

## Where Science Meets Stage: Embracing Art in the Practice of Research

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### Abstract

This reflective paper explores my experience participating in the *Blackout* project and how it brought together two parts of myself that I had long understood as separate: my creative identity and my scientific training. Drawing on personal reflection, research literature, and my role within the project, I share three interconnected learnings that emerged: how expressive art can help process emotions and experiences, how art can function as a meaningful tool for communication and learning, and how creating together can cultivate a sense of community. Grounded in my research interests in ADHD and neuroqueer youth, I reflect on how research-informed theatre can translate lived experiences into emotional and embodied understanding. Being part of *Blackout* has influenced how I see scholarship, therapy, and community work, reinforcing the power of art, listening, and youth storytelling.

*Keywords:* research-based theatre, neurodiversity, community engagement, therapeutic practice

IN  
EDUCATION

## Where Science Meets Stage: Embracing Art in the Practice of Research

I was incredibly eager to begin writing this piece, reflecting on how artistic expression has influenced my life, the convergence of my scientific and creative domains, and the wonderful project that *Blackout* is. Once I began, I quickly realized it would be a much more difficult task than I had thought. I couldn't understand why; it was amusing how something as fundamental to my own identity and life as artistic expression was stumping me. I believe this is because creative expression is something I hold close to my heart. How do I describe my relationship to something so integral to my being, and encompass this in words? How do I bring to life the way the *Blackout* project has solidified the connection between my two worlds of art and research? I wanted to give these feelings justice, as the coming together of art and research has been happening for me for a while; *Blackout* has significantly impacted that fusion.

I broke down what I have learned through this experience into three main parts:

1. Processing emotions and experiences through expressive art.
2. Expressive art as a tool for communicating, expression and learning.
3. How creating together cultivates community.

I begin by situating my research focus on Attention Deficit-Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) and how ADHD is expressed in both art and science. Art has a way of bringing together a community and changing the way people think. Art can convey an emotional experience from one person to others, allowing them to empathize with what is being expressed. Artist Nora Nord (2024) challenges the stereotypes surrounding ADHD and features the underrepresented faces of neurodivergence, providing a spotlight and raising the voices of members of the neuroqueer community. Nord uses the art of photography to amplify people's voices and help others gain a deeper understanding through their experiences, much like what the *Blackout* project aims to achieve. Nord's perspective provides a lens through which we can zoom in on people's experiences and learn personally, promoting empathy and understanding.

We utilize scientific research to explore and communicate new findings that can help us better understand people's experiences and inform policies and practices. Nord amplifies the voices of the people she interviews, in a similar way to Attoe and Climie (2023), who highlight the voices of researchers and women with ADHD. Both Nord's art and the research work of Attoe and Climie communicate information in different forms. When art and science can come together, then something extraordinary happens. While some people are more connected to art, others resonate more with science. But what happens when we combine both?

I find physics to be a fascinating science despite my lack of deep knowledge in the field. It's a science I have rarely encountered outside of a few documentaries and books that barely scratch the surface. Recently, I came across a video of a community engagement research initiative called *Break-in' Point*, which featured a physicist and a dancer collaborating on a highly impactful and insightful performance (Webster et al., 2022). When I watched this performance, I was struck by how the body movements, the art of dance, the personal stories, coupled with the explanations of physics concepts that are usually confusing (to me at least), made those concepts seem less convoluted. The performance demonstrated how, when scientific information is combined with art, emotion, narrative, and somatic movement, we may connect with it more deeply and process it more effectively. Personally, I was able to connect with the material on both an emotional and somatic level, which allowed me to understand and retain it more fully because it was grounded in

more than just numbers, data, and citations. All of these elements are incredibly important for validating information as being scientifically accurate; however, when such academic content is connected to emotion, it creates a particularly powerful combination.

I believe *Blackout* is a special project that has done, and will continue to do, the same. It involves creating art to translate the experiences of a highly talented youth group and to help inform people in our community. It is one thing to read about research on queer youth that presents crucial statistics, such as those reported by “The Trevor Project.” According to its website, the 2023 U.S. National Survey on the Mental Health of LGBTQ Young People amplifies the experiences of more than 28,000 LGBTQ young people ages 13 to 24 across the United States (The Trevor Project, 2023). The survey found that transgender and nonbinary young people whose pronouns were respected by those they live with reported lower rates of suicide attempts, and that fewer than 40% of LGBTQ young people found their home to be LGBTQ-affirming. Communicating these statistics publicly has the potential to save lives. Similarly, Statistics Canada reported that compared to their cisgender, heterosexual peers, youth aged 15 to 24 years who are two-Spirit, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or queer and those who use other terms related to gender or sexual diversity (2SLGBTQ+) were found to be at higher risk for mental health disorders and suicidal ideation in 2022 (Statistics Canada, 2024). However, not everyone responds to statistics, percentages, PowerPoint and research articles. When art is combined with and informed by scientific research, it can make these learnings more accessible, helping broader audiences gain perspectives and promoting empathy.

Why is art such an effective form of communication for humans? One reason may be the somatic connection that occurs when information is portrayed through artistic expression. According to Nummenmaa and Riitta, (2023), research using bodily sensation mapping demonstrates that viewing visual art can elicit measurable physical sensations in our body, particularly in the chest and upper limbs. Artwork depicting human figures produced the most significant responses, leading the authors to conclude that the presence and salience of human forms may heighten attention and interest, therefore mediating art-elicited emotions.

Along with a somatic connection, there is also an emotional one. A field study, Rathje et al. (2021), randomly assigned audience members to complete surveys before or after attending theatre performances. The surveys measured empathy, attitudes, and prosocial behaviour, with the results indicating that participants reported greater empathy toward groups depicted after viewing the plays. Art, therefore, functions as a communicative medium in which both creating and experiencing art constitute a distinct kind of communication (Tyler & Likova, 2012). Cook et al. (2024) similarly describe their research-based theatre project, *Unload*, developed through collaboration among veterans, artists, researchers, and counsellors. The play follows a veteran’s journey to navigate challenges in and out of uniform, while guiding a civilian friend through longstanding, unspoken grief. Analysis of audience responses (Belliveau & Nichols, 2017) highlights the role of empathy within research-based theatre while cautioning against assumptions of sameness. The authors caution that when audiences presume they fully understand the character’s experience, the complexity of marginalized identities can be missed. Rather than rejecting empathy, the authors encourage audience members to move beyond emotional resonance into critical reflection, including an awareness of privilege and difference.

In this context, research-based theatre (such as *Blackout*) can cultivate a deeper form of empathy and engagement (Cook et al., 2024). Like *Unload*, it draws directly on participants’ lived experiences, centring their voices and inviting audiences not only to relate and/or confront

privilege, but also to witness. Watching *Blackout* for the first time, I was struck by its honest portrayal of characters' lives and its invitation to the audience to listen more deeply to experiences many viewers have not personally encountered. Those of us who have been outside school environments for many years may assume we understand contemporary youth experiences, yet many would likely be surprised by how much has changed. *Blackout* offers a nuanced portrayal of young people's lives directly drawn from their own writing. Reflecting on my role as a graduate student in this project and contributing to this special issue has encouraged me to engage with art not only through empathy but also through critical awareness of my own privilege, an orientation I will carry forward into my future work as a therapist.

Participating in the *Blackout* project has brought art and science together for me in ways that I had not personally anticipated. I always saw my science research self and creative art self as entirely separate parts of my identity, and I did not expect these aspects to converge towards the end of my education, just before the beginning of my career as a therapist.

Brian Stokes, a Tony Award-winning actor and singer, described this transformative potential in an interview with Craig Byrd for *LA Magazine* stating, "That's the magic of art and the magic of theatre: it has the power to transform an audience... and give them an epiphanal experience that changes their life, opens their hearts and their minds and the way they think" (Byrd, 2016). This perspective resonates with my own experience of the project. While I had long understood art as cathartic and capable of conveying meaning, working with the *Blackout* project has allowed me to see firsthand how art can not only instill but also contribute to social change through both performance and narrative.

I have been a graduate assistant with this project since I began my Master of Counselling Psychology. In this role, I have participated in research meetings within the ECHO Lab, contributed to presentations, and supported development. Once the project began, I had the opportunity to act out the student-written script alongside the youth creators. I also assisted with workshops and focus groups exploring audience responses to the performance of *Blackout*.

Art and performance have always been at the forefront of my life. I was born into a musical family with an immense appreciation for music of all genres and ages. My grandmother and her siblings regularly sang together and played the guitar when they were growing up. I can remember sitting in the back of her Cadillac as she perfectly harmonized with *River Blue* by A La Carte. My mother, who also has a beautiful voice, instilled in me a love of music, ensuring I was familiar with performances like Simon and Garfunkel's *Live in Central Park*, and by middle school, I had memorized the words of *The Sound of Silence*. As far back as I can remember, I have been privileged to participate in music lessons, acting, and musical theatre camps, where I learned and performed alongside friends. Performing musical theatre duets at music festivals required trust, vulnerability and collaboration, experiences that shaped my confidence and became a meaningful part of my childhood. Performing with my friends gave me courage.

Reflecting on my involvement in *Blackout* has highlighted how these lifelong artistic experiences now intersect with my academic and professional development. This integration of art, research and clinical training has encouraged me to approach both scholarship and creative work with greater openness to creative embodied and relational forms of understanding.

Another form of art that is dearly important to me is creative writing. It has been a part of my life as far back as I can remember, beginning with stories I created in primary school. One of my earliest memories is a Halloween writing prompt, where I felt immense joy adding vivid, visual

details about a holiday I loved. From that moment, I recognized the power of translating thoughts and emotions into narrative. In addition to writing, I also love film. Growing up in a small town, two hours away from St. John's, Newfoundland and Labrador, I moved to the city after high school and quickly became involved in filmmaking, working on locally made films. I appreciated the cathartic experience of learning a character and expressing their emotions, even when uncomfortable. Playing roles whose values did not align with mine required me to understand the "why" behind their actions, an exercise in perspective-taking that has remained meaningful to me. Through the film community, I also met a mentor who helped me see research and writing as another artistic outlet. Since then, writing: poetry, reflections, or stories has remained central to my life. I don't think a day has passed that I haven't written. It's how I process each part of my life with every character or line expressing what I couldn't process without the art of writing.

At the same time, I was completing my honours degree in psychology, and my academic demands intensified during my final year. I have always dreamed of being a therapist and was completing my first thesis. Following that, I pursued a master's degree in experimental psychology, then came the onset of a global pandemic. Although research was challenging, I remained passionate about the field. My academic schedule limited my opportunities for filmmaking. Every time I passed a parking lot with trailers lined up and assistant directors walking around with headsets on, I felt a strong pull toward the creative work I was missing.

The opportunity to work at a shelter for individuals and their children fleeing abuse and intimate partner violence further focused my attention on professional and academic responsibilities. During the pandemic, I felt more distant from artistic expression than ever before. Volunteering helped to foster positive human connections and promote healing through collaborative songwriting and storytelling (Buley, 2020). During the meetings, participants gathered to talk, create crafts, and develop songs with support from facilitators and volunteers. I realized how long it had been since I had created anything with my hands other than plucking away at my laptop. It felt so good to create again with tangible materials.

Participants reflected on personal narratives while experimenting with lyrics, chord progressions, and harmonies that shaped their songs. Being part of a collective creative process again was powerful. Witnessing the participants be so open and honest with their songwriting reignited the flame for me, and I wrote and played the guitar again, much more. At the time, art functioned primarily as a means of personal processing alongside my academic work. I would work on my studies and then take a break to play my guitar or write. There had been a *vast* separation between my academic pursuits, professional life, and my art. However, this experience demonstrated that art could become integrated, enriching multiple aspects of my life.

Several years after I completed my second thesis, I began my Master of Counselling program, focusing on ADHD. It was during this time that I was introduced to the *Blackout* project through the ECHO Lab. When I first heard the story of *Blackout*, something clicked. The project offered a powerful way for individuals to explore identity while educating others. What better way to learn about yourself and help others learn than through writing, music and performance? As a therapist-in-training, this realization was particularly meaningful. Like impactful theatre or film, the project communicated important messages while fostering emotional connections that linger beyond the performance itself. The youth involved are provided with a safe space to express themselves, build empowerment, and reflect on their experiences through creative processes, while also informing the community around them.

How remarkable is this work? How *brave* is this? How lucky am I to be a part of this?

The intersection of being neurodiverse and queer is ebbed within the community but also deeply personal to the individual; it's an experience that cannot always be easily explained with words and words alone. Artistic expression offers a pathway for understanding.

### **Thankfully, There Is Art**

Whenever a feeling is too large, too tangled, just too *much*, I have always turned to art. More than anything. It's such an unexplainable sensation to me. Still, personally, the emotion or experience feels less heavy and more digestible once it is turned into a poem, song, story, or clay. Emotion is no longer just anxiety; it can be externalized as a piece of art. Through the process of making, I find relief and solace. Afterward, I can look at it and learn more about myself. If someone else can witness someone else's creation, they may be able to say, "Ah, through this art, I can see that person's experience; I can feel empathy for what they are going through and maybe feel not so alone myself." Hopefully, they can learn something about themselves, or others, or both.

Participating in the *Blackout* project continued to deepen my understanding of how art, research and therapeutic practice can intersect. I recall the first ECHO Lab meeting I attended for the *Blackout* project, which felt warm and welcoming. As discussions unfolded, I began to see how these domains could converge rather than exist as separate parts of my identity. The lab brought together individuals with expertise in social policy, counselling psychology, music, and theatre pedagogy, united by a genuine commitment to supporting youth. I discovered that *Blackout* is a community-youth co-created musical theatre production that engages public conversations about neuroqueer youth who seek safety by concealing themselves or blending in with the crowd. Following anti-pride protests across Canada in June 2022, some junior high schools in Newfoundland and Labrador, including allies of the LGBTQ2SIA+ and neurodiversity communities, participated by wearing black during Pride events and avoided Gender & Sexuality Alliances (GSAs) in schools. From this context, important questions emerged: Why are queer youth avoiding GSAs? How can educators improve the everyday experiences for marginalized youth? How can we as educators further support marginalized youth and ensure there are truly safer spaces in schools and homes? How can we affirm our youth? Are we truly including them by creating places for them to go, separate from their peers? How can we teach cis-heteronormative and neurotypical peers and those in authoritative positions the most affirming, accepting, empathetic ways to support them?

The first time I watched *Blackout*, I was struck by the honesty of the youth writing. Among the beautiful harmonies of the young voices, there were heart-wrenching, honest lyrics such as:

"Pick up my phone and scroll until I disappear."

This line captured a familiar impulse to escape, or doom scroll, to dissociate through technology.

Another lyric, "I make comedy out of catastrophe," reflects how humour can create distance from overwhelming emotions, a pattern I have observed clinically and in research on masking among neurodivergent individuals. I have worked with so many people who have told me something that has happened to them in their lives. Just as they were about to get too close to the experience, a joke or a funny anecdote came to the rescue, something we do to escape an emotion that is just too much to look straight in the eyes. Humour *can* be a great way to cope; have you ever heard the line "If I don't laugh, I'll cry?" Similarly, "I do everything to fit in, even though

it takes everything from who I am” conveys the exhaustion and shame involved in having to mask who you are to fit in and feel connected to your peers in order to gain acceptance.

As the story unfolded, it was evident that *Blackout* was an authentic, honest look into what young people experience. I think many people would be surprised to hear about the challenges that today’s youth face, and that these challenges may not align with the assumptions they have. Within counselling psychology, we emphasize “within-groups differences” (Collins, 2018) where individuals within any identity group vary significantly in experience, values, and worldviews. Personal cultural identities are shaped by various factors, including personal, interpersonal, contextual, and systemic influences, leading to intragroup or intracultural diversity (McNair, 2017). Furthermore, while it’s common to believe that specific traits are typical for all individuals in a cultural group or subgroup, there is frequently as much variation within the group as there is between that group and those outside of the group (Ratts et al., 2016). Assuming all individuals in a group are identical can result in stigmatization and stereotyping, obscuring critical differences in values and worldviews among individuals and their cultural affiliations (Pohlman et al., 2014).

Personally, I believe a way to reduce stigmatization and stereotyping is to openly and carefully listen to people’s experiences and learn directly from them, to not just assume that we know the answers without hearing from many different perspectives within a group of people. When I watched *Blackout*, I thought back to these concepts and realized that it could be a way for people who may not be aware of “within-group differences” to learn more about individual experiences, open their minds, and challenge previously held stereotypes. *Blackout* provides the opportunity to hear directly from youth and their individual experiences in the education system today.

The inclusion of a teacher’s perspective also resonated:

“We watch our kids break into pieces, knowing there is nothing we can do.”

This sentiment is likely familiar to many educators, mental health professionals, parents, and others in the school community and offers insight into the emotional realities we are navigating. As a future therapist, my initial response was gratitude for the courage required to share these expressions openly so that others may learn. Hearing about the hard truths and “within-group differences” was crucial, and because of the writers’ courage, we can help others challenge their biases.

Several moments remained particularly impactful and have stayed in my heart. In one, a character recalls their childhood experiences with compassion toward their younger self. It was a poignant moment to see them reflecting on what they had gone through as children and where they were now. It was as if they wanted to reach out and hug their inner child. It was very powerful. In another, a mother apologizes after reacting negatively to her child coming out as bisexual, explaining that she was scared and that her fear stemmed from wanting to protect her child from judgment. This moment highlights a tension common to many parents: attempts at protection may unintentionally cause harm, while acceptance and support are often the most powerful forms of protection they can offer.

Three main learnings emerged during my time with the ECHO lab that have remained particularly meaningful:

## I. Processing Emotions and Experiences through Expressive Art

Through both community work and my involvement with the ECHO lab, I have seen how art can create spaces of safety, reflection, and expression. Living in Newfoundland and Labrador, where music, theatre and storytelling are deeply embedded in community life, reinforced how artistic engagement can support identity exploration. Newfoundland and Labrador is a province that nurtures their artistic community and provides experiences for everyone of all ages. A local Brazilian-born artist, Bruno Vinhas, described this act of self-exploration through art:

It was through my practice that I actually allowed myself to be who I am. In every play, art piece or curatorial project, I learned to put down my walls and to listen to the artists I am working with. The silent moments of creation are the moments where I reflect on what I am, who I am, and why I am doing what I do. (B. Vinhas, personal communication, February 12, 2025)

Witnessing youth in *Blackout* engage in a similarly courageous act of self-expression through art was profoundly impactful. Their brave self-expression was something I will hold for my entire career. It has influenced how I intend to approach therapeutic practice going forward.

## II. Expressive Art as a Tool for Communicating, Expression and Learning

When words are insufficient to capture internal experiences, art can provide an alternative language for expression and understanding. Art provides a universal language that transcends social barriers, allowing personal experiences to be shared in ways that resonate emotionally and relationally. Vinhas described this:

Art has been the first way that I was able to communicate, to be myself and to develop a sense of being. Living with high-functioning depression, it is through my artwork and my art-related work that I am able to release the tensions and express feelings, emotions, and world views. (B. Vinhas, personal communication, February 12, 2025)

This reinforces the role of creative expression not only as communication, but also as a process of learning about oneself and others.

## III. Creating Together Cultivates Community

There is a deep, collaborative bond that can occur when people connect over art. Sharing vulnerability through creative work allows individuals to witness one another more authentically, strengthening relational bonds. I think that this speaks to how we process our emotions and the vulnerable way we express ourselves. People get to see each other in such an honest way through working on art together, and I believe it creates such a beautiful form of community. *Blackout* emerged from this collective process, with youth wanting to create something together, grounded in honest storytelling and mutual understanding. Observing and being part of this collaboration highlighted how artistic engagement can build community while also giving voice to those who may not often be heard.

## Conclusion

Reflecting on my involvement with *Blackout*, I am reminded of the performance that altered my understanding of how art and science can converge to deepen learning. Just as dance movement and narrative made complex physics concepts more accessible to me, this project demonstrates how artistic expression can illuminate the lived experiences of neuroqueer youth in ways that statistics or theory alone cannot. Knowledge is not just cognitive. It is also emotional and

embodied. I am still early in my graduate assistantship and look forward to continuing to learn while contributing to this important work. *Blackout* highlights the value of positioning youth as active participants in educating their communities, and it demonstrates how important it is to let our young people be active participants in telling their own stories. The more we listen to young people, understanding what they are experiencing and going through, the more effective support we can provide. They are the experts on themselves; we, as professionals, are their students learning what they have to share and how we can best support them. Cultivating and nurturing these safe spaces for young people to express their most honest stories not only allows us to learn priceless lessons but also gives them space to learn about themselves, each other and create community. As I move forward in my career as a therapist, I carry with me the recognition that art and the act of listening can be powerful tools for understanding, healing, and change.

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