Rehearsing the Possible: Practicing Reparative Creativity

After two years of remote engagement, ATHE 2022 promises to bring its members together in person in Detroit, Michigan. Detroit, or Waawiyataanong, is the multi-national ancestral and contemporary homeland of the Anishinaabe three fires confederacy: Ojibwe, Ottawa, Potawatomi, and Meškwahi-âšà-hina, Myaamia, Mississauga, Peoria and Wyandot tribes. An original stop on the Underground Railroad, today it is also a city made up of residents who are majority Black, Indigenous and People of Color, including one the largest Middle East/North African populations in the United States. Detroit, sometimes called the Renaissance City, has repeatedly risen from literal and proverbial ashes—destruction by fire and decimation by deindustrialization and neoliberal policy, among them—to emerge as a home to Black creative and artistic excellence, from Motown to Dominique Morisseau. Following adrienne marie brown’s vision of emergent strategy, or “[..] ways for humans to practice being in right relationship to our home and each other, to practice complexity and grow a compelling future … [to] change in ways that grow our capacity to embody the just and liberated worlds we long for,” we ask: How can our collective live presence in Detroit offer emergent strategies that shape sustainable change in our field, our host city, and our communities?

Building upon the work of the 2021 conference of RE: (claim, frame, pair, write, etc.), 2022 invites ATHE to deepen engagements with questions that Detroit urges us to address. How will we abolish institutional, embedded racist structures? As we seek to reimagine, rebuild, and rise up, what are some new arrangements of the possible that we might pursue? In Worldmaking, Dorinne Kondo asserts that "reparative creativity offers possibilities to work through effects of affective and structural violence," reminding us that the "reparative is a critical, political, and artistic practice." Engaging this line of thinking, we query: How will we engage our practices to harness the power of theatre for social justice?

As theatre artists and scholars, we recognize that rehearsals, the acts of constant creation, can be more significant than the product and, indeed, that the work is ongoing and incomplete. Can we rehearse for the possible in all aspects of our research, pedagogy, and practice for the better present and future we want to embody, or as Tina Campt frames futurity, "live the future now"?

- What are some of the ways theater and performance can enable us to imagine and embody new possibilities?
- How do theater and performance rearrange our relationship to the impossible?
- How might the theatre as a space of imaginative possibility work to rethink the world in practical and impractical ways?
- How might rehearsing the possible ask us to rethink potential theatre careers for our students, opening up possibilities for how students might use theatre differently to change the world?
• Drawing from Kondo’s view of the reparative as a practice that makes and unmakes race throughout the creative process, what processes that uphold white supremacy can we abolish from our classrooms, rehearsals, production, and performance spaces and what do we imagine in their place?

• What are white theatre scholars, artists, and educators willing to risk to dismantle white supremacy and enact collective liberation?

• Given the austerity we are experiencing nationally across colleges and universities, how might we actualize potentiality amid ongoing crises?

• Detroit and the state of Michigan have long traditions of theatre making in prisons. How does grassroots theatre making with historically excluded groups, like the incarcerated and the homeless, help us to rehearse for social justice efforts or otherwise contribute to social change? How can theatre learn from such transdisciplinary grassroots work as we re-imagine a more inclusive field and engage trauma-informed practices?

• How might ATHE and/or theatre makers and organizations contribute to efforts to make reparations to historically enslaved or oppressed communities? In what ways can theatre and performance work to help equalize the economic and education gaps that exist in places like Detroit?

• How might theatre training institutions engage in actively creating space to advance discussion on climate crisis as it relates to performance, protest, and the disproportionately impacted global majority (BIPOC communities and nations)?

• Nina Simone said “It is the artist’s duty to reflect the times in which we live.” With this in mind, what is the role of the theatre practitioner/scholar in social justice and revolution in these current times? Why and how does theatre reify historic inequalities?

• If we think of abolition as Critical Resistance and as some define it, being about presence rather than absence, how might the theatre help shore up the presence of vital resources that could help alleviate the perceived need for prisons, weaponized policing, and other institutions that perpetuate structural racism and harm to marginalized communities?

• What types of theatre and performance have arisen (emerged) from our collective time in isolation and from the demands for equality such as those from “We see you white American Theatre”? What changes have you or your institutions made? How will this work be sustained?

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