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A Touch on Intimacy:

Building Belonging for Diasporic Pain in Participatory Performances

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**A Touch on Intimacy:
Building Belonging for Diasporic Pain in Participatory Performances**

**by
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Thesis

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Dedication

For all the people who have kindly contributed meanings to my existence
in this life we call home.

“No self is an island.”
Jean-François Lyotard

“A story isn’t a good story until it receives a story in return.”
Barbara Myerhoff, quoted by Arthur Strimling

Abstract

A Touch on Intimacy: Building Belonging for Diasporic Pain in Participatory Performances

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Theatre, as a form of live performing art, offers a space of intimacy for the audience and the creators of the theatrical events. The audience is not only introduced to a psychological world built by the performance itself, but is also, in various degrees, invited to co-author the theatrical experiences and narratives, which for me creates the opportunities to connect human beings to one another. This thesis reviews how theatre offers moments of intimacy through my reflection on my three-year study in the MFA Playwriting Program at University of Texas at Austin. In particular, this document traces my evolving writing practices that centered on my relationship with diasporic pain, an experience of being away from homelands. I will weave in my personal experience to better understand my identity as a non-native English writer and a foreigner in the United States. I will also scrutinize my experience of diasporic pain and its connection to vulnerability, aid, reciprocation, meaning-making, memory, time, while exploring how these ideas can be delivered aesthetically in the theatre-making process and the product of the production. This document also envisions pathways towards possibilities of finding a place of belonging for other multi-lingual writers who are also away from home.

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1. Introduction

When I came to the United States for graduate school, I was inflamed with both excitement and horror. Working creatively in partnership with a foreign language was like walking into a new class in high school—unknown hopes, confused smiles, and the apologies for all the mistakes I knew I was about to make. Meanwhile, America as cultural entity was also misty with familiar items that had been strongly present in my childhood. Growing up with stories narrated by the people from the English-speaking world, I found my early reading and film-watching experience significantly shaped how I approached life as a storyteller. In a way, coming to the US implied a collision with a hyper-reality, a term Jean Baudrillard used to describe the condition of a fiction world being mistaken as the reality.

Coming to the US means I would be experiencing this world without second-hand messages. The first touch of an American door in the restroom in an American airport, the first step into an American supermarket, the first sip of American coffee, the first ride on an American street, and the first sight of an American house in an American neighborhood—backyards, swings, and treehouses. I couldn't wait to find a diner that had red booth sets, get a milkshake, and pour all the honey syrup on my chicken and waffles. Every fantasy about America suddenly got transformed into a concrete world when my flight landed in Austin, Texas on a summer night in 2016. Even though I was aware of the degree of my unfamiliarity with the experience of writing plays in a non-native language and being so far away from family and friends, there I was, standing still with curiosity in this foreign land.

This thesis essentially serves as a thorough examination on my writing practices that explore possibilities to find and build space for intimacy in theatre. It gradually dawned on me that my artistic visions are woven with inner dialogues about my

identity as a non-native English writer and a foreigner in the US. For me, the idea of foreigner was more of a continual process of *becoming* rather than *being*, as it was developed in moments of conversation when I caught myself stuttering in front of people, when I became silenced due to lack of mutual understanding in conversations, when I realized how alone I was in the middle of the crowd. The experience of alienation had come hand in hand with the feelings of loneliness, anxiety, and fear, which eventually evolved into a long-existing pain, trauma. At the same time, I encountered struggles in finding the right words for my dramatic writing in English, realizing I could neither present myself truly as a human being nor as an artist.

As I started scrutinizing these emotional shifts, I found similarity between my experience of alienation and the affective changes often described in discourses about diaspora. In my attempts to define my diasporic pain, I realized that diaspora could be a spread both in geography and time as an experience of feeling not belonging and continually revisiting the idea of “home”, which I considered as not only a geographic place but also a moment in time. Responding to such discoveries, I seek to find a healing space and human connection through my writing in my stay in the MFA Playwriting Program at University of Texas at Austin. I became interested in inquiry-driven approaches in my search of intimacy in theatrical practices. How can I find my authentic voice as a non-native English writer? How can I alleviate and make meaning out of my and others’ diasporic pain through theatre? How do I create accessibility for other people’s needs for theatre? Through different projects, experiments, and collaborations, I made discoveries that the form of participatory performance could offer opportunities for intimate human connection, as the audience would potentially be defined as a necessary component for community-building.

These experiences and relationships left me wondering how I can better frame the art-making process to inform the product of production.

This paper examines my ongoing inquiry of how theatre finds me a home and how I can also build home for the others—my collaborators and my audience. While some might argue that not every audience needs the same thing as I do in theatre, I am choosing this lens to better understand my identity as a non-native English writer so as to engage with theatre with a more authentic voice. In particular, I will trace my findings in different projects to elaborate how the need of belonging can be connected aesthetically to the ideas of diasporic pain, vulnerability, mutual aid, memory, meaning-making, and time.

2.

A Path of Loneliness: Exposing Vulnerability in a Diasporic Body

Reflection on *Songs of 52-Hertz Whale*

What if loneliness is driven, often, by changing who we are, being “perfect,” saying what we’re supposed to say, doing what we’re supposed to do? What if loneliness is driven in part by our lack of authenticity — that I can go to a party, and I can be the belle of the ball and come home completely disconnected, lonely, anxious, because never once during that experience was I myself? –Brené Brown¹

In the September of 2016, I turned in my first piece of dramatic writing to Elizabeth (Liz) Engelman’s Playwriting Workshop at UT. It is short piece entitled *Songs of 52-Hertz Whale*, examining the experience of loneliness through narrative perspectives of a lonely whale that sings songs that no one understands, and a child who keeps failing in putting ideas into words in English. Despite the rawness in writing, I consider this piece as my first attempt to define my relationship with the experience of diasporic pain.² What I tried to scrutinize was the loneliness that derived from my inability to present myself authentically, and to find acceptance, a purpose, and a sense of belonging in a foreign land. Over time, the pain evolved into something long-lasting—a trauma that exists in my / the characters’ diasporic bodies.

As I am adopting the term “diaspora”, I am also aware of the absence of the ethno-political context this word implied in my personal history, as the term was originally defined as an involuntary dispersion of the population of certain ethnic group, with Jewish and African diaspora being part of its history. I was never forced

¹ Brown, Brené and Tippett, Krista. “Strong Back, Soft Front, Wild Heart.” On Being Project, 8 Feb. 2018. <https://onbeing.org/programs/brene-brown-strong-back-soft-front-wild-heart-feb2018/>

to be a non-native English writer. I came to study in the US voluntarily—there was no external force that led me to this decision. And yet, despite this major difference, I found I shared similar patterns and feelings often explored in discourses about diaspora.

Originally, the piece was inspired by an essay about diaspora—“The Parched Tongue” by Hosu Kim. In this document, Kim uses a poetic language to describe the incapacity to communicate well in a foreign land. For foreigners who are not familiar with the local language, their tongues are always “parched”. There will be a “hollow body emptied of words”, as “the diasporic body is a ghosted body”³. Kim’s argument offers an empathizing energy for me, laying groundwork for further discussion of experience of diasporic pain. As I read about this, a feeling of being understood swam over my body. The article beautifully captured abstract ideas for me to describe my challenges in language—particularly in daily communication and in creative writing.

As I reviewed this idea along with Brené Brown’s idea of loneliness, as shown in the quotes in the beginning of the chapter, it occurred to me that both concepts were connected. The diasporic body is “ghosted body”, feeling lonely as it has no words to be “authentic” and the capacity to be one’s true self. Loneliness thus evolves into the experience of diasporic pain. As I started transforming these ideas into a piece of dramatic writing, I noticed that it became an empowering process in which I finally found words to describe my personal experience. I also felt heard as the piece was being read. The nature of spoken words in dramatic writing offered space of listening. During the playwriting workshop, the class listened to the voices in this piece, offering feedback, and a conversation thus started. I felt it was the first time I was

³ Kim, Hosu. “The Parched Tongue.” *The Affective Turn: Theorizing the Social*. Ed. Patricia Ticineto Clough, with Jean Halley. Durham: Duke UP, 2007. 34-46. Print.

truly myself—more vulnerable and more authentic.

Vulnerability, originally meaning “to wound” in Latin, became significant in shaping my voice as a writer. Through sharing my own fear, I was invited to stay closer to myself and consequently to other people:

To me, vulnerability is courage. It’s about the willingness to show up and be seen in our lives. And in those moments when we show up, I think those are the most powerful, meaning-making moments of our lives even if they don’t go well. I think they define who we are. (Brown)

The experience of being understood leads me to think about the idea of “access intimacy”, as described as a “feeling of someone else gets your access needs”, which is the opposite of “forced intimacy”⁴. Through exposing vulnerability, an intimate space of understanding was created.

As I started examining the philosophy behind this piece, I realized I had developed a few patterns in this piece that would shape much of my future writing. I found it helpful to explore how I presented diasporic pain aesthetically, after having categorized them into the following features:

1) Repetition

I realized the use of repetition serves as an outlet of the abundance of my emotions. Throughout this piece, there is a line that goes like this:

(And once again i sing a song that no one understands...)

There is a series of failing attempts to pronounce the word “thank you” correctly. The character can only say “Sank you” because “th” sound is too hard for a tongue that

⁴ Boren, Ryan “Accessibility, Access Intimacy, and Forced Intimacy” , Blog, 15, May, 2018, <https://boren.blog/2018/05/15/accessibility-access-intimacy-and-forced-intimacy/>

doesn't belong to English. What follows is the speaker apologizing for the inadequacy to articulate ideas and words.

2) Shift between different points of view

To amplify the sense of isolation, I had the piece jumping between the form of dialogue and monologue. The perspective also changes, shifting from a third-person point of view that sees the child from the eyes of their classmates, to an omniscient point of view that narrates the scientific facts about the whale, and then to the first-person point of view of the child, who talks about their pain in their diasporic body.

3) Non-linearity in time

The time progresses very slowly in this piece, as that's how the internal anxiety is manifested. The litany of memory shapes a time system that is circular. In the dialogue in the end, the time jumps back to the moments of repetition. The major speaker eventually chooses to give up communicating, hiding the anxiety behind a smiling face, as shown below:

How are you today?
i am fine sank you.

Over time, I gradually came to realize that these writing patterns actually address the symptoms of trauma. As I was making researching on trauma, I learned:

“The repetitions of the traumatic event . . . suggest a larger relation to the event that extends beyond what can simply be seen or what can be known, and is inextricably tied up with the belatedness and incomprehensibility that re-main at the heart of this **repetitive seeing**”⁵ (Caruth 10)

⁵Caruth, Cathy. *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996. Print.

I noticed that there was a structural similarity between my writing and the emotions I was addressing. There was often a repetitive seeing—the same emotion kept resurfacing, the same moment kept being re-visualized, the time kept circling back. I interpreted these patterns as the result of my diasporic experience. Things always came back—there was always a yearning for returning and for belonging.

Essentially, this piece served as an entry point for my inquiry into the idea of intimacy. The nature of creative writing allowed me to expose my vulnerability freely through lyrical style in the piece. I didn't need to be concerned over my grammar, therefore becoming able to expose my pain freely, which was not something I could do in daily life due to my capacity of English. It was in the moment of reading this piece in class that, for the first time, I felt a sense of belonging in the writing community at UT.

3.

A Search for Help: Receiving Support from the Audience

Reflection on *The Smells of the Furnished Room*

*“Can human nature not survive
Without a listener?”
–Emily Dickson, “Reticence”*

During a performance I made in 2017, something unexpected happened: an audience member offered a hug to the performer without being prompted directly. Prior to this particular moment, the performer⁶ was sharing an experience of isolation with the audience. Surprised by the gesture of hugging, I felt as if I was being supported in every moments of loneliness I encountered in the United States.

The performance was a work-in-progress piece, *The Smells of the Furnished Room*.⁷ Inspired by *The Furnished Room*, a short fiction by O. Henry, the play borrows the elements of the story and takes the form of a long monologue by a “flat character”, which I define as an existence who lacks details of personal history in the fictional world. A “flat character” usually gets forgotten as such character is not contributing significant meanings to other characters’ storylines.

⁶ The performer is Leng Wong, an Austin-based theatre-maker and artist. The audience is Jeff Gan, a theatre-maker, a graduate student in the Performance as Public Practice Program at UT, and an audience who have offered me many inspirations to my writing practices.

⁷The piece was originally an exercise based on Paula Vogel’s renowned “Bake-Off” writing event, which is a quickly written exercise on an assigned theme with assigned elements that folks do within a 48-hour period of time. During her visit in 2016, we were given an assignment to write a short piece using ingredients drawn from O. Henry’s short story, *The Furnished Room*. I later developed this short piece of dramatic writing into a thirty-minute play when being invited to present a piece of my work in “Mi Casa Su Teatro” by Patrick Shaw, who was then a curator for this Austin annual site-specific performance project called “Mi Casa Su Teatro”.

In real life, I found the idea of a “flat character” echoed my experience in diaspora: In the first year of my stay in the US, I often found myself standing awkwardly in the corner of the room in social events, resembling a “flat character”, while everyone else started deepening their relationship through conversations. Eventually, my presence faded out and I suspected it got forgotten as well, just as the flat characters in novels and plays.

As in *Songs of 52 Hertz Whale*, the speaker also experiences a diasporic pain in this piece. Throughout the piece, the character poses an inquiry about their purpose of life with the audience. Aside from a strong sense of nostalgia in their tone of speaking, the speaker struggles to remember their past. The speaker is stuck in an American house but does not know the purpose of being there. It represented a confusion I was experiencing in my diasporic experience: I was aware I did not belong here, but I didn’t know what to do to and where to go next, either.

As I connect such experience to the moment of audience hugging the performer, I thought about how the idea of “aid” could be both powerful and authentic in theatre. Such ideas also led me to review the nature of talking cure, an idea proposed by Bertha Pappenheim in her research on trauma. Through talking about traumatic feelings or experience, one becomes able to examine the trauma better. At the same time, having a trust-worthy listener is a key element in the process. The presence of the trusty listener offering aid is crucial.

In the case of *The Smells of the Furnished Room*, audience was seen as a trust-worthy listener. Not only did I feel safe, but also delighted that I could share these diasporic feelings with the listeners.⁸ Meanwhile, it is equally important that I should

⁸ In my last year of grad school, I learned about the word “spect-actor”, an idea that the Brazilian applied theatre practitioner August Boal used to describe the audience engagement in Forum Theatre. Although I was neither adopting the form of Forum Theatre nor practicing the Theatre of the

earn the audience's trust as well. Sharing a degree of vulnerability became an approach I adopted at that time.

Looking back, I realized that I was exploring ways to shorten the distance between my audience and my character, so as to create a space in which they could become friends with each other temporarily and therefore become less lonely. In the following pages, I will explore how it was done technically in this piece:

(1) Meta-theatricality

The piece *The Smell of the Furnished Room* is essentially inspired by the meta-theatricality in Italo Calvino's novel, *If on a Winter's Night a Traveler*. In the world of meta-theatricality, the recognition of the audience's presence serves as a device to create fluidity in perspective change, which leads me to my pattern of point of view shifting in my writing, as described in the previous chapter. In the piece, the speaker is aware they are different from the character "you", who is personified by the audience.⁹ As in Calvino's book, my character has little knowledge about where they are geographically. Unlike the audience, who are human beings with true memories, the speaker doesn't have access to their past. Without memories, the character eventually realizes that they do not have access to the future, either:

Oppressed, this idea helped me shape what I believed in theatre. The idea of "spect-actor" implies that the audience are seen as a necessary component in the creation of the performance. The performance is not only made "for" the audience, but also made "with" the audience. For me, it was the "with-ness" that created the space of intimacy. Through recognizing each other's presence, we were empowered to offer help to each other.

⁹ As Calvino did in his novel, I decided to use a second-person point of view to connect the speaker to the presence of the audience.

SPEAKER

...You all laughed. Together.

But I feel fake.

I am knock-off of human beings.

Like a OPPO Phone (btw it is knock-off of iphone. Made in China.)

I am nothing but an Edison Doll.¹⁰

A doll who smells things.

A doll who smells you.

(The speaker dies.)

(2) Prompted Questions

To alleviate the diasporic pain, I made the character highly dependent on the knowledge of the audience. Throughout the piece, the character seeks help from the audience in different ways, interacting with the audience to fulfill their gaps of memory. For instance, one of the devices I used is to put blanks in the script to prompt the audience to provide answers to the character's question:

See the tapestries up there? The tapestries with mysterious black patterns on them...Were they gifts? _____

Who gave me them to me? _____ I see.

And the lava lamp? Where did I buy it? _____ I see.

...

Do I look sincere when I apologize? _____

(if the answer is yes...) Ohhhhhh. Thank you so much. This means a world to me.

(if the answer is no...) I am so sorry. *(keeps apologizing again and again.)*

(3) Role-Play

Another device I used is to ask the audience to help reenact a memory through role-play. Throughout this following section, the character tries to speak several times

¹⁰ The Edison Doll was, as Paula Vogel proposed, one of the key ingredients we were assigned to put into our Bake-Off writing exercise.

but only finds themselves silently smiling. Since the character is paralyzed internally, they turn to seek the audience's help to by assigning each audience member to say one interjection word like "ha", "oh", "hmm", and "yeah":

You who stand there. Among the crowds.
and there's you.
You stand among these people.
The crowd.
Among them.
They are talking.
You smile.
And you open your mouth. You close your mouth.
They talk.
Joyfully. Casually.
A woman tells a story.
A man bursts out laughing.
A man gives an empathetic look.
A woman gasps.
A man goes "Oh----"
A woman goes "huh...."
A man goes "Ha!"
A woman goes "what?!"
A man goes "yeah..."
A woman goes "oh yeah..."
And then
They laugh.
And you open your mouth.
You close your mouth.
You smile.
You want to know.
You open your mouth.
You close your mouth.
No one looks at you.
You walk away.
You want to hug someone.

You want to give advice. You want to be useful. You want to be helpful. You want to say goodbye. You want to say goodbye nicely.

But.

But you can't.

Not because you don't want to

But you can't.

Through this experience, I developed a better understanding of how I could work creatively in partnership with English, as I noticed audience participation served as a beautiful vehicle which offered voices and laughter that filled the gaps in my self-expression. In other words, the audience was helping me to speak. The excerpt of text above serves as an example of such moment in the performance. As someone who was relatively new to the audience in the US, I realized that creating moments of humor became a significant part of the performance as it would offer levity, which made the theatrical event more accessible emotionally to the audience. Meanwhile, I found that humor was created organically through audience participation as the responses were authentic and real in the moment of the performance. It occurred to me that meaningful communication could happen without words in theatre. A smile, a hug, a shrug, could all be very loud. Humor became a shared experience that went beyond language in this performance.

Still, not every audience would share similar responses towards the participatory nature of the performance I made. I was left pondering how I could frame my invitation better to engage with the audience differently. The audience seemed very engaged in this particular show, but what if they refused to interact? Would it count as a failure if it happened? How to define and navigate between authentic invitation and the flow of my narrative became a task for me. I also envisioned a pathway in which the audience was no longer a passive spectator or a passive recipient of prompted

questions. They could empower themselves to offer emotional support for a desperate character. Through an authentic invitation, the audience offers a generous gesture of aid, which would create a moment of belonging.

4.

A Return of Help: Reciprocating the Support of the Audience

Reflection on *Common Things*

“The gift of theatre may be well-intentioned and generously given, but it may be experienced as a hierarchy.”—Helen Nicholson

In my attempts of defining my authentic voice in artistry, questions about intention became the center of my inquiry. I found myself pondering a lot on my relationship with my audience, wondering which population of people should be my ideal audience, why I should make performances for and/or with them, what I could offer to make it worthwhile for people to invest their time for my theatrical events. I also realized that there was a deep connection between my identity as a non-native English writer/foreigner and my interest in finding answers for the questions above. The experience of being an outsider has invited me to trouble my thinking, to examine people’s needs, and to ask how I can make bold decisions while making my art accessible and responsible for my audience.

The questions about intentionality led me to think about the idea of gift. In Helen Nicholson’s book, she quoted from Mart Osteen:

“Gift practices expound a narrative of transfer and exchange, of hierarchy, aspiration, and freedom from history; and on the other hand, they retell a narrative of continuity with nature and the past, a story of human inter-connection.”¹¹

¹¹ Nicholson, Helen. *Applied Drama: The Gift of Theatre*, Second Edition; Palgrave Macmillan, 2014.

The aspect of gift-giving in theatre became a significant element that shapes my artistic vision. I realized that there could be “a story of human inter-connection” shared by me and my audience. As described by previous chapters, the audience had shown willingness to be helpful when a trusty-worthy relationship was built upon an authentic sharing of vulnerability. I saw the audience as a generous being from whom I could borrow ears for listening, mouths for speaking, and even arms for hugging. Touched by the audience’s presence to listen and to respond to my voice, I found myself pondering over the ways to reciprocate their love. The idea of gift became the center of my focus, as I started to explore how I could present gifts that deepens my relationship with the audience without creating burdens of hierarchy.

The first of such attempts began with a project I called *Common Things*. In the summer of 2017, as I was planning to visit Taiwan, my home, I decided to make a work-in-progress performance for my friends there to share my learning process in my first year of study at UT Austin. The performance could be seen as a temporary moment of return from diaspora, as it took place in my hometown. At that time, my intention was to make a performance for my friends who had supported me in Taiwa¹²ⁿ. Later, I had translated the piece into English and performed it again in Austin, with the intention of reciprocating the patience and love I received from my friends in the US¹³. If *The Smells of the Furnished Room* is a piece about seeking help from the audience, *Common Things* is a piece about reciprocal help.

¹² The performance received dramaturgical support from Bang-En Chen 陳邦恩, a theatre-maker and a poet based in Taiwan. Without his dramaturgy, the piece would not have come into being.

¹³ Here I want to give credits to Karen J. Sanchez, my professor in the MFA Directing/Playwriting Program at UT. She offered encouragements to me to do a performance in Austin after I shared my experience of making the performance in Taipei. The experience of making this performance has shaped much of my creative research process.

In particular, *Common Things* was inspired by my experience of an exercise in Kirk Lynn's "Devised Work" class at UT. In this exercise, we were assigned to make a piece "to make someone happy". In my group, we decided to include various ingredients that make our teammate happy: a phone call from his parents, the smell of morning coffee, lying on the ground and looking at the sky. The effect of this customized theatre for one audience was compelling. Until today, I still remembered the joyful emotional expression our audience shared in response to what they experienced.

Such experience left me wondering if people would be happy when their past was acknowledged and when their personal history were highlighted. Going off from that, I started experimenting with the idea of memory, which became the entry point of my writing of *Common Things*. For me, performing memory served as a platform on which I could weave poetry with the intention to offer gift to my audience.

As in my previous work, *The Smells of the Furnished Room*, I continued to use the idea of "flat character" as the major narrator in this piece. For *Common Things*, I wrote a long monologue that offered opportunities for verbal and physical interaction, then putting it inside a cassette tape. The audience was invited to take turns repeating what they heard through a set of headphones, after receiving message that the narrator was so flat that they only existed in the form of voice, meaning that the character was really desperate and vulnerable. In this way, the performance was highly dependent on the audience's help to move the story forward. The performance was also inherently built with the audience's presence. The performance text was imbedded with the audience's memories. Without the audience members' presence and their memories, the show would be empty. In other words, without the receiver of the gift, the gift would become meaningless.

Invitation

To collect the audience members' memories, I sent out an email to my audience to ask for their offer of presence two weeks before the show. I made a list of prompts and the audience could decide how devoted they wanted to be:

--Please pick as many as possible--

1. A dream.
2. A magical object.
3. A secret you can share.
4. A childhood smell.
5. A gift you'd like to have.
6. A hero you'd like to become.
7. A person you miss(ed).
8. A bad joke.
9. A thing you've stolen.
10. A thing stolen from you.
11. A food that you have romantic feelings about.
12. A dialogue/monologue from a play that means a lot to you.
13. A place you call home.

In some ways, I considered this an act of mutual aid—the audience needed to help me first, so they could enjoy the piece better. They needed to offer their memories to become the ideal audience for the piece, otherwise all they experienced would be other people's memories, which would create exclusion and loneliness when they understood their memories were not performed.

Barebone Text

In the attempt to perform memory, I was also searching for a sustainable narrative system to support the memories that were essentially different from each other. In response to this need, I built a structure for myself to fill in the memories of

the audience easily. I called such structure “the barebone text”, which I used as the base for the performance text. The barebone text basically remained the same, so the only thing I needed to do was to fill in the new memories from the new audience. As the flat character in this piece, the barebone text relied on the help from the audience to fill up the empty spots so as to give meaning to the full theatrical event.

Sensory Experience & Synesthesia

Inspired by a quote from Francis Bacon, “In heightened emotions, the sight is usually the most suppressed,”¹⁴ I started to explore different ways to include multiple sensory experiences into the performance. I started playing with the idea of morphing different memories together. I later interpreted this as a way to add imagination into the gesture of retelling memories. In the process of editing the audience’s memories, I intentionally mixed up different sensory experiences with each other. The following is an example of how I morphed the memory together, with the audience’s memories being bolded in the text:

Can someone please offer me a piece of food?

A piece of food. A piece of food.

I am empty. Feed me.

*(The performer gestures the audience to feed them.
Once an audience finds food and feed the performer,
the performer would say...)*

Umm... This is how my pain taste like.

(Prompt: food you have romantic relationship with)

It’s creamed spinach. Pumpkin soup.

The warmth of your hands ...it taste like

¹⁴ The quote came from Natalie Diaz, a poet and my teacher in a poetry workshop I took in 2017. It was because of my encounter with English poetry that I decided to explore different senses as I was rewriting the barebone text for the work-in-progress performance in Austin.

(Prompt: a place you call home)

The signatures on the cabin walls that went back to the 1950s.

The songs we used to sing in the old camp.

The Argentinian bench that sits on the east side of town, which is so far yet so close.

In this section, I put different audience members' memories together, hoping to create a sense of "synesthesia", a sensory experience of more than two sensory memories being stimulated at the same time.¹⁵ At this stage, I was testing if the audience would be happier when they couldn't find the distinct line between their memories. Through such a device, I blurred the boundaries between me as the performer and the audience, which I hoped could create a space of intimacy.

Learning from the audience: Serendipity

As I revisited the memory of the performance of this piece, I realized that the audience offered another gift back to me: the serendipity. As shared by the Merriam-Webster Dictionary, serendipity means "phenomenon of finding valuable or agreeable things not sought for." I became interested in knowing the relationship between participatory performances and serendipity.

In *Common Things*, as the audience didn't know when their memories were performed, there were serendipitous moments in which the audience found belonging in other people's memories. For instance, in one of the performances in Taipei, there was a section in which the audience got invited to read a text from Tennessee William's play *Glass Menagerie*, which was offered by another audience member in response to my prompt "a text from a play that means a lot to you." The text was

¹⁵ Interestingly, the idea of synesthesia later evolved into an exercise I used to teach "image", as one of the craft areas in playwriting, for the two playwriting courses I instructed in 2018.

Tom's final monologue. In the audience, a dear friend of mine volunteered to read it and later shared with me that when she read the part about St. Louis and following "my father's footsteps,"¹⁶ she remembered memories about her father and the memories of living with her father in St. Louis as a child. The moment of serendipity was created and generously shared by this special audience member.

For me, the idea of serendipity is a way of the audience co-authoring the theatrical event, as the audience could add a new layer of the meaning to the memory. Since the audience was involved as the essential component of the performance, I, as the author, had less control over the delivery of the story. In a way, the audience and I were reciprocating each other's help as the surprise of serendipity took place in the process of performing memories.

¹⁶ "Not long after that I left St. Louis. I descended the steps of our fire escape for the last time and from then on I followed in my father's footsteps attempting to find in motion what was lost in space..." (*Glass Menagerie*, Tennessee Williams, 1945.)

5.

Intermission: A Meandering in Memory

Reflection on the Challenges in Retelling Memory

“Through telling the story I am over-exposed. I overstepped my own privacy. Revealing what, at that moment, was not safe to reveal, I opened a wound...”

-Nick Rowe¹⁷

My experience of *Common Things* led me continue deepening my relationship with performing memory through different experimentations in order to build belonging in theatre. During the process of this exploration, I realized working with memory could actually be painful.

I remember feeling exhausted the second time I performed *Common Things*, being tired of holding various memories collected from the audience. I remember feeling paralyzed when I was reading books about memory loss as part of my research for performing memory. I remember writing a letter to my classmates to explain why I had trouble turning pages for the same play for our playwriting workshop because I dove deep into my traumatic memories, as I was working on the play *a song not song*, which I will talk about later in this chapter.

Challenge: Empathy fatigue

Over the course of this creative process of research on memory, I experienced empathy fatigue from my conversation with myself. I had the experience of talking about my sadness so often that I couldn't endure listening to myself anymore. The

¹⁷ *Playing the Other: Dramatizing Personal Narratives in Playback Theatre* by Nick Rowe

active listening for myself became energy-consuming. How could I make my work around memory sustainably? Why did I still want to work on memory if I felt so tired of representing and retelling memories? As performing memory is risk-taking, I also became interested in exploring is to know how it could become productive risk as opposed to a force that exhausted the participants' and /or the creators' energy.

Challenge: Craft Areas—Character and Motion

In the meantime, I found challenges in applying my knowledge of certain playwriting crafts to my writing practices. I became interested in knowing how this addressed my identity as a non-native English writer and my experience of diaspora. During my stay in the MFA Playwriting Program, I learned about different craft areas such as time, motion, language, image, character, status as a way to guide thinking for discussion of our work. These ideas have been shaping my dramaturgical sensibility and have been feeding my teaching practices in my playwriting class.¹⁸ However, I noticed I had a hard time deepening my relationship with character and motion as two of the major craft areas in creative writing. I found it difficult to lean into character-driven narratives as I often got asked about characters by my collaborators. And yet, my writing still centered on depicting non-linear time and fleeting emotions. I found myself often unable to explain full story context for my characters and their feelings. For instance, I could describe the nostalgia a character was feeling when they smelled soap in the summer—maybe it reminded them of a summer balcony where they helped hang clothes when they were a kid. However, I couldn't offer specific details of the events that took place in this summer memory. I experienced difficulty in

¹⁸ I was appointed to teach "Playwriting I" for undergraduate students as assistant instructor in spring, 2018 and fall, 2019, which offered me the opportunity to design my syllabus and practice teaching.

describing my characters' independent personalities—their full family background, their character's goals, and new characters' impact on their decisions. My characters were not integral—they are always “flat” in some ways. They only showed the audience a glimpse of their life before they were gone, and little did we know where they were heading towards. The only thing I knew was that my characters were paralyzed and stuck with their memories in some ways.

In terms of motion as a craft area, I found it hard to create horizontal moves, as a term Steven Dietz uses to describe the turn that propels the motion of the play forward¹⁹. Why is most of my creative writing, both plays and fiction, always fragmented in some ways? Why is there no linear arc with which the audience or the readers can easily ground themselves in my writing? Why can't I write in Aristotelian structure as many other writers do? Even until today, I am still questioning myself: am I not good enough or am I too lazy to devote myself to the creation of a cause-and-effect story? Will I be able to apply these crafts better when I return Taiwan to compose in my native language again?

Experience of Diaspora

I wonder if the inquiry above has a deep connection to my experience of diaspora. In my personal life, I see things in a circular pattern. I, as a foreigner in America, I carry memories of my home with me. My solution to ease the loneliness is to visit my memories over and over again. Then things get circular. This aspect of my

¹⁹ The idea about motion as a craft area in playwriting is by Steven Dietz, a mentor and a former Playwriting faculty in the Department of Theatre and Dance. Although I encounter challenges in creating horizontal moves, it was inspirational for me to identify the pattern of the motion in my play. Until today, I am still trying to unpack my thinking about my habit in writing, trying to identify if my habits as my areas of strength or areas of growth.

life echoes with how memories are constructed, as explored in Helen Nicholson's book about applied theatre:

“Life is not itself a coherent unity, nor a linear narrative, but a ‘configuration of memories’ and ‘matrices of meanings’ which become stories as experience are re-told.” (Nicholson, 67)²⁰

Despite the fact I, as all the other human beings, physically exist in a linear time, meaning I cannot travel to the past or to the future, my internal world is essentially a non-linear configuration. This aspect makes me wonder if the story arc in my writing is therefore as fragmented as the memories it depicts.

“All storytellers are vulnerable because stories, once told, have a life beyond the immediate context in which they were heard.” (Nicholson, *Re-Locating Memories* 271) In my process of performing memory, I learned more about where my pain came from. Unlike fictional stories, our memories are true only to us. Memories are unique because they are part of our past, our personal history, despite the fact that they are often the products of reconstruction²¹. As I share my memories in life, I am offering

²⁰ Nicholson, Helen. *Applied Drama: The Gift of Theatre*, Second Edition; Palgrave Macmillan, 2014.

²¹ What is worth noting is that memories are not always true: “When people talk about their lives, people lie sometimes, forget a little, exaggerate, become confused, get things wrong. Yet they are revealing truths...the guiding principle could be that all autobiographical memory is true: it is up to the interpreter to discover in what sense, where, and for what purpose. (Nicholson 93)

But at the same time, there is a process of meaning making as the memories are retold and reshaped. “As our memories become more penetrable how much can we trust the stories that we have come to believe, however certainly, about our lives? When people recall, “they are reconstructing,” he said. “It doesn't mean it's totally false. It means that they're telling a story about themselves and they're integrating things they really do remember in detail, with things that are generally true.” (Hayasaki 3)

my trust to the listener. In performances, in return for the trust the audience shares with me, I have to consider my responsibility in advance, which can be overwhelmingly heavy if I fail to find a way to take care of my audience.

Play: *a song not song*

I wonder if this is where my resistance to work with memories comes from. As I was working on *a song not song*, a play loosely based on Euripides tragedy, *The Trojan Women*, telling stories of lost homelands after war and exploring themes related to trauma. It was later developed into the text for a season subscription production *The Women of ____ (a song not song)*, an ensemble work produced at UT in the spring semester in 2019. Although the topic directly addresses my experience of diaspora, I kept questioning why I should make a play that examined trauma throughout the art-making process. How I could draw clear distinction between engendering effect of catharsis and triggering audience's trauma became an important but difficult task.

During tech week of the production of *The Women of ____ (a song not song)*, I found myself estranged when having heard a line in the end of the play:

-I don't use tampons anymore; insertion reminds me of him.

I wrote this line in the early development of the play, using my personal experience of trauma as a major resource to write this tragedy. As I heard this line, the stinging pain of trauma came back all of a sudden. I adored the delivery of the lines by the actors, appreciating how the actors approached these subtle feeling with gentle eyes and hearts, empathy and compassion. What left me pondering was the effect of my

writing. The wound was not there anymore—I had already moved forward from the traumatic event I portrayed at that point— but the original pain was locked in the form of spoken words on stage. Even in this very moment of writing this document of thesis, I found my body shaken by the memory of hearing this line. It then took me a few minutes to invite myself to return to the present. This, however, does not mean there is no value in these words. Words are strong when they stand as part of our personal truth. The only need I have is to examine what form can serve the best vehicle for such words. They may exist well in poetry, fiction, or other plays—yet I question their function as spoken words in this particular play.

I wonder if we, as theatre-goers, might all share the experience of walking out of a performance, wondering why we should have spent time being talked at for two or three hours while already knowing a lot about the content matter. We crave to gain new insights and move forward, but in those performances, we are only invited to review the past with the same lens we are already familiar with. Some words might be well-intentioned, but their impact would not benefit its audience. Having had such experience, I found myself resisting against creating a play that could produce patronizing experience for its audience.

I became interested in knowing how to empower myself and my audience through a process of meaning-making with each other, and yet I found it difficult to achieve such goal in the process of making a tragedy. I was left wondering if inviting traumatic memories would require responsibility to avoid empathy fatigue and fear due to over-shared memories, as there could be high risks in performing memory:

“Through telling the story I am over-exposed. I overstepped my own privacy. Revealing what, at that moment, was not safe to reveal, I opened a wound, perhaps to appease, to please, or to be seen – and then I could find no way to close it. One of the other actors said to me ‘People will only tell stories that they

feel safe to tell'. Is this true? Is it not possible that tellers will find themselves stumbling into saying more than they wished to say, or more than they had expected?" (Rowe 42)²²

After the realization that sharing memories could essentially contain risks of overstepping one's privacy, I decided to re-examine my relationship with my diasporic pain. Despite the challenges, this experience still offered me opportunities to ask again how I could frame the process of collaboration differently, to examine the values of process, to create a more dialogic rehearsal space for collaboration through devices like ground-rules and collaborative agreement to talk about boundaries and ways of engagement.

Sometimes I wonder if I can't write in a way I expect to because I am too far away from home. Writing about home has become too painful. Sometimes I wonder if I have come to a place where the nostalgia is too vast that no writing could serve a container to support such feelings. How can I write to create happiness for others if I am not happy myself? How can I support others' memories when I feel my nostalgia is not supported and not listened to? What's possible? These questions brought me back to Brené Brown's ideas about vulnerability:

I think one of the greatest casualties of trauma is the loss of the ability to be vulnerable. And so when we define trauma as oppression, sexism, racism, I have no choice but to leave my house with my armor on and carry the 20 tons of that through my day, no matter how crippling it is, no matter how heavy it is, because I am not physically safe in a world — or, this environment. (Brown)

Brown's ideas about vulnerability gets to the core of my doubts in performing traumatic memories. As a writer, I felt obliged to take care of my audience. How to be

²² *Playing the Other: Dramatizing Personal Narratives in Playback Theatre* by Nick Rowe

brave and vulnerable authentically at the same time became my interest in this stage of my writing career, which brought me to reflect on the devising process in the project discussed in the next chapter.

6.

An Anchor in the Process: Recognizing Joy in Meaning-Making

Reflection on the Devising Practices in PDW

“It’s all about our community humanity, and when we own our stories and we share our stories with one another and we see ourselves reflected back in the stories of people in our lives, we know we’re not alone. And to me, that’s the heart of wholeheartedness, it’s the center of spirituality. To me, that’s the nature of connection, to be able to see myself and hear myself and learn more about myself in the stories you tell about your experiences.”— Brené Brown²³

The above quote served as a significant part of my process of working with Lina Chambers, an MFA candidate in the Program of Drama and Theatre for Youth and Community at UT, for a project-based course “Professional Development Workshop” (PDW) in the spring of 2018. Our work was a series of devising practices, an inquiry-driven project, a continuation of my work-in-progress piece *Common Things*, which was discussed in previous chapters. This particular collaboration has contributed meanings that significantly shaped my inquiry of vulnerability, memory, and belonging, leading me to reflect on my writing process discussed in this thesis document.

What makes this collaboration so special is because it helped me unpack my thinking about loneliness and re-learn about my relationship with diasporic pain. In the middle of our process, we had come up with a few devising exercises that addressed the mission questions of this project:

²³ Brown, Brené and Tippett, Krista. “Strong Back, Soft Front, Wild Heart.” On Being Project, 8 Feb. 2018. <https://onbeing.org/programs/brene-brown-strong-back-soft-front-wild-heart-feb2018/>

“How do we engender vulnerability safely? How might our piece invite audience members to feel connected through their personal (perhaps relatable) memories? How might one person’s memory live in another person’s body in a pleasing way?” (Lina Chambers, my collaborator in Professional Development Workshop)

My favorite moment in working with Lina Chambers was a phone conversation in which we discussed our plan for the workshop day in class. As I asked her if we should make more time to invite the class to share experience of loneliness, Lina shared with me “No—I am not that interested in loneliness. I am more interested in **belonging!**” In this very moment, I felt both relieved and empowered. Free from the burden of re-examining trauma over and over again, I found power in moving forward to be actively engaged in finding solutions for my problems, the experience of loneliness as part of diasporic pain. Looking back, I realized that such approach of thinking echoes a way of seeing that deals with conflicts in conversation:

There is no greater power than a community discovering what it cares about. Notice what you care about. Assume that many others share your dreams. **Ask “What’s possible?” Not “What’s wrong?”** Keep asking. (Wheatley, Margaret J.)

Inspired by this quote, I started examining the difference between my previous projects and my collaboration with Lina. It occurred to me that the main focus of my previous projects—*Songs of 52 Hertz Whale*, *The Smells of the Furnished Room*, *Common Things, a song not song*— was primarily about “What’s wrong?” When I worked with Lina, the focus turned into “What’s possible?” as we were experimenting different ways to find space for belonging.

As Lina and I were experimenting in different ways of retelling and representing memories, I felt my diasporic pain was alleviated. One of the examples was our invention of an exquisite corpse memory game. Originally as a method of game that asks its participant to add to a composition of words or images in sequence, the exquisite corpse became a good device for us to play along each other's memory. As we retold each other's memories imaginatively and metaphorically, I experienced a shift of the ownership in the memory. The boundary between us became blurry. As such intimate human connection took place in the moment, I found myself redefining my relationship with time, anchoring more in the "present" rather than the "past" or "the future". The trauma was therefore lessened, as we played along, as the playing engendered the joy of living in the present.

To illustrate the discoveries I made about myself, I will draw particular moments that connected me to the idea of "joy" in the process of collaboration:

Framing the Process with a Process-driven Approach

In the process of collaboration with Lina, I was invited to explore the distinction between the ideas of "result-driven" and "process-driven" as approaches in theatre-making. As my art had been primarily been idea-driven (as opposed to character-driven), I wondered if a process-driven approach would better serve the development of my artistry. By following the process, I could be given a more flexible space to explore ideas with myself and my collaborators.

It was not until my PDW collaboration that I realized that having a process-driven approach could help me anchor in the "present". A concept like "process-driven" was very new to me, as I grew up with a result-driven education. By drawing more attention to the process, I became braver and more patient in experimentation

with ideas. I felt connected and listened to by my collaborator, as we invented many strategies or games to collect memories. There was a pure joy as we made discoveries together. The joy is not solitary but collaborative and communal, which was important in my research of intimacy and belonging for participatory performance.

Creating through Playing

Over the course of collaboration, I gradually shifted my focus to the idea of “belonging” from the idea of “loneliness” As talking about the past and diasporic pain was energy-consuming, a shift of focus allowed me to anchor myself to the joy of living. One of my favorite examples of “playing” is my encounter with water-beads. In our rehearsal process, Lina shared with me a toy called “water beads”. The water beads usually looked very small but they would grow into colorful and slippery bean-sized balls once we feed them water. We were both deeply delighted by this tactile and whimsical thing, and we decided to use it as a device to bring playful memories from the participants of our memory experiment. In the day of our workshop, we passed a bowl of water beads around, and invited our cohort to share a piece of happy memory. I saw my friends playing with the water beads with eyes wide open and burst into a surprise gasp. What happened in the room was pure joy—suddenly we were like kids, curious and delighted, playing with this new toy.

Things like water-beads can be both simple and profoundly playful. My engagement in water-beads and games like exquisite corpse helped anchor me in the present and offered a window of hopes for the future. In other words, we were making “new memories” together when we were exploring new things with each other.²⁴ The

²⁴ I also want to mention my collaboration with Mason Rosenthal, a devising artist, director, and a performer originally based in Philadelphia. In our devising practices for a guerilla performance called “Aisle” in the supermarket, I found the joy of collaboration. Devising was a pure joy as we were

pure joy came from the spirit of “play”, which reminds me of my favorite quote from Peter Brook: “A play is a play.”²⁵

Meaning-making in the process

It was in this collaboration that I came to realize the value of meaning-making in dialogues through theatre. As we adopted a process-driven approach, I was enabled to make meanings with my collaborator through conversation that invited close-reading of the ideas such as memory, vulnerability, and reciprocal help.

The meaning-making process offered me the joy of discovery and left me wonder if theatre was essentially a dialogic space that troubles one’s thinking through inviting conversations in which we contribute new meanings to each other’s existence. As Lina and I talked a lot about our thoughts and research on various ideas, there was a joy created in the process in which we talked “with” each other, as opposed to “talk at” each other, which led me to ponder on this following quote:

“Participants profit from their own talking...from what others contribute and, above all, from the interaction—that is to say, from the enabling effect of each upon the others.” (James Britton, quoted by Noral Morgan et al.²⁶)

As I read this quote, I thought how the idea of “with-ness” was a key in shaping a dialogic space. Lina and I share thoughts with each other, and new meanings arise from our talking. As a non-native English speaker, I felt genuinely happy when being

constantly contributing new meanings to each other’s ideas. For me, this defines theatre, a dialogic space where we know better about ourselves through talking and playing with each other.

²⁵ Brook, Peter. *The Empty Space*. New York :Atheneum, 1968. Print.

²⁶ Morgan, Norah and Saxton, Juliana. *Asking Better Questions*, Pembroke Publishers, 2006.

heard and understood, while being tossed with more questions that deepen and trouble my habitual thinking.

One of the big discoveries I made took place in my conversation with Lina about a study about mutual aid. The author Esther Farmer defined the moments of human connection as “magical experience”:

“There are moments in community building where time stands still; something special happens that no one can quite put their fingers on, and people are collectively transformed into some new kind of understanding...There may be an unspoken but conscious feeling of awe, or possibility, or a new experience of connection and empathy towards another human being. ...This experience of transcendence, of being unselfconsciously part of something bigger than oneself, is one type of **magical experience**.”²⁷

Later in the essay, Farmer takes this concept further: “The process of creating environment for magic can promote a culture for democracy, where principles of inclusion and participation are manifest.” Inspired by the examples of community engagement, I came up with a hypothesis that the moments of profound human connection, or the magical moments, happen when there is a process of “teaching” and “helping”. These ideas served as a way of scaffolding the audience to the step of creating new memories together with me. Through sharing the rules of the world (teaching) and inviting them to take part in the rule to add their presence (helping), I can take care of the audience better. The act of mutual aid became significant in molding my interaction with the audience.

²⁷ Farmer, Esther, “Strange Bedfellows: Community development, democracy, and magic”, *Community Development*, 25 March, 2015. 294-306.

7.

A Co-Construction of Meaning: Reconciling with Linear Time through Mutual Aid

Reflection on a place called the middle

“All negativity is caused by an accumulation of psychological time and denial of the present. Unease, anxiety, tension, stress, worry - all forms of fear - are caused by too much future, and not enough presence. Guilt, regret, resentment, grievances, sadness, bitterness, and all forms of non-forgiveness are caused by too much past, and not enough presence.”—Eckhart Tolle²⁸

In the spring of 2019, my play *a place called the middle* was produced as part of UT New Theatre, or UTNT, a showcase for the third-year MFA playwrights in the Department of Theatre and Dance. As this was my last piece at UT, I framed the play as an opportunity to apply my two-year long creative research on human connection to the making of participatory performance. In the spirit of experimentation, the making of *a place called the middle* served as a proof of concept in my long process of inquiry, as I planned to continue the creative research after the show closed.

Essentially, *a place called the middle* is a performance that takes the audience to an imaginary world where the sun moves very slowly and people there only live half a day. Throughout the play, the characters, the unnamed voices that share the same consciousness, invite the audience to take part in reminiscent storytelling of their diaspora experience with the evocation of different sensory memories. It is a performance that highly depends on the collaboration of the audience and poses questions about our relationship to time.

²⁸ Tolle, Eckhart, and OverDrive Inc. *The Power of Now: A Guide to Spiritual Enlightenment*. Novato, CA: New World Library, 2010.

As I was framing the relationship between diaspora and the play, I gave a new definition to my personal experience of diaspora. The diaspora is no longer limited to a change in space, but can also be seen as a temporal change, which I suspect is something all human beings share in common, as we are always moving linearly from the moment of birth to the day of death.

If I see my life as a story, then I would always be walking in the middle of my story. I wouldn't remember the beginning of my story—only my mother does. I meet different people every day as if I was encountering other characters in the story. Everyone has a different role in my story: friends, enemies, and strangers. What I know for sure is that everyone is also walking in the middle of their own stories as well; and we are always encountering each other in the middle of our story. Moreover, it is highly unlikely that everyone will get to know the ending of each other's stories. I see you, you see me, we spend time together, and then we depart.

This is where I got the idea of the title of the performance *a place called the middle*. It is a performance that explores the inquiry about “what it means to be in the middle of something.” I was curious to know about the moments in which different life stories overlap with each other. I suspected these moments could offer a sense of intimacy: Human beings would no longer be lonely when their pathways run across each other. From there, through the encounter, they could find community and feel belonging, which I identified as the function of *a place called the middle*.

In this chapter, I will draw attention to the process of the development of the play. I will divide the chapter into three sections: the challenges I encountered, the effective tactics that supported the process, and my on-going wonders about my inquiry. As this chapter serves a reflection of the play development, I also hope it can

be a reflection of how I synthesized my findings from the previous projects that are connected to this ongoing creative research:

Section One: Challenges

For me, the biggest challenge was to create a content and a form that served the function of this theatrical experience²⁹. My roles as writer was not just to finish a story, but I had to take audience's experience into account. As I had been exploring the form of audience participation for two year, how could I generate a form of writing/a style of writing that could best support participatory performance? How could I find a content to best support the form and the function?

(1) Challenge One: Adaptation

One of the biggest wonders I had in mind was the difference that exists in different forms of writing, as the development of *a place called the middle* was first a process of adaptation across genres. To elaborate, the story of "the middle" originated from a series of short fiction I created with Edward Carey, a novelist and a professor in the Department of English at UT. During my independent study with him, I came up with the idea of a mythical hometown called "the middle," and then wrote a few short stories that pose different questions about the reliability of memory and the idea of home. What exactly is home? Are we always traveling? Though the word "diaspora" has never been named in my fiction, all my characters are essentially

²⁹ I learned about the idea of form, function, content from Megan Alrutz, one of the professors in the Program of Drama and Theatre for Youth and Community at UT, as I was taking New Play Dramaturgy class with her. The concept has helped me approach a development of a new play and production.

pondering these questions to make meanings out of the nature of diaspora in their life.³⁰

As I was exploring ways of adapting my fiction writing to playwriting, I became curious about the distinction between the form of fiction and performing art. In particular, I thought about what Kirk Lynn said: “Plays work by a series of limitations...Novels work by a series of excesses.”³¹ Unlike novelists, I, as a theatre-maker, got to interact with my audience in person, especially because I was making participatory performance with a hope to find belonging with the audience. How could I find a balance between the desire to explain all the story context and the need to build intimacy with audience?

a. Challenges in Adaptations: Meta-theatricality

In the fiction version of “the middle”, the main characters all share the role of writer in some ways. Their narrative style is reminiscent/retrospective, which creates an experience for the readers that they were reading journals or autobiography. In the fiction, these characters occasionally bring up the stories they are writing about and ponder on the nature of reality, memory, and fiction. For me, meta-theatricality always serves as a good device to serve my interest in self-reflection.

³⁰ These stories include: a girl describing her hometown “the middle” on her trip back to home for her grandpa’s funeral, another girl remembering her childhood friend who got bullied and lost his shadow after falling into a goblin hole, another girl reflecting on her love with a fictional flat character who can only exist as a real person in the place called the “middle”, and a woman who continuously buys new memories for her eyes, feet, and ears after her body forgets how things feel.

³¹ Lynn, Kirk, “Plays vs. Novels (You will never guess what happens next)”Liuhub, 19 Oct. 2015 <https://lithub.com/plays-vs-novels-youll-never-guess-what-happens-next/>

Following this passion about meta-theatricality, I put a group of “flat characters” seeking their identity and the absent writer in the early versions of the play *a place called the middle*. However, I encountered difficulty as I was connecting this layer of meta-theatricality to audience participation. I realized there was a need to make the story more accessible to ground the audience if I wanted the audience to feel comfortable enough to participate. More importantly, the world of meta-theatricality also added to the complication of the story, which might make the participation less accessible. My concern was: When there are too many layers of the worlds, the audience gets confused more easily.

The defining moment for the decision to cut this device came from my conversation with the director and the dramaturg. I remember being asked about what these characters wanted, and I told them that they wanted to be the protagonist of their stories; they didn’t want to be flat characters anymore. In response to this, Lena Barnard, our dramaturg, then posed this question: “If they want to be protagonist of their story, if they want to control their fate, then why do they keep talking about the writer?” It was a moment of great epiphany. It dawned on me that these characters need to talk about their memories more than their creator. Following that, I decided to remove the presence of the absent writer. In order to follow my interest in discussing the writing in our life, I defined these characters as voices that share the same consciousness of a writer who travels far away from home and gradually forget things about their hometown.

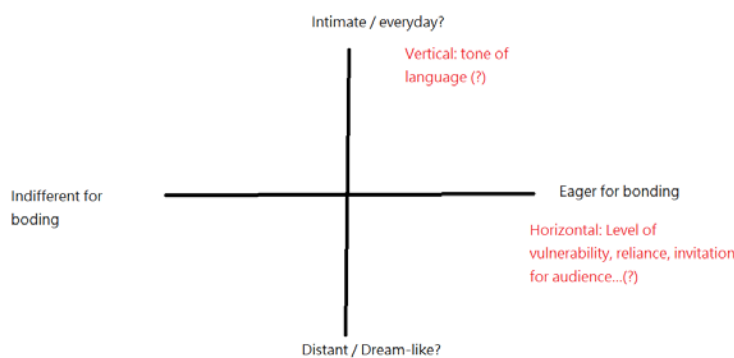
Looking back, I wonder if audience participation inherently has a quality of meta-theatricality. The audience is interacting with the actors, and the fourth wall is broken. If we add more layers, such complication would make it difficult to invite the

audience into the experience of memory, which would affect the audience's willingness to participate.

b. Challenges in Adaptation: Language— Tone and POV

One of the big questions I danced around was how to make my language more accessible to the audience since the play is participatory. I was curious about “the tone” and “the point of view” in the language of the play. In the draft I brought in to the first day of rehearsal, the tone of the play is considered “poetic and heightened”, as described by my collaborators. More, the play is filled with descriptive words, as it is a feature in my short fiction. As mentioned previously, I carried a pattern of shifting point of view in my writing. In the play, the point of view shifts between the first-person point of view and the third-person point of view. However, I had concerns that the change of POV would affect the audience's experience of emotional investment.

Today I am still pondering over the effect of such language in participatory performance, as this was how I wrote and how I approached language. In order to better understand the relationship between language and audience participation, I made a small chart for myself to track changes in our text experimentation in rehearsal, as shown below:



(Figure 1: Language and Engagement)

In the development of the new play, Adam Sussman, my director³², offered space for “text experimentation” for the process of rewriting. For me, it was a great opportunity to examine my writing by using the continuum as shown above. In the process, I learned that the text experimentation was an effective way to explore the relationship between the “content”, “form” and “function” of this theatrical event.

In the rehearsal room, the actors, the director, the dramaturg and I collaborated to change the line assignment and to cut things. We played around with different tones and jumped between points of view just to see which style of speaking can make the character feel more vulnerable, understandable, approachable, and sincere. At the end, it dawned on me that the first-person point of view might serve the play the best, as the first POV might engender more vulnerability than the other forms of perspective.

Following this decision, I made all the stories highly relevant to the characters on stage. In the early version, the characters were telling stories that belonged to someone else’s memories. Now, the stories the characters talk about became their own memories. In response to that, I realized that I had to add more specificity to their memories, and potentially adding my own memories to the story to make it more vulnerable so as to create moments of connection.

For example, in the last scene, the characters reveal that the “middle” is actually a hospital, where the characters are experiencing the first bout of illness and feeling extremely lonely. To elaborate, I drew this from my personal memory. For me, it was challenging since I had been struggling with exposing my memories too much, as I had the experience of empathy fatigue in my conversation with myself, as previously

³² For *a place called the middle*, I was working with Adam Sussman, an MFA director in the Department of Theatre and Dance, as the director of the piece, and Lena Barnard, an MFA playwright, as the dramaturg of the piece.

described. How to navigate such feelings as I am engaged with memories in theatre? I have been pondering on this question as I am reflecting on my process of research.

(2) Challenge Two: Inquiries around Intention

The Gift in Theatre: Why does it need to be a participatory performance?

Throughout the development of *a place called the middle*, I had been interrogating the intention of gift, as I was hoping this theatrical event could be a gift to the audience. Gift, by definition, means something you offer without expectation of payment. However, I kept scrutinizing my intention to build “a gift in theatre”. Do I not want to have anything in return?” What does it mean to give and receive a gift? How does the process of gift-giving affect the power dynamic between the giver and the receiver? How can a gift-giving culture be sustainable? Especially when the gift-giver, who is me in this scenario, experience empathy / compassion fatigue? How does the idea of reciprocity affect the intention of offering a gift? More importantly, is the gift ever wanted or needed?

In my conversation with Maria Striar, a NYC-based artistic director and a guest artist for UTNT, it dawned on me that interactive theatre sometimes creates negative experiences because “it is intimidating for the audience to perform things they don’t actually experience.” The lack of authenticity becomes one of the reasons people hesitate to see a participatory performance. Following these thoughts, I noticed an irony gradually emerging. I wanted to make a performance that serves as “a gift for the audience”. Yet, at the same time, I was building an interactive theatrical experience, which I knew was not desired by a certain number of people. I started questioning my intention to build participatory performance.

Aside from these doubts, I also wondered if I was being hypocritical because I was building a gift more for myself than for the audience. Did I do this just for the sake of my own interest rather than for the sake of the audience? Since it is true that I am more drawn to participatory performances than to the other forms of theatre, could this just be a matter of my personal taste for theatre? I wanted to build human connection with the audience so as to create moments of empathy and joy, but do I only want to use this as a device to cure my own loneliness? Is this all about me?

Such questions had been hovering over my head as I was reflecting back on my creative process at UT. It wasn't until the middle of the process that I realized why this play, *a place called the middle* had to be participatory rather than a "play-type play." In one of our conversations, Adam, my director, brought up an example inspired by the TV Series "Russian Doll." In the TV series, there is a scene in which a character tells another sad character:

"I cannot make sure you are not unhappy.

But I can make sure you are not alone."

It was at that moment that I realized that this might be why I was making participatory performance. The participation was meant to serve as a way to alleviate the pain of loneliness. Recognizing the presence of the audience would create a sense of togetherness. The characters might still feel sad in *a place called the middle*, but with the company of the audience, they are no longer in pain because they are alone.

Section Two: Effective Tactic

In this section, I will review the moments that are the most helpful for the process of production, which I identified as tactics I could apply for future development of my play. As a process-based approach has been significant in my creative process, I am interested in exploring tactics that can support my collaboration. In particular, I found some decisions relatively effective for shaping a collaborative and organic process in the development of *a place called the middle*. In the meantime, I also reflected on my previous work as I was making the show, which I will discuss below:

(1) Tactic One: Process—Identifying the Mission Question

In the development of a new play, mission question plays a significant role as it helps us to examine if our decisions have digressed from our intention. A mission question, as I define it, is the central question that drives the play/ performance forward, and everything is related to the mission question in the play/ performance³³. For the development of *a place called the middle*, the concept of a mission question served as the most helpful device throughout. As previously described, since I was exploring the best content and form that served the function of the performance, the mission question therefore became a great tool to anchor us in this process of rehearsal. To illustrate, the evolvement of my mission question can be divided into these different stages:

³³ I learned about the idea of mission question from Liz Engelman, professor of the Playwriting Program, as I was taking PDW. The concept has shaped my thinking about idea-driven project and devising since then.

Name of the piece	Mission Question
Stage zero: (<i>52 Hertz Whale</i> , 2016)	-How can I expose the diasporic pain? (How can I expose my vulnerability?)
Stage one: (<i>The Smells in Furnished Room</i> , 2017)	-How can I get help from the audience? (How can the audience support the vulnerability?)
Stage two: (<i>Common Things</i> , 2017)	-How do I make my friends happy? (How can I reciprocate the audience's help?) -How can I engage with the audience members' memories to make them happy? (How can I make the audience happy by giving them a purpose, inviting them help me?)
Stage three: (PDW, 2018)	-How do I give people a sense of purpose in theatre? -How do I create space in which people can offer help? (How do I engender vulnerability safely /responsively?)
Stage four: (<i>a place called the middle</i> , 2019)	-How do we help our friends to reconcile with the pain in linear time by giving them a sense of purpose through mutual aid?

(Figure 2: Mission Question)

About Time

For the mission question of *a place called the middle*, I was synthesizing all the mission questions from previous work³⁴It dawned on me that the task of *a place called the middle* was to find a way to reconcile with the nature of the linearity in time through mutual aid.

Before I started working on *a place called the middle*, I had a strong hesitation over making theatre about memories. I noticed the past is not retrievable, no matter how hard I tried to evoke the memories in my writing. I started to wonder if the exposing

³⁴ Here I offer credits to my collaborators Adam Sussman and Lena Barnard who came up with this mission question together with me. It was through a deep conversation about the history of my mission questions for previous work that we came up our mission question for *a place called the middle*.

nostalgia was not very productive in the sense that it could help me reconcile with the diasporic pain.

Since the mind was so often conditioned by the past, I was forced to reenact the past again and again—I was trapped in the past. As I learned from previous projects, the only way to escape from this experience of trapped-ness, I suspected, was to find a way to live in the present. I was particularly drawn to by Eckhart Tolle’s idea of time, which helped me to shift my focus to the present from the past, where memories usually dwell and thrive:

“Time isn’t precious at all, because it is an illusion. What you perceive as precious is not time but the one point that is out of time: the Now. That is precious indeed. The more you are focused on time—past and future—the more you miss the Now, the most precious thing there is.”³⁵

With the hope of building a sustainable sense of belonging, I started thinking about helping others anchor themselves in the present. In this way, when the audience walked out of the theatre, they could have their own toolkit to reconcile with the loneliness in their life.

After a performance of *a place called the middle*, an audience shared with me that he felt like helping the actor whose voice was trembling in a scene in which the actor asked the audience if he could read a letter to them. The audience member was so emotionally invested that he patted the actor and said “It’s okay” without being prompted to. For me, this was an embodiment of emotional aid. Applying the idea of “aid” that came from my discovery in previous work was crucial for *a place called*

³⁵ Tolle, Eckhart, and OverDrive Inc. *The Power of Now: A Guide to Spiritual Enlightenment*. Novato, CA: New World Library, 2010.

the middle. It helped shape needs to be based on mutual invitation, so as to create a sense of togetherness. The gift-giver can also be the gift-receiver at the same time.

Looking back, I became aware that these hypotheses and my mission questions were flawed, as a lot of these thoughts derived from my subjective experience and my assumption on human psychology. Yet, it was still helpful the development of the play. Throughout the process of rehearsal, we kept visiting our mission question. Whenever we encountered difficulties in making decisions, we would remind each other of the mission question. Instead of jumping into characters, we would ask: How does this decision help to deepen or propel our mission question forward?

(2) Tactic: Process—Team-Building through Collaboration Agreement

I define collaborative agreement as a continual process of dialogue as opposed to “let’s fight for what I want and sign this contract.” Through collaborative agreement, I establish a common language and a way of working with my collaborators³⁶. When the play itself involves devising and memory together, it is needed to set boundaries to prevent from “overstepping one’s privacy”³⁷. Without a clear rule, I found it difficult to prevent myself and my collaborators from sharing memories that were painful but do not help propel the development forward.

³⁶ The idea of a collaboration agreement first came up in my work with Lina Chambers. We first talked about our strengths and then we shared our needs. Later, when I was in Megan Alrutz’s “Applied Theatre” class, the class established ground rules, from which I felt a culture of the community is built. Establishing collaboration agreement is also a big take-away from my process with the project *The Women of ____ (a song not song)*.

³⁷ Rowe, Nick. *Playing the Other: Dramatizing Personal Narratives in Playback Theatre*, Jessica Kingsley Publishers. 2006. In the book, he said there is a danger of exposing oneself when we share memories.

In the first week of UTNT rehearsal, my collaborators and I spent time coming up with our collaboration agreement. The process of this conversation can be three-folded. First, we discussed our strength, then our areas of growth, meaning areas for improvement and support, and finally our needs. After talking through these areas, we, together as a team, came up with ways of working to proactively honor our individuality. Some examples include: “honor time landmarks”, “choice in acting”, “check-in and check-out”, “no traumatic memories are needed or desired”, “call in and not call out”, “talk *with* the stage manager, not talk *at* the stage manager.”

There was an agreement that established a routine to “de-role” and “en-role” through the act of tapping-in and tapping-out, which was important for actors who worked with memories. Meanwhile, there was an agreement on the need of a warm-up in the beginning of the rehearsal. This helped to create levity and also positive effect on ensemble-building.

(3) Tactic: Meaning-Making to finding inspiration for ways of participation

In the process of rehearsal, we found it useful to study the works of other works of participatory theater. I found this surprisingly helpful for the development of a new play. Through reading other dramatic writing and sharing different experiences with participatory performances, we invited the actors to reflect on different ways to interact with the audience. One of the examples is a conversation in which we talked about different tones of speaking in other participatory performances, such as *The Fever* by 600 Highwayman, *The Red Rabbit and the White Rabbit* by Nassim Soleimanpour, *The Method Gun* by Kirk Lynn and the Rude Mechs, *Every Brilliant*

Thing by Duncan Macmillan and Jonny Donahoe³⁸. All of these discussions about these plays were helpful—by looking at other people’s work, we know better how to establish our unique tone of audience participation. Here I will describe on some tactics (or aesthetic choices from others’ work) we identified as helpful tools for shaping a successful participatory performance, then I will name the potential outcome of these aesthetic choices. Finally, I will talk about how these tactics swim into the development of *a place called the middle*:

(Figure 3: Tactics and Application)

Tactics (Aesthetic choices from others’ work)	Outcome/Effect	Application/Practice in my UTNT
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Start the performance with a happy place. 	By creating a happy place, we might be able to better invite the audience, since they might think participation is a happy thing.	In the beginning of the play, we had a scene in which we invited all the audience to play “Hide and Seek” with the characters in an imaginary childhood park. It became one of my favorite scenes as I always heard laughter from the audience when the seeker of the game opened their eyes and saw a forest of people standing in front of them.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● The task we assign for the audience is something that the audience knows how it ends. 	The audience can share the same knowledge of the task and won’t feel so intimidated when invited to participate.	Most of our activities of engagement had a clear ticking clock. For example, the audience playing “Hide and Seek”, the audience holding hands with the actors, the audience reading letters. In the moments, although the audience didn’t know for sure how long their participation would last, they usually knew how their participation would end.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Ask an audience member if they can help (as opposed to asking 	We can try to keep things simple, since the audience doesn’t need to	Throughout the play, we didn’t ask for volunteers for audience engagement. Our intention was to

³⁸ I want to thank Andrew Rodriguez, our assistant director for sharing this piece with us. Our conversation about the play *Everything Brilliant Things* was particularly helpful in shaping our vision for participation. The play had a tone of vulnerability that invite the audience to provide aid to the character on stage.

for volunteers)	think too much about if they want to participate, but only give response like “yes” or “no”.	have the characters more vulnerable. This means they would see every audience as necessary and important, as the audience are defined as “the people who come to sit in for those we miss”. (In the beginning of the play, we also inserted one line “It is okay to say no,” which, based on some audience’s feedback, was considered helpful for those who didn’t want to engage.)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Give the audience a simple task rather than complicated /multi-tasked exercises. 	The task should be simple enough that the audience doesn’t need to “perform”. They can “help” by being themselves, by being human beings. In this way, we can maintain the authenticity in our connection with the audience.	In the early process, I thought of having the audience read letters that contained really poetic languages and asking the audience to offer their memories based on our prompt questions. Through experimentation, we found it hard to explain the rules. More, the audience are not actors. Eventually, I removed these ideas, and, instead, we assigned the audience simple tasks like “holding hands”, “reading a few letters”, “giving a toast for a family dinner”.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Let the audience know it’s okay to do things wrong. 	By assuring the audience, we lower the stakes so the audience feel more invited.	We spent a lot of time trying to give the best and clearest instruction for the audience. For example, in the last scene, the audience was asked to take the pulse of the character, as they were situated in the hospital. The characters will instruct the audience, scaffolding the tasks.

(Figure 3: Continued)

Section Three: Wonders—On-Going Wonders in the Creative Research

In this section, I will examine the wonders I have as I am moving into the future while reviewing notes and feedback I received from the audience:

(1) Wonder One: Not every tear is a good thing.

It gradually dawned on me that not all tears are good in theatre. It is not necessarily a virtue that we get an audience to cry in theatre. I used to see audience crying as evidence of how moving the performance is, but I learned from my experience that there is a distinction between trauma and productive tears, as there is a difference between resonance and meaning-making.

In the process of making *a place called the middle*, what mattered for me was less about how to engender emotions, but more about how to create an experience that supports and complements the audience's emotions. There were certainly challenges to identify or define productive tears, especially post production. I am still wondering how I can better gather information from the audience and better frame this mission as I am moving into the future.

(2) Wonder Two: Shifting of Ownership: A dialogic space in participatory performance

The idea of reciprocity and mutual invitation became significant to me as I was making *a place called the middle*. As Barbara Mayholf mentioned: "A story is not a good story until it receives a story in return."³⁹ This quote brings my attention to the power of both listening and storytelling. What can I do as a theatre-maker to create a space in which audience members are no longer passive listeners, but are empowered to contribute meanings to the story?

During performances of UTNT, I realized that feedback from the audience also altered my own perception of memories that served as an inspiration for the piece. Some audience members shared similar memories about things I brought up in the

³⁹ Quoted by Arthur Strimling in *Roots and Branches: Intergenerational Theatre*

performance. Some audience members shared their response to the smells our aromaturgy built in the space.⁴⁰ One of the responses I received was an audience member sharing with me that they found courage in this performance after receiving a handwritten note that said “Do not stop writing. Do not stop writing.” The performance went beyond a talking cure, as previously described as considered a treatment to trauma. I learned that the participatory performance becomes the most effective when it is a dialogue. It was through the dialogic space that I found new meanings in my memory.

I gradually learned that the power of sharing memories might lie in the effect of shifting ownership and creating new meanings. There was one time in rehearsal that we played a telephone game of storytelling, in which the actors retold the same memory multiple times with added description of imagination. I remember one of our actors shared with us that her memory was originally sad but now had become a “happy memory” after hearing the memory retold. What she said stayed with me and reminded me of an essay about memory written by Helen Nicholson:

“Sharing stories changes their ownership, moving from the storyteller to the reminiscence actors and to the audience. This means that the act of witnessing autobiographical performance not only invites reflection, it is also good practice for the emotional significance of treasured and guarded memories to be valued and actively recognised whether they are pleasurable or painful” (Nicholson, *Re-Locating Memories*, 272)

Following what Helen Nicholson was describing, I realized that new meaning could find their way into our life when we were empowered to share memories in theatre. I wonder if the meaning-making could be a significant step in the

⁴⁰ In the show, we released different smells that serve as a stimulation of memory.

participatory performance I am making. In other words, the audience could be invited to become the co-author the story, and from there we build a space of human connection. Through the co-sharing of memories, we get to add and rewrite to each other's story.

There is a word that might better capture what I have in mind in Mandarin. The direct translation of the word “感動” is “touched” or “touching”, but the original meaning of these two characters means “to feel” and “to move.” If I intentionally apply the meaning of the individual characters to my engagement with audience, my vision of the future would be my audience feeling empowered “to move” as they walk out from my performance. They not only “feel” things but also gain a new way of looking and thinking in a dialogic space I facilitated. Then I wonder: if this is the function of the theatrical event I want to create, what kind of content should I bring to the process of the production of the performance? I believe there are also ways to shape and frame the process to serve this goal of the audience co-authoring the theatrical event. Ultimately, how do we get the audience to “feel” and then to “move” at the same time?

8.

CONCLUSION

It never occurred to me that one day I would be working so much on diaspora for participatory performances. Much of my work in the US centered on my research on building intimacy with an audience. Such styles of theatre or dramatic writing were not what I pictured myself doing when I applied for graduate school. A month before coming to America, I was planning on writing a violent play that depicted cannibalism and its relationship to capitalism. The play would be absurd, funny, witty, and cruel. It would feature a man who volunteers to be dissected as a lab monkey, an alien who gives a tour in a factory that produces human flesh cans, a female mantis eating a male mantis, and Jonathan Swift, the author of *Gulliver's Travels*, giving a speech about babies being made into soup and coats.

I didn't finish that play.

It became one of the many plays I left behind in my life.

If I were asked to finish this play now, I would be asking a lot of whys. I would not understand why I should create a play like this. My interest and belief in theatre has shifted drastically over the course of my study, as now I became more curious about making theatre *with* the audience.

As a non-native English writer, I always suspect myself incapable of transforming my ideas into the language that could authentically present who I am. Despite interest in exploring time through art, time is often working against me. There is never enough time to focus both on the linguistic and the conceptual aspect of the play. Time pressure has affected me and my relationship with writing. I write and communicate worse when under high pressure and with little time to prepare, which,

inherently, seems to be a weakness of mine because, in my experience, efficiency is so often honored and structured to be part of collaboration.

Defining my needs, I am learning to come up with strategies to better articulate myself. I found myself asking questions about the relationship between my areas of growth, collaboration, accommodation and accessibility. Do I deserve accessibility? Am I still a good collaborator, good artist and a good student if I cannot meet certain standards people expect? All these questions lead me to think about the different levels of accessibility and how I could apply the idea of “access intimacy,” as described and explored in previous chapters⁴¹, in the process of my collaboration.

Looking back, I found there was a sense of suffocating frustration in the process of reconciling with the identity as a non-native English writer who has to serve audience/readers who are primarily English speakers. And yet, I found myself being guilty whenever I complained about it, even though I felt it promising when I learned stories of non-native English writers such as María Irene Fornés and Samuel Becket, even though I read about the following ideas:

“Our universities are woefully lacking in multilingual writing programs that can give students the encouragement and freedom to use their native languages. We should be building many more such programs, and they should not only be for multilingual writers. Monolingual writers, too, have much to learn from the multilingual experience, one that will invite them to confront, perhaps for the first time, the gulf between a lively mind and a poor tongue.”⁴²

⁴¹ Boren, Ryan “Accessibility, Access Intimacy, and Forced Intimacy” , Blog, 15, May, 2018, <https://boren.blog/2018/05/15/accessibility-access-intimacy-and-forced-intimacy/>

⁴² Menéndez, Ana “Are we different people in different languages: The Multilingual Writers in 21th Century”, Lithub, 19, Nov, 2015, https://lithub.com/are-we-different-people-in-different-languages/?fbclid=IwAR2QBb8FK94rCNOAX0yOrSqoFGSCdfQyQloC_Er4EKT2EPL-rzjdgchN4YE

I would benefit from the practice described above, but I also want to add my wonders on this argument. How can we advocate support for multi-lingual writers in an institutional context? How do we serve English-speaking audience while pondering our relationship to English as a colonizing language for certain demographic of population? Would there be multi-lingual faculty who share similar experience and offer guidance?

Responding the need to both find my own voice as a writer and serve the English-speaking audience, I turned to participatory performance, which served as a gentle vehicle that offered opportunities to invite the audience to speak *with* me. By empowering my audience and giving them agency, they are offered a place to share their presence. In the performances I seek to make, the audience should not be “voyeuristic on the teller’s story”⁴³ but real human beings with whom I can have dialogic connection, which would offer space for intimacy. We can rewrite each other’s life by offering our presence to each other:

“Meaning does not reside in the word or in the soul of the speaker or in the soul of the listener. Meaning is the effect of an interaction between speaker and listener produced via the material of a particular sound complex. It is like an electric spark that occurs only when the two terminals are hooked together.”
(Rowe cited from Bakhtin, 69)

As Bahktin described, meaning will change once the memory is shared. Through performing memory with each other, we can create a new system of meaning-making and therefore experience the joy of being together in the present moment.

In this inquiry, I seek to find a balance between my style of language and the

⁴³ Rowe, Nick. *Playing the Other: Dramatizing Personal Narratives in Playback Theatre*, Jessica Kingsley Publishers. 2006.

need of creating accessibility for my audience. As a non-native English writer, I found it easier to communicate through poetry. Metaphoric and imagistic language has been a major part of my writing. However, I am also aware that heightened language might create challenges for audience to engage immediately. If I want to talk “with” the audience, I might need to be mindful of the language I choose to use. This inquiry also invites me to ask how I will write in my native language when I finally land on a place I considered home. Today I am curious to find answers for these questions through more writing practices.

This thesis has served as an examination of my attempts in finding reconciliation with the diasporic body I carry. Through this creative process of research, I understand better and better how to define myself as a non-native English writer in theatre. What makes my heart smile is that when I, as a foreigner in the US, make the performances I believe in, I find belonging from my collaborators and my audience. Theatre has become a dialogic space where I anchor myself in the present with the reciprocal aid. Theatre has offered a touch on intimacy where we, as participants, are invited to ask “What’s possible?” and to rewrite our own stories with the company of each other. Theatre has built a home for me. I am not alone anymore.

I am glad to be in this life we call home.⁴⁴

⁴⁴ Inspired by a phrase in the lyrics of the song “Heart Cooks Brain” by Modest Mouse, a song recommended by my friend Alex White.

9.

Songs of 52-Hertz Whale

(And once again i sing a song that no one understands...)

And there she was. Once again.

The rest of you were

waiting, staring, and smiling.

She tried to focus but after 30 minutes her ears were already defeated.

Her mind was trapped in a pool where no one else was invited.

Dive. Dive. And swallow.

She tried to

reach out to something but

there was nothing but the splatter of silence.

Then silence

got louder

and louder

then her breath meandered through her memories and

then her heart beat drowned her breath she could not hear a thing she struggled no one

else could hear her she screamed her heart beat drowned her scream

And time flies like this.

1

2

3

4

5

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10

Not a single voice was heard.

A body without words.

And then she feels nauseous.

Ewwwww

And some of you gasped some of you screamed but we comforted him but you gave him a glass of water but you sent him to the ER but all of you helped each other clean this mess up.

Her daddy and mommy say:

It was so nice of you.

Oh it's nothing.

No no no really it's really really nice of you.

How is she now? Feeling better?

She is. Sank you.

We all wish her a speedy recovery.

She's doing ok. Better and better.

but

i wish

i wish

i could tell you that they took a good care of her

and she refused to speak for a very long time

and all her classmates were sorry for her

and her teacher came to visit her

and her mommy and daddy took care of her-fed her with all the love all the care-

and there was a team of national experts came to treated him and maybe he recovered

but no

next day he still needs to go to school

and everyone remembers

and one of her classmates (his name was Max or Mike or Marcus or something I

could not tell you because he could not remembered) this Max something made fun of

him at lunch he didn't remember what he said but he remembered this Max said

something about him and everybody laughed and he remembers the fact

that everyone remembers ...

And life goes on...

.
. .
. .
. .
. .

(And once again i sing a song that no one understands...)

So once upon a time there was a 52 hertz whale. Its frequency was so unique so different from the others so no other whales were able to hear him.

Does he have friends?

He was the loneliest whale on earth.

Does he sing?

He sings the loneliest song in this planet.

What happened to him?

He was left alone and was stranded on the beach and no other whales could help him and he was full of plastic bags and car parts in his stomach and he could not spill it out because he could not reach out to the others because no other whales understand his agony and anxiety and despair...

Do his mommy and daddy reach out?

His song is unheard by everyone-mommy and daddy included.

And then?

He died alone. With no sound heard...

(And once again i sing a song that no one understands...)

i know in America you expect students to be active. To raise their hands to dare to speak to be fearless to challenge to discuss to interact to be humorous to say something smart to make people laugh to...

The anxiety of inadequacy.

You're so unique.

A parched tongue. Thoughts piled up but stuck in the throat.

We like who you are.

A hollow body emptied of words.

if only we get to know you better.

And words filled with broken meanings.

What did you just say?

The disconnection of the signifiers and the signified.

What do you mean by that?

Breathless.

Motionless.

We understand. No worries.

If only.

If only the thoughts could come out...

If only there were subtitles to every word you said...

If only the syntax, phonology, and morphology remained the same...

(And once again i sing a song that no one understands...)

So this is written like this.

i did this on purpose because you have to experience the way I felt.

i now prefer to write down everything before i say something out loud...

Is there anyone who do not understand a thing i said?

Please raise your hands if you have ever felt so.

Do you feel you have problems understanding me?

Please raise your hands if you have tried to translate what i said in your mind?

Thank you.

i apologize for my inadequacy.

Could you forgive me?

Could you imagine what i would become if i were able to speak your language?

Are there any chances that we could become good friends or best friends

if i were able to have you understand me?

Is there anyone who would like to become my friend? Don't raise your hand. Say yes in your mind and i will understand.

Shall we continue?

So there she was. Once again.

What up?

And she panicked.

What up?

What should she say?

She has never learned this before. In her school they taught her when someone say how are you she should answer I'm fine thank you. In her home his mommy and daddy have never taught him that.

And It's your turn your turn to say something something nice something cool something sweet.

And then once again i am ,no, she is speechless.

i am fine sank you.

Thank you.
Sank you.

Thank you.
Sank you.

Thank you.
Sank you.
Sank you for your understanding.
Xie Xie. Xie. Xie. Sank you. Sank you. Sank you.

i came here and i am learning to be a *Mo-Sheng-Ren*. A stranger. A foreigner. An alien.

What does it mean to be *Ren*? To be human? When you could not reach out to the other human beings?

In this lengthy soliloquy,
you are my interlocutor. My only addressee. i wish i could be you.

Words swallow words as thoughts swallow thoughts.

i wish i were you.

i created a you within myself. A myself projected in you. A better me within you. And become a better us. You created a we and we become you.

In this diasporic body. A ghosted body.

A haunting memory.

Switching back and forth between the past and the future.

Moving forward without present

for both of us wish we were not here. A present we could not speak.

A crack in time.

And gradually

gradually

i forgot how to speak

And you know i would prefer not to.

But what

happened to the whale?

And then the whale dies.

Did its daddy and mommy find it?

They never know it was dying when it lives.

What did they do with the body?

And then his body exploded. As all the other whales did when they die.

What did you find in his broken body?

Thousands of songs unsung and millions of poems unread.

And as i said i would prefer silence

i would prefer not to.

(And once again i sing a song that no one understands...)

How are you today?

i am fine sank you.

THE SMELL IN THE FURNISHED ROOM

(Excerpt)

SYNOPSIS

The Smell in the Furnished Room is a work-in-progress short play about a flat character that desperately needs the help from the audience to fill their empty memory. Loosely based on O Henry's novel, *A Furnished Room*, the play transports the audience to Asia from a room in an American house, plunging them into a visceral inner voyage. With English and foreign languages interwoven with each other, the play introduces an exotic land. The play invites the audience to help construct the world with an anonymous storyteller while being penetrated to the core of thoughts in a labyrinth of smells and sounds. *The Smell in the Furnished Room* promises intimate interactive experience, a journey far away, and a special little gift for everyone.

CAST

One or many.

NOTE:

The blanks in this script serves as a space for interaction between the actor and the audience members.

Before the audience members enter, a greeter greets the audience. This greeter needs to give the audience guidance. This greeter's mission is to make the audience prepared and welcomed, which is to say, inviting them being seen.

The greeter may ask one of the audience to read the following instructions.

Here is an example:

Hi. Welcome.

How is everything going? Do you have a good time so far?

We are going embark on a journey.

Would you like to join this adventure with us?

Thank you. (smile)

No. Yes. There might be dangers.

But I will take care of you.

I promise.

Do you promise to offer me your trust?

Thank you. (big smile)

Before you get in, we have something for you.

#1 A gift.

Please take one. Like this.

Good choice.

Take care of this object with you. This is our present for you.

The greeter will offer the audience a small object which has strong smell on it. The smell needs to represent or imply where the speaker comes from-- like a star anise or a slice of ginger.

#2 A piece of paper and a pencil.

Write down...

#1 A childhood smell.

#2 Something you smell in this room you are about to enter.

#3 Your favorite object in this room.

The greeter will offer the audience a piece of paper on which they need to write down something. The audience is given a piece of paper sheet and invited to write down (1) their favorite object in the room and (2) a childhood smell (3) something they smell in this room.

That's all.

Any questions so far?

Thank you.

(The greeter offers a big big smile silently.)

Let the journey begin. Shall we?

When the audience enter, there will be a preshow going on offstage. Someone is cooking something. It smells good. Damn good. We hear someone is humming with the song played by the stereo. It is a song in a language we are not familiar with.

A broadcast:

Good morning. Welcome aboard.

We are sorry for the delay in our departure.

Please find a seat as soon as possible and refrain yourself from smoking while the no smoking sign is on.

From captain to the crew, it is our pleasure to serve you today.

If there is anything we can do to make your travel more enjoyable, please let us know. In a few moments we'll depart. We require that you give us your careful attention.... Thank you.

(The actor is lip-syncing in their own native language.

The following is an example in Chinese.)

歡迎各位乘客。

很抱歉我們的班機誤點。

請盡快回到您的座位。當禁止吸菸號誌亮起時，請您不要吸菸。

機長與機組人員在此很榮幸為您服務。

如果哪裡可讓您的旅途更加舒適，請讓我們知道。

幾分鐘後我們將起飛。在此麻煩請您多加配合，謝謝您。

1. The Opening.

Dear friends,

Welcome.

Thank you for being here.

I know this is all new to you. It's a new journey after all. What do you feel when you embark on a journey and step your feet on a foreign land? Or strange place?

Like where you are now.

Are you worried?

Forget about your worries. Focus. Nothing exist outside there.

We are here.

Our world is here.

The world only exists In this room.

The couch you're sitting on. This red wall. The tapestry above your head.

You.

Me.

And you.

Let's take a deep breathe together.

(breathe)

You're doing great.

Let's breathe again.

(takes a second breathe)

So we're now in a room in a hotel. But I do not know much about this room. And I need your help to find out.

It is 3pm (the real time of the performance) in the afternoon.

The following is a detailed description of the city the actor come from. Sounds and images are provided. *Here is an example.*

You could hear the sounds of street vendors.

In Cantonese. The food vendors yelling for customers. They're selling fish selling sweets selling chicken which has just been slaughtered. The spoons clicking on the bowls for congee and wonton soup.

Sounds of wok. The clink clank of the metal spatula. The chopping sounds of the Chinese cleavers. And the honking. The honking of vehicles, of bikes, of scooters.

The vendors selling buns and tea houses are opening.

The steam of the tea houses is hovering in the air in this room. In this building.

Right above you. It comes from behind you and is now everywhere.

2. *The Smell*

And as you breathed the breath of the room, what do you smell?

Ummm...interesting but strange.

Thank you though....I didn't smell that.

What else do you smell? _____

Ummm...interesting but strange.

But I believe you. I believe you have sensed that smell.

One special thing about sense of smell, a scientific fact is that human beings can detect at least one trillion distinct scents.

And I smelled something different from you.

As I breathed the breath of the room—I can smell a tinge of herbal savour flowing in the air... mingled with the exhalations of linoleum and furniture

And there is a fragrance of _the sea?_ mixed in the odor.

Ummm. I wonder who brought it here right now.

That's what I smelled. That reminds me of where I came from.

My family came far away from this land.

But this is all I knew about them.

And myself.

And nothing more.

When you leave this room, this sea salt will stick on you.

In your hair. On your shirt. Your shoes. And eyes.

Do you believe it? And I smelled something different from you.

Do you believe me? Do you believe I smell something different?

(asks an audience member and keeps asking until this speaker find a person who says yes)

Thank you. For your trust.

Trust is like a mirror you can fix it but you can still see the cracks.

Do you have trust issues?

Your trust means a world to me.

Thank you.

Cuz I indeed smell something different from you...

As I said, my knowledge to this room is limited.

3. The Objects

This should be my home but I have never felt so distant from it before.

Am I borne here? _____ You sure?

Now we're all here in this room. But I have no knowledge of this room.

Please help me construct the world I am in right now.

Where exactly do these objects come from? I must have traveled to many places.

That must be how I collected them.

Here the actor will pick an object in the room, then ask the audience about its origin. Here's an example.

See the tapestries up there? The tapestries with mysterious black patterns on them...

Were they gifts? _____

Who gave me them to me? _____

I see.

And the lava lamp? Where did I buy it? _____

I see.

And the stairs.

The stairs that lead to the second floor of this building.

Sometimes I hear strange crackling noises from down here. It disturbs me so much...I can barely sleep at night...And I dare not to go up there...because I am afraid I can't communicate with ...

Do you know who...or what live up there? _____

I see. And do you think I should talk to them?

Can I succeed?

Do you think I can succeed in having a nice small talk with them? _____

Thank you. I wish I had the confidence in myself as you do.

I don't exactly know who I am and where I belong.

4. The conversation

In fact, I don't know why I am behaving like that.

I don't like to be shy but I have no choice. I prefer silence when I don't know what to say.

Have you ever felt you are a different person when you are in a foreign land?

I had a few conversations with a bunch of people this week. They came to my place. And they made me feel a total stranger here.

Like this.

Monday.

A common place.

A group of people.

Chatting.

There's (name of audience member, or AM 1) , there's (name of AM 2) , And there's (name of audience member, or AM 3)...(AM6)

and there's me. You can play me. (*Signals an AM to play the role.*)

You stand among these people.

The crowd.

Among them.

They are talking.

You smile.

And you open your mouth. You close your mouth.

They talk.

Joyfully. Casually.

Woman tells a story.

A man bursts out laughing.

A man gives an empathetic look.

A woman gasps.

A man goes "Oh----"

A woman goes "huh...."

A man goes "Ha!"

A woman goes "what?!"

A man goes "yeah..."

A woman goes "oh yeah..."

And then

They laugh.

They look at you.

You want to say something smart.
But.
But you can't.
They look at you. And you say nothing.
Not because you don't want to
But you can't.

And you smile.
They laugh.

Wednesday.
A common place.
A group of people. Chatting.

You who stand there. Among the crowds.
and there's you.
You stand among these people.
The crowd.
Among them.
They are talking.
You smile.
And you open your mouth. You close your mouth.
They talk.
Joyfully. Casually.
A woman tells a story.
A man bursts out laughing.
A man gives an empathetic look.
A woman gasps.
A man goes "Oh----"
A woman goes "huh...."
A man goes "Ha!"
A woman goes "what?!"
A man goes "yeah..."
A woman goes "oh yeah..."
And then
They laugh.
You want to know.
You open your mouth.

You mumble.
You stutter.
They look at you.
“What do you mean?” a woman asks.
A man frowns.
Before you spew out any words,
The woman asks a question to another man.
The man laughs.
The conversation goes on.
Everybody laughs.
But.
But you can't.
Not because you don't want to
But you can't.

And you smile.
They laugh.

Today.
A common place.
A group of people. Chatting.

You who stand there. Among the crowds.
and there's you.
You stand among these people.
The crowd.
Among them.
They are talking.
You smile.
And you open your mouth. You close your mouth.
They talk.
Joyfully. Casually.
A woman tells a story.
A man bursts out laughing.
A man gives an empathetic look.
A woman gasps.
A man goes “Oh----”

A woman goes “huh....”

A man goes “Ha!”

A woman goes “what?!”

A man goes “yeah...”

A woman goes “oh yeah...”

And then

They laugh.

You want to know.

You open your mouth.

You close your mouth.

No one looks at you.

You walk away.

You want to hug someone. You want to give advice. You want to be useful. You want to be helpful. You want to say goodbye. You want to say goodbye nicely.

But.

But you can't.

Not because you don't want to

But you can't.

And you smile.

They laugh.

You smile.

Thank you for playing these people and me.

5. Confession of a Flat Character

So. Where were we? Ah. The story.

This happened yesterday.

You are now

with me

In yesterday.

Time travel. Exciting isn't? If we travel through time, travel before this room is built...before you were borne...isn't exciting?

Have you ever time traveled before? Huh? _____

Talking about yesterday.
Wanna hear a joke?
Present, past, and future gather together in a bar.
And guess what?
It's tense!

(laughing really hard)

Hahahahahahahaahha

(laughing and gasping and coughing and then finally stops laughing abruptly)

Sorry. Not funny.

I apologize. (bows)

Do I look sincere when I apologize? _____

(if the answer is yes...) Ohhhhhh. Thank you so much. This means a world to me.

(if the answer is no...) I am so sorry. *(keeps apologizing again and again.*

Exaggeratingly.)

You see

Why I keep digressing from the subject is because

I am a flat character.

My story is not complete.

I can do many tricks. But I just don't know why I can do these things. I can dance. I can sing. But I just don't know why.

I seemed to have lived here before. But I don't remember anymore.

I am not the author. Yes she speaks through me. And your expectation speaks through her. Her words are now floating in the air. Here and there.

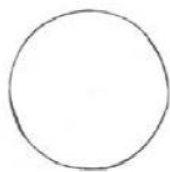
The excerpt ends here.

11.
COMMON THINGS
(excerpt)

Common Things is a work-in-progress performance workshopped first in Taipei then in Austin in 2017. The performance invites the audience to embark on a sensory journey to help feed the empty memory of a flat character who desperately craves for more stories. Presented by a silent performer and a voice from the headphone, the piece seeks to light magic in real memories, explores the relationship between vulnerability and belonging, and offers a sensory feast for everyone.



there will be moments of darkness.
when the moon goes dark, draw a line of your laughter.
make it round



and transparent

so the sun can walk through it
steadily.

Before show, you will receive an email like this:

My dearest friends,

This is an invitation for a performance called “Common things”.

This is a show in which I will perform. This is a show in which you are invited to help me perform. This is a show about a flat character who lives in the headphone and desperately needs our help.

If you'd like to come, please share a memory of least one item in the following list and send it back to me via email.

It can be whichever way you'd like—text, images, audio files will all be great.

1. A dream.
2. A magical object.
3. A secret you can share.
4. A childhood smell.
5. A gift you'd like to have.
6. A hero you'd like to become.
7. A person you miss(ed).
8. A bad joke.
9. A thing you've stolen.
10. A thing stolen from you.
11. A food that you have romantic feelings about.
12. A dialogue/monologue from a play that means a lot to you.
13. A place you call home.

I hope you're all doing well.

Thank you.

After sending the email and receiving replies, we collect stories from the audience.

We weave the audience's memories into the Barebone text.

In the following pages, you will see lines marked in different colors.

The underlined lines are the memories provided by the audience.

The text marked in red are the prompts I shared with the audience in the e-mail.)

This following text is based on the performance we made on 11/2, 2017.

On 11/2, 7pm, we gathered together in Lab Theatre at UT campus.

Tonight we have Lina, KJ, Daria, Drew, Sam, Mason, Dan, Eli, Tucker, Cecelia, Abigail, Hannah W, Alice here.

Thank you so much for joining us.

And thank you for providing your stories.

The theatre is dark. But we have some lights on the stage.

When it is time, when everyone arrive...

the performer suggests someone in the audience to read the following lines from a notebook kind of thing.

Page by page. Line by line.

From the notebook:

Hello.

How are you?

How's this week going?

Thank you. For joining me. And us.

Don't worry. You'll be taken care of.

I promise.

Let's take a deep breath.

Again.

Do you believe in me?

Thank you. For sharing your trust.

To repay you, I'm now offering a smile to you.

Before we begin, we'll make a semi-circle.

Ready?

Go.

That's a good semi-circle. It's not round. It's half round. Like the rivers that run in our life.

In this show, I'm going to touch you.

You feel alright being touched?

You do know— touch is mutual right?

When I am touching you,

You're touching me back.
When you touch me—do you wanna touch me?
I'm touching you back.
My warmth is bouncing back to you. Through your hairs, through your skin.

In this show, I'm going to ask for your help.
Like...can you turn the lights off?
It's there. The lights. You might need to take the plug off.

Wait!

You might wanna bring your own lights with you.
Like...cell phone or...something...so you can find the plug in the darkness.
It'll be dark when you turn it off. I don't want you to get hurt.
After you turn the lights off, wait. Wait until you see a moon in your mind.
The moon needs to be bright. Because I am afraid of darkness.
You'll see the moon. And you will see a lunar eclipse.
When your moon is fully devoured by the darkness, turn on the lights.

Thank you. I like the shape of your moon.

In this show, you can speak--if you want to--
If you feel you want to respond to me, speak.
In this shows, you will read out the notes from the cards.
And...here! I already got some notes for you.
I'll pass them down. Like this.

Let's read them one by one.

The performer shows a headphone and a recording machine, and then gives every audience member a paper strips or a card. Each strip/card has a number and a line of instruction. The audience takes turns reading the following lines:

1. This is a house.
2. Inside the house live some songs.

3. A song of you. A song of me.
4. THIS is a door to the house.
5. It will kiss your ears.
Would that be okay for you? A kiss?
6. If you want to open the door,
Press the triangle.
7. If you want to shut the door,
Press the square here.
8. When the sounds of the house enter you, you will repeat what you hear.
9. Note. When you hear this noise...
(The performer makes a sound with the music box hidden from the audience.)
press the square to stop the sounds.
Then pass the house to the person who sits next to you.
10. If the sounds are cloudy to you,
here is how you control the volume.
11. You're doing great.
Any questions so far?
12. Thank you. Shall we?
13. Close your eyes.

The performer gestures the first audience member to take on the headphone. The first audience member hears a voice coming from the headphone, and then repeats it:

1. Time

Hi. Sound test. Sound test.
Can everyone hear me?
Do I need to raise my voice?

Good.

Thank you for coming.

You're all staring at me. This is kinda awkward. Haha.

Let's do a little stretch out together. Shall we? Arms. Fingers. Shoulders....

This is great.

I'm glad you're here.

There is a world out there.

As we speak, the world out there is still growing.

But here.

The room is old.

Time is here. And there. A swarm of time flies to you. They will hit your face, your fingers, look out! That one just crawls into your sleeves. Haha don't worry. They don't sting.

Time is stinky like warm honey.

Do you wanna have a try?

(a bowl of honey)

Try to see what time taste like?

Don't swallow. Let it stay on your tongue.

(childhood smell)

Once I ate the moon with its shell and the volcanoes numbed my tongue. The core of the moon is soft and somehow it tastes like the scent of piñon smoke, the first wood fires of the fall, the roasting green chiles and wet earth on chilly September nights after a thunderstorm.

Anyone wants some more?

This is how the time in this room tastes like.

I wonder if there is a non-human memory inside you now. Since you've eaten it. The memory. It's buzzing ...like bees...through your throat.

This piece of memory is old.

2. Fire

This piece of memory is old.

It is before you were borne,

When the sun was dark,

And fire is young

It was before the ticking of the clocks,

- before the zooming of airplanes, the humming of phones,
- the booming of guns, the bombing of bombs,
- the babbling of crooks, the splashing of the sea,
- the cracking of fire, the rumbling of thunders,
- the rustling of leaves, the howling of wind,
- the chirping of cicadas, the clicking of the whales,
- the murmurs of humans, -the pattering of tears, -the roaring of laughter,
- the throbbing of hearts,

If you smell smoke, that's the smell of the old.

It is ___(smell)

The smell of baby blanket that your mother gave to you

We travel to the time when the first word was not spoken, to the time when giant animals—giant as mountains—walked on earth and swam in the sea...Be careful with the shadows!

We travel to the time when silence is acceptable in this world. See?

How silent it is.

Your names. My names. They have left our bodies.

They are floating in the air. They are the stars.

Oh look! Falling stars! Catch them !

Has everyone caught a falling star?

Do you have one? You can have mine.

Everyone has a star in your hand?

Let's all make a wish together. In celebration of the silence.

I wish to find where I belong in this world.

I wish our encounter ...our meet-cute is not just a dream.

3. Dream

You keeps dreaming about flying.

(dream)

In my dream, there was a dry grass. Put your hands on the ground. Feel the ground. It's as dry as a winter apple. And we are floating. See? Your legs are off the

ground. Can I hold your sleeves? So we don't drift away. Can we all hold each other's sleeves? Like this. Your sleeves make me feel very secured. We are the balloons and we are floating One feet. Two feet. Three feet.. It's high. I am glad there's a ceiling to stop us from...you know...Or else I'll never see you again. And wow I never thought this room can look so big. Be careful with the strong wind! Hang on! I'd love to hang out with you more but the height is getting me a bit dizzy. Does anyone suffer from Acrophobia?
Yeah I'm glad I know this word. I looked up the dictionary.
And I am glad I didn't eat too much in dinner.
Let's go down? Shall we?
Someone will count to three. On the count to three let's go down together.
Can someone count to 3? Please?

Landing!

Be careful. Do not step on the dreams. When it breaks, it will make mourns like broken egg shells. They are the dreams of yesterday. The ghosts of planets.
The ghosts of the things that have left me.

4. Joke and magical objects

Hey don't be so serious.

do you wanna hear a bad joke?

I shouldn't have told you it's a bad joke. It's like you buy a book and you saw the bad reviews of the books...

But anyway,

(a bad joke)

Q: What's the difference between a hippo and a zippo?

A: One's heavy and the other's a little lighter.

Sorry it's not that funny.

But your laughter

Your laughter is a spell that charms me.

It is Magic.

I rely on magic so as to keep myself believing things.

I need magic.

(Magic objects.)

This is a blue rock. This is where my magic comes from.

Can someone search for the sound effects of thunders? Could you play it? I figured it would be more theatrical while we pass this rock around. The best part about this rock is that it has these white veins that run through it like lightning bolts. Put it near to your ears. You will hear some non-human memories thundering to you. They are ancient and furry. The memories belong to the people who live in it. The rock's polished. If you hold it just right to the light, you can see the people walking. And I am the person who lives in it. The shapes of my body are the lines of the tress that were once hit by lightning. Be careful with the rock. If you break the rock, you break my soul.

(A gift you'd like to have)

I am a big wooden spoon on the middle of my body is a black burning hole.

(Childhood smell)

If you smell the rock, you can taste rotten eggs, cigarettes, sage and Rose eau de toilette. They coexist...on my tongue.

I live in the rock. Well disguised.

5. The stolen things

From time to time I thought about the things I have stolen.
Are they still there?

Do trees still make sounds when we're not watching?
Are apples still red when no one sees them?

Do things still exist if they fall out of our memories?
I thought about the things I have stolen.
And these object that went astray and got lost and never returned?
What if we can return them?

The performer folds paper airplanes with the audience members.

What if we can restore these memories? What if ...we learn some kind of craft...to return these pieces of lost objects?

(The stolen things)

Like... The pint glasses from the restaurants.
The Juicy Fruit in Wal-Mart. You've been stealing gum all the time.
I guess I'm kinda ashamed. But not really. Okay. I'm not. Most of the time I
do not see these stolen things in my memories.
Oh and the money you stole from your mom. And oreos. You bought the
oreos with the dollar bills you're your mother's pocket on the way she
drives you to school.

Let them be returned to their homes.
Goodbye. Objects! Go home!

They will return.

6. History

History always comes back to where they were first told.

I guess that's (a place called home) why I love Half Price Books so much.

All of its books have history behind them. Maybe they've had a million owners that
have loved this book as much as I do.

A book.

I got a book to share with you.

The performer shows the audience a very old book.

*In my case, it was a 100-year-old book. It was a UT's collection of Matter and Memory by
henri bergson.*

You can smell.

What does it smell like? Tell us.

(The audience answers) _____

Thanks.

Can you turn to one of the pages and read my favourite paragraph for us?

You can ...can someone help press the square button to stop me from speaking? Cuz I
wanna hear you read?

(The audience reads a paragraph on a random page.) _____

Thank you for reading it.

I've been reading it all the time these days. And I imagined I wrote that paragraph. And it's autobiographical.

(a hero you want to become)

In my book I am described as the hero.

A good friend. A good student. A good listener. A good lover. A good seeker.

I am good at finding the lost things. The lost memories.

My memories are just the days that fall upon us like autumn leaves.

You know I can hear things. The whispers of shadows. They tell me your secrets.

The lost memories.

The performer leans their ears to the ground. Listen.

The things that were stolen from you.

They're everywhere.

They will crawl underneath the floor...

If you put your ears on the ground, let's do that together...

When your ears kiss this dry grass, closer...closer...

You will hear the whispers of some old songs. The songs of a whales.

The sound of an object you lost...

(the lost things)

The forgotten memories knocking. The wheels of your stolen bike.

The crackling of the planets in the astrology book taken by your

roommate. The turquoise ring you bought when you were 14. It's

been on a road trip for years. Should we look for it together? Since we're

all kneeling on the floor. No. It shouldn't show up so soon. I will see it

behind a bed or in a pocket or sometimes just back in my drawer.

I've always felt though that it travels on its own. I miss it when it's

gone but when it comes back I feel stronger and worldly.

Can someone please go back and take the book

tell us when the book was published?

I want to be that old and wonderful.

The excerpt ends here.

12.

a place called the middle

(Excerpt)

by I-Chia Chiu

in collaboration with

Adam Sussman and Lena Barnard

My deep special thanks to

Adam Sussman—Without Adam’s human leadership, I could never have come this far to finish the production.

Lena Barnard—Without Lena’s active dramaturgical sensibility, I would have lost in time and in the process.

Lina Chambers, who taught me how process mattered, and offered ears & heart to help me see who I was.

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Megan Alrutz, who guided me, with generosity and kindness, to unpack my thinking, to capture ideas that didn’t exist in my native language.

Edward Carey, who was the first reader of “the middle” when they were still in the shape of short fiction. He shared patience, passion, and this secret “Write the story you want to read” when I felt devastated by the nostalgia in my own stories.

My family and friends, who have listened to me and offered kindness to my existence.

All my collaborators for this piece, whose names are credited in the next page. They are the people who made the performance happen.

PRODUCTION DEVELOPMENT

The performance is part of UT New Theatre (UTNT), a showcase for third-year MFA playwrights at the University of Texas at Austin. The performance ran from March 26th to March 31th, 2019.

AKNOWLEDGEMENT

The production of *a place called the middle* is part of my long-lasting and ongoing creative research on building belonging through participatory performance. The research centers on the idea of diaspora, and its connection to vulnerability, aid, reciprocation, and memory. There were different stages of the research—the collaborators have all contributed ideas to feed this research in various degrees.

For *a place called the middle*, the performance is developed with a process that involves generative input and dramaturgical support from the key collaborators in the team, which includes:

Adam Sussman as the director,
Lena Barnard as the dramaturg,
Brittney Dolan as the stage manager,
Brisa Shaw as the assistant stage manager and guitar musician,
Andrew Rodriguez and Aaron Moore as the assistant directors,
Rachel Atkinson as the environment designer (for both lighting and scenic design),
Mikeala Kelarek as the sound designer,
Benjamin Clark as the assistant sound designer,
Laura Gonzalez as the costume designer and the aromaturg (for the design of aroma-turgy which creates experience of smell),
Mingxiang Ya as the integrated media designer,
and also,
Devin Ramirez,
Diana Guizado,
Eleanor Webster,
Francis Garnett,
Ryan Cruz,
as the cast of the first school production.

No self is an island;
each exists in a fabric of relations that is now more complex and mobile than ever
before.

-Jean-François Lyotard

Life is not itself a coherent unity, nor a linear narrative,
but a “configuration of memories” and “matrices of meanings”
which become stories as experience are re-told.

-Helen Nicholson

Life goes on grinding up
glass, wearing out clothes ...
and what lasts through time
is like an island on a ship in the sea ...

May whatever breaks
be reconstructed by the sea ...

-Pablo Neruda “Ode to Broken Things”

A story isn't a good story until it receives a story in return.

-Barbara Myerhoff, quoted by Arthur Stirling

PLACE

An almost empty space.

TIME

The performance begins with the dawn.

Throughout the course of the performance, the lights move from one side to another,
as if the sun was falling off, casting longer and longer shadows in the space.

Near the end of the performance, there will be a repeating sequence of sunrise and
sunset. Days pass. Months pass. Years pass. In the end, there will be a sheer darkness,
and a universe of star lights surrounding everyone, and everything.

CHARACTER

YOU: the audience

WE: the voices who share the same consciousness

A NOTE FOR THE CREATIVE TEAM:

This draft is a script for five performers. The production team should feel free to change the assignments of lines for the needs of the production. All these characters are designed to be multiple voices that exist within one human body, and therefore they all share the same memory of this anonymous speaker in the story.

In our early process, we realized that this central question of this performance is “How do we support the audience to reconcile with the loss/pain in linear time through mutual aid?” This inquiry invites an examination on the idea of diaspora, as it could be a spread both in geography and time as an experience of feeling not belonged and continually revisiting the idea of “home”, which I considered as not only a geographic place but also a moment in time.

For us, it is important that the audience experience the passage of time throughout the performance. The audience should also feel invited to connect their own memories to the experience of the story. The creative team should be aware of the ways to support the audience’s memories and engender vulnerability responsively during the performance. The performers should be aware of the distinctions between sincerity, vulnerability, nervousness, and fear as different psychological aspects are presented by the character they are embodying. Ultimately, the performance envisions a pathway towards possibilities that the audience should feel a human connection with the character, and potentially, with each other.

STRUCTURE

1. Step one: Entrance
2. Step two: Greeting
 - CHAIR
 - BETTER STORYTELLER
 - SMILE
 - TIME IS STICKY AS HONEY
 - SUNRISE
3. Step three: Morning
 - INTRO TO THE MIDDLE: FRAGMENTS
 - TREE & GRANDPA
 - HIDE & SEEK
4. Step four: Noon
 - INTRO TO THE MIDDLE: FRAGMENTS
 - INTRO TO THE MIDDLE: FOOD
 - SOUP & MOTHER
5. Step five: Afternoon
 - INTRO TO THE MIDDLE: FRAGMENTS
 - RAIN & SISTER
 - LETTER & JOKE
6. Step five: Dusk
 - INTRO TO THE MIDDLE: DRAW MOON
 - INTRO TO THE MIDDLE: SHADOWS
 - HOSPITAL & HANDS
 - WHALE & STORIES
7. Step six: Departing

Step One: Entrance

You enter.

Before you enter, you might be given a piece of food.

It is a small gift.

It should be small and can be consumed fast.

*It might be a sugar cube, or honey stick
—since honey will be mentioned later in this story.*

Then...

You find yourselves stepping into dawn.

Warm and shadowy, like a burned orange.

Not far away, summer bugs are humming.

If there are enough seats, we might be sitting in the auditorium already.

You don't know we are the performers yet.

You think we are just another audience member.

*We might be reading, or might just focus on our own thing, like all the other
audience.*

Step Two: Greetings

(A quiet moment.

We look around. We absorb the presence of you.

We see you. We see us. We see each other.

Then...)

1

This is how the story starts.

2

The story starts with you staring at each other, looking for faces that are familiar among all the unfamiliar faces in this unfamiliar place—

3

The story starts with you stepping out from the door of your home, leaving people and things behind, coming for a good story—

4

The story starts with you waiting, sitting in chairs, which I hope are comfortable enough for you—

5

The story starts with you realizing you don't have to be anywhere but here.

1

(to the room)

Sank you for coming here, to sit in for all the people, all our friends who cannot be here today.

(pensive. and turns to you)

Would you mind

if I, if we put a chair next to you?

Just in case. Someone else might show up later.

(Please? Oh great. There's still room there.

Then we squeeze a chair in between the audience.)

Sanks.

2

That's better.

(A pause. We wait for a second,

until we feel the presence of all our absent friends.)

4

This is how the story should start.

5

Maybe we should give this empty chair a name.

3

Maybe the chair should be called "Tennyson", because—

1

--this is a story about traveling, it's necessary to bring up a quote from Lord Alfred Tennyson's poems.

2

To strive, to seek, to find,

1

And not to yield.

4

Wait. Where are we now?

1

We are in a place called the middle.

And you and I are both far from home.

4

Why did we leave home?

2

To strive, to seek, to find—

1

I want to start the story by assuring you that
You are going to hear a good story.

2

I want to tell you that
This is a good story.
It is worth watching. It is worth your time.
It will make you laugh. It will make you cry.
It will make you angry—in a good way of course.

3

Not that kind of “give my money back” kind of angry.

4

No.
The story should be good.

5

And like many other good stories, this story should be so good that everyone in the party will listen to you, want to know more about you, after you retell the story and make them cry, make them laugh, make their hearts full—

1

But if you let me be honest with you, if you let me TRY to be honest with you—
I would say:

This is indeed a good story. But you deserve a better storyteller. And it’s not me.

2

And it is not any of us either.

3

This is not how I, how we pictured the story started—

SMILE

4

Well. Yeah. And also
The story should actually start with—

3

With us reassuring you:
We are glad you are here to listen to this story
and you should be taken care of.
We should assure you that nothing is going to hurt you.
We should all assure that while we may ask for your help, you can always tell us no.

And in return to your trust,

4

which is a lot to ask for,

3

we should start the play with offering a smile to you.

*(We grinned to you. It might be the first smile
you see on our faces since the play starts.*

You should feel a bit amused and might smile back.)

And one of us should show appreciation for your smiles.

5

Well. Sank you.

2

But also, I, we want to share with you—

If you have expectation for the this story,

if you expect this much,

(We raise our hands to a high place.)

Lower it to... here,

(We lower our hands to a low place.)

then you will find yourself a happier person, when you walk out from these stories.

(A smile. A pause.)

4

That's how the story should start.

TIME IS STICKY AS HONEY

1

We should also start the story

by telling you

this is a story about

the things that we've lost in our life

and how they came back to us unexpectedly.

2

One thing we'd like you to know

is that the fragments of memories will come to the place called the middle—

3

in some ways—

1

The story should start with a greeting
that welcomes you to the place called the middle.

2

Welcome to the middle.

3/4/5

Welcome to the middle.

1

To describe the place called the middle,

I have to put some colors of the lights, shapes of the shadows, and the outlines of the
town people into your eyes.

And I need to tell you:

Remember

in this place,

the time moves very differently

from the other places in the world.

In this place, people only live half a day. The sun moves very very slowly,
so slow that

no one lives long enough to see the change of the four seasons.

Your lifetime is compressed into the space between day and night,
that you only witness the sunrise, or the sunset once.

In this place,

time is sticky as honey.

SUNRISE

3

The story should actually
start like this.

It should begin with the dawn.

5

It should start with a place that is both dark and bright.

(We look around the room.

It is bright and shadowy, like a burned orange.)

4

You see, the sun is rising.

3

Then the sun will fall.

4

Not yet.

1

By the end of the story, we will see the sunrise again.

That's how the story should start.

(The sun starts to rise.)

STEP THREE: MORNING

(Morning. We can see each other clearly now.)

INTRO TO THE MIDDLE: RANDOM THINGS #1

1

The place called the middle is a strange place.

In this place,

things are always appearing from nowhere.

Things that seems strange but also familiar.

From time to time, you wake up and smell pancakes made by your mom.

5

But your mom is not even here.

2

And you walk into the living room, there is the red carpet, the television table, the lava lamp hanging on the brick wall....

(The ellipse here suggests that the creative team should feel free to add details of what a living room should look like.

They might use their real memory to insert detailed description.

The goal is to create a sense of familiarity and hominess.)

2

And you open the window, you see

random things in your back yard.

The books you borrowed for too long.

The guitar you forgot how to play.

The wooden box you kept for secrets.

The baby blanket you used to hold tight...

(The ellipse here suggests that the creative team should feel free to add details of objects people lost throughout their life.

The goal is to create a sense of familiarity and hominess.)

The photo album. The type writer. The tapes of old songs from the 80s. The yellow raincoat—

4

The bench.

2

The wooden bench where you sat with an almost lover.

1

The bike.

2

The red bicycle that was stolen from your sister a long time ago.

3

Or the soup.

2

Or the soup...?

5

Or the sea wind.

4

Or the sun

*(And we feel the existence of the sunlight, the wind, and the tree leaves.
Do you remember how the sun dances on your eyelids as the tree moves?
It should feel familiar, like how you feel
when you stand under a summer tree during a hot day...)*

TREE & GRANDPA

2

And as I feel the warmth of the sun, the wind, the cloud

I remember

Before I arrived at the place called the middle, in my memory, there was a tree—

1

And I played with the tree.

*(A shadow of the tree appears in this empty space.
One of us looks intrigued by the image of the shadow,
then walks to the shadow,
examines the shadow, stands next to shadow,
and position the body as how the shadows looks like,
then...
gradually becomes the tree in the park.)*

2

Not far away from my home, there was a park.

One day, I left home, I moved across the backyard, across the meadow near the pond,

(There might be footsteps on the grass as we move across the space.)

And finally, I arrived at the park.

And now, here was the tree in my memory.

*(More and more shadows start gathering.
the rest of us seems inspired by this image, and walk towards the tree,
and position our bodies to become the trees.)*

I stood in front of the tree. It was tall. The sun, the wind moved through the leaves and fell on my eyelids. It felt warm and nice.

Now my grandpa—who was the best storyteller / best liar in the world—when I was little, he used to hide candies on the trees. He told me they were gifts from angels-- My grandpa and I--We usually went to the park together. But today, my grandpa told me to go to the park myself. He told me there were candies hidden on the top of the trees— and he wanted me to find them on my own.

I was afraid to go to the park alone.

I was usually the kid who stood far away and watched others play.

But now here I am. I am in the park now --and I've found the candies on my own.

I am so happy

That I feel confident enough

To ask other kids to play along.

HIDE AND SEEK

2

(We turn to one of you.)

Hi...

Do you want to play with me?

*(Usually the answer is yes.
But if you feel uncertain about this question,
we will explain the rules to you.
We will try not to look overly-excited
when we share the rules in a simple and understandable way.)*

Do you know how to play Hide and Seek?

(You answer. Usually your answer is yes.)

*But if you look hesitant,
we will not make you uncomfortable
and tell you it's really easy, we will explain the rule to you.)*

2

Great. Could you come here with me?

(We move together. We come next to the tree.)

Now, you are going to remember my face.

I have to remember your face too.

There are other kids in the playground

I don't want to mix you up with the others.

(A brief pause. We take a moment reading your faces.)

Great. Now I know how you look like.

I also have a shirt like yours. It's a good shirt.

Now...Can you now close your eyes?

I will explain the rules to you. In a moment, I will find a place to hide. You are going to count to fifteen. And you will come to find me.

When you find me, you will say "I found you!"

And the game will be over.

Okay? Ready? You can start counting.

*(As you start counting, the rest of us will spread out
—except for the one who plays the original tree.*

We will come to you, ask you if you want to play along.

We will bring you to the stage and invite you to become a tree in the park.

We will tell you something like "Now, just follow me",

"You're doing great.",

"Stay like this, don't move."

while demonstrating how to position your body like a tree.

We will make sure you don't feel lost and make this instruction simple.

Meanwhile, there might be more shadows of the trees occupying the stage.

*We bring more and more of you to the stage.
until the space is occupied by a crowd of trees.*

*Then finally, you finish counting. You start seeking.
The hide and seek begins.*

When you find us, you will say "I found you!"

The end of the game.

We might say: "You found me!"

We might have a high-five with you,

just to celebrate our collaborative victory.)

2

Sank you for playing with me. Now you can go home.

(We might thank you, might say something like:

"Sank you for playing, now you can go back."

We then will escort each of you to your seats.)

1

This was fun.

All the children laughed.

I was usually the kid who stood far away and watched others play.

(pensive.)

But it's been a good day in the park.

Years later, I received a phone call from home,

it was about my grandpa.

but I could not go home immediately,

I was traveling,

I was too far away,

But I had to—

4

Sometimes I fear if I turned back, if I go home, I will become a half-human, half-animal—

3

--I have dreams about being a giant whale, lost in the cities,

stuck in a place too far away from the sea--

2

--I have to reach somewhere.

I cannot go home.

5

I am stuck in the middle.

(The sun keeps moving.)

STEP FOUR: NOON

INTRO TO THE MIDDLE: RANDOM THINGS 2

1

We should share with you
that the place called the middle
is a place far from your home,
and a place you cannot find on the map, because it's always moving.
All the things here are always appearing and disappearing.
And you can always find random things everywhere—

(The creative team should feel free to decide if the following lines are delivered simultaneously, or if there is overlap between these lines.)

<p><i>(The creative team should feel free to change the items in this list. As #1 is naming these objects, the audience should feel invited that their personal memories are connected to these objects, as if all these things are left by the audience themselves.)</i></p> <p>1 (to you) the letters you wrote but forgot to finish- The gifts you decided to keep for yourselves- The first bite of ice cream- The books you borrowed for too long The ghosts in your childhood home- The smell of the feet in a summer basement- The names of the trees in a faraway park- The sounds of butterflies- The coldness of the rain- The frenzy about balloons- The dirt in your finger nails- The secret garden behind your grandpa's home- A lost sock-</p>	<p>5 Here's another thing we need to tell you: Not every story is worth telling, Not every story is worth sharing, 4 But this is supposed to be a good story. 3 It is a good story— 2 But you deserve a better storyteller. And it's not me. 3 And it is not any of us either. 4</p>
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<p>A pair of half-wet shoes- A mold on the wall- A note in lunch box- A stolen coin- A magic stone- A half-eaten cheesecake- A sharp glass A piece of broken chalk- A fallen bicycle- A suitcase- A recording machine- A hospital balloon- And the characters in the stories you didn't finish writing-</p> <p>1 This is how the story starts.</p>	<p>We've thought of millions of ways to start this story— 5 And we're trying so hard— 4 We tried so hard to tell you a good story-</p> <p>2 But this is not how I, how we pictured the story started—</p>
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The Excerpt ends here.

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