to offer, such as virtual backgrounds and changing their names on screen.

Subsequently, they decided to include singing, musical composition, dance choreography, a poem, Newspaper Theatre, and painting in their public performance. Each student then indicated how they envisioned their contribution and split into smaller groups. As the students self-selected the project and what group they wanted to be in, I noticed how quickly all of them rose to different leadership opportunities, voicing their opinions, and taking turns guiding the group. I encouraged them to use this opportunity to try out something new, or something that they had always wanted to

do in a class but could not. Noah Michael,<sup>5</sup> for instance, wanted to workshop a music score he had been composing; Symphony wanted to share her painting skills which had become a therapeutic avenue for her during lockdown; Nadia wanted the chance to choreograph and perform a dance, something they had not been able to do since their surgery and the pandemic. We titled the production *C(U)VID-19* as a play on words to combine our university's abbreviation CU and COVID-19. The art piece Symphony painted was used as the Zoom background for our performance and used for promotions (Image 2). In the center it says 2020-2021; in the top left corner there is a drawing of George Floyd with BLM on top; in the top right corner there are three drawings of medical professionals in masks and surgical gear; in the bottom right corner a drawing of Trump and the Capitol building; and in the bottom left is a drawing of the King Soopers in Boulder where the shooting took place.



**Image 2: Artwork by Symphony Nicholson**

Using applied theatre's values and techniques, I offered students the flexibility that allowed them to author their own narratives and supported their processing of their own emotions.

When participants' personal narratives are given time and attention, participants "create a social bond among themselves" (Skeiker, 2021, p. 31). Creatively authoring the story they wanted to tell

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<sup>5</sup> Students consented to having their full names and photos included in the archived video, and to appear in this article. I credit them when I cite their contributions.

enabled students to practice their authority and be in control of the narrative. Students met outside of class; and given the unusual circumstances of this production and in the spirit of deconstructing power-dynamics in the classroom, I took an active role participating in tasks that they assigned me. For example, I attended the music recording session one evening as they needed stage-managerial support and recording assistance. I also helped them organize the Newspaper script once they had generated the content. Students additionally recruited their friends, parents, and professors to support the production at various levels. For example, they decided they really wanted a flute in the recording, but none of our class members was a flutist, so a friend came to help. They borrowed recording equipment from a music professor, and Yuli's mother even made a cameo in the Newspaper Theatre play.

By relying on the students' preexisting strengths and interests, and networks to create the performance, we enacted three "essential applied theatre practices" (Streeter & Olusanya, 2022, p. 93). We activated "asset-based education" (2022, p. 98) by relying on the students' experiences, talents, and stories; we centered "collaborative care" (2022, p. 99) by centering the social and emotional well-being of the group and built upon the strong relationships that had emerged over the semester. Finally, we centered students "artistic expression" (2022, p. 99) by taking various approaches to explore the issues and encouraging them to author and perform their own material.

### **Using collective poetry for communal healing to envision the future**

Borrowing language from an Image Theatre activity, "current vs. new story," we authored a two-part poem that would feature all the students in the class. The first part, "Hardship and Isolation," opened the performance, and the second part, "Perseverance," closed it. Each student had the opportunity to author a few lines about their experiences and they could decide for themselves which of these poems they preferred to work on, according to which poem would best serve their needs at

the time. They were not restricted to rhythm, language, or sentence structure. It was intended to be an authentic representation of their feelings. Since they had previously authored monologues in class about their experiences in the pandemic, some of them re-used some of the sentences they had already written, while others wanted to write something completely new. Once everyone wrote a few lines, they bolded the most important words that they wanted to stress. Then, Miranda and Maddi read through it, rearranging the text for flow based on themes or sentence length, editing certain words for emphasis. During our rehearsals, a couple of students shared their fear of performing as they'd never done it before, indicating that they'd rather someone else perform their line. As we practiced, however, all of them indicated they wanted to share their own words. When participants share their own stories and listen to others tell theirs, they dig into empathy—"the cornerstone of theatrical communication" and the driving force behind why Boal's spect-actors intervene (Etherton & Prentki, 2006, p. 146). When they listen to one another, they acknowledge and validate one another's experiences (Alrutz & Hoare, 2020, p. 64; Kandil, 2016, p. 208), and through collaborative storytelling they have a framework "to tell an inclusive story that takes into account distinct circumstances and situate[s] knowledge while facilitating connection among diverse participants operating in different places" (Goldstein et al., 2015, p. 1279). This enables a collective visioning of the future that participants want to see.

During the performance, the students kept their cameras off until it was their turn to speak. Looking directly into the camera, each student delivered their line. Once the final person had spoken, they waited for a beat, then one at a time turned their cameras back on to say the repeated line of either "I have faced Hardship and Isolation," in the first poem, or "we will persevere." They left their cameras on showing a full tableau of their faces at the end before they turned off their cameras together.



**Poems (with the students' emphasized words in bold)**

*Poem 1: Hardship and Isolation*

NOAH-MICHAEL

**Isolation.** We are stuck, imprisoned by the minutes, in a frozen desert; the sands of time drown us in the ocean of loss. We appear to stand victorious and proud on a hill; a hill built on the sorrows that we endure.

AJ

**Hardship.** I can't think, I can't speak, I can't breathe. Without being reminded of how you did leave. I can't think, I can't speak, I can't exist. Without being reminded of how much you are missed.

MOE

**Isolation.** It's like **time** doesn't exist, days turn into weeks, weeks turn into months and before you know it a year has gone by.

MCKAELA<sup>6</sup>

**Hardship.** Dreams that are sitting here **no longer** vanquished.

Hopes once acquired have since **vanished**.

The trembling shift of the **clouds**

**eludes** me to the chances of proud possibilities I have gained the **infringements** are strained

Then for the **treacheries** I have lost

For what is to come of me **now**,

if love's pattern is **lost**

let my spirit **decease** with the **frost**...

ALLISON

**Isolation.** If I wanted to know what it was like to live the same day over and over again, all I needed was a pandemic. It was supposed to last two weeks, starting to look a lot more like two years. We're already halfway there.

MIRANDA

**Hardship.** I was walking in Boulder

When smoke came confronting me.

I coughed and looked for a new direction on the shoulder I must have taken the wrong path though

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<sup>6</sup> McKaela and Mikaela are two different students, who spell their names differently.

People's faces were half covered and it was dead silent. Isolation is a virus all on its own row.  
So back into the smoke I go hoping I can get out of **this dimension**.  
Back into times of laughter, loudness, and connection  
But I'm stuck, so I walk into the frost  
Wondering where do I go now?  
Yet life is all about getting lost.

CAROLINE

**Isolation**. we hold our breath. **Physically** to avoid glares from strangers. **Metaphorically** as we wait.  
**Wait** for restaurants, movies, gathering with friends. **waiting** for everything to start moving again. To  
start **breathing** again. Start living again.

*(Beat. Each turns camera on and keeps it on)*

NOAH-MICHAEL

I have faced Hardship and Isolation.

AJ

I have faced Hardship and Isolation.

MOE

I have faced Hardship and Isolation.

MCKAELA

I have faced Hardship and Isolation.

ALLISON

I have faced Hardship and Isolation.

MIRANDA

I have faced Hardship and Isolation.

CAROLINE

I have faced Hardship and Isolation.

*(Beat. All turn off cameras. End)*

*Poem 2: Perseverance*

NADIA

**We feel** like the world is **crashing down**. Our worlds are being **spun** around. The pandemic and the recent tragedy have left us with feelings of **sadness and distrust**. Our society cannot know what will happen when we can come out of the dust. **Believe** in who you are and know you are a **shining star**. We can make it through **this storm together** rather than from a far.

MIKAELA

**We believe** Life is **beautiful**, even when it is crumbling apart. We will emerge victorious and become **super humans** with the strongest minds and hearts. Our **superpowers** will be the ability to **live and love** in the most extreme times. We won't be returning back to normal; we'll be entering a brand-new world **beaming** with humanity and love.

KEITH

**We find** Certain ceremonies are traded for others. Zoom links replace classrooms. Masks hide the smiles underneath. If smiles still exist. Still, we **persevere**. Anxieties about what they think are left in the classroom. Vaccines offer an out, yet are we ready to go back?

MADDI

**We** Sometimes find, it's the little moments in life that matter the most. We can find the beauty in everything we do. Times may be dark, bleak and seemingly hopeless, yet starting with the **small wins, tiny triumphs** may be the first step forward.

YULI

**We** struggle and lose ourselves within this society and for what I ask? Not focusing on ourselves, instead focusing more on deadlines, responsibilities, our "roles", when we should be looking out for our own well-being, to feel okay, to **take breathers**. The things that have happened, all the events, should be enough to make us take a step back and realize the bigger picture in our lives. Live it as you please, **appreciate all the good**, and take it slow. We only have this chance once and it would be a waste to focus on anything else while time is passing by us every second.

AHMED

**We** feel pain with so many things lost, but in the end there is something that will always be gained, it can be turned into experience or resilience.

SYMPHONY

**We see** Our plumes have withered and we have shed every beautiful feather, as we lay vulnerable, naked, and afraid, we are reminded of what we are capable of. COVID you disastrous cacophony, though you have taken much, you have also given. You came in, a wildfire, strong and deadly but

you never accounted for the fact we are impervious. A phoenix cannot die by trial of fire. Though burnt to cinders, we return.

ABDULRAHMAN

We believe Words may lie, but actions always tell the truth. Feelings might judge, while instinct can lead. When our minds are elevated, we wish good to others, and good will come to you. The higher the lamp, the wider the scope of its lighting raising your morals to achieve strength. We live in a world rich in impertinent beings, who shouldn't have the upper hand in our emotions, hence pay no attention to their utterance. Words are just an outcome of a moving muscle, tongues that move with the will of its possessor shouldn't be no burden to you and I, then we can boast about our vigorousness.

*(Beat. Each turns camera on and keeps it on)*

NADIA

We will persevere.

MIKAELA

We will persevere.

KEITH

We will persevere.

MADDI

We will persevere.

YULI

We will persevere.

AHMED

We will persevere.

SYMPHONY

We will persevere.

ABDULRAHMAN

We will persevere.

*(Beat. All turn off cameras. End)*

There is a juxtaposition between "I" and "we" in the poems, a significant choice that reflects the power of community and the collective to support one another in overcoming the isolation that

each individual experiences. They shared a sentiment that I also echo: that this class enhanced their sense of belonging and allowed them to cultivate friendships, and thus alleviated some of the stress and burden that they were carrying, as they could creatively express themselves. In writing this spoken word performance, they hoped to evoke a similar experience in our audiences.

### **Using Satire as a Processing Mechanism: Newspaper Theatre**

This performance is an amalgamation of everything that happened in 2020. It is a fast-paced, cacophonous script that appears quite disjointed to resemble the feelings the students had listening to the news over the past few years. The play features quotations taken directly from contrasting news outlets, and several characters are based on Dr. Anthony Fauci, Donald Trump, Carlson Tucker, and Rachel Maddow. The play was set in a “Zoom classroom,” there was a technologically-challenged professor, an overly worried student, a student who is aware of all the factual COVID-19 information, a student who never turns their camera on and yells out “Trump Student Twitter” quotes, a student that resembles the epitome of white privilege, a distracted student who lives at home, can’t mute themselves and are concerned about running out of toilet paper. There was also a character who shared “bear-puns,” serving as our class inside joke. The students chose the characters they wanted to perform using color-blind casting.

The play opens with students waiting for their professor to show up. Their lecture is on *The Tiger King*—an early pandemic lock-down “classic” series—however it doesn’t take long before the students and professor are distracted by debating political opinions and reflecting on outrageously comical pandemic memories. Their disjointed, chaotic conversation ranges from polarizing political perspectives about the vaccine and the ongoing presidential election, to sharing their disdain over

inaccessible toilet paper, hand sanitizer supply, and the murder hornets scare<sup>7</sup>. They cannot seem to agree on anything, as they each offer their opinion and the professor struggles to control the class discussion.

Mirroring the chaos of Zoom classes, one student's name is incorrectly labelled, leading to the class thinking they are being "Zoom bombed," students reluctantly turn their cameras on, or fail to mute themselves while partaking in conversations with family members, and the professor cannot navigate the screen-share. The class ends with the disgruntled professor assigning additional homework during "spring pause." In 2021, spring pause and "wellness days" replaced a traditional spring break at CU to help reduce COVID-19 cases, and professors were encouraged to avoid assigning homework or exams. However, the students shared that several professors disregarded this and assigned even more work instead. This line was a direct critique of that practice.

While the play is riddled with satire and political commentary, it is ultimately about students' mental health. The play opens with a quote about the pandemic expediting educators' retirements and concludes with a statistic about students' depression. At the end of the play, a silent PowerPoint presentation of images from the pandemic plays. Each image lasts for 10 seconds. Those included The Tiger King, empty toilet paper shelves, nurses, wildfires, murder hornets, BLM protests, the riots at the capitol, the election map, and finally ends with the King Soopers shooting. The script, characters, and arrangement of the events in chronological order is reflective of the students' anxiety experiencing these events. When students author and perform their own experiences, they change "from being passive spectators to into actors, transformers of dramatic action" (Boal, 1985, p. 122), and they practice their agency by offering their own perspectives. (To read the full script, see Appendix 1.)

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<sup>7</sup> Referring to the 2020 headlines about the Vespa mandarinia hornets, nicknamed "murder hornets," that were sighted in the US. These hornets are invasive, venomous and can grow up to two inches in length.

Participating in these creative, applied theatre forms also impacted students' feelings. Looking at their responses to the daily Feeling Wheel activity half-way through the class, right before they started working on the public performance (image 3), versus afterwards when they were conceptualizing their creative visions (image 4), we can see this change. At the beginning, they were predominantly in the "sad" and "scared" quadrants, though some shared some "joyful" feelings. Whereas at the end, more emotions from the "joyful" and "powerful" quadrants are represented. One of the primary purposes of using this Wheel was for students to be able to identify and express their emotions in pursuit of individual and collective healing from their shared trauma. Given that "joyful" and "sad" are opposite emotions on the Wheel, and that joyful emotions are often linked to a sense of community and belonging, this was a desired change. When a person feels a sense of belonging and joy, as they process their trauma (especially resulting from gun-crime like a mass shooting) they may feel an increased desire towards self-agency to advocate for positive social change (Muldoon et al., 2019, p. 338).

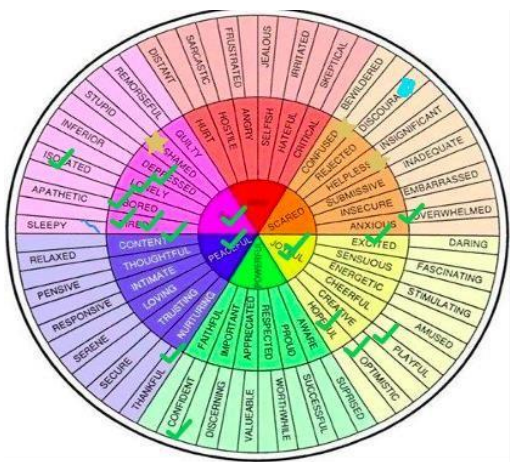


Image 3: Before working on the performance

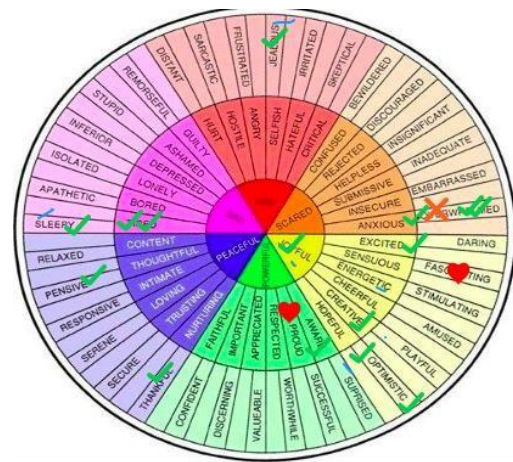


Image 4: After working on the performance

## **Conclusion**

My students never failed to surprise me that semester with their creativity and vulnerability, particularly given the online modality of this lecture-based class. This production depicts a slither of their ambition, energy, humor, and commitment. I couldn't imagine being able to process the events of this year if it weren't for them.

Created in two weeks, under unprecedented circumstances, *C(U)VID-19* was a public-facing, virtual performance reflective of the students' experiences during the pandemic and nationwide civil unrest, while wildfires and a mass shooting occurred in their backyard. We performed live on Zoom on Sunday May 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2021, and a video was also archived, where it remains publicly accessible on the CU Presents website and the CU Theatre and Dance Department website (Fahmy, 2021). The production started and ended with a collective poem authored and arranged by the students. The first poem depicted the sense of helplessness, isolation, and fear. The concluding poem depicted perseverance, resilience, and hope, to reflect on the support we had cultivated within our class, and our hopes for the future of our community. They composed and performed an original music piece and choreographed a dance. Students wrote and performed a Newspaper Theatre play in which each character mirrored the political divisiveness of the United States and commented on COVID-19 and mental health at academic institutions. They also created a visual art piece, designed the set and costumes, and created promotional material.

As an educator and applied theatre facilitator, I am leaving this experience with more confidence trusting that when I model leading with empathy and exposing my vulnerabilities while teaching critical societal issues, I hold space for students to do the same. Utilizing applied theatre techniques and the multi-cultural and Afrocentric pedagogy and performances we had studied to guide us during unprecedented times, at a time when our collective emotional and mental health was strained, allowed us to center the students' experiences, knowledge, and assets. Doing so enabled



me to tailor and enhance the pedagogical experience, offer opportunities for student community-building, and increase students' capacity and agency to take creative risks that are responsive to their daily realities.

Applied theatre intentionally allows the students to reflect on their lived experiences as part of their learning in the classroom, centering their emotions, feelings, and perspectives as sources of knowledge rather than distractions to their education. Applied theatre may therefore extend opportunities for students to voice their opinions and process their emotions in pursuit of collective healing. Ultimately, when students are offered the space, time, and tools to practice their agency through creative authorship, they enhance their critical consciousness, desire to participate in their communities' wellbeing, and their belief in their abilities to enact transformative societal change, both within and beyond the duration of the class.

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## **Appendix 1: Newspaper Theatre Script**

*(Tucker, Anthony, Rachel all have their cameras ON)*

**Tucker:** Oh, the professor is still not here. You guys know if he doesn't come in like, 15 minutes, we can all leave. You see the problem arises with the level of education, they think they know better than us. These elites think we are worthless and can learn nothing from us-

**Anthony:** According to a nationwide poll done by the National Education Association (NEA), 28% of teachers said the COVID-19 pandemic has made them more likely to retire early or leave the profession. There is a lot of pressure on educators right now.

**Tucker:** You think he retired and didn't tell us?

**Rachel:** who's DREAM3657? *(beat)* Are you zoom bombing us?

**DREAM3657:** *(with camera on, is seen talking to her mom before realizing and waving)* Oh whoops I'm DREAM3657. I'm not on zoom but you should follow me on twitch

**Professor:** *(struggles with sharing his camera, tries a couple of times and then gives up)* Howdy folks. What do we have here?

**Rachel:** Hello professor, *(in a smirkingly manner)* Tucker was giving us a presentation about how professors struggle with technology.

**Professor:** He did what?

**Symphony:** Yeah it was un-bear-able.

**Tucker:** Again with the bear puns *(Sigh)* I was just talking about the news with the class and I wanted to know your opinion on the news. *(nervous giggles)*

**Professor:** Oh well, we don't have time for that. We have a lot of things to cover. Can ... can you see me? *(No response from class.)*

**Professor:** *(Turns off camera)* how about now?

**Anthony:** No. you just turned yourself off

**Professor:** Okaaaay (*pause and turns camera back on*) how 'bout now? (*comes up very close to the screen*)

*(Mixed nods/responses from class)*

**Professor:** okay. I hope everyone is adjusting to this predicament. The whole transition midsemester has been rough on me too. I have had to redo my entire teaching plan overnight. *Sighs.* Anyways; today's lecture is on the Tiger King. Anyone heard of that?

Oh I'm supposed to remind you to wash your hands for 20 seconds, social distance, so stay about a ski length away from each other, and try not to touch your face. (*Beat*) Would be nice if I saw your faces though. Is anyone even here? (*Pause. No reaction. Changes Slide to image of Tiger King*)

Does anyone know who this is?

**Tucker:** Carole Baskin killed her husband. She's gui-

**Professor:** Jeff Lowe claims Carole Baskin and her husband Howard Baskin have been snooping on him utilizing drone technology.

**DREAM3657:** Can you pick me up some Toilet Paper at the store? *Beat.* Yeah, Toilet Paper please I am all out. (*munches on chips casually*)

**Professor:** Whoever is talking, can you please mute your mic?

**DREAM3657:** What do you mean there is no Charmin Ultra Strong. God Dammit! I don't want the Angel Soft Mom.

*All the students start laughing*

**DREAM3657:** Oh my bad.

**Rachel:** He sent a hitman after her!

**Tucker:** She fed her husband to the tigers!

**Symphony:** that's im-paws-ible

*Class groan (End Screen share)*

**Rachel:** Do you think they would've survived Coronavirus?

**Professor:** Alright, that is enough! We have more stuff to cover. This has been the little bugger keeping us from partying and cracking a cold one with the bros as I'm told is hip these days.

**Anthony:** We had over 30,000 cases yesterday. It is important to flatten the curve. Everyone, please stay home and take care of yourself.

**Chad;** Covid, Covid, Covid is the unified chant of the Fake News Lamestream Media. They will talk about nothing else until November 4th., when the Election will be (hopefully!) over. Then the talk will be how low the death rate is, plenty of hospital rooms, & many tests of young people.

**Tucker:** This isn't even worse than the common flu. The government is threatening our liberties.

**Anthony:** People are dying at an alarming rate.

**Rachel:** My grandmother passed away from it!

**Professor:** I am sorry for your loss. If you ever need anyone to talk to I am always here.

**DREAM3657:** Whatever this will only last 2 weeks. I can't wait for spring break.

*(The class sits in silence for an awkward amount of time. Around 15 seconds)*

**Professor:** Okay moving on. Does anyone have any hand sanitizer? I am all out and the stores are out of stock. *(The class sits in silence for 15 seconds. People with cameras on look around awkwardly).*

**Professor:** I'm willing to pay \$20 for a roll of toilet paper. Seriously, folks, I am all out. Please someone just respond.

**DREAM3657:** Me too professor, me too.

**Anthony:** In other news, Did you know A roughly 2-inch long insect known as the "[murder hornet](#)" has made its way to the U.S. for the first time ever, researchers said. The Asian giant hornet, Vespa

mandarinia, has been known to kill up to 50 people a year in Japan, according to [The New York Times](#), and has the potential to devastate [U.S. bee populations](#), which have already been declining.

**Professor:** Oh my god what is that?

**Chad:** whatever, it's more fake news.

**Tucker:** Did you watch @cestbonny's video of him being stung by hundreds of them?

**Anthony:** Researchers say the sting of a murder hornet is painful and packed with neurotoxins. Even if someone is not allergic to the hornet, multiple stings have the potential to kill.

**Professor:** Why would someone sane do that? He does have a lot of guts.

**Tucker:** He makes millions of ad revenue from the video. I would do it for that price.

**Anthony:** You could have an allergic reaction and die from anaphylactic shock!

**Tucker:** I would take the chance.

**Professor:** We just can't go a day without something else happening? I mean look outside today. We don't have red skies today. That's exciting, right? I just love the reactions of black screens.

**Tucker:** I thought it was just pollution.

**Symphony:** Paw-llution (awkward pause) too much?

**Anthony:** An elaborate plan to reveal a baby's gender went disastrously wrong when a "[smokegenerating pyrotechnic device](#)" ignited a [wildfire](#) that consumed thousands of acres east of Los Angeles over Labor Day weekend, the authorities said.

**Rachel:** isn't it worse because of climate change?

**Chad:** They only changed the term to CLIMATE CHANGE when the words GLOBAL WARMING didn't work anymore. Come on people, get smart!

**Anthony:** Climate Change is real. Bears are dying and fires are burning from Australia to California!

**Symphony:** Oh bother (*said like Winnie the Pooh*) this is a night-bear

**Anthony:** Along with everything else that happened in 2020, Colorado's fire season was exceptionally catastrophic. More than 625,000 acres burned across the state with [the three largest recorded fires in Centennial State history](#) occurring in one 366-day spin around the sun.

**Tucker:** Firefighters battling the two largest [wildfires](#) in [Colorado](#) state history got some relief from Mother Nature after the state was blasted with [snow](#).

**Rachel:** Yeah, I heard that animals are coming into urban spaces.

**Tucker:** Damn, Rachel you are so annoying.

**Symphony:** My friend fought a bear once, it's me I am the friend

**Professor:** I shouldn't have said anything. Please focus back on the Tiger King Lecture. This is very important (*shares screen of election map and panics*) Oh, I think I shared the wrong thing.

**Tucker:** Am I color blind. Georgia went blue??

**Chad:** Just happened to have found another 4000 ballots from Fulton County. Here we go!

*(End Screen share of Map)*

**Anthony:** Casting a ballot by mail isn't a new way to vote, but it is getting fresh attention as the coronavirus pandemic upends daily life.

**Chad:** The Fake News Media is riding

Losers!

COVID, COVID, COVID, all the way to the Election.

**Anthony:** Generally, Democrats see the practice as helpful for vulnerable populations; one person turning in all the ballots for a nursing home or housing complex for instance. But what Democrats call "community ballot collection," Republicans deride as "ballot harvesting," and say it opens up those same vulnerable populations to manipulation and vote coercion.

**Rachel:** Yeah I was able to vote that way!



**Anthony:** Can't we all just calm down?

**Rachel:** Did you know people are rioting? These people are reckless. Do they not care about the lives of others?

**Symphony:** They probably just can't bear it.

**Anthony:** They should wear a mask when they gather in groups like that.

**Tucker:** These people are patriots. They are exercising their first amendment right. You should be thanking them for having the courage you lack to stand up to these tyrannical governors.

**Chad:** Please support our Capitol Police and Law Enforcement. They are truly on the side of our Country. Stay peaceful!

**Anthony:** They know there's still a pandemic right?

**Tucker:** urgh stop living in fear

**Rachel:** They are endangering people. These kinds of people would hide a zombie bite and endanger everyone. This is a debate about rights its-

**DREAM3657:** Mom I can't talk right now...I am in a stupid class. *Beat.* We are talking about the first amendment and zombies...Mom I'm not joking. Urgh

**Professor:** Excuse me! Could you pay attention? We are not talking about the first amendment here!

**Symphony:** Fur real! Ha! Really? Thought that was a good one.

**DREAM3657:** Oh wasn't talking about the class. (*Thinks she mutes himself*). God, mom you are embarrassing me. No, don't worry about the damn toilet paper I got to go.

**Chad:** just stand back and stand by.

(*Beat. transition to next class*)

**Professor:** Well I got my first dose of the vaccine today (presentation slide) and I haven't dealt with any symptoms yet. Is anyone excited for me??

**Symphony:** Round of a-paws (*golf claps*).

**Tucker:** I'm not sure about these vaccines. Do you think they are putting trackers in them?

**Anthony:** That is just not possible Tucker. Do you remember what source you found this information from? I would love to take a look at it.

**Chad:** The most outrageous lies are the ones about Covid 19. Everyone is lying. The CDC, Media, Democrats, our Doctors.

**Rachel:** You know I had a friend and half her face was paralyzed for a day from it.

**Tucker:** See this is what I mean.

**Anthony:** I think the benefits outweigh the risk and...

**DREAM3657:** Who cares about the vaccine? I just want my toilet paper brand back.

**Professor:** That reminds me, I'm assigning a couple of extra readings, and an essay assignment this week before the exam.

**Rachel:** Aren't we supposed to be on Spring Pause? I'm so stressed.

**Tucker:** Rachel, when are you not a *snowflake*?

**Anthony:** In a recent survey, over 80% of college students reported that COVID-19 has impacted their lives through increased isolation, loneliness, stress, and sadness.

**Professor:** You still need to do the work. This is just an excuse to slack off.

**Anthony:** A survey by a Boston University researcher of nearly 33,000 college students across the country reveals the prevalence of depression and anxiety in young people continues to increase, now reaching its highest levels, a sign of the mounting stress factors due to the coronavirus pandemic, and political unrest, specifically focusing on systemic racism and inequality.

*(Beat. Play presentation of images. End of play)*