

Running head: A+VENGERS

**A+Vengers**  
**Empowering Students through Superheroic Re-Storying**

by

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### Abstract

This portfolio is based on my understanding of the importance of promoting mental health and wellness in schools for students. This project focused on the integration of specific mental health promoting therapies (narrative and creative arts-based) through pre-existing Ontario curriculum, as facilitated in a local Grade 9/10 drama classroom. In this class, I functioned as co-teacher, dramaturge, and conversational consultant in the creation of eight mental health-based plays—six of which also purposefully integrated comic book superheroes as a form of play—that worked to externalize and personify the research participants’ mental health challenges into defeatable entities. These students—the A+Vengers—eventually performed their plays as part of a special one-night showcase, bringing their re-storied identities and narratives to life on stage. This portfolio is a collection of six chapters documenting this experience: (1) an introduction to the project/portfolio; (2) a literature review addressing contemporary mental health issues in schools; (3) a literature review explaining my approach toward alleviating these issues; (4) the methodology of my intervention; (5) the resources that the students created as a result of my intervention; and (6) a reflection and conclusion about the experience in its entirety.

*Keywords:* narrative therapy, creative arts-based therapy, superhero, re-storying, critical pedagogy, performance pedagogy, emergent pedagogy, curriculum-as-lived, play, cultural safety, performance-based research, research-based theatre, a/r/tography, art-as-event

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## Chapter 1: Introduction

### Description of the Project

This portfolio is based on a combination of everything I've come to experience and regard as either important or interesting during my time as a post-secondary student (encompassing a great deal of professional and academic experience as both a teacher and a social worker). From the very beginning, my work was intended to answer a specific research question: *Can mental health and wellness strategies be integrated into the Ontario high school curriculum—and if so, just how well?* In time, several more questions subsequently emerged: How well can certain, specific theories and practices be applied—namely narrative therapy and creative arts-based therapy? How well can these therapies be applied in the drama classroom through playwriting and acting (dramaturgy)? How might these applications intersect with comic book superheroes? And, what specific applications are there, or might there be for Indigenous students (which are of the utmost concern to me as a settler-Canadian and Indigenous ally educator)?

To answer these questions, I networked through pre-existing field contacts and eventually met a local teacher who was willing to invite into their Grade 9/10 drama classroom. Conveniently, this educator just so happened to be teaching a culminating unit on heroes and they were more than happy to introduce/integrate my research as their students' final examination project. I came to spend nearly two months in that classroom co-teaching about play development, resulting in 28 unique scripts written and performed by the students, acted out on stage in front of their parents and guardians as parts of a special one-night showcase. Out of these 28 plays, 8 were mental health based; six focused on superheroes as I intended; and to my surprise (as well as approval), the other two deviated, focusing on mental health and wellness



issues more directly, or rather, *without* the use of superheroes. Regardless of their approach, each of these eight students became one of my *A+Vengers*, re-storying themselves through the power of their imaginations and serving as the ultimate informational vessels of this portfolio.

### **Currere**

Framing my motivation in undertaking this project is most easily achieved in accordance with William Pinar's (1975) highly influential concept of *currere*, which, by and large, has underscored my post-graduate study in its entirety. *Currere* represents the infinitive root in Latin for curriculum, meaning *to keep on running*, "stressing the idea of circularity [and] activity of running towards the self, unlike the noun *curriculum* which denotes the idea of a race that has to be run, starting from one point and reaching another" (Soare, 2009, p. 650). According to Pinar (1975), *currere* is systematically regressive; progressive; analytical; and synthetical, aiming for the "cultivation of a developmental point of view" that is simultaneously trans-temporal and trans-conceptual (p. 1). When applied (e.g., thought about), *currere* attempts to answer the question, *what has been and what is now the nature of my educational experience?* (p. 2). As such, *currere* evokes both reconceptualism and reflexivity (Soare, 2009, p. 650), entailing "a complicated conversation with oneself [and] an ongoing project of self-understanding in which one becomes mobilized for engaged pedagogical action" (Powell & Lajevic, 2011, p. 38).

As such a conversation would suggest, *currere* is inherently auto/biographical (Kanu & Glor, 2006, p. 105), foregrounding the relationship between narrative (life history) and practice, as well as providing both teachers and students with "opportunities to theorize particular moments in [their] educational history, to dialogue with these moments, and examine possibilities for change" (p. 104). Simply put, *currere* means/is to reflect on the past, present, and future of one's individual-educational experience—or, simpler yet, a dynamic reformation of

one's educational *raison d'être*. Ironically, *currere* is also evocative of one of my favourite superheroes, the godlike Doctor Manhattan, who in Alan Moore's 1987 *Watchmen* becomes simultaneously unstuck and omnipresent in time, capable of looking forward, backward, inward, and outward all at once. "Things have their shape in time, not space alone," he says at one point in the story, "Some marble blocks have statues within them, embedded in their future" (p. 24, vol. 4).

As I have already alluded to, Pinar (1975) posited *currere* as a four-step process, the first of which is (1) *regressive*. During this first stage, one returns to their biographic past to capture it as it once was: "one goes back . . . the past is entered, lived in, but not necessarily succumbed to . . . one avoids complete identification with the self that was, and hence is able to observe" (p. 8). In this state, "one takes special notice of one's past life-in-schools, with one's life-with-schoolteachers and one's life-with-books and other school-related artifacts" (p. 8). I must make it clear that to recount my engagement with *currere* in its entirety would *vastly* exceed the scope of this portfolio; so I will instead do so very briefly. Without going into detail, my childhood was not easy; I valued academics, but my life at home was complicated, to the point that it significantly affected my wellbeing—and often. And yet, it was around this time that I also met someone very special and important: *Mr. J—*, one of my high school English teachers. While this man's tutelage was nothing to shake a stick at, he had an even better heart and an even bigger soul; his classroom became my *new* home, and he taught me just how impactful a teacher could be—and, how education really could be one of the *helping professions*. It did not take long for me, even at that young age, to realize that I wanted to become a teacher like him, not just to help others learn, but to help them like he helped me.

Pinar's second step of *currere* is (2) *progressive*, wherein we "look the other way . . . at

what is not yet the case, what is not yet present” (p. 9), into the future as much and as far ahead as we need, focusing on our relationships with students and colleagues in conjunction with the related emotional and intellectual content (p. 10). It is when I ‘look the other way’ that I am strongly reminded of some of Led Zeppelin’s lyrics from “Stairway to Heaven,” namely, *there are two paths you can go by, but in the long run, there’s still time to change the road you’re on*. On one hand, I feel as if society is beginning to appropriately engage with mental health and confront related challenges (look no further than Bell’s *Let’s Talk Day*). But at the same time, the educational climate (at least in Ontario) is in practical shambles: there are governmental cuts to education abound; mandated, overcrowded classrooms; a proposed shift toward *e-learning* (an environment where there never could be a “Mr. J”); teachers on strike; and, public divide (Alphonso, 2020; Feinstein, 2020; Jeffords, 2020). Thus, we are at a crossroads: students are our future; and yet, their future is currently in jeopardy, which I fear can only exacerbate the kinds of problems and challenges they might face like I did when I was their age.

Pinar’s third step of *currere* is (3) *analytical*—to “describe the biographic present, exclusive of the past and future, but inclusive of responses to them” (p. 11), thinking and theorizing about how everything fits together (or doesn’t, or hasn’t, or could, or should, and so on). In addition to teaching locally, I also help facilitate a mental health-based program called CHOICES at several schools across my city; it is in my experience with this program that I have come to realize just how effective school-based mental health programming can be: both how well the students take to it, and just how much it benefits them. It was during an appraisal of this effectiveness that I began to ask myself, *why is there no dedicated or official mental health class for students to take in school? We have gym classes to help promote out students’ physical health, so why is there nothing in place to help promote their mental health? Even if it were, say,*

a half-credit? Such a course could be vastly utilized at the school I teach at, where numerous deaths by suicide have resulted in the national Seven Youth Inquest (Ministry of the Solicitor General, 2016). Dunk (2007) has explained how there is a clear racial division in the region, brought about by the “coded expressions of the ageing white population’s discomfort with the presence of a growing, young Aboriginal population” (p. 102), resulting in Indigenous students often facing racism, discrimination, and stereotyping (OPACY, n.d., p. 39). Anishinaabe author Tanya Talaga has respectfully stated that “the contexts of people’s lives determine their health” (Upstream, 2018); if this is to be believed, than one can begin to fathom how such context is not merely uncondusive to mental health, but grossly predatory against it.

In addition to my personal thoughts, I am also quite partial to the critical opinions of the field’s more learned and reputable minds. Like many, I believe that the educational system consistently teeters on rigidity and soullessness, owing to its longstanding standardized (e.g., curriculum and test-focused) nature (Kanu & Glor, 2006, p. 102). In this (or ‘the’) system, students all too often become silent, “faceless others” (Aoki, 1993, pp. 265-266), helpless and hopeless against educational over-instrumentalization and “the ethos of convergent learning that desires/demands a predetermined answer/outcome” (Norris, 2012, p. 300). Freire (1973) has poignantly termed this reality the *banking model of education*, feeling that it prioritizes deposits “into a student’s mind irrespective of meaning, purpose, or personal growth” (qtd. in Wiebe, 2016, p. 544), much like coins are dropped carelessly into a piggybank. Under this model, students become “passive recipients of knowledge transmitted to them for direct assimilation,” robbing them of the opportunity to develop and nurture authentic and critical thought (Brown & Clark, 2013, p. 39). Worse yet, the nature of this (the) system instills “an inherent fear of the unknown that brings about an entrenchment within [the] existing patterns of thinking” (Brown &

Clark, 2013, p. 40), significantly reducing student agency (Sawyer & Earle, 2019, p. 85).

Notably, this (the) system has been viewed alongside Bourdieu's (1977) concept of *habitus*, suggesting that everyone involved is informed by (and ingrained with) powerful hegemonic forces disguised as normalcy (Brown & Clark, 2013, p. 36), resulting in the inculcation and denigration of certain student values while "those of the educational establishment are reified . . . reinforced and perpetuated" (p. 38). Under this pretense, Wiebe (2016) describes how both teachers and students are effectively silenced: the former must essentially *remain silent while speaking*, lest they forsake the both the idealistic pedestal society places them on and the rules of the structures they serve (p. 535); and, the latter are often born into (discursive) language and (societal) culture that further disempowers and/or limits their ways of thinking and being, "whether from family history, life circumstances, or previous experiences of education" (p. 544). Once silenced, both teachers and students are rendered less agential, and thus, any kind of change that they could hope for (or need) becomes even less likely to happen. All of these issues will be explicated later on in this paper, but for now, I would just like to make it clear that I agree with them.

Pinar's fourth and final step of *currere* is (4) *synthetical*: to "look at oneself concretely, as if in a mirror," with the added tip of paying attention to one's breath, "to underscore the concreteness of being" (p. 12). Here, one recognizes their own contributions and professional station in accordance with the intellections, emotions, and overall behaviours that have been experienced/felt thus far to help form and better understand "the Self" (p. 13). With everything I have already stated in mind, I am left feeling like I can and must make a difference: I know what it is like to struggle as a student; I am interested in what education can do, but also worried about what it might do; I know that mental health promotion (and everything that it entails) has a

rightful, albeit missing place in the classroom; and, I am an Indigenous ally of the belief that a greater effort must be made to decolonize and work toward reconciliation. As such, my ‘station’ is to solve all of these issues: to answer the very calls that society is putting out, both covertly and overtly, in the classroom—where I am, and where I belong.

Ultimately, through currere, “teachers and students negotiate the space(s) of teaching, learning, making, and doing that challenge the preconceived ways and prescribed ideas and stimulate new ways to view, understand, and engage with curriculum” (Powell & Lajevic, 2011, p. 38). By doing this, an educator can become a “transformative intellectual . . . who envisions what is possible rather than merely accepting what is probable” (Kanu & Glor, 2006, p. 107). As I see it, this portfolio is both a manifestation and extension of my currere, and a response to Pinar’s question of the nature of my educational experience; as such, this portfolio is intended as one of these kinds of teacher-student negotiations, challenging curriculum and the system directly by (a) pointing a finger at something they’re both missing, and (b) helping to fill in the gap, thereby stimulating teaching that isn’t just new, but immensely and wholeheartedly important.

## Chapter 2: Framing the Problem (Literature Review, Part 1)

### Mental Health and Wellness

*Mental health* significantly affects our daily lives and our overall (e.g., physical and spiritual) health; it is our foundation for emotion, thinking, communication, learning, and self-esteem. According to the World Health Organization (WHO), mental health reflects “a state of well-being in which the individual realizes their own abilities, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully, and is able to make a contribution to his or her community” (qtd. in Newman, 2009, par. 5). According to Cowen (1991), mental health is indicative of psychological *wellness*: “a sense of control over one’s fate, a feeling of purpose and belongingness, and a basic satisfaction with oneself and one’s existence” (p. 404). As an ideal that exists along the mental health continuum, wellness can either be “enhanced by favourable conditions” or “erode under conditions of adversity” (p. 405).

### Mental Illness

With this in mind, it is important to understand that mental health relates to, but is nonsynonymous with *mental illness*, which instead refers to changes in emotion, thinking, or behaviour typically associated with “distress and/or problems functioning in social, work, or family activities” (Parekh, 2018, par. 1)—and sometimes, the aforementioned *erosion* of wellness. Mental illness does not discriminate and can affect anyone regardless of age, gender, geography, income, social status, race/ethnicity, religion/spirituality, sexual orientation, background or any other aspect of identity (par. 5). Moreover, mental illness can take many forms, ranging from mild (e.g., a fear or phobia) to severe (e.g., depressive suicidal ideation); at its worst, mental illness can also manifest as a *disorder*, resulting in functional impairment that can substantially impede major life activities (e.g., schizophrenia). Essentially, mental illness is a

*negative* aspect of (or part on) the mental health spectrum—existing on the side opposite that of wellness—that is difficult and challenging in nature.

### **Mental Illness and Youth**

Adolescence is a critical time period in the development and respective promotion of mental health: approximately one in five Canadian adolescents will experience a mental disorder, and only one in five of those 20% will receive the kind of treatment or specialty care that they need (McLuckie et al., 2014, p. 1; Kutcher et al., 2015, p. 581; Roeser et al., 1998, p. 153; Manion et al., 2012, p. 120; Sawyer & Earle, 2019, p. 84). Worse yet, these rates are expected to worsen in severity as time goes on (Whitley et al., 2012, p. 57; Manion et al., 2012, p. 121). According to both Wei et al. (2011, p. 215) and Kutcher et al. (2015, p. 581), corroborated by the Canadian Council on Learning (qtd. in Wei et al., 2011, p. 215), when mental disorders are left untreated or unrecognized, youth become more prone to both (a) poor educational and vocational achievement, often leading to chronic absenteeism and/or early school leaving (dropping out), and (b) problems with personal and interpersonal functioning (competence, efficacy, and social skills) that are critical for life success. Manion et al. (2012) have gone a step further and detailed how mental disorders can also result in (a) increased rates of unemployment and (b) greater involvement with the child welfare and criminal justice systems (p. 121). Most importantly, it should be noted that these mental health challenges also denote a reduced life expectancy via a significantly increased risk of dying by suicide (Wei et al., 2011, p. 215), which is the second-highest leading cause of death in Canadian youth (Whitley et al., 2012, p. 57).

Where explicit mental disorders might be absent, Cowen (1991) has detailed how similar threats to adolescent mental health and wellness can also come in many different forms:

Wellness can be seriously undermined by any of the following: (a) A child's



givens or early experiences fail to provide essential ingredients (e.g., love, adequate care, a secure relationship) to nourish their development. (b) A child's formal and informal educational experiences fail to root the basic skills, competencies, and self-views that mediate wellness. (c) Events and circumstances occurring that impair wellness (e.g., *a death in the family*). (d) Key social settings in people's lives operate in ways that undermine wellness (e.g., *bullying*). (e) For many segments of society, macrosocial factors such as disempowerment and injustice work insidiously against wellness. (p. 406, my emphases)

Be it a disorder or the erosion of wellness, Whitley et al. (2012) detail how the “fragmentation, or disciplinary ‘silos,’ in the healthcare system, as well as insufficient numbers of qualified professionals, inadequate funding, and long wait times” add layers of complication to these issues and essentially impose an omnipresent system-level barrier to youth receiving adequate mental health care (p. 57). Notably, there also exists a strong stigma held by many adolescents about mental health in general, often fueled by ignorance and misinformation (Pinfold et al., 2005, p. 48) and resulting in discrimination and/or ostracization. Manion et al. (2012) summarily understand this combination of problems as significantly burdensome and respectively argue that “there is strong impetus to identify [mental health] problems and to intervene early” (p. 120).

### **Mental Health and Schools**

Schools have been posited as an ideal (e.g., focused and cost-effective) locus for the implementation of said interventions and the promotion of mental health, as the average teen spends upwards of thirty hours a week in the classroom (Mcluckie et al., 2014, p. 2; Wei et al., 2011, p. 216; Whitley et al., 2012, p. 58; Cowen, 1991, p. 405). In fact, the WHO, UNESCO, UNICEF, Pan-Canadian Joint Consortium for School Health (JCSH), Mental Health

Commission of Canada (MHCC), and the Canadian Alliance for Healthy Schools have all advocated for *health promoting schools*, places where “all members of the school community work together to provide students with integrated and positive experiences and structures which promote and protect their health” (p. 216). Interestingly, while the United States, United Kingdom, Australia, and New Zealand have all introduced national strategies and official policy frameworks to formally answer this call, Canada, inexplicably, has not: “although fledgling initiatives are underway, to date no nationally applicable model that can take into account the characteristics of Canadian health and education sectors has been developed” (Wei et al., 2011, p. 217). Moreover, these ‘fledgling initiatives’ typically only (a) address specific problems or (b) facilitate general (lacklustre) understandings, and the majority of them have been proven “to be associated with no or only minor gains in the students’ knowledge and/or attitudes” (McLuckie et al., 2014, p. 2). A recent study of 3,900 Canadian teachers suggested that the vast majority of them considered mental health issues as “pressing concerns in their schools” (Whitley et al., 2012, p. 59), and according to the Canadian Coalition for Children and Youth Mental Health, the mental health of Canadian students is the “number one issue facing schools today” (p. 57). Professionals from several other fields (e.g., practitioners, researchers, and policy analysts) have also noted the simultaneous importance and untapped potential of a public health approach to addressing mental health in schools (Manion et al., 2012, p. 120).

Where the aforementioned organizations and related parties have argued for health promoting schools, others have proposed *school-based mental health* (SBMH) as a construct within them. According to Roeser et al. (1998), schooling, learning, and achievement are inherently related to student mental health, denoting a *co-occurrence* between academic and emotional domains of functioning wherein both “influence each other in a reciprocal fashion

over time” (p. 153). With this in mind, Manion et al. (2012) have framed schools as a *natural setting* for intervention and the capability to “promote positive mental health of *all* students rather than focus on those identified as having mental health or behavioural problems” (p. 120, my emphasis). SBMH directly treats with students’ psychological needs, including their desire for efficacy, competence, autonomy, and quality social relationships (Roeser et al., 1998, p. 169), imbuing it with a beneficial holistic quality (Pinfold et al., 2005, p. 51). However, several challenges often stand in the way of successful SBMH initiatives: (1) insufficient funding; (2) insufficient staff; (3) need for parental awareness and engagement; (4) lack of programming; (5) need for professional development; and (6) stigma (Manion et al., 2012, p. 129). Thus, even though Canadians can facilitate SBMH—despite lacking a nationally developed framework—few boards or schools do, or achieve a “level of partial implementation” at best (p. 129).

### **Mental Health Literacy**

To overcome these challenges and successfully promote school-based mental health, some have developed and refined *mental health literacy* (MHL) programming, which when taught can facilitate “a necessary foundation for mental health promotion, prevention, and interventions” (Mcluckie et al., 2014, p. 4). As a teachable construct, MHL has four specific components: (1) understanding how to obtain and maintain good mental health; (2) understanding mental disorders and their treatments; (3) decreasing stigma; and (4) enhancing help seeking efficacy (knowing when, where, and how to obtain mental health care) (Mcluckie et al., 2014, p. 2; Kutcher et al., 2015, p. 581). Previous research has shown that teaching MHL in schools helps “significantly and substantively” improve students’ knowledge and attitudes about mental health (Kutcher et al., 2015, p. 582) by enhancing the former and changing the latter for the better (e.g., from negative to positive) (Mcluckie et al., 2014, p. 4; Manion et al., 2012, p.

120). Moreover, these same studies have also proven that these benefits are also long-lasting/sustainable over time (Kutcher et al., 2015, p. 582), especially when cohorts involved are larger (e.g., when the whole school is involved) (Manion et al., 2012, p. 120).

### **The Guide**

Consecutive studies led by McLuckie et al. (2014) and Kutcher et al. (2015) examined the implementation of a specific MHL resource, the *Mental Health and High School Curriculum Guide* (hereby referred to as ‘The Guide’) in schools. Developed by education and mental health experts alongside Curriculum Services Canada and the Healthy School Alliance, The Guide functioned as a *curriculum-embedded resource* consisting of six MHL-based modules delivered over 10-12 hours of class time through a mixture of instruction, discussion, activities, and self-directed video learning (Kutcher, 2015, p. 582). The Guide is currently available online for free download or as a hardcopy purchase (ranging from \$40-\$70 CDN), but it must also “be applied by a . . . classroom teacher who has been trained,” thereby also requiring a one day professional development session in order to be taught (Kutcher et al., 2015, p. 582). While both studies successfully illuminated The Guide as a highly effective MHL resource, at the time of this portfolio’s writing, no such certified training sessions appear to be available or scheduled (anywhere), and the researchers’ official website is defunct. Therefore, it may be understood that the best possible MHL resource available to Canadian teachers requires a substantial amount of time and money, as well as unavailable guidance/instruction. Evidently, there is no solution to the aforementioned challenges that SBMH presents.

### **A Special Note on Indigenized Perspectives and Practices in Education**

As a settler Canadian and Indigenous ally, I believe it is not merely important, but necessary for *any* educational endeavour in this country to decolonize and do what it can to work

toward reconciliation. Based on the most recent official assessment, there are at least 64,000 Indigenous students enrolled in Ontario public schools (Government of Ontario, 2013, p. 11); and, in conjunction with the fact that the Canadian Indigenous population is increasing at four times the rate of others (Cherubini, 2010, p. 12; Kirkup, 2017), this amount of students is only going to increase. According to the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples (1996), each one of these students face “significant challenges” (Gallop & Bastien, 2016, p. 209) and an *educational deficit problem* (Cherubini, 2010, p. 12), as Canadian schools (a) underrepresent Indigenous epistemic traditions in favour of Eurocentric perspectives and knowledge; (b) help create and reinforce “dangerously negative” cultural stereotypes, which often lead to self-fulfilling prophecies (p. 13); (c) feature “largely inactive” policymakers (p. 12) and respectively misguided and misinformed policy documents (p. 14); and (d) a myriad of other, smaller factors that further contribute to the general discontinuity between Indigenous and school communities (p. 16). As a result, nearly 40% of Indigenous students do not earn a high school diploma, and roughly 12% pursue no studies (or quit school) after completion of the elementary grades (p. 12).

Naturally, each one of these saddening facts exists following the extremely tragic and oppressive Colonial history that has befallen Indigenous people in Canada. Regarding the education system more specifically, society is *still* (and might forever be) coming to terms with the grossly negative legacy of Residential Schools (RS), where Indigenous children and youth were essentially abducted, indoctrinated, assimilated, and sometimes outright killed, in what was a decades-long “cultural genocide” (Cherubini, 2010, p. 11). Worse yet, this legacy has caused intergenerational shockwaves, resulting in *historical trauma* (HT) for a large portion of the affected population, worsening all the other problems (Gone, 2013, p. 683). Referred to by some as a *soul wound*, HT denotes “a collective trauma inflicted on a group of people who share a

specific group identity or affiliation . . . it is the legacy of numerous traumatic events a community experiences over generations and encompasses the psychological and social responses to such events” (p. 687). In part due to both the nature of HT and the education system, the Indigenous population has been challenged with increased rates of anomie; demoralization; substance abuse (p. 687); violence; neglect (p. 685); sexual assault (p. 686); poverty; discrimination; and associated distress (p. 684). As one might expect, all the mental health challenges and issues (and statistics, etc.) detailed thus far have been documented as markedly worse in Indigenous populations (Cowen, 2011, p. 406; Manion et al., 2012, p. 120; Whitley et al., 2012, p. 57; Maar et al., 2009, p.1).

Notably, where these (mental health) problems might exceed or look past the bounds of the education system, there also exists a grander societal/structural *clinical incompetence* that sees relevant programs and institutions as “fraught with problems,” rendering them incapable of properly engaging with and serving the Indigenous population (Westerman, 2004, p. 2). In other words, social service agencies and organizations are largely un(der)equipped and un(der)prepared to help, preventing Indigenous people from accessing mental health services at a level that is “commensurate with their need” (p. 1). This is largely due to (a) the cultural appropriateness of the processes and interventions used by the practitioners in question, and (b) qualities intrinsic to the practitioner-client relationship—or sometimes a *lack thereof*, as many who require service live in remote communities where no such practitioners exist (p. 2). Ultimately, the reality of our postcolonial Canadian society demands more attention paid to our Indigenous brothers and sisters, especially where issues of mental health, wellness, and their souls are concerned. This portfolio is intended to accept this responsibility and—by creating a culturally safe educational solution—help contribute to a better and reconciled future.

### Chapter 3: Framing the Solution (Literature Review, Part 2)

#### Critical Pedagogy

This research project was underscored by several different pedagogical approaches, the first of which was *critical pedagogy*: the critical analyses of educational institutions, policies, and practices to achieve social change (Christensen, 2013, p. 4). Critical pedagogy was founded by Paulo Freire in his seminal text *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, wherein he stated that “the goal of education is to bring marginalised individuals together for dialogue, which aims to understand the social reality of an oppressed group,” and that “the group can use [said] dialogue to critically reflect upon that reality, which results in the group taking action to transform community problems into solutions” (qtd. in Christensen, 2013, p. 4). Notably, Freire proposed two key concepts in his work: *conscientization*—learned critical consciousness, or “teaching a group to view their social reality with . . . a complex, nuanced understanding of the world and the socio-political forces that shape one’s daily experience” (qtd. in pp. 4-5)—and *praxis*, the act of “engaging a community in critical reflection, then taking action to change oppressive situations” (qtd. in p. 5). Freire argued that, together, these dialectical approaches could resolve differences and create solidarity, thereby yielding both transformation and liberation for oppressed groups (qtd. in p. 5). As such, some refer to critical pedagogy as *emancipatory pedagogy* (Hawkins & Georgakopolous, 2010, p. 249).

#### Performance Pedagogy

In addition to critical pedagogy, this portfolio also involves *performance pedagogy*: pedagogical values and practices based on the metaphor that our *lives* are themselves performances/performative (Prendergast, 2008, p. 3). The first to apply this metaphor to education was McLaren (1986/93), who—working through a critical lens—proposed the notions

of *teacher-as-hegemonic overlord* (bad), *teacher-as-entertainer* (better), and *teacher-as-liminal-servant* (best) (qtd. in Prendergast, 2008, p. 11), wherein *liminality* refers to “a space or threshold that is created by ritual and performance where the norms of culture can be changed and broken by the actors” (Hawkins & Georgakopolous, 2010, p. 546). Afterward, Garoian (1999) formally proposed performance pedagogy, describing his own teaching as transgressive and disruptive, and his classroom as “a space where [his] students could discuss openly the cultural issues that mattered to them most, to play with ideas, metaphors and images, and to create art that represented their cultural studies” (qtd. in Prendergast, 2008, p. 12). He and others argued that, essentially, teachers embody certain kinds of performances that deliver—both overtly and covertly—certain messages (Prendergast, 2008, p. 9), thereby rendering all educators as a kind of *performance artist* (p. 13) or *teacher-as-actor* (Pineau, 1994, p. 6).

Under these pretenses, the classroom becomes a site of seeing, understanding, and reforming ourselves “in relation to the culture that surrounds us, and/or transforming . . . culture itself through performative actions” (Prendergast, 2008, p. 8). Conquergood (1989) has poignantly termed this ideal *educational poetics*, citing its focus on “the fabricated, invented, imagined, [and] constructed nature of human realities,” and how cultures and selves are not *given*, but in fact, *made* (p. 83). Pineau (1994) has built on this notion, describing how educators “engage not in ‘the pursuit of truths,’ but in collaborative fictions—perpetually making and remaking world views and their tenuous positions within them” (p. 10), thereby justifying McLaren’s (1988) claim that the performance-centred educator “understands teaching to be an essentially improvised drama that takes place within a curricular narrative” (p. 174). In effect, performance reframes the whole educational enterprise as a mutable and ongoing ensemble of narratives, rendering both teacher and student experiences alike as stories. By engaging with and



reforming these stories, educators can answer the call of critical pedagogy and help emancipate students from all that which constricts and oppresses them (Pineau, 1994, p. 20).

### **Emergent Pedagogy**

Thirdly, this research project is also concerned with *emergent pedagogy*. Ellsworth (2005) has emphasized the “corporeality of space, place, and time,” and how “experience . . . is always a somatic response that is felt in relation to something specific” (qtd. in Powell & Lajevic, 2011, p. 38). As something relational, dynamic, and experimental, she situated emergent pedagogy in “alternative places of learning”—such as the arts—and framed it as the emergence of other, *yet unmade* pedagogies, or if you will, “knowledge in the making that provokes *new* pedagogies in *new* ways” (qtd. in Powell & Lajevic, 2011, p. 38, my emphases). In a sense, emergent pedagogy is similar to a matryoshka doll in that it essentially contains (by way of searching for or producing) other, newer pedagogies. Notably, it also has its roots in the ideas of John Dewey (1934/2005), who, framing the *transactive self*, described how anytime a person (e.g., self) and a place (e.g., a learning environment) interact, “both of them acquire a form and order that they did not at first possess” (qtd. in Powell & Lajevic, 2011, p. 38). Concordantly, under these pretenses, educators working within their medium can and should “move beyond mere habit and routine to[ward] a conscious awareness of new possibilities and imaginings, with artist and materials (in)forming one another” (Powell & Lajevic, 2011, p. 38). Simply put, by framing teaching as something *felt* rather than merely *done*, emergent pedagogy seeks out that which is, or could be pedagogically *new*.

### **Theatre of the Oppressed**

Notably, critical, performative, and emergent pedagogies can and often do intersect and coalesce, just as they did in Augusto Boal’s (1974) landmark *Theatre of the Oppressed* (TO), his

theatrical counter piece to Freire's earlier work and the locus of his *Theatre for Social Change theory* (Christensen, 2013, p. 5). TO consisted of participatory, improvisational, and dramatic forms (activities) that critically examined power relationships, exploring how "humans oppress each other in physical and psychological ways" (Saldaña, 2005, p. 117), thereby harmonizing the critical and performative pedagogies to create a liberatory praxis (p. 119) with the intent of creating a more positive school environment (p. 118). As a problem-solving forum theatre, TO provided the grounds for an incongruous and contradictory liminal place where all ideas were welcome (Brown & Clark, 2013, p. 45), thusly creating an *intermediary space* "where symbolic realization [took] place before it [was] transformed into everyday life" (Hawkins & Georgakopolous, 2010, p. 546). In this light, TO encouraged participants (e.g., students) to "try on new identities, new behaviours and ways of dealing with conflicts, themselves, and others" (p. 546) in order to help "engage and incite the public to thought and action" (p. 547-8).

### **Curriculum-as-lived**

In addition to TO, critical, performance, and emergent pedagogies also lend themselves to the curriculum-based ideas of Aoki (1993). According to Aoki, school curriculum may be thought of as a kind of landscape or topography featuring (or populated by) the various kinds of classes and subjects typical of the Western education system; with this in mind, he argues that we must also pay attention to how students inhabit and live within these pedagogical spaces (p. 255-256). To help with this understanding, Aoki proposes the notion of *curriculum-as-plan* versus *curriculum-as-lived*, wherein the former "usually has its origin outside of the classroom, such as the [Ministry of Education]" (p. 257) and the latter pertains to "the more poetic, the more phenomenological and hermeneutic discourse in which life is embodied in the very stories and languages people speak in live" (p. 261). In simpler terms, these conceptions suggest a difference

between education ‘on paper’ versus education in actuality, as lived uniquely by each equally-unique student—or if you will, between *the hypothetical* and *the experience* (Norris, 2012, p. 299).

Minding this dichotomy, Aoki (1993) argues that curriculum-as-planned enjoys, or is imbued with a misplaced and problematic kind of favouritism or “primacy” (p. 260):

Let us remember where we now are. For many of us, *curriculum*, in spite of its inherent indefiniteness, has become definitive, so much so that we speak with ease of *the curriculum*, *the curriculum-as-plan*. And when we so speak, we seem to be heedless of the way we have been drawn into a curricular landscape where in privileged aplomb stands, as a tree does, a single curriculum. In this arboreal landscape, curriculum-related activities such as ‘instruction,’ ‘teaching,’ ‘pedagogy,’ and ‘implementation’ become derivatives in the shadow of the curriculum-as-plan. (p. 259)

In other words, Aoki suggests that where so many think of ‘curriculum,’ they recall only that which is ‘planned,’ forgetting (or ignoring) that which is, in effect, ‘lived.’ Aoki also complicates this problem by explaining how the curriculum-as-planned is “imbued with the planners’ orientations to the world, which inevitably includes their own interests and assumptions about ways of knowing and about how teachers and students are to be understood” (p. 258)—or rather, how it also enacts and is skewed toward power structures that effectively *disempower* students. As a critical pedagogue, Aoki respectfully stated that all educators should work to “displace” this curricular landscape by heeding and embracing the curriculum-as-lived (p. 259). As such, curriculum-as-lived is versed in *relational practice*, relying on *interplay* between teachers, students, and the larger community to flourish (Powell & Lajevic, 2011, p. 38).

**Play**

Norris (2012) has built on Aoki's work, detailing how *play* (activity versed most often in intrinsic motivation and creative-thinking skills) effectively reframes the curricular landscape by turning it into an intermediary and liminal “threshold of opportunities from which ideas can emerge” (p. 300)—or as Neilsen (2002) termed it, a kind of intellectual “waiting space” or “green room” (qtd. in Norris, 2012, p. 300). Interestingly, as a universal concept/construct, play has managed to avoid any kind of absolute classification or definition (Brown & Clark, 2013, p. 40), but there are certain things that scholars agree it *does*: namely, carry and promote learning by treating with a diversity of experiences and interests; and, provide meaningful ways to creatively test out new ideas (p. 41). With said creativity in mind, Norris (2012) situates play firmly in the *imagination*, which he defines as one's capacity to be engaged with possibility and “in a state of openness to the unknown” (p. 300). Moreover, play is also rich: during it, everything is open to discovery without any barriers or infringing agendas; it is, in effect, “a game of *what if*, in which participants are free to examine alternatives and explore their meanings and implications” (Brown & Clark, 2013, p. 41), helping prepare them for future challenges and opportunities (p. 42).

Based on these qualities, one can ascertain that play is antithetical toward the school system—in fact, students are often taught “*not* to be creative, but to comply instead with the limitations imposed” (p. 41, my emphasis), evidenced most simply by common quips such as *get back to work* and *quit playing around* (Norris, 2012, p. 303). However, this conundrum *can* be navigated favourably by informed and willing educators:

It is . . . neither about a case of anything goes, nor is it about asking students to (figuratively) wander off aimlessly in the vain hope that they will find a way

forward. It requires structure. The structure is not about setting boundaries, but about providing a platform from which to start and venture outwards. Those in creative industries . . . are all familiar with the challenge of working in a ‘blank site’; it is the site which, at first glance, imposes the most restrictions that is often the one that provides the most inspiration. (Brown & Clark, 2013, p. 42)

In other words, it is worth considering how a game cannot be played without rules: to think about how play *also* exists within any given student’s zone of proximal development. Linking back to the earlier mentioned concept of habitus, many argue that it is best to start *where the student is at*, and then to help them *build*—a notion in line with Freire’s (1974) construct of *generative themes*, wherein learners are encouraged to “reveal to themselves what they already know, providing a space from which they might emerge and intervene with the world” (qtd. in Brown & Clark, 2013, p. 43). In such a space (or place), students can use play to achieve both a sense of self-worth and a feeling of ownership over their ideas, effectively reinforcing efficacy, autonomy, and ultimately, restoring their (lost) agency (p. 43). Once empowered in this manner, students become primed to break convention and confront dangerous and tough issues (Pineau, 1994, p. 15).

### **Narrative Therapy**

*Narrative therapy* (NT) is a postmodern (and more specifically, poststructuralist) approach to counselling created by Michael White and David Epston wherein “there is no fixed or objective meaning of self, reality, nature, the universe, or even lived experiences” (Buckman & Buckman, 2016, p. 396). In this light, meaning is perpetually ambiguous and can only ever be subjectively interpreted, rendering the self as “culturally and discursively constituted . . . in symbolic interaction with others,” or in other words, as always under construction (p. 397).

Identity, respectfully, is understood as inherently relational, distributed, performed, and fluid, as well as “brought forth in *stories* that are performed by the person intertwined with *stories* performed by others” (p. 399, my emphases). As a result, NT employs a collaborative, respectful, and nonblaming stance that honours people as “the *authors* of and experts on their own lives” (p. 399, my emphasis), allowing any dimension of diversity (e.g., class, race, gender, ability, and so on) to be accommodated (p. 408-409). Simply put, NT is a kind of *open book* (p. 391) wherein peoples’ life stories are “deconstructed as plot and examined for meaning” (Sawyer & Earle, 2019, p. 85), and thus, open to being re-written.

Functionally, NT practitioners serve as *appreciative allies* (Buckman & Buckman, 2016, p. 399) that work to identify and challenge *problem-saturated stories*—any kind of unhelpful, unsatisfying, or dead-ended personal belief that might dominate, restrain, or prevent one’s “more preferred ways of being, relating, and living” (p. 393). Notably, such problem-saturated stories can become “fused” with a person’s identity, creating a larger *problematic identity story* (p. 393) that becomes increasingly entrenched and exponentially disempowering. As a solution, narrative therapists strive to discover *new preferred stories*, or rather, alternative and missed perspectives that have the potential to change and empower; once this has been achieved, the therapist and their partner then work together to *thicken* the new story by richly describing and instilling belief in it (p. 392). Very often, this process entails the separation of the person from the problem by “objecting and at times personifying the problem as an *oppressive external entity*” (p. 392; 399), such as in the famed example wherein a young boy’s encopresis was personified as ‘Sneaky Poo,’ a character/enemy capable of being defeated (p. 402). Moreover, NT often encourages the use of *definitional ceremonies* wherein partners can document and share their preferred stories through *therapy artifacts* (e.g., artwork), allowing them to further develop the capacity to

“intervene in the shaping of one’s life and relationships” (p. 403). Lastly, NT also employs *remembering*, in which partners reaggregate their “members,” those people who do (or do not) belong in their new life story (p. 404).

With its roots in interpretive anthropology, linguistic philosophy, postmodernism, literary criticism, and social reconstructionism (p. 394), NT is “very aware of the power of social discourses to dominate, oppress, silence, and isolate” (p. 409), and thus, is apt for treating with vulnerable and marginalized individuals, groups, and communities (p. 407). Moreover, NT is very effective in helping children and youth, especially in schools: Smith (1997) notes how, by working from a stance of *not-knowing*, narrative therapists encourage students to be their own experts and fully believe in the kinds of fantastical and imaginative (playful) narratives that are second-nature to them (p. 43). Additionally, Besley (2001) has proposed that NT can help establish a *narrative-oriented school* wherein dominant pedagogies and psychological discourses can be more easily challenged, signifying “major implications” (p. 83). Essentially, in providing a non-judgemental way of conversation, NT can help negotiate school power structures and facilitate power sharing between teachers, students, and counsellors (p. 84). In creating a “mirror of the larger educative process” (p. 86) and holding it up to *the norm*, a narrative-oriented school becomes a freer, more open educational institution that can successfully accommodate different—or once again, vulnerable—understandings, voices, and cultures (p. 88).

Notably, one of NT’s founders (White) formally applied narrative therapy with children in a recent study, facilitating and tracking its effectiveness in conjunction with Vygotsky’s concepts of the *zone of proximal development* and *scaffolding*. In this Vygotskian framework, externalizing was meant to support children “in distancing themselves from the concrete, day-to-day, lived experience of their problems, and to move them toward new, broader understandings

of what they want for their lives and identities” (Ramey et al., 2009, p. 268). As such, White (2007) worked to create what he termed *initiatives* and/or *unique outcomes*, “solution-focused externalizations including thoughts, feelings, or actions that are not in accordance with what the problem wants or invokes from the child” (qtd. in Ramey et al., 2009, p. 263), and to scaffold these outcomes, he framed each externalization as a sequential process, including: (1) naming and characterizing the problem or initiative; (2) describing the effects of the problem or initiative on the child’s life; (3) soliciting an evaluation of the problem or initiative and its effects; and (4) exploring the thinking behind this evaluation and its relation to other aspects of the child’s life (qtd. in Ramey et al., 2009, p. 264). In his study, White (2007) observed the students begin to master the development of their abstract thinking, which he understood as “critical to the establishment of [their] ability to intervene in shaping their own lives and influence their relationships with others” (qtd. in Ramey et al., 2009, p. 268). Other studies have also shown similar results, demonstrating that the power of NT externalization with children and youth is clear (Manion et al., 2012, p. 123).

### **Creative Arts-based Therapy**

While creative arts-based therapy (CAT) is separate from the kind of therapies that most teachers and mental health practitioners are trained and licensed to provide (Sanders, 2013, p. 6), it is nonetheless a viable and exceptionally impactful *therapeutic tool* that is “as diverse as the individual participants it may serve” (p. 7), as well as complimentary toward NT (p. 14-15). CAT entails a substantial range of media including writing, drama, music, film, and the visual arts (etc.), all therapeutically delivered and/or performed so that healing may take place (p. 6-7). CAT programs are typically either preventative or rehabilitative (p. 2) and demarcated as either (a) arts-based programs (“art *is* therapy”), where participants are made to feel better simply by



doing art; or (b) arts therapies (“arts *in* therapy”), wherein art is an active, chosen, and decided-upon aspect of the therapeutic healing process (p. 2). When used in therapy, art can be implemented in one of three ways: (1) *receptive*, in which already created art is used to further therapy (e.g., use of a book or song); (2) *expressive*, in which therapists prescribe creative tasks (e.g., letter writing); or (3) *symbolic*, in which there is a specific focus on rituals, symbols, and metaphor (e.g., group performance or fiction) (p. 9-10). Each method and approach contained in CAT is intended to help people “cope with life’s stressors, pains, and limitations,” as well as with the self-exploration of their own *internal worlds* (p. 11).

When applied with youth, the benefits of CAT are many: according to Riley (2001), “imagery taps into a person’s earliest way of knowing and reacting to the world” (p. 54), and the “emergence of an image is an extension of the processes of memory and conceptualization” (p. 56). Because of this, both Riley and Sanders (2013) suggest that CAT functions as an “expressive language” that is both nonthreatening and highly self-expressive (p. 13; p. 55). Moreover, Sanders (2013) alone suggests that, through these merits, CAT also invokes *group cohesion*, as it helps to create a comfortable environment wherein staying on task and problem-solving become easier (p. 13). Riley (2001) has also explained how “teens often have no words available to express their deep feelings,” but in many cases, “the image comes first” (p. 56), opening the door for *art as language* and allowing said youth to communicate through CAT when they otherwise would not have been able. Sanders (2013) corroborates this, writing that art therapies allow youth to “communicate emotions or experiences that may be difficult to verbalize” (p. 12). In this light, CAT provides a “pleasure factor that is not what teens expect to encounter,” stimulating their inherent desire to be expressive (Riley, 2001, p. 55) and fostering a long list of other beneficial developmental and prosocial qualities (Sanders, 2013, p. 2).

### **Indigenous Cultural Safety**

The exact definition of *cultural safety* remains elusive; while it is best left to those who receive its benefits or service (Rigby et al., 2011, p. 24), one approach has been to define it in relation to practices deemed culturally *unsafe*, or rather, “any actions which diminish, demean, or disempower the cultural identity and wellbeing of an individual” (Baskin, 2016, p. 88). In this light, cultural safety encompasses equality, equity, and “awareness to the ways in which ‘historical, economical, and social contexts’ influence our position” (qtd. in Baskin, 2016, p. 88), as well as “learning together with dignity, and truly listening” (Rigby et al., 2011, p. 24). Whereas some might draw connections with cultural sensitivity, awareness, and competence, cultural safety instead “moves beyond these ideas and involves reflection on racism, power relations, and one’s own privilege and status,” intended to result in a true and proper *bicultural relationship* (Baskin, 2016, p. 88). In Canada, such a relationship entails an engagement with the colonizer/colonized binary (p. 88), and in Canadian schools—as outlined by the OME—this entails “pedagogical practices . . . more aligned with holistic epistemic understandings of teaching and learning” (Cherubini, 2010, p. 10). As such, cultural safety is a reflexive means to enable Indigenous students “to feel safe to express themselves from the viewpoint of their culture . . . supported by staff and other students” (Rigby et al., 2011, p. 24). Thusly, cultural safety invokes the use of culturally appropriate (and encouraging, etc.) techniques and strategies by educators in their classrooms (Westernman, 2004, p. 4).

### **Indigenous Storytelling**

Despite the difficulties they face, Indigenous people have and continue to find strength in (and fight back through) their cultural tradition of *storytelling*. Whether spoken, written, or filmed (e.g., in children’s picture books; adult poetry; scientific research; song; myths;

anecdotes; ceremony; etc.), Indigenous stories are often connected to pre-Contact culture through the Land (Corntassel, 2009, pp. 148-149) and can be either personal or communal (Sium & Ritskes, 2013). Their narratives are honouring, corrective, justice-seeking, truth-telling, self-deterministic, and regenerative (Corntassel, 2009 p. 138); and, they recall, reproduce, and reformulate Indigenous ontologies and epistemologies (Caxaj, 2015, p. 1) to create new Indigenous Knowledge (Sium & Ritskes, 2013, p. 2). Critically, Indigenous storytelling is also an act of decolonization, as the stories “reclaim epistemic ground . . . erased by colonialism” and lay the “framework and foundation for the resurgence of Indigenous sovereignty” (Sium & Ritskes, 2013, p. 3). By functioning as counternarratives, these stories “represent an alternative to the Canadian state” (Corntassel, 2009, p. 139); and by functioning through multiplicity, holism, and experience (Caxaj, 2015, p. 2), they “shift away from the mainstream [to] address ontological tensions” (p. 3). Essentially, Indigenous storytelling is *story-as-theory*, as they tell the “contradictions, complicities, and complexities” of Indigenous lived experiences, complicating and contextualizing their differences in relation to the Western/Eurocentric world (Sium & Ritskes, 2013, p. 7).

### **Indigenous Re-Storying**

According to Voyageur et al. (2014), *re-storying* is a strengths-based approach to Indigenous storytelling focused on healing pain and despair (be it systemic or personal) through narratives of creativity and possibility (p. 329). Borrowing from other cultural ideals like holism, circularity, and interconnectedness, re-storying acknowledges that the *good* and *bad* exist together to make something whole, and thus, that people (or communities) can *re-create* themselves “into being whole again,” or more specifically, that they can rebalance or replace the ‘bad’ with the ‘good’ (p. 331). Thusly, re-storying involves context (p. 329), meaning-making (p.

337), and looking at the *big picture* (p. 338). As a *restorative process* (p. 331), it also seeks “balance and harmony” (Antone & Córdoba, 2005, p. 9), especially between “pain and . . . potential” (Voyageur et al., 2014, p. 328). Notably, re-storying is not inherently tied to language (or texts), as evidenced by the following example involving a Residential School:

On 10 February 2009, the demolition of a former residential school building took place on the territory of the Tseshah First Nation . . . The Tseshah Nation hosted a ceremony for all survivors and their families . . . and started by holding a pre-demolition day . . . crowbars and sledgehammers were provided to anyone who wanted to pry off pieces of the building for a burning. Throughout the day, two fires were kept going so that the survivors could burn ‘pieces of discarded siding from the building’ . . . sage and cedar were also burned with the pieces, in order to ‘cleanse and allow the trapped spirits to finally be freed.’ (Corntassel, 2009, p. 143-144)

Also worthy of consideration is the following re-storying of a room during a cultural conference:

In preparing the space where the tribunal would take place, a spiritual leader shared that there was a need to ‘decolonize’ the room—pointing to the straight lines of chairs assembled in the salon. As a group, we rearranged the chairs that had been in rows into a circular formation.

[. . .]

With the space overtly Indigenized . . . new stories and possibilities were bound to emerge. (Caxaj, 2015, p. 5)

As these two examples demonstrate, re-storying works to undo the “historical disruption” imposed by colonialism by strengthening the “transmission of Aboriginal knowledge” (Antone

& Córdoba, 2005, p. 10). However, while both examples are primarily physical in nature, it is important to note that re-storying is, at its core, a framework for Indigenous literacy (p. 10)—one that rejects “narrowly defined” (e.g., Western or textual) avenues in favour of culturally appropriate (p. 10) ways of “learning, living, and being” (p. 11). Essentially, minding that Indigenous people “become the stories [they] are told” (Voyageur et al., 2014, p. 332), re-storying is not only decolonial and reflective story-as-theory, but perhaps *life* itself (Antone & Córdoba, 2005, p. 11). Finally, it should also be noted that, as a practice, re-storying is typically reserved for/performed by Indigenous leaders (e.g., Elders), but there is nothing in the literature to suggest that Indigenous youth (e.g., students) cannot partake in and benefit from it as well.

### **Superheroes**

Loeb and Morris (2005) define a superhero as a character with powers and abilities far beyond those of ordinary mortals who use their abilities to defend the defenseless, help those who cannot help themselves, and overcome evil with the force of good (p. 11). However, these scholars also note that the “concept of a hero is a moral category,” and thus, that there are many superheroes in the world who have no superpowers at all (pp. 12-13), such as stay-at-home mothers, public servants, and artists (p. 14), as well as anyone else whose sacrifices and noble deeds “benefit us all” (p. 13). Consider the following:

In a culture of pervasive self-interest and self-indulgent passivity, where people are more often inclined to be spectators than participants, and typically embrace easy comfort rather than initiating needed change, we can forget the relative rarity of the motivation behind what is actually heroic behaviour.

[. . .]

Superheroes stand out, not just because of their outfits and powers, but because of

their altruistic activism and a dedication to what is good . . . a person can make a heroic struggle against cancer, or some other terrible disease . . . a young man or woman can fight heroically *for their own education*, against all odds and expectations. (pp. 13-14, my emphasis added for poignancy)

These contemporary (or rather, real) examples remind us of how “the core concept of a hero has morphed over time from the ancient idea that did involve something like superpowers to the more modern notion that focuses mainly on high achievements and moral nobility” (p. 14), as well as sacrifice, self-discipline, and choice (p. 15). Because of this, they embody what philosophers call a *narrative concept*, as a hero “doesn’t just characterize what is, it offers us a glimpse of what ought to be”—and when they are developed properly and portrayed well, they “present us with something to which we should all aspire” (p. 16). Simply put, there exists an inherent and exploitable parallel between superheroes and ordinary people (Weschenfelder & Yunes, 2016, p. 413).

Taken at face value, superheroes *are* undeniably popular and thus ideal for *any* kind of research project wherein (youth) engagement is paramount. Fradkin et al. (2016) have noted that “with the advent of film, comic book superheroes have filled the silver screen with their larger-than-life presence and their abilities to leap large buildings in a single bound” (p. 410). With this in mind, consider the top five highest grossing films of the past two years: in 2019, superhero movies held the first, fourth, and fifth spots (*Avengers: Endgame*, *Spider-Man: Far from Home*, and *Captain Marvel* respectively) for a total box office gross of \$5.05B; and in 2018, they held the first, second, fourth, and fifth spots (*Avengers: Infinity War*, *Black Panther*, *Incredibles 2*, and *Aquaman*) for a total of \$5.78B (\$14.99B CDN in total). Interestingly, this kind of popularity is already being utilized by others in research and the helping professions: take, for example, the

children's hospital in Brazil running the *Comic Super-Heroes* program for its cancer patients, where in addition to superhero-based resources and other minutiae, things like chemo drip are disguised as 'superformula,' demonstrably lifting the residents' spirits and inspiring wellness (p. 409). Other studies have also shown students at numerous schools associating themselves with wizards and vampires after reading the *Harry Potter* and *Twilight* book series, respectively (Gabriel & Young, 2011, p. 993). Evidently, superheroes can "keep that flame alive in our hearts as we ponder their sense of mission, and as we see them live it," establishing them as *intentionally instructional* (Loeb & Morris, 2008, p. 16).

Despite its relative newness (Fradkin et al., 2016, p. 410), the intersection between superheroes and theory is already brimming with relevant critical concepts and terminology. Both Martin (2007) and Gabriel & Young (2011) propose that children and youth engage in a specific kind of *superhero play*, which, according to the former, can either implicitly or explicitly address "issues of complex human relationships and social identity" in unique ways (p. 242). Additionally, Fradkin et al. (2016) have described how children and youth can identify with superheroes *before* they become super-heroic, which they term character's *pre-cloak stage* (p. 410). Martin (2007) corroborates this, claiming that by seeing the similarities between their struggles, at-risk and otherwise vulnerable youth can relate with superheroes in a way that helps them find/create their own inner strengths and perceive themselves in new, empowered ways (p. 243; Fradkin et al., 2016, p. 410). Notably, this process can be either personal (e.g., a parentless student relating with Marvel's Wolverine, an orphan) or systemic (e.g., marginalized students relating with Wolverine's team, the X-Men, who are discriminated and oppressed for being mutants). Fradkin et al. (2016) have also detailed how the transition from the pre-cloak stage to comic book superhero is similar to a child's transition into adulthood, and thus how youth can

look to superhero stories for guidance and support with their own developmental milestones (p. 410).

According to Martin (2007), superheroes also instill *moral perception* in their young audiences, which (a) helps youth see their and others' lives as *narratives*, and (b) further enables their *moral imagination*, instilling moral agency and decision-making (p. 240) and spurring the development of morality itself. Gabriel and Young (2011) have built on this idea of life-as-narrative, writing that "many of the neural regions that are activated when people read about activities (e.g., superhero stories) overlap substantially with the regions that are activated when people imagine and actually engage in activities" (p. 990). Based on this presumption, they propose the *narrative collection-assimilation hypothesis*, in which narrative engagement "provides the positive experience of connection to a collective," leading to psychological assimilation (p. 990), positive affect (p. 993), and ultimately, social surrogacy (p. 993). In other words, similar to the notion of *getting lost in a good book*, vulnerable youth (especially those who lack guidance) are naturally and willfully predisposed to superhero narratives, as they provide the means to finally feel *at home* or *as a part of the team*. Because of this, educators can and should use superheroes to help students develop prosocial values and participate in society (Martin, 2007, p. 248).

### **Synthesis**

In summary, with all of these theories, concepts, and constructs in mind, it was my intention to do the following:

- (1) As a critical pedagogue, I would channel the essence of Boal's (1974) Theatre of the Oppressed by facilitating an intermediary space wherein the A+Vengers could try on new identities. Such measures would be undertaken with the goal of instilling conscientization



- by enacting a praxis focused on challenging their oppressive realities, especially with regard to the liberation and/or emancipation of their mental health and wellness.
- (2) As a performant pedagogue, I would channel Aoki's (1993) curriculum-as-lived in order to facilitate a liminal space (as a liminal servant) wherein the A+Vengers could disrupt and transgress that which they saw fit. Such entailed holistically understanding and appreciating each A+Venger's life story in a relational manner, which would in turn help me help them further engage with their mental health.
  - (3) As an emergent pedagogue, I would channel Norris' (2012) ideas about play, situating my work in the imagination and helping the A+Vengers play the game of *what if*. Furthermore, I would also be ever mindful of the fact that, together, we were doing something *new*, and thus, that it would be wise to both 'give myself up' to—that is, *live*—the research, and to leave none of its stones unturned.
  - (4) I would mediate these goals and processes by utilizing certain theories and therapies from the social work profession: borrowing from narrative therapy, I would function as a conversational consultant focused on externalization and the generation of new, preferred stories; and, borrowing from creative arts-based therapies, I would make use of play development to do so.
  - (5) As an Indigenous ally, I would strive to function in a culturally safe manner, largely achieved through my research's congruence with Indigenous storytelling and re-storying, both of which I understood myself as borrowing and imbuing within my research.
  - (6) Lastly, I would utilize the nature (e.g., pretenses and conception) of comic book superheroes to tie everything together, based on both their proven popularity and marked critical underpinnings.

## Chapter 4: The Intervention

### Ethics

An ethics review for this research project was obtained from the Lakehead University Research Ethics Board (REB), in conjunction with approval from the participating school's principal and its board's ethics committee. As the research participants were youth, and thus, members of a vulnerable population—in addition to being asked to engage with potentially unsettling tasks (e.g., confronting mental health challenges)—every effort and precaution was taken to help ensure their safety and wellbeing throughout the research process. For the duration of the study, a school social worker agreed to offer their guidance and support, and professionally intervene if necessary; a second child and youth worker also agreed to provide their contact information to the students and make themselves available for emergencies around the clock. Additionally, the students were also briefed on (and provided with a supplementary document outlining) several other important local and national mental health resources and initiatives, including (a) mental health services offered at the local organizations, (b) the Kids Help Phone, (c) the national Crisis Text Line, and (d) the Canada Suicide Prevention Service.

Each student was provided with a comprehensive consent form, describing what would be asked of them, as well as the risks and benefits of becoming research participants. During class time, the students were briefed on (a) the data collection process; (b) their rights as participants, including but not limited to (i) the voluntary nature of their participation, (ii) their ability to, and instructions for withdrawing from the study at any time, and (iii) assurance that their participation (or lack thereof) would *not* affect their final ADA2O1 class grade; (c) the nature of the study's confidentiality, including but not limited to (i) the study's use of pseudonyms, and (ii) the inability to *guarantee* confidentiality, based on the possibility of peers

sharing information they might overhear; (d) where data would be stored and what it would ultimately be used for; and (e) researcher, supervisor, and other relevant contact information. In order to opt in, research participants signified their understanding of all the information explained and contained within the consent form by completing it with both their signature, and that of their parents/guardians.

### **Morals**

I share the beliefs of Chenail (2010), who, having performed research in a similar manner, remarked “it’s exciting to work creatively, especially when that collaboration can help people find a voice and that performance can help bring focus to personally and socially critical issues, such as prejudice and oppression” (p. 1286). Essentially, such work denotes a kind of *mirror theatre* wherein the research “can bring attention to marginalized groups or to folks who have been silenced in some manner” (p. 1286). Based on the critical constructs I have outlined thus far, it is possible to understand how the school system and its metanarratives are inherently oppressive, and thus, how all students (and thus, most of us) are or have been oppressed to some extent in time (Sawyer & Earle, 2019, p. 85). Thus, this project, “due to its liberating ends, its attention to challenging dominant cultural assumptions, its rejection of expert knowledge, and its emphasis on *confronting* forces of oppression” (p. 85, my emphasis), features a background objective of emancipating the students and restoring their social justice by helping them fight back against the powers that be. For myself, this meant reflexively learning even more about “how we live in a power-laden context, which informs how we behave, create meaning, and produce knowledge about our lived experiences” (Christensen, 2013, p. 7).

By and large—and as NT would uphold—the study was kept grounded in the fact that “multiple truths exist and are shaped by the context in which the knowledge is created,” allowing

me to properly honour the students' identities and guide them toward social action (Christensen, 2013, p. 7). Kopp (1972) believes that we can "learn vicariously by listening to the stories of others as we resonate with certain aspects and incorporate them into our own beliefs and actions" (qtd. in Norris, 2012, p. 306). With this in mind, I must express that this project in its entirety meant more to me than a 'portfolio' or mere words on paper ever could; it was, for all intents and purposes, something living and breathing, and I did everything I could to help make the stories I was listening to *real*. Norris (2012) has detailed how the biggest obstacle to this kind of creativity is the *fear of the judge* (p. 305), and thus, eliminating such was also of the utmost importance throughout my time spent in the classroom. To achieve this, I worked deliberately to "create a playful atmosphere" where the students would feel comfortable, relaxed, and most importantly, trusting (p. 310), all the while sharing Norris's intent of "reclaiming the role of fantasy in our lives" (p. 306).

### **A/r/tography**

First and foremost, it should be understood that "art and research can be the same thing" (Chenail, 2010, p. 1285). According to Irwin and Springgay (2008), *a/r/tography* is the respectful intertwining of art, research, *and* teaching wherein "each separate process is really not separate, but braided with the others" (qtd. in Wiebe & Smith, 2016, p. 1165), serving as a kind of *lens* for educators (as well as students) to look and work through (qtd. in Wiebe & Smith, 2016, p. 1169). Regarding education, *a/r/tography* is in line with both student-centred and constructivist learning theories wherein teachers and learners are *co-architects* in the in the curriculum experience: both work together (holistically) to "co-create knowledge, with learning focused on the learners' experiences, needs, interests, and aspirations" (Wiebe & Smith, 2016, p. 1169). Regarding, research, *a/r/tography* is "undertaken by practitioners . . . for the purpose of

developing their own artistic practices” and moving beyond the “simple, transactional process of knowledge delivery and acquisition” (p. 1169). And, regarding art, a/r/tography provides practitioners with avenues to advance their own artistic practices (p. 1169) and a means to engage with “communities that [typically only] value research” (p. 1166). Ultimately, a/r/tography may also be understood as a new, swinging or revolving *door* into and out of educational research.

### **Art-as-event**

A/r/tography often centres around the creation of *art-as-event*, which Wiebe (2016) posits as “imagining the world other than it is” and “shattering what has become solidified” through reflective engagement and subjective reconstruction (p. 545). In this light, art-as-event typically transcends its own artistic medium, fueling passions and curiosities from other fields and disciplines (p. 545). Regarding education, Dewey (1934/2005) has remarked that “the real work of art is the building up of an integral experience out of the interaction of organic and environmental conditions and energies” (qtd. in Powell & Lajevic, 2011, p. 49). Regarding emergent pedagogy more specifically, art-as-event also “challenges the notion of pre-planning lessons with specific known outcomes, and opens the possibilities of what can emerge, be discovered, and happen in the classroom” (Powell & Lajevic, 2011, p. 49). For teachers, this means orchestrating a design that “contains pivot points in which students . . . can link imagination with reality” (Powell & Lajevic, 2011, p. 49) and refute oppressive compliance (Wiebe, 2016, p. 545). Moreover, minding performance pedagogy, educators facilitating art-as-event are further charged with generating new forms of classroom communication and “shifting stories that do not mirror the world, but, rather, attempt to articulate our experience within it” (Pineau, 1994, p. 11). Interestingly, this process often entails the use of specific narrative devices

and structures to help students create alternative stories (p. 11).

### **Theatre**

As the means through which I intended to informally facilitate NT, the drama classroom offered several unique curricular opportunities that other curricula simply could not. After all, theatre *is* one of the oldest communication methods in the world (Manukonda, 2013, p. 1), making it ideal for the kinds of communicative and narrative-based performance inquiries I would be asking the students to undertake; better yet, it also aligns with oral traditions (p. 5), fulfilling my desire to open the door for Indigenous tradition in a culturally safe manner. Moreover, according to Norris (2016), drama integrates all five major ways of meaning making: “word & language arts; number & mathematics, science, and music; image & visual arts; gesture & dance; and sound & music” (pp. 122-124), providing the grounds for learners of all kinds to engage. And, according to Saldaña (2003), the stage offers unparalleled intimacy and is capable of offering “an entreatingly informative experience for an audience, one that is aesthetically sound, intellectually rich, and emotionally evocative” (p. 219). In this light, students are afforded the opportunity to “continually generate and test hypothesis through the magic of ‘what if’” (Norris, 2016, p. 124), altogether entailing the perfect environment for NT work.

### **Dramaturgy**

As an extension of the stage and an aspect of drama, *dramaturgy* has long been understood as the critical theory and practice of dramatic composition. In fact, it existed as an “essential part of the [theatrical] production process long before the term came into use, and that role remains the same today” (Haedicke, 1998, p. 125), suggesting that people have been playwriting in provocative and purposefully meaningful ways for a long, long time. More recently, however, it has been more formally defined as a profession, a set of tasks, and a theory;

according to some, it is “not so much a matter of how to do it as it is about the development of an interconnected set of ideas, attitudes, feelings, skills, and behaviours: in short, an education” (p. 125). Others have also defined it as a kind of *monitoring device*, “meant to keep the process on course,” or if you will, a kind of praxis that “forms the underpinning of all intuitive or deliberate choices, thoughts, debates and nurtures the passionate search for artistic truth on stage” (p. 125). Notably, some have posited *community-based dramaturgy*, which “initiates unique script development strategies and often redefines ‘text’” (p. 125). While the A+Vengers’ scripts were not communal as was the case in Boal’s (1974) TO—that is, they were not a joint(ly written) effort—they *were* imbued with a sense of community *spirit*, in the sense that all of the research participants were *in it together*.

### **Performance-based Research**

Of central importance to this portfolio is *performance-based research* (PBR), also known as both *performance studies* and *arts-based research*. According to Prendergast & Belliveau (2013), PBR engages in the work of art while simultaneously “carrying out the work of social science in innovative and interdisciplinary ways” (p. 197), entailing researchers and/or artists making use of “both artistic and research approaches to bring particular research phenomena to life for outside and/or inside witnesses/audiences” (p. 198). In other words, PBR is a marriage of scholarship and aestheticism, that—like other (e.g., qualitative or quantitative) research methods—collects, analyzes, and disseminates data with and through art (Norris, 2016, p. 125). Several scholars (Norris, 2016, p. 127; Hawkins & Georgakopolous, 2010, p. 546) have explained PBR’s potential to create and sustain new meaning(s) in society, and thus, how it “outlines ways to make findings transferable to multiple contexts” (Sawyer & Earle, 2019, p. 87), including noncanonical texts (Pineau, 1994, p. 9). Interestingly, Turner (1982) has also

framed PBR as exceptionally receptive toward liminal spaces and situations wherein “participants can try on new identities, new behaviours and ways of dealing with conflicts, themselves, and others” (qtd. in Hawkins & Georgakopolous, 2010, p. 546).

### **Research-based Theatre**

As a subset of PBR, *research-based theatre* (RBT) was the primary means through which this portfolio was conceptualized and completed, based on Norris’s (2016) contention that those in drama education “have much to offer . . . research from our wealth of experience in drama as both a process of meaning making and as a presentational/representational form” (p. 122). Generally, RBT incorporates theatre throughout the research process with the aim of enhancing understandings in different groups and/or communities (Prendergast & Belliveau, 2013, p. 198) by critically exploiting blurred interdisciplinary lines via simultaneous “interpretation and performance” (Saldaña, 2003, p. 218). Similar to narrative and hermeneutic phenomenology, RBT favours “nondiscursive forms that express” over “discursive forms that state” (Norris, 2016, p. 131), enabling research participants to embody *lived understandings* in their performances (or on stage, etc.) that produce unique data unattainable by any other means (p. 127). Simply put, RBT provides the grounds for research participants—and by extension, readers and audience members—to create and interact with data in ways that mere printed materials cannot (p. 131). Interestingly, RBT has also been posited by some as *ancient*, guided by the assertion that “the playwright as researcher is not new, as playwrights have been researching and reflecting on the human story for thousands of years” (McKenzie & Belliveau, 2011, p. 3).

Whereas avenues such as *ethnodrama* and *ethnotheatre* are popular methods (both of which will be explicated later on in this paper), it is important to note that RBT does *not* restrict the approach to creating theatre from disseminated research or ethnographic data (p. 198). In



other words, while a substantial amount of RBT creates its plays *last*, sometimes the process can occur in reverse, entailing data acquired from plays created *first*. An excellent example of this is Saldaña's (2005) work with playwriting and rehearsal to demonstrate how "researchers can work with artists to create pieces that 'entertain' ideas as well as provide an aesthetic experience," wherein he analyzed entire scripts *for* data (qtd. in Prendergast & Belliveau, 2013, p. 201). Additionally, RBT can also be significantly emancipatory (Norris, 2016, p. 124): for example, Boal's (1985) TO understood everyone as an actor performing scripts "written . . . by oppressive systems" (qtd. in Christensen, 2013, p. 5), and under this pretense, his Theatre for Social Change techniques aimed to abolish passivity and turn audience members into *spect-actors* capable of "creating their own scripts and providing solutions that empower the oppressed" (qtd. in Christensen, 2013, p. 5). Others have termed this kind of introspection *dramatic problem solving* (DPS) and *theatre for development* (TfD) (Hawkins & Georgakopolous, 2010, p. 546; Manukonda, 2013, p. 7), situating both in a Freirean framework wherein the participants "tell their own stories, involving and addressing issues that are relevant to them" (p. 1).

Notably, both Norris (2016, p. 125) and Prendergast and Belliveau (2013) have situated RBT as closer to, or in a proximal relation with the qualitative (rather than quantitative) research paradigm (p. 201), and the latter pair have respectfully proposed four *qualitative touchstones* valuable in its assessment: (1) Researchers must strike a balance between the "instrumental (research) and the aesthetic (theatre) in their work" (p. 203), as RBT's ultimate strength is when "art and research inform one another, working in tandem, neither taking precedence over the other" (p. 204); (2) Researchers must share the artistic within the academic and facilitate "a blending . . . in the scholarly article," thereby creating an "exegesis and/or scholarly discussion to situate the underpinnings of the work" (p. 204); (3) Researchers must strive to use *all* elements

of theatre, merging ideas with emotions in a manner that invites their audience to properly “think and feel” (p. 204); and, (4) Researchers must honor the research context by authentically bringing their study (or the studied) to life, which is most commonly achieved through the direct inclusion of stakeholders in the project (e.g., participants; other academics; policy makers; etc.). Lastly, Saldaña (2003) has also written about the specific importance of analyzing character (p. 221), dialogue (p. 225), monologue (p. 223), and scenography (p. 227) in RBT work.

### **Youth Participatory Action Research**

*Participatory action research* (PAR) is academic study performed in purposeful collaboration with community members, typically focusing on a social problem with the intent of “taking action based on knowledge gained from the research” (Sawyer & Earle, 2019, p. 86). PAR frameworks are distinct from other research approaches in that they are (a) focused on generating research to promote action or change, (b) centred on decreasing power differentials and power-sharing, and (c) seek to *directly* involve the community participants in the research process (Caxaj, 2015, p. 9). Guided by a critical paradigm—and by extension, critical pedagogy—PAR can address “ontological tensions with transparency and respect” (p. 3), thereby making it ideal for research involving vulnerable populations. Cammarota and Fine (2008) term this process of addressing systemic injustice *transformational resistance* (p. 3); under this pretense, researchers “engage in ongoing conversation and reflection with others,” denoting a *collective process* that is enriched by its own inclusion of multiple perspectives and different voices working together (p. 5). These kinds of collective processes are typically achieved through relationship-building, trust, and a long-term commitment to community benefit, as well as an effort to articulate decentred (e.g., marginalized) knowledges (Caxaj, 2015, p. 3).

Sometimes (as is the case with this portfolio), PAR is performed exclusively with youth,

entailing the added label *youth* participatory action research (YPAR). Building upon PAR's aforementioned qualities, YPAR is a means for simultaneous youth development and social justice work (Cammarota & Fine, 2008, p. 2), most often achieved by moving from (a) being youth oriented to (b) youth engagement to (c) youth participation and then finally to (d) being youth led (Sawyer & Earle, 2019, p. 86). Cammarota and Fine (2008) state that, critically, youth can "resist the normalization of systemic oppression by undertaking their own *engaged praxis*—collective and social inquiry, reflection, and action focused on 'reading' and speaking back to the reality of the world, their world" (p. 2). As such, YPAR enables youth to re-vision and denaturalize realities and social norms "and then undertake forms of collective challenge based on the knowledge gained through their social inquiries" (p. 2). It should also be noted that YPAR is rooted in *popular education*, the process of students learning together about the social injustices that "negatively influence their life circumstances" (p. 5), enabling them to perform *recreative actions* that "produce realities better suited to meet their needs and interests" (p. 7). Additionally, when performed in schools, YPAR is also strongly suited to using educational performance (e.g., assignments) as dissemination tools (Sawyer & Earle, 2019, p. 86).

Based on its critical nature, YPAR is also congruent with Indigenous culture and knowledges, and in being so, is a means for Indigenous self-determination (Caxaj, 2015, p. 1). In its quest for truth-telling and justice-seeking, YPAR involves and invites Indigenous partners and stakeholders to be "full collaborators in the research process" (p. 3), embracing the potential for decolonization (p. 6) and aligning itself with cultural safety (Maar et al., 2009, p. 1). In other words, by building relationships, honouring differences, and embracing epistemological pluralism, YPAR can facilitate the co-construction of narratives that do not silence, co-opt, or distort the voices of Indigenous youth (Caxaj, 2015, p. 9), thereby opening the floor for

“revolutionary pedagogical projects” (Cammarota & Fine, 2008, p. 4).

### **Synthesis**

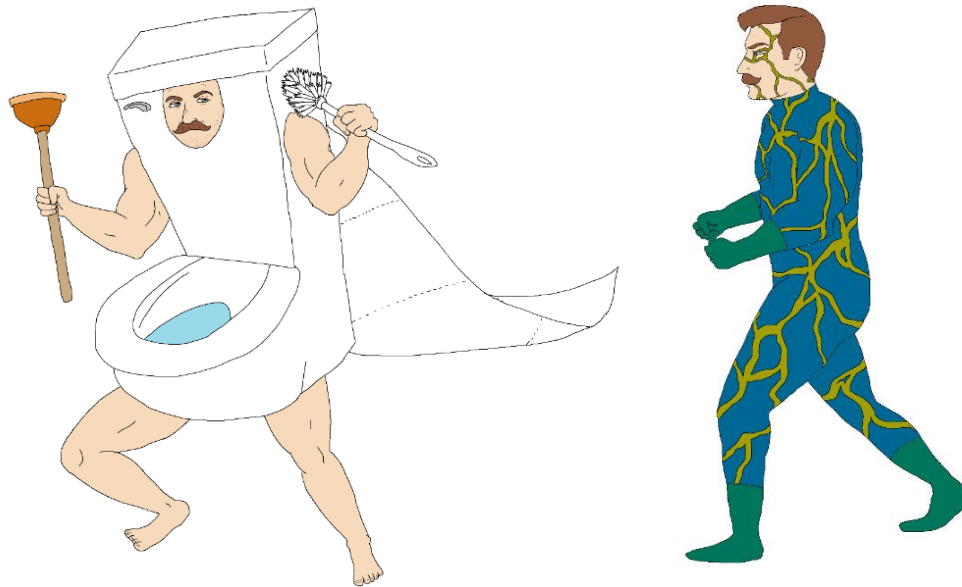
In summary, it was my intent to utilize and combine these research-based tenets in the following ways: (1) as an *a/r/tographer*, I would intertwine teaching, art, and research in a manner that would allow me to effectively co-create art-as-event with the A+Vengers, allowing us to jointly contribute new, emergent, and imaginative thinking (e.g., ideas, stories, and realities) to all three fields; (2) as a dramaturge, I would employ the vast history and guidelines (etc.) of drama and drama education to facilitate this process, entailing the art-as-event materializing in the form of scripts and play development; (3) as a performance- and arts-based researcher investigating research-based theatre, I would prioritize any and all aspects of art within the research, and in turn, strive to interpret and represent said data in equally artful and artistic ways; (4) minding youth participatory action research, I would strive to allot as much control (e.g., creative) to the A+Vengers as possible in an effort to establish a collective process wherein they could properly perform emancipatory recreative actions; and (5) once again, I would ensure that everything I did throughout the research process would be culturally safe.

### **Methodology**

Throughout the research process, I was simultaneously responsible for co-teaching the participants' entire drama class (even those who were *not* opting into the study), helping each student write and develop a superhero-based script while also conducting my own studies. Upon meeting the class, I first spent time building rapport by playing games, touching on my own history as a playwright, and engaging in other teacherly activities. In time, I began introducing the students to lessons and activities based on narrative, identity, and mental health; for example, in once case I lectured about *kintsugi* or *kintsukuroi* pottery, which is fashioned in accordance

with the Japanese *wabi-sabi* worldview and intended to demonstrate both the beauty of imperfection and how something can ‘become better having been broken.’

Eventually, the time came to help the students write their plays; by this point, eight students had decided to opt into my study, thusly becoming my team of *A+Vengers* (though in class, I referred to them most often as my ‘mental healthers’). To help the students write their plays, I developed two separate exemplary scripts of my own, showcasing my transformation into two different superheroes. Notably, to help keep all students engaged, I encouraged them to consider whether they would prefer to write a ‘silly’ or a ‘serious’ play, regardless of whether or not they were an A+Venger. As such, my ‘silly’ superhero transformation was into *Toilet-Man*, and my ‘serious’ transformation was *The Golden Fix* (based on the aforementioned kintsugi pottery). With these characters, I wrote two separate scripts, “A Wolf in the Throne Room” and “Solicitude,” respectively; below, you will find reproduced copies of them, as well as artistic depictions of their superhero characters:



*“Toilet-Man” and “The Golden Fix,” the two superheroes based on myself to help demonstrate playwriting to the students [digital drawings], B. Carver, 2019.*

**A WOLF IN THE THRONE ROOM**

*(Enter TOILET MAN, still in costume and visibly exhausted)*

TOILET *(Stretches and yawns)* ...there's nothing I like more after a day of fighting crime than lying in bed and falling asleep to SpongeBob. *(He walks over to his bed)*

EX-GF.M *(Emerges from beneath TOILET MAN's blanket)* How about a bedtime story instead?

TOILET *(Screams like a four year old girl)* *(Sighs)* *(Massaging his forehead)* Who in the world are you?

EX-GF.M *I... AM... (Casts the blanket aside)* EX-GIRLFRIEND—uhh, uhh—MAN!!

TOILET *(Looks suspiciously from side to side)* Ex-Girlfriend... Man...?

EX-GF.M Yes!

TOILET That's the best you could come up with? Really?

EX-GF.M *(Clears his throat)* Knock knock.

TOILET *(Rolls his eyes)* Who's there?

EX-GF.M SHUTUP!

TOILET *(Pauses)* ...shut up who?

EX-GF.M Shut up! Just shut up and listen!

TOILET *(Crosses his arms)* Well, I guess I may as well considering it's *THREE A.M.* and you're in my *BEDROOM...*!

EX-GF.M I've been watching you, Toilet Man. Watching. And waiting. Waiting for the *perfect* moment to *destroy* your livelihood and everything that you hold dear.

TOILET Okay... uhh... why?

EX-GF.M Because your ex-girlfriends paid me to, you nitwit!

TOILET You couldn't just rip off a bank or something?

EX-GF.M Do I look like the kind of person who could pull that off?

TOILET I see your point.

EX-GF.M Good! *(Pulling out a strange looking zap gun)* Now take a look at this!

TOILET What is that, like a blackhead remover?

EX-GF.M *(Menacingly)* It's a memory beam, you fool!

TOILET        *(Pointing at his bed)* And that's memory foam. If you wouldn't mind, I'd really like to get to sleep. Maybe you could come back, like, never?

EX-GF.M      *(Pushing the tip of the zapper in TOILET MAN's face)* We'll see how funny you are once I zap you with all of the bad memories you've ever had with your former partners! *(He fires the gun)* Write the you little worm! Re-live love that you've lost!

TOILET        *(Double blinks)* *(Scratches his butt)* *(After a moment)* ...is that it?

EX-GF.M      Sometimes it takes a while!

TOILET        Well, I— *(Suddenly drops to his knees)* Oh god... that time... I plugged the toilet... on that camping trip and Nicole's dad had to unclog it for me... with his bare hands...

EX-GF.M      *(Laughing)* See!? I told you! And she's just one of your exes! *(Waving the gun)* Just wait until this thing gets to Bruntilda!

TOILET        *(Falls onto his back)* Argh... I feel like... *(Wincing)* A goldfish that's about to get flushed down the drain... wait a second... a fish! That's it!

EX-GF.M      What are you on about?

TOILET        There's always another fish in the sea! *(He reaches inside of his own toilet bowl and pulls out a large fish, then throws it at EX-GIRLFRIEND MAN's zapper gun)*

EX-GF.M      *(With the gun knocked out of his hand)* You can't do that!

TOILET        *(Rises and uses his plunger to cover EX-GIRLFRIEND MAN's face)* Oh, I just did.

EX-GF.M      *(Muffled noises)*

TOILET        *(Ties EX-GIRLFRIEND MAN's hands behind his back with a toilet paper handcuff)* I'm gonna send you straight to jail where you belong. But you know what?

EX-GF.M      *(Muffled)* What?

TOILET        You forgot to wipe! *(Literally kicks EX-GIRLFRIEND MAN's butt)*

EX-GF.M      *(Exits, flying off stage)*

*(Lights out)*

*(I'in)*

**SOLICITUDE**

The Panic has tricked The Golden Fix into one of his traps, an echochamber where he can speak his words into reality. The Golden Fix is disoriented and searching for a way out.

*(Lights up)*

- G.FIX *(Enters, looking distressed and for a way out)*
- PANIC *(Voice only)* You may as well just give up, there's no way out.
- G.FIX *(Covers his ears and tries breathing deeply)*
- PANIC *(Voice only)* I built this chamber special—just for you, Fix. I wanted to prove that even you can be broken...
- G.FIX *(Winces and falls to his knees)*
- PANIC *(Voice only)* ...and after it's done, I'll make sure there'll be no one else to pick up the pieces. I'll throw them in the trash where they belong.
- G.FIX I—I don't—I don't have to listen to you!
- PANIC *(Voice only)* Oh, but you do. I've planned this whole thing out. I'm inside your head now, and there's nothing you can do to stop me.
- G.FIX *(Falls to the ground)*
- PANIC *(Voice only) (Laughs)* I've come to know you so well, over all these years! I know all your tells—
- G.FIX Stop!
- PANIC I can *feel* your heart rate rising, just like it always does. Your body, succumbing to restlessness, and yet, still weary of every move. You can't think straight. It's getting harder to breathe. Hell, I can practically smell the stench of your cold sweat already...
- G.FIX *(Tries crawling away)*
- PANIC I can see you shaking, Fix. Trembling like a little child. *(Laughs again)* Do you think you'll lose sleep over this? *(Laughs some more)*
- G.FIX *(Still struggling)* I—I—I've got to think of something!
- PANIC Better hurry, then. You aren't my first victim, you know—far from it, in fact. Though, to your credit, you've already lasted longer than most...
- G.FIX It's like this room is sending his voices straight into my brain! If I can't get out, then I need to quiet them some other way...
- PANIC Good luck.
- G.FIX Think... think... *(Grimaces)* His words... are only... in my head... that means that... I can regain control... of my body...



PANIC Like hell you will.

G.FIX I have to at least... try. *(Rolls over onto his back)* I'll start with... my... breathing...

PANIC No!

G.FIX A breathing... technique... *(Breathing in)* Arriving... *(Breathing out)* Here... *(Breathing in)* Arriving... *(Breathing out)* Here...

PANIC Stop that, damn you!

G.FIX And now... *(Raising his arms and flexing his fingers)* I can flex each muscle on its own... *(Rolls over and starts getting to a knee)* I'm in control...

PANIC *(Enters)* You can't beat me! You can't beat anxiety! You can't beat dread! You can't beat suffering! No one can! *(He kicks THE GOLDEN FIX)*

G.FIX *(Catching the kick)* I can definitely try. *(He trips THE PANIC)* *(Rising to his feet)* Over, and over, and over. I'll never stop.

PANIC *(Tries kicking back with his other foot)* Well neither will I!

G.FIX *(Catches the second kick)* Then I guess we'll just have to see who can last longer!

PANIC I'll find a way...

G.FIX That's what you don't get, Panic. You *need* me. You're *nothing* without me.

PANIC No!

G.FIX *(Dragging THE PANIC to his feet and putting him in an arm lock)* Yes! I was here before you, and I'll be here long after you're gone...

PANIC What makes you think that day will ever come? Even if you put me in jail now—put me in the deepest, darkest place you can think of—I'll come back. I'll always come back. That's a promise.

G.FIX And I'll be waiting. With even more ways to deal with you.

PANIC You sound so sure of yourself.

G.FIX ...does that *scare* you?

*(Lights out)*

*(Fin)*

With my externalizations and personifications of relationship troubles (in “Throne Room”) and anxiety (in “Solicitude”) made clear, the A+Vengers were subsequently asked to craft their own scripts in a similar manner, re-storying themselves and their own mental health challenges as they saw fit. To streamline the development process, each A+Venger was instructed to limit their play to two characters (albeit with some exceptions), to (a) simply the externalization process and (b) ensure everyone had a partner they could easily work with. In time, guided by myself as both a conversational consultant and experienced playwright, the following superheroes and supervillains emerged:

A+Venger (Student)	Superhero (Re-storied self)	Supervillain (based on)	Play Performed on stage? (Yes/No)	Student completed questionnaires? (Yes/No/Some)	Notes:
Bruce (M)	Free Parker	Trauma (PTSD*)	Yes	Some	*Student focused on a mental health issue they perceived <i>others</i> as experiencing
Tony (M)	The Light	Rancor ( <i>self-doubt</i> )	Yes	Yes	
Diana (F)	Lady Justice	The Slanderer ( <i>school gossip</i> )	Yes	No*	*Student was a late opt-in research participant
Jennifer (F)	Connie*, Maisie*, Connie’s mom*	N/A* ( <i>bad grades</i> )	No**	Yes	*Play did not involve superheroes/villains **Student was not present enough to prepare their play for the stage; they did however act in Barbara’s play
Carol* (F)	Lady Present	The Past ( <i>the past</i> )	Yes	Yes	*Indigenous cultural background
Wanda (F)	Etana	Sir Society ( <i>life’s hardships</i> )	No*	No*	*This student was rarely present in class due to extenuating circumstances. She was able to act in some non-participants’ plays
Barbara (F)	Negative Nancy*, Sensitive Sally*	N/A* ( <i>relationship difficulties</i> )	Yes	Yes	*Play did not involve superheroes/villains
Jean (F)	Willow	The Drag* ( <i>depression</i> )	Yes	Some	*This student opted to act as their villain instead of their hero

Once their scripts were completed, the A+Vengers (as well as their other classmates) began the play development process, rehearsing and making their costumes for the stage. In time, each student performed their play as a part of Arkham High's special, one-night-only *superhero showcase* in the school's gymnasium, complete with an audience of their friends and family. I hosted the showcase in character as "The Golden Gitch" (a sort of amalgamation of Toilet-Man and The Golden Fix) in order to help the students feel comfortable and believe in the narratives and realities that they were about to present.



*Myself in character as "The Golden Gitch," the evening's master of ceremonies.*

### **Data Collection**

This project utilized multiple methods of data collection. First, as foregrounded in Chapter 3, each one of the A+Venger's plays were collected as data, including both (a) their scripts and (b) their performances on stage. In addition to this, each A+Venger was also provided with a series of qualitative questionnaires throughout the duration of the study designed to help them articulate their experience as research participants. Examples of the kinds of questions

asked include the following:

- (1) How would you rate and describe your own mental health and wellness?
- (2) Have you ever been taught a mental wellness strategy in class before? If yes, how so?
- (3) Since starting to write your play, have you noticed any changes in your mental health?
- (4) Has your ‘problem of choice’ become more or less of a problem in your life?
- (5) Do you think that you might ever try to handle other challenges as your superhero?
- (6) Are there any other thoughts you would like to share about your experience?

### **Data Analysis**

Data analysis consisted of (1) a close reading of each A+Venger’s created script, treating it as a readable *text* rich with linguistic insight; (2) assessing each A+Venger’s answers on their questionnaires; and last but not least, (3) gauging each A+Venger’s *embodiment* during their staged performances. Notably, Dewey (1902) located education “not just within the student’s experiences, but also within the student’s physical being” (qtd. in Wiebe, 2016, p. 545), suggesting that how the A+Vengers moved and acted on stage (thereby negotiating their mind/body connection) was also a form of discernable data. In other words, embodiment is indicative of ways of being and conceptions of self that language alone cannot articulate (Wiebe, 2016, p. 545)—or as Freire (1998) put it, a specific kind of *authentic dialogue* that, in turn, helps students produce knowledge to higher degrees of legitimacy (qtd. in Wiebe, 2016, p. 545). Heeding Powell and Lajevic’s (2011) sentiment that “place is more than a physical location . . . it is also the evocation of memory, imagination, and . . . experience” (p. 38), specific attention was paid to how the A+Vengers staged their plays (i.e., where they stood; where and how they placed and used props, etc.). Lastly, following Norris’s (2016) instruction, specific attention was also paid to the A+Vengers’ vocal intonations and inflections during their performances (p. 126).

## Chapter 5: Findings (The Plays)

### *Lady Justice vs. The Slanderer*, by Diana

Diana's attendance in class was sporadic, and for this reason, she opted into being an A+Venger late, preventing her from completing any of the questionnaires. However, she presented as an exceptionally gifted writer for her age (both in technical skill and her aptitude for fiction), and she displayed immense enthusiasm in bringing her work to life on stage. In her play, Lady Justice infiltrates the lair of her nemesis, The Slanderer, who is attempting to spread derogatory, untrue, and hurtful rumours about others. In personal communication, Diana expressed that her play was a response to school gossip and 'how easily it's spread around nowadays with technology.' When I asked her if she felt it was a challenge that she experienced often, she replied that 'everyone does.' Interestingly, Diana opted to play her own villain, suggesting that the articulation of her chosen mental health challenge—that is, the sharing of her feelings—was more important than re-storying herself as a superhero, and thus, cathartic in its own right.

Analysis of Diana's play reveals how school gossip wreaks havoc on her personal and school lives: her use of the word "awful" appears several times in the script, and as The Slanderer on stage, both her voice and demeanour were particularly scathing (e.g., mocking and overbearing). Diana also depicts the prevalence of said rumours, most poignantly in the play's ending where Lady Justice is tricked by yet another one of the Slanderer's lies. Additionally, Diana illuminates her felt sense of powerlessness, evidenced by the Slanderer's boast that "anyone will believe rumours they hear, even if there's not a single fact behind it." Interestingly, Diana links the problem with the internet and social media, as seen with (a) the Slanderer's confession that "the internet just made it so easy," and (b) the same character's citation of the

“@thereal...” Instagram page, which is a covert reference to a real life local Facebook page that is notorious for slander and defamation; here, Diana also writes and acts to a communal issue that exceeds the walls of her school.

Once again, Diana was unfortunately prevented from completing any of the A+Venger questionnaires, and as such, there exists an unfortunate lack of data detailing her own feelings about and interpretations of her own work.



*Diana as “The Slanderer”* [digital drawing], B. Carver, 2020.

**LADY JUSTICE VS THE SLANDERER**

*(Enter LADY JUSTICE, sneaking through THE SLANDERER's lair)*

- LADY-J. This place gives me the creeps...
- SLAND. *(Sitting in a chair) (Laughs)*  
*(LADY JUSTICE steps on a discarded newspaper, alerting THE SLANDERER of her presence)*
- SLAND. Ah, Lady Justice! I've been waiting for you... *(He turns around in his chair to face her)*
- LADY-J. Of course you have... Just what are you up to!?
- SLAND. I'm glad you asked. *(He clears his throat and begins to read from a newspaper)* Lady Justice is no longer wanted!?! *(He stands and starts pacing, continuing to read)* In a social media rumour, it seems someone has leaked that Lady Justice is in fact racist, sexist, and seemingly against helping the poor! The first place this rumour was seen was on the Instagram page @therealsland—Oops! Didn't mean to say that part! *(He laughs)*
- LADY-J. So it was you that spread that awful rumor! You're—awful!
- SLAND. So what if it was me! I'm just telling everyone what they wanted to hear! *(He points at LADY JUSTICE)* That you're a no-good person! A racist! A sexist, and scared of the poor! No one would want help from someone like you ever again!
- LADY-J. You're nothing but a liar! No one would ever believe that!
- SLAND. I'm not too sure about that... Just listen to some of these testimonies! *(He clears his throat again, then starts to read)* "I cannot believe this! All my life I believed that Lady Justice was doing something good, but really, she's a bad person! I was such a fool for thinking she was trying to help" – Cheesehead Chad, California.
- LADY-J. No! How are all of these people believing such an awful lie?
- SLAND. Welcome to the real world, doll. Anyone will believe rumours they hear, even if there's not a single fact behind it.
- LADY-J. Stop! Please!
- SLAND. "I'll never be accepting help from her ever again! It'd be wise for her to not show her face in this town ever again" – Danny Margaret, Los Angeles.
- LADY-J. How am I supposed to fix this!?
- SLAND. You'll never know!
- LADY-J. Confess! If you tell everyone you were lying... Then maybe they'll realize they were tricked!
- SLAND. Pfft, that'll never work. *(He's obviously lying)*

LADY-J. I need to try!

SLAND. “Maybe the world isn’t a place for heroes... If they’re just as bad as us humans, there’s really no point to them” – Suzie Anne, Illinois.

LADY-J. STOP IT! The people of this world don’t deserve to deal with the repercussions of your petty lies! My job as Lady Justice is to protect the population from your mayhem, and as long as I’m around, your chaos will never last! The people need me, and I need them! Your lying streak ends now, Slanderer!

*(LADY JUSTICE punches through THE SLANDERER’s newspaper, hitting him right in the face)*

SLAND. No! This can’t be! *(He falls to the ground)*

LADY-J. Your time of spreading lies is over, Slanderer.

SLAND. Please, no! I promise I’ll change!

LADY-J. That’s what they always say!

SLAND. Oh, who am I kidding... I won’t change. It’s just too easy to lie nowadays.

LADY-J. Every time I take you down you always manage to come back with a lie or a rumour worse than the last one. *(She picks up a newspaper from the ground and clears her throat)* You started off with just childish antics... “Town mayor reportedly has six toes!” “The mayor has decided to ban all forms of cheese simply because he doesn’t like it!” *(To the SLANDERER)* What happened? You went from being a harmless prankster to a villain.

SLAND. *(Standing up)* The internet just made it so easy. My face was replaced with a blank screen and I didn’t have to show my real emotions to the person I was spreading lies about.

LADY-J. Thank you for telling the truth for once. I’m sure it feels nice. *(She begins to leave)* Don’t let me down. I’d rather not see you again. Not as a nemesis, anyways.

SLAND. I won’t let you down.

*(LADY JUSTICE exits)*

...I can’t believe she believed all that. Ha!

*(THE SLANDERER sits back in his chair and begins brainstorming more ideas for his next big lie)*

*(Lights out)*

*(Fin.)*



***The Light versus Rancor, by Tony***

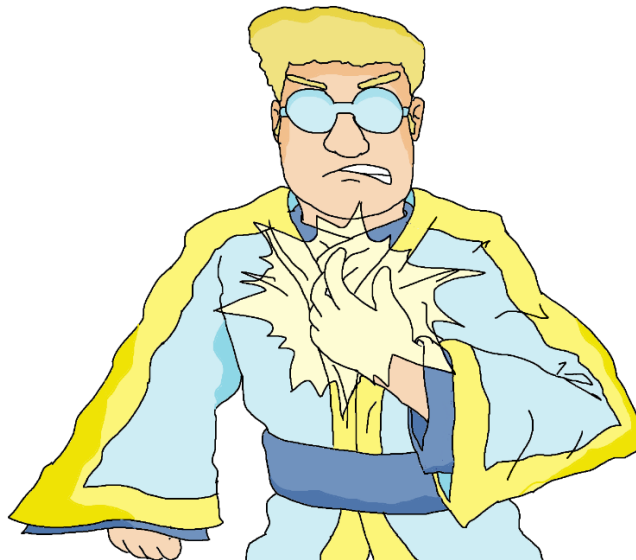
Early on in writing his script, Tony expressed to me that his play was intended to be a representation of ‘getting in your own head’ and succumbing to (or dwelling on, etc.) things like ‘past mistakes’ and ‘self-doubt.’ Tony further confided that these kinds of challenges held particular relevance for him, as he admittedly faced them quite often. Interestingly, his supervillain (“Rancor”) never appears on stage, and their dialogue with the hero (“The Light”) is indicative of an internal dialogue; while there were two actors involved (Tony and Carol), the play presented very much like a monologue, opening a vivid window into Tony’s thought processes. As reading his script will demonstrate, this introspective journey manifested as a clear battle between what was essentially *good and evil*, suggesting that Tony’s play also served as a readjustment or recalibration of his own moral compass, providing him with an effective means to explore and come to terms with his identity.

Tony’s play reflects the severity of the feelings, thoughts, and emotions that exist inside his head: he references “hating” (some aspect of) himself six times; being an “idiot” three times; not being liked twice; and, being “trapped” three times. Interestingly, it is almost as if the Rancor character speaks in absolutes—implying they are certain of what they are saying—whereas The Light consistently questions themselves, using words like “can,” “need to,” and “will.” Much like Diana’s play, Tony’s ends on a more sour note—or as he put it, “an abrupt ending, meant to cause confusion”—and when I asked him about this, he said it was because he’s not sure what ‘side’ would actually ‘win’ if push came to shove. On stage as the Light, Tony depicted himself as in distress throughout almost the entire play, whereas Carol as Rancor shouted at him from off-stage with both the utmost authority and the benefit of being invisible (and thus unavailable for scrutiny); in other words, the Light’s torment was put on full display, while Rancor enjoyed

free rein to *cause* it.

Notably, in the questionnaires, Tony disclosed that he suffers from depression and had been taking antidepressants for three months. Reflecting on the Light, Tony said: “he is a not so bright individual . . . he has become a jerk and treated his friends and parents horribly due to his own mental health, the situations he’s been in and how lonely he is. He’s often got a lot of people disliking him because of his many mistakes that he can’t seem to learn from.”

Conversely, Tony described Rancor as a stand-in for hatred, and described him as “formed mainly from my thoughts.” Reflecting his creation of art-as-event, Tony added that “being up on stage and showing a small group of people what I feel inside and turning that into two characters really put my mental health in an interrogation room and shined a flashlight in its eyes, I really see a lot more in myself now than ever before.” About Light, he added “I think he can overcome a lot more . . . maybe he’ll shine a light on his loneliness at some point.” Writing about the experience as a whole, Tony described the process as “amazing” and a “great learning experience,” and stated that “creativity helps greatly with dealing with mental health.”



*Tony as “The Light”* [digital drawing], B. Carver, 2020.

**THE LIGHT VERSUS RANCOR**

LIGHT *(Enters, walking toward the centre of the stage)*

RANCOR *(Voice only)* ...idiot.

LIGHT What was that?

RANCOR You've fallen into my trap. *(He laughs)*

*(Lights dim)*

LIGHT W-what are you...? *(He falls to his knees and looks up to the ceiling)* You can't control me... *(He begins to hold his head, as if in agony)*

RANCOR I most certainly can. You don't know the extent of my power. You hate yourself... no one likes you... You're trapped within your own worthless head.

LIGHT No... you're trapped in my head! I won't let you out!

RANCOR You can't control me, I control you!

LIGHT W-what is going on!?

RANCOR See? You're an idiot. No wonder no one likes you. You are HATED.

LIGHT *(Falls to the ground entirely, groaning in pain)* You don't—know that! You don't understand anything!

RANCOR I'm getting to you... Let. It. Happen.

LIGHT *(Slowly standing back up)* I won't let you in!

RANCOR Let. Me. In.

LIGHT Y-you c-cant! *(He falls back down to a knee)*

RANCOR Hatred consumes you. All that you are is hated. You even hate yourself. And why, you do not know.

LIGHT I'm not an idiot... I can change... I need to change.

RANCOR Everyone hates you, you can't change that. You can't change now, it's too late. You've gone too far. You've been a massive jerk, don't you see that? Don't you see the mess that you've caused?

LIGHT *(Covering his hears)* *(Yelling)* I CAN CHANGE! I WILL CHANGE!

RANCOR Stop resisting!

LIGHT As long as I like myself, everything can change... It will all be okay...

RANCOR That's not true...

*(Lights out)* *(An abrupt ending, meant to cause confusion)*

*(Fin.)*

***Not Enough, by Jennifer***

Like a few of the other A+Vengers, Jennifer's attendance during the two months of development time was unideal. For this reason, she was unfortunately unable to bring her play to life on stage as a part of the showcase (though she was thankfully able to act in Barbara's play, *The Text*). Regardless, her script is remarkable in that she naturally deviated away from superheroes—that is, the *playful* factor that I theorized as crucial in facilitating the experience—and decided to write a play focused explicitly on mental health. In conceptualizing this project, I felt that the largest hurdle in its completion would be finding a way to overcome the stigma surrounding mental health; or in other words, how to motivate the students to engage with a taboo issue. Based on their popularity, superheroes were my answer, intended to incite the kind of play described in Chapter 3. However, as Jennifer's play demonstrates, some students were capable, ready, and willing to engage mental health issues directly: in *Not Enough*, Connie struggles with both a poor report card and her mother's subsequent anger; but, with her friend Maisie by her side, she starts to feel better and finds the strength to persevere.

A textual analysis of "Not Enough" reveals a clear picture of the kinds of struggles Jennifer has faced as a result of her schooling: namely, the pressure to do well, as enforced by both the school system and her parents. And yet, at the same time, she also speaks to something deeper, or perhaps more serious, as seen in Connie's confession that she's 'never good enough no matter how hard she tries.' Interestingly, in the questionnaires, Jennifer initially rated her own mental health as a 3/10 and indicated that her play was indeed "based . . . off my life," suggesting that Connie essentially *is* Jennifer. Remarkably, after her script was completed, Jennifer's re-rated her mental health at a 6/10, describing the playwriting process as "effective" and noting that she would like to see mental health initiatives "incorporated into other classes,"

as she felt like “it would help people a lot.” Regarding the A+Venger experience as a whole, Jennifer described it as “amazing” and stated that seeing the others’ plays also made her feel better and helped increase her overall mental wellness.



*Jennifer as “Connie” [digital drawing], B. Carver, 2020.*

**NOT ENOUGH**

*(Scene I: CONNIE is in her 1st period class, anxiously waiting to get her report card back)*

CONNIE *(Starts biting her nails)*

MAISIE *(Enters) (Takes a seat next to CONNIE)* Hey, Connie!

CONNIE *(Remains silent and continues to stare at her desk)*

MAISIE *(Putting a hand on CONNIE's shoulder)* Hey, are you alright?

CONNIE Maisie, I'm nervous. What if my report isn't good enough?

MAISIE Are you kidding? Connie, you're the smartest person I know! There's no doubt in my mind that your report card's gonna be great.

CONNIE *(She nods and takes a deep breath)*

*(Lights out)*

*(Scene II: CONNIE's house)*

*(Lights up)*

CONNIE *(Enters, into her bedroom) (Takes her report card out of her pocket)*

MOM *(Enters)* Connie, you're home! I didn't hear you come in. Is that your report card? Let me see it. *(She snatches the report card)*

CONNIE Wait mom—!

MOM *(Visibly angry) (Yelling)* Connie, what is this!? Not one single A!? I thought I raised you better!

CONNIE But mom...

MOM This is unbelievable! Did you even study?

CONNIE *(Breathing heavily)* Shut up! Is that all you care about? My grades? I'm never enough for you! Never! No matter how much I try, I'm never good enough for you. *(Falls to her knees, crying, struggling to breathe)*

MOM *(Taken aback, she begins to leave the room) (Exits)*

CONNIE *(Continuing to cry)* I'll never be enough! I'm nothing!

MAISIE *(Enters and rushes to CONNIE's side)* Connie! What's wrong?

CONNIE It doesn't matter! I'm not good enough!

MAISIE Connie, I need you to listen to me... don't listen to what your mother said. You are always enough. No matter what.

CONNIE Don't lie to me...

MAISIE I would never lie to you. You are enough, and so much more. I believe in you and I need you to believe in yourself.

CONNIE ...thank you. (*Hugs MAISIE*)

*(Lights out)*

*(Fin.)*

***Fiends of Freedom, by Bruce***

Bruce's approach to this project was interesting in that he chose to focus on a mental health problem that he perceived *others* as possibly experiencing, rather than a challenge of his own (of which maybe there were truly none). I was happy to have Bruce do this, as I felt it would be great for him—a hockey player, and someone who Mrs. Wayne described as a 'popular kid'—to set an example by showing his classmates that mental health could be broached in the classroom by seemingly anyone. More simply put, I felt as if he was a strong candidate to instill an *if he can do it, I can do it* attitude in his peers. Thankfully, he rose to the occasion, creating an interesting play focused on post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). In *Fiends of Freedom*, Bruce assumes the role of the hero "Free Parker," who is confronted in a park by "Trauma" and forced to re-live (and then overcome) some traumatic memories.

Bruce's play utilized several audio and visual elements that enhanced the plight of his hero, Free Parker: his use of car crash and gunfire noises, as well as swelling (on-stage) darkness strongly communicated the sensory aspect of mental health, or rather, how it can overwhelm one's senses. Much like Tony's play, there was a kind of combative dualism present, in that Free Parker and Trauma were never on stage at the same time; that is to say, Bruce's play was similarly, albeit vicariously in someone else's head. I am particularly fond of his line "You may be able to control my emotions, but you can't control my mind," which is evocative of several cognitive- and language-based mental health strategies intended to relax emotion, such as speaking/thinking "*arriving... here...*" in conjunction with one's breath to calm oneself down and return to baseline during an anxiety attack (a technique which I referenced in my own play, "Solicitude").

Unfortunately, due to circumstances beyond anyone's control, Bruce was only able to



complete two out of the three questionnaires. Perhaps not surprisingly, he rated his own mental health (prior to becoming an A+Venger) as a 10/10, and described how he *had* been taught effective mental health and wellness strategies in school before (a correlation which I do not think is coincidental). Interestingly, Bruce relayed that he *could* relate to the story in the sense that “repeating one’s mistakes has been tough for me at times,” suggesting that he may very well have learned a new coping mechanism despite choosing to develop a play based on an issue he felt he was not experiencing. Reflecting on the experience as a whole, Bruce remarked “I believe this was a fun and enticing learning experiment . . . and I believe that this would be a good experience moving forward the art of theatre.”



*Bruce as “Free Parker”* [digital drawing], B. Carver, 2020.

**FIENDS OF FREEDOM**

*(FREE MASON enters a park and sits on a bench. Everything is peaceful. But then, he starts to show signs of distress and the park becomes distorted)*

*(Lights dimmed)*

FREE       What is this?

TRAUMA   *(Voice only)* You should remember...

FREE       *(Distraught)* What is this—!

TRAUMA   You'll see...

*(The sound of a heartbeat is heard, followed by that of a flatlining EKG)*

FREE       Argh! Why are you doing this to me!?

TRAUMA   *(Laughs)* Free Parker, you have no clue about the pain I will inflict upon you...

*(The sound of a car swerving and crashing is heard)*

FREE       *(Panicking)* Stop... Stop! Who are you and why are you doing this!?

TRAUMA   I am Trauma, and I have a *bone* to pick with you, Free Parker!

FREE       Whatever it is you want, I don't have it!

TRAUMA   But you will...

*(The sound of someone saying "hands up!" is heard, followed by gunshots)*

FREE       This isn't real... You're trying to trick me...

TRAUMA   Is anything real nowadays?

*(The sound of static is heard, and continues)*

TRAUMA   *(He laughs again, but then starts to worry)* W-what...? What is going on!?

FREE       *(Smiling)* That's it. I found it.

TRAUMA   Found what?

FREE       The way out of this.

*(The sound of static stops)*

TRAUMA   How is this possible!? How are you doing this!?

FREE       You may be able to control my emotions, but you can't control my mind.

*(Lights brighten)*

TRAUMA   *(Appears from behind the curtains)* Well then I guess I'll take it myself!

*(To TRAUMA's surprise, he is instantly thrown into a maze. He looks for a way out but cannot escape)*

FREE Not so fun when the shoe's on the other foot, is it?

TRAUMA *(Running around hectically)* I'll do whatever you want! Just let me out of here!

FREE Well, there is one thing you could do...

TRAUMA *(Desperately)* What is it!? I'll do anything!!

FREE Anything?

TRAUMA ANYTHING!!

FREE If you want out, then you have to promise that you'll no longer manipulate and control others, like you've done to me.

TRAUMA I won't, I promise!

*(A gust of wind is heard, and TRAUMA is blown away off stage)*

*(FREE PARKER gets up off the bench and exits)*

*(Lights out)*

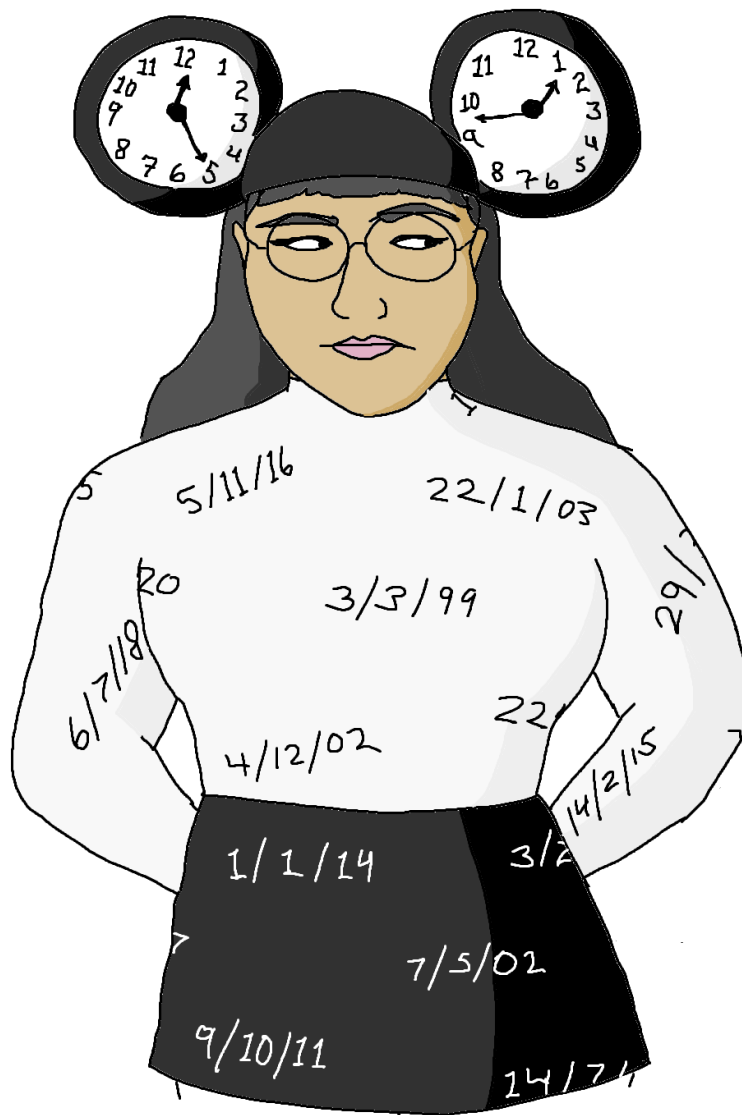
*(Fin.)*

***Let the Past Die, by Carol***

To hear Mrs. Wayne tell it, Carol was a ‘shy student who just needed to come out of her shell.’ Much like with Diana, it became very much apparent that creativity was one of her strengths, and I quickly became excited to see what she was going to bring to life on stage. In *Let the Past Die*, “Lady Present” is confronted by “The Past,” who tries to torment her by stealing her photo album and criticizing her past. Coincidentally, Carol’s partner was the fellow A+Venger Tony, and their plays are very much alike in that both serve as open windows into their playwright’s thought processes, feelings, and emotions. However, unlike Tony’s play, Carol’s ends on a less ambiguous and happier note, as her hero is able to overcome the villain and, through self-exploration, earn catharsis.

Carol’s play features a brave confession: she openly shares with her audience that both she and her mother suffer from depression, and as a result, they have (at times) grown apart. Carol speaks to the severity of this reality with words like “danger,” “coldness,” “terrible,” as well as her “loss of love,” her need to be “saved,” and the Past’s costume being completely black (dark). And yet, despite all of this, Lady Present is still able to “forgive” and use The Past’s ridicule as a “lesson.” More broadly, *Let the Past Die* hinges upon Lady Present’s realization that depression can and does happen to anybody—evidenced by her revelation that her mother “had her own problems that *she* had to face”—and thus, that everyone is in the struggle together in what is essentially a kind of grand mental health community. Interestingly, Carol intended to help communicate this by having a projector on stage that would show the childhood pictures she was talking about to the audience; unfortunately, due to several constraints, it was not logistical and/or possible to accommodate her wish. Despite this, Carol was still able to overcome her shyness and use her play to express her feelings clearly, passionately, and purposefully.

In the questionnaires, Carol first rated her mental health as a 5/10; by the time the play development process was over, her rating rose to a 7/10. Reflecting on the experience, Carol described how her past often caused her to suffer from anxiety and “feel unwanted,” but that developing her play helped alleviate these issues by enabling her “to talk to her past face to face” and fight it off. Carol also expressed that she would very much like to see mental health-based curriculum in other classes, and that, overall, she “loved” her time spent as an A+Venger.



Carol as “Lady Present” [digital drawing], B. Carver, 2020.

**LET THE PAST DIE**

LADY-P *(Enters, holding a photo album)* Ugh... I can't believe my mom found my old photo album. *(She sits down on a couch and starts to flip through it)* Look at how long my hair was... I look like I'm having so much fun in Disneyland... *(She sighs)* I wish I could go back...

*(Continuing to flip through the photo album)* *(He smile disappears)* Oh... my baby photos... You were so innocent... Not knowing what the world had in store, all its dangers. I wish I could save her from what must happen...

PAST *(Stands up from behind the couch)* Yes... it would be nice to save her from the inevitable coldness of depression, wouldn't it? *(He snatches the photo album from LADY PRESENT)*

*(He begins to pace, looking through the album)* She's never going to understand what will happen... the loss of love she will feel...

It is impossible to stop it... This little, *helpless* baby will grow up normally... But then, when she comes of age... she will fall.

LADY-P No! Stop! *(She stands up and takes the photo album back)* That's enough!

PAST What's wrong? *(In a mocking, childish voice)* Are you reminiscing about your past? Your terrible depression?

LADY-P Shut up!

PAST Your mother didn't care about you!

LADY-P She did care about me! She loved me!

PAST She didn't care about you for two years! She left you to suffer!

LADY-P *(Breathing heavily)* It's the depression! She had her own problems that *she* had to face! And she did it all on her own... without me... *(After a moment)* ...and now we're here together!

You will no longer be my enemy! You will be my lesson! My teaching!

I thank you for giving me the knowledge to love and forgive... but you will no longer break me down and hurt me! *(She pushes THE PAST, who dies)*

So long, my friend... rest... *(She sits back down on the couch and takes a deep breath)* Now... I can finally breathe.

*(Lights out)*

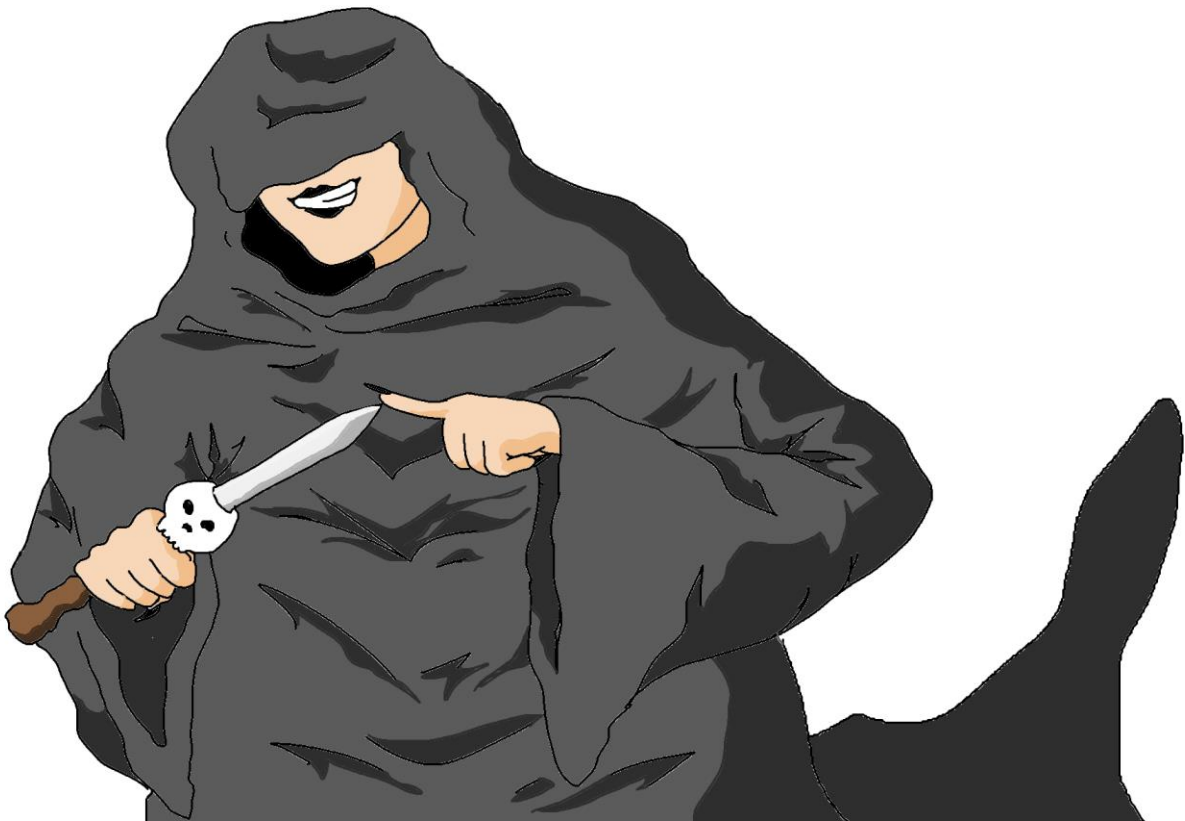
*(Fin.)*

***Into the Darkness, by Jean***

Without a doubt, Jean's *Into the Darkness* is the most serious and, well, *dark* A+Venger play: it directly confronts depression (one of the most severe and widespread mental health challenges), and by extension, suicide, situating it within a sad and violent fictional realm. Without revealing any details, Jean confided in me several past and present challenges that she was continuing to come to terms with in her daily life; as such, I found myself very interested to see where such a kind of personal stake would take her as an A+Venger in the play development process. In *Into the Darkness*, "The Drag" confronts "Willow," urging them to give into their worst fears and take their own life. Like Diana, Jean opted to play her own villain, once again suggesting that her communication of the issue (depression) was her primary concern, rather than overcoming it (with her superhero). As was the case with Tony's work, Jean's play features an unhappy ending; however, it is in this ending that her message about *what* depression is and *how* it makes her feel is the most poignantly communicated.

In her play, Jean makes strong use of repetition to describe the lingering and perpetual sense and feeling of depression that she so often feels: The Drag repeats "you're unloved. . . you're useless. . . you're nothing. . ." several times, adding that Willow "can never win" and "will always lose, no matter how hard you try." These words are exemplified by The Drag's costume, which was an exceptionally large black (dark) blanket that *dragged* across the stage, powerfully representing Jean's personification of her depressive feelings. Moreover, The Drag's weapon of choice was a dagger, something *sharp* and *deadly*. Interestingly, Jean confided in me that when she showed her play to her mother, her mother cried as she felt it was so moving. Whereas communication of her depression was the play's core feature, The Drag's revelation after Willow dies by suicide is also particularly noteworthy: here, with the lines "What can I do

if I can no longer cause you pain and distress? What is depression if it has nothing to prey on?”, Jean suggests that depression cannot function or exist without a host, much like a virus, and thus, that it is truly (and inherently) an *external and defeatable entity*. In communicating that depression needs *us*, but that we do not need *it*, Jean encourages others struggling with the same kinds of challenges that there is indeed some light at the end of the tunnel. Unfortunately, Jean was not able to complete most of the questionnaires; regarding her play’s (and thus her) battle with depression, however, she did ultimately state that “it felt better to let it all out.”



*Jean as “The Drag”* [digital drawing], B. Carver, 2020.



**INTO THE DARKNESS**

- WILLOW *(Throws her backpack to the side and falls onto her bed)* What a great day it's been fighting crime!
- THE DRAG *(Voice only)* You're unloved... You're useless... You're nothing...
- WILLOW No, stop! Who is that!? *(She covers her ears)*
- THE DRAG You're unloved... you're useless... you're nothing... even if you *are* a superhero. I know your dark secret.
- WILLOW STOP! Please... *(She falls to the ground, still covering her ears)*
- THE DRAG No, I'll never stop... I will always be with you and in your head... there is no escape from depression... You're unloved... you're useless... you're nothing...
- WILLOW No... *(She manages to stand up)* I am loved... I am not useless... I am something...
- THE DRAG *(Enters, holding a dagger)* How? When? When you're upstairs crying, while your family is downstairs laughing and having fun? No one cares about you. You're unloved. You can't do anything right. You try so hard, but you still get yelled at. You're useless. Nobody knows that you, the *real* you is here and on this earth... You might be a superhero to some, but you... you're nothing.
- WILLOW *(Hides her face and curls up)* No, you're all wrong... it's not true...
- THE DRAG If it's not true, then why are you crying? *(With the dagger)* Here, just take this and end it all...
- WILLOW No!
- THE DRAG *(Pushing the dagger in WILLOW's face)* Yes!
- WILLOW *(Wails and pounds her fist on the floor)*
- THE DRAG You can never win. You will always lose, no matter how hard you try. *(Putting the dagger on the floor in front of WILLOW)* Here, just take this knife and end it all. End all this pain.
- WILLOW NO! *(She pushes the knife away)* I have dealt with depression before! I have beaten you already, and I can do it again!
- THE DRAG *(Kicks the dagger back closer)* Why not just take it? You will be in pain no more. Isn't that what you want?
- WILLOW You don't know what I want!
- THE DRAG Are you sure about that?
- WILLOW I... think so?
- THE DRAG You're unloved... you're useless... you're nothing...

WILLOW I'M NOT!

THE DRAG YES YOU ARE!

WILLOW I—I am... you're right... I can't do this... I don't belong here... *(She takes out a paper and pencil and starts writing a letter)* I'm sorry mom and dad, I'm nothing and I don't belong here. Tell Meg that I'm sorry, too. It's just hard and I can't take it anymore. Goodbye. I'm sorry for messing up your lives.

THE DRAG Good... now just take the knife. You don't belong here, you don't belong anywhere.

WILLOW *(Grabs the dagger and plunges it into her chest)*

THE DRAG NO! STOP!

WILLOW *(Collapses to the floor)*

THE DRAG *(Runs and picks up WILLOW)* *(Starts to cry)* WHAT HAVE I DONE!?! I didn't think she would actually do it... I'm so sorry, Willow... I didn't mean... I didn't mean any of it... What can I do if I can no longer cause you pain and distress? What is depression if it has nothing to prey on? Willow, please wake up! I can't lose you! Please Willow, wake up!

*(Lights dim)*

*(A spotlight appears on THE DRAG)*

THE DRAG *(Still crying)* It's all my fault... It's my fault that this happened. I shouldn't have made fun of you. I shouldn't have made fun of your depression. Depression is nothing to make fun of. I'm so sorry. I didn't know that you were fighting other problems...

*(THE DRAG gets up and exits, walking off stage slowly. His cries are still heard)*

*(Lights out)*

*(Fin.)*

***Reality, by Wanda***

Unfortunately, Wanda was only present in class for what I would estimate to be 15% of the time. Early on, I was made aware/realized that such delinquency was in part due to circumstances beyond Arkham High's control, and that any participation by Wanda as an A+Venger would be an absolute victory for both her and the school. Despite some self-imposed barriers to her success, Wanda established herself as a very bright, passionate, and capable student, and I was certain that anything she could contribute to my project would be very meaningful and valuable. By the end of it all, the only thing she was able to produce was a script, which I am happy with. In *Reality*, "Etana" is confronted by "Sir Society," who goads her into questioning herself, her abilities, and her future. As Wanda herself wrote in a preface, *Reality* is about "what we must go through daily, and how much everything affects us . . . to show our parents/guardians how different our lives are compared to when they were younger, and how much pressure they put us under." I would also like to note that, while Wanda was not able to develop and produce her play on stage, she was able to act in some of her non-A+Venger peers' plays, which she was very happy and proud to do.

Evidently, Wanda's play is very similar to Tony and Carol's in that it is indicative of self-dialogue or a stream of consciousness wherein the hero and villain are two oppositional sides of the same dialectical coin. Etana's ridicule by Sir Society suggests that Wanda is (both in and out of her play) on a quest for self-discovery, experimenting with who she is, who she can be, and how she will relate with the others in her life. Simply put, *Reality* is indicative of the teenage experience as a one grows into adulthood and discovers who they really are. Like some of the other A+Venger scripts, Wanda's seems predicated in the mere (albeit important) communication of her thoughts, feelings, and emotions. Where Etana is Wanda's re-storied self,

she remains oppressed, imparting a sense of learned powerlessness; as such, the catharsis that Wanda can glean is rooted in her audience simply understanding what she is going through. Conversely, Sir Society appears to be re-storying of her own parents, or rather, a personification of how she perceives their judgement and criticism, resulting in an immense about of doubt placed upon Etana's shoulders. Where Etana says "I need to prove it to them all," I am inclined to believe that Wanda also means proving her worth (and the validity of her decisions, etc.) to *herself*, in addition to fulfilling the wants and needs of everyone else in her life.

Unfortunately, Wanda was not able to complete any of the questionnaires and she was not present enough to garner substantial insight into her script and thought process in writing it. Nonetheless, I think *Reality* is a powerful and wide-open window into her identity that is primed to help everyone *else* understand who she truly is, and who she wants to be.



*Wanda as "Etana"* [digital drawing], B. Carver, 2020.

**REALITY**

ETANA Please, leave me alone!

S.S. Never! You don't deserve to live! Your life is a joke!

ETANA No, it's not! I have a great life! I have a perfect boyfriend, amazing parents, and nothing could go wrong...

S.S. You are wrong. Your boyfriend is too good for you, and your parents don't understand you. They just see you as a little girl who can't take care of herself.

ETANA You're wrong! Please, just stop! I just want to live my life!

S.S. You deserve *nothing*. You're not good enough for your parents and they don't approve of your decisions. They will *never* trust you again.

ETANA Even if that were true, I still have my boyfriend!

S.S. You're not good enough for him, either. And you never will be. He will leave you.

ETANA No, he won't!

S.S. ...would your parents approve of him? They will never accept your love...

ETANA No, they will! Hopefully... they will learn to love him...

S.S. They think that all your mistakes are *because* of him! And because of your friends!

ETANA But that's not true! It's all me... It's all my fault... not theirs...

S.S. But that's not how anyone sees it...

ETANA Then I need to prove it to them all.

S.S. You could never change their minds. They will never like your boyfriend or your friends.

ETANA But they are the people who bring me happiness! I can't live without them! They helped me through so much... they helped me gain my strength!

S.S. Your family is falling apart. You will never feel true happiness again. You can't look at your brother without remembering everything that he's done. You want to help your sister with her problems, but you can't. You want to be there for your nieces and nephews, but you're too afraid you'll mess it up even more than you already have...

ETANA You're right... I will never be that perfect daughter. I can't help anyone. I can't do anything.

*(Lights out)*

*(Fin.)*

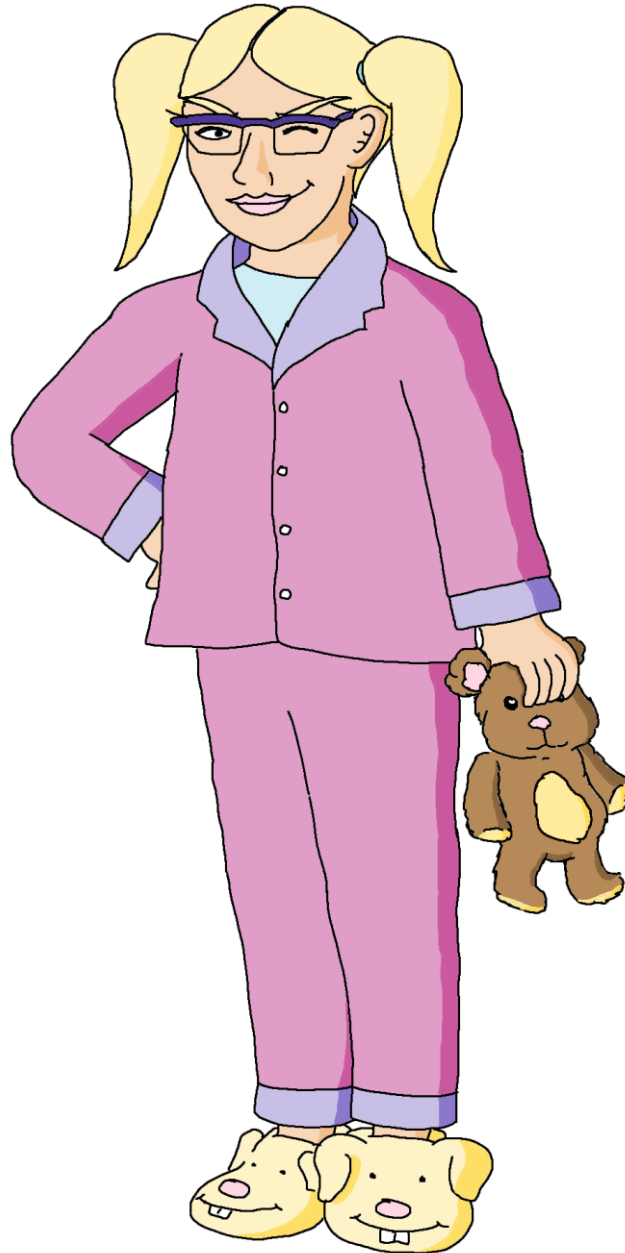
***The Text, by Barbara***

Like Jennifer, Barbara deviated from the proverbial script of my study and developed a play that did *not* utilize any superhero personas; instead, she chose to depict a mental health challenge (relationship difficulties) directly. In *The Text*, “Negative Nancy” receives a notification from her boyfriend “James” indicating that he is breaking up with her; afterward, Nancy’s friend “Sensitive Sally” arrives, and together, they help each other with their emotions and realize that they might be better off alone. Much like Bruce, I was pleased that Barbara was willing to participate as an A+Venger, as I felt she held the potential to set a good example for the other students and help dissolve the stigma surrounding mental health. Like Jennifer and Wanda’s work, Barbara’s play is indicative of the typical (or at least, a common) teenage experience, complete with an emancipatory message about how to deal with it.

By and large, Barbara’s script is about self-expression—in this case, getting or letting one’s anger out in a productive way. Where some might have stress balls, *The Text*’s Nancy and Sally have each other, and together, they literally stomp their anger out (not to mention that, at one point during her performance, Barbara flew through the air like a professional wrestler to deliver a blow to one of the stuffed animals on the bed). Thus, while there is no supervillain in her script, Barbara still manages to personify her chosen mental health challenge(s) into something that, while still markedly abstract, is nonetheless *stomp-able* and defeatable. Additionally, I think that Barbara’s play also inspires solidarity, in that most youth likely have (or will) deal with the kinds of mental health challenges it tackles.

Notably, when asked to rate her mental health on one of the questionnaires, Barbara wrote “my mental health is terrible and is . . . probably a -10,000/10.” Afterward, she added that she had never been taught or learned any kind of mental health/wellness strategy in class before.

In reflection, Barbara described her time as an A+Venger as “cool” and indicated that she would like to undergo similar experiences in other classes.



*Barbara as “Sensitive Sally” [digital drawing], B. Carver, 2020.*

**THE TEXT**

*(NEGATIVE NANCY is in her bedroom, waiting for a text from her boyfriend JAMES)*

- NANCY *(Gets a text message)* WHAT!?!? *(Sits down on her bed)* Whyyyyy meeeeeeee!?
- SALLY *(Enters)* *(Looking concerned)* What's wrong? What happened?
- NANCY He left me! *(Sobbing into her pillow)* Right... after... Valentine's Day!!
- SALLY It's going to be oka—
- NANCY *(Yelling angrily)* NO IT'S NOT!!
- SALLY Stop! You are being such a Negative Nancy right now! You have to drop that attitude! Look at all the good stuff that can come out of this. What did James even do—?
- NANCY *(Sniffles, then stops crying)* Well, he always burps when we're out to dinner, he swears in public, and he ALWAYS SAYS "WHATEVER"!! IT MAKES MY BLOOD BOIL!!
- SALLY I see. Anything else?
- NANCY When he snores, he's just so loud! I can't sleep! And don't even get me started on their man colds—they just act like they're dying, then spread it to you!
- (NEGATIVE NANCY and SENSITIVE SALLY look at the audience)*
- SALLY Okay... you need to take all of that anger and just stomp on it. Right now. Use your foot and literally stomp on it. *(She grabs onto NEGATIVE NANCY's foot and helps her stomp it)*
- NANCY *(Almost falls over from stomping so hard and so much)*
- SALLY Okay, not that much!!
- NANCY *(Keeps on stomping)*
- SALLY See? It helps! Why were you even sad? You are so much better off without him.
- NANCY You're one to talk, do you remember how you acted when Chad broke up with you not long ago?
- SALLY Whaaaaat? Noooooo!! DON'T TALK ABOUT HIM!! *(She plops onto the bed)*
- NANCY Now you're the one being all mopey. You can't be mad at me for being sad if you still are.
- SALLY *(Sits up)* Well then what do we do? *(Slouches and makes a sad face)*
- NANCY We need to do what YOU told me to do... WE NEED TO STOMP ON IT!!!
- SALLY Oh... okay! Yeah, stomp on it!



NANCY      *(Pointing)* Stomp right now!

SALLY      *(Lightly taps her foot)*

NANCY      Come on, you can do better than that!

SALLY      Okay. *(Stomps harder and harder)*

NANCY      *(Starts to stomp too)*

SALLY      *(Throws stuffed toys onto the bed and starts stomping on them)*

NANCY      Oh my!

SALLY      *(Shrugging her shoulders)* I guess I got carried away.  
*(NEGATIVE NANCY and SENSITIVE SALLY look at each other. After a moment, they both start throwing more toys on the bed, and then stomp and jump on them)*

SALLY      *(After a while)* Well I feel better.

NANCY      Yeah, me too.

SALLY      Well, I'll see you tomorrow. *(Exits)*

NANCY      Okay, bye! *(Lays on her bed and goes back on her phone, happily kicking her feet)*  
*(Lights out)*  
*(Fin.)*

## Chapter 6: Reflection & Summary

### Ekphrastic Catechization

Unfortunately, you (the reader) were likely not able to attend the A+Vengers' play showcase, and thus, you have probably missed out on a significant portion of their hard work and growth that my (mere) literary analysis is incapable of representing—plays are, after all, live performances, and to not see them in such a manner is to lack, among other things, important context and understanding. Moreover, you also lack additional experience(s) that only I can and will ever possess as the researcher/conversational consultant/teacher/and so on. To remedy this issue, I have chosen to follow in the footsteps of Sameshima et al. (2019), who have outlined the use of *ekphrastic catechizations*, or “questioning within specific themes . . . to guide analytic processes of data visualizations” (p. 199). Sameshima et al. (2019) define ekphrasis as “a rhetorical device where one medium tries to re-create an object's essence and form in another medium in the hopes of relating more directly with the audience” (p. 199). As such, I *hope* to briefly use said catechization to represent the various essences of the A+Vengers' primary medium (their performances, in the pedagogical sense) for you, the audience (reader), in a different medium (my text). To catechize is to question systematically, and in this case, a means to guide my personal reflection about the collection of artefacts as I ekphrastically re-render them for you. Notably, there are seven different kinds of ekphrastic catechization, namely *mimesis*, *poiesis*, *palimpsest*, *intertextuality*, *antiphona*, *sortes*, and *aporia* (Sameshima, 2019, p. 495); for the purpose of my catechization, I have chosen to employ palimpsest, intertextuality, and aporia in conjunction with the A+Vengers' plays, questionnaires, and selves, respectively.

Sameshima et al. (2019) define palimpsest as a means to “describe something that has been reused or altered but still bears visible traces of its earlier form,” producing further depth

and layers of understanding that allow for everyone involved to be “present at once” (p. 200), based on the pretense that the representation of participant perspectives are “critical in an arts-based text” (Barone & Eisner, 2012, p. 134). It is with this in mind that I would like to point out that the dynamics of play development are inherently evocative of palimpsest: that is, to conceptualize, write, and bring a play to life is a complicated process situated in intense reflection and revision. Luckily, as the researcher, I was deeply embedded within and for the entirety of the A+Vengers’ play development processes, and as such, I am capable of recounting how their works in their earliest forms evolved into their final, staged forms, complete with each and every alteration made (or not made) along the way. To guide my engagement with palimpsest, I asked myself the following questions: *How did the A+Vengers’ plays change throughout the development process? What did they change? When and why?*

My answer is, ironically, that the A+Vengers’ plays did not change all that much. Being within the realms of both emergent pedagogy (where anything can happen) and mental health (where stigma often reigns), I must admit that with my study I was initially worried about how much and how well (read: if) the A+Vengers would (be able to) engage with all (or any) of that which I was going to ask them to do. And yet, as my project and the research unfolded, my worry very quickly turned into pleasant surprise: each A+Venger came to me from the beginning with nothing short of a brilliant idea—a conceptualization based on something important to them that, by and large, they saw through to the very end (to the best of their abilities). In other words, I am overjoyed to report and exclaim that each A+Venger began with a vision that, over time, they never lost sight of. As such, my function as a conversational consultant was less work than I anticipated it being—it was almost as if all the students really needed was a *spark* or *green light* to get going. To be clear, I am not poised to call this collective and resolute staying of the course

a coincidence, nor a miracle; I am, however, confident in attributing it to their wholehearted openness to do everything that I feared they might not. Above all else, the A+Vengers (through their plays) taught me that youth are absolutely willing and able to engage with mental health in ways that are both pedagogically rich and personally meaningful.

Moving on, Sameshima et al. (2019) define intertextuality as adding breath to interpretations by “creating a relationship between the various texts,” thereby yielding meaning by “seeing or unpacking the researcher-generated artworks in reference to each other” (p. 200). With all due respect, I would like to *redefine* (or at least rework) this definition and extend its core principles to the A+Venger’s questionnaires, which I understand as vital and undetachable parts/pieces of their play development journeys. In order to assess their intertextuality in this manner, I asked myself: *How did the A+Vengers’ questionnaires work in combination to teach us something new?* In response to this question, a series of patterns and/or themes quickly emerged as answers:

- (1) First, the A+Vengers collectively identified a marked lack of mental health-based programming and initiatives in their school, confirming a lot of what has been said in Chapter 2. Moreover, with the exception of Bruce, they further agreed they had never been taught anything mental health-based as a part of their formal education.
- (2) Second, in what is likely related to the first point, the majority of the A+Vengers indicated that they had, were, or soon expected to encounter significant mental health challenges, thereby illuminating their need for the very things that they described themselves as lacking—that is, some sort of mental health-based intervention.
- (3) Third, thankfully, the A+Vengers confirmed that my proposed intervention was successful: by engaging with narrative therapy and re-storying themselves as

comic books superheroes and supervillains—as a part of their curriculum!—their mental health improved as a result, favourably answering my initial research question.

Last but not least, aporia may be defined as “an impasse or puzzlement,” or more philosophically, a “puzzle or a seemingly insoluble impasse in an inquiry, often arising as a result of equally plausible yet inconsistent premises . . . the state of being perplexed or at a loss” (Stock et al., 2016, p. 497). Sameshima et al. (2019) describe how one must “sit in the dissonance of simultaneous and seemingly contradictory life circumstances that do not fit into familiar cultural narratives and ‘truths’ (Dewey 1934; Spivak 2013)”. In this light, I began to search myself for anything that I still felt perplexed about or at a loss for; in time, as inspired by the ideas of Norris (2012), I began to metaphorically play with everything that aporia entailed. It was during this play that I began to attach myself to aporia’s notion of a puzzle, but in a different way—that is, I began to view each A+Venger as a puzzle *piece*, and by extension, as a part of a complete puzzle. With this in mind, I sought to answer the question: *How did all of them fit together?*

In reflection, I came to realize that, in theory, the A+Vengers should *not* have fit together; for all intents and purposes, they *were* aporia’s inconsistent premises. And yet, they did. Echoing John Hughes’ 1985 film *The Breakfast Club*, the A+Vengers roster included a jock; a nerd; a popular girl; an outcast; a brain; and a troublemaker—a critically varied cast of characters that, as the movie itself suggests, should not have been able to come and work together at all, much less so soundly. And yet, much like Marvel’s Avengers (the A+Vengers’ namesake) and DC’s Justice League, the A+Vengers were able to do just that, despite their seemingly contradictory set of backgrounds and personalities. In other words, whereas Captain America and Iron Man or Batman and Superman routinely put aside their differences for the greater good, so too did the

A+Vengers in the sense that they were also able to come together as a team. And, as this projects' postmodern tenets would uphold, this coming together rejected the kinds of 'truths' that would suggest they shouldn't or wouldn't be able to. In the Russo brothers' 2018 film *Avengers: Infinity War*, the character Doctor Strange looks into 14,000,605 alternate futures to determine how many in which the heroes might be able to defeat their greatest villain, Thanos; when Tony Stark (Iron Man) asks him for the answer, he replies, "One." While the odds may have not been as severely stacked against us, I truly believe and am proud to say that the A+Vengers not only rose to the occasion, but rose *above* it in a manner that only a group of superheroes ever could.

### **Limitations**

It must be noted that, while I am content with this portfolio, its research was not quite as in-depth as I originally hoped for and intended it to be. Due to the nature of the Ontario's educational landscape while I was conducting my research, I lost a significant amount of time and opportunity that was originally planned to be allocated to further my understanding of the A+Vengers' experiences; simply put, ongoing rotating teacher strikes closed Arkham High for several days during my research window, significantly limiting my ability to interact with and learn from the students. I am saddened that, due to imposed time constraints, the final group/roundtable discussion that was scheduled to take place had to be cancelled. While I made subsequent plans to make up for this lost research, the COVID-19 coronavirus outbreak further stifled my ability to garner data, as (at the time) it closed all public schools in the country indefinitely. Additionally, as I have already alluded to, some of the A+Vengers' (Diana; Jean; Jennifer; and Wanda's) attendances were unideal, and because of this, they were not able to conversate, consult, or complete questionnaires to the degree that I would have liked. Naturally, such was beyond my control—not to mention the likelihood of being linked to mental health

challenges, ironically—but I still wish it were not the case. Lastly, it is also of note that the Indigenous cohort within my research was similarly not what I hoped it would be, or rather, insufficient for the kind of culturally-based understanding I hoped to achieve.

### **Contributions**

I am glad to say that my research and this portfolio help fill in several formally identified knowledge gaps: first, I have contributed to the fields of both PBT and RBT, following in the footsteps of (and answering the calls for further inquiry by) pioneers such as Prendergast and Belliveau (2013, p. 201), MacKenzie (2011), and Norris (2012; 2016). More specifically, as an a/r/tographer (Irwin & Springgay, 2008), I have helped illuminate how theatre can be used critically and academically, especially during the data analysis phase (Prendergast & Belliveau, 2013, p. 201). Second, I have also contributed to the lack of information surrounding the nature and implementation of mental health (and MHL, etc.) in schools, thereby helping educators and other professionals alike understand how to approach and deal with mental health challenges (Roeser et al., 1998, p. 153/5; Sawyer & Earle, 2019, p. 84), helping answer the need for a “comprehensive secondary school mental health model that can be applied across Canada” (Wei et al., 2011, p. 217). Third, I have contributed to similarly-emergent branch of study concerned with the critical application (and intersections, etc.) of comic book superheroes in the social sciences (Fradkin et al., 2016, p. 410) by illuminating how they might be utilized in the classroom. Lastly, I have also contributed to the lack of data surrounding the intersection of schools, narrative therapy, and externalization (Rame et al., 2009, p. 263) by understanding all three as core tenets of my research approach and intervention.

### **Next Steps**

With my project complete, I have begun to think about what might come next, both

professionally and personally. As mentioned in Chapter 4, many who engage with PBR and RBT favour ethnodrama and ethnotheatre—which some term *data as star* (Chenail, 2010, p. 1286)—wherein data is turned into scripts and/or plays. I am left with a desire to answer this call; that is, to think about how I could create ethnotheatre based on the data I have collected. Exactly what this might entail, I do not yet know—but I am interested in the prospect. Moreover, I now have many more questions and hypothesis about the ways in which everything I have engaged with could be applied in different settings and scenarios: that is, how everything might have gone (or might go) with students of different ages and grades. I am curious as to both (a) the kinds of plays senior students would have been able to create, and (b) how such measures could be applied to children instead of youth, which I would argue are also very much in need of MHL. In this light, I would also like to remedy one of my limitations by performing more research with Indigenous students. Last but not least, I have also generated several ideas about the creation of a multi-act play similarly based on externalized mental health issues and superheroes; while I think that leaving the messages up to the students (with their own plays) was certainly effective, I am also interested in the kinds of messages *I* could communicate, were I to write my own play designed for performance by a high school drama class. Ultimately, my options are many, and I hope to someday soon pick up where I am leaving off.

### **Recap**

In its entirety, this portfolio consisted of:

- (1) A self-reflection through Pinar's concept of *currere*, which entailed (a) recognizing how mental health challenges can affect youth; (b) treating with the current (and problematic) educational climate in Ontario; (c) inferring about the lack of mental health-based programming and/or curriculum in schools, including systemic reasons and barriers; and



- (d) affirming my desire to make things better.
- (2) Outlining the nature of mental health in schools today, including (a) exactly what mental health, wellness, illness, and disorders all are; (b) describing the nature of mental health in schools, and more specifically, how its promotion is lacking in Canadian institutions; (c) describing past approaches to mental health promotion, such as MHL and The Guide; (d) detailing how said approaches are not viable or sustainable; and (e) presenting a special note on Indigenous students and their marked mental health challenges.
- (3) Outlining the nature of my proposed solution, and how it aligns with and/or invokes (a) several different kinds of pedagogies (critical, performance, and emergent); (b) the work of other educational philosophers, including the Theatre of the Oppressed (Boal), curriculum-as-lived (Aoki), and play (Norris); (c) several distinct therapies (narrative and creative art-based); several critical Indigenous theories (cultural safety, storytelling, and re-storying); and (d) superheroes.
- (4) A description of my methodology, including (a) ethics; (b) morals; (c) the nature of performance-based research, entailing explication of (i) theatre; (ii) dramaturgy; (iii) a/r/tography; (iv) art-as-event; and (v) research-based theatre; and (d) youth participatory action research.
- (5) A subsequent, two-month-long research project wherein I was embedded as a classroom teacher, dramaturge, and conversational consultant. This research project involved (a) talking about mental health and my research with twenty-eight junior students; (b) engaging eight of these students as research participants; (c) explaining narrative and creative-arts based therapies to these eight students; (d) demonstrating how these therapies could be applied to play development with my two pieces, “A Wolf in the

Throne Room” and “Solicitude”; (e) helping all twenty-eight students write and develop their own plays, with specific research-based attention paid to the eight research participants (including the distribution of qualitative questionnaires); and (f) facilitating a special one-night showcase for the students to act their plays for an audience.

- (6) Assessment, analyzation, and dissemination of data, entailing the presentation of each research participant’s play as a specific example of art-as-event, as well as the subsequent explication of their engagement with the therapies involved.

### **Conclusion**

According to Manion et al. (2012), “an important element for success is the match between the program and the needs and resources of the setting in which it is to be implemented” (p. 124). I am of the belief that, with this portfolio, I have created and engaged with the best fit possible: that is to say, I am confident in how well everything that I chose to integrate works with each other (narrative therapy; superheroes; mental health; research-based theatre; and so on). While it was not the same as Boal’s (1974) TO in execution, I think that it is very much fair to say that my project was a kind of *spiritual successor*, in that our (emancipatory) aims for such dramatic endeavours were and are very much the same. Haedicke (1998) has written that “the real job of all good dramaturgs is to extend and explore territory that the theatre has not yet made its own” (p. 125). I wholeheartedly believe that myself and the A+Vengers have done just that, working through/alongside critical, performance, and emergent pedagogies to bring and enact theatre in the classroom in way that has never been done before.

According to Powell and Lajevic (2011), “teachers and students have continued to negotiate the space(s) of teaching, learning, making, and doing that challenge preconceived ideas and stimulate new ways to view, understand, and engage with curriculum” (p. 35). Channelling

Ezra Pound (1928) and his slogan to *make it new* (qtd. in North, 2013), I believe that this portfolio has done just that: where resources like The Guide are merely curriculum-embedded, my work has gone a step further, creating resources and an approach to MHL that are effectively *curriculum-based* or *curriculum-blended*. Roeser et al. (1998) tell us that “it is only through institutional reform . . . that we will be able to address the many educational and mental health needs of children” (p. 155). And, Brown and Clark (2013) state that “the challenge is to encourage students to take the seldom trodden path in an open-ended search for the previously unanswerable, unobtainable, and unthinkable” (p. 41). Together, with the A+Vengers, I believe we have done just that: outline a potential means for institutional reform through the play-based creation of art-as-event, enabling a unique and viable kind of potential care for student mental health needs through a curriculum that is very much *alive*.

Ultimately, like the work of others before me, my portfolio “had no static or linear direction, but rather exhibited dynamic and fluid dimensions that guided [the students’] uncertain, yet exciting, curricular and pedagogical journeys” (Powell & Lajevic, 2011, p. 49). Minding Norris’ (2012) wisdom that “we all have our stories, and by sharing them we assist others in enforcing what they already do, providing new pathways to their imaginations, and/or point out obstacles to avoid” (p. 312), it was my intention to help the A+Vengers create and believe in new stories, through the power of narrative therapy and externalization, for the betterment of themselves and their mental health and wellbeing, as well as the larger school system and society itself. To quote Batman in Christopher Nolan’s (2012) *The Dark Knight Rises*, “a hero can be anyone, even a man doing something as simple and reassuring as putting a coat around a young boy’s shoulders to let him know the world hadn’t ended.” While I did not offer any of the A+Vengers a *coat*, with this portfolio, I did offer them a *cape*.

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