

## Up-staging Ourselves: Performing Community as Critical Change in the Blackout Project

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### Abstract

How do we know when we are just going through the motions? Moreover, how do we close the gap between our stated commitments and our everyday practices in our community-facing academic work? This article is an autoethnographic study that uses found poems derived from interview transcripts and personal reflections to describe and explore our work in the *Blackout* Project. This arts-based and community-oriented project aims to celebrate and explore neuroqueer identity by staging tensions around visibility, agency and belonging and inviting persuasion through performance. Here, we describe the origins of *Blackout*, our positioning as critical scholars at a crucial juncture in our careers, and the project's inception as a response to shifting historical and cultural conditions. We also discuss the challenges associated with partnerships among academics, community educators, and community members, as well as how we envision the future trajectory of work that pushes representational and institutional boundaries during a time of realignment and challenge within today's universities.

*Keywords:* anti-oppressive education, neuroqueer identity, arts-based education

IN  
EDUCATION

## Up-staging Ourselves: Performing Community as Critical Change in the Blackout Project

### Taking Stock: *Blackout*, Shifting Identities and Perspectives

What do we do when our critical work begins to feel misaligned with the world it is meant to address? “Perhaps it goes without saying,” says Carmen Shields (2005), “that we are born into a story already in progress, but the implications [...] are profound in terms of examining the roots of our beliefs about the world, and the way our thinking and actions are enacted in our lives” (p. 180). This autoethnographic piece represents our desire to express and explore our collaboration on a community-focused arts-based project centred on neuroqueer experience. It discusses the project within the context of our careers, our changing views on critical education, and our increasing anxieties about shifting cultural and historical conditions in Canada and globally.

Although we are proud of our work in critical circles, we also wonder whether it is time to adjust our approach to critical work, given the increasing polarization and conflict in our society and the sense that familiar strategies may be losing traction. In exploring our views, we are not asserting that this is the only approach or the best practice; instead, we are engaging in a broader discussion from a moment of vulnerability that, for us, reflects where we are honestly situated at this time. Rather than ignoring feelings of apprehension, uncertainty and frustration, it may be time to reassess and take stock of what meaningful, achievable praxis looks like in today’s age, what we have done right, what we feel needs to shift, and how *Blackout* and projects like it, represent a new, more effective, way of doing critical research, and creating effective partnerships that proudly refuse to conform to the conventional academic mould.

This is the space from which our collaboration emerged, as two mid-career, nonconventional academics admitted their discomfort with the direction of our culture and our fears about what might be. Emerging from this shared unease, our collaboration was guided by a recognition that “hope is the acknowledgement of more openness in a situation than the situation easily reveals” (Simon, 1992, p. 3). In what follows, we draw on our shared reflections and conversations about *Blackout*, and explore themes connected to the challenges of forging community-based partnerships in today’s academy and how we see our work as a response to a more careful and ‘slow’ form of praxis (Berg & Seeber, 2016), ideally one that is more far-reaching and impactful in the long run. Collectively, our piece is intended as both an autoethnographic reflection and a call to spark a broader conversation about how we perceive intellectuals and how our preconceptions about what and who count in the academic world filter some important voices out of the frame.

### Beyond Pathology: Neuroqueer Identity and the Creative Turn

To interpret what *Blackout* stages, it is vital to explore the arts-informed neuroqueer framing through which we encounter the project, and that resists a fixing logic by keeping youth agency central. For scholars and activists, understanding neurodiversity as a complex, situated, and intersectional aspect of human identity is crucial to grasping how people relate with one another and to the contexts in which they live. Reductive or exclusionary conceptions of exceptionality are not benign; they can actively harm or exclude others. This is especially evident in rigid, non-fluid discourses on gender and sexuality that leave little room for voices outside dominant norms, even within frameworks that present themselves as critical or progressive (Egner, 2019; Johnson, 2021).

Fortunately, new perspectives are emerging. Researchers increasingly caution against adopting what Walker and Raymaker (2021) have termed a “pathology paradigm” (p. ?) regarding

exceptionality, identity, and difference. Although many attempts to ‘help’ or ‘fix’ neurodivergent people are well-intentioned, this framing still treats neurodiversity as a deficiency. In contrast, critical work stresses that people think, feel, and perceive the world differently, and that these differences are not simply to be weighed against an absolute measure of what is good and bad or ‘normal’ (Rosqvist et al., 2020; Walker & Raymaker, 2021). Scholars working with the notion of ‘neurodiversity’ (Singer, 2017) foreground intersectional human identity and embodied subjectivity, placing these at the core of efforts to move beyond simplistic binaries of normal and dysfunctional.

One way this shift materializes is through art and arts-informed inquiry, which is increasingly used to create sites where neurodivergent and neuroqueer individuals can share their experiences in more affirmative and, ideally, authentic ways. Performance offers a powerful means of showcasing the creativity, talent, and wisdom (Grandi, 2022) associated with neurodiversity. It fosters community and belonging while providing neurodivergent youth with opportunities to exercise agency. At the same time, performance enables artists, creators, and performers to engage with the public beyond simplistic platitudes, allowing community members to speak in their own words. In doing so, it underscores the diversity and intersectionality within the neurodiverse and neuroqueer communities, as well as among individuals, differences that are often overlooked.

By situating neurodiversity within broader conversations about embodiment, gender, and desire, scholars and activists seek to affirm neurodiverse ways of being through approaches that are both transformative and grounded in practice (Rosqvist et al., 2020; Walker & Raymaker, 2021). Community-crafted scripts can be deeply fulfilling for artistic creators and performers, who give voice to previously unheard ‘truths’ of their experiences, while also offering audiences up-close and personal encounters with stories that move beyond clichéd depictions of neurodiverse or neuroqueer life. Art’s capacity to generate productive tension allows performance to be both disruptive and connective, challenging reductive narratives while inviting empathy and understanding (Kershaw & Nicholson, 2011; Piantanida et al., 2003). Nevertheless, change remains hard-won and often requires performance and pedagogical practices rooted in genuine empathy and listening, rather than top-down solutions, especially as artists and educators respond to a growing heteronormative and cisnormative backlash against LGBTQ2SIA+ communities.

### **Situating *Blackout*: Performance Pedagogy in a Local Moment**

*Blackout* emerged from a local sequence of events that made the aforementioned ‘academic’ concerns highly tangible. In June 2022, anti-Pride protests occurred across Canada, including junior high schools in Newfoundland and Labrador where students, including allies of LGBTQ2SIA+ and neurodiverse communities, participated by wearing black during Pride events and avoiding Gender & Sexuality Alliances (GSAs). As a musical grounded in real-life events, *Blackout* seeks to ask how we might imagine the world otherwise, using the creative power and impact of the performing arts. This is why we agreed to collaborate with community partners on the *Blackout* Project. This effort represented a shift in our existing work toward more action-based, community-oriented practice, in which our roles are more supportive and less directive.

*Blackout* is a co-constructed musical theatre production developed with and for youth to engage and inform public discourse about neuroqueer youth who seek safety by blending into the crowd. The performance aims to disrupt harmful narratives and affirm LGBTQ2SIA+ and neurodiverse identities, speaking directly to educators, parents, community leaders, and policymakers to inspire meaningful change. We observe that K-12 schools in Newfoundland and

Labrador (NL) have primarily focused on increasing the visibility of LGBTQ2SIA+ individuals and families, recognizing the life-saving impact of such efforts. With this in mind, *Blackout* represents a different form of public pedagogy, in which youth and community educators can engage with real-life events and present them as a living text that celebrates neuroqueer identity with nuance and complexity. *Blackout* resists easy categorization because it offers an ironic, satirical take on surface-level engagements with LGBTQ2SIA+ identity. Its sharp social critique is tempered by humour and an upbeat, almost ‘campy’ musical score. Though it addresses violence and anti-LGBTQ2SIA+ protests, the narrative and tone remain consistently hopeful amid the many strains and conflicts driving these events. This remarkable balance mirrored our desire for academic work that embraces subtlety and tension within a non-didactic yet pedagogical orientation.

### **What We Did: Crafting an Autoethnography through Found Poetry**

To understand *Blackout*, we adopt a methodology that keeps us experience-near and conveys our distinct experiences and voices. Consequently, we use autoethnographic writing and, as we elaborate below, found poetry to examine our experiences and perceptions of everyday life as academics, citizens, and teachers (Ellis, 2004; Ellis & Bochner, 2000; Richardson, 2000). We view the self as a partial, intersectional, constructed, and contested site that can teach us much about broader culture, while also recognizing the significance and poignancy of individual subjective experience (Richardson, 2000). Our paper explores Sarah’s role as the faculty lead on the project, John’s position as an ally, and our collaboration with community educators, all within the context of the expectations and realities of contemporary academic settings. At the core of our investigation was our hope that we could somehow harness and capture “education’s belief in the ability of both art and language to represent the real and the anxiety associated with a move away from what has become commonsense” (Triggs, 2009, p. 85).

We reflected on the reasons for our decision to collaborate on *Blackout* and how our participation in the project impacted our perceptions of belonging and academic identity. At the centre of our broad-based inquiry was the question of how community-based, arts-informed collaborations like the *Blackout* project help us reimagine what it means to engage critically in a changing world. This question prompted us to write individual reflections and then to engage in an hour-long conversation about the project, which was subsequently transcribed. We met to discuss these reflections and to select passages that highlighted key issues and themes.

Some of these passages, which we felt were most representative, were then selected and, in keeping with the arts-inspired theme of our special issue, edited to create found poems, a genre that, according to Prendergast (2006), “has an established history and practice in literature” (p. 372) and educational research. Found poetry from research data or texts (Sullivan, 2000), also known as “poetic transcription,” or, more commonly, “research poetry” (Patrick, 2016), enables the exploration of experimental research forms where, as Glesne (1997) notes, “horizons are broadened” (p. 219). Autoethnographic reflections on these found poems, together with our own narratives, serve as points of departure for discussing and analyzing the meaning and nature of our arts-based collaboration. In this sense, our method is not simply a way of reporting on *Blackout*; it is itself an act of creative and critical reflection that keeps us close to our lived experience as we examine what the project makes possible.

## Reframing through Performance: Transformative, Anxiety-Inducing Spaces

With this framing in place, we turn from methodology to practice, using found poems and key scenes from the musical itself to explore how performance functions in *Blackout* as a non-conventional mode of inquiry. Many of our reflections intersected with songs and themes from *Blackout* and, often, represented a creative interplay with the musical. *Blackout* itself invited audiences to grapple with tensions surrounding the simultaneous need for LGBTQ2SIA+ visibility, anonymity, agency, as well as the ongoing fluidity/evolution of sexuality, gender, and other social constructions (Butler, 1999; Warner, 1993). We want to reassure ourselves and others that it is acceptable to exist in these hybrid spaces, that we value beginning where we are, and that we encourage others to do the same.

All too often, formal education has forgotten that we are all “beings in the process of becoming [and exist] as unfinished, uncompleted beings, in, and with, a likewise unfinished reality” (Freire, 1970, p. 72). A recurring theme in our reflections was the limitations of a one-size-fits-all institutional response that youth have resisted, a phenomenon explored in *Blackout*. This often means listening to the people in front of us, rather than being prescriptive and didactic. It also requires careful consideration of the complexity of existing institutional responses to neuroqueer identity and how, in many respects, they fail to recognize its ambivalence. *Blackout*'s performance pedagogy, we argue, renders this ambivalence visible and invites audiences to dwell in it, rather than resolving it too quickly. In this spirit, the found poem *Shift* reflects on the need for GSAs alongside other conventional approaches to supporting LGBTQ2SIA+ youth, but also on how to move beyond those approaches to find ways of celebrating and supporting LGBTQ2SIA+ identity that offer greater nuance and depth.

### Shift

We needed GSAs... and we still do...  
In some spaces, we still do.

We need champion teachers...  
Rainbows. All the colours, all the care...  
But sometimes,  
It is a thin response, isn't it?

Some teachers, well-intentioned,  
Say, “I know the right pronoun...  
I've done this... I've done that...”  
But the kid in their classroom,  
Maybe they're trans... Maybe they don't want the GSA.  
And the teacher thinks, “We made this for you... We helped you...”

But maybe...  
Maybe they want to be stealth, fly under the radar...

Disappear a little... like the neurodiverse student,  
Who would rather get a “C” than stand out for an “A”  
Who wants... just to move through quietly...

And us?  
Sometimes we don’t know, I don’t know...  
How to wrestle with that agency...  
How to honour the world the way they live it... it shifts so fast...

But *Blackout*?  
Oh, *Blackout*. It’s different.  
It’s messy. It’s alive.

Youth brought their stories.  
Educators wrestled.  
No neat endings. No tidy bows.

Just real. Complicated. Authentic.

And I love that. I’ve always loved messy spaces.  
Music that doesn’t resolve. Things that aren’t wrapped up.

They feel real. They feel alive.

*Shift* exemplifies the kind of arts-informed, critical practice we value; it honours the desire for safety and vulnerability alongside calls for visibility and affirmation, without forcing a single solution. Being alive means that our experiences unfold unpredictably, sometimes chaotically, despite our best efforts to slow them down or to rationalize them. For academics, at first glance, this can be unnerving: the open texturedness of life seems much more familiar than the linear predictability of arguments. Feeling and experiencing knowledge means making room for intuition and imagination, even as we trust the creative process to form our ideas, hoping they will be different and fresh.

*Blackout* challenges us to consider the pull between form and open-endedness, the comfort of what we know, and the thrill of what is in the process of becoming, driven by passion. It also captures the uncertainty that often accompanies transformation and growth in the interval between the old and new, especially when we feel at risk of being on the ‘outside.’ Indeed, a key narrative thread in *Blackout* centres on the GSA, which provides a sense of community for some but remains more fraught for others, including Chris, a transgender character. The song, *Join the GSA!*, captures the GSA champions’ well-meaning enthusiasm, drawing on *Blackout*’s characteristic campy, self-deprecating humour. Staged as an upbeat, cheery invitation to join the school’s Gender

and Sexuality Alliance, the number's bright, confident tone satirizes the notion that belonging is simply a matter of adopting the right language or entering the right room. The character's exaggerated earnestness is funny, but it also captures a familiar institutional reflex: when faced with complexity, reaching for an easily replicable and visible sign of care.

What gives the number its edge is the friction it stages around youth response. The invitation is not received as liberating by everyone. For some students, the offer of visibility feels like safety, while for others, it feels like exposure, or a misreading of what they need in that moment. The juxtaposition is a reminder of how, in art and life, "different modes of perception are asked of us" (Greene, 1995, p. 131) if we genuinely want to effect change. From the live performance, we were struck by how the comedy did not soften the critique but rather signalled its referentiality and complexity. Read alongside *Shift*, the scene clarifies that the question is not about whether GSAs matter, but whether schools and the community can also honour quieter, more nuanced, and deeply personal expressions of identity that are not easily reducible to an institutional checklist. Taken together, *Shift* and *Join the GSA!* model a persuasive, non-didactic performance pedagogy; they keep institutional logic and youth agency in productive friction, asking audiences to linger with complexity rather than resolving it.

This is what art and writing do; they make it possible to let go of old identities and to try on new ones. As Carl Leggo (2023) observes: "I am a writer because I have created myself, written myself as a writer, and in the creating and writing, I have come to know myself" (p. 11). His insight resonates with our own ongoing negotiation of academic work and identity, and with the students who animate *Blackout* and the events it stages. Read this way, *Blackout* functions as a mode of self-authorship, inviting both performers and audiences to experiment with new ways of being.

### **Performing Discomfort: Finding Ourselves Through Uncomfortable Roles**

If *Shift* and *Join the GSA* stage the limits of institutional logic and the complexities of youth agency, we also need to turn the lens inward to examine how performance implicates us as academics and allies. Consequently, we interrogate the tensions among masking, complicity and vulnerability, in both the musical and our own narrative and poetic responses, attending to how these dynamics are made visible within performance practice. People are also much less predictable than we assume, meaning that, as art like *Blackout* allows us to depict, they are never only one thing at once. This tension between the roles we play and the lives we lead is elusive yet central to the power of artistic expression. Identity involves nuance, tension, emotion, and depth, themes that also operate in our own search for new conceptions of academic identity and cultural spaces. This theme of masking and unmasking, of assuming different identities to be recognized across different settings, runs throughout the musical. *Blackout's* staging thus exposes not only institutional contradictions, but our own investments in particular social roles.

Conventionally, we look at indecisiveness as a form of weakness, a failure to commit, especially in the academic world. However, why is this so? Can vulnerability be heroic? In the song *Batman*, from the musical, the straight, well-intentioned ally Josh describes living 'two lives' in different contexts, hiding his love of theatre and performing a version of masculinity he believes will be accepted. However, this insight is also accompanied by an implicit awareness that life could unfold differently, capturing both caution and a sense of transformative possibility. The song uses humour to keep the scene accessible, but also functions as a form of cover. It tells the truth without fully exposing it. However, what stands out is the contrast between the superhero metaphor and

the ordinariness of masking for this character. Masking is not a rare phenomenon, but a routine strategy learned under social pressure to conform.

As audience members, we recognized how the number functioned as a subtle hinge between lightness and discomfort. The performance invites us to recognize how quickly people are trained to manage impressions, and how closely that training is tied to gendered norms of masculinity and belonging. The song is complex, however, because it integrates these social and personal dynamics with a performance that renders this tension visible and thus available for shared reflection and, potentially, change. In the words of Roger Simon (1992), the number is an act of engaging in “the production of images of that which is not yet that provoke people to consider, and inform them in considering, what would have to be done for things to be otherwise” (p. 9). In *Blackout*, performance becomes a praxis of self-implication; it does not simply describe masking but asks us to inhabit the discomfort of living ‘two lives’ and to imagine alternatives, if we can.

Identity’s relational and performative aspects are explored across multiple levels throughout the musical, sometimes in humorous, light-hearted terms and sometimes in darker, satirical ones. But this anxiety moves in many different directions. The capacity to change sometimes begins with the realization that there may not be a single ‘right’ answer, a position that requires a willingness to listen and learn. Persuasion often has an uneasy alliance with the truth because we fear that telling others how we really feel will be rejected. But our experiences and emotions are never as linear and unambiguous as we pretend. This found poem was taken from John’s written reflection as he reflected on the sense of inadequacy he felt as a novice ally:

### **Scared Straight Man**

Speaking as a straight man...  
But also... neurodiverse.

Not knowing...  
Yet wanting to work here—  
It’s scary. It takes guts.

In the university—  
Especially the neoliberal one—  
We’re told: brand yourself. Be an expert.  
But this project? It’s different.  
Admit we don’t know.  
Start the conversation. Use art.  
Show what it feels like... from the inside.

After tenure, I asked myself—  
More publications? Pages no one reads?  
It didn’t matter. It didn’t change a thing.

I wanted...  
Meaning. Connection. Impact.

And maybe...  
Admitting we don't know  
Is the first step.

John found reading the found poem as Sarah crafted it was surprising, because he felt it cast him in a different light, one that gave him more agency than he would typically allow himself, given how uncertain he often felt in the ally role. He recalled that Sarah and other project members had made him feel safe and welcome, and that it is acceptable to make mistakes as he learned. “Admitting we don't know/Is the first step.” Perhaps it is also a condition of authentic presence. In this way, performance and poetic transcription together create a critical space in which uncertainty is not a deficit to be hidden, but a starting point for genuine engagement. As Bayles and Orland (2001) remind us, “the only voice you need is the voice you already have” (p. 117). Their broader point is that creative work becomes possible when we stop waiting for permission and begin where we are, accepting that fear accompanies the creative act of self-expression.

Performance is relational and participatory, and the most powerful texts are those that create space for readers to (re)imagine themselves through others' eyes, to draw on memory and imagination, and to lend life to other worlds in which people can be otherwise. Such an immediate, visceral, and intimate response reminds us that “participatory involvement with the many forms of art can enable us to *see* more in our experience, to *hear* more on normally unheard frequencies, to *become conscious* of what daily routines have obscured, what habit and convention have suppressed” (Greene, 1995, p. 123). This is especially true for themes as complex and fraught as identity, since *Blackout* celebrates identity while refusing to reduce individuals to a single group label. We understand these uncomfortable roles, then, as central to *Blackout's* reflexive, intersectional frame, since they hold us accountable to our own complexity while still making space for change.

### **Embodied Emotion: Stitching Together Lived Moments**

The experience-near moments traced above, including our own discomfort, invite us to consider how emotion and embodiment function as forms of knowledge within *Blackout*, connecting musical performance to personal history and public memory. Critical, arts-based approaches are uniquely positioned to capture the tension between educational culture and the complexity of everyday life, particularly when they decentre power and create space for multiple voices. In contrast to formal educational settings, where knowledge is presented as settled and authoritative, art invites participants to dwell in the lived moment, in which past and present are mutually constitutive and together shape how we see and experience the world. Embodied performance pedagogy can seamlessly combine affective engagement and critical insight in ways that mirror the intensity and passion of actual life. *Blackout's* use of musical performance to capture a particular cultural moment reminded Sarah of her own engagement with the musicals of her youth, and her found poem explores similar themes:

## Hard Return

You know...  
I'm from a generation...  
That *watched musicals break the rules.*

The one that hit us?  
*Rent.*

It captured a moment in history...  
The turn of the century...  
The AIDS crisis...  
Policies that ignored lives...  
Artists figuring themselves out...  
Neurodiverse voices...  
Queer love... Trans love...  
All of it—on stage.

You can't read this in a book.  
No textbook... No paper...  
Could ever hold that.

When the US government...  
Refused to fund HIV or AIDS research—  
Because it was a “gay disease”...  
That silence... that erasure...  
You *felt* it in the music.  
In the rebellion.  
In the living, breathing story.

You don't watch it...you *participate in it!*  
Move with it. Sing with it.  
Feel it. *Live it.*

The music!  
Rebellious. Raw. Visceral.  
Not like anything we'd ever heard before.

It hit you. It shook you.  
It pulled you into the story.

It isn't just a show...  
It's history.  
It's anger.  
It's joy.  
It's pain.  
It's love.  
And you *feel* every bit of it.

In *Hard Return*, musical theatre appears as a living archive of a cultural moment, a mode of critical public engagement through which audiences come to know history not only intellectually, but intimately. 'Freedom,' says Timothy Snyder (2024), "is about knowing what we value and bringing it to life" (p. xv). This version of freedom is the creative impetus that gave life to *Blackout* and animates other artistic works, as it is the capacity to transform what is given into something that speaks through the artistic act of reclamation. In this framing, personal stories are stitched to broader histories in ways that invite audiences to remember, connect, and hope together. As Sarah noted, just as *Rent* (Larson, 1996) offered a mirror to a generation grappling with loss, desire, and social neglect, *Blackout* provides a space for young people to author their own unique cultural narrative:

Sarah: What I am saying feels bold, because I am not saying that *Blackout* is like *Rent*, but there is something about the youth-driven closeness... it is staying very experience-near, even if that experience is not the same as someone else's in another part of the world. I think the visceral nature of it offers a glimpse of what it could be like and helps contextualize what is happening in the larger world, even though, like *Rent*, it does not name everything that is happening. In some respects, *Blackout* shares the same tenets. It is an experience close to us, visceral, and collective. Whether or not you are part of the community or are aware of this happening, it uses youth language, which is also what is happening in our larger world. The audience is centred on how systems are functioning. However, it is subtle in a way that is accessible to the audience and not confrontational or overwhelming. I think it is powerful, which helps me feel less afraid of continuing this work.

Anxiety, we recognized, was a recurrent theme in our reflections and in *Blackout* itself. Fear arises from visibility when communities of difference are under threat, but it is also linked to the moral responsibility of advocacy and allyship. We fear misrepresenting others or centring our experiences in reductive ways. To us, working in a public-facing arts-based collaboration is less well-mapped out and less familiar than conventional academic work. Although this is often positive, it also means that our work is not often recognized or supported by the university, and acknowledging this reality can bring a real sense of trepidation. Positioning *Blackout* alongside *Rent* in this way underscores our claim that performance can serve as a form of public pedagogy; it allows youth to feel their way into complex social realities and rehearse new forms of belonging.

The messiness of using an experience-near lens can lead to anxiety, just as relinquishing control through a collaborative process can. In many ways, much of the groundwork for such projects involves creating the conditions for creative collaboration and fostering a climate of trust. This emphasis on relationships and connection also stands in stark contrast to the often formal and formulaic academic world. Collaborative art-making can serve as both a response to the possibility of discovery and as a reminder that knowing, like art, is a living process that connects us to one another and to a collective past. The shared act of creation enables us to forge new subjectivities and transformative spaces, even amid the most challenging circumstances. In *Blackout*, this shared creation brings emotion, risk, and relationship to the centre of our critical work, rather than treating them as peripheral to ‘real’ scholarship.

### **The Praxis of Persuasion: How Do We Create Lasting Change?**

Having considered performance as a site of institutional critique, counter-narrative, and embodied knowledge, we now turn explicitly to questions of persuasion as a mode of praxis. *Blackout* has prompted us to consider how performance can function pragmatically as a mode of critical engagement in ways that institutional or academic scripts often cannot. One way it does this is by giving voice to lived experience in a powerful, engaging manner. More broadly, our experiences have also prompted us to view changes in people as more about persuasion than overt moralizing. *Blackout* is primarily concerned with attending to the intersubjective and intersectional aspects of identity, because our identities manifest differently across relationships, often in unexpected ways. This fundamental insight includes reconsidering how we can more effectively problematize masculinity in ways that do not alienate or push away young men.

At the academic level, we aim to undertake work that extends the growing body of scholarship on how neurodiversity intersects with other dimensions of identity, including gender and sexuality within LGBTQ2SIA+ communities (Rosqvist et al., 2020; Walker & Raymaker, 2021). On a more human level, this project made us think a lot about how we can convince others to commit to change. Art can help persuade others by offering intimate glimpses into subjective and situated experiences. Moreover, it can help people imagine how the world might be otherwise, even as we examine its imperfections and blemishes. Performance art, rooted in real-life experience, can do these things in a way that didactic moralizing, however earnestly communicated, often cannot.

In an era marked by polarization and performative outrage, this kind of slow, embodied persuasion, rooted in vulnerability and invitation, offers a vital alternative to more didactic or purely abstract models of critical education. We wish people would change when we tell them that their actions are hurtful or their words tend to wound. However, in an age of algorithms, people’s views have become increasingly entrenched, with little middle ground from which to seek reconciliation (Neiman, 2024). We acknowledged that mainstream critical approaches had failed to engage certain groups, particularly young males. Sarah, as we see in the following found poem, voiced her concern about the need to find new ways to engage this group while still addressing the harmful dimensions of traditional masculinity:

#### **The Men in My Life**

Some narrow expressions of masculinity...  
They can feel threatened.

The belief that I have to be tough...  
All the time.  
That I can't show emotions...  
That I can't be tearful.

That I can't like musicals.  
That I *have* to like sports.

*(She pauses, looks out at the audience, almost whispering.)*  
This dichotomy—  
This box—  
It doesn't come from nowhere.

It comes from what we've heard.  
From society.  
From our families.  
From our cultural context.

*(Her voice rises, more passionate now.)*  
But is that all masculinity is?  
Toughness? Silence? Denial?

Or can it be something else?  
Something wider...  
Fuller...  
Human.

*(Music swells. She steps closer to the audience, almost confessing.)*  
Because I believe...  
Masculinity can hold tears.  
Masculinity can sing.  
Masculinity can be soft...  
And still be strong.

Sarah's found poem opens up masculinity as a question rather than a verdict. It offers a pedagogy of invitation in which young men are addressed as capable of tenderness and change, rather than positioned solely as embodying patriarchal harm. Read through a neuroqueer and intersectional lens, the poem loosens the grip of narrowly scripted gender norms and suggests that masculinities, too, can be re-authored in more expansive and life-affirming ways. In this sense, the poem

exemplifies the type of persuasive, experience-near praxis we see in *Blackout*: it names the harms of dominant gender norms while simultaneously extending an open invitation to transformation. Making this change requires us to mindfully balance the tension between critique and care, as we make room for a more proactive, humane and attentive form of critical activism, themes that Sarah reflected on at length during our interview:

Sarah: Those folks, especially those who are going to be teachers and working with youth, are part of the audience where *Blackout* is disruptive. It challenges what we think we know about gender, about neurodiversity, about queerness, and how we come to learn about these things. And here is my little soapbox moment: I think we have done a disservice to our men and boys, particularly our Cisgendered, heterosexual, and I would even go so far as to say, white, men and boys, because we have kept them out of the conversation. We have often done that by shaming them and telling them that everything they do is wrong...The challenge is how to address that truth, culturally, and with youth, in a way that helps them feel heard, valued, and given a voice? How can we create space where they can let their guard down enough to say, “Oh, I see how I can walk into a room in a way that you cannot. I see how you have to shut down a part of yourself to be in this space. Did you know that I have to shut down a part of myself to enter this other space?” Furthermore, from there, can we work toward not having anyone shut down any part of themselves to belong and to enter a space?

When voiced in and around a performance like *Blackout*, such reflections become more than individual insights; they form part of a reflexive practice that invites audiences, particularly future teachers, to reconsider their own roles in sustaining or disrupting gendered norms. ‘Teaching,’ writes bell hooks (1994), “is a performative act” (p. 11). However, how this performative aspect of teaching becomes operational is often complex. As hooks explains, teachers perform, but, more importantly, they invite active participation from students, their audience (hooks, 1994). Collectively, we find ourselves breaking ground between the conventional academic culture we have known and new creative spaces that are both invigorating and anxiety-inducing. We resist the idea that these two realms can be neatly divided, or that doing so would deepen our sense of worth, either as individuals or academics. *Blackout*, we realize, models a performance-based pedagogy that keeps contradictions in view long enough for something to move, in audiences, institutions, and in ourselves.

### **Coda: Performing Community Beyond the Printed Page**

Our paper has traced how *Blackout* resists the temptation of easy solutions by bringing dramatic power to a local moment and staging the complex dynamics of intersectional identity in an engaging, memorable way. Performance art can serve as both method and message, embodying critical principles while telling the stories of academics working with community educators. By reflecting on *Blackout* and our own “poetic transcriptions” (Glesne, 1997), we have explored how creative arts-based approaches can work to make critical education tangible and transformative (Cohen et al., 2018). In doing so, we seek to contribute to the growing body of work that connects creativity, community, and education (Arnold & Norton, 2021; Lowe et al., 2021; Smith, 2021). This convergence of approaches offers hope, but also introduces new challenges and forms of vulnerability.

*Blackout* grew from a desire to move our work in a new direction, one that would be more impactful and foster boundary crossing through a partnership with community-based educators.

Our aim in this project was to use arts-based research to identify new ways of seeing ourselves and our contributions to the world. We saw performance art as a valuable means of encouraging audiences to explore the multi-textured nature of human experience and social reality (Kershaw & Nicholson, 2011).

As Leavy (2020) emphasizes, “arts-based practices can get at multiple meanings, opening up multiplicity in meaning making instead of pushing authoritative claims” (p. 27). This desire to persuade rather than to tell felt like a much-needed way forward in an increasingly fractured and angry world. Performance art, especially art created by youth working in concert within a particular cultural and historical moment, is a means of capturing multiple truths, intersecting identities, and gripping tensions. We saw our aim not as bottling up a message to be administered wholesale to an unthinking audience, but as creating cultural moments in which stories could be told, and people could encounter perhaps unfamiliar perspectives (Grandi, 2022). These were spaces charged and animated by emotion, with feelings that spilled out over the page and across the stage, resisting any easy answers, much like lived experience itself.

These performative spaces also allow us to explore art as a form of bearing witness to the historical and cultural world in which we hope, dream, fear, cry, and love. They stand in welcome contrast to the much more sanitized habits of academic life, where we are encouraged to keep our feelings in check and to file away the more imaginative and passionate parts of ourselves. Instead of focusing on who is right, they instead gesture towards an intellectual and artistic project where we explore how we became this particular way in this particular moment, how that experience feels, how we carry it in our senses, how it unfolds in time, and how mysterious it is to exist together in the ever-elusive, bittersweet now. Performance art, like *Blackout*, stages that ever-encroaching darkness, not to leave us there, but to let in a little, much-needed light, so that we can finally see each other more fully, and perhaps begin, at last, to understand.

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