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Whitewashed, II

Morgan Rowena Barnes-Whitehead
Bard College

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Whitewashed, II

Senior Project Submitted to
The Division of the Arts
of Bard College

by
Morgan Barnes-Whitehead

Annandale-on-Hudson, New York
May 2021

To my mother, who is the most beautiful woman on earth.

Thanks to Chiori Miyagawa, Nilaja Sun, Miriam Felton-Dansky, Faith Amrapali Williams, Dawn Akemi Saito, Gavin McKenzie, Damaris Borden, Lukina Andreyev, and Laila Perlman for your guidance, support, and expertise throughout my theatrical and academic journey.

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I've struggled, over the past few months, to find a way to begin this paper. Should I go in-depth about the step-by-step process, how it impacted the final product, and what I learned? Should I write something more emotional, about the impacts that the pandemic and the subject matter of the piece had on me? Maybe I would try and write something more stylistic, to save everyone the trouble of having to read something too matter of fact and academic. I felt, as I began writing this paper, that I'd wasted all my best words over the course of my senior year. Well, of course, not all of them had gone to *waste* exactly, since many of them had made their way into the script at the end of this paper, and others had gone towards creating positive change in the Department. But I spent so much of this year talking. Crying. Publicly. Explaining the pain I've felt and the hoops I've had to jump through to feel seen and heard in this program.

Here I am, with a chance to actually let some of that out. To be frank and honest with you, my captive audience, and yet I'm speechless. That's facetious. I'm not without words. I'm just without beautiful ones. I'm without the vocabulary to accurately describe what any of this has been like. I'm without the guidance or instruction about what tone to take in this paper, who this is really for, or why any of it truly matters. My art, my script, matters because it matters to me, and that's always been clear. But why this paper? Why sit down and write fifteen (or more) pages of unresearched non-fiction writing to be read once and then filed away in a sea of other *very* well-researched writing that I'm sure other students spent much longer than a month thinking about how to write.

The conclusion I've reached is that this essay is for closure. For me, the writer, to sum up this project as a culmination of my undergraduate experience at Bard, and for you, the reader, to read (with or without having seen my play staged) and learn a little bit more about how the final

product came to be. Why I made this choice or that one. I'm sorry to say that most of my choices were informed by the usual suspects: my race, my family, my socioeconomic status, my hometown, my sexuality, the global pandemic I'm living through, the population of students I'm surrounded by, and of course the department which is now pushing me out of its birth canal into the Real World.

I don't mean to sound cynical or overly critical of the Senior Project process, but I've been trying to write this introduction for four weeks now, and this is all my brain is capable of producing. I've lost my energy to use the correct academic language, to be polite to the people I'm supposed to be polite to, to pretend to have "gotten" every play I've studied. I didn't get them all. I'm sorry for that, but I'm also not, because not every play was written for me, just like my play wasn't written for everyone.

What's left is for you to read the rest of this essay, the bulk of which was written more than three weeks ago, and which has no coherent tonal connection to this introduction, and understand as you read it, that I will not be as honest or sincere in the body of this essay as I have been in this introduction or in the conclusion. I'm hoping, however, as I read back through it to edit it, that I'll find that closure we're all seeking out, so that the conclusion will be able to wrap up these thoughts in a way that's acceptable in a Senior Project essay. Please do not fail me.

I: What Went Well

On Playwriting.

Before my moderation project and Jonathan Rosenberg's Intro to Theater Making class in Spring 2019, I had boxed myself into the category of Theater Scholar and was more than happy to stay in that comfort zone. Through the combination of recognizing that my words were often

the most important and impactful feature of my theater pieces and becoming more comfortable with my ability to perform and devise, it became clear that scholarly analysis of theater was simply one of many tools I had available to me, and that I could label myself however I wanted. Then, during my Moderation Board, in Fall 2019, Jorge Cortiñas (who had been my Into to Playwriting professor), Miriam Felton-Dansky, and Jonathan all expressed their positive opinions of my writing and asked if I would be writing my senior project. That conversation unlocked my long-hibernating joy of fiction writing. Throughout elementary, middle, and high school I'd written both poetry and fictional prose consistently, producing around 10 pages of writing every week, but towards the end of my secondary education, I'd convinced myself that it was more of a hobby, and not something I should continue to pursue academically, let alone professionally. Immediately after the board was over, I made plans to take the next two sequence courses in Playwriting to aid in the writing of my Senior Project.

As I have for most of my life, the first place I started when I began writing was my personal experience. I began freewriting on the topics of family, identity, queerness, race, motherhood, romance, and community until the intersections of those topics became clear. The things that came up for me in every single writing session were my mother, being “whitewashed”, the term “sapphic”, and the suburbs. Once I realized how deeply ingrained suburbia was in everything I was talking about, I had a setting, and it was easier to reach for things like character, plot, and theme within this giant grab bag of topics. I began with what I knew; being one of very few people of color in the suburbs, surrounded by whiteness is extremely familiar, and I knew I wanted to write something romantic in spite (or perhaps because of) the global health crisis. Hannah was the first character I thought of. I knew a lot of East Asian girls that had been adopted into white families back home in Ann Arbor, and always found their

relationships to race to be uniquely complicated and wanted to explore that proximity to whiteness theatrically.

After I'd created Hannah, all the other characters came very naturally. I imagined her love interest as someone else with a foot in two worlds, but perhaps one that hides it a bit better on the outside—someone like me, a Black woman, raised in a Black household, but existing in a predominantly white space. Perhaps this character, Amira, could even be a little better at it than I am; she could be less accommodating of white feelings, less polite and forgiving, a little more clinical and overtly judgmental. This would, of course, exacerbate the friction between Hannah's navigation of her Asian identity and her familial connections with these suburban white folks. It was easy to conceive of a Nuclear Family based on the white families in Ann Arbor, complete with an older brother that can do no wrong in the mother's eyes, an emotionally (and often physically) absent father who works full-time in a nondescript job, and of course the overbearing matriarch who was once a staunch feminist in college, but who hasn't kept up with the movement since the 80s and now finds herself uncomfortably out of touch.

Early versions of the script included a scene with the father (Brad), monologues from all five characters, and even an interlude that would show Amira and Hannah away at college, to contrast their relationship in the suburbs, but as the process went on, it became clear to me which scenes were most necessary to tell the story and create my intended atmosphere, and I ended up cutting a lot of that content before showing it to anyone else.

On Advising and A Developmental Reading.

At this point in the process, I began to share my drafts with Dmitri Ades-Laurent (my collaborator) and Chiori Miyagawa (our advisor). Their feedback was detailed, constructive, and essential, and by October, I was already on my third or fourth draft of the script. Chiori

suggested that we could hire professional actors to read the script so that I could get a better sense of what needed to change, what was working, and of course how long the piece was, since Dmitri and I had elected to be in the Senior Project Festival and would need to be diligent about sticking to the 25-minute length. While Dmitri and I set about casting our student actors for the official production, Chiori reached out to professional actors for a developmental reading. On October 19, 2020, Nilaja Sun read for Amira, Maria Christina Oliveras read for Hannah, LeeAnne Hutchison read for Kate (the mother), and Gavin McKenzie, a Bard student that had already been cast in the project, read for Colin (the older brother).

Chiori was extremely helpful in teaching me how to get the most out of the reading, how to unpack the results of the reading, and what to do with the information at the end. Hearing the words out loud alongside her guidance not only helped me create the next few drafts of the script, but reinvigorated my joy for writing, my enthusiasm in the script, and my confidence in the quality of the project.

Throughout the process, Chiori continued to champion us through every potential difficulty, from our academic difficulties to our struggles with advocating for ourselves with the Fisher Center staff. Through it all, it was abundantly clear that she believed in us, our abilities, and the project, and I can't imagine having a better advisor. As of writing this paper, in Spring 2021, I have still not met Chiori in person, despite having taken a class with her and having been her advisee for a year. We hope that by the end of the semester, since Dmitri, Chiori, and I are all fully vaccinated, we'll finally be able to meet without worrying about putting ourselves or each other in danger. Despite the physical distance between us, I feel extremely close to Chiori and am incredibly impressed by her talents as a playwright, professor, and advisor.

On Casting.

Bard College is predominantly white. I knew this when I decided to attend the school, and I knew it when I wrote the script. But I also knew there were extremely magnetic and talented students of color on campus that would be glad to assist us on this journey by performing for us. Casting Gavin as Colin was quite simple, because Dmitri and I had a preexisting theatrical relationship with him through classes and student theater, and we knew that any white man that we brought into the cast needed to have been actively participating in the anti-racism work that occurred in our department over the summer, or else we'd be potentially exposing our actors of color to harm in our rehearsal space. Gavin is an excellent theater maker and playwright in his own right, and would be invaluable to anyone's project, but we also, as fans of his, wanted to give him an opportunity to play a kind of role that he isn't often considered for on campus, and challenge him the way we were attempting to challenge ourselves.

By wonderful coincidence, in Fall 2020, Miriam asked students that had previously taken her Theater History course if they had any copies of the assigned books that current students could loan for the semester, and I offered to provide a copy of *The Recognition of Sakuntala*. She put me in touch with Ogechi Egonu, and during the book exchange, we sparked a conversation about what theater was like here at Bard, what I was working on, and of course this project. I asked if she'd be interested in auditioning for the lead, and my other prospective actors for this role hadn't gotten back to me, so I was quietly hopeful that she'd be a good fit. Needless to say, when she sent her audition to Dmitri and me, we were absolutely blown away. She was talented, bright, exciting, and engaging, and she seemed to like the script! So, we cast her as Amira.

Through our work with the Shakespeare club, we'd met and interacted with Allie Sahargun multiple times. She was friendly, dynamic, funny, and sincere, and had been an

integral part of the production of *King Lear* our club had been mounting before the pandemic halted it in its tracks. Truthfully, we hadn't considered her for the role of Kate earlier simply because she was so bubbly and youthful, but after seeing her perform in a Shakespeare monologue festival we'd organized, we knew we had to reach out to her. She had the range, the commitment, and of course the talent to play Kate, and we'd been struggling to find another white actor on campus that had similar capacity for the suburban mom character without being sarcastic or overly self-deferential. Allie could play her sincerely or sarcastically, subtly or over-the-top, and we knew that would be essential.

Unsurprisingly, Hannah was the most difficult role for us to cast. I held onto a concern for a long time that Brad (the father) not appearing on stage would allow the audience to fill in the blanks that he was also East Asian if our actor was biracial, and that it would disrupt the illustration of the family I'd intended. However, after reaching out to our various connections and resources on campus, it became clear that not only was Julie Reed coming highly recommended by every person that we spoke to, but that her talents and chemistry with the other actors would supersede any superficial worries I had about the "confusion" about the familial relationships. At this point, I'd already tweaked the dialogue a bit to include direct references to Colin and Hannah being siblings and Kate being Hannah and Colin's mother, rather than these things being simply implied in their direct interactions (which had now been cut). Somehow, none of the family members directly interacting with each other had actually ended up clarifying their relationships, which allowed my worries about Julie to turn into pure excitement for her performance (I'm trying hard not to gush in this essay, but I need it to be known that I could write for Julie for the rest of my life.).

On Rehearsal.

The collaborative synergy between the entire team really began to shine once we started the rehearsal process. After dedicating the fall semester to writing and workshopping the script, we had the entire spring semester at our disposal to create community, comfort, and progress in our rehearsal room. Thankfully, all four of our cast members have wonderful senses of humor, and most of them knew each other from around campus and their classes, so without much intervention from Dmitri or me, the rehearsal room took on a very healthy culture. As the creators of the piece, it was our job to maintain and expand upon that natural energy and ensure that it was serving both the performers and the piece as a whole.

Each rehearsal, we did our best to not only request/encourage sharing from our performers but share ourselves as much as felt appropriate and relevant to maintaining trust in the room. This often looked like checking in and/or warming up together, allowing space and time for socialization and comedic inclinations to exist, and ensuring that we were consistently respecting everyone's expertise and talents in the room.

It was at this point that we began work with our dramaturg, Faith Amrapali Williams, who I asked to sign onto the project because of the similarities between her lived experiences and Hannah's fictional ones. As a Black woman raised by two Black parents, there are things that I simply do not and cannot understand about transracial adoption or Asian identity. Additionally, Julie is half-Japanese and was raised with a Japanese parent in her household, so her connections to Asian identity and family intersect with but are not identical to Faith's. Between our actors, myself, and Faith, we were able to have full well-rounded discussions surrounding the racial and familial dynamics at play.

We discussed everything from how we'd each been named, to what kind of music we thought the characters would listen to, to how our respective families celebrate various holidays. These cultural similarities and differences put us all in the correct mindset to work on the script, thinking about Amira's culture shock being in the suburbs, Kate and Colin's relative comfort, and where that puts Hannah in the middle of it all.

It was exciting and rewarding to hear my text spoken aloud and to hear both my interpretation of the words as well as slight variations from the different actors. My rule for being in the rehearsal room was that as the playwright, I would only answer questions fielded to me by pointing to evidence that was in the text, and that I would be welcoming to any and all readings of said text that the actors brought to the table. After all, if I wanted the text performed exactly as I envisioned it, I could simply perform every role (or at least the role of Amira) myself. The point of staging a script with a cast of actors, in my estimation, is to utilize the creative friction that is collaboration.

II: What Was Difficult

On COVID-19 and The Fisher Center for Performing Arts.

The greatest and most obvious challenge in our creative process was of course the pandemic. This fact of life found its way into every aspect of our journey but was enthusiastically and creatively worked around in almost every stage until we reached the point of actually staging the piece. In fact, I sensed that my peers were not having quite so much joy or excitement in the early stages and actually felt quite a bit of guilt for how well things were going for Dmitri and me. That is, until we had to begin in-person rehearsals and our collaboration with the Fisher Center for Performing Arts.

In the virtual sphere, we'd been able to imagine that health and safety protocols might be looser by the time it was May and knew that because information about the virus was updating almost moment-to-moment, it would be a better use of our time to focus on the aspects of the piece we had control over, which were coincidentally also all the aspects that went well and felt truthful to us as theater makers. The guidelines and protocols seemed to change so often, it was nearly impossible to effectively plan ahead, and even tasks that had clear and consistent protocols proved themselves arduous and with elusive extra rules and regulations you couldn't know until you'd already broken one.

Our initial plan for staging the piece was to have one person unmasked in LUMA at a time. We thought this would be perfectly COVID-safe, if not immediately, then by the time the festival rolled around. We were sorely mistaken. We tried to explore the option of having our actors Zoom into the theater, but the Wi-Fi couldn't support that option. We asked about pre-recording material for our lead actor, Ogechi, to act against onstage, but it was far too late in the process by then for her to have adequate rehearsal time with the footage. We asked if we could use the nearby offices inside the Fisher Center to create booths for one actor at a time to sit in with their masks off and act into a camera that would be connected directly to a monitor onstage, but were told that this was very complicated, the COVID Response Team had said no, and that they wouldn't fight for this for us because they'd already turned down other students requesting similar technology. Finally, it became clear that significant portions of the piece would need to be filmed and simply played onscreen during the festival, and that only brief sections of the 25-minute theatrical script would actually be able to be staged in person.

Of course, the concept of wearing masks on stage was brought up several times over the course of the production, but Dmitri and I felt that the concept of several people standing 6 feet

apart on stage with masks (and implying they're in a backyard) changed the tone, setting, and focus of the piece more than we were comfortable with. Over the course of the negotiations about safety with the Fisher Center, we felt that we were being guilted into choosing this option, as it would be the easiest for them, and they even tried to convince us of this idea's artistic merit, citing the "intimacy" of having people physically onstage together. While outside of a pandemic, I would be inclined to agree with that assessment, two people standing 6 feet apart without being able to see the majority of each other's faces or properly make out the words they're saying didn't feel any more intimate to us than the distance created by screens; in fact, even just the knowledge that our actors' faces would be seen, and my words would be heard clearly felt much more important than having bodies physically in space.

Despite our assertion that we preferred pre-recording the material artistically, Dmitri and I did not have much relevant experience with film and relied heavily on the expertise of our cast members and the internet through the pre-recording process. With only a little under two weeks with the camera borrowed from the Fisher Center, we ran into all sorts of rookie mistakes; not understanding how to change the lighting settings in order to film outside, not having access to the Film Department's resources or spaces, and of course getting kicked out of a music practice room by a Karen-in-training for not having followed all the correct protocols (she claimed, at the time, that we couldn't be in the room for COVID-tracing purposes, but never took our names despite the fact that we'd been in the space for about 20 minutes and she sent another student in there immediately after us without airing it out. That hardly seemed COVID-safe to us, nor did it accomplish her supposed goal of contact-tracing.).

In the end, it became clear that nobody in the music, film, or theater departments was going to give us the space for one person to be mask-less by themselves in a room with the door

closed, and our outdoor filming attempts were fruitless, so we ended up having to have each actor film their scenes by themselves (or with their housemates) in their rooms. This process gave us much less control over how the end product looked, and was frustratingly hands-off, but it was the only way to be safe and get it done within the short time frame.

Had the Fisher Center and COVID Response Team been clearer about our limitations from the very beginning instead of telling us to “dream big” during information sessions, we could’ve realized that pre-recording would be our only option much earlier in the process, and then had much more time to play with that medium and cater it to our vision. Instead, we spent months of back and forth spanning from November to April constructing well-thought-out plans, pitching them, and having them rejected one by one by the Fisher Center staff, leaving us in a time crunch to complete our project.

On Motivation.

As our advisor Chiori can attest, our enthusiasm for the project waxed and waned over the course of the year. Though we consistently had love for the material and our cast, we were continually frustrated by a number of outside factors ranging from classes that didn’t live up to our expectations, unhealthy living situations, medical and financial issues, and of course our dealings with the Fisher Center. Through it all, Chiori remained supportive and sympathetic to our needs and desires and did everything in her power to keep us going.

Though I’d hoped my words and my love of theater alone would be enough for me to continue the project through anything, I must admit that there were times that I wanted to throw in the towel. I considered giving up on all the bells and whistles and simply staging it with everyone wearing masks or pre-recording all of it like a film. But those were not my vision, and as much as I may have wanted to take an easier route, I knew that I would be annoyed with

myself if I gave in. I wanted bodies of color to get to shine on stage in LUMA, and Dmitri and I wanted to take advantage of the learning opportunities that staging something inside the theater would afford us. The only combination of those that was COVID (and budget) compliant is the version that will be presented in LUMA the weekend of May 14, 2021.

I'm a theater maker. Of course, my dream was to be able to stage my play the way the graduating classes before (and presumably after) me have always been able to; live onstage with a live audience. It has been frustrating and disheartening have to sacrifice everything I've been working towards and learning for the last few years in the name of safety in ways that I know my peers have never previously had to. I am not a film major. I have not been conditioned to sit in front of a computer for hours, watching take after take of the same scenes over and over again. After going through all the footage to pick out the most usable takes, doing my best to edit the background noise to be less overwhelming, and adding in the green screen effect, I had nothing left in my tank and needed to hand the footage over to Dmitri to be cut together into scenes. Throughout the entire pre-recording and footage editing process, I considered giving up every 10 minutes. I felt immense regret about every choice I'd made to get me to that moment, even regarding things that I described as being beneficial previously. I wished I'd done a solo project, that I'd never decided to work in LUMA, that I'd written a different script. It was the academic low point of my senior year, and if you work at Counseling Services, you'll know that's really saying something.

Even now, as I write this essay, I wonder what actual benefit there was to staging our work in LUMA. We'd considered performing the piece outside multiple times over the course of the year, and always returned to LUMA for reasons I now cannot fully remember or articulate. That is one regret I can't quite shake. It would've been very nice not to have wasted months on

ideas that the FC would then veto, and instead been able to work with the campus COVID guidelines alone in negotiating staging the script. If I were to go back to the beginning of the process knowing what I know now, I might've written this script, directed it myself, and spent my budget on creating an outdoor venue for myself (and perhaps other students) to use.

III: What I Felt Prepared For

On Collaboration.

Dmitri and I met in Miriam's Intro to Theater and Performance class in Fall 2018. It was my very first semester at Bard, after transferring here from a community college in Ann Arbor, Michigan. Immediately, Dmitri and I got along, but we didn't work together much outside that class until the following semester, when I was cast in the Bard Bards (Shakespeare club) production of *Much Ado About Nothing* as Claudio. Dmitri was the stage manager, and I (along with the rest of the cast) looked to them for guidance more than we looked to the directors. I'd never performed Shakespeare before, only studied his works in an academic capacity, so this was uncharted territory for me at the time, but through the supportive and casual environment, I quickly became confident in my ability to perform a play I'd adored since my youth.

Since that first production together, Dmitri and I have continued to be friends and collaborators in classes and in student theater, which made the decision to become Senior Project partners an obvious one. We kept in near-constant contact over the summer and were consistently brainstorming new approaches and concepts. We also kept in touch with Chiori beginning at the end of the Spring 2020, and through the summer. Chiori helped me begin my first draft of the script, and immediately began fostering a comforting and trusting environment for the three of us to talk, which was extremely helpful to me in beginning my writing process.

Despite our shared theatrical history and having been friends for a year before deciding to collaborate, I found I still had a lot learning and adapting to do in the collaboration process. Since the first semester I spent writing several drafts of the script and Dmitri was there largely to support me in that, I assumed that the second semester would be the reverse of that. Instead of Dmitri doing the bulk of the work this semester while I was there to uplift and support them, it felt like I was often doing as much, if not more, from week to week. Sometimes in rehearsal rooms, the actors would do a really excellent run of a scene, and Dmitri would tell them they had “no notes,” which isn’t really what you want to be hearing from the director (as a playwright or an actor) with over a month left of rehearsals. In those cases, I would find it necessary to give my own notes and encourage the actors to dig deeper, do more work, and find ways to keep rehearsal exciting when it seemed to stagnate. Of course, their practical skills in directing often did shine, and I was able to applaud those moments and appreciated them dearly, but I did find myself combatting my control-freak tendencies more and more as the collaborative process went on.

In retrospect, I feel that a lot of my feelings about the amount of work I put into the process compared to them is entirely my own fault; I often volunteer to do things for myself and redo the work of others because I have a hard time trusting people to get things done in a way I’ll approve of. I’ve been trying to let go of some of my perfectionism, but it’s difficult to let things go when little mistakes plague you. Of course, in the grand scheme of the universe, the shadow of the camera being visible on the actor’s shoulder isn’t any worse than the unappealing visual and “demystifying” of the magic of film that accompanies it, but when something like that is completely avoidable and you trusted the other person in the room to catch it, it can feel like a sign that you need to check and recheck what everyone else is doing to avoid mistakes.

Ultimately to rectify the feelings of anxiety and perfectionism that came with relinquishing tasks to Dmitri, I had to consult my mother, who often runs into the same issues at work. People she's been working with for years, that she loves dearly as humans, and who have been doing their jobs for years make mistakes she knows she wouldn't have made had she simply done it herself, and yet she knows she needs to allow everyone to do their own job. I took her advice as best I could and tried to step back for the last weeks of rehearsal and tech and give Dmitri full reign of the project, both out of respect for them as a theater artist and as preservation of my own mental and physical health. I'm sure that Dmitri often felt the same way about me, frustrated at simple mistakes I made that they simply wouldn't have. I know that I'm not infallible, and the sooner I accept that others aren't either, the better off I'll be as a collaborator and artist. Since my childhood, I've been prone to placing undue stress upon myself and the quality of my work. People will remember this project as being mine and speak about it with one another, and the feeling of not having done everything in my power to ensure that it's as high-quality as possible is difficult, but I'd rather give Dmitri creative agency than step on their toes constantly chasing the unattainable ideal of perfection I've been chasing since preschool.

On Student Theater at Bard.

While, of course, classroom education from professors and visiting artists is extremely valuable and I have learned plenty from my coursework at Bard, the main way that I've been able to learn and grow as an artist has been by actually creating theater. In theater and performance classes, the longest staged works you'll create are between 10 and 15 minutes long, and the vast majority will sit somewhere around 5 to 7. While these smaller-scale pieces with shorter time frames teach valuable skills surrounding stripping things to their bare essentials and dissecting one theatrical technique at a time, the majority of theater students aren't looking to

create 5- to 25-minute-long pieces for the remainder of their careers. I've yet to take (or hear about) a class wherein by the end of the semester, the culmination of the instruction has been a full-length show. The department's mainstage production is the primary academic opportunity to be part of a full-length show, but it can often feel exclusive and even a bit out of touch with the students, their goals as artists, and the classes they're taking. As such, over the course of the time I've been at Bard, the mainstage has garnered a reputation as being much more for the benefit of the director and their "professional" collaborators than the students. It's seen as an avenue for them to get free labor and ideas out of unpaid student actors that they can then take with them and profit off of without giving students credit (or until recently) any form of compensation.

Consequently, the main way that I and many other Bard students learn how to utilize our theatrical skills in a practical way is student theater. Through clubs and independent student-run productions, we learn the ins and outs of production, directing, design, stage management, budgeting, advertisement, auditions, rehearsal, and tech, which are all skills that our classes rarely touch upon, let alone go in-depth regarding. In fact, many students in the theater department can go semesters at a time without interacting with the mainstage in any meaningful way, but it's rare to meet a student who hasn't attended or participated in at least one student-run performance in a given semester.

All of these skills were the primary learning opportunities I recalled when navigating the difficulties of this project. Compared to the creativity and resilience it takes to cut, cast, produce, fund, and advertise a full-length Shakespeare play as a club head, senior project ends up being much less intensive. This meant that during a global pandemic, I felt I was running up against fewer roadblocks staging this show than I have working in student theater, where things can and will go wrong, and it's on us to find creative solutions, even when that involves sacrificing

concepts from our visions. These problem-solving skills were how we bounced back with new ideas within a day of having our previous ones rejected, and I'm not sure we could've continued to get back up after being knocked down without that experience under our belts.

On Directing Fucking A by Suzan-Lori Parks.

After several semesters of the bulk of my theatrical work not being viewed or supported by the T&P Department or the Fisher Center, a series of blunders in the inception of the Spring 2021 Mainstage led me to the opportunity to direct it myself through the POC Theater Ensemble. Because there are very few moderated T&P students of color (the main demographic the audition notices were being sent to), it became my responsibility to personally invite and convince all of the performers to be part of the production in order to make it happen.

At the time of writing this paper, I don't yet feel removed enough from the experience to reflect on it fully, but I know that it taught me a lot about my needs and goals as a theater maker. Everything I learned about directing I essentially gained through osmosis, never having actually taken a directing course before. I wasn't even entirely certain what the role of a director was, going into the project, and decided to approach it much in the way I approach teaching. My goal was not to impose my interpretation or vision on the actors, but to facilitate an environment where every individual actor could discover their own journey, and then ensure that those journeys were portrayed on stage in a way that was coherent and true to the source material. I did the best I could with the limited time frame and was able to create a piece of art that showcased the talents of my peers wonderfully. I couldn't have dreamt up a better group of performers for the task if I'd tried, and I wouldn't have wanted to.

It was a great trial run for being in LUMA, for protecting bodies of color onstage, and getting back into the groove of in-person theater. We even had a live audience of about 5 people

for each performance, which filled me with joy. I'd been sorely missing the exchange of energy between audience and performer. Ultimately, the experience served me as a person, as a theater maker, and as a scholar in ways that I'm sure I'll continue to discover in the months and even years ahead.

We've now reached the conclusion of this essay, and I regret to say that I'm not certain I can provide you or myself with the closure I've been seeking. In all honesty, I'm writing this conclusion alone in my room on a Friday night, while other students scream gleefully just outside. Now doesn't feel like the right time to finish this essay, but of course there never truly is a right time. I could try and finish it on a day that I'm feeling more optimistic, when nothing else is going on around me, and when I feel "ready" to be done. Instead, I feel that it's actually more poetic to end this anti-climatically.

I've learned a lot about my worth, about my friendships, about my goals. I don't know how much I've learned about Theater and Performance, and I don't know if I utilized this Place to Think properly over the years, but I do think that it was worth my time. I wouldn't go back and tell myself to go to a different school or choose a different major. I think that's good. I hope you enjoy my script. I loved writing it.

Whitewashed, II
By Morgan Barnes-Whitehead

Characters

Amira – Doing her senior thesis about the so-called “nuclear family”. Is here to observe, thanks again for having her. Black. Lesbian. Feels she lacks the skills to assimilate to the cultures on any planet.

Hannah – Amira’s girlfriend of 10 months. Peacekeeper. Adopted. East Asian. Her birth name is now her middle name, and she goes by it at school. Uses the general term “sapphic” to describe herself.

Colin – Hannah’s brother. Older. Lives at home “to save money.” White. Didn’t get into his dream art school, so he skipped college altogether.

Kate – Hannah’s mother. Please call her Kate, not Mrs. Michaels. Loves having guests. White, like her favorite wine. She has an undergraduate degree but has never had a real job.

Time

July.

Place

The Michaels’ backyard in the Suburbs.

Real World Time

This play is performed such that the sun is setting during Part Three, and it’s dark during the Outro.

when Amira says Hannah’s name in bold (like **Hannah) it will actually be replaced with the character’s birth name. This name will be chosen with the actress playing Hannah.*

PART ONE

[Amira stands center stage with a tape recorder. We can't see the set yet, just her, in a single spotlight. She can see us, she waves hello. She's nervous, but glad we're here. The lights should slowly go up as she talks, illuminating the world as she describes it. She begins recording.]

AMIRA

Day three on this strange planet. Atmospheric levels still seem normal, though the wind is of course still knocked out of me on occasion. Such is the way when the alien race has members alluring enough to get you to touchdown, when you'd been in fact very happy in orbit. It's correct to say that there's only so much that can be gleaned from the thermosphere, especially considering the hole in this planet's ozone layer is much smaller than the last, hard to peer through. They pay a lot of money to shrink it.

The Matriarch on this planet has a much more hands-on approach to ruling than I'm used to on my HomeWorld; my Mothership is more vessel than emperor, so this new orbit will be an adjustment.

I've been taking my vitals daily, and apart from the intermittent shortness of breath, lung function seems normal. In fact, I've noticed an improvement in air quality here, partly due to the fact that the Matriarch "cleanses" her living room with sage, as it is where the matriarch of the previous generation passed, and she wants to dissuade the spirit from lingering. She is unable to explain to me the origins or effectiveness of this ritual but swears by it.

Heart rate and blood pressure are normal, but they spike whenever the Matriarch's elder child plays Childish Gambino on his portable speakers. He knows all of the words, but thankfully refrains from singing them *all*.

Weight has gone down. This planet has an overabundance of a substance called kale, which is such an invasive plant species that it finds its way into almost every meal. Though it is tolerable in small doses, it accelerates bowel function to a frightening degree in large quantities.

Unfortunately, this home base has only two toilets.

Tonight, the aliens plan to celebrate the annual festival of lights they refer to simply as "the fourth". Preparations began before my arrival, and the festivities are due to begin this afternoon and continue into the night. We had a similar tradition on my home planet, though the particulars varied. Here, for example, the meat they cook is not marinated or even seasoned before being placed upon the grill. This is a curious practice that I suspect is in an effort to feel closer to the animals who provided the sustenance—

[She remembers we're here. She gives us a look like, "I know, I know, get serious." She starts the recording over.]

Day three with **Hannah's** family. Observations:

Colin asked if he could paint me. I'll pay attention to what color my palms end up being.

Kate must be excited that her daughter has finally brought me home to meet them, because she coos at everything **Hannah** and I do together, no matter how benign. She prompts her husband constantly; "Isn't that adorable, Brad? Doesn't that remind you of us when we were that young?"

Brad grumbles a lot over the top of a newspaper he is obviously pretending to read to avoid conversations at breakfast. He still thinks my name is Mira, no matter how much he's corrected.

Every time, he rolls his eyes and huffs, as though he's been insulted. I try my best not to immediately pull out my journal. I can't help but wonder if it matters to him. Or to Kate. I'd ask what she thinks about it, him getting it wrong over and over. But I know what she'd say. So, I don't ask. I observe.

[COLIN enters the backyard, getting ready to light up, until he sees AMIRA. He stops in his tracks. They exchange awkward half-waves, his hand closed around his lighter, her finger still holding down the Record button for a moment before releasing.]

COLIN
Morning.

AMIRA
Afternoon.

COLIN
Right... I don't want to interrupt.

AMIRA
It's a *free country*, isn't it? Or... a free backyard at least.

COLIN
I get it. Because we're "celebrating freedom" today.

AMIRA
It's funny your mom feels that way. About today.
[Beat.]
Because white women didn't get the vote until 1920 or whatever.

COLIN
Right.
[Beat.]
You didn't like her patriotic pancakes?

AMIRA
No, no, the blueberries and strawberries were fun. It's just... interesting that she associates it with freedom. That's all.

COLIN
What do you associate it with?

AMIRA
Fireworks. Grilling.

COLIN
Fair enough. Your family doesn't celebrate?

AMIRA

We do. We grill.

[*Pause.*]

You can smoke, I don't care.

COLIN

You sure?

AMIRA

Yeah, go ahead. It's your backyard.

[*She stands and watches awkwardly as he sits down in a chair and lights up. She puts the recorder away in her pocket.*]

COLIN

You want a hit?

AMIRA

I'm good, thanks.

COLIN

Gotta stay sharp for your research?

AMIRA

Something like that.

COLIN

What have you *observed* so far about the Average American Family?

AMIRA

It's been really enlightening, actually. Super different.

COLIN

You were somewhere else last month, right?

AMIRA

Yeah. They had four kids. It was hectic. But they made it work.

COLIN

Wow... I'd want to tear my hair out with one. Don't know how my mom did it. Hannah and I *sucked* as kids.

[*Long silence. He finishes smoking and gets up to head inside.*]

AMIRA

How's your painting going?

COLIN
I finished it.

AMIRA
Oh, that's great.

COLIN
I have some others to get to before I can start your portrait.

AMIRA
No rush.
[Long pause. COLIN starts to leave again.]
I'll be here all month.
[Yikes. Waited too long.]

COLIN
Right.
[He pauses, about to exit. He smiles, trying to be polite.]
Where are you going next month?

AMIRA
My friend Will's house.

COLIN
What's special about Will's family?

AMIRA
He and his brother were foster kids, growing up. Now it's just the two of them.

COLIN
Oh, is that how you met?

[Beat.]

AMIRA
No. I've never been in the system. We met at school.

COLIN
Right.
[Pause. He clears his throat and points towards the house.]
I'm gonna...

AMIRA
Alright. See you later.

COLIN

See ya.

[He exits. AMIRA pulls her recorder back out, about to recount the interaction. She hesitates. She looks at us, knowingly. Puts it away. Follows him inside.]

PART TWO

[HANNAH has a slice of cake. She sits at the table and eats it throughout her monologue.]

HANNAH

You let her in. You have to. You say, “of course you can sleep in my childhood bedroom with me.” You don’t even take the posters down. You let her see all your embarrassing phases and hope she finds them endearing. You can’t hide, because then when she chooses you, she isn’t choosing all of you. You know that, because your mother still gets up earlier than your father to brush her hair and teeth and claims that he’s never heard her fart. I’m not saying your person has to love the smell of your farts. I’m just saying that your person should know that you’re a human being.

Okay, so now that you’ve let her in, how do you get her to stay? Well, simply remind your person that she provides something to you that nobody else can. Orgasms? No. Don’t be crude. This isn’t about primal pleasure. This is about *after* the orgasm. You need to remind her that you want to be held, wrapped up in her while you fall asleep. She’ll like that. For good measure, act a little needy about it—but not so needy that she sits you down and reminds you that she’s coming up on a deadline and can’t go to bed before 10 like you want her to.

When she bakes you your birthday cake in your parents’ house with your mother’s fucking apron on, you’ll know you’ve sealed the deal. She stares your brother down as if to tell him, “Hannah and I will be inheriting this house, not you.” When she frosts the cake, tell her to add just enough flair as to prove that she knows what she’s doing, but not so much that she’s overtly flexing on your mom. Mmmm. Delicious. You love it.

[She’s done with her cake. She pushes the plate away and stretches. She gets a shiver down her spine, like she’s coming down from an orgasm.]

You let her in. Because you aren’t a cynic. In fact, you’re a romantic. This kind of person needs to be let in. She has to come in and mark her territory and take up your drawers before she’ll tell you about her first crush. You don’t mind that. One day, she’s going to wake up in your childhood bedroom to the sound of local pop radio blaring from your alarm clock and think to herself, “This needy bitch deserves a birthday cake.”

[HANNAH rises from the table, leaving her plate behind. She exits. She reenters with a pair of sunglasses, a towel, and a magazine. She spreads the towel out. She lays down. She looks up at the sky, realizing she doesn’t have much light left. She cracks open the magazine anyway. AMIRA enters. She stands back to admire.]

AMIRA

A sight for sore eyes.

HANNAH
Who? Lil ol' me?

AMIRA
Who else? What'cha reading?

HANNAH
Teen Vogue. I had a subscription for two years and never cracked one open.

AMIRA
Before they got all cool and political?

HANNAH
Mmm-hmm. Just fashion tips.

AMIRA
Want another slice?

HANNAH
I'm good, baby. It was really yummy.

[*AMIRA picks up the plate.*]

AMIRA [*exiting*]
Come in soon or you'll start to get bit.

[*HANNAH spreads out on the towel with the magazine. At first, she's reading it, but she slowly lowers it onto her face and puts her arms at her sides.*]

HANNAH [*muffled*]
When they all sang, "happy birthday dear..." you didn't know what name to expect. You wonder when your girl is going to request you pick a side.

[*Beat. She removes the magazine and sits up.*]
It's time to call back your cousins.

[*HANNAH exits with her towel and magazine.*]

PART THREE

[KATE brings a glass of wine and a copy of a *White woman* onstage. She sits in her chair and makes herself comfortable. She takes a sip of wine, scrunches up her nose, and clears her throat. AMIRA enters.]

KATE

Hi, sweetheart. How was the mall?

AMIRA

Truly an experience.

KATE

You can come and sit.

AMIRA

Oh, I don't want to intrude.

KATE [*lightly*]

Not an intrusion. I'm just suffering through this book club romance.

AMIRA

You don't like romance novels?

KATE

I love them. There's something about this one, though... I can't quite place it... So, the mall!

AMIRA

Haha. It was like another world...

KATE

You didn't have a mall nearby, growing up?

AMIRA

We did. I just... never went.

KATE

Oh, I couldn't get my kids to come *home* from the mall. Back in the day, that's where Brad used to take me out, too. You know, Colin had his first job there. At a pretzel stand! He was so cute in his little hat, a little working man...

[*Pause. Discomfort: she's not getting anything in return.*]

What did you do instead, growing up?

AMIRA

Instead of the mall?

KATE
Mmmhmm.

AMIRA
I spent time with my mom.

KATE
How sweet.

[As AMIRA speaks, the lights close around her, sealing her into her space station (a spotlight), until she's alone with us on stage.]

AMIRA
It was. Sweet, I mean. It was like... us against the world, back then. She would take me everywhere. And, and this woman was never *not* going somewhere, you know? I knew everybody in our neighborhood, because I was strapped to her chest, holding her hand, bumping my shoulder against hers while we walked down the street, and all the aunties in the neighborhood would tell us we looked like sisters. I would think, *what a huge compliment*. Because my mother is the most beautiful woman on earth. I just felt like... she was gliding, and I was tripping over my feet next to her, so maybe they were wrong. Or being polite. But she swore it was true, that I looked just like her.

[Pause. KATE is gone now. AMIRA sees she's alone with us, for a moment.]

I remember, when I was little, she used to let me flip through her old photo albums, and I'd be so sad whenever I saw her without me, before me. I'd ask her, "Where am I, Mama?" and she'd reply that I was the sparkle in her eye. Like I'd always been there. Like I was the magic in her wink. When I moved out for school, it was like... she became the glimmer in my eye instead. But we're both so bad at keeping in touch, because... Well, we never really *talked*. We were always just... together.

[Mama is so far away, now.]

I usually go home for the summers, but, this summer, I...

[Sudden: lights back up. KATE has been here all along.]

I'm sorry—

KATE
No need to be sorry, sweetheart. Your mother sounds amazing.

[Beat. AMIRA decides she's not upset. She bulldozes through it.]

AMIRA
You know, Hannah loves romance, if your club needs some recommendations.

KATE *[surprised]*
I didn't know she'd gotten back into reading. That's lovely.

AMIRA
I never really knew her when she didn't read.

KATE [*lightly*]

I felt like I didn't either. All kids go through phases. I just got worried that one wasn't going to end.

AMIRA [*joking*]

Was it a goth phase?

KATE

Quite the opposite, actually—

AMIRA

Hold on, would you mind if I recorded this?

KATE [*tentative*]

Um... no, no of course not. But ask Hannah before you use any of it in your project.

AMIRA

Absolutely.

[*She sets up the recorder and clears her throat.*]

Day twenty-six with the Michaels. This is Kate, on one of her daughter's childhood phases. Go ahead.

KATE

Well, um... I think it started in 8th grade. Puberty is especially rough on girls; I know it was a difficult time for me as well. She'd always been such an *individual* growing up, very unique, and of course loved how... different she was. But when she hit those teenage years, she really wanted to fit in. She started dressing differently, she swapped out her friend group for a new set of girls—you know, growing up, she'd always been friends with *my* friends' daughters, but all of a sudden, she wanted nothing to do with Becca or Annaleigh anymore. It was... concerning. I started getting calls home from the school, because she was breaking the dress code, picking fights with other girls... you're going to ask her about this yourself, right? Before you put it in your project?

AMIRA

I would never use anything without her permission.

[*She reaches forward and stops the recording.*]

All your names will be changed in the final product... nobody will know it's you. If there's anything you'd like me leave out, I'll absolutely—

KATE [*quickly*]

Oh, I have nothing to hide. Hannah's just so private.

AMIRA

Right.

[They stare at each other.]

KATE

I'm going to make some tea. Would you like some?

[AMIRA agrees. They exit.]

OUTRO

[Dim, the set doesn't matter anymore, but we're technically still in the backyard. AMIRA sits down, a row of fake candles "burning" in front of her. She notices us. She smiles, waves a little.]

AMIRA

My commanding officer will ask me if this was worth it. Did I observe any cosmic anomalies? Did I learn the customs of this planet, acclimate to its gravity? No. No, I didn't. But was it worth it? The frozen river that separates my living quarters from the rest of this home base never melted. Instead, my alien defied this galaxy's physics to leap over it in one resounding bound. She tucked me into my bed each night and pulled me out of it each morning, jumping back across the icy water. And then, from the other shore, she waved to me. Taught me the ways of this world. The universe shrank around her, squeezing the two of us together. Tonight, she wraps me up in her blanket, and tomorrow she places me back into my capsule and launches me into orbit. Was it worth it?

[She laughs.]

If she isn't, what could be?

[HANNAH enters and sits across from AMIRA. Jokingly, she puts her fingers over the flames to make her girlfriend smile. Music slowly swells up around them, swallowing them. Blast off. It cuts out, echoes, stops. We are in orbit.]

HANNAH

I'm sorry we barely got to spend time together, just us.

AMIRA

That's alright. We decided this was a work trip.

HANNAH

I never committed to that. My goal was to distract you at every turn. I failed.

AMIRA

You usually have such excellent follow-through.

HANNAH

Well, I got caught up in it all.

AMIRA

I shouldn't have taken it so seriously. I know that's why.

HANNAH

Don't say that. Of *course* you should take it seriously. Senior thesis, baby. Don't you want to kick everyone else's ass so you can win the Thesis Trophy?

AMIRA

I love when you make things up.

HANNAH

I just don't want you to feel bad for doing what you *said* you'd do. That's like... a dream come true in a partner, and you're trying to say sorry for it.

AMIRA

I could've taken your birthday off...

HANNAH

It's not like you spent the whole day *documenting* or whatever. You partied harder than my dad!

AMIRA

The bar is lower than I thought.

HANNAH [*softly*]

I love you.

AMIRA

I love you too.

HANNAH

Yeah?

AMIRA

Yeah.

[*Beat.*]

And to think, I was going to power down the romantic part of my brain like an android. I mean, it's not like it's a big wing of the operation upstairs.

HANNAH

There's plenty of room up there.

[*Pause.*]

You were going to give up?

AMIRA

Yeah. Before I met you.

HANNAH

Me and my stupid light show.

AMIRA

You and your supernova, exploding, and sending me into orbit.

HANNAH

Sounds violent.

AMIRA

No, never. It was just what I needed.

[Pause.]

I love you too.

END