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UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA

SANTA CRUZ

**LIBERATING ARTS LEADERS:
TOWARDS AN EMBODIED FRAMEWORK FOR ARTS LEADERSHIP**

A thesis submitted in partial satisfaction
of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

in

THEATRE ARTS

by

Darren Jackson-Wilkins

June 2026

The Thesis of Darren Jackson-Wilkins
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ABSTRACT

Can arts leaders use embodied abolition to liberate their bodies from the white supremacist structures and decenter whiteness within arts organizations?

By: Darren Jackson-Wilkins

Following the murder of George Floyd and the release of “We See You White American Theater,” many arts organizations rushed to enact vague DEI (diversity, equity, inclusion) practices and a churn of artistic leaders that prioritized performative representation. This churn of artistic leaders is compounded by the prevailing normalcy of blaming organizational failures on leaders of color in the United States. Conversely, in 2020, Penumbra Theater restructured its organization to foreground racial healing practice both in and outside the theatrical space. In collaboration with psychotherapist Resmaa Menakem, they have instituted somatic abolition— an approach that bridges mindfulness with theoretical understandings— to encourage active consideration of racial trauma. In this thesis, I ask how somatic abolition and mindfulness, when consciously integrated into an arts leader’s pedagogy, can serve as a restorative practice for arts leaders of color. Drawing on Penumbra’s leadership model and Resmaa Menakem’s research, I consciously integrated somatic abolition into my pedagogy as the Managing Director of Barnstorm Theater Company at the University of California, Santa Cruz, and the director of a workshop production of Gloria by Branden Jacobs-Jenkins. I centered arts, equity, and wellness by incorporating journaling, meditative practice, and body-based exercises. Drawing on leadership and performance studies,

I sought to reify the relationship between embodiment and decolonial practice to argue for an arts leadership approach that centralizes somatic abolition and develops a potential strategy for protecting the bodies of Black artistic leaders.

DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to all the black arts leaders before me and the many more to come. This is written for us.

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INTRODUCTION

For the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house. They may allow us to temporarily beat him at his own game, but they will never enable us to bring genuine change. Racism and homophobia are real conditions of all our lives in this place and time. I urge each one of us here to reach down into that deep place of knowledge inside herself and touch that terror and loathing of any difference that lives here. See whose face it wears. Then the personal and the political can begin to illuminate all our choices.¹

—Audre Lorde, 1979

Audre Lorde expresses that to dismantle a system that centers whiteness, we will need to create new tools. How can we create tools that are not given to us, not only to exist but to succeed? How do we continue to tell stories of our experiences and uplift voices of color within historically oppressive systems? This thesis explores a potential tool for our abolitionist toolbox. I ask, can arts leaders use embodied abolition to liberate their bodies from the constructed white supremacist structures and abolish the centering of whiteness within arts organizations? In this project, I crafted a directorial pedagogy focused on challenging the white normativity in nonprofit theater spaces as the Managing Director of Barnstorm Theater Company and director of their production of *Gloria*² by Branden Jacobs-Jenkins.

I position embodied abolition, a framework constructed by psychotherapist Resmaa Menakem as a partial antidote to the ways that white supremacy affects the body of the arts leader. Embodied abolition combines body-based racial healing

¹ Lorde, Audre. "The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House." Essay. In *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches*, 110–14. Trumansburg, New York: Crossing Press, 1984.

² Jacobs-Jenkins, Branden. *Gloria*. London, UK: Nick Hern Books, 2017.

practice and critical race theory to aid the resistance of the virus Menakem coins as “white-body supremacy virus.”³

Additionally, this thesis emerges from the ongoing crisis of vague and performative diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) policies in the nonprofit theater sector. Many arts organizations rushed to release statements that seemingly prioritized abolition of racist structural, programmatic, and organizational practices in response to the rise of the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement and the release of “We See You, White American Theater”— a manifesto calling out shortcomings in the performing arts industry.⁴ These superficial statements, often posted near a mission or vision statement, were meant to counteract the inherent inequality within these institutions—namely, a lack of representation onstage, in the audience, and on staff. While these statements acknowledge a disparity, they do not inherently enforce any accountability or provide a measurable means of contributing to active liberative practice.

Regarding this project, liberation refers to the ongoing deconstruction of systems of oppression that affect the work we create. These systems include, but are not limited to, white supremacy, patriarchy, and capitalism. This project seeks to work continuously towards the dismantling of these systems, with the hope of freeing our bodies from them.

In our current moment, the efforts in place are vulnerable to the recent federal government crackdown on diversity education and programming. As

³ Menakem, Resmaa. “Somatic Abolitionism: Anti-Racist Practices.” Dr. Resmaa. Accessed November 2025. <https://resmaa.com/movement/>.

⁴ “We See You, White American Theater.” We See You W.A.T., June 8, 2020. <https://www.weseeyouwat.com/statement>.

someone who works in the theater and performing arts industries, I have experienced firsthand what it feels like to navigate predominantly white spaces. The tension in my body and the constant self-doubt are not isolated experiences. Rather, it has been socially constructed, and many folks of color can relate to it.

While I was raised in a very diverse neighborhood, I can recall the first time I was confronted with my race (a rite of passage for most people of color). In kindergarten, I labeled myself white because of my fairer skin tone than that of my classmates. My teacher was quick to call home and have my family give me ‘the talk.’ From this moment on, I was taught always to be aware of my skin color, of its difference, of my difference.

As I continued to understand other parts of my identity, I started to feel that some parts were disconnected. Commonly, folks of mixed or multicultural backgrounds insinuate their inability to feel fully accepted by each of their communities. I echoed this sentiment in that I often feel too Black to fit in with the white gays but too gay to fit in with the Black community. Finding confidence and comfort in my intersectional identity is not a sprint– it is a marathon that I am still running. As I have gotten older, I have come to understand the need to find a groundedness that prepares me to navigate complicated circumstances, familial and organizational.

For my undergraduate degree, I attended Skidmore College in Saratoga Springs, NY– a predominantly white liberal arts college. Then, for my graduate program, I am here at the University of California, Santa Cruz, where the marketing team might flaunt diversity and representation. However, the theater department still struggles to cast plays that center BIPOC experiences.

As I navigate white artistic communities, I find myself feeling like I have to actively convince everyone (and myself) that I am not a diversity hire. Reducing this sentiment to an isolated experience or critique negates a larger systemic issue of performativity. The performative hiring and firing of leaders/artists of color is what I will refer to in this thesis as *leadership churn*.

As I continued to settle into this new professional and social environment, I simultaneously began researching diversity in arts leadership. Before my collegiate career, navigating predominantly white spaces as a young Black queer arts leader was not something I consciously thought about from a theoretical standpoint; it was something I just did. In one of our first graduate courses, I was suggested that I consider the role of my actor training, in particular body-based practices, in how I navigated leadership. I began to research embodied cognition and its relationship to race and sexuality. It was then that I discovered Menakem's framework—somatic abolitionism.⁵ As I continued to read, I found some of its core principles familiar and others of interest.

While I typically describe myself as an actor and arts administrator, I am also passionate about directing and producing. However, when it comes to these titles, I have imposter syndrome. What qualifies me to assign these labels to myself when I have a degree in one thing and not another? That's another conversation for further research, but I want to frame this as my experience as “director” of *Gloria*⁶ by Branden Jacobs-Jenkins at the University of California, Santa Cruz.

⁵ Menakem, Resmaa. “Somatic Abolitionism: Anti-Racist Practices.” Dr. Resmaa. Accessed November 2025. <https://resmaa.com/movement/>.

⁶ Jacobs-Jenkins, Branden. *Gloria*. London, UK: Nick Hern Books, 2017.

At the time of this writing, I am also directing another production for the department– a new full-length play written by an undergraduate student. This piece explores the intergenerational connections of a family of the African diaspora via orisha and traditional West African spirituality. Through music, dance, and storytelling, each woman comes to recognize the power of our ancestors to provide guidance. I acknowledge that this writing will continue to develop as it is undoubtedly affected by my ongoing adaptation to new professional communities. While I am primarily accustomed to non-profit arts organizations, much of my research is in response to “We See You, White American Theater,”⁷ which denounces the racist practices in non-profit, regional, and commercial theater spaces.

In chapter 2, I will complete a literature review of embodiment to clarify its use as a methodological framework. In chapter 3, I will explore how embodied abolition, an individual and collective-care-centered approach that utilizes racial healing and community building, has been implemented at the Penumbra Center for Racial Healing as a model for my project. Chapter 4 will be devoted to reflecting on my directing pedagogy for *Gloria*⁸ by exploring my rehearsal documents and process. The following chapter will present the results of the process by examining journaling and cast members’ responses. I hope that planting the seed of racial healing for arts leaders will become a means of survival against daily microaggressions and advocate for an individual framework that contributes to the collective decolonization of non-profit theater. I hope to advocate for self-care as an active resistance to the

⁷ “We See You, White American Theater.” We See You W.A.T., June 8, 2020. <https://www.weseeyouwat.com/statement.to>

⁸ Jacobs-Jenkins, Branden. *Gloria*. London, UK: Nick Hern Books, 2017.

oppressive systems we work in, rather than a solution for white supremacy, an issue we did not create.

Ultimately, there is a need for radical interventions not only in arts organizational structures but also, more broadly, in the ways we understand leadership. The necessity of reimagining arts leadership and artistic collaboration is a driving force in my research. This project is an acknowledgment of our present reality— that until radical intervention happens, we continue to exist in these white-dominated, oppressive spaces. As folks born out of systemic privilege, we protest institutions in different ways. This project serves as a form of protest—a form of resistance.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

This literature review aims to situate my work within a lineage of research on embodiment, leadership, and embodied abolition. I will begin by examining the nonprofit's role in sustaining oppressive structures despite its presumed avoidance of capitalism. I will then attempt to define leadership and explore alternative structures that have emerged in opposition to strict hierarchies. Next, I will walk through early research on mind-body connections in cognitive science and philosophy. I will reference the development of contemporary understandings of embodiment and its use in actor training and performance studies. Finally, I will summarize how it has been incorporated into leadership practice. A clear understanding of language is imperative for framing the methodological lens of my pedagogy as a director.

ROLE OF THE NON-PROFIT ORGANIZATION

The hierarchical structures in not-for-profit arts organizations tend to reinforce or supplement the very structures they are considered to be fighting against or separate from. In Miranda Joseph's book, *Against the Romance of Community*, a scholar of women, gender, and sexuality describes in detail how non-governmental organizations aid in what I call 'operation capitalism.' We, as participants in these organizations, become "willing subjects" in these institutions that supplement

capitalism. In *Against the Romance of Community*⁹, Joseph describes the role of the “willing subject”:

The promotion of nonprofit nongovernmental organizations as instruments of hegemony-building depends on the notion that, despite the fact that these organizations are actively instrumentally encouraged, participation in such organizations is voluntary, is an authentic expression of real “grassroots” communities and their interests...Even Lester Salamon, in an article that primarily accounts for the recent growth of NGO activity around the world in terms of the crises of capitalism and the state, says, “The most basic force is that of ordinary people who decide to take matters into their own hands and organize to improve their conditions or seek basic rights.”¹⁰

In this excerpt, Joseph outlines how, as voluntary participants in nonprofits, we are inherently responsible for aiding the very capitalist issues we hope to dismantle. If the willing subject is someone who (knowingly or unknowingly) uses nonprofit organizations to aid the capitalist structure, it is essential to consider the role of race in this relationship. If an arts leader, as a participant or constituent of the nonprofit nongovernmental arts organization, is serving as a willing subject, their identity can be part of their service, disruption, or exclusion. As Joseph eloquently outlines, ‘community’ seeks to create unified groups of willing subjects.

This unification prioritizes conformity, therefore negating any sense of individuality or intersectionality of identities. The use of racial healing and mindfulness practice has the potential to push against the trope of the willing subject. By prioritizing the intentional welcoming of identity into a nonprofit nongovernmental organization, I am advocating for the acceptance of individuality

⁹ Miranda Joseph, *Against the Romance of Community* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002).

¹⁰ Miranda Joseph, *Against the Romance of Community* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002), 111.

and for understanding and respect for intersectional identities. This active acknowledgment of the individual resists the willing subject by enabling conversations about different experiences and ideas that would not be possible within a conformist group. As a Black queer man, I write from my experience and reiterate that any practices I reflect on or suggest must be adapted to each leader, follower, and cultural context.

One might argue that this practice continues to build the communities we are attempting to deconstruct. However, the ways that communities are formed with intersecting identities, specifically those rooted in racial healing that I am proposing, are created in non-traditional ways and formats. These new ways of considering community are essential to its differentiation. In the book, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure*, Victor Turner describes ‘communitas’ as a new way to think about how we organize ourselves:

I prefer the Latin term “communitas” to “community” to distinguish this modality of social relationship from an “area of common living.” The distinction between structure and communitas is not simply the familiar one between “secular” and “sacred,” or that, for example, between politics and religion...It is rather a matter of giving recognition to an essential and generic human bond, without which there could be no society.¹¹

In this quote, Turner explains that redefining community does not negate the need for connection-building and the natural organization of social relationships. Rather, we need to use new tools to create these relationships without submitting to capitalist structures. Instead, we must prioritize people’s needs and use new resources to support them.

¹¹ Turner, Victor. “Liminality and Communitas.” Essay. In *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure*, 94–113, 125–30. Chicago: Aldine Publishing, 1969.

Within the typical Western organizational hierarchy, there is, broadly speaking, someone in control of the people under them. Understandings of leadership differ among contexts and preferred styles. In their article, *Leadership in dance and dance education: a review*, the authors define how leadership has been socially constructed:

Leadership can be defined in terms of three interacting elements: a) an influencing process - and its resultant outcomes - that occurs between leader(s) and follower(s); b) how this influencing process can be explained by dispositional characteristics and behaviors, perceptions, and attributions; and c) the context in which the influencing occurs.¹²

Simply put, in our Western understanding, leadership is defined as an entity with specified duties and constituents in a specific place. Performance Studies scholars such as Dwight Conquergood explore how we perform leadership in the same ways that we perform a theatrical character.¹³ Leadership, like most social interactions, has been constructed, shaping its performance and presentational quality. Again, whether or not we agree with them, these are the constructs that we exist within until they are radically interrupted.

While many have proved performative, attempts towards liberation have shown a progressive way of knowing. For instance, some have tried to abolish our standard hierarchical approach, which places one person at the top with all constituents reporting to them. This is often referred to as a top-down model, in

¹² Bashaw, Barbara, Jill Grundstrom, Christopher Houston, and Edward C. Warburton. "Leadership in Dance and Dance Education: A Review." *Research in Dance Education* 26, no. 1 (January 2, 2025): 7–29. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14647893.2025.2455666>.

¹³ Conquergood, Dwight. "Performance Studies: Interventions and Radical Research." *TDR/The Drama Review* 46, no. 2 (June 2002): 145–56. <https://doi.org/10.1162/105420402320980550>.

which key executives or stakeholders establish the vision and policy, which are then carried out by other staff. The opposite of this, a bottom-up approach, draws insights from all organizational levels, including those without authoritative power.¹⁴

ArtsEmerson, a theater presenter housed at Emerson College, has notably modeled a shared leadership approach in which multiple leaders work together ‘equally’ to make decisions rather than in a hierarchical manner. In a 2023 HowlRound essay, one of the leaders, David Howse, writes:

Our shared leadership model aspires to be a decolonized leadership model, one that reimagines, reshapes, and restores the role that organizational leaders can play in leading their institutions...We are frequently reflecting on how our identities and our shared leadership inform accountability. We need to support each other in being accountable to the communities we hail from, to the city of Boston, to the larger arts field ecology that is in a key moment of crisis, and to ourselves and our shared (and not shared) values. This requires deep listening, agreeing to disagree, radical support, and transparency. In a world that emphasizes the solo leader and ‘genius,’ and that wants to attribute credit (or blame) to one key person, the trust and buy-in that is required for shared leadership is palpable. It is a daily exercise, a commitment, and like any living thing, requires care.¹⁵

In other words, the leaders, David Howse and Ronee Penoi, created a model that not only allowed them both to participate in decision-making but also to bring their experiences and identities into the room. This did not mean that they always agreed; rather, they were forced to trust and listen to each other. As wonderful as this

¹⁴ Kezar, Adrianna. “Bottom-up/Top-down Leadership: Contradiction or Hidden Phenomenon.” *The Journal of Higher Education* 83, no. 5 (September 2012): 725–60. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00221546.2012.11777264>.

¹⁵ Howse, David, and Ronee Penoi. “Decolonizing Arts Leadership through Shared Black and Indigenous Leadership.” HowlRound Theatre Commons, September 12, 2023. <https://howlround.com/decolonizing-arts-leadership-through-shared-black-and-indigenous-leadership>.

shared form of leadership is, there is plenty of room for miscommunication and conflict. Howse and Penoi address their differences, but what happens when there is no time for conflict? What happens when the choices are black-and-white, with no gray areas? This is not to say it cannot be collaborative, but our current organizational system depends on someone controlling others. I do appreciate that these authors introduce an alternative to 'traditional' leadership and, more importantly, outline that this type of work requires ongoing, daily work. Despite the author's use of 'decolonization,' they are actually referring to decoloniality or decolonial practice.

In his paper, *Notes for Decolonizing Embodiment*, Spatz insists that we become intentional in how we describe abolitionist practices.¹⁶ The use of 'decolonial practice' in contrast to decolonization points to an understanding that disrupting the racist systems that arts organizations are built on will require ongoing, daily practice. The organizational systems we hope to disrupt are ingrained in every aspect of our reality and therefore cannot be destroyed in a single movement. Rather, we need to continuously interrogate and rebuild in achievable tasks rather than abstract plans. It is with strategic planning and persistence that we can make sustainable change.

Beyond creating different models, there have also been new ways to characterize leadership styles. In her paper, "Leading beautifully: How mastery, congruence and purpose create the aesthetic of embodied leadership practice," Ethics scholar Donna Ladkin uses the aesthetic of beauty to understand effective

¹⁶ Spatz, Ben. "Notes for Decolonizing Embodiment." *Journal of Dramatic Theory and Criticism* 33, no. 2 (2019): 9–22. <https://doi.org/10.1353/dtc.2019.0001>.

leadership.¹⁷ She explores mastery, congruence, and purpose as qualities of one's performance of beautiful leadership, as well as of leading as a performing art, charismatic or authentic leadership, and impression management. While these management styles are beyond the scope of my research, Ladkin's understanding of somatic practice still rings true. In the paper, she quotes leadership studies scholar, Amanda Sinclair's article, "Body possibilities in leadership," where she writes that:

Although leadership has been constructed as an activity of brains without bodies, it is a bodily practice, a physical performance in addition to a triumph of mental or motivational mastery...leadership works at a visceral and sensual level, activating appetites and desires...The accomplishment of leadership is often highly dramatic and full-bodied; there is intimacy, titillation, sometimes mystique.¹⁸

In the quote above, Sinclair explains that scholars of leadership and performance studies are noting its inherently embodied nature. She states that we experience leadership not only intellectually, but also physically. To understand the physical experience that has been alluded to thus far, it is essential to clarify my use of 'embodiment,' given its broad reach.

¹⁷ Ladkin, Donna. "Leading Beautifully: How Mastery, Congruence and Purpose Create the Aesthetic of Embodied Leadership Practice." *The Leadership Quarterly* 19, no. 1 (February 2008): 31–41. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.leaqua.2007.12.003>.

¹⁸ Sinclair, Amanda. "Body Possibilities in Leadership." *Leadership* 1, no. 4 (November 2005): 387–406. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1742715005057231>.

UNDERSTANDING EMBODIMENT

As with DEI's vagueness, 'embodiment' is used rather loosely to describe connections between our minds and bodies. Generally speaking, actors are encouraged to explore how we create characters from the inside out (using beats, text analysis, character development) or from the outside in (using physical expression, gesture, and tasks) to learn about a character. Regardless of method, using Stanislavski or Meisner as examples, directors often request the embodiment of a character without using a specific vocabulary. This somatic approach is typically a tool to help actors get out of their heads and into the bodies and lived experiences of the characters they portray.

To understand body-based practice in the arts, it is important first to understand its development in cognitive science and psychology. Early research in embodied cognition, beginning in the 1980s, created a vocabulary to describe the relationship among gesture, reasoning, and problem-solving—essentially, how our mind and body communicate to process complex information. Key research by George Lakoff and Mark Johnson in *Philosophy in the Flesh* outlines that human cognition is embodied through metaphor and physical experiences:

There is no such fully autonomous faculty of reason separate from and independent of bodily capacities. The evidence, instead, supports an evolutionary view in which reason uses and grows out of bodily capacities. The result is a radically different view of what reason is and, therefore, what a human being is.¹⁹

¹⁹ Lakoff, George, and Mark Johnson. *Philosophy in the Flesh: The Embodied Mind and Its Challenge to Western Thought*. New York: Basic Books, 1999.

In other words, there is a connection between our cognitive processing and the physical body. Until this point, these two (mind and body) were usually considered separate in Western research. I emphasize this Western understanding to reiterate that embodiment is perceived differently across cultures. As knowledge of this relationship increased, scientists and philosophers began considering the mind and body to have a symbiotic relationship—the mind and body influenced each other rather than just one influencing the other. For instance, in *Gesture in Reasoning*, Martha W. Alibali explains the relationship between physical gestures and cognitive processing. Alibali defines gestures as body motions that do not require another object or person. In the text, she says:

It is becoming increasingly clear that gestures are more than simple 'hand-waving.' Gestures offer researchers a valuable window on the embodied cognitive processes involved in reasoning. Moreover, as a form of action, gestures can also play a functional role in those processes. A deeper understanding of how and why gesture is critical for scientific progress in understanding human reasoning. Better understanding of the mechanisms that underpin gesture production and comprehension will lead to greater insight into when, why, for whom, and in what contexts gesture contributes to reasoning.²⁰

Alibali highlights the weight that gestures can hold in processing and understanding information. She continues to explain the ways that these gestures might impact cognitive processing— activation of problem solving and compartmentalization of complex information.

²⁰ Alibali, Martha W. "Gesture in Reasoning." Essay. In *The Cambridge Handbook of Thinking and Reasoning*, edited by Keith J Holyoak and Robert G Morrison. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press (2005): 242.

As studies of embodied cognition continued to develop, it became clear that a multidisciplinary approach would be needed to fully understand it. Scholars from cognitive science and psychology began to work alongside philosophy and performance studies. While the practice is mostly present in actor training, there was an acknowledgment that the field of theater would benefit from a deeper engagement with the mind-body connection. Theatermaker and scholar Rick Kemp notoriously discussed the cyclical nature of the mind and body. In his book *Embodied acting: what neuroscience tells us about performance*,²¹ he draws attention to the impact of body-based cognition on actor training. Kemp discusses nonverbal communication, body language, and the importance of gesture. He draws on the research of Lakoff and Johnson to recognize the role our bodies play in perception, conceptualization, and expression.

On a broader scale, the connection between mind, body, and spirit is far from new. However, these concepts have continued to be developed over the years. For instance, in his book, *Theatre of the Sphere: The Vibrant Being*, Luis Valdez discusses his conceptual framework based on the Mayan concept of zero:

To begin at the root, Theatre of the Sphere is based on the Mayan concept of zero. In fact, it is synonymous with the Theatre of the Maya Zero. True to the notion of Zero as an “empty fullness and a full emptiness,” it is a sphere of potential energy that can best be described as a “vibration.” All human beings exist in their own sphere of vibrant energy, manifesting their spiritual vitality through the body-heart-mind-spirit continuum. As actors on stage as well as in life, we are all “vibrant beings.” This is the cosmic key left to us by our Ancient American ancestors.²²

²¹ Kemp, Rick. *Embodied acting: What neuroscience tells us about performance*. Hoboken: Taylor and Francis, 2012.

²² Valdez, Luis, Michael M. Chemers, and Jorge A. Huerta. *Theatre of the sphere: The vibrant being*. London: Routledge, 2022.

In this quote, Valdez states that the Mayans had already discovered this mind-body connection, reinforcing that discoveries about the mind-body relationship are not new; rather, they are reiterations of previously discovered information. An understanding of the “vibrant energy” in our bodies and the ability to control its use are essential in my research.

In the spirit of multidisciplinary collaboration, other theater practitioners have called for this same understanding of a somatic approach to be utilized across the arts, rather than only in actor training. In her paper, “Embodiment: a Cross-Disciplinary Provocation,” Deirdre McLaughlin calls for transdisciplinarity, which “takes us beyond disciplines by weaving a new kind of knowledge.”²³ When we think of interactions among multiple fields, we often think only of reading and listening to their work. The relationship that McLaughlin calls for is an active collaboration and combining of disciplines to create new ways of understanding. As a promotion of this form of collaboration, I hope that my research contributes to the embodied arts— a field that combines cognitive processing, body-based practice, and artistic expression.

While I am using embodied abolition as a methodology for decoloniality in arts administration, I want to acknowledge that the term “embodiment” is rooted in Western understandings of audience spectatorship. In his article, “Notes for Decolonizing Embodiment,” Ben Spatz discusses that even within this somatic approach to the arts, there is room to decenter whiteness.²⁴ Intending to use a

²³ McLaughlin, Deirdre. “Embodiment: A Cross-Disciplinary Provocation.” *Connection Science* 29, no. 1 (January 2, 2017): 36–42. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09540091.2017.1284760>.

²⁴ Spatz, Ben. “Notes for Decolonizing Embodiment.” *Journal of Dramatic Theory and Criticism* 33, no. 2 (2019): 9–22. <https://doi.org/10.1353/dtc.2019.0001>.

somatic approach that does not seek to center whiteness, I adapted my practice to employ non-Western techniques to racial healing.

Beyond the arts, other scholars and organizations have articulated the need for embodied healing. For instance, the Embodiment Institute, founded by Prentis Hemphill, offers resources, training, and research surrounding liberating practice for cultural building and connection. On their website, they write that their “mission is to change the conversation, practice, and politics of healing through strategic training and interventions at interpersonal, organizational, cultural, and environmental scales.”²⁵ This organization is advocating for more discourse on how healing and liberative practices can be applied individually to spread to the collective.

Prentis Hemphill, Co-Executive Director of The Embodiment Institute and Black Embodiment Initiative, has become well-renowned for teaching somatic practice throughout social movements and moments of social unrest and organizational upheaval.²⁶ Their use of this methodology reinforces the role of our bodies in abolitionist practice. Inspired by their methodology, I hope to engage in healing-focused work to reimagine a liberative future.

Scholars of Black feminism have also considered the relationship between our bodies and the way that we create. In her book *Feelin'*, Bettina Judd explores how emotion and sensation might affect how Black women create art. She writes, “To speak of feelin’ is to deal with the states of being across mind, body, and spirit. *Feelin'* implicates all three at once. As a bodily way of knowing, it reverberates in the spirit

²⁵ Hemphill, Prentis. “Mission & Values.” The Embodiment Institute, n.d. <https://www.theembodimentinstitute.org/about#mission>.

²⁶ Hemphill, Prentis. “Prentis Hemphill.” The Embodiment Institute, February 13, 2024. <https://www.theembodimentinstitute.org/staffbios/prentis>.

and the mind.”²⁷ In other words, Judd is arguing that somaticism is partly responsible for how we navigate our lives and, thus, the things that we create and the relationships we have. This sentiment mirrors my argument that the body is engaged when we lead and are affected by the environments we inhabit; therefore, we must find ways to protect it and use it to deconstruct those oppressive spaces or systems.

EMBODIED APPROACH TO LEADERSHIP

Now that I have established my understanding of body-based practice, the next step is to review how it has already been applied to leadership skills and observed in practice. Scholars of performance and leadership studies have noted the advantages (and necessity) of body-based practices in our fundamental understanding. Specifically, there has been a growing interest in how performance-based activities can contribute to equitable and innovative management styles. In *Leadership in Dance and Dance Education: A Review*, four scholars (Barbara Bashaw, Jill Grundstrom, Christopher Houston, and Edward C. Warburton) discuss the growth of arts-based learning activities in leadership training:

Today, there continues to be a persistent call to use arts-based concepts and methods to better understand and develop leadership in the arts and beyond. Though interest in leadership studies among American corporate and educational professionals goes back at least as far as the early 20th century, the ‘art of leadership’ has been largely conceived in executive boardrooms as the ‘art of influencing others’. Ever since, theorists and researchers have relied on the metaphor of leadership as art, which seems to recognize that art, like leadership, can have the power to inspire, transform, heal, or connect us

²⁷ Judd, Bettina. *Feelin: Creative Practice, pleasure, and Black Feminist thought*. Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2023, 10.

to something larger than us....Today, researchers study leadership *in* the arts, investigating the potential of arts-based methods in leadership development to address emerging issues relating to culture, diversity, equity, gender, and identity, among others.²⁸

Simply put, the authors are suggesting that arts-based approaches to leadership are becoming more popular. The authors of this text explain how body-based practice, such as dance, reinforces the power of the mind-body connection. This increase in research is promising, as it contributes to an ongoing understanding of the value of arts-based leadership. Further, I agree that centering the body and mind is bound to lead to greater clarity. When I am in tune with my body and connected to the ground and the space I am in, I can think more clearly and more efficiently.

In any directorial role, it is generally necessary to remain calm under pressure. The ability to resist panic in a vulnerable, stressful moment is often taken for granted, but this can become a determining factor in how the situation is handled. Finding grounding beneath my feet and breath has become pivotal in how I approach uncomfortable situations or conversations.

This groundedness and connection to my breath have been ingrained in me as an actor. Through a myriad of techniques and games, I have learned to listen to my body and instincts. In the same vein, an article by arts leaders highlights skills held by dancers and dance educators that might benefit a wider range of leaders beyond their field. In the article, “Embodied and Embodiary Leadership: Experiential Learning in Dance and Leadership Education,” Zeitner, Rowe, and Jackson write:

²⁸ Bashaw, Barbara, Jill Grundstrom, Christopher Houston, and Edward C. Warburton. “Leadership in Dance and Dance Education: A Review.” *Research in Dance Education* 26, no. 1 (January 2, 2025): 7–29. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14647893.2025.2455666>.

The process of becoming an embodied leader might thus involve a greater sensual awareness of the people in a group and their kinesthetic impact on each other. Such sensual awareness is not difficult to awaken, as Barbara Snook suggests, ‘everybody has embodied knowledge. A lot of people are just not aware of it because they never think about it. When people do dance workshops, they become aware of that and it surprises them how much they know about nonverbal communication, but never think about it in real life...Subsequent exploration of new ways of physically communicating might then liberate individuals to more effectively express and receive information with and through their bodies.’²⁹

To summarize, they suggest that movement, specifically dance, can affect how we understand our bodies and our surroundings. Moreover, there are implications for understanding body language and nonverbal communication when their minds and bodies are unrestricted. Finding connection and having control over your thoughts and body are indispensable skills we all continue to learn. However, once these skills are learned and put into practice, we can liberate our bodies and become a better, more productive, and healthier version of ourselves as arts leaders.

Other scholars, particularly those in Black feminist thought, have explored how body-based leadership practices can contribute to resistance. Considering Audre Lorde’s quote from the introduction to this thesis, the use of new tools has the potential to create space for change. In *Body Matters: Arts-based, embodied leadership development for resisting violence and injustice*, the authors establish the body as the vehicle for a new form of leadership:

²⁹ Zeitner, David, Nicholas Rowe, and Brad Jackson. “Embodied and Embodiary Leadership: Experiential Learning in Dance and Leadership Education.” Essay. In *Organizational Aesthetics* 5, 1st ed., 5:167–87, 2016. www.organizationalaesthetics.org.

The body is the first site of resistance, political action, mourning, healing, and/or creative declarations in the face of all that would crush willfulness, artful action, courage, and creativity. We present a feminist, participatory approach to leadership development that engages participants in arts-based, embodied learning and focuses on creative approaches to addressing the needs that emerge from violence, injustice, and trauma. In a series of learning forums (2016–22), activists, peacebuilders, educators, and others have explored embodied processes that open spaces for healing and storytelling, reignite creativity, and deepen practice of and imagination for embodied, artful leadership.³⁰

Essentially, somatic ways of knowing can be used to develop leadership that intentionally fights against social injustice. In the same vein, I hoped this framework would actively work against violence in an achievable and meaningful way. By outlining what the framework might look like, I will contribute to the ongoing discourse on reframing and embodying our ways of knowing, with the intention of contributing to decolonial practice.

WHAT ARE THE STAKES?

As noted in the aforementioned HowlRound article from David Howse and Ronee Penoi, when something goes awry at the theater, audience members are always looking for someone to blame.³¹ While leaders of an arts organization are generally the easiest to blame, this is even more pronounced when people of color hold those positions. The swiftness to use people of color as a scapegoat in any

³⁰ Mansfield, Kathryn, and Katia Ornelas. “Body Matters: Arts-Based, Embodied Leadership Development for Resisting Violence and Injustice.” Essay. In *Women Embodied Leaders: Peacebuilding, Protest and Professions*, 209–22. Emerald Publishing, 2025.

³¹ Howse and Penoi, “Decolonizing Arts Leadership.”

context can become a root cause of many instances of racial trauma. Impacted by many societal stressors, African Americans in particular experience disproportionately higher rates of stress and mental health issues than white folks.³² Racial healing and mindfulness interventions have quickly risen as a means of counteracting this psychological stress. In a study of mindfulness-based interventions, “Promoting Mindfulness in African American Communities,” the authors write that:

Despite the few studies identified and their methodological limitations, findings from one review of mind-body therapies provided mixed but promising early evidence of improvement in hypertension and perceived stress among African American participants.³³

The authors are referring to a sleep study titled, “The contribution of psychosocial stressors to sleep among African Americans in the Jackson Heart Study,” which was published in 2016.³⁴ The use of body-based practices has also shown increasing potential to address health issues resulting from daily stressors, such as microaggressions and major life events, caused by social inequality. These scholars note the popularity of mindfulness in white communities, which means we

³² Biggers, Alana, Claire Adams Spears, Kimberly Sanders, Jason Ong, Lisa K. Sharp, and Ben S. Gerber. “Promoting Mindfulness in African American Communities.” *Mindfulness* 11, no. 10 (August 21, 2020): 2274–82. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12671-020-01480-w>.

³³ Biggers, Alana, Claire Adams Spears, Kimberly Sanders, Jason Ong, Lisa K. Sharp, and Ben S. Gerber. “Promoting Mindfulness in African American Communities.” *Mindfulness* 11, no. 10 (August 21, 2020): 4. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12671-020-01480-w>.

³⁴ Johnson, Dayna A., Lynda Lisabeth, Tené T. Lewis, Mario Sims, DeMarc A. Hickson, Tandaw Samdarshi, Herman Taylor, and Ana V. Roux. “The Contribution of Psychosocial Stressors to Sleep among African Americans in the Jackson Heart Study.” *Sleep* 39, no. 7 (July 1, 2016): 1411–19. <https://doi.org/10.5665/sleep.5974>.

will need to adapt the practice to meet our community's needs. Further in the article, the authors write that:

Among African Americans, cultural adaptations might target specific factors and psychological stressors relevant to African American communities, such as perceived discrimination, occupational stress, and limited access to healthcare treatment...Adaptations might also highlight story-telling (fostering community and connection) and emphasize interdependence (and how self-care can aid caring for others).³⁵

In other words, these practices that were created with white folks in mind will need to be adapted to reflect the needs of people of color and larger, each individual. As previously mentioned, Ben Spatz echoes this, recognizing that we will need to decolonize embodiment before we can benefit from it. In researching mindfulness practice for arts leaders of color, I turned to scholars of color who wrote about our experiences and our need for healing. While the medical repercussions of social injustice are not the primary goal of my research, this is to raise the stakes of mental health in our community as Black folks. I insert my framework as a preventive resource or a treatment for BIPOC community members in leadership positions.

³⁵ Biggers, Alana, Claire Adams Spears, Kimberly Sanders, Jason Ong, Lisa K. Sharp, and Ben S. Gerber. "Promoting Mindfulness in African American Communities." *Mindfulness* 11, no. 10 (August 21, 2020): 2274–82. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12671-020-01480-w>.

METHODOLOGY

*Rarely, if ever, are any of us healed in isolation. Healing is an act of communion*³⁶

-bell hooks

In this section, I will describe the methodological lens I used to develop my directing pedagogy. As previously mentioned, in this project, I am primarily guided by Resmaa Menakem's embodied abolitionist practice.³⁷ The nonprofit theater organization, Penumbra Center for Racial Healing in Minneapolis, also inspires me. While these contribute to my specific lenses, I am also following a practice-as-research approach. The research, writing, reflecting, and discovering all happen simultaneously. My practice and my research have undoubtedly inspired and influenced each other. In the following sections, I will further detail how I adapted this framework and its potential resonances beyond this project.

Specifically, I am using practices outlined in *My Grandmother's Hands*³⁸ by Resmaa Menakem and ideas from *Jambalaya*³⁹ by Luisah Teish. Menakem, a psychotherapist specializing in racial healing and racial trauma, is credited with coining somatic abolitionism, often referred to as embodied abolition. He uses this as

³⁶ hooks, bell. *all about love*. New Visions. New York: William Morrow, an imprint of HarperCollins Publishers, 2022.

³⁷ Menakem, Resmaa. "Somatic Abolitionism: Anti-Racist Practices." Dr. Resmaa. Accessed November 2025. <https://resmaa.com/movement/>.

³⁸ Menakem, Resmaa. *My Grandmother's Hands: Racialized trauma and the Pathway to Mending Our Hearts and Bodies*. Las Vegas, NV: Central Recovery Press, 2017.

³⁹ Teish, Luisah. *Jambalaya: The Natural Woman's Book of Personal Charms and Practical Rituals*. United States: HarperOne, 2021.

an ongoing anti-racist practice that hopes to rid our bodies of what he describes as ‘white-body supremacy’ -- a construct that has been created to prioritize the bodies of white folks.⁴⁰ Furthermore, Menakem writes that this training is meant to supplement vague diversity statements, much like those instituted in response to We See You White American Theater.

Resmaa Menakem has developed several workshops and training sessions designed to support repeated individual and communal restorative practices. In addition to his books, study guides, and online training opportunities, Menakem has also collaborated with organizations and companies, including the Penumbra Center for Racial Healing, to explore how somatic abolitionism might benefit the workplace. This collaboration demonstrates that there is a place for this methodology beyond abolition studies.

EMBODIED ABOLITION IN NONPROFIT THEATER

In this section, I will explore how the values of my methodology are already being applied in nonprofit theater. On June 8, 2020, We See You White American Theater, an alliance of arts workers of color, released a condemnation of the racist systems that exist in theater systems.⁴¹ In this manifesto, the alliance issued demands to reshape the industry to better care for and respect artists of color. Following its

⁴⁰ Menakem, Resmaa. “Somatic Abolitionism: Anti-Racist Practices.” Dr. Resmaa. Accessed November 2025. <https://resmaa.com/movement/>.

⁴¹ “We See You, White American Theater.” We See You W.A.T., June 8, 2020. <https://www.weseeyouwat.com/statement>.

dissemination, many organizations rushed to enact performative diversity statements.

In this age of AI and social media, it is easy to perform diversity and inclusion without doing the work. The Kennedy Center in Washington, D.C., now known as The Trump Kennedy Center, has become a cultural center. In their mission statement, they claim to use the performing arts to reflect the diverse needs of the people. An officially filed mission statement is the guiding light for a nonprofit organization. If an organization is no longer serving its mission, it becomes vulnerable to losing its 501(c)3 status. The mission statement reads that they will, “... strive to ensure that the education and outreach programs and policies of the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts meet[s] the highest level of excellence and reflect[s] the cultural diversity of the United States...”⁴² Following his re-election, President Donald Trump assumed control of the arts center as the chair of the Board and appointed over thirty other board members. As a part of his campaign, Trump has worked to repeal arts funding and diversity efforts across federally funded organizations. If the organization is cutting programming that sought to diversify audiences and uplift diverse voices, it is no longer serving its mission.

In addition to the performativity of enacting vague statements or falsifying diversity, another callout was the lack of people of color reflected in organizational administrative roles. In response, organizations rushed to hire people of color into management roles but neglected to provide them with the resources they needed to succeed. Additionally, these folks, often viewed as ‘diversity hires,’ were not provided the same respect as their white counterparts. In the past year, we have seen the

⁴² Kennedy Center. “Mission.” The Trump Kennedy Center. Accessed February 2026. <https://www.kennedy-center.org/our-story/mission/>.

turnover of leaders of color in arts organizations across the United States, including, but not limited to, Jeremy O'Harris as the Creative Director at Williamstown Theatre and Nataki Garrett at Oregon Shakespeare Festival. There are undoubtedly other contributing factors, but it is important to understand the underlying systemic issues. Along with this churn, there is also often an expectation that leaders of color will 'fix diversity problems' or can speak for entire communities of people, given their identity, which just creates more harm.

While some organizations scrambled to perform equity, others rose to accept failures and institute measurable changes. This means there is a lineage of leaders who prioritize racial healing practices in their work.

Penumbra's organizational shift did not reduce the quality of its programming or the artists it worked with. Instead, it gave a name to their existing practices and expanded them. By inserting this into their mission statement, they found a way to hold them accountable. Non-profit organizations measure their success and progress by considering their programming, stakeholders, and community against their published mission statements. Organizations that expressed solidarity might have acknowledged the injustices outlined in *We See You White American Theater*,⁴³ but lacked accountability for their shortcomings.

Overall, these scholars of cognitive science, philosophy, performance studies, and abolitionist practice are interested in addressing the necessity of a connection between the mind and the body. This project invites each of these fields to the same table to fuel the growing urgency to protect ourselves as BIPOC artists and arts leaders in spaces that have historically not been designed for us. Larger, it

⁴³ "We See You, White American Theater." We See You W.A.T., June 8, 2020. <https://www.weseeyouwat.com/statement>.

contributes to new ways of thinking about decoloniality in a measurable context rather than superficial catchphrases.

PENUMBRA CENTER FOR RACIAL HEALING

Blocks away from where the police murdered an innocent Black man, George Floyd, and more recently, where ICE murdered two US citizens, stands Penumbra Center for Racial Healing. Originally founded in 1976 by Lou Bellamy, this theater became recognized as a prominent professional organization for Black artists. They quickly rose as a site for diverse programs, famously collaborating with playwright August Wilson. The theater is committed to nurturing Black voices and promoting active participation among its audiences.

As mentioned above, in 2020, following the murder of George Floyd, the organization pivoted to foreground their racial healing practice. Now led by Sarah Bellamy, daughter of the founder, the theater offers a unique curriculum built on three main principles– arts, racial equity, and wellness. As the only professional Black theatre in Minnesota, they continue to produce full theatre seasons and artist training programs, and have also expanded to include wellness and racial equity programs. In their organizational materials, they outline what sets them apart from other affinity-focused arts organizations:

Penumbra’s racial healing work springs from theatre practices that traverse the psychology of human behavior. Our trauma-informed trainers are constantly learning so that we can stay at the forefront of equity efforts. We use our expertise in theatre to create spaces where nuance and complexity can

emerge, while still holding our collective focus on healing. Penumbra's embodied process sparks empathy through the power of personal testimony and story facilitated by seasoned artists. Our unique cultural grounding as a Black institution means that we center race as our primary lens, bringing deep historical and contemporary analysis to our racial healing work.⁴⁴

The articulation of their goals is strong, as is that of many other arts organizations across the United States. However, Penumbra Center for Racial Healing has demonstrated its commitment to making authentic strides toward its mission through intentional programming and targeted audience engagement efforts. In addition to their theater season, the organization now offers racial healing sessions and training for individuals and organizations. Organizations that have utilized their sessions vary in location, size, and field, including but not limited to: Best Buy, Target, New Jersey Child Support, Indiana Repertory Theatre, and Twin Cities Habitat for Humanity. These sessions are open to all regardless of race as they aim to foster meaningful allyship. There are four modules in their racial healing training: Foundations of Racial Healing, Psychology of Race, Belonging, and Allyship. These educational programs support the diverse range of stories being told on stage. As represented on their website, the stories they tell and the audiences they target are crafted with care by a staff and board that is reflective.

Penumbra is also a member of the Twin Cities Theatres of Color Coalition, a group that seeks to educate and take action on racial equity challenges in theater. Combining their commitment to action with theater performances that explore Blackness, the organization offers youth programs and creates study guides to

⁴⁴ "Penumbra Difference." Penumbra Theatre. Accessed January 21, 2026. <https://penumbratheatre.org/penumbra-difference/>.

provide their community with resources. Their choice to collaborate with Menakem showcases their efforts to find tactile ways to support racial equity.

Menakem and Penumbra have collaborated to develop their somatic approach further. Finding traces of his work in their programming made the organization pivotal to my research. While I acknowledge that other institutions might do similar work, this one quickly rose to prominence.

CRAFTING AN EMBODIED ABOLITIONIST APPROACH TO LEADERSHIP

While Penumbra's model was a strong guide for my process, it became clear that I would need to connect the dots between the fields I am trying to intersect. Their model focuses on the organizational level, while this project aims to defamiliarize an embodied abolitionist practice through an adaptable framework. By taking a deep dive into their online resources, I identified several common threads I considered prominent in their model: arts, equity, and wellness. In planning my rehearsal process for *Gloria*, I considered these three pillars of my pedagogy.

As mentioned in the previous chapter, Penumbra is unique in that it directly names its commitment to equity in its mission statement, rather than adopting performative diversity initiatives that most orgs rushed to create as an acknowledgment of racial disparities. While these demonstrate awareness, I reinforce that they are used to exonerate an organization from taking action. Meanwhile, Penumbra embeds equity in its core mission, which introduces

accountability. In a similar vein, I inserted accountability into my pedagogy. By naming my intention, I held myself and the creative team accountable.

In Resmaa Menakem's book *My Grandmother's Hands*,⁴⁵ he advocates for consistent body-based practice and reflection. Throughout this book, sections outline specific practices that can be done at the individual or collective level to embody abolition. There are specific body practices for Black folks and others for non-Black folks, which reinforces the aforementioned writing from Spatz— embodiment is defined differently depending on cultural understanding. To support that, the practices must have breathing room to adapt across cultures. In chapter 6 of his book, he outlines an individual practice for non-Black folks that can be done continually to rid our bodies of intolerable images crafted by white-body supremacy:

Visit a physically safe place where you will be populated with a lot of Black bodies...Throughout the experience, periodically pause and pay attention to your body. What is it experiencing? What urges and thoughts arise? A week or two later, go to a different physically safe place filled with Black bodies. Once again, pay attention to your body, moment by moment. Does it feel or react differently this time? This is not a cultural immersion exercise. It's about noticing what you experience in your body in real time.⁴⁶

In this section, he says that inviting folks to shift their awareness to their body and breath in different social situations requires bodily and environmental awareness that actors are always working towards. As an actor, I have spent time training in viewpoints, elemental work, Laban, Meisner technique, and other modes of shifting awareness to our bodies. An artistic leader or director who encourages

⁴⁵ Menakem, Resmaa. *My Grandmother's Hands: Racialized trauma and the Pathway to Mending Our Hearts and Bodies*. Las Vegas, NV: Central Recovery Press, 2017.

⁴⁶ Menakem, *My Grandmother's Hands*, 95.

actors and creative teams to intentionally consider their bodies and identities in a room through an embodied abolitionist pedagogy adds another layer to organizational liberation.

In creating this approach, I also researched other scholars of somatic approaches. In their article, “Body Matters: Arts-Based, Embodied Leadership Development for Resisting Violence and Injustice,” Mansfield and Ornelas introduce the idea of the (de-)mechanized body as a way to understand the way capitalist and patriarchal systems restrict our bodies:

Social change leaders operate mechanistically when imagining a single formula for the work, when trying to control the process tightly, when leaving no space for mess, discomfort, and emergence, and when throwing out/imprisoning the troublemakers. Practices that demechnize people, dismantle rigidity, and promote flexibility are a critical component to resilience building and moving away from violence.⁴⁷

In other words, the systems in which we exist affect the kind of work we do. We must create practices for ourselves to rejuvenate ourselves. Without this, we lack the capacity to oppose the systems; instead, we are depicted as failures. I agree. We should consciously include these practices in the training of leaders, especially arts leaders.

While Penumbra’s model and the model I crafted for this workshop use the arts as a vehicle, I’m more interested in contributing to collective liberation than in helping arts orgs succeed. In her book, *Acts of Activism*, D. Soyini Madison seeks to

⁴⁷ Mansfield, Kathryn, and Katia Ornelas. “Body Matters: Arts-Based, Embodied Leadership Development for Resisting Violence and Injustice.” Essay. In *Women Embodied Leaders: Peacebuilding, Protest and Professions*, 212. Emerald Publishing, 2025.

understand relationships between the performativity of activism and social justice.⁴⁸

Madison is a critical performance ethnographer who specifically focuses on oral history. She explores how performance can serve as the vehicle for social action rather than the other way around.

In the introduction of the book, Madison writes that, “the major work of performance ethnography is to make performances that do the labor of advocacy, and do it ethically to inspire realms of reflection and responsibility.”⁴⁹ In other words, Madison is insisting that we can look at activism through performance studies to better understand how to perform advocacy work. Further, performance can be seen as the process through which we carry out activism, therefore grounding social justice as the priority rather than a consequence or result. This has been monumental in thinking about how I am framing my project.

Originally, I was positioning racial healing as supplementary to achieving diversity and equity in a nonprofit arts organization. However, the goal of my project should be to contribute to racial healing practice and collective liberation. If racial healing and mindfulness can help arm artistic leaders and provide resources for arts leaders of color, this project can contribute to the liberation of bodies of color. Additionally, it has the potential to help shape understandings of allyship and belonging for white arts leaders.

In Act III of the book, D. Soyini Madison discusses how her methodology was inspired by Theater for Development. This practice seeks to challenge our understanding of developed vs. underdeveloped through communal context,

⁴⁸ Madison, D Soyini. *Acts of Activism: Human Rights as Radical Performance*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012.

⁴⁹ Madison, D Soyini. *Acts of Activism: Human Rights as Radical Performance*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012.

reciprocity, hyphenation, and active culture. These principles refer to shared space and time, shared ownership of performances, the integration of entertainment and efficiency, and opportunities for community growth. Further, she describes intimate habitation and performative witnessing as an outline of how she interacts with communities as an outsider.

My original project planned to use *What to Send Up When It Goes Down* by Aleeshea Harris, which requires a cast of all Black actors, but I was unable to due to casting constraints in the department.⁵⁰ While *Gloria* has a more diverse casting breakdown, the intentions of my project were the same.⁵¹ Much of Madison's writing revolves around her approach to ethnographic work. I shifted the focus from the actors and more to my own experience because I was weary of speaking for someone else's lived experience. A clear vision for how I wanted to develop my pedagogy and the necessity for it have become guiding principles for how I place my practice within this theoretical framework, as well as for how I interact with my cast and creative team.

⁵⁰ Harris, Aleeshea. *Is god is; what to send up when it goes down*. New York: Theatre Communications Group, 2022.

⁵¹ Jacobs-Jenkins, *Gloria*.

PROCEDURE

*In America, it is tradition to destroy the black body. It is heritage.*⁵²

- Ta-Nehisi Coates

For this project, I decided to direct a workshop production in the Barnstorm Theater Company, where I also serve as the Managing Director. Barnstorm is a student-run theater company where undergraduates can perform, learn new roles, or gain more experience. The company and the associated course are typically run by two graduate students who serve as Managing Director and Artistic Director. However, for this year, I carried out the tasks of both while also directing *Gloria* in the winter quarter.

The Barnstorm season has historically consisted of one or two full-length plays, improv and comedy performances that have become tradition, and a musical theater cabaret. For the winter quarter, I wanted to challenge the audience to see what Barnstorm could do. I wanted to diversify the season in terms of whose stories are represented, the folks that are cast, and who fills the production and creative teams.

In addition to their traditional sketch comedy performances, I programmed a production of *Our Dear Dead Drug Lord* by Alexis Scheer.⁵³ This piece is essentially a lesbian Latina coming-of-age story with ghosts, spirits, blood, gore, mentions of

⁵² Coates, Ta-Nehisi. *Between the World and Me*. New York: One World, 2025.

⁵³ Scheer, Alexis. *Our Dear Dead Drug Lord*. New York: Samuel French, 2021.,

self-harm, and a forced abortion. The mature content written by the playwright and the relentless and skillful direction by Angela Rangel '26 left audiences impressed, uncomfortable, and shocked. I also programmed the usual musical theater cabaret. Still, I had a conversation with the director about the themes they might choose, and they selected songs on social justice and empowerment. that resonate with us and provide the encouragement we need.

Finally, I decided to direct a show in one of the Barnstorm blocks as a place to put my pedagogy into action. As previously mentioned, the first title I landed on was *What to Send Up When It Goes Down* by Aleeshea Harris because it actively disrupts the theatrical conventions we are accustomed to.⁵⁴ The play featured elements of promenade theater, direct address, ritual, and audience participation, but most importantly, an all-Black cast speaking bluntly about their experience. I received the rights to the show but was unable to cast it due to low turnout, despite my outreach to different departments and classes. I want to share my original vision for my project as a frame for the type of theater I hope to create in the future. Also, it serves as an acknowledgment that we must continue to make space for underrepresented voices in the theater community. To reinforce my earlier point, there remains more work to be done on a systemic level.

DIRECTING GLORIA

To incorporate this somatic approach into my framework, I used 10-minute meditations at the start of rehearsal twice a week, racial healing-focused body scans

⁵⁴ Harris, Aleshea. *Is god is; what to send up when it goes down*. New York: Theatre Communications Group, 2022.

and journaling prompts, and open journaling time at the end of rehearsal. Also, I repeatedly welcomed my actors to consider the distance between their characters' identities and their own.

I selected *Gloria*⁵⁵ by Branden Jacobs-Jenkins, an outstanding contemporary playwright whose simplistic writing is notoriously sharp and clever. *Gloria* begins with a typical day in a Manhattan magazine office where the assistants and interns are up to their usual antics—gossiping, drinking coffee, and ambitiously looking for new opportunities. Out of (what feels like) nowhere, one of the ostracized employees shoots 18 people and kills an additional 10; the survivors battle for ownership of the experience, which speaks to our present indifference to violence and need to commodify tragedy. Each actor plays at least two characters, except for one, Lorin, whom I considered the closest to a protagonist. The playwright uses archetypes to illuminate various stereotypes and malpractices within office hierarchies. This also reinforces how little capitalist corporations care about the individual. As a director, I was excited by the playwright's use of office archetypes and refusal to tie up loose ends at the end of the play.

In her article, "*I know how it is when nobody sees you*": oral-history performance methods for staging trauma, Nikki Yeboah uses three main principles based on theatre for social change in her approach to ethnotheatre:

I consider how a character-driven approach to making ethnotheatre works in the service of oppressive systems rather than against them. I posit that theatre makers should deemphasize the singularity of the individual's experience and instead place the victim, perpetrator, and traumatic episode within the larger, complex system of power and dominance in which trauma unfolds. Second, I question the utility of maintaining the theatrical fourth

⁵⁵ Jacobs-Jenkins, *Gloria*.

wall when dialogue is at the core of our intentions...Finally, I ask us to reimage the end of the play as the beginning of a much greater drama where change can be, must be, and is already being enacted. In light of this premise, this final principle insists that we refuse catharsis.⁵⁶

While Yeboah writes in the context of ethnotheatre, the principles she writes about apply to numerous compositional styles. I was inspired by this play's desire to use the theatrical space to create social change while still disrupting our theatrical conventions.

After another round of auditions and finalizing my production team, I also finalized my rehearsal schedule outline. I structured time to focus on body-based practice, including guided meditation and journaling. As noted in the sample schedule overview for the rehearsal process (Appendix A), I planned to cycle through different activities that left time for reflection while keeping their bodies engaged as the primary site for change for understanding their identity in relation to their character.

With humility, I shared with my cast and production team the goals of my thesis and that I would be incorporating moments of embodied abolitionist practice for myself, inviting them to participate. I constructed a few different guided meditations that I cycled through that were based on combining principles from *My Grandmother's Hands* and racial healing-focused meditations by Kaira Jewel Lingo.⁵⁷

⁵⁶ Yeboah, Nikki Owusu. "‘I Know How It Is When Nobody Sees You’: Oral-History Performance Methods for Staging Trauma." *Text and Performance Quarterly* 40, no. 2 (April 2, 2020): 132. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10462937.2020.1788133>.

⁵⁷ Lingo, Kaira Jewel. "Racial Healing | On-The-Go Meditation Guided." YouTube, May 2023. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EMfZUkLf36c>.

Another way I sought to acknowledge the power dynamics and inherent hierarchies was by providing a bit of breathing room in my leadership style. I was clear that I was not creating a shared leadership environment, as that can open its own can of worms. In this educational environment, I felt it was important that each person understand their personal responsibility for the project, rather than developing excess interdependence.

Instead, I pushed for respectful collaboration in every way. If actors had questions or suggestions for designers, I welcomed them to share them. Also, I asked the designers, specifically hair, makeup, and costumes, to hold conversations with each actor early on to begin a dialogue about needs and vision. In contrast to a shared leadership model, I retained the ability to approve or reject ideas and introduced a vision for the story I wanted to tell. How we told that story and reached the finish line was up for discussion.

While many arts leaders will claim to incorporate this into their work, I also considered how to keep myself accountable. I held check-ins with my actors and creative team to evaluate myself. At the beginning of the process, we created a community agreement, which we drafted and amended together. These values included both small, manageable tasks and larger ideas. In Appendix F, you will find a full list of our community agreements.

Aside from the initial casting issues, the project experienced other logistical challenges. For instance, we rarely had rehearsal time in the theater space until the week of tech. While this is a professional standard, the students and I weren't used to shifting into a new space so quickly. Another challenge was that we did not have a scenic designer until more than halfway through the process, which meant I designed

the set, and the scenic designer who joined halfway through became responsible for execution. While it all worked out, some uncertainty created complications for staging.



In terms of staging complications, the most difficult scene was the shooting sequence at the end of the first act. The playwright is clear that this moment needs to feel realistic by jolting the entire production out of its prior monotony. While I understood the need to use a prop gun, I opted to avoid the extra gore and brought in a movement coordinator to help stylize the sequence. Through a collaborative, safe experience, the entire team worked together to stage this sequence in a way that felt intense yet safe and repeatable.

As we moved into technical rehearsal and dress rehearsals, stress began to rise for us all. With limited rehearsal time, sickness floating around the cast and department, and late design elements, I started to feel quite a bit of stress in the first half of the week. However, as my journaling dictates, by the end of the tech week, I

⁵⁸ Gloria (Jessica Post) and Dean (Samuel Smith) in UCSC Barnstorm 2026 production. Photographed by Stephen Louis Marino.

felt a sense of release. Letting go of the nerves, the fear, and essentially the show. As the director, I slowly backed away and let the team settle into their rhythm. I watched as my actors and designers became more confident in their own work. I am very appreciative of this opportunity to collaborate with young actors and designers because they are excited to play and have a willingness to learn that makes the rehearsal room a special place.

As I will expand on in my results section, I asked a few of the actors to share feedback with me regarding the process in relation to their other experiences. I created a survey and passed it along after the show had closed, and grading was submitted. I wanted each actor to give honest feedback without the pressure of the director standing in the room or their teacher controlling their course grade.

GLORIA
BY: BRANDEN JACOBS-JENKINS

DIRECTED BY:
DARREN JACKSON-WILKINS

MARCH 6TH & 7TH AT 7:30PM | MARCH 7TH & 8TH AT 2:00PM | THEA B100

BARNSTORM
THEATER CO.
STUDENT PRODUCED THEATER

UC SANTA CRUZ Arts Performance, Play & Design

Like any theater process, there are always things you wish you could change or have done differently. We often find ourselves asking for one more week or one more day of rehearsals. This project proved difficult in new ways, but created challenges to solve and an opportunity to work differently.

Overall, this process was strongly impeded by my inability to find actors of color at the beginning of the academic quarter, which condensed the rehearsal schedule. This, combined with the sharing of rehearsal spaces, minimal time in the performance space, limited resources, directing while also serving as the managing director, and directing while also mentoring the production team, all contributed to shifts in my original plans.

That said, there were many successes, including a cohesive performance that resonated with four sold-out audiences. Also, the professionalism and maturity of the actors and creative team were inspiring and representative of the spaces I aspire to work in.

I attempted to journal consistently at the beginning of rehearsal and after a meditation or racial healing-centered activity. I prepared rehearsals with a journaling prompt that centered on awareness of their bodies' different levels, rather than only considering their race, ethnicity, or gender. Additionally, I was keen on journaling after difficult rehearsal moments and stressful times in the quarter, to encourage myself to lean fully into the process.

In Appendix B, you will find one of the guided meditations that I used at the beginning of the rehearsals. Building off the ideas of Resmaa Menakem, I crafted a meditation script that felt relevant to our cast and show. I focused on creating meditations that were valuable to the actors and to myself as an arts leader. In this

meditation, you will see references on the left from Menakem's book, *My Grandmother's Hands*: opening grounding, breath, and identity awareness.⁵⁹ I used these three categories as guides for any somatic activities I utilized. The intention was to allow our bodies to relax before welcoming and considering our racial identities, and to be aware of them as we move into the rehearsal. After this exercise, we would move into the group rehearsal, stretching, and other tasks for the day. Also, I listened to a great deal of music during the process. I believe that combining movement and music can help us get out of our busy minds and notice what we are actually hearing.

I found the meditations and conscious thought of my identity to be centering but also uncomfortable at times. These activities forced me to consciously consider my body in relation to those around me, which brought about awareness and sometimes stress. As the person with multiple authoritative roles in the room, I was constantly approached with questions, needs, wants, concerns, and excitements. These interactions, with the reminder of my Blackness in relation to the surrounding whiteness, were a bit unsettling at times.

However, there is cause to say that this unsettling awareness of my identity and its relation to the others influenced my work. In a space with a more diverse rehearsal room than I am used to, but still majority white, I felt more inclined to bring that into the storytelling.

I encouraged my actors of color to consider the role of their identities in the context of the play and in relation to those around them. Playwright Branden Jacobs-Jenkins is specific in outlining each character's race and ethnicity. The primary office space in the play has a white femme, a white (perhaps gay) masc, a

⁵⁹ Menakem, Resmaa. *My Grandmother's Hands: Racialized trauma and the Pathway to Mending Our Hearts and Bodies*. Las Vegas, NV: Central Recovery Press, 2017.

Black masc, and a Chinese American femme. Each character is different in this scene; there is no ‘majority’ in these four walls. Almost every conversation in the office has an offhanded remark about race, gender, or sexuality that is used to speak to someone’s reliability, skill, or level of ambition. I asked each actor to consider how and where that existed in their bodies.



Cast and crew group photo from the 2026 UCSC Barnstorm production of Gloria

EVALUATION & ANALYSIS

Anyone who's interested in making a change in the world also has to learn how to take care of themselves.⁶⁰

-Angela Davis

Like any other rehearsal process, there were many twists, turns, and conflicts. The ability to stay grounded, efficient, and to resist burnout was undoubtedly a result of the mindfulness practice I adopted. The mindfulness practices I speak of above (journaling, meditation, body-based decision-making, shared leadership, etc.) were not limited to the rehearsal room. It was important to me that these embodied abolitionist principles found their way into my other work. As I continued to work alongside faculty and designers on other productions and my graduate cohort, I sought ways to ground myself through these practices.

The audience feedback for the show was highly positive. There were many comments on the actors' believability, the clarity of vision, and cohesive world-building. During a post-show talkback after the third performance, many audience members shared that they were moved by the sincerity of the characters and by the fact that the play does not have a protagonist, despite being titled *Gloria*, after one of the most impactful characters. Each character in the play that survives the tragedy is left with a desire to forget that day, but the media would rather find the most marketable version of the story.

⁶⁰ Angela Davis (2018).

During this talkback, an audience member asked the actors what their experience was like creating and playing so many different characters. Except for one actor, the rest played between 2 and 4 different characters, each of whom was specifically outlined in the script. From the beginning of the rehearsal process, I encouraged my actors to start from the outside in. In movement workshops led by our movement coordinator or me, I guided the actors in discovering unique physicalities to help them enter the character's mind. Additionally, regarding identity and experiences, I asked them to consider similarities and differences that would help establish the distance between them and their numerous characters.

I incorporated this deep reflection into my pedagogy, but I wasn't sure how effective or helpful it would be for my actors. However, during the talkback, at least two of the actors expressed their appreciation for being allowed to bring their identities into the room and the show. A unique aspect of the process was that the entire cast was made up of first-year students. For most of them, this was also their first experience in college theater. My intentional pedagogy is designed to impact their perspective on college theater positively.

As my thesis research progressed, it became increasingly difficult to determine how to evaluate it. The focus seemed to shift away from just the leader to the collective room. At first, this felt like a failure or a misjudgment, but now I understand it reflects Menakem's ideology. As mentioned in my methodology section, somatic abolitionism focuses on individual practice that is then shared with a group to begin a shift towards collective liberation. For this specific project, I introduced my team to the embodiment of abolitionist practice and invited them to

join me in this work. By working individually and collectively, we supported ourselves and the communities we work in.

As I reflect on the process, I think back to this notion of “freeing your mind” that Zeitner, Rowe, and Jackson introduced above. The intentional use of body-based practice helped me remove restrictions, negativity, and panic from the rehearsal room. Despite juggling multiple projects (as artists always do), my mind never felt bogged down, and I never reached burnout, even when it felt like I should have. While I found these practices liberating, it was almost more rejuvenating to breathe this freedom back into the room and into my actors and creative team. The first few meditations and journalings were met with hesitation and quiet laughter. Still, once it became part of the routine and flow of rehearsal, I noticed an increase in excitement among my actors, as well as among the designers and stage management team, to meditate and journal.

In Appendices C-E, there are examples of my journaling from different stages of the process, including the first day of rehearsal, our first stumble-through, and final rehearsals before tech. Looking back at my journaling, I noticed it has been getting progressively shorter. As the process progressed and more was expected of me, my time to fully participate in journaling during rehearsal was limited. However, I continued to journal when I arrived home in the evenings. In the examples below, I aimed to record any tensions I felt in my body and where I could place them. I also brought my identity to the front of my mind while journaling, even if it is not directly articulated in the writing.

After hearing the actors speak openly about their experience with this process, I reached out to the entire cast to see what they would be comfortable

sharing. As I mentioned before, no cast member was ever required to share any of their journaling, so this was the clearest reflection I had received on the process.

One of the actors wrote profoundly about how this experience was quite different from other acting processes she had been a part of. In the survey, I asked: *Did the invitation to acknowledge your identity in this process affect the way you interacted with others in the room?* Their response to this question was, "It made me more aware of the aspects that me and other people in the room had in common and things that were different. Not that either of those things were necessarily good or bad, but just that I began to take notice of them."

The acknowledgment of similarities and differences in the rehearsal room was a main aim of this project. Rather than attempting to justify or negate them, the goal was to recognize and welcome them into the space and our work. The idea of 'leaving your baggage at the door' is not completely possible for theater artists. If we want to inspire action and attainable change, we have to bring our world into the theater and our theater into the world in some type of symbiosis.

Another actor wrote that this rehearsal approach also affected how they carried themselves outside the room. In the survey, I asked, *"Did you find it effective to have the project leader welcome you to think about your identity?"* If so, why or how? Their response was:

Yes. It was very useful for both character and self-exploration. While it was mostly to build [their character], I found myself wondering more about my relationship to my identity outside of rehearsals when I'd just be walking around or talking to people. It shone a light on a part of me that didn't often get much attention. A funny little bit of it came when I was trying to learn the [language]. I had called my mom and asked her to help me figure out the pronunciation and wording. And it was hard. It made me feel a bit

disappointed that I never learned [language] as a kid, and that's one part of my culture that's removed from me. It made me want to be more involved in my culture going forward.

This particular actor approached me early in the process for help developing their character's motivations and characterization. Their deep character work allowed for leaps and bounds in their acting. Additionally, the opportunity to play a role in a culture is a gift. This seemingly simple invitation to bring your own experiences, rooted in your culture and identity, into your role has the potential to transform how you carry yourself in the day-to-day.

Similarly, I remember the first time I played a role that was specifically written as Black. It was a unique process to tell a story so important to my community, while also acknowledging that I am not that character. We share identity markers, but we are still different. While directing *Gloria*, I had to consciously remind my actors that, while their personal experiences are always welcome in the room, they should also acknowledge the differences to protect their mental well-being in a piece that deals with such difficult themes.

Theater is inherently collaborative, even when not everyone is in the room. The director sets the tone in the rehearsal room and is essential to establishing how the team interacts. I clearly explained my project to the team to help them feel comfortable joining the process. In another piece of feedback, a student writes:

I absolutely found it beneficial to have a leader who encouraged everybody to acknowledge their identities! As a viewer, it makes for more authentic performances when actors are incorporating their own experiences into their characters!

This student, who was not a member of the cast but still worked closely on the production, shares that the welcoming of identity into the rehearsal room was modeled and encouraged by the leader of the space. It is not only beneficial to the arts leader but also their responsibility.

As I have repeatedly throughout, the main goal of this project was to investigate a method to combat vague and performative organizational inclusivity practices. This is increasingly important as these initiatives are at severe risk. Organizations are being asked to justify their values, risking the loss of federal funding. Now more than ever, we, as arts leaders of color, need to establish a practice that protects our mental well-being.

As rehearsals grew longer and shifted towards tech, it became difficult to prioritize these embodied abolitionist practices. At first, this felt like a directorial failure or a lack of commitment to my pedagogy. While this does complicate how I measure the 'effectiveness' or 'success' of the pedagogy, it shines light on another important aspect. When tasked with my directorial duties and role as managing director, I found that my focus on my mental health practice was the first to go. Similarly, when I get busy with school, work, and social responsibilities (anywhere there is a white person), my mental well-being and rest are always the first to go. This speaks to our tendency as arts leaders and people of color to appease the system that oppresses us. Some might call it people-pleasing or use other negative terms, but I believe it's a desire to prove ourselves worthy. This echoes my discussion of Mansfield and Ornelas' article in the Methodology section, in which they discuss the (de-) mechanized body as a way to resist the oppressive constructs and processes we have been socialized to accept as fact.

How do race and sexuality operate in a space where these markers can quickly be used as a justification for your actions or competence? In our reality, one way that racial and gender constructs are used is the measurement of capacity or capability. How does this constant, socially constructed measurement wear down the body of the character you are embodying? How does it wear down the actor's body? How does it wear down the body of the director or artistic leader? There is a mirror here. The weight of these constructs on the character's body is emulated onto the actor's body. Therefore, it was important to me to share these liberating and rejuvenating practices with all my actors to acknowledge this difference and welcome it into the space.

CONCLUSIONS

*Caring for myself is not self-indulgence, it is self-preservation, and that is an act of political warfare.*⁶¹

-Audre Lorde

As arts leaders, we are often the first point of contact for patrons and artists, leaving us vulnerable to audience complaints, outside pressures, and scapegoating. As leaders of color, we are often tokenized as examples of diversity, stripped of the proper resources, and then accused of incompetence as diversity hires. As artists, we feel the pressure to change, fix, or heal the world. Apart from the ethical issues at play, the workplace stressors, alongside other societal pressures and microaggressions, undoubtedly contribute to the alarming health disparities amongst the African American community.⁶²

As a Black person, I was raised knowing that I would have to work twice as hard as any white person to receive half of what is just given to them. In a world (and white-dominated field) that looks for any reason to invalidate Black excellence and blame it on diversity initiatives, it strengthens my grind. However, the flip side is that this double-time stride to success can push us straight to burnout. Could this grind to create the resources that are not provided to us and prove our worth beyond a

⁶¹ Lorde, Audre. *A burst of light*. S.I.: Dover Publications, 2017.

⁶² Cogburn, Courtney D, Samuel K Roberts, Yusuf Ransome, Nii Addy, Helena Hansen, and Ayana Jordan. "The Impact of Racism on Black American Mental Health." *The Lancet Psychiatry* 11, no. 1 (January 2024): 56–64. [https://doi.org/10.1016/s2215-0366\(23\)00361-9](https://doi.org/10.1016/s2215-0366(23)00361-9).

diversity hire be what drives us out the door? Could forced burnout have pushed Jeremy O'Harris and Nataki Garrett to step down after their short tenures as artistic leaders? I assert that we are being pigeonholed into contributing to our own leadership churn. Our ambition can be used to guilt us, manipulate us, and invalidate our work. How do we fight that? How do we show up and stand out while arming ourselves and leaving space for rest?

I provided embodied abolition, a body-based, identity-focused, ongoing meditative and reflective practice as a vital intervention. By intentionally practicing guided meditation, creating space for private journaling and reflection, and acknowledging the differences in a rehearsal room and within a company, I became more confident in my role as a leader. As a young director, I found that this space for healing-centered activity grounded me in my work and learning goals throughout the process. As Audre Lorde writes above, there should be no shame in resting and strengthening our minds. Leaving space for rejuvenation is an act of resistance that should not be underestimated. Let us push back against this draining of our ambition by taking our space and coming back stronger. Like decolonial practice, this self-care must be ongoing and consistent.

While I consider this project a success, I recognize gaps that were beyond the scope of my research. This is not to say that they lack importance, but to say that I crafted an approach to embodying abolition as the tip of the iceberg. It is important to note that body-based practice, embodiment, abolition, and liberation are but a few of the buzzwords in this thesis that have different definitions depending on publication date, field of study, and cultural context. Given the brevity of this

program, I selected contexts that were most accessible to me and that represented a diverse range of voices.

As the leader of the body-based practice, I sometimes facilitated rather than fully immersing myself in the activities. For instance, I crafted the guided meditation and participated simultaneously. The need to guide the rest of the team through the process while also attending to my own bodily awareness became complicated, leading me to shift towards using recorded meditations rather than my own. In future research, it would be interesting to fully immerse myself in the practice without including my team to shift the focus. I noticed this imbalance during the rehearsal process and began to consciously expand my personal practice beyond the collective in the rehearsal room.

FUTURE IMPLICATIONS

In my future research, I hope to broaden my understanding of somatics beyond the Western context and become more specific in my use of it. I plan to incorporate more of my own interpretation to craft a clearer framework for arts leaders and artists.

I will carry many aspects of this methodology with me, and I hope readers can absorb them. There will never be a one-size-fits-all approach to leadership or the way that we liberate ourselves from the oppressive structures we work in. This project is an attempt to find what works best for me and might have insights for those around me.

I intend that there is an understanding of the important work that arts leaders do and the value of having arts leaders of color—and providing them with the

resources that they need to succeed, especially when those resources are different from their white counterparts.

In considering embodied abolition as a framework for arts leaders, artists, or, on an organizational level, I encourage us to reflect consciously on our challenges with it. If there are hesitations from arts leaders of color to engage in this body-based practice or to have these vulnerable conversations, let us question why. People of color have historically been misled and mistreated by arts organizations, the judicial system, the healthcare system, and many more. Rather than blame the individual or the group, consider what oppressive system might be at play in closing those doors.

In her book, *Invitation to the Party: Building Bridges to the Arts, Culture and Community*,⁶³ author Donna Walker-Kuhne encourages arts administrators to consider how their organizations are perceived by the communities they claim to serve. I echo this and encourage arts organizations to continue finding ways to open the door to the party in their organizations. Continue to open doors for arts leaders of color to thrive.

Black folks know how we acknowledge each other in spaces where we are the minority. It is astounding how much impact a nod or a slight smile from another Black person can have. I encourage arts leaders of color to actively consider how you show up in an organization and how you welcome other folks to the space. Let us intentionally consider how we ground ourselves in these spaces to ensure we show up as our best selves in ways that are safe and affirming of our experience. We must continue to protect ourselves when no one else will. Let us not be convinced that we are failures in systems that are mere social constructs. Rather, we must continue to

⁶³ Walker-Kuhne, Donna. *Invitation to the Party: Building Bridges to the Arts, Culture, and Community*. New York: Theatre Communications Group, 2007.

exist loudly within these systems. We need to care for our mental health so we can do the work with confidence and ease that spits in the faces of our oppressors, disguised as progressive. Celebrate Black success and Black excellence because we are here, have been here, and will continue to be here.

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APPENDIX A: REHEARSAL CALENDAR

Rehearsal Overview Calendar for *Gloria* February 2026

	<i>FEBRUARY</i>			
MONDAY	TUESDAY	WEDNESDAY	THURSDAY	
2	3	4	5	
- Group Stretch - Viewpoints Workshop - Blocking - Clap Out	- Group Stretch - Riff, weave, copy - Blocking - Clap Out	- Guided Meditation - Journaling - Blocking - Clap Out	- Group Stretch - Flocking - Blocking - Clap Out	
9	10	11	12	
- Group stretch - Movement character workshop - Act 1 clean up - Clap out	- Group stretch - Fight rehearsal - Act 2 clean up - Clap out	- Production Meeting - Guided Meditation - Journaling - Stumble through - Clap out	<i>DESIGNER RUN</i> <i>*OFF BOOK DATE*</i>	

APPENDIX B: GUIDED MEDITATION SCRIPT

	<u>Guided Meditation for Arrival</u>
opening grounding	◦ Invitation to enter the space in whatever way is comfortable / accessible ◦ take note of where your body meets the floor. where are these points of contact? ◦ change your focus to weight: how the ground or chair is holding you up ◦ take a deep breath into those contact points ◦ shift your focus to one sound in the room ◦ shift your focus to the temperature on your skin
breath	◦ now bring your attention to your breath. where do you feel it most clearly? ◦ without changing it, where does your breath feel deep? where does it feel shallow? ◦ now try to lengthen your exhale ◦ inhale for 2, exhale for 4 (repeat about 3 times)
identity awareness	◦ still keeping your breath and body, I am going to offer some invitations. You don't need to answer aloud - this is for you. ◦ first, acknowledge who you are and where you are at today ↳ you might think of your name or a part of your identity. Note how your body reacts ◦ gently begin to bring to mind one or maybe two parts of your identity that feel important to you in this space ↳ focus on one that feels present today? ↳ where do you recognize that identity present in the body?

APPENDIX C: JOURNALING EXCERPT

1 27 26 Journaling

Today was a super progressive and informative day in terms of research and rehearsals. I had a bit of a breakthrough on how I want to/can incorporate an abolitionist administrative framework that is inspired by Penumbra Center. I can focus on arts, equity, and wellness which takes the pressure off becoming an expert in racial healing. Instead, I will be more intentional with my arts-based wellness + equitable focused process. For instance, on the first day of rehearsal I took time to create a collaborative community values sheet that we can use to keep us accountable + to ensure everyone in the room has agency. Also, I had them select a cast rep that could help to mediate potential conflicts or concerns. I did some additional reading -key that informed my rehearsal room talk.

Journaling (cont) 1 27 20

I opened rehearsal with a guided meditation that I scripted myself that was borrowing prompts from racial healing mindfulness practices. I specifically invited the team to bring their awareness to their identity + its role in their work and encouraged them to welcome that into the space. I then structured in time for journaling which they requested and seem to appreciate. We then did a viewpoints workshop that was meant to help the actors exercise an ongoing awareness of the spaces they are in and the people around them. Then, we moved onto blocking rehearsal time where I welcomed ideas + questions from everyone in the room including stage management. I closed rehearsal with a prompt that asked everyone to share something they wanted to carry with them from today's rehearsal.

APPENDIX D: JOURNALING EXCERPT

2 4 26 Freewrite Activity

Write 2-3 worries you have about your project:

° I am worried that my actors aren't/won't fully grasp how this framework is different than others

° I am worried that my connection to Penumbra will be too late to have a real effect on my process

° I am worried about making too many assumptions about the lived experiences of my actors

Journaling 2 4 26

Today I am feeling pretty well. I had quite a productive day and got some fresh air. Tonight we are doing our first full stumble and also had a big production meeting. It was a little nerve-wracking because I've never led a production meeting and everyone kept turning to me for answers. Focusing on the things I could control and what I know was helpful. We started rehearsal with a meditation to center ourselves and be on the same page which I found helpful in bringing me into the space.

APPENDIX E: JOURNALING EXCERPT

Journaling Reflection 2/18/26

It was nice starting rehearsal with a nice gentle meditation + reflection. At this point in the quarter, everyone is feeling a lot of tension + stress so it was nice to detach and just focus on my breath and my body + awareness of what its like in the space before even touching the script.

I wish I could find a meditation series so I could participate more than facilitate but I can also meditate on my own.

APPENDIX F: COMMUNITY AGREEMENT

- We will respect stage management and designers
 - Stage Management and designers will also treat actors with respect.
- We will come to rehearsals and performances showered and practice personal hygiene as we are in a shared space.
- We will respect everyone's identity and points of view. We can critique an idea but not a person.
- We will practice strong communication among ourselves and with our stage managers and director.
- We will be on time (and communicate in extenuating circumstances)!
- We will respect each other's boundaries.
 - We will use *banana* as our safe word when we need to step out of a moment, no questions asked.
- We will take care of our scripts and bring them to all rehearsals & performances.
- We will work hard and remain committed to the process.
- We will work together towards maintaining a brave space.
- We will clean up after ourselves and take care of the space.
- We will take care of ourselves and each other. This includes bringing snacks/food and plenty of water.
- Have fun!

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