

EMBRACING FEAR: FINDING OPPORTUNITIES WITHIN FAILURE

REBBECA A LLOYD

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## Abstract

As an actor I am a careful explorer. For this careful explorer the challenge is: Embracing Fear: Finding Opportunities Within Failure. The primary area of investigation concerns the relationship between *Race: Understanding Origins* and *Sensuality/Sexuality: Understanding the Vocabulary of my Body*. Within this document I am investigating the structure of Racial Passing as it relates to fear and limitation in theatre performance. Specifically in the rehearsal process and ultimately dictating choices made in/for performance. Through academic research and physical/studio exploration I have built a conscious awareness of my own habitual participation in Racial Passing. This awareness will allow me to have more effective use of the vocabulary of my body resulting in more range and specificity. This, in-turn, will allow me to discover/utilize different aspects of myself and allow the text to function as a road map for moments of discovery, the natural geographical information filled in with in-rehearsal risk taking. I am establishing concrete tools that can be used to address these challenges throughout the rehearsal process and ultimately during performance. In the role of Maybe Jane in the 2017 winter term's unmounted production of Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *The Yellow Wall Paper*, adapted for the stage by the director Matthew Earnest, I apply my explorations. Performing this thesis role is an opportunity to put my discoveries into action.

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Forward

**This Lesson Requires Looking**

This lesson requires looking.

Watch me undress my distress so I don't regress.

This is not a condition, it is simply a concern.

Watch me press the pressure of your prejudice onto the stage.

I will take apart the parts that you know and show you how the parts don't always make the shape you expect.

Watch me stand before you and tell you this is about you.

Wait.

So I have to be *in* the dress to accurately stress my distress at this mess?

Because Beyonce has left the building.

I'm locked in a room with a woman grabbing her tits and telling me I need to grab mine but...

Beyonce has left the building.

I'm locked in a room with a woman who has "A lot of black female role models"

But I love Cher.

I'm locked in a room with a woman. She saw me - heard sex - and expected anger - and expected loud - and expected tits - and expected ass.

But my sex is quiet.

"You weren't in the boobs and the vagina of the piece" says the woman.

I'm sorry. My boobs don't bounce and my pussy is polite. (Most of the time.)

"It was safe" she says.

You cannot tell me it was safe.

My body is not safe.

That is why my rib case is a cage.

Why my collar bones confront.

Why my pelvis does not go public until my hips hold on - just incase it all goes wrong.

Why my femurs are frightened.

And my knees function on a need to know basis.

But we're working on that...

But where was the anger? The loud? The tits? The ass?

Wait.

You are not telling me that to be authentically present as a sexual woman of colour I need the anger, I need the loud, I need the tits, and I need the ass...are you?

But didn't you see me press the pressure of your prejudice onto the stage?

Didn't you see me take apart the parts that you know and show you how the parts don't always make the shape you expect?

This lesson requires looking.

Didn't you see me stand before you and tell you this is about you?

You didn't look. You didn't see. You didn't hear.

But the next time,

When we are locked in a room,

When you feed me my feedback,

Don't feed me racist raw meat and tell me it's nourishment.

- Beck Lloyd

## I. ACTING CHALLENGE RESEARCH

As an actor, as a body, as a woman who expects to see a different face, different hair, and different coloured skin every time I look in the mirror, I wonder what perception to work with? What the audience sees? What the mirror shows me? Or what exists in my mind's eye? How does this perception feed into expectation? This includes expectations I put on myself, expectations that are explicitly put on me by others, and expectations I *feel* are put on me by others.

Air on my belly. Warmth in my thighs. Warm dense light in my eyes. Tingling on my lips. Breath on my hips. Eyes on my buttocks. Even though I am wearing a sweatsuit this is how I feel during my first dance class of summer 2016.

I began this summer investigating the structure of racial passing as it relates to fear and limitation in my theatre performance. I spent this summer defining my black shame and discovering the ways in which it seeds into my life, my play, my work. My black shame asks me to make certain choices during a cold read. My black shame asks me to downsize my sexuality. My black shame asks me to straighten my hair. My black shame asks me to "organize" my lower body. My black shame decides when I offer my body to a friend, a scene partner, a lover, an audience.

This acting challenge research is presented in an order I believe best follows the path my investigation took, moving from thought to action and back again. I have asked myself five main questions: Where does my black shame come from? What am I afraid of? What did I try? How did it feel? How do I continue the work? This paper seeks to organize these thoughts and frame them in such a way that I may apply the answers to the creation of a thesis role.

## **1. RACE: UNDERSTANDING ORIGINS**

Tackling a race related research topic had my heart racing. Do I know enough to participate in the precarious dialogue? What authority does my biracial lived experience grant me? What am I allowed to say? To feel? To ask? To write? I began with a question: Why am I so uncomfortable? Through journal-based self-analysis I was able to identify shame. My shame came in the form of humiliation and the fear that I was somehow foolish. Recognizing that this shame was tied directly to my blackness was done quickly and painfully. This is what I call my “black shame”. My black shame refers to the feelings of embarrassment, resentment, and a general hide-me-under-a-rock sensation that I feel when my blackness is somehow recognized and identified.

It is important for me to articulate that I can only speak for my own blackness. I, as everyone does, come from a unique set of experiences that have awarded and burdened me with specific reactions to particular situations. Through journal-based research and periodic cognitive therapy sessions I was able to identify that my blackness and adjacently my black shame is fastened tightly to my sense of sexuality and sensuality. Again, this had my heart racing. Now the careful explorer (me), must delve into what feels like the scariest pool yet. But why is this the scariest?

### **A. THE PERCEPTION CREATED THROUGH HISTORY (CHATTEL SLAVERY TO BEYONCE)**

Understanding black sexual politics means understanding black gender ideology and becoming aware of the widespread cultural beliefs that shape the way we understand sexual prac-

tice, especially concerning people of African descent. As distinguished University Professor of Sociology at the University of Maryland, Patricia Hill Collins, writes it is important to understand that “For African Americans, the relationship between gender and race is intensified, producing a black gender ideology that shapes ideas about black masculinity and black femininity” (6). Here we run into the intersection of race, gender, and sexuality that can be traced back to chattel slavery and followed to Beyonce’s latest music video. Tracing and following this journey of black gender ideology is what has shown me how and why I am a participant. It has also functioned to demonstrate the ways I resist this narrative and why shame is involved. Collins also acknowledges “For both women and men, Western social thought associates blackness with an imagined uncivilized, wild sexuality and uses this association as one lynchpin of racial difference. Whether depicted as “freaks” of nature or as being the essence of nature itself, savage, untamed sexuality characterizes Western representations of women and men of African descent” (27).

Black sexual politics begins with the political economy of chattel slavery as explained by Collins when she writes “Chattel slavery was crucial to the founding of U.S. capitalism because the buying and selling of human beings of African descent formed a template for the economic and racial oppression of Black Americans” (55). She continues illustrating the direct relationship between chattel slavery and the image of the hypersexual black female when she notes, “objectifying Black women agricultural workers as mules justified working them as if they were animals. The institutionalized rape of enslaved Black women spawned the controlling image of the Jezebel or sexually wanton black woman. This representation redefined Black women’s bodies as sites of wild, unrestrained sexuality that could be tamed but never completely subdued” (56).



This image of the black woman as a wild, unrestrained, hypersexual body can be found time and again in current popular culture, Collins observes “African Americans and Black culture are highly visible within the American movies, music, sports, dance, and fashion that help shape contemporary ideologies of race, gender, sexuality, and class in a global context” (42).

My research included collecting examples of these movies, music, sports, dance, and fashion. This allowed me to understand certain aspects of my black shame and visually identify elements of the narrative that I actively, though perhaps subconsciously, reject. How do I do this? By participating in modern day racial passing.

## **B. WHAT IS RACIAL PASSING**

This term was originally used to describe a person of multiracial ancestry assimilating into the white majority. During times of legal segregation and discrimination, racial passing referred to a person classified as a member of one racial group being accepted as a member of a different racial group. Collins adds, “Enforcing the rigid system of segregation required maintaining clear boundaries between racial groups to ensure that some African Americans would not “pass” as White and thus illegally enjoy the privileges reserved for Whites” (62). In today’s post-civil rights era the term takes on many facets of meaning. Passing has become a cultural apparatus that functions to allow one to show loyalty or rejection towards the Black community. Passing is no longer purely physical and can be broken down into thinking, acting, and speaking. In *Sellout*, American Law professor and author, Randall Kennedy describes the “African American anxiety over racial betrayal” (9) and lists the Black on Black insults that are thrown at people who are thinking white, acting white, or speaking white. These insults include sellout, Oreo, snowflake, and white Negro. The critical examination with regards to “acting white” or “passing”

is often met with diligent concentration in Black communities as there is a sense of required “commitment to black solidarity” (Kennedy, 58).

Researching passing and understanding the complexities within its current definition brought my past experiences to the forefront. I was repeatedly labeled an Oreo by friends of various backgrounds in my high school. I was rejected by the Black community for reasons I did not understand until participating in this investigation. I am now able to identify myself as a passer. Spending time with the Black community with which I am closest (familial) has illustrated to me that I am considered a person who thinks white, acts white, and speaks white. In his discussion of racial passing and social mobility, Professor of English and of African American Studies at Harvard University, Werner Sollors writes “In many cases literary Mulattoes were able to cross racial boundaries that were considered fixed, real, or even natural. This ability is what made them such ideal questioners of the status quo. It was also what led to the emergence of the popular literary theme of crossing lines” (245). In the spirit of questioning ideas I ask: Why do I do this? Why do I try to pass?

### **C. THE BIRACIAL NARRATIVE: FROM TALKSHOWS TO MY BEDROOM**

I identify as a biracial woman. This identity, as all identities, comes to me with a set of lived experiences that allow me to make observations with regards to the biracial narrative that those of us who are visibly mixed race experience. (This is not to say that those who are not visible minorities do not participate in a similar experience, but I cannot speak to that.) Through studio based research it has come to my attention that this identity, although in many ways it enriches my experience, limits me. It has been through identifying Black shame, researching passing

and furthering my understanding of Black history, that I am beginning to see where these limits lie and understand why they are there.

Inspired by the work of Patricia Hill Collins I went back and watched some of the television talk shows I used to watch with Deanna Lopez during our lunch breaks and spare periods in grades nine through eleven. I did not have cable at the time so Deanna got to choose all the shows. We would watch Maury Povich, Jerry Springer, and Montel Williams. These programs contained a plethora of Black deadbeat dads, sexual spectacles, paternity tests and very clear messages surrounding race, class, and gender. Here is where a limit exists for me; re-watching clips from these television programs gave me an overwhelming and familiar feeling of wanting to distance myself and my existence from this narrative the best I could. I did not want to be the biracial baby that the black deadbeat dad and poor white mother were fighting over.

Bringing this understanding to the studio and investigating the ways it influences the use of my body has allowed me to find more flexibility in my hips and in my general lower body. I look forward to bringing this into the rehearsal space.

#### **D. PRIVILEGE AND PASSING**

It is important for me to state here that I live a life that allows me to benefit from certain kinds of privilege. My “look” equips me with a number of invisible privileges that make my life easier than those who are not equipped with this particular combination of privilege. My particular combination is very different than my blond, fair skinned British mother’s combination. For me there is without a doubt privilege in passing. My life is easier when people can tell that I am half white. I benefit from being half white in this world. In *Neither White or Black* Sollors confirms the beneficial nature of passing when he writes “...only a situation of sharp inequality be-

tween groups would create the need for the emergence of a socially significant number of cases of ‘passing’” (248).

Part of my research this summer included identifying and isolating the ways in which I work to pass and how I attempt to shed those as a means of setting myself free from the ways they limit me in my theatre work.

### **3. SENSUALITY AND SEXUALITY: UNDERSTANDING THE VOCABULARY OF MY BODY**

At the beginning of my research I set out a list of activities I would complete in order to attempt to address my artistic challenge. This list included spending time with my Jamaican father, going to dance classes, meeting strangers, wearing different clothes, moving my body in different ways in varying environments, and reading many books. Some of these activities led to terrifying breakthroughs, others were simply fun, and others bored me to near death.

I quickly came to realize sensuality was the string that connected my understanding of every exercise I participated in. I am a twenty-four year-old woman who is terrified of presenting herself as a sexual being for fear of being perceived as “too black” because I have spent my life benefiting from passing in the ways for which my biracial identity allows.

#### **A. THE PROBLEM: PASSING THROUGH FREEZING MY HIPS**

The construction of black race, gender, class, and sexual politics taught me at a young age, as Austin based theatre artist and scholar Lisa B. Thompson observes, that it was beneficial for me to “...challenge the dominant representation of black womanhood in the public imagination, where one-dimensional images of them as promiscuous, seductive, and sexually irrespons-

ble circulate” (7). I did this by thinking white, acting white, and speaking white, although I did not categorize or have a completely conscious understanding of my choices. I just knew I felt better when my hair was straightened. I knew I felt surprised every time I looked at my hands expecting to see another colour. I knew I was confused and disappointed every time I looked in the mirror expecting to see a different face. I avoided being too tanned in the summer months I spent at my cottage. What I did not know was that it felt better to “organize” my lower body as this is where the centre of my sexuality lives. By limiting my connection to that part of my body I shut down sensations and potential movements that I believed would allow others to see my blackness. I froze my hips as a means of passing in a world I wanted to be seen in as more white than black.

Coming into the MFA program and having my body, my choices, and my responses analyzed in extreme detail has given me insight into some of my habitual patterns. This type of reflection brought forth a number of questions: Why I am overly “organized” in my lower body? (movement class) Why are my performances slightly under-energized? (acting class) Why is my work “nice, detailed, and fine” work (acting class) Why am I a careful explorer? (voice class) It is now that I understand that this organized, under-energized, careful work birthed from my attempt to actively pass during my rehearsal process and through to performance.

## **B. DANCE, SPORTS, SEX, READING, AND DINNER**

Dancing throughout this research period included multiple types of dance at multiple studios in order to avoid finding too much comfort in my environment. My goal was to keep things fresh, keep taking risks, keep giving myself room to fail. Dancing encouraged the awakening of my hips and functioned to force me to enjoy the beauty of my body. Hip hop classes asked me to

say “Hey, look at my ass and watch what it can do!” This is still something that feels extremely uncomfortable but, as I continue to take these classes, is becoming slightly easier. Dancing also included going out to dance as well as dancing at music festivals. Here I experienced a brand new sense of freedom in my body. I was able to close my eyes and enjoy the fact that perhaps I was dancing harder than those around me. I was able to give myself permission to offer my body to those around me. I was able to move based on impulse, sometimes leading to emotional episodes that have inspired my solo studio work.

Sports throughout this research period included soccer, badminton, and ultimate frisbee. Soccer is a sport I have played competitively from a young age, badminton was played in shallow water in fun, low-stakes competition at my cottage in Huntsville, and ultimate frisbee was played with a recreational adult league. My goal here was to observe my body in familiar competition, fun competition, and brand-new competition. Participation in these varying situations led me to the understanding that playing sports my entire life, (soccer from age 4, rowing through my undergrad, water/winter skiing with family) has made me a success oriented athlete/actor. As an athlete one is taught to avoid mistakes at all costs. Mistakes lead you to lose the game. This differs greatly from the rehearsal space where genius is often found in the accidental. A narrow reading of the script with ‘getting it right’ in mind can lead to a dull and washed out performance. In *Mistakes Worth Making*, professional coach Sue Halden-Brown writes “Most athletic preparation focuses hugely, and necessarily, on technique and requires us to make immense efforts to ignore our mistakes” (4). As a careful performer who comes from an athletic background my mistake management needs to be altered in order to successfully address my acting challenge in the rehearsal space and ultimately in performance. Inspired by the work of Halden-Brown I

have begun to track my in-studio “mistakes” and learn to incorporate them into my process of creation, valuing them just as much as the moments I consider “gems”.

Sex throughout this summer research period was something I did not anticipate using as a tracking tool, but presented itself as one difficult to ignore. As I work to address my acting challenge, as an actor who is careful and controlled to the point of limiting, I have felt my mind and hips opening up. This mental opening has allowed for more fun during sex. I am more willing to play, be naked, and be watched. The physical changes in my body allow for more pleasure during intercourse. Without a doubt I credit the work I have been doing as a part of my research for this, and I look forward to observing how these concrete changes in my intimate life affect my rehearsal process and the choices I make in/for performance.

While participating in these activities and documenting the changes I noticed I also spent the summer going to dinner with strangers. I participated in RNDMDNR, (See Appendix B) this as a means of tracking my progress and ensuring that my work continued to feel fresh. RNDMDNR is a group that organizes random dinners for strangers to gather, meet and chat. I used this as a tool through which I could test the differences I was feeling in myself by being surrounded by others. I found it helped me track what questions came up, what discoveries were made, where there were turns in the road and any other notable outcomes throughout the summer semester. Interacting with strangers, having to improvise, and create a self-identity through which others could understand me forced me to make decisions about who I am, take them for a test run, and write about them later. It allowed me to solidify some of the ideas I was interacting with and learn ways to continue kneading them.

### **C. SEXUALITY AS A RACIAL IDENTIFYER AND HOW THIS RELATES TO PASSING**

It has taken me some time to have a clear understanding with regards to sexuality as a racial identifier and how this relates to passing for me specifically. I have a very clear memory of working with David Smukler (Voice Teacher, York University) and having him ask me about the sensual nature of the monologue I was tackling. I promptly began to cry. Some of my peers viewed this as a breakthrough, but for me it was a wall. I had a similar experience in class with Eric Armstrong, (Text/ Dialect Teacher, York University) and when he requested that I interact with my environment in a sexual manner I promptly began to cry. It is only through the research I have done (reading, dancing, paying attention to my body's reaction to intercourse) that I can now state that my fear of sexuality comes from my need to pass as the image of the hypersexual-black woman is one that I have learned to avoid at all costs in order to benefit from certain privilege. As Thompson phrases this, "...[it is] tragic that social ideas and myths invade black women's sexual lives and prohibit many from experiencing sexuality without the oppressive social standards that regulate women's actions or the derogatory labels that damage black women's psyches" (63).

### **D. FEAR OF THE WILD, HYPERSEXUALITY, AND MY SAFETY**

After working to articulate the particular fears that I carry surrounding passing, racial identity and sexuality, it felt important for me to know what that fear felt like in action. In essence this meant deliberately letting go of the ways in which I attempt to pass physically (my hair, clothes, etc.). I have spent the last twelve years using a hair straightener to flatten out the curls in my hair. Before spending a weekend in Montreal this August I had cornrow type braids put in my hair accompanied by coloured hair extensions that hung down past my hips. This hair



functioned as an identifier to strangers around me. I was asked about my hair multiple times a day, I was approached at the bar by men and women I do not usually attract, and I felt different. But instead of feeling like I wanted to hide, I was able to transition my feelings of *difference* into *possibility*. Perhaps I was being hit on because the image and idea of promiscuous black women still circulates at an alarming rate, but instead of feeling the weight of challenging that perception I said, “Fuck it, this is an identity I get to play with.” This is something I am bringing into the studio with me. This is how I am learning to freely offer my body to the script and to others.

## II. HISTORICAL AND PLAY RESEARCH

In order to contextualize the play I will address Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s *The Yellow Wallpaper*, the short story from which the play was written. I will provide a picture of American physicians in the nineteenth century detailing problematic perspectives on hysteria/depression and methods prescribed to benefit this diagnosis. The US women’s movement will serve as the point of departure in the investigation of the climate in which Maybe Jane finds herself. Through examining the rich history of radical feminist gestures, the pedagogical importance of *The Yellow Wallpaper*, as well as relevant biographical information from the life of Gilman, I hope to provide an illustration of the lack of agency within the world of Maybe Jane.

Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s *The Yellow Wallpaper* was first published in 1892 in *The New England Magazine*. Victorian Era expert and Professor of English at Skidmore College, Catherine J. Golden summarizes the importance of Gilman’s short fiction when she writes “Although Gilman’s extensive oeuvre includes poetry, short fiction, novels, lectures, theoretical works, and an autobiography, her literary reputation mainly rests on this striking example of psychological

realism...” (1). The text is not only quite famous but carries heavy pedagogical importance in many studies. Gold continues, “Hailed in feminist circles, ‘The Yellow Wall-Paper’ is now among the most studied texts in the English-speaking world” (1). The text provides insight into the work of nineteenth century physicians, contemporary gendered practices, and the potent unraveling of a woman, *Maybe Jane*. To understand the dilemma of the character it is important to comprehend the gendered struggle that the character and the author confront. Women at this time were expected to exist in the home with little to no means of instrumentality. American literature, film, and media scholar Jeffery Andrew Weinstock interprets the story when he suggests that “The narrator’s madness at the end of ‘The Yellow Wall-paper’ therefore critiques the oppression and silencing of women. In a patriarchal system that prevents her from expressing herself and realizing her potential, her breakdown is really a response to the madness of gender oppression” (145). It is no secret that aspects of the famous short story are directly related to events in the life of its author. Gilman was thought to have used this story, in part, to comment on the work of a particular doctor with whom she had undergone treatment. Golden acknowledges that “Scholars and biographers often comment on a palpable biographical dimension underpinning her [Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s] characterization of a powerful husband and intelligent wife forbidden to write as well as the suffocating walls of a nursery/prison (a symbol of patriarchal marriage) and the bars of a wallpaper pattern restricting the figure of a woman, a symbol of the narrator herself” (12). Gilman wrote this story while actively arguing for the equal treatment of women, especially within the institution of marriage, and for place outside the realm of the home. Golden expresses Gilman’s passion when she writes that “During an era when the home and family were sacrosanct and the angel in the house was the Victorian ideal, Gilman argued persuasively for equal gender relations, women’s autonomy, meaningful work outside the home,

payment for housework, kitchenless homes, and community child care—the most radical part of her agenda for social change” (1).

The story and the play follow our female protagonist as she undergoes treatment for a nervous disorder. “The Yellow Wall-Paper” graphically presents the consequences of women’s subordination in marriage” (Golden, 10). Gilman draws upon her own experience under the treatment of Dr. Silas Weir Mitchell, who was a famous physician. Gilman suffered from depression early into her first marriage after the birth of her daughter. William G. Rothstein, the author of *American Physicians in the Nineteenth Century*, explains that “The first half of the nineteenth century was the period in which the American medical profession became firmly established. Thousands of men became professionally trained, full-time physicians; they organized medical schools, obtained licensing legislation, and established institutional relations with clients” (41). This is the medical terrain the plot finds itself treading, focusing specifically on the methods of one Dr. Mitchell. Ilya Veith, who received her Ph.D. in the History of Medicine from Johns Hopkins University, provides insight into the physician when she writes “Mitchell has been hailed as one of the founders of American neurology and neurophysiology, and his merits in the field of psychiatry were as widely acclaimed as was his fame as a physician as well as a popular author of novels and poems” (212). Mitchell is famous for his introduction of the “...rest cure, which entailed a specific period of bedrest away from the influence of oversolicitous families...”(Veith 216). Gilman underwent a one month rest cure in a sanatorium after her own diagnosis of depression.

Hysteria has a history with regards to its lack of clarity of definition and the diagnosis of this disorder is not an issue of the past. Phillip R. Slavney, author of *Perspectives on "Hysteria"*

provides his reader with insight when he shares that “Despite condemnation from physicians and feminists, however, the concept of ‘hysteria’ is alive and well in the practice of medicine...And after centuries of trying to define the concept, it is still debated whether ‘hysteria’ is something a person *has*, something he *does*, or something he *is*” (3). Today, female hysteria is no longer a recognized illness, but different manifestations of hysteria are recognized in other conditions such as borderline personality disorder, conversion disorder, and anxiety attacks. Even today these types of diagnosis reflect a sexism that exists within the medical world, and is likely a reflection of society at large. Slavney suggests traditionally feminine attributes are not as valued as those attributes that are considered traditionally masculine, and that the result of this is inaccuracy and bias in diagnosis, he writes “The diagnosis of “hysterical” personality disorder is made more often for women than for men. How should this fact be understood? It might reflect the accurate detection of characteristics that are represented to different degrees among men and women. Alternatively, it might reveal a sexist prejudice in diagnosis, with demeaning attributes being ascribed to women only *because* they are women” (111). This stripping away, then and now, of the privilege to be diagnosed without bias is a dynamic illustration of sexism and its ability to tear away at agency.

Golden illustrates the trapped nature of Gilman’s life when she shares “Today, we embrace the author, lecturer, and socialist who wanted to create a truly “human world” as a woman ahead of her time, but uncomfortably rooted in her time” (2). This narrative functions as an exploration in agency. As the plot progresses Maybe Jane locks her husband, John, from the room in which the wallpaper is found. This can be interpreted in multiple ways, “...in locking John out of her room, has the narrator achieved what Virginia Woolf deemed necessary for all literary women—a room of her own?” (Golden 3). Agency seemed to exist in the life of Gilman as she

scandalously abandoned her husband and child followed by a second marriage and a successful career. Scholars often pinpoint the character of John, who is the physician, as the antagonist. Weinstock argues “Her main tormentor is her husband, John. He is not an obviously evil man, but his patriarchal outlook on life makes him incompatible with Jane and her struggle for freedom and self-expression.” (69) This *struggle* is not only seeped in the gender dichotomy and sexism of the time but can also speak to a struggle that exists today. When discussing the pedagogical importance of the story Weinstock writes, “An unfortunate but too often tacit assumption in teaching ‘The Yellow Wall-paper’ is the student-reader should study the narrator, whom I will refer to as Jane for reasons explained below, from a distance as a subject of nineteenth-century brutality and sexism. However, as contemporary America is deeply concerned not only with issues of sexuality and power control but also of dysfunctional families, such distance seems unnecessary.” (64) Despite the time specific setting of the short story the adaptation carries heavy importance and relevance to lives today.

*The Yellow Wallpaper* invites observers into the mind of its female protagonist. This was the goal of its author: “...Gilman’s story offers an excellent illustration of a text for which the recorded intention of the author exists but has come under scrutiny” (Weinstock, 116). This scrutiny comes in the form of questioning the intention behind the ending of the story, what has happened to Jane and what does it mean? Golden poses the question “Does the narrator’s creeping at the end of the story signal regression or rebirth? Is the narrator simply trapped in the wallpapered room whose bars connote patriarchal repression?” (3). This scrutiny is what allows the story to remain relevant to audiences today. “Generically, feminist, the gothic, and even realism have served as categories through which to understand ‘The Yellow Wall-paper’” (Weinstock 83). This

story has the ability to not only educate on topical issues of the past but also comment on controversies and concerns today.

Understanding the values of Gilman, the kinds of writing she published, and the arguments she defended is what gives *The Yellow Wallpaper* its contemporary context. “What gave “The Yellow Wall-paper” its peculiar force as a feminist exemplum was its “subjective” (first-person) narrative, couched from start to finish in the language of polite, civil rationality, of a progression culminating in madness” (Weinstock 49) and this is still true today. As a work *The Yellow Wallpaper* functions as a feminist piece of art and consenting to NSCAD Professor Jayne Wark’s notion that “...feminist art is by definition political” (4) means that this play is a political play.

This adaptation of Gilman’s *The Yellow Wallpaper* takes place then, now, and once upon a time. This setting therefore tells a story that comments on the world of Charlotte Perkins Gilman, the world of women today, and world of all the women in between then and now. Gilman acts as one guidepost in the messy map that tracks women who have challenged the inequalities between the sexes. Gilman was writing at a transitional time for American literary history and “Along with a widening of woman’s sphere and changes in gender roles lively debates arose over what came to be called ‘the woman question’ ” (Golden 9). As we move forward in time there is an increase of women participating and taking action outside the home. Investigating this shift means tracking the discoveries of women stretching the realm. “As they [women] sought to negotiate a new relationship between art, life, and politics, they recognized how existing aesthetic practice was itself a form of gender oppression” (Wark 23). As women began to openly express their understanding of this problematic system of oppression the definition of

success had to alter to fit into this system. “It was possible for a woman to achieve a modicum of success, provided she worked within the conventions established by men” (Wark 28). Rewriting these conventions then becomes the goal of feminist artists, politicians, and believers.

Feminism seeks to find equality among the sexes. Levelling the playing field means restructuring the ways in which we as a society distribute power. Gendered power relations are one of the threads that ties this scrip to then, now, and once upon a time. Wark makes this distinction when she acknowledges “...the body, especially the female body, has been systematically regulated and disciplined by strict codes. In order to transgress these controlling regimes, either one must already possess power or one must appropriate power” (Wark 43). For that reason the character of Maybe Jane is an example of a woman crumbling under or rising above attempts to usurp power. Then, now, and once upon a time this woman has been barred within a space where the only means of escape is to create the exit herself and she does so within the walls.

What does this mean for the contemporary audience witnessing the play today? It is a reminder that we must still create our own exits. An associate professor of women and gender studies at Arizona State University, Breanne Fahs writes that “Due to the power of social structures, and the various sanctions on gendered behaviour that arise from these structures, most people conform to conventional definitions of masculinity and femininity in their everyday lives” (7). This script identifies the problematic nature of conformity and its potential to result in troubling outcomes. Fahs also writes that “While the pressures of conforming are strong, gender roles are not static or predetermined, and people can challenge and rebel against traditional constraints” (7). This play is that challenge and rebel as it exists to create a dialogue within the framework of feminist art.

## PRODUCTION HISTORY

Gilman's *The Yellow Wallpaper* has been adapted for the stage a great deal. For the purposes of this research I will look at four contrasting American adaptations.

In 2014 The Workshop Theatre, located in New York, New York, staged a one-woman adaptation of the short story. "The Workshop Theater is a company of artists whose mission is the rigorous development and production of new American plays and musicals that transport, challenge and surprise both artists and audiences" ("Workshop Theatre"). The goal of the production was to tell the "shocking story of one woman's isolation, obsession, and descent into madness" (*THE YELLOW WALLPAPER: A One-Woman Play*). Despite the absence of the character on stage, based on reviews and a synopsis produced from the company itself, this production seemed to lay a heavy focus on the betrayal of the protagonist's husband/physician. This adaptation presents itself as a work interested in the feminist ideals often identified within the plot Gilman wrote. "This 75-minute solo adaptation of Charlotte Perkins Gilman's classic short story was first produced at Manhattan Theatre Source in March 2009 before it toured area libraries and colleges for Women's History Month. Annalisa Loeffler returns to NYC in this one-woman tour de force written by Greg Oliver Bodine and directed DeLisa M. White" (*THE YELLOW WALLPAPER: A One-Woman Play*)

In 2003 Theater Schmeater, located in Seattle, Washington, staged an adaptation of the short story with a cast of 4 women and 2 men. The adaptation of the original short story was scripted and directed by Heather Newman, which is available for purchase online. This adaptation won the 2003 Seattle Times "Best of the Fringe" award. One review writes, "Newman communicates the play's theme best in her use of actresses as silhouettes behind the wallpaper,



suggesting that all of these women are somehow trapped. This play is not just about the repression of women but about the life of the mind and the depths revealed as it unravels” (Fromowitz 1). Another review states, “‘The Yellow Wallpaper’ has important things to say about women, about society, and about the power of the creative soul to endure and transcend. While this play clearly states those things, it does not embody them, does not give them a distinct dramatic identity” (Kraft 1). It seems this production lost the sense of the solitary individual that is notably fundamental to Gilman’s original text.

In 2003 The East Lynne Company, located in New Jersey, staged a one-woman show directed and adapted by Warren Kliever and performed by Michele LaRue. This adaptation, directed by a man, presents John/husband/physician as a loving character who is constant and generous with his attention. What also makes this particular production noteworthy is its dip into educational outreach. “This has been performed at libraries, in schools and museums and for various women's organizations throughout the country” (Tales Well Told). The company appealed to its potential audience by offering study guides. Their website states this production “is recommended, as well, for high school students. The extraordinary story and performance stimulate discussions about imagination vs. science, the place of women in society and marriage, and more” (Tales Well Told).

In 2014 The Mill Theatre, located in Chicago, Illinois, staged a movement-based production adapted by Lorelei Sturm. The cast of three, directed by Jaclyn Bikup, attempted to incorporate and navigate a series of ropes symbolizing entrapment. One review writes “Scenic Designer Eleanor Kahn’s evocative spiderweb of rope encompassing the in-the-round set elevates our expectations of what thrilling experimental movements might occur therein, but those expectations

are thwarted” (Zacher). The company felt the piece had relevance to modern audiences in terms of the pressure put on woman to be everything from supermoms to CEOs as well as the misunderstanding of and negative connotations surrounding postpartum depression. Based on reviews it seems the advertisements of a “movement-based” adaptation were inaccurate. Sturm decided to have the play end in the suicide of the protagonist which reviewers interpreted as a cheap out that did not speak to the truth or authentic message of Gilman’s narrative.

This small collection of production history speaks to the plethora of ways in which this story can be interpreted. Matthew Earnest’s 2017 production will be an all female cast with each actor sharing the parts of the characters found within the original text. It will incorporate choral speaking and be a very physically demanding show. Through these choices I see a text that has the potential to tackle the issues that arose for these four productions.

### **III. MY CREATIVE PROCESS**

I will be applying my artistic challenge research to the creation and the performance of the role of Maybe Jane. In order to articulate this creative process I will break down this procedure into two categories: the head and the body. The head refers to the ways in which my historical and play research overlap with ideas and research presented within my artistic challenge document. The body refers to the ways in which these ideas and research will present themselves as physicalized exercises forming practical elements of my performance and rehearsal process. *The Yellow Wallpaper* strongly connects to three main ideas I feel my acting challenge research has allowed me to understand in relation to my lived experience: agency and privilege, the body, and perception versus reality. Agency refers to the state of taking action or to the extortion of power.

Privilege refers to special rights available to a particular group of people. Gilman's 6,000 word story and Matthew Earnest's adaptation depict a woman who is stripped of agency because the world she exists in awards particular privilege to men and not to women. After spending the summer researching the privileges I seek, the privileges I am awarded, and the privileges I am denied, I am acutely aware of my relationship with privilege. Agency is something more difficult to pinpoint as I feel my relationship with agency is not as concrete or static.

The body is a complex idea that, for the purposes of my investigation, refers to one's own control of their body. My practical in-studio acting challenge research this summer demonstrated to me that there is a level of control I do not have over my body. My body, my pelvic bowl, the tension in my hips, the base of my neck react to specific situations without being given the "okay" from me. My body has programmed defensiveness in times of danger, whether that danger be serious physical danger, being outed as black, or being asked to do something I feel has the potential to reveal my blackness. My body has programmed whiteness in all the ways that it is convincingly able to do so. Lastly, my body has begun to experience and relish in new sensation as I continue to open myself up to alternate ways of perceiving and being perceived. Maybe Jane is a woman who has lost control over her body. Her body is made a prisoner in a room with yellow wallpaper. Trapped in isolation she experiences her body being seen by other bodies. Within this relationship she must be the dominant, the one who does not need to creep around. Rather, she is the one who must hunt. In this foreign place for an amount of time unknown to Maybe Jane, she begins to experience her body in a new way. Opening her eyes to the pattern of the wallpaper and the potential for life within it, she awakens something inside herself. Whether that awakened part of Maybe Jane is the hunter, the dominant, the dreamer or the cry for help, is something to be left for discovery in rehearsal.

Lastly, perception versus reality is a concept that my research this summer articulated as something with which I am extremely in touch. In the latter half of the play, Maybe Jane begins to see figures within the wallpaper that others do not see. To Maybe Jane these figures are as real as her own hands. She describes their movements, their schedule, their patterns, and is thoroughly convinced of their existence. So much so that it becomes her mission to catch them. Maybe Jane's perception of the wallpaper, the way she understands it to be, might be different than the other characters that share the stage. Whether "versus" refers to a comparison or one of two choices, Maybe Jane is caught in a reality that differs from those around her. This, on top of her time alone in the room, is another potent form of isolation. My artistic challenge research speaks to this sense of disparity in terms of my own ability to predict my appearance. My research allowed me the opportunity to declare that I expect to see a different face, different hair, and different coloured skin every time I look in the mirror and I wonder with what perception I am to work. This dissimilitude, between what I see and what I expect to see, functions as my gateway to understanding the experiences of Maybe Jane.

These are the ways I can intellectually approach the creation of the character of Maybe Jane. The creation of this role and its rehearsal period will also contain physicalized exercises forming practical elements of my performance process. During this creation process I will be using imagery-based exercises, flexibility work, and my own methods of monitoring progress and maintaining freshness, (see Appendix A), to ensure my acting challenge is being addressed and to bring new potential to the character of Maybe Jane.

Throughout this academic period I have been exposed to a series of methods by which the actor uses imagery to stimulate movement in the body. My first two semesters at York, while

participating in these types of explorations, were useful in terms of acquiring the ability to complete the exercise. It is only after completing this period of research that I am now able to find these exercises fruitful. My imagery-incorporating-muscles have been vigorously worked, they have found flexibility, aptitude, and endurance. I have discovered my ability to work with large, colourful, bright imagery that allows my movements to be larger and less careful than my previous work. These muscles are on the path to finding the ability to transcend my perceived racial limitations. With regards to incorporating these muscles into the creation of this character throughout the rehearsal process and sequentially for performance, I will be incorporating these movement and imagery-based exercises into my rehearsal schedule. With the goal of differentiating my body from that of Maybe Jane, I will be creating three distinct chains of imagery for here, now and once upon a time. These exercises allow me, as an actor body, to incorporate self-discovery with character discovery. These exercises provide me with a space to combine character discovery through my body that is, hopefully, learning and changing.

Physical flexibility that has lead me to find mental flexibility is something I have acquired as a result of both the intellectual and practical work that I have been doing. The consequences of the holding I have been doing as a body seeking to pass in ways that award me privilege, resulted in a body that was actively losing flexibility. Throughout the research and the work within the studio, I have found flexibility that I wish to maintain. This flexibility awards me with possibilities as an actor. I approach the text and the exploration of the character with more options. My body is able to cover more ground and approach the work from multiple spacial relationships. Maintaining this authentic flexibility through the creation of the character means arriving to rehearsal with a body that does not have to be careful. Rather, this body can make larger choices, bolder choices, and ultimately choices that lead to finding the best version of the character.

Monitoring progress refers to a means of allowing the acting challenge work to maintain fresh and to ensure it is moving forward. I have uncovered multiple ways to track my progress and document it. I will continue to participate in the RNDMDNR program as it allows me to step away from the York community and tests my ability to hold on to the work in a different context. I will also continue to practice my personal journeys. These are my own structured forms of the type of exploration I was doing in Erika Batorf's movement class. Through allowing my body to follow its physical impulses I seek to discover: What am I attracted to? Scared of? Grieving for? Imagining? Remembering? The intention here continues to be that I may, first, become closer with these emotional states and open up pathways that allow me to explore them through script and stage work and then identify and explore the physical feelings associated with these emotions as a means of accessing them for other purposes.

This summer while working on the creation of my solo project I discovered that "This lesson requires looking" (ix Harris-Perry). I took it upon myself to create a piece that I felt authentically examined and communicated the way my body navigates the world. Within the context of a kissing booth open to the audience I sought to unpack and break down the elements of my representation and put them back together with the outcome of finding myself unable to live up to a stereotype. After dressing myself for my observers, applying makeup, and putting on some large heels, I did not become *the* sexy black woman. What I became, and had been the whole time, was authentically present as a sexualized woman of colour. This demonstration of awkward sexualization was a huge step forward in my ability to live in the offer of a choice that cannot be careful because it is out of my control. After learning this summer that "To be an embodied black woman is also to know joy, subjectivity, pleasure, and the latent capacity to enjoy being seen: to, in a sense, transcend invisibility and to resist erasure" (ix Harris-Perry) it was im-

portant for me to try this out. Despite finding this experience extremely advantageous with regards to my own process and receiving positive feedback from peers and guest artists the feedback I received from my faculty was not in agreement. I was told the piece was “safe”, that “it was missing the Beyonce” and I “was not in the shoes, the vagina, or the breast of the piece”. For the purposes of this thesis, my research, and my embodied practice, this commentary is proving to be instrumental. Comprehending that I was essentially seen by my faculty the way I was commenting on being seen, says to me that the challenge presented is so big that commentary on it can be lost. Combing this with the understanding that “Attempts by middle-class black women to assert control over their sexual image are an effective strategy toward reclaiming their sexuality” (14 Thompson) makes the approach to the creation of Maybe Jane even more important. I feel I have a responsibility to remain actively aware that the university, the rehearsal space, and the stage are not privilege free spaces. I feel I have a responsibility to test the boundaries as much as I can and remain vigilant in my documentation in order that the next artist to make this comment will be heard.

Subject to change that will be documented through my journal entries, I hope to approach the role of Maybe Jane with a conscious awareness of my own habitual participation in racial passing. This awareness, paired with specific exercises, should allow me to have more effective use of the vocabulary of my body, resulting in more specificity and range. The concrete tools I will use to address this challenge through the lens of Maybe Jane are included in Appendix A. It is in the spirit of discipline and bravery that I enter rehearsal with Maybe Jane.

## IV REHEARSAL JOURNALS

Dec 6-10th

My Opinion “And journeys” IN THE WALLS “I hold me in my arms and tell myself a story”

Educated Diction To Creep                      **Generosity (of self?)**                      Jennie

Teacher / Director    *being the protagonist of you own life*    What does it mean to move the bed?

LOVING    Maybe Jane is You.                      All female pornography of art.                      YELLOW

KIND

JOHN              Clearly other voice & body - Perceptions of ‘hers’                      *real joy yellow real fear*

Play making as an extension of your academic program?

Turn about the room. FURTIVELY. (On the sly.)                      **dance theatre**                      *an army of me*

THE BED

THE ROOM

Discoveries

Challenges

Plans

Scientific Quality Curiosity is a sign of intelligence. HUSBAND AND WIFE intimate captive

*No blame*              People learn to act when they have to solve real problems in real time.

or

*Revenge*

*THE MIND & THE MEMORY*

AGENCY V LIMITATION

feminist vs humanist COURAGE                      **real discovery**

**you have got to rob a lot of houses** *conflict and interaction*    *ACTING VS REACTING*

an invitation for more people to write on the wall

be the subject not the object of history

*don't soften the edges and make it nice*

*Action*

vs

*sit-react-sit-react*

We are going to throw a lot of spaghetti at the wall.

Jan/6/17

Challenges: Going into rehearsal attempting to embrace fear and make bolder choices steers in the direction of pushing. I am trying to find the line. The space where I am pushing my own limits while still staying true to my understanding of the narrative and the experiences of Maybe Jane.

I am having difficulty connecting to the character of Maybe Jane. Perhaps this is because I am sharing the character and her trajectory with 7 other women? There is a tendency to simplify her. I can see it happening in multiple sections of the text. Her voice is innocent. I am challenging myself to find the unpleasant within Maybe Jane. **What is not heroic about our hero?**



Discoveries: I am not finding actioning my script useful. Despite attempting to keep up with my physical practice during the winter break I have lost some flexibility. It is very important to my process that address this very quickly. I can feel how the limitation my body holds confines my ability to make physical choices in rehearsal. I can feel tension in my lower body as I deliver lines. It feels like I am working so hard to push them out of my throat. I think this is happening because they are new words, the script is still in my hand, and I need to incorporate them into my warm up.

Plans:

- Begin to re-work flexibility
- incorporate lines into warm up
- learn lines
- Think about the “hero”

Jan 11/17

Challenges: Still trying to shake the initial Maybe Jane persona which feels very soft, innocent, naive and perhaps childish? I am beginning to think this has arisen because of her lack of agency. The script is heavy in description and lacks dialogue. I am trying to shift description into discovery. Maybe Jane is a fiercely intelligent woman - somehow it is safer for me to play with a character who is softer than me. I am working to integrate the conversations around privilege agency, perception vs. reality into my rehearsal work with Maybe Jane. I think this will help me find her corners. The parts of her that are sharp, pointed, uncomfortable. **Is discovery innately “young” feeling?**

Discoveries: Working with 7 other women all playing the same woman sometimes at the same time demands a level of connection I am not sure this group has. I believe we are working towards that. It demands a comfort with touch and proximity that I am realizing I avoid. I am going to begin wearing tank tops to rehearsal as I believe this will bring some needed vulnerability to my process. This also mirrors my costume.

Plans:

- Use off book day to find intimacy with scene partners
- Work to find corners of Jane
- Connect to Maybe Jane’s discoveries in order to avoid “over-nice-ing” her
- Remember: Maybe Jane is **COMPLICATED**

Jan 14/17

Challenges: I am working to track Maybe Jane’s trajectory. Working to keep in mind that she is becoming more and more paranoid. Not letting the paranoia manifest itself in tension. Not letting the walls of Jane close in on me as an actor. Today was the first rehearsal working with my costume. This includes a lengthy petticoat. The skirt does change the way I interact with my environment. This is something to consider/manage. Matthew has given us a new chunk of dialog to

memorize. A section of a manifesto. I am working to incorporate this addition into my understanding of the play as a whole.

Discoveries: Last night during a conversation with my mother I finally felt Jane's fear. While discussing my anxiety over teaching THEA 1011 I voiced my difficulties connecting to the stakes of Maybe Jane. Then my mother said "SHE THINKS THERE IS A **WOMAN IN THE WALLS!**". My bedroom was dark and I had to ask her to stop! My heart raced. She really does! She believes there is a woman in there. That is fucking scary. I am wondering if it is a mechanism within myself that steps away from high stakes as a safety. Is that something I have put in place to manage myself more easily? To make sure I do not go out of control in the *believing* of a characters' circumstance?

Plans:

- Introduce levels of paranoia/frantic/suspicious
- Believe in the woman in the walls
- Interact with the other facets of Jane (7 other woman)

Jan 19/17

Challenges: Really battling exhaustion. Tonight during a dancing sequence of the piece I was working so hard to push through I nearly had tears in my eyes. The next section was one in which I play Maybe Jane and Matthew had asked me to up the paranoia in this particular section. Through the frustration with my own actor body, feeling trapped in rehearsal, having to push through and perform I found a new energy that makes me feel very connected to Jane. I finally found the kind of work where there is much less Beck thinking through the action - but more of Beck understanding the circumstances and just leading from there. My understanding took over and I was not carefully crafting each moment. The challenge is now finding that again, in each section, remaining fresh, and making sense!

Discoveries: Not every moment requires my logic - but requires doing the homework. Drop in the understanding and toboggan from there.

Plans:

- Gently try and find that feeling again
- Experiment leading from the physical sensation
- Fly
- Still working with seduction and surrender

Jan 20/17

Challenges: I received feed back from Matthew last night sharing that this rehearsal was important for me in my life as an actor. I knew something had happened but I didn't know exactly what it was. I described it as tobogganing. It arrived through my very real physical exhaustion and it

felt amazing to do! This rehearsal we changed locations, (from 024-142) a much smaller space with very different acoustic qualities. I knew I was nervous going into the run as I felt an enormous amount of pressure. How do I find that again? Can I find that again? What if I don't find that again? And I didn't. I pushed, I could tell.

Discoveries: In notes Matthew told me that last night I had burned it all down and started again and it was magic. Tonight a habit that he has identified in me returned, (it had left in last night's burning down magic important night for me as an actor run) and he encouraged me to get rid of it. The habit is me using my hands and fingers in tension when trying to find clarity in something emotionally charged. This has never been brought to my attention before and I feel extremely grateful to have someone paying such close attention to me. **Is energy sent out of my body and into my hands?**

Plans:

- Experiment with this habit!

#### Inventory

1. I identify as female
2. I have been in love
3. I have been heart broken
4. I have felt pain both emotional and physical
5. I have felt fear, astonishment, joy surprise, anticipation, pride, embarrassment, shame
6. I know what my body looks like
7. My skin surprises me
8. My body is strong
9. There is an army of me
10. I am a teacher
11. I value generosity
12. Control makes me feel safe
13. I crave passion
14. Music feeds me
15. My hands hold power and my hands give power
16. I am a careful explorer with a complex relationship with sensuality

Jan 25/17

Opening Night

Challenges: Live bodies! Breathing journals! Trying to sound smart at this moment. My heart is still dancing. I feel immense pride. The cardboard turned yellow. I walked out with one goal, which is what I tell my students to do. I wanted to let go of my hands without thinking about my hands. This was done. Now the work is to consider what that did for me. Now the work is to be true to Maybe Jane and not smother her in my thesis work.

Discoveries: I held back tears for the first time. I think there is a pressure to find tears in performance, this is something I have experienced. But the act of having an objective so strong that Maybe Jane fought Beck and held back her tears is invigorating. **Was this the energy that used to live in my hands?** This is something I never felt in rehearsal.

Plans:

- Keep exploring
  - Review script for seduction and surrender
- 

Jan 28/17

Closing

Challenges: With a run of three shows one stands out as being not as strong. I felt our last matinee was my weakest performance, (or exploration) but this could be because it was different than the first two. Perhaps this was the strongest exploration because I found new moments. I was taken by surprise. Working not rank the performances is difficult. The challenge is now to try and sort out all of these experiences and figure out how they fit into the shape of my acting challenge.

Discoveries: Surprise. Fear. The power in seduction. Accessing and navigating risk.

Plans:

- Write conclusion
- Write in personal journal
- Plan next RNDMDNR
- Seduce and Surrender in rehearsal for A Dream Play

## V. EPILOGUE

I began this journey with a question: Why am I a careful performer/explorer? Why is my work detailed, but small? My research brought me what became the focus of this thesis. I wanted to formally look at the structure of racial passing as it relates to fear and limitation in my theatre performance. I wanted to personally investigate the ways in which I habitually participate in racial passing as I have lead a practice where I make choices about seeming more white over the authenticity and specificity of a character. I wanted to work towards countering my choices in order to find more range in my practice with the hope of ultimately finding my way to a character that stretches the boundaries of what I ‘think I can’ or generally allow myself to do.

As I began the rehearsal process I was still butting up against limits. Limits I felt familiar with from work in studio classes. These limits were not based in fear but based in comprehension. Where was the choice I was not making? I could not understand it. I could not see it. This investigation filled many of my journal entries. Where are the bigger choices? Where are the bolder choices? I could not longer identify with the notion that I was afraid to make them, but rather, I could not see them. Through conversation and consultation with my journals I came to the conclusion that I was spending time trying to change myself instead of figuring out how to use what I have and what I know. I came to call this *inventory*. My inventory was a complete list of everything I understood, everything I knew I could do, and everything I had felt, (See Rehearsal Log).

What stood out for me in this list of inventory was what I had experienced this summer while working on my solo piece, mainly what occurred in the actual showing of it. The piece was a commentary as well as a coming out. I had organized the piece in such a way that I was able to

ensure I would have to sit in the coming out. The piece was structured so that I was guaranteed time in the uncomfortable and scary. I presented myself and sat in it. This sitting was, prior to the piece, and area of myself that was unknown. I did not know the dimensions of this fear and whether or not I would fall forever. However, in the performance of this piece, the sitting allowed me to investigate this space. I came away knowing exactly what the fear felt like, it was no longer imaginary, but instead palpable and almost familiar. This was the fear I had to play with in rehearsal. This was fear I understood, I knew how to get there and I knew that I would and could get out. A process that remained terrifying, but now I knew there was a bottom.

As I began to use this inventory it became clear that certain states of being that I are required to use as an actor scared me because they were associated with power, or sass, or sensuality. All things I associated with Blackness. I was embarrassed or ashamed or thought I would lose something by stepping into these arenas. I was able to use this inventory as something to come back to in order to find my way into arenas that felt risky.

The question then became: Can I stay alive in the territory my body deems as risky?

I went into this rehearsal process with a clear idea of the work I would be doing, (Appendix A). Some of this work I would remove from the list completely and some, despite being completed, had to be let go later in the rehearsal process.

During the rehearsal period I tried to use my script as a tool to assist me in addressing my acting challenge. I assigned action verbs to each beat and broke each scene down into units. In terms of assisting me in the playing of Maybe Jane I found verbs to be unhelpful. The story being told was of a woman and her journal. In this way I found I was confiding as opposed to doing

something to someone else. I tried to apply the verbs to my scene partner, (the audience, my journal) but found this work was not fruitful. When I let go of playing verbs and worked towards authentically sharing my secrets with the only safe space I knew I could use, (my journal) I found myself more able to find variety, flexibility, and what felt like true risk.

The script and the original story were brought to the work. As a company we would often discuss what took place in Gilman's text and how that complimented or contrasted what Matthew Earnest included in his adaptation. The places where there lived large difference created enjoyable homework for the actor. I got to go home and problem solve. Why was this added? What new quality or piece of history can I award Maybe Jane because of this addition. The experience of sharing this decision making process with 7 other women sharing the same part made the choices stronger. The company would sometimes come to a conclusion I would have never landed on myself, and in this was I was stretched. This is something I feel my acting challenge demands of me. The decisions were rooted in consensus and made the act of performing feel rooted, grounded, and strong.

During the winter break I created a warm up that I would complete prior to each rehearsal and performance. I found this warm up helpful, it prepared my body for the physical vigour of the show and ensured I was open emotionally. I was able to arrive on campus early enough to fully complete this warm up before each rehearsal and before my evening performances. The last performance of the show was a matinee and because of this our pre-show schedule was altered. We were loading in our set at a different time and running our fight/dance call closer to the 5 minute call. This altered my warm up, and because I had been repeating the same warm up for a length of time I felt ill prepared to perform. That performance was a very different experience

than the previous two, (see Rehearsal Log). I had inadvertently ritualized my warm up. Moving forward I will be sure to vary my pre-rehearsal and pre-show warm up to ensure I do not become ritualistic, superstitious, or sentimental.

Through the image based movement work I was able to complete during the rehearsal period I was able to stay connected to the journals I was writing. These two aspects of the process went hand-in-hand. Communication became the main concept for me. In rehearsal I would dig up relevant information. Through journaling I could target the information I felt I needed to plaster on the inside of a glass wall so that the audience was able to see it. Through the movement work I could physically interact with the glass wall I felt separating me from the audience.

My experience altered drastically from rehearsal and into performance. After the rehearsal period and into the three performances I noticed three major changes. These changes were difficult to articulate as they were happening in the rehearsal logs, but have required looking at the larger picture and tracking my own trajectory to identify. The first change is my ability to feel surprise. This occurred in a major way during the third performance. I experienced moments and emotions on stage that genuinely took me by surprise. I was able to stay in character and use what was happening to me to communicate the needs of Maybe Jane. This, I feel, is a result of the work. This speaks to a letting go of the reins that represent the fear and limitations I went into this exploration with. The second change from rehearsal to performance was fear and frustration. A similar experience to the surprise as these feelings were not choreographed into the performance but arrived without me asking. They belonged to both Maybe Jane and myself. They were rooted deeply in both of our experiences. This was something I had never felt before,



and something that functioned to help me accomplish my job as an actor communicating on-stage. The third change that occurred was a habit that director Matthew Earnest identified for me. When taking on the character of Maybe Jane I began using my fingers, squeezing and pinching them, when processing emotional high stakes. Matthew shared this habit with me and encouraged I distance myself from this crutch. In rehearsal this was difficult, but during performance it melted. These changes I identified when moving from rehearsal to performance are assets of the work I still need to grapple with. With the research I have done I feel prepared to do so.

As I work to conclude this project there are aspects I discovered on the journey that I hope to investigate further. As I worked with my script, my fellow actors, and director I found a swing in each scene I was participating in. Initially I identified this internal swing as a fight or flight response. Upon further analysis and a desire to make this sensation something useful to me I labeled the ends of this swing as the *seduction* and the *surrender*. These labels spoke to the sensual aspects of my acting challenge I was targeting. These labels spoke to vulnerability, the offer, power, choice and the possibility of falling.

The seduction refers to the objective or want within a scene. What am I seducing my scene partner(s) into doing? How do I go after what it is I want? How do I seduce? The word alone takes me to a place that I can now identify as risky territory and for this reason it seemed like an ideal choice. To fully and properly commit to the seduce you must be in a vulnerable place, putting my power on display and offering it to the scene partner(s) and here lies the possibility of the fall.

The surrender refers to the elements within a scene that I submit to. What do I offer? What makes you vulnerable? The word surrender holds many connotations and for this reason

felt like a strong choice. To surrender conjures feelings of potential weakness and vulnerability. To honestly surrender I must be willing to show the weak and vulnerable aspects of myself and prepare myself for the fall.

While working with the seduction and the surrender I found I was in touch with both in every scene but would choose to lean to one side or the other. They exist on a spectrum and I would choose my place on that spectrum during a given scene. I found these words in my image based movement practice, and could trace them in my warm up. The seduction and surrender are also a practice that I can work with outside of the studio. I have been incorporating these actions into my RNDMDNR practice arena as well as my teaching.

I am an actor who is growing and rapidly changing. I leave this investigation with an understanding of my relationship with risk and the necessary role it plays in my practice. I leave this investigation with tools that allow me to take risks and assess their benefit. I now understand why I am a careful explorer and how I can shed my default choices to make room for choices that allow me to reach the truth of a character.

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## Appendix A

## Week One (December)

1. Read the script
2. Complete the actors 26 questions/ gather what I say and what is said about me (see Appendix C)
3. Begin journaling (to continue throughout entire process)

## During Winter Break

4. Image based movement work (based on Grotowski's River work)
5. Memorization
6. Solo improvisation within the role in the form of my personal journey
7. Participating in RNDMDNR
8. Physical fitness to encourage flexibility and endurance
9. Create warm up

## January Rehearsal Period

10. Re-do #2
11. Verb script
12. Continue work with 3-7
13. Movement improvisation within the context of rehearsal

## Performance

14. Continue to work with warm up
15. Continue to work with imagery during performance

## Appendix B

### RNDMDNR WHY SHOULD YOU SIGN UP? WHAT IS THIS?

#### **WHAT ARE RNDMDNRS?**

A random dinner is exactly what it sounds like. It's the opportunity for you to have dinner at new restaurants, with new friends, for a new experience. It is hard to have authentic interactions at networking events and impossible to truly connect with someone new online. Having hosted dozens of dinners that brought together creatives and entrepreneurs who didn't know each other, we realized something special was happening. When people share a meal, share their stories, and find deeper reasons to connect something magical happens.

#### **WHY SHOULD I ATTEND A RNDMDNR?**

You want to meet new people, engage in interesting conversations, and have authentic interactions. You don't believe that relationships are transactional and you believe you can learn something from anyone.

#### **WHAT INSPIRED RNDMDNR?**

##### **Serendipity**

Serendipitous moments happen when we give them an opportunity to. We decide to head to that coffee shop and just happen to sit beside someone who can help us solve a design problem. We meet the love of our life when your friend coerces us to go out and celebrate his new job. Moments that matter, aren't always planned.

##### **Creative cities**

Creative Cities are driven by the connections that happen between intelligent, engaged, and creative citizens serendipitously. Creative Cities are driven by connection, discussion, and collaboration.

#### **JOIN US?**

Join us for our first Random Dinner - Italian @ Ufficio

Hey!

Thanks again for signing up. This is the first dinner we've put together for RNDMDNR, and I hope you will join us. I wanted to say thanks to everyone that has

signed up, replied to our emails, or hopped on a call with us. We appreciate all of the feedback!

We've hosted these types of dinners with random friends before. This is the first time we are opening up to hosting them for people we don't know.

Since announcing this new open project, we've had previous attendees tell us that they've made some of their closest friends and had some of their most memorable conversations at these dinners. We are looking forward to sharing a memorable night with you!

Can't wait to meet as many of you as possible! It has been amazing to hear from hundreds of you, and to see that thousands of you are interested in what we are doing. We are working every day to put together more experiences but here is the first!

Shoot me an email if you have any questions...

All the best,  
David

[Book Now](#)

## More Info on Ufficio

Ufficio is an Italian restaurant located in the Dundas West Neighbourhood. Join us for a completely random dinner.

**More Info:** [www.ufficiorestaurant.com](http://www.ufficiorestaurant.com)

Type of Meal: 3 Course Prix Fixe

*Note: Not vegetarian/Vegan/Gluten Free*

### **Toronto Life Describes it as:**

Unfussy pescatarian Italian plates that Harding describes as “satisfying, but light.” Lapointe’s menu incorporates seasonal vegetables with responsibly harvested seafood (sourced from Honest Weight, Jim Giggie, Société-Original) and Mediterranean flavours, punched up with the hits of coriander, saffron and smoke.

David started RNDMDNR and wants to meet as many of you as possible so that he can connect all of you for awesome dinners and activities.

**Who's invited?**

Completely RNDM group

**Want to host a dinner?**

[Let us know](#)

[Book Now](#)

**FAQs****Why do you charge for tickets?**

Splitting bills can get ugly even amongst the closest of friends. To keep things simple for you and the restaurant we charge a flat price for your meal and give you the option to purchase additional drinks on your own tab.

**Why don't we just order off the menu?**

Sharing your culinary experience with your fellow RNDMs is a part of the experience. We work with our partner restaurants to provide you with a unique experience at their establishment. The menus they select are meant to give you a taste of a few things they have to offer.

**How many people will be at each dinner?**

Dinners will be for 6-10 guests depending on the type of dinner. Activities will range from 10-30 people.

No longer interested in meeting new people? [unsubscribe](#)



## Appendix C

## Building Character:

1. How old am I?
2. Ancestors
3. Stock/Class
4. Breeding?
5. Position trained for?
6. What am I like physically?
7. What am I like mentally?
8. My strengths?
9. My weaknesses?
10. What do others think of me? (Do I know? How does it affect me?)
11. What way do I speak? What way do I listen?
12. My physiological quirks
13. Personal patterns in life
14. What is my emotional range?
15. Basic Action - main objective expressed as a verb
16. Moment by moment action expressed as a verb (What am I doing?)
17. Where am I going?
18. Where am I coming from?
19. Who am I talking to?
20. What do I expect of them?
21. Physical preoccupation
22. What happens physically to affect action?
23. What has happened before?

24. What is about to happen?

25. Do I know?

26. How much information do I have?

Appendix D

**PROLOGUE.**

(TWILIGHT IN SUMMER. A ROOM WITH A BED AND A SIMPLE LIGHT HANGING ABOVE IT. UNREMARKABLE FURNISHINGS: A RUG, A STANDING BASIN WITH A PITCHER, etc. **SOUND:** A PENCIL WRITING QUICKLY AND FREELY ON PAPER. **LIGHTS:** REVEAL A GROUP OF WOMEN. LIKE STATUARY, OR LIKE ANIMALS DISCOVERED IN THE WILD, THEY STUDY THE FACES OF THE AUDIENCE. **SOUND:** FOOTSTEPS. **SOUND:** PENCIL STOPS. **SOUND:** THE FOOTSTEPS SLOW DOWN AND COME TO A STOP (SOMEONE IS LISTENING AT THE DOOR). THE WOMEN LOOK AT THE FLOOR. SILENCE. **SOUND:** A MAN BREATHING. **SOUND:** THE FOOTSTEPS RESUME AND EVENTUALLY TAPER OFF (THE MAN WALKS ON). SILENCE AGAIN. THE WOMEN LOOK UP AGAIN WITH **SOUND:** PENCIL ON PAPER. THE WOMEN REMAIN MOTIONLESS AS **LIGHTS:** FADE TO BLACK.)

*Handwritten notes: Lights, wheel Bed, ME!, safe again, = paper*

**1. MAYBE JANE.**

(**SOUND:** PENCIL WRITING CONTINUES. LIGHTS REVEAL THE WOMEN ALL SEATED TOGETHER ON THE BED. MORNING.)

*Handwritten notes: I'm writing in my journal*

**ALL:** It is very seldom  
That mere ordinary people like John and myself  
Secure ancestral halls for the summer. Period.

*Handwritten notes: as though one is writing, I open you, information in the phrasing*

**BLANE:** A colonial mansion, *Facts*

**EMMA:** A hereditary estate, *Facts/subjective*

**ALEX:** I would say a haunted house, and reach the height of romantic felicity— *Subjective*

**ALL:** But that would be asking too much of fate! *[Don't say it! it'll make it true]*

*Handwritten note: shut it down*

**BREFNY:** Still  
 I will proudly declare that there is something queer about it.

**EMILY:** Else, why should it be let so cheaply?

**BECK:** And why have stood so long untenanted? *creep (acquire knowledge)*

(ALEX, AS JOHN, **LAUGHS** HEARTILY AND LONG. PAUSE.) *(M)'s imitation of [looking @ John]*

**ALL:** John laughs at me, of course, *invite*  
But one expects that *console*  
In marriage. *teach*

**OKSANA:** John is practical in the extreme.

**SIENA:** He has no patience with faith,  
 An intense horror of superstition,  
 And he scoffs openly at any talk of things not to be felt  
 And seen  
 And put down in figures.

**ALL:** John is a physician, *explain*  
*I show you*

3

Image 1