

(Re)Imagine Theatre Education Teacher Preparation in Higher Education

A DISSERTATION
submitted to the Faculty and Administration
of Fairleigh Dickinson University in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Education

by

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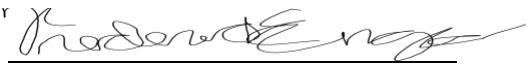
January 2026


Higher Education Program


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ABSTRACT

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January 2026

This three-paper dissertation examined existing barriers that impede the inclusion and advancement of female-identifying performing artists from racially and ethnically diverse communities in the performing arts, with a focus on South Asian female performing artists. Grounded in Asian critical theory (AsianCrit) and feminist theory, the study interrogated how social, cultural, and institutional structures shape access, opportunity, and leadership in the performing arts. Drawing on the lived experiences of the researcher, a South Asian American woman and theatre educator, the research uplifted counternarratives through narrative inquiry and ethnodramatic approaches. Paper I examined how South Asian performing artists navigate familial expectations and cultural identity through their experiences to inform practices in higher education, teacher education, and theatre education. Paper II used ethnodrama to illuminate the lived experiences of racially and ethnically diverse female-identifying performing artists, highlighting themes of power and oppression that inform practices in higher education, teacher education, and theatre education. Paper III offered a reflective tool, the VOICE reflective framework, for theatre education programs in teacher training to consider their equity practices through inclusive curriculum, pedagogy, mentorship, and recruitment. The study used semi-structured interviews to gain insight into participants' narratives. This research provided actionable recommendations for developing equitable theatre education programs, with a focus

on amplifying the voices of female-identifying performing artists from racially and ethnically diverse communities.

Keywords: theatre education, South Asian performing artists, AsianCrit, higher education, teacher education

DEDICATION

For every little girl who dreams big: may you always find your voice.

To every little South Asian girl: sing louder, dance harder, and rise stronger.

This is for you.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am grateful to everyone who supported me, especially my dissertation committee. To my dissertation committee chair, Dr. Frederick V. Engram, thank you for seeing me and for encouraging me to use my voice. Dr. Ashley Robinson, thank you for opening my eyes (and heart) to qualitative research. And to Dr. Daphne Sicre, whose artistry continues to inspire me. I am deeply grateful to all three of you for your dedication to my growth as a scholar.

To my high school theatre teacher, Mrs. Joy Varley from Byram Hills High School, thank you for opening up my world to theatre.

Thank you to my City College family, with a special thanks to the graduate program in educational theatre at The City College of New York, especially to all of our incredible students. I am especially grateful to the 2025 Artistic Lab I class—thank you for creating magical moments with me. Your creativity inspired me to be better.

Roxanna Arrojo, Kim Olsen and Lauren Daas, thank you for making me believe I could finish! Courtney Boddie, Jennifer DiBella, Amy Harris, Lauren Jost, Jennifer Katona, and Lindsey Buller Maliekel—wherever you are, I feel your energy. I am forever grateful for us.

And to my very big family, I cannot name all of you. The ones who supported from far away, the little ones who made me smile, the older ones who encouraged me, the furry ones who stayed up with me late into the night while I was writing, and my incredible cousins and aunts: I am grateful for you, especially Asha Kurian, for your love of data and family history. A very big thank you to Julie Cherian for your constant interest in and support of my work, and for sharing my love of musical theater and education! And a big thank you to Abigail Alex, Bella Oommen, Dylan Hosein, and Chloe Hosein for your support this past year.

Thank you to my Mom and Dad, Mariamma Easo and Varghese Kavanakudiyil, for coming to all my shows when I was little, whether they were good or not-so-good, and for sitting through them. You did not always understand what I was doing, but you always encouraged me to be the best at it. My accomplishments stand on the sacrifices you have made. And now my artistry is my superpower.

None of this would have been possible without my favorite person in the whole world, Ryan Hosein. Thank you for turning down the volume, walking the dogs, and for all the ice cream. You are my light.

Finally, I dedicate this dissertation to all the incredible artists who continue to break barriers, reclaim their stories, and create new legacies. This work is for you.

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INTRODUCTION

My professional journey has followed a dynamic path, evolving since 2001 from a career in television news to one in arts education. I often say that I began a doctoral journey for the “wrong” reason: out of frustration with the lack of advancement in my role at the university where I worked. The professional criteria for advancement in academia appeared to overlook factors that other professions valued more explicitly (e.g., role-specific development, performance growth, the creativity inherent in one’s work). This reflects the systems that often overlook the wide breadth of talent in the arts. I convinced myself it was necessary to complete my doctoral journey, seeking professional growth in my role at that time. However, I was surprised by what I learned, not just about the research topic (i.e., not just about South Asian identity and the lack of representation from racially and ethnically diverse artists in the performing arts), but also the power of counternarrative storytelling and the importance of authenticity in identity.

My research, which focused on illuminating South Asian identity and uplifting counternarrative stories from racially and ethnically diverse communities, was a response to my desire to deepen my awareness of internal questions about my identity as a South Asian woman in the performing arts, specifically in theatre education. I did not realize these questions had been quietly building for years. I approached this research from a place of “spiritual healing and service to the world” (Dillard, 2012, p. 2). However, I learned more through this process than I ever thought I would, both about the topic’s content, scholarship, and research, and, most importantly, about my own identity. Dillard (2012) mirrored much of this process when she reflected on research and wrote, “I have come to understand myself better, my life’s purpose and a new direction for the work as a teacher and researcher” (p. 2). These words resonated deeply as

I reflected on the evolution of my journey that serendipitously aligned with a milestone birthday and an earned sabbatical year from work. The process of going back to school and earning my doctorate became a time of reflection and learning.

Positionality Statement

I am the daughter of immigrant parents from India who came to the United States in the late 1960s. I was born and raised in and around NYC. I have experienced navigating cultural expectations and identity confusion. Throughout my doctoral journey, I began to recognize my privileges and the need to deepen my self-awareness, hold myself accountable, facilitate inclusivity, and decenter dominant narratives by interrogating my positionality, privilege, and complicity (Bhattacharya, 2023). This evolution was paralleled by Sealy-Ruiz (2022) in “the archeology of self” (p. 24), as she referred to it. The *archaeology of self* is a fundamental principle that involves engaging in deep self-exploration and understanding where race and racism reside in oneself (Sealy-Ruiz, 2022). As a theatre educator, it is essential to adhere to this fundamental principle when working in classroom settings and communities that serve racially and ethnically diverse communities. Emdin (2021) emphasized the importance of bringing one’s authentic self into the classroom, including one’s scholarship, because without this introspection, the same perpetuating cycles may continue the same oppression by centering the dominant narrative (Bhattacharya, 2023).

My professional role as a theatre educator in the NYC arts education community also has shaped my understanding of the need for more significant equity in the performing arts professions. The summer of 2020 was emotionally charged and draining, both personally and professionally, sparking an identity crisis as I pondered, “Why have I not seen someone who looks like me in theatre education?” Conversations in the arts education field became

increasingly divided, and I struggled to understand my place in them. Unknowingly, these questions marked the beginning of my research focus. Drawing on my experience as a South Asian woman, this research examined barriers that hinder the inclusion and advancement of female-identifying performing artists from racially and ethnically diverse communities and barriers to access, opportunity, and leadership in the performing arts professions.

The experiences I share, my own intersecting identities, and my connection with the community about which I have written were not only an asset to the study but also drove my passion for this research. I brought implicit biases to my study, which could have impacted how I interpreted the data (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). To address this, I employed methodological approaches that incorporated reflexive practices to ensure transparency in my findings. I approached this work with an awareness of my own privilege, a deep respect for the participant voices I centered, and a place of humility and a profound sense of gratitude for the opportunity to uplift these stories.

Representation in the Performing Arts

The year 2020 brought unprecedented changes to the education landscape, and arts education was no exception. Beyond the shift to distance learning during the COVID-19 global pandemic in 2020, the impact of polarizing conversations about race and ethnicity became increasingly clear. The performing arts are led by predominantly white institutions, which are sustained by funding networks that are also predominantly white, and they continue to perpetuate exclusionary practices (Stein, 2020). The Asian American Performers Action Coalition (AAPAC, 2019), in partnership with the American Theatre Wing, shared that New York City's (NYC's) theatre industry reflected systemic racial bias and remained predominantly white (Čirić-Fazlija, 2022).

Jacobs (2019) discussed a study commissioned by then-Mayor Bill de Blasio, which found people from racially and ethnically diverse communities were significantly underrepresented in many cultural organizations, especially in leadership and board roles. Stein (2020) emphasized that an intersectional identity, encompassing diversity in race, gender, class, sexuality, and disability, should be viewed as an asset and recognized as a valuable perspective for genuine collaboration. These are the same inequities I examined in my research, which highlights how South Asian and female identifying performing artists from racially and ethnically diverse communities navigate exclusion in theatre education and the performing arts. Moving beyond performativity in the performing arts is essential, as it involves not just representation but genuine inclusion (Stein, 2020).

Meanwhile, the We See You White American Theater collective, which comprised over 300 multigenerational theatre artists from Black, Indigenous, and racially and ethnically diverse backgrounds, released a letter demanding institutions take meaningful action against systemic racism (Stigler, 2020a; We See You White American Theatre, 2020). Stigler (2020a) noted many influential artists, including Lynn Nottage, Viola Davis, Lin-Manuel Miranda, Sandra Oh, and Issa Rae, signed the letter. The letter pointed out systemic inequalities (Stigler, 2020a; We See You White American Theatre, 2020) and read, “We have watched you amplify our voices when the press heralds us, but refuse to defend our aesthetic when we are not, allowing our livelihoods to be destroyed by a monolithic and racist critical culture. We see you.” (para. 5). As their work continued, they outlined demands that are necessary for true equity in the performing arts (We See You White American Theatre, 2020).

Although productions by playwrights of color nearly doubled between 2010 and 2020, they still accounted for only 20% of all productions in the 2018–2019 season (Rosky, 2020).

Additionally, 80% of Broadway and off-Broadway productions were written by white playwrights, white directors led 93.8% of Broadway productions, and 84.6% of productions at nonprofit theaters were led by white directors (Stigler, 2020b). These statistics also aligned with what was observed in other cities. According to the NYC Department of Cultural Affairs (2019) study, in 2017 and 2018 in Harris County, Texas (where Houston, Texas, is located), 73% of culture and arts survey respondents identified as white (non-Hispanic). However, the general population was 32% white (non-Hispanic). In Los Angeles County, California, 60% of the culture and arts survey respondents self-identified as white (non-Hispanic), but white citizens comprised 27% of the population. This is further discussed in Paper II, which focuses on female performing artists from racially and ethnically diverse populations.

Casting

Performing arts activists have challenged typecasting and emphasized the importance of showcasing the talents of diverse artists (Lee, 2024). Inclusive casting can be defined as nontraditional and cross-cultural (Stamatiou, 2020). However, Stamatiou (2020) noted that diversity-oriented casting practices in theatre need to be truly inclusive. This means evaluating not just how much diversity-oriented casting is done, but also the quality of the casting, and it needs to be more than just performative. Young (2013) also discussed casting practices and the need for structural transformation to achieve this. Lee (2024) noted that, in connection with musical theatre, race also has been a factor in who performs, what is performed, and who attends the theatre.

If what is seen on stage is racial stereotypes, then that is problematic (Lee, 2024). Cantu (2019) in her chapter of *Reframing the Musical: Race, Culture and Identity* noted the many African American women (e.g., Josephine Baker) who played to a white cultural elite at one

time; however, many of them have been overlooked as a true influence on musical theatre studies, which is an example of exclusion in another form. These conversations around inclusive casting parallel my research, where South Asian and other racially and ethnically diverse women in the performing arts continue to navigate limited representation and systemic barriers that shape whose stories are told and who gets to tell them.

There also has been a debate about mixed-race casting, as some would look at it as “the future” (Henrich, 2023, p. 1), and some would say that it does a disservice by taking jobs away from actors who identify with diverse backgrounds. Sicre (2022) brought to the conversation that many Afro-Latinx actors face casting bias and lean in toward ethnic ambiguity in theatre, aiming to increase their employment opportunities for survival. In fact, Sicre noted that lighter-skinned Afro-Latinx performers tend to gain more opportunities, highlighting the privileges that lighter skin gains over darker skin in casting (Sicre, 2022). For example, Yarro (2023) discussed Teatro Prometeo at Miami Dade College, which became a cultural hub for many Latinx actors seeking to train and perform in Spanish. It also offered the first bilingual theatre courses (Yarro, 2023). Heinrich (2023) noted the current American theatre landscape has begun to become more inclusive of mixed-race Asian experiences, whereas in the past, this was not the case. Heinrich (2023) mentioned plays by mixed-race playwrights of Asian descent, such as Nanako Winkler, who examined racial dynamics in the United States in *God Said This* (2018), *Kentucky* (2016), and *Two Mile Hollow* (2017). Discussions around mixed-race casting have emphasized the complexities of representation that my research also examined.

Inclusive casting has been skewed when dominant identities (i.e., white actors) are cast in roles meant for racially and ethnically diverse identities (Stamatiou, 2020). Sicre (2022) used *Plátanos y Collard Greens* by David Lamb, based on the book, *Do Plátanos Go Wit' Collard*

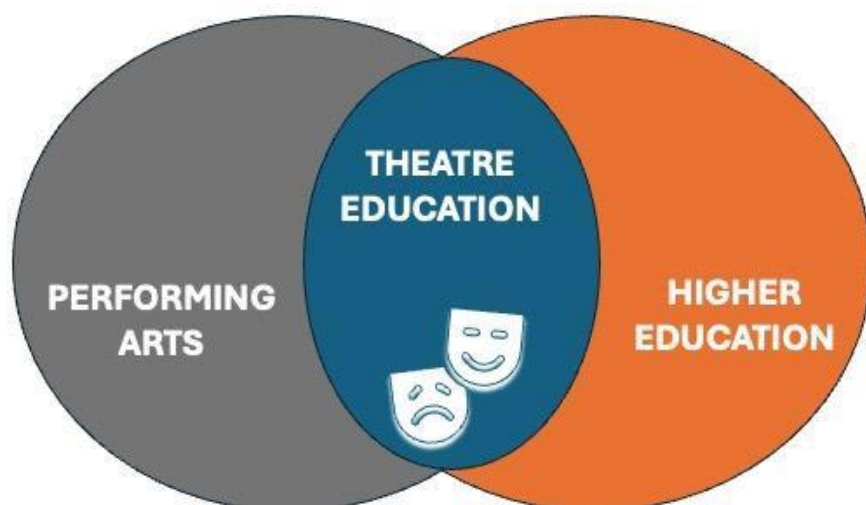
Greens? (Sicre, 2013), as an example to examine race relations among African American, Latinx, and Afro-Latinx communities, highlighting how its rotating casting with changing skin tones reveals how the perception of race alters meaning on stage (Sicre, 2022). Stamatiou (2020) also stated that it is important to note who is writing, directing, and producing productions because when white men continue to dominate these decisions, the stories perpetuate the perspective of the dominant culture (Stamatiou, 2020). Stamatiou (2020) noted inclusive casting cannot happen alone, but needs to happen in conjunction with writing, directing, and producing. These multiple layers connected with the challenges in theatre education that my study examined, revealing whose stories are heard and influence decision making.

Theatre Education

Shifting the conversation to theatre education specifically, it still largely operates in dominant narratives that influence classroom representation (Schroeder-Arce, 2023). First, let me be clear about theatre education in this research. To give context to the ecosystem about which I have written, I first consider the performing arts professions, which most people might traditionally associate with Broadway and the broader performance world. Then, I consider higher education, and in those colleges and universities sits this overlapping space of theatre education. In Figure 1, I have demonstrated this by using a visual representation of where these two worlds intersect.

Figure 1

Visual Representation of Theatre Education Placement



Theatre education is a small piece of the performing arts landscape. I am very interested in how teacher preparation, and theatre education programs in particular, can train theatre teachers and teaching artists with a more equitable mindset.

This research is not in reference to undergraduate or graduate theatre programs. Although this tool is adaptable for other contexts, the context upon which this research focuses is theatre education teacher training programs. This opportunity to train theatre teachers and teaching artists who, in turn, will have the gift of working with our future artists and educators as they work with their students in PK–12th grade, is a significant opportunity to engage more performing artists from racially and ethnically diverse communities. This research provides a tool to help theatre education teacher training programs reflect on what they have been doing well and what they could improve in equity practices, giving them agency over change. I also want to be clear that I am not assuming they are not already doing the work; in fact, many theatre

education programs are doing great work, but there is still a problem. Additionally, this work should not be stagnant, as reflection is evolutionary and should continue to grow.

Lazarus (2012) pointed out that there are limited opportunities for arts instruction in the United States. Some progress has occurred since Lazarus made this statement; how much equity-minded progress has been made? Lazarus (2012) also noted that quality theatre arts instruction must include a “learner-centered classroom and production work, socially responsible practice and comprehensive theatre education” (p. 35), but it is questionable if that definition is still applicable. Banerji (2025) shared that the academy has continued to maintain systems that “perpetuate a prejudicial understanding of stories from Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) communities” (p. 112). He then stated that his theatre history course fulfills one of the 13 core curriculum requirements (Banerji, 2025), leading me to wonder, if that is the case, and we also have nonmajors taking these courses who do not see themselves in the content, there will be an additional disconnect.

Artist educators from racially and ethnically diverse communities often are tasked with modeling culturally responsive practice and educating their peers about equity (Schroeder-Arce, 2023). Additionally, Johansson, et al. (2023) noted that many theatre educators are excluded from leadership. Jacobs (2019) discussed a study commissioned by then-Mayor Bill de Blasio, which found that people from racially and ethnically diverse communities were significantly underrepresented in many cultural organizations, particularly in leadership and board positions. I myself have experienced the underrepresentation, and in particular, the lack of South Asian representation.

To connect theatre education with the theoretical lenses of Asian critical theory and feminist theory, which I discuss in the upcoming papers of this dissertation, theatre education has

the potential to challenge the dominant narrative and uplift racially and ethnically diverse communities. This dissertation aims to demonstrate that theatre education teacher training programs in higher education can be a transformative space for the performing arts. Theatre education is one small part of the larger performing arts context with the ability to influence teacher candidates and prepare them better to sustain theatre with racially and ethnically diverse communities.

A recent study by the NYC Arts in Education Roundtable (2025) examined teaching artist compensation through a survey of teaching artists in New York City. Of those who completed the survey, “the largest ethnicities represented were white (49%), Black (21%), and Latinx (18%)” (p. 19). Although not all of these teaching artists were theatre educators, this is reflective of the NYC teaching artist community from leading theatre organizations who completed the survey. Also, the theatre for young audiences (TYA) field had made strides in increasing representation of gender and race between 2010–2020. However, TYA USA, in collaboration with UCLA’s Center for Scholars and Storytellers (CSS), published “Exploring the Landscape of Live Theatre for Young Audiences in the U.S.” (Rosky, 2020), which reinforced concerns from the field of TYA about persistent racial inequities. That report showed racial diversity in live theatre for young people still did not reflect the U.S. population (Rosky, 2020). Theatre education programs have an opportunity to train future teachers who can make a difference.

Multicultural Practice

In the late 1990’s, Grady (2000) called on white theatre practitioners, and educators in general, to center the complexities of racial bias in classroom practice in creative drama. Early in theatre education, multiculturalism served as the lens through which theatre educators sought to

include voices from a multitude of cultures. O'Neill (1997) wrote, "American society is essentially multicultural, and its variety is essentially reflected in our classrooms" (p. ix). These ideas often were integrated into the classroom through a focus on cultural backgrounds, history, literacy, and the arts (Manley & O'Neill, 1997). Culturally responsive practices in the classroom validate students' identities and contribute to more sustainable learning experiences (Gorelov, 2022).

The idea behind these practices was to support students in developing a firm sense of their identities and ethnicities (Manely & O'Neill, 1997). Even then, the idea that varied perspectives need to be integrated into all areas of the school curriculum was discussed. Saldaña (1995) stated that sometimes defining multiculturalism was complex when these conversations began happening because "Not only are culture, ethnicity, and race involved, but so are gender, social class, disability, sexual orientation, and other distinguishing characteristics that classify and categorize each of us" (p. xi). Educational equality was a primary goal of multicultural education, requiring changes in curriculum, teaching styles, and other personal and institutional changes (Saldaña, 1995).

Identity formation in theatre education has been shaped by cultural context, socialization, and the racialized dynamics embedded in the educational system. Grady (2000) emphasized that race and ethnicity are identifiers influenced by white privilege, which profoundly shape how individuals come to understand themselves. As Grady (2000) noted, "Children first learn about race and racial bias from parents and teachers" (p. 28), underscoring the foundational role that educational spaces play in early identity development. Hope also becomes a critical component of identity formation. Ginwright (2009) argued hope is one of the most significant catalysts for social change.

When communities cultivate hope, young people become more willing to engage in collective activities to improve their neighborhoods and schools, laying the groundwork for what Ginwright described as “critical action” (p. 23). Theatre education provides a powerful site for this identity work. Manley and O’Neill (1997) noted the arts build community and support students in developing a sense of who they are and that, through drama, learners can “experience the lives of those who came before us, those who exist with us, those who are yet to exist, and those who may never exist” (p. 23). Theatre practitioners should interrogate identity continually as an ethical imperative (Brown et al., 2017). Similarly, Jones (2023) highlighted how dialogue and collective accountability can repair harm in theatre spaces. Afolabi’s (2022) discussion of artists who exist “between borders” further illuminated the complex negotiations performers make when managing competing cultural expectations.

Social Transformation

Theatre education serves as a platform for social transformation that can influence the performing arts. According to Prendergast (2013) and Saxton (2013), *applied theatre* is theatre that operates apart from mainstage productions, involving participants who may or may not be artists with an engaged audience interested in the subject matter. Applied theatre approaches have been employed to address various social issues (Wasmuth et al., 2020) and are associated with theatre for social change (Landy & Montgomery, 2012). However, inequities remain in how stories are told and who has the opportunity to tell them.

An example of using research-based theatre to illuminate the human experience is *The COVID Monologues*, which showcased different experiences during the COVID-19 global pandemic (Hurley et al., 2023). This theatre piece demonstrated how theatre and storytelling can promote empathy. In addition, another example is the Verbatim Performance Lab (VPL) at New

York University (NYU), founded and directed by Salvatore (2017), which uses verbatim theatre by performing the exact words and gestures drawn from interviews and media, and then studies audience and actor responses. An example of VPL's work is *Her Opponent* (NYU, 2017), a gender-reversed restaging of the 2016 U.S. presidential debates. *Her Opponent* invites audiences to reconsider how gendered expectations shape perception.

Theatre intended for equity also can reproduce systems of privilege if prioritization of equity is not present. Improv theater and whiteness in education exposed how improvisational theater, often celebrated for its inclusivity, can uphold the dominant white culture (Tanner & McCloskey, 2022). These practitioners called for improv principles that align closely with antiracist practices and emphasize the need for theatre education programs to examine how pedagogy and curriculum can reinforce inequity (Tanner & McCloskey, 2022).

Theatre education is a space for counternarrative storytelling. For example, Readers Theatre can be used to present oral histories (Quinn et al., 2020). Another example comes from Beth Powers (2015) and Peter Duffy (2015), who discussed Augusto Boal's Theatre of the Oppressed (TO) in preservice teacher education, where TO participants engaged in practices that make visible their own identities in educational spaces. Puvaneyshwaran (2024) used TO as an intervention with youth offenders. He used storytelling and collaboration and showed how they enabled participants to talk about issues important to them. This highlighted how theatre education can serve as a transformative experience. Similarly, Saldanha et al. (2022) examined how Forum Theatre, a TO strategy, also uplifts counternarratives. Their study revealed that community-based performance can empower participants to collectively reframe their experiences of exclusion and reclaim agency through storytelling.

Research Problem

In this qualitative research study, I examined experiences that influence career decisions in the performing arts to expand access for female-identifying performing artists from racially and ethnically diverse communities by analyzing narratives and offering strategies to promote change in theatre education programs. After examining the experiences that shaped career decisions in the performing arts in Papers I and II, I use Paper III to offer actionable strategies to foster inclusivity in university theatre education teacher-training programs by conducting discussions with a focus group of higher education professionals in theatre education.

It does a disservice to students not to provide opportunities to recognize more multicultural and multiethnic populations (Mukherji et al., 2019). For example, I recall being asked to teach an after-school program at an all-girls middle school in a borough of a major city where all of the students were Black. The school wanted me to introduce the Shakespeare play of Hamlet. The students were disinterested and unenthusiastic when I arrived. This continued for a few sessions. Attendance was grim. I realized I needed to get to know these students and be transparent about who I was (Emdin, 2016). Once I did, I recognized the unique talents they had in performance as dancers, singers, and steppers. Davis (2002) wrote that to shape a reality for young people one must listen to their voices. I advocated for a play by the well-known Black playwright Ntozake Shange and introduced it to the girls. They were not only interested in the play but also in the playwright. It was relatable. Soon, they saw themselves in the work. The challenge in theatre is to integrate the worlds of all involved, past and present (Davis, 2002).

These pedagogical choices I made were based on ideas from Muhammad's (2020) culturally and historically responsive literacy framework and Emdin's (2016) coteaching model in the classroom. In this case, the students taught me and each other artistic skills and played a

significant role in directing the performance. Getting to know the students and allowing them to get to know me enabled us to work as artistic collaborators. We created a performance using language from the text, but the students used stepping, dancing, and movement to tell the story, which, in turn, meant they influenced the staging. Attendance increased. Soon, our rehearsal ritual began with them sharing with me about their days at school and their real-world connections to the text. Our closing ritual was to gather in a circle, with students sharing what they were grateful for, proud of, and felt they had accomplished during the rehearsal. The middle schoolers created an incredible performance for proud parents, community members, teachers, and administrators in the audience.

Higher Education-Related Focus

Higher education is uniquely positioned to drive change in the performing arts by preparing future educators who will shape the field. This research considered the role of teacher training programs in preparing teacher candidates to extend access through the spaces they create to increase racial and ethnic diversity in the performing arts. However, a significant challenge in training preservice teachers, or teacher candidates preparing to work in schools, is the holistic lack of attention to their development, field placements, curriculum, candidate demographics, and the justice involved in their training (Patterson, 2020). This dissertation uplifts counternarrative stories and examines experiences of female performing artists from racially and ethnically diverse communities in Papers I and II, and with the emergent themes from those papers and the emergent themes from Paper III, it offers a framework to hone in on how theatre education teacher training programs can integrate more equitable practices both as a model for the teacher candidates and as a good practice. These efforts can be seen not only as a method in revisiting practices that center voices from racially and ethnically diverse communities but also

as a way to reflect on current practices and move theatre teacher preparation programs to engage in reflective practices in higher education.

Significance of the Problem

Although NYC is a cultural hub, systemic inequities have persisted in the performing arts, where racial and ethnic diversity have remained challenging. Stein (2020) noted that when a workforce is racially and ethnically diverse, there is a high respect for cultural differences, which then becomes a core value and the glue that holds the community together. Society often centers white culture, shaping how racial and ethnic identities are perceived and valued (Henry, 2003; Malhi et al., 2009). This impact has extended beyond students to theatre teachers and teaching artists navigating exclusionary structures. Identity profoundly influences the artistic and pedagogical approaches of theatre educators (Gee, 2001; Tuhus-Dubrow, 2022). As Tuhus-Dubrow (2022) noted, students benefit from representation in their learning experiences. However, as Kavanakudiyil (2024) argued, theatre education often fails to incorporate diverse playwrights and perspectives, limiting opportunities for inclusive storytelling.

I can also recall moments when I was not even considered to play certain roles due to my South Asian ethnicity and other times when I experienced not being “Indian enough.” Sleeter (2017) highlighted that education systems are primarily structured around the white experience, a pattern also reflected in theatre education. Increasing diversity among theatre educators could inspire students from racially and ethnically diverse communities to pursue careers by providing representation, fostering meaningful pedagogical relationships, and actively decentering whiteness in theatre education (Sleeter, 2017). Theatre education is a small part of the performing arts but has the ability to make a big impact.

Purpose of the Study

In this study, I set out to identify barriers to racial and ethnic diversity in the performing arts by examining the experiences of female-identifying performing artists. The study amplified the voices of South Asian female performing artists and individuals from racially and ethnically diverse communities by highlighting their narratives to reveal challenges they faced and to use that information to create a reflection tool to allow growth in teacher training programs in theatre education. Storytelling is a powerful tool for breaking barriers, fostering connection, and driving meaningful change (Bhattacharya, 2023). People make sense of their experiences through personal narratives, shaping collective understanding and influencing institutional practices (Bhattacharya, 2023).

While storytelling uplifts experiences, sensemaking allows for a deeper exploration of how individuals make meaning of those experiences. Weick (2011) described sensemaking as an interpretive process where individuals retrospectively assign meaning to past events (Kanji & Cahusack, 2015; Weick, 2022). This process is essential in understanding how female-identifying performing artists from racially and ethnically diverse communities navigate exclusionary structures. Weick (2011) argued that sensemaking involves interpreting complex moments, recognizing who is involved, and noticing what or who is absent from the conversation, prompting deeper reflection on whose voices are heard and whose are silenced (Kanji & Cahusack, 2015). Sensemaking offers a lens for understanding how South Asian female-identifying performing artists create meaning from their lived experiences related to the performing arts, cultural expectations, and identity negotiation.

By examining professional experiences and personal factors that influence these experiences, I aimed to identify necessary changes in teacher training programs. Bhattacharya

(2023) reflected on how oppression has been normalized, often limiting individuals' agency by reinforcing dominant cultural narratives as the status quo. Similarly, Young et al. (2022) discussed how Asian Americans, particularly those with immigrant parents, navigate the complexities of adapting to U.S. culture while attempting to make sense of their ethnic identities. Understanding these tensions in the experiences of South Asian female performing artists offers critical insight into the systemic barriers they encounter. This research informed the development of a reflective framework to support theatre teacher training programs in higher education. By examining the participants' lived experiences, I aimed to guide graduate-level theatre teacher training programs in fostering more inclusive and equitable practices that challenge systemic exclusion and elevate diverse voices in the field.

Research Focus

This three-paper dissertation investigated the systemic barriers that have hindered the inclusion and advancement of female-identifying performing artists in the performing arts. Each paper was designed to explore a distinct dimension of this issue, using Asian critical theory (AsianCrit) and feminist theory to examine the intersection of identity, culture, and institutional practices. Table 1 provides an overview of all three papers, including the research focus and research question of each paper.

Table 1*Overview of Three-Paper Dissertation*

Title	Research focus	Research question
Paper I: <i>Illuminating South Asian Female Identity and its Implications for Theatre Education in Higher Education</i>	This research paper examines the South Asian experience through an AsianCrit lens, analyzing themes such as sensemaking, the model minority myth, and cultural influence on career trajectories in theatre education.	How do female-identifying South Asian performing artists navigate social, cultural, and familial dynamics while pursuing a career in the performing arts?
Paper II: <i>Centering Identity for Higher Education Theatre Teacher Preparation</i>	This paper is an ethnodrama that presents the experiences of female-identifying artist educators from racially and ethnically diverse backgrounds. This paper will focus on themes of power, oppression, and intersectionality, using performance to engage audiences in broader conversations about systemic change in higher education.	How have the personal, cultural, and professional experiences of female-identifying performing artists from racially and ethnically diverse communities influenced their contributions to the performing arts?
Paper III: <i>The VOICE Reflective Framework: Advancing Equity in Higher Education Theatre Teacher Preparation</i>	This paper is a strategic plan that evaluates institutional practices in theatre education programs and proposes concrete strategies to increase representation, equity, and access for racially and ethnically diverse communities.	What are theatre education programs doing to create access and opportunity for performing arts practitioners from racially and ethnically diverse communities, and how effective are these efforts in fostering systemic change at higher education institutions?

Trustworthiness

To ensure the trustworthiness of this entire study, I applied Lincoln and Guba's (1985) criteria of credibility, dependability, confirmability, and generalizability while grounding my research in AsianCrit and feminist theory (Amankwaa, 2016). In Table 2, I created a visual representation of my process for establishing trustworthiness. I supported the credibility of my findings through discussions with participants, detailed narratives, and member checking, which confirmed my interpretations of their words (Amankwaa, 2016; Enworo, 2023; Lincoln & Guba,

1985; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). I ensured dependability by having a codebook that clearly outlined my coding process (Amankwaa, 2016; Bhattacharya, 2017; Enworo, 2023; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). I established confirmability through reflexive journaling and positionality statements that articulated my biases and assumptions as a South Asian female-identifying artist-scholar (Amankwaa, 2016; Enworo, 2023; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). I addressed generalizability by providing in-depth, detailed, and honest descriptions of participants' experiences, along with reflective journaling, to clarify my thoughts throughout the process (Amankwaa, 2016; Bhattacharya, 2017; Enworo, 2023; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). These strategies aligned with my research method, narrative inquiry, and the analytical frameworks used, Asian critical theory and feminist theory, which will be discussed in further detail in the sections following, ensuring an ethical research study (Amankwaa, 2016; Bhattacharya, 2017; Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Table 2

Lincoln and Guba's Criteria of Trustworthiness

Criterion	Definition	Question I asked of myself	Research strategies used
Credibility	Establishing that the researcher's findings can be trusted by clear and meaningful interpretations of the data	Do the findings accurately represent the participants' multiple realities?	Peer debriefing, member checking
Dependability	Understanding that if the study were repeated under the same conditions, it would produce the same results	Are the findings consistent given the context?	Peer debriefing
Confirmability	Ensuring interpretations come directly from the data, not from the researcher's imagination	Are findings shaped by the participants, not researcher bias?	Reflexive journaling, positionality statements
Generalizability	Ensuring underlying intention is the result of a qualitative inquiry that can be generalized or transferred to other settings	Can findings be transferred to other contexts?	Detailed description, reflexive journaling

Limitations, Delimitations, and Affordances

It is essential to acknowledge the limitations, delimitations, and affordances of this dissertation study, which offered an in-depth exploration of female-identifying performing artists from racially and ethnically diverse communities, with a specific focus on South Asian female performing artists. One limitation of the study is that it includes only the voices of participants who responded to an open invitation distributed through my professional networks. As a result, the sample of participants may not fully represent the broader population of female-identifying South Asian performing artists (Paper I) and the population of female-identifying performing artists from racially and ethnically diverse communities more broadly (Paper II). Additionally, due to my professional and personal networks, the participant pool may reflect only individuals who are part of those networks.

As I began data analysis for Papers I and II, I became aware that it would be essential to process what I had learned in Papers I and II before conducting the focus group. Additionally, the responses for Paper III were limited. I completed data collection and analysis for Papers I and II and then redistributed the survey through my professional network. I also received very few responses to join the focus group for Paper III and wondered if the lack of responses to the survey for the focus group in Paper III was a notable finding in itself (i.e., if there was a connection between prioritizing social justice and equity-based dialogue at higher education institutions and the limited responses for the focus group). Although my personal lived experiences contributed to this research, I recognized they also influenced how I interpreted participants' stories. To address this, I engaged in reflective journaling throughout the research process and incorporated much of this reflection into the writing of this dissertation.

I chose to develop an ethnodrama for Paper II. As an artist and researcher, my artistry was integral to my research process. Ethnodrama is a method rooted in artistic interpretation, which may raise questions about rigor (Saldaña, 2011; Salvatore, 2025). Ethnodrama incorporates research text to be performed, and the audience members become participants (Saldaña, 2011). Ethnodrama is considered a part of arts-based research (ABR; Salvatore, 2025), and Salvatore (2025) acknowledged that there are challenges in evaluating ABR. Salvatore (2025) further highlighted the subjectivity involved with arts processes, including ABR, and the importance of evolving criteria for different artistic projects.

Regarding delimitations, I intentionally focused on female-identifying performing artists from racially and ethnically diverse communities, with a particular focus on female performing artists from South Asian communities. This choice was grounded in my lived experiences and my desire to uplift the community to which I connect on a personal level, while also exploring questions of identity and belonging. In Paper III, I further delimited the study by centering on strategies for theatre education teacher training programs, informed by my role as a faculty member and program director and by my 25 years as a theatre educator. This focus reflects my commitment to generating not only theoretical insight but also actionable contributions that can impact curriculum, pedagogy, and institutional practices that will evolve the field of theatre education.

This study was also shaped by its affordances. The integration of Asian critical theory (AsianCrit) and feminist theory strengthened the framework by centering intersectional identities and lived experiences that historically have been excluded from theatre education discourse. By employing counternarrative storytelling and ethnodrama as both methodology and dissemination tools, this research contributes to a more inclusive framework for theatre education programs in

higher education. Although this dissertation centered on the experiences of female-identifying performing artists from racially and ethnically diverse communities, it represents just one contribution to a much larger conversation about equity and inclusion in the performing arts. The work has affirmed that many historically excluded communities must be invited in and uplifted, and it aims to serve as a catalyst for ongoing dialogue and systemic change.

Research Design

This study employed a narrative inquiry approach. Each paper elaborates on the research method specific to its research focus, including discussions on context, data sources, collection methods, and analysis. Participants were selected through purposeful sampling, with eligibility based on specific criteria for interview participation. A survey was designed and distributed to support this process, serving as an initial data collection tool to gather insights and identify potential interview participants. The research included a total of 15 participants, which included six participants for Papers I and II and three participants in the focus group for Paper III. The initial survey is provided in Appendix A, and a flyer for recruitment is provided in Appendix B. Participants were recruited through social media and e-blasts sent via listservs for higher education institutions, professional organizations in theatre education, and my professional network (see Appendix B).

Interviews

IRB approval was received on June 23, 2025. Surveys were initially sent immediately after IRB approval was obtained. After eliminating nonresponsive submissions, there were 52 complete responses. Of the 52 responses, 40 individuals agreed to participate in an interview. Twelve respondents did not want to participate in interviews. Of the 40 individuals contacted for the interview for Paper I, 15 participants who fit the study criteria responded, and 10 participants

agreed to be interviewed. For Paper II, 21 participants responded, and 16 participants agreed to be interviewed. When invitations were sent for the interviews for Papers I and II, only six participants responded, returned consent forms, and were interviewed for Paper I and II. For Paper III, there were 16 responses from participants who fit the criteria, and three participated in the focus group. Although I captured 16 faculty in higher education for Paper III, four full-time and 12 part-time, only one of the full-time faculty indicated they wanted to participate in the interviews, and 11 part-time faculty responded they wanted to participate (see Table 3).

However, only three participants responded to the invitation to participate in the focus group. As I continued with interviews and data analysis in tandem, I decided to wait until after I completed coding to invite participants to the focus group to inform the discussion during the session.

Table 3

Participant Responses

Item	Responses	Agreed to participate in interview	Responded and were able to participate in interview
Total	52	40	15
Paper I	15	10	6
Paper II	21	16	6
Paper III	16	12	3

After the survey was reviewed, an email invitation to participants for the semi-structured interviews was sent (see Appendices C and D). Follow-up emails were sent to engage participants who had agreed to be interviewed. As I began coding the interviews for Papers I and II, the data I collected helped me understand it was best to wait until I had coded all the

interviews for Papers I and II before I followed up for the focus group for Paper III. After the start of the new academic year, targeted emails also were also sent to professional organizations and my professional networks.

Once participants returned their signed consent forms, a follow-up email with a Calendly link and a Zoom link were sent. To promote consistency and reduce potential bias, participants also received the interview and focus group questions in advance. The interview and focus group questions were carefully developed and aligned with the study's research focus and questions, following the interview protocol refinement (IPR) framework by Castillo-Montoya (2016; see Table 4). All interviews were conducted in accordance with a structured protocol (see Appendices E and F) and were held virtually via Zoom using the researcher's laptop. With participants' permission, each session was recorded for subsequent transcription and analysis. All protocols obtained IRB approval. A \$10 Amazon gift card was sent to each participant following the interviews and focus group.

Table 4*Alignment With Castillo-Montoya's IPR Framework*

Phase	Inclusive	Pedagogical	Representative
Ensuring interview questions align with research questions	Survey questions were designed to invite in female identifying South Asian performing artists and female performing artists from racially and ethnically diverse communities.	Interview and focus group questions were developed to allow participants to be reflective and collect data.	Member checking was used to ensure that participant voices were represented accurately and during the interview and focus group, clarification was elicited to ensure their voices were accurately heard.
Constructing an inquiry-based conversation	Prior to the start of each, interview and the focus group, access needs were checked (are they in a comfortable location, do they need closed captioning turned on).	Participants were encouraged to ask questions about the research, to ask clarification on questions, or decline an answer if they did not want to answer.	Participants were encouraged to describe in detail their experiences and to be reflective on cultural and familial connections.
Receiving feedback on interview protocols	Received feedback from peers, professors, and colleagues.	Received feedback from peers, professors, and colleagues.	Received feedback from peers, professors, and colleagues.
Piloting the interview protocol	Conducted a pilot interview as a rehearsal and received feedback on the process, also put myself in the role of the participant.	Conducted a pilot interview as a rehearsal and received feedback on the process, also put myself in the role of the participant.	Conducted a pilot interview as a rehearsal and received feedback on the process, also put myself in the role of the participant.

Note. This is an overview of alignment for all three papers.

Data analysis involved coding processes, where I initially used open coding and continued the iterative process, refining the codes (Saldaña, 2011, 2021). I then moved into an axial coding phase and used in vivo coding, as well. I used Delve software to assist in organizing codes initially and then moved them into a code book I created using Google Docs. I then

analyzed participant narratives to identify emergent themes, ultimately developing a theoretical framework for theatre education policies and practices in higher education.

Feasibility

The study was designed to be completed over a period of 9 months. By the end of April 2025, I had defended my proposal, and immediately following the defense, I for IRB approval. I received IRB approval on June 23, 2025. Between July 2025 and September 2025, I recruited participants, conducted interviews, and coded all interviews for Papers I and II. The focus group was held in late September. Data analysis began with the first interview and continued in tandem, as it was an iterative process. This process continued to October 2025, with the writing of the analysis concurrent with the completion of the interviews and the focus group. This was completed in September 2025. My goal was to complete writing by mid-October 2025, to have a full draft ready for review.

Definitions of Terms

The following definitions may be helpful for readers' understanding of this research study:

Artistic skill building refers to building skills in one of the arts areas, which include theatre, dance, visual art, music, and film/media (Dewey, 1934; O'Neil & Lambert, 1982).

Arts administrators are artist educators at cultural organizations with arts-based programming. They facilitate the administrative work needed to run programs and departments or work at the executive level (Benton & Diyanni, 2004; Byrnes, 2013).

Arts integration refers to using the arts as a teaching tool to teach core content subject areas or using the core content subject areas as source material to teach arts skills (O'Neil, 2015).

Arts teachers refer to certified teachers who teach in any recognized arts area, including theatre, dance, visual art, music, and film/media (Katona, 2016; New York State Education Department, n.d.).

AsianCrit is short for Asian critical theory, which is deeply embedded in the principles of critical race theory and provides a perspective on the Asian American experience. AsianCRIT highlights the ways Asian Americans are uniquely racialized with the model minority myth, the idea of the perpetual foreigner, and how they contribute to racism relative to other groups (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017; Museus & Iftikar, 2013; Yoo et al., 2022).

Critical race theory (CRT) is how discrimination was first understood as a response to colorblindness. CRT began by examining issues of race, racism, and power in law, economics, and history until it was brought to the education field by scholars (Bell, 1992; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995).

Devising theatre is a collaborative creation process without a pre-existing script that uses storytelling, improvisation, play, and the elements of the theatre to develop material (Hashagen, 2014; Kaufman et al., 2018).

Ethnodrama is a script developed with data collected and analyzed by an artist-researcher with the purpose of performing the data (Saldaña, 2011; Salvatore, 2025).

Ethnotheatre is the theatrical production of an ethnodrama script (Saldaña, 2011; Salvatore, 2025).

Feminist theory examines how systems of oppression influence identity formation and uphold power structures through the lens of women's experiences and their uniqueness at the intersection of gender, race, class, sexuality, and ability (Ahmed, 2017; Butler, 1988; Crenshaw, 1991).

Intersectionality is when race, gender, and other identities overlap to define lived experiences. It was first introduced to explain how Black women's experiences of discrimination were overlooked through both a feminist and an antiracist lens (Crenshaw, 1995).

Performance arts include any performing art medium, such as dance, theatre, musical theatre, orchestra, hip-hop education, etc. (Katona, 2016).

A **teaching artist** is a practitioner in any art form who does not work full-time for a public school but is a consultant or part-time employee of a cultural organization with residency programs in schools, after-school programs, or nontraditional community settings (Dawson, 2018; Katona, 2016).

Theater, spelled with the ending of -er, refers to the practice of skill-building that culminates in a product, such as a production (Guerra, 2023).

Theatre, spelled with the ending of -re, refers to a process, such as education (Guerra, 2023). **Theatre education** encompasses educators who train theatre artists (e.g., theatre educators, educators interested in working with drama in their classroom setting) and practitioners who work in nontraditional community-based settings (Maguire & Schuitema, 2012).

Theatre for Young Audiences (TYA) includes performances created for children and youth (ASSITEJ International, n.d.; Katona, 2016; O'Neil & Lambert, 1982).

**PAPER I: ILLUMINATING SOUTH ASIAN FEMALE IDENTITY AND ITS
IMPLICATIONS FOR THEATRE EDUCATION
IN HIGHER EDUCATION**

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My family moved from New York City (NYC) when I was 6 years old and settled in a predominantly white and affluent suburb about 30 miles outside of NYC for most of my childhood. My parents focused on ensuring that my siblings and I received a quality public school education. We attended school in a blue-ribbon school district, which in and of itself came with privileges. However, we lived differently from most of our peers, as our home was modest in comparison. In the late 1970s and early 1980s, we frequently had family from India living with us. My parents' siblings and their children came with hopes of a promising future.

As a South Asian, female-identifying artist and educator, I often felt invisible during my education (Kavanakudiyil, 2024). Tuhus-Dubrow (2022) emphasized the importance of children seeing themselves reflected in their learning; however, throughout my education, discussions about playwrights and practitioners from racially and ethnically diverse communities were nearly nonexistent (Kavanakudiyil, 2024). I frequently found myself in learning environments where no one looked like me. At the time, I did not think much of it; only in hindsight did I recognize the profound impact of this nonexistence. In this research paper, I explore the experiences of South Asian, female-identifying performing artists to illuminate their experiences and to impact understanding and change in teacher preparation in higher education. I employed interviews and reflective journaling to explore these experiences, centering the question: How do female-identifying South Asian American performing artists navigate social, cultural, and familial dynamics in their decision-making processes to pursue a career in the performing arts?

Literature Review

I approached this literature review drawing from the perspective of narrative inquiry and intentionally integrated personal reflection throughout. Researchers conducting qualitative research often explore their own proximity to privilege and power, which are part of the stories

they examine (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Esposito & Evans-Winters, 2022). So, the researcher's story cannot be separated from the research journey. I approached this literature review weaving in my experience as a South Asian female theatre educator, including my values (Bhattacharya, 2017) and the idea of taking responsibility for ongoing, transparent reflection (Esposito & Evans-Winters, 2022). This integration also acknowledged that meaning is coconstructed through lived experiences and reflective individual perspectives and understanding (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Transparency in the researcher's voice is important in reclaiming one's self through the research process (Evans-Winters, 2019). My voice, integrated with this literature review, mirrors the idea of uplifting the voices of South Asian female performing artists.

Asian communities often have faced the challenge of being homogenized despite their vast diversity. Võ (2012) emphasized the need to resist the tendency to treat Asian Americans as a monolithic group. South Asian Americans can trace their ancestry to countries such as Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, the Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka (Jain, 2022; Museus, 2014). Indian Americans represent the largest subgroup of South Asian Americans and at the time of this writing were the second-largest Asian American ethnic group in the United States (Jain, 2022; Tummala-Narra et al., 2024). When completing demographic information, South Asians frequently have been categorized simply as "Asian" or "other," which has failed to capture the nuances of their identities (J. L. Young et al., 2022). This oversimplification can create a sense of disconnection, as South Asians may not identify with East Asian cultures (e.g., Chinese, Japanese, Korean; J. L. Young et al., 2022), leading to feelings of exclusion and identity confusion. In fact, as a child of Indian parents, I recall being forced to select "other" on standardized test demographic information as a child because I had no other option. I was not

represented. I also distinctly remember feeling “othered” in that moment, right before starting a state exam, as young as second grade.

Identity

South Asian women often have adapted their identities to fit different social and professional contexts (Malhi et al., 2009). Many South Asian women navigate between multiple intersecting identities, often gravitating toward the dominant white culture for comfort and validation (Liang & Peters-Hawkins, 2017). In fact, before 9/11, many South Asian Americans did not self-identify as people of color, despite experiencing discrimination (Tummala-Narra et al., 2024). This was partly because they shifted between aligning with the dominant culture and their cultural background as needed (Malhi et al., 2009). This fluid positionality underscores the complexity of South Asian women’s identities and highlights the need for more inclusive representation (Liang & Peters-Hawkins, 2017). With consideration to this research, this fluid positionality is reflective of how female-identifying South Asian performing artists continually negotiate their identities.

Shafi (2023) highlighted identity formation theory, which is a process shaped by acculturation and is constantly shifting as individuals navigate their sense of belonging between the cultural hierarchies of the dominant culture and their own. Identity formation involves how much an individual has explored their ethnic identity, has clarity on the ethnic group to which they belong, and is clear on what that means to them and how they identify as part of the group (Umaña-Taylor et al., 2006). Identity formation theory, as applied to South Asians, includes identity in the context of whether their South Asian Indian identity is integrated with U.S. identity and if they retain their South Asian identity, as compared to having a more U.S. identity or having an Indian identity, as part of their ethnicity (Shafi, 2023). This theory reflects the

pressure immigrants face to adapt to the dominant culture at the expense of their ethnic identities (Shafi, 2023). Shafi (2023) described when individuals experience exclusion from the dominant culture, it can lead to culture shock and resistance to assimilation.

Engaging with one's culture is central to identity development and navigating bias and discrimination (Kiang et al., 2023; Shafi, 2023). Cultural connections are important in validating identity and fostering personal and professional growth (J. L. Young et al., 2022). For example, many participants shared that early arts experiences included an experience as part of an Indian cultural events. As an example, Banerji (2019b) discussed *Durga Puja* as a social drama where Bengali identity is uplifted and intended to engage South Asian Americans with their Bengali roots. This is an example of how performance connects to cultural identity. Cultural identity is shaped by one's affiliation with their cultural heritage (Hamid, 2015). However, in his other work, Banerji (2019b) noted that non-Western performance traditions often are overlooked in U.S. theatre curricula and advocated for greater integration into mainstream theatre education as part of global theater history.

Identity formation for South Asian women often has been shaped by gendered expectations, racial stereotyping, and cultural norms. These intersections can both empower and constrain one's ability to fully express cultural belonging in professional spaces. These connections are important; however, they are not the total of what makes a person's identity (Yoo et al., 2022). Increased representation of South Asian women in leadership roles is essential for fostering a sense of belonging and visibility (Yoo et al., 2022), particularly in theatre education. Through this research, I aimed to explore the implications of these experiences in fostering a more inclusive environment in educational settings.

An important attribute of identity formation is the act of memory and remembering (Dillard, 2012). For example, I have struggled with my identity since I was a little girl. As a South Asian American woman who grew up in an affluent suburb just outside of NYC during the 1980s and 1990s, I often felt a sense of cultural disconnect. I was born in NYC and lived there until I was about 5. I have very little recollection of the time, but I do know any of the few Indian friends I had stemmed from familial relationships. My parents, who immigrated to the United States in the late 1960s, spoke to me only in English, determined that I would grow up without an accent. The landscape began to change in the early 1980s when my parents started sponsoring their siblings to come to the United States. There were more Indian people and more opportunities to connect with the Indian community in the form of dance schools, churches, and community gatherings. I remember thinking how lucky they were to have a community.

I have younger family members who grew up surrounded by Indian peers, with a stronger sense of cultural community. That was not my experience. By the time I had the opportunity to be part of the South Asian community, I was already immersed in U.S. cultural activities (e.g., theatre, sports, attending a U.S. church). I had close friends in the small town where I grew up, some of whom have remained lifelong friends, who were all white. Even as a child, I felt slightly different without fully understanding why. I was not bullied and never lacked a social life, yet there was an underlying sense of not quite fitting in. That feeling did not begin to fade until I found my theatre education community, where something finally clicked.

Despite being included in social circles, something internal prompted me to understand I was somehow different. This ambiguity made it difficult to understand who I was, how my identity was constructed, and how I truly fit in (Shenoy-Packer, 2015). Moments like the 1st day of school, every year, reminded me of these differences, and I dreaded those days with a passion.

Although I had lived in the same town since I was 6 years old, each new school year brought a familiar discomfort because I just wanted to blend in. My teachers often mispronounced my name on the 1st day if they had not met me before, and the entire class would echo it back correctly. While it is apparent I had support from my peers, I wished this didn't have to happen at all.

In high school, this ritual repeated itself every period in every new class, every 1st day. I remain sensitive to the mispronunciation or misspelling of my name, especially when no effort is made to try. I am able to move past the moment when people try, but to me, lack of trying and dismissiveness about pronunciation are acts of disrespect and disregard because to me it gives the impression that paying attention to such a thing is not important, therefore my identity is not important.

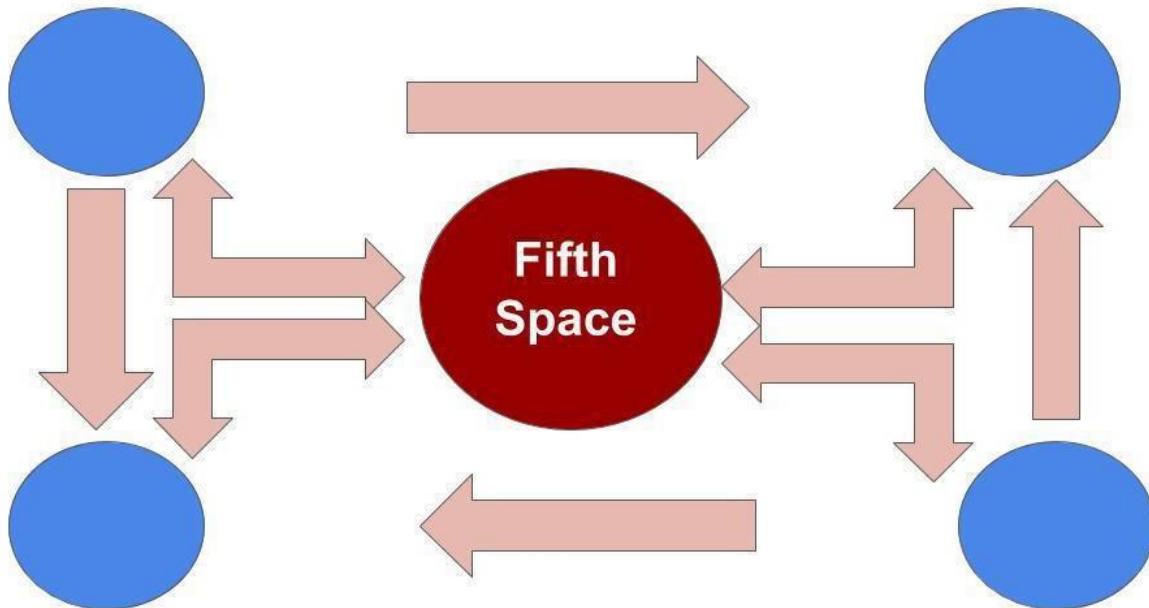
These moments have persisted into adulthood. Even during meetings both at the college where I work and in the field, I have experienced colleagues dismissing the importance of how my name is presented, not everyone, but a privileged few (Kavanakudiyil, 2024). It is exhausting to correct people who do not seem to care or to know when the correct moment is to bring something to someone's attention. With the advent of Zoom meetings and our names being displayed on our frames, mine not being phonetically spelled, I have recently experienced people who previously said my name correctly now mispronouncing it.

The Fifth Space: The Floating Circle

In 2020, I started to visualize my identity crisis or identity exploration, depending on how I was feeling. I wrote about how I visualized this in a blog that year. It starts with four circles on a piece of paper and the upper left represented association with Indian culture, with movement toward the lower left indicating a space further removed from the origin (Kavanakudiyil, 2020).

U.S. culture was on the lower right; moving farther above was another space further removed from that identity (Kavanakudiyil, 2020). Then, imagine a ball bouncing between all four corners (Kavanakudiyil, 2020). Additionally, fragments were flying everywhere, creating chaos.

Dillard (2012) pointed out it is important to see the fragments to sustain the whole. Somewhere in the center of this movement, I exist. I call it *The Fifth Space: The Floating Circle* (Kavanakudiyil, 2020), with the middle being the fifth space (see Figure 1). However, I realized that I was not grounded in the center. The ever-evolving identities cause fragments of myself to be left behind, and those fragments are constantly in motion. These fragments are filled with chaos and overpower my ability to make sense of who I am at times. They may also be a representation of my shredded patience. It is a crossroads with nowhere to stop, just continuous shifting and emotional charge. I picture it as fragments flying through space with nowhere to land. I have spent my life shifting between these identities, constantly adjusting my sense of self to fit the situation. It is draining.

Figure 1*The Fifth Space: Fragmented Identity*

Note. This image was created to illustrate how I visualize the concepts described previously.

The fifth space is a visual representation of identity confusion. The term *second-generation* typically refers to individuals born in the United States to at least one foreign-born parent (Massey, 2018; Schneider, 2016). Shafi (2023) noted many second-generation Indians born in the United States navigate a complex, triple-layered identity that encompasses being Indian, Asian, and American, which raises the question of whether they assimilate into the U.S. identity, retain an Asian identity, or maintain a specifically Indian identity. This is relatable for me. As mentioned previously, navigating identity as a second-generation person can be challenging. The challenge was not always noticeably present in the moment. I did not always feel like I fit into U.S. culture, but I also did not fit into Indian culture.

In the late 1990s and early 2000s when I was auditioning, I even remember being told “You’re not Indian enough,” or “You can pass for Latina.” This sent a message to me that who I was not being seen and was not enough. This went unrecognized at the time. However, in reflection, the impact of negotiating these challenges became apparent. This ongoing negotiation of identity, when compounded by workplace environments that often challenge the expression of ethnic identity and include microaggressions, can lead to experiences of fear and discomfort (Shenoy-Packer, 2015). This introduces the complication of the intersectional emergence of identity, which is influenced by additional factors (e.g., race, gender, class) and has implications in various social contexts (Collins & Bilge, 2020). These moments shaped my understanding of self and my identity within the spaces I am in.

According to Weick’s (2011) sensemaking theory, one can only make sense of one’s life by reflecting on past experiences (Chace et al., 2021). Recalling acts of the past also can be an act of decolonization (Dillard, 2012). Dillard (2012) explained, “We must learn to remember the things we have learned to forget” (p. 2). Weick’s (2011) theory of sensemaking clarifies that each person’s understanding of past events impacts their future. This kind of reflection is crucial in understanding past experiences and making meaning for the future. One’s notion of one’s own identity is affected by and rooted in the past (Dillard, 2012). Collins and Bilge (2020) suggested identity can be understood not just as something one possesses, but as something one actively performs or enacts. Power influences the outcome of actions in these social situations, and it varies from one situation to the next (Collins & Bilge, 2020). These ideas highlight how South Asian female-identifying performing artists interpret their experiences. Sensemaking becomes not only a tool for understanding how they construct identity but also a method of reclaiming.

This body of literature directly informed the development of my interview protocol, coding structure, and the emergent themes that shaped the VOICE framework for higher education teacher training programs in theatre education. My findings intentionally revisit the scholarship reviewed here, demonstrating how my research extends and challenges current conversations in theatre education to inform the VOICE reflective framework for theatre education programs.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework for this study was Asian critical theory (AsianCrit). As Yoo et al. (2022) and Aggarwal and Ayse Ciftci (2021) noted, AsianCrit provides a lens to amplify the diverse experiences of Asian Americans, focusing on the experiences of Asian communities. I used this framework to examine systemic barriers critically while centering South Asian female-identifying voices. I critically assessed the dominant narratives that have shaped the experiences and identities of South Asian female-identifying performing artists.

Critical Legal Studies

AsianCrit cannot be used as a framework without first introducing its emergence from critical race theory (CRT; Iftikar & Museus, 2018) and CRT's emergence from critical legal studies (CLS; Crenshaw, 2019). CLS is an intellectual movement that challenges traditional legal theories with the idea that the legal system in the United States has been shaped by dominant power structures having a significant impact on Indigenous, Latinx, Asian, and Black Americans (Bell, 1995). This provides important context for understanding AsianCrit. U.S. legal history includes examples of systemic racialization of various groups (e.g., the Indian Appropriation Act, the Chinese Exclusion Act; Delgado & Stefancic, 2017; Shafi, 2023). Scholars from both the right and left political sides have critiqued *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) for

reinforcing dominant power structures (Crenshaw, 2019). *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) was a pivotal decision in civil rights law, but its implementation was not prioritized at that time, which limited its impact (Bell, 1995). Additionally, the reinterpretation of *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) provided conservative legal advocates and scholars with the means to justify colorblind approaches to race reform, doing a disservice to civil rights and equality for many (Crenshaw, 2019). Crenshaw (2019) points out that this reinterpretation allowed a perception that progress was made but structural racism was ignored.

Critical Race Theory

CRT emerged as a response to colorblindness in law and included an examination of issues of race, racism, and power in law, economics, history, and civil rights (Crenshaw, 2019; Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) brought CRT to the American Educational Research Association annual meeting in 1994, and this was the first time an educational article applied CRT. CRT expanded into education, sociology, and other disciplines (Crenshaw, 2019), where it emphasizes the ideas of racism being embedded in everyday life, interest convergence (i.e., the notion that the majority will not work to eradicate racism unless it benefits them), and social construction (i.e., the idea that racism is socially constructed; Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). Delgado and Stefancic (2017) stated that CRT also highlights how dominant groups continually redefine the racialization of communities in response to shifting social, political, and economic conditions that benefit them. My research expands CRT's principles into the performing arts by illuminating how centering South Asian female narratives disrupt those dominant constructions.

AsianCrit

AsianCrit evolved from CRT to center the unique racialized experiences of the Asian American community and explain how these experiences intersect with other forms of oppression (Iftikar & Museus, 2018). AsianCrit is grounded in seven tenets: (a) Asianization; (b) transnational context; (c) (re)constructivist history; (d) intersectionality; (e) antiessentialism; (f) commitment to social justice; and (g) story, theory, and praxis (Yoo et al., 2022). Although inspired by CRT, these tenets focus specifically on Asian American experiences and offer a lens to examine how Asian Americans navigate and sometimes perpetuate racism based on their experiences relative to other groups (Yoo et al., 2022). AsianCrit discusses the model minority myth and racial triangulation, which add to the complexities of power dynamics and cultural representation (Iftikar & Museus, 2018). An example of this idea applied to performing arts is the lack of culturally relevant content and processes. Applying AsianCrit allows for a deeper exploration of how South Asian female-identifying performing artists negotiate belonging and visibility in predominantly white artistic and educational spaces.

AsianCrit highlights the reality that Asian Americans are uniquely racialized as both model minorities and perpetually foreign threats, which are racial formations deployed to harm Asian Americans and other communities of color (Iftikar & Museus, 2018). Yoo et al. (2022) emphasized that AsianCrit addresses limited research on the racialization of Asians in the United States, advocating for a framework that highlights their unique history of oppression, resilience, and resistance. Different racial and ethnic groups in the United States have faced racialization in distinct ways.

For example, South Asian Indians in the United States have faced racism based on ethnicity, religion, skin color, language, and bias-based violence. Racism toward Asians

increased during World War II, when Japanese Americans were forced into internment camps (Yoo et al., 2022), in the aftermath of the 9/11 terrorist attacks (Inman et al., 2015; Tummala-Narra et al., 2024), and in the racialization of the Asian community during the COVID-19 global pandemic (Yoo et al., 2022). These examples of exclusion resulted from attitudes perpetuated by fear, leading to inequities influenced by societal norms. Asians are racialized in a distinct manner with their own negative experiences (Aggarwal & Ciftci, 2021; Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). Knowing these racialized experiences provides a foundation for understanding more deeply how systemic inequities persist.

Model Minority Myth

The model minority myth, which reemerged in the 1960s as a strategy to undermine gains from the Civil Rights Movement, has framed Asians as the most successful underrepresented racial group due to their hard work and belief in the American Dream (Yoo et al., 2022). It has acted as a barrier to accessing essential services, has placed undue pressure on individuals to conform, and has perpetuated anti-Asian stigma (Liang & Peters-Hawkins, 2017). Furthermore, it has reinforced harmful stereotypes, erased the cultural diversity among Asian Americans (e.g., the distinct differences between East and South Asian cultures), and neglected socioeconomic disparities. Those who do not fit the stereotype have been marginalized, exacerbating inequities in the community (Aggarwal & Ciftci, 2021). This limits authentic representation.

This myth has portrayed Asians as the ideal underrepresented group, emphasizing that success is achieved solely through effort and implying any failure stems from a lack thereof (Jain, 2022; Yoo et al., 2022). However, this narrative has ignored systemic barriers to success and often has prevented Asian Americans from accessing necessary support and services (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). For example, many South Asians are seen as perpetual outsiders

(Inman et al., 2015). This stereotype of the “perpetual foreigner” (Yoo et al., 2022, p. 571) frames Asian Americans as outsiders regardless of their citizenship. South Asian people have often been overlooked in educational research due to categorization under this stereotype, which inaccurately suggests they are not disadvantaged (Liang & Peters-Hawkins, 2017). Often, they could benefit from support services (e.g., mental health services) that have not been extended to them, particularly when cultural expectations are not met (Inman et al., 2015).

The model minority myth has perpetuated divisions among racial groups by implying racially and ethnically diverse groups fail due to their deficiencies (i.e., failures are effectively their fault), pitting one group against another (J. L. Young et al., 2022). AsianCrit highlights the harmful effects the model minority myth stereotype creates in Asian American communities by masking challenges they face (Yoo et al., 2022). The model minority myth not only has contributed to the minimization of the impact of racism but also has been used as a coping strategy by many first-generation South Asian Indian Americans as they forged toward thriving in the United States (Inman et al., 2015). Although it has created an illusion of security, stability, and belonging, Shams (2020) demonstrated that this perception is misleading. The model minority myth often has been used to define all Asian Americans, which can dilute the diversity that exists among Asian Americans (Yi et al., 2020).

Black–White Binary

The Black–white binary simplifies race into two categories: white as normative and Black as nonwhite (Museus, 2014; Yoo et al., 2022). Kim (2023) explained this dynamic elevates non-Black communities while oppressing Black communities at the expense of all nonwhite groups, uplifting white supremacy and privileging white people. It is essential to move beyond the binary of Black versus white (Võ et al., 2012). When the discourse only is framed as

Black and white, it excludes Asian Americans (Museus, 2014). Museus (2014) noted going beyond the binary is important for developing a more critical understanding of issues of race in U.S. society. This binary framework has positioned Asian Americans to resist and perpetuate anti-Blackness at the same time (Yoo et al., 2022). Collins (2022) referred to this as the matrix of domination. Collins (2022) described intersecting oppressions as socially organized and sustained by perpetuating each other, emphasizing how lived realities structurally shape how intersectionality is understood. So, although Asian Americans have been elevated by anti-Blackness, they also have been oppressed by white supremacy (Kim, 2023).

Yoo et al. (2022) highlighted the complex racial positioning of Asian Americans, which reflects both unique forms of white supremacy and conditional privilege as non-Black people of color. This has given them the label of successful minority and conditional inclusion whiteness, which allows them to distance themselves from Blackness, align with success, and disassociate from racialized oppression. The Black–white binary requires non-Black groups to measure their mistreatment in comparison to that of Black Americans (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). AsianCrit shifts the focus away from individuals and instead centers on the structural, institutional, and cultural aspects of the white-dominant society and white American’s roles in perpetuating racism in the lives of Asian Americans (Yoo et al., 2022).

Racial Triangulation

Racial triangulation positions Asian Americans relative to both white and Black communities. Racial triangulation models emphasize perceived inferiority and the experience of being an outsider (Kiang et al., 2023). They can be looked at as two-dimensional, with one race being on the superior–inferior scale and the other being on the “insider–outsider scale” (Kim, 2023, p. 5), with white people sitting at the top of the triangle and Black people at the bottom and

Asian Americans in between. This frames Asian racialization as “better” than Blacks but never fully attaining the status of whites (Museus, 2014).

This concept of racial triangulation explains how the dominant group (i.e., white Americans) elevates one subgroup (e.g., Asian Americans) over another (e.g., Black Americans) to perpetuate oppression (J. L. Young et al., 2022). The theory of racial triangulation states Asian Americans are racially inferior to white Americans yet racially superior to Black Americans (Kim, 2023). Still, Asian Americans also have been ostracized, and Asian Americans’ experiences in the United States cannot be understood without examining both dominance and inferiority (Adem et al., 2023). This idea of how Asian Americans have been pitted against other racial groups to uphold white supremacy is essential to consider (Yoo et al., 2022).

Understanding AsianCrit connects the Asian American experience to the dialogue on identity with a focus on their experiences. This connects to my paper, as Paper I focuses on the experiences of South Asian performing artists.

DesiCrit

The first large wave of Asian Americans immigrated to the United States in the mid-1800s and did not consider themselves Asian or Asian American (Museus, 2014). In fact, during this time, the U.S. census oscillated between labeling South Asian Indians as “white” or “other” (Jain, 2022). In the early 1900s, they were all labeled as “Hindu,” even those who identified as Christian, Sikh, and Muslim, and in the mid-1900s, they reverted to being categorized as “other” (Jain, 2022). Jain (2022) noted that in the 1970s census, Indians were classified as white, and then in the 1980s, they were labeled as Asian Indian, which meant they gained legal minority status and were included in federal affirmative action programs.

Museus (2014) noted when Asians began entering the United States, the dominant group began to refer to them as “Asians” due to the continent from which they came, even though their cultures differed. Although AsianCrit focuses on all Asian communities, there are vast differences (Haque, 2025). These communities can include South Asian, Southeast Asian, and East Asian peoples (Haque, 2025; Museus, 2014). There are vast differences among these communities in terms of history, experiences, customs, and culture (Harpalani, 2013). In the 1960s, the term “Asian American” emerged as a means to create solidarity among Asian Americans, uniting them to combat societal racism (Museus, 2014). Museus (2014) noted that in Asian American studies, scholars have noted that East Asian Americans (e.g., Chinese, Japanese, and Korean Americans) have dominated discourse, and South Asian Americans (e.g., Bangladeshi, Indian, Pakistani, Sri Lankan Americans) have been minimized in discussions.

DesiCrit focuses on the South Asian population, which encompasses communities from countries of India, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Nepal, Bhutan, and the Maldives, and South Asian Americans, who originally trace their ancestry back to these regions; this includes people of South Asian descent who immigrated to the United States from other regions (e.g., various nations in the Caribbean, Africa, Asia, Europe, Canada, the Middle East; Harpalani, 2013; Jain, 2022). At the time of this study, South Asians were among the fastest-growing minority groups, and according to the 2020 U.S. Census, they comprised approximately 6% of the U.S. foreign-born population and 23% of the Asian American population (Chempanal, 2025; Jain, 2022).

DesiCrit allows for deeper discussions on colorism, specific racialization of South Asians, and a more nuanced understanding of their struggles, including colonialism (Haque, 2025). *Desi*, a term derived from the Sanskrit word *deśha*, refers to the motherland (Haque,

2025). In this context, it refers to the second generation of immigrants or the next generation of the post-1965 immigrants from India (Jain, 2022). Jain (2022) noted the irony that although Desis are granted U.S. citizenship, they are not fully accepted as part of the U.S. culture. This is where the phrase ABCD, short for American-born confused desi, can be seen as derogatory and portrays those born in the United States to South Asian immigrant parents as confused about being part of two worlds.

South Asians often are identified as a homogeneous group through the lens of Western society; however, there are vast differences among South Asians in relations, culture, and language (Haque, 2025; Jain, 2022). Harpalani (2013) developed DesiCrit as a framework that focuses on the intersection of race and racism for South Asians (Jain, 2022). Harpalani (2013) was transparent about the reasons for the development of DesiCrit, which included providing an opportunity for South Asian Americans to investigate and reflect on their own racialization and uplifting the South Asian community. DesiCrit offers a chance to focus on topics such as caste, colorism, religious discrimination, postcolonial trauma, and antiblackness in South Asian communities (Harpalani, 2013).

It is essential to recognize that the process of acculturation varies according to the culture of both the minority group and the majority group into which it is adopted and the impact of generational factors on integration into the dominant culture (Chempanal et al., 2025).

Microclimes is another term associated with DesiCrit, defined as South Asians striving for whiteness at certain times to obtain specific benefits (Jain, 2022). Although this paper focuses on using AsianCrit, elements of DesiCrit are integrated into the discussion, making an introduction such as this necessary. To clarify, I developed a chart to visually illustrate the connections between critical race theory, Asian critical theory, and DesiCrit as I understood them (see Table 1). Incorporating DesiCrit into this research contributes to the limited scholarship on South Asian

identity in the performing arts and theatre education by acknowledging the diversity within the Asian diaspora, particularly the unique cultural and historical contexts of South Asian communities.

Table 1

Side by Side Visualization of the Core Tenets of CRT, AsianCrit, and DesiCrit

Tenet	Critical race theory (CRT)	Asian critical theory (AsianCrit)	Desi critical theory (DesiCrit)
Race	Race is socially constructed (a social construct; Delgado & Stefancic, 2017).	<i>Asianization</i> refers to the racialization of Asian Americans (Iftikar & Museus, 2018; Yoo et al., 2022).	<i>Racial ambiguity</i> refers to the formal and informal ways in which South Asians are assigned a racial identity (Harpalani, 2013; Jain, 2022).
Whiteness	<i>Whiteness as property</i> refers to whiteness as having material and immaterial gains (Harris, 1993).	<i>Transnational context</i> refers to how imperialism and colonialism have impacted racial identity (Iftikar & Museus, 2018; Yoo et al., 2022).	<i>Whiteness as capital</i> refers to how South Asians determine value that lingers from colonialism (Haque, 2025).
Relevant terms	<i>Racial realism</i> refers to how racism impacts every part of one's life, that it often is not recognized, and that colorblind or equal treatment is insisted upon (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017).	<i>(Re)constructivist history</i> refers to the importance of understanding Asian American histories to contextualize present-day experiences with racism (Iftikar & Museus 2018; Yoo et al., 2022).	<i>Displacement</i> refers to South Asian American experiences of displacement due to political and social challenges (Haque, 2025).
Intersectional identity	<i>Intersectionality</i> refers to people having multiple identities that overlap and can conflict (Crenshaw, 2019).	<i>Intersectionality</i> refers to understanding how experiences can be integrated with other forms of oppression (e.g., gender and class; Iftikar & Museus, 2018; Yoo et al., 2022).	<i>Intersectionality</i> refers to how experiences of South Asians intersect with identities such as class, gender, and religion (Harpalani, 2013).

Tenet	Critical race theory (CRT)	Asian critical theory (AsianCrit)	Desi critical theory (DesiCrit)
	<p><i>Interest convergence</i> refers to progression only occurring when it converges with white interest (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017).</p> <p><i>Differential racialization</i> refers to the ways in which the dominant society racializes marginalized groups at different times, to advance its own interests (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017).</p>	<p><i>Strategic (anti)essentialism</i> refers to understanding Asian Americans should not be categorized as one homogenous group (Iftikar & Museus, 2018; Yoo et al., 2022).</p> <p><i>Commitment to social justice</i> refers to the focus of speaking Asian Americans' narratives (Iftikar & Museus, 2018; Yoo et al., 2022).</p>	<p><i>Invisibility</i> refers to the erasure of experiences of South Asian Americans (Haque, 2025).</p> <p><i>Interracial alliance</i> refers to the deep-rooted anti-Black sentiment in the South Asian community (Haque, 2025).</p>
Impact of story	<p><i>Counterstorytelling</i> refers to the importance of hearing the historically oppressed voices, particularly Black voices, and that those voices are experts on their experiences (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017; Solórzano & Yasso, 2002).</p>	<p><i>Story, theory, and praxis</i> refer to centering the experiences of Asian Americans (Iftikar & Museus, 2018; Yoo et al., 2022).</p>	<p><i>Folklore</i> refers to storytelling centering South Asian perspectives and experiences (Haque, 2025).</p> <p><i>Microclimate</i> refers to how different political climates determine how a person is racialized (Harpalani, 2013; Jain, 2022).</p>

Note. This chart was created to compare all three theories.

My study primarily employed AsianCrit as an extension of CRT to examine the racialization of Asian American communities, while also acknowledging the limitations of this framework, which often overlooks the specific experiences of South Asian individuals. Haque (2025) noted Asian Americans are more aware of how U.S. society frequently misrepresents them. AsianCrit's focus on racialization, and the model minority myth is essential, as it is a foundation for understanding how South Asians often are misunderstood and lumped together in race discussions in the United States. DesiCrit brings to the conversation the importance of

understanding the triple identity of South Asian Indian Americans, who hold the intersectional identities of being Indian, being Asian American, and being American (Shafi, 2023). I looked at DesiCrit as an innovative and complementary framework that also helped to frame identity in the context of this paper. Integrating DesiCrit into my thought process resisted essentializing Asian American identity.

Methodology

Storytelling is a method through which experiences can be shared, but it also is a way in which the storyteller, or in the case of this research, the participant, can make sense of past experiences and reclaim agency, which in turn impacts how these experiences fit into the societal narrative (Caine et al., 2018; Toliver, 2020). Sensemaking connects what a person experiences and how they understand those experiences by helping to form meaning from experiences (Weick, 2011). Experiences are how stories evolve. Gavidia and Adu (2022) noted storytelling is a defining component of narrative inquiry. The methodology for this study centered on storytelling and exploring how people make sense of their experiences through narrative (Bhattacharya, 2017).

Narrative Inquiry

Narrative research was developed as a model that centers a person's experiences as a mode of resistance to existing power structures (Andrews et al., 2013; Bhattacharya, 2017). Narrative research does not prescribe specific guidelines for selecting appropriate materials, methods of investigation, or level of analysis for stories (Andrews et al., 2013; Creswell & Poth, 2025). It is a research method that validates the stories as a data source (Saldaña, 2021). The meaning-making of stories is a key component of narrative inquiry (Bhattacharya, 2017).

Narrative inquiry emphasizes understanding experiences through storytelling, exploring how stories are constructed, and understanding their meanings (Bhattacharya, 2017). In this dissertation, I use narrative inquiry to uplift the lived experiences of South Asian and other racially and ethnically diverse female identifying performing artists treating their stories as sites of knowledge that challenge dominant narratives in theatre education.

There is a relationship between how an individual experiences the world and how they interpret their experiences (Weick, 2011). Narrative inquiry focuses on how researchers explore, capture, understand, and construct stories based on participants' recounting their experiences (Bhattacharya, 2017; Saldaña, 2011). Kanji and Cahusac (2015) highlighted the importance of narrative in sensemaking. Clandinin and Connelly (2000), drawing on Dewey's (1934) ideas about the nature of experience, shaped narrative inquiry as a form of storytelling that explores individuals in their social context. Clandinin and Connelly (2000) argued that narrative inquiries shape our "inquiry plotlines" (p. 121) and described narrative inquiry as a "metaphorical three-dimensional space" (p. 50), referring to the varied dimensions of time, social conditions, and place, and how these impact the interpretation and understanding of experiences. In this study, narrative inquiry provided a lens through which I explored how South Asian female performing artists connect personal identity to their artistic experiences. This understanding facilitated the exploration of participants' stories in the contexts of the performing arts and cultural identity.

Endarkened Storywork

Endarkened storywork centers on culturally rich narratives of Black existence that counter dominant narratives, which antiracist researchers find valuable for educational, cultural, and social critique (Toliver, 2021). This was a strong model to consider in my research. It is rooted in Black feminist thought and CRT and emphasizes the importance of challenging

dominant ideals (Dillard, 2012; Solórzano & Yasso, 2002). The history of Black storytelling came before any theoretical framework (Toliver, 2021). Toliver (2021) also noted the importance of stories as a way to “reaffirm the humanity of the storyteller because they share their lives with those willing to listen” (p. 507). Endarkened storywork remembers the past and encourages asking questions to bring diverse perspectives in interpreting the past (Dillard, 2012). By drawing from endarkened storywork, my research centers on South Asian women’s voices using storytelling.

Storytelling is often a means of learning about the struggles and survival of historically excluded communities (Bell, 1995). Narrative research often has been employed to challenge existing power structures, collect oral histories of working-class communities, and examine the (auto)biographical expressions of women (Andrews et al., 2013). However, it falls short because it does not offer the cultural responsiveness necessary to uplift all experiences (McClish-Boyd & Bhattacharya, 2024). McClish-Boyd and Bhattacharya (2024) gave the example of *Natyashastra*, an Indian storytelling framework that is not present in the dominant dialogue of narrative inquiry. Endarkened storywork emphasizes narrative storytelling that challenges dominant paradigms (Toliver, 2020). Building on these frameworks, my research on South Asian women’s narratives positioned their stories as a way to understand better how their experiences in the performing arts impacted them.

Endarkened storywork centers meaning in participants’ stories and is committed to culturally responsive dialogue for the communities with which the researcher engages (McClish-Boyd & Bhattacharya, 2024). Endarkened storywork honors women’s ways of knowing that uplift memories, wisdom, and spirituality (Dillard, 2012). Like oral traditions, storytelling is a method to learn about the world more personally (Bell, 1995). Reflection is also vital in

collecting stories. This study gathered participant narratives through interviews and my reflective journaling with a focus on cultural and historical contexts. Although narrative inquiry similarly centers participants' stories and explores how social contexts shape them, endarkened storywork adopts a more political stance (Toliver, 2020). It emphasizes emancipatory perspectives, positioning participant narratives as tools for fostering social transformation (Bell, 1995). Endarkened storywork invited me in as part of the story to reflect on my experiences as a South Asian woman and connect my experiences with those of my participants.

Research Method

A researcher's starting point emerges from their own life (Caine et al., 2018). However, Saldaña (2011) cautioned researchers against using research as therapy. This research focus stemmed from an internal desire of mine to interact with more South Asian women in theatre education and from wondering why there were not more South Asian women present in my professional journey.

Narrative inquiry is inherently rooted in reflexivity (Gavidia & Adu, 2022). Merriam and Grenier (2019) discussed the importance of interpretation, reflexivity, and the role of the researcher's positionality in interpreting data. Charmaz (2016) discussed the importance of the researcher examining themselves in the research process to understand personal privileges. This reflective practice was essential to ensure ethical alignment with the principles of AsianCrit. I have also considered my professional journey for this research study and engaged with journaling as a researcher and South Asian woman.

Data Sources

A survey was used to identify participants for this research study. This survey allowed participants to skip questions and emphasized confidentiality to ensure participants' comfort in

participating. Participants were given a consent form at the beginning of the study that outlined their participation. The survey included demographic questions (e.g., gender identity, ethnicity, educational background, professional experience) and questions about participants' experiences in the performing arts (e.g., years in theatre education). Semistructured interview questions were designed to capture detailed stories, personal reflections, and lived experiences.

Purposeful sampling (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019) was employed following the principles of critical qualitative research practices. Critical qualitative research practices ensure researchers are intentional about whom they ask to participate in interviews, with consideration for the unique perspectives participants may contribute to the study (Bhattacharya, 2017; Creswell & Poth, 2025). Snowball sampling allowed participants to recommend others who met the criteria but may have been difficult to reach otherwise (Creswell & Poth, 2025).

Data Collection

I created and distributed a survey using Qualtrics, and the results were analyzed by reviewing insights shared and demographic data. For this paper, I conducted interviews with female-identifying South Asian performing artists. I used open coding to examine the initial survey responses and to guide the selection of participants, ensuring they met the criteria. The criteria for this study were female-identifying South Asian artists (by profession or passion). Once survey data were reviewed, individual participants who met the criteria and expressed interest were contacted for interviews. Fifteen South Asian female-identifying performing artists responded to the survey. Of the 15 respondents, 10 agreed to participate in the interview. An invitation to participate in an interview was sent to each potential participant. Several did not respond initially, and follow-up emails were needed. Eventually, six individuals were identified and interviewed.

Interviews were conducted via Zoom and recorded. Participants' names were kept confidential, and pseudonyms were used throughout the study. Participants were sent consent forms prior to scheduling interviews. Once consent forms were received, an email with a Calendly link was sent to allow participants to schedule their interviews at a convenient time. The established interview protocol (see Appendix A) aligned with the interview protocol refinement (IPR) framework (Castillo-Montoya, 2016). Castillo-Montoya (2016) stated, "By enhancing the reliability of interview protocols, researchers can increase the quality of data they obtain from research interviews" (p. 811). This framework ensured that interview questions aligned with the research focus, created a safe and inquiry-based environment, and provided an opportunity for feedback and revision.

Samples of open-ended questions used during the semi-structured interviews included:

- Please describe your first performing arts experience.
- Does your performing arts experience connect to your current professional role?
- Describe the support you felt in the performing arts as you developed professionally.
- When you reflect on your professional journey, describe any moments you might return to and encourage yourself to think differently about a choice or make a different one.
- How do you describe fulfillment, and do you feel fulfilled in your professional role today?

Throughout the process, I used journaling to capture my insights and reflections, which served as an additional data source for the study. All interview recordings and transcripts were stored on a password-protected, secure drive and will be destroyed 6 months after the dissertation's publication to maintain participants' privacy.

Data Analysis

The first paper of the three-paper dissertation presents the experiences of South Asian female-identifying performing artists. The participants did not necessarily pursue a profession in the performing arts, but have incorporated the performing arts into their lives in some way. By reflecting on my own experiences and those of the participants, this research paper examined the South Asian experience through an AsianCrit lens, analyzing themes (e.g., the model minority myth, sense-making, sense of belonging) and the impact of these themes on participants' career trajectories. Through this discussion, one can gain a deeper understanding of the choices made to pursue a career in the performing arts. The research question for Paper I was How do female-identifying South Asian performing artists navigate social, cultural, and familial dynamics while pursuing a career in the performing arts?

Using a narrative inquiry approach, I began with open coding and captured participants' words and stories (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Saldaña, 2011). This phase of coding used the DELVE software. I began to analyze the data or the words of the participants into initial codes. Three examples of initial codes and the data or quotes from participants are as follows:

Code: Rehearsal

Um, my first experience in the audience, well my dad's a percussionist, my mother sings at cultural programs, so...Um they were always performing, and I was with them, so I was kind of born into that, I remember going to rehearsals.

Code: Religious

At my church, where a lot of my musical experiences happened, and I was given the solo and the children's choir, and I say it was for mother's day. So I got to sing the first verse by myself and then everyone came in on the chorus.

Code: In school

The opportunity to join choir in the 4th and 5th grade, we kind of had to do it. And so at that point, I had only really been singing in church.

Then, I grouped them into axial codes (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Saldaña, 2011). At this stage I began to connect the open codes by specific experiences, events, or thoughts. I then went back and listened to the interviews again, reflecting on personal connections and what sparked my curiosity, to cluster them together even further. For example, the participant quotes from above were then categorized under codes labeled “cultural events,” “church,” and “opportunities affiliated with school or community theatre.”

Finally, thematic coding enabled key themes to emerge. For example, the codes from above moved into the emergent theme of Early Arts Exposure. Other emergent themes included Barriers to Access, and Negotiation of Cultural and Family Expectations. Table 2 provides examples of participant quote connected with the emergent themes.

Table 2*Participant Quotes Connected to Emergent Themes*

Participant Quote	Emergent Theme	Notes
“I started to play the violin at 6 years old and would play in church . . . I started dancing when I was 7 and a half, almost 8 years old . . . and started to sing too . . . my parents were really involved in Indian cultural events.”	Early Arts Exposure	Many participants discovered the arts through cultural or community events and described these moments as joyful and affirming.
“My parents were both immigrants. They came here; they worked really hard to provide a good life for myself and my siblings, and so in their mind, doing something in the performing arts doesn’t really earn you that much money, so you can’t really be successful.”	Cultural and Familial Expectations	Families often encouraged participation in the arts but discouraged it as a career.
We did one community theater show . . . It was like \$150 per kid, which was crazy. Rehearsals started right after school at 3 o’clock, and we were like maybe 30 to 40 min away from there, and both of my parents were working parents, and so getting us there was like, super challenging.”	Barriers to Access	Challenges included finances, transportation, and emotional pressures such as fear of failure or disappointing family expectations, all of which limited early opportunities to pursue the arts deeply.

Findings

This section presents the findings from Paper I, beginning with a brief overview of participant profiles and then a discussion of the emergent themes. The participant profiles introduce the six South Asian female-identifying performing artists. Following the participant profiles are the emergent themes.

Participant Profile

In this section, I share participant profiles alongside short excerpts from their interviews. I chose these excerpts because they capture something essential about each participant’s story.

All participants in Paper I were South Asian and female identifying, and each profile offers a glimpse into their experiences in their own words. I have included a chart that highlights the key details upon which I drew my analysis. The profiles appear in the order in which I met with each participant.

Table 3

Overview of Participants for Paper I

Pseudonym	Age range	Artistry	Working in the arts	Current participation in the arts
J	25–34	Musician	No	Still played piano and sang in church and participated in supporting musicals at her school. She was an English teacher at a high school.
Martha	65+	Dancer	No (retired)	Still participated as an audience member. When she moved to the United States from India she encouraged and exposed her daughter to dance. She was retired and did not work in the performing arts.
Ashley	25–34	Musician/ dancer/ sound design/ costumes	No	Sometimes participated in performances or was asked to choreograph. She often performed with family. She worked as a data analyst.
Red	25–34	Costume designer	Yes	Had worked professionally as a costume designer for off Broadway productions. Was working in the profession as a costumer.
Susan	25–34	Musician/ dancer	No	Danced in competitions and with family and sometimes professionally. She worked in the pharmaceutical industry.
Aurora	25–34	Musician	No	Worked as a math teacher at a high school. She performed in church.

J

J was 25–34 years old. She was a musician. She played the flute and piano and sang. Her journey in the performing arts was centered around her experiences in church and with her family. She was an English teacher at a public high school at the time of this study. She often enjoyed performing and showcasing her artistry with her family, at her church, and by supporting the after-school program at her job. J said:

There are a lot of moments that are part of my experience with singing, and then I play flute and piano, which include getting to perform with my siblings and my family. So, I remember, growing up, my church was always really supportive of us as kids playing. Our orchestra was really three people; it wasn't grand, but I started playing flute and piano when I was 7, and it clicked. My sister and brother are older than me, 5 years and 7 years older. They were already into playing instruments. I saw the flute. I knew that that was my calling, and I really liked playing piano.

Ashley

Ashley's age range was 25–34 years old. She was a dancer and musician and also grew up immersed in South Asian Indian culture. She studied Bharatanatyam dance (a traditional Indian dance form). Performing was foundational in her family. Her artistry was singing and dancing. Her family sang, danced, and played instruments. She did not perform professionally at the time of this study. She was a data analyst by profession. She often was asked to choreograph dances for cultural performances and, for a while, was also giving lessons to young children. Although not currently dancing by profession, she enjoyed the opportunities she had experienced teaching dance and performing with her family. She stated:

My parents are very involved with performing arts. My siblings are as well. I think the moments that we get to do things together, it's always just very nice to be able to do that with your family, and to be able to say, "Oh, I can do this with my family."

Martha

Martha was 65+ and was retired. She came to the United States in the 1980s. Prior to that, she had studied Indian dance in India. She did not pursue a career in the performing arts. After she got married, she left India, and she focused on raising a family. She did seize the opportunity to expose her daughter to dance. Martha said:

In those days, in the late 1970s, if girls from affluent families went dancing, they got a bad reputation. It was actually culture restraint. Well, then marriage market becomes ready, in our days, there was no choice. And that was, was important. And even my mother, who wanted to go into a professional field, was married off. So, when I came to United States, it is like we were the first generation of immigrants. Building a life for us is important because we had a certain standard of living in India. We were not able to afford a lot of stuff. We built our life from the most minimal amount of money. Because you are on your own; nobody else is there to support you.

Red

Red was 25–34 years old. Red worked as a costume designer and was working professionally in the performing arts. Red had felt supported throughout their career. Participation in community theatre exposed barriers of cost, accessibility, and whiteness that excluded many families like theirs. Still, Red found validation in high school when their handmade costume renderings won a design festival, confirming that artistry could be a career. Red said:

By the time I got into high school I had seen the Lion King on tour. And that's when I got obsessed with theater and design, which Lion King is, like, great. It's a designer starter musical. By the time we saw it, I'd looked up every video that there was about it. I knew about all the puppets, and I was so enamored by it. And then for ninth grade I saw Wicked on Broadway. So, between those two, which again, famously strong, designer musicals that piqued my interest a lot. By the time I joined theater in high school, that was the first time I was really seeing it as something I could do.

Aurora

Aurora was in the 25–34 age range. Her artistry was music. She learned to play the violin and piano and taught herself to play guitar. She worked as a math teacher at a public high school. She began performing by singing in the church choir and continued to do so at the time of this study. She spoke of a recent time she was able to sing at a friend's wedding. Aurora said:

So, something that I am really proud of, a couple of months ago, I was able to sing for my friend's wedding, which was in front of 500 people, and it was also being streamed. I was also working with a group of people that I had never met before. But it did come out really well, so I was proud about that.

Susan

Susan's age range was 25–34 years old. She was a dancer and a musician. She grew up in a family surrounded by South Asian Indian cultural music. She studied Bharanatayam dance. She was not working as an artist. She worked in the pharmaceutical field; however, she continued to perform professionally. She described her first performing arts experience as a memorable experience that fueled her passion for Indian dance, and it was also a family affair. She said:

I started dancing when I was 6 years old. I was taking private lessons in my basement at home. My older sister was already taking lessons at that time, so I grew up watching her dance, and it was something that I took interest in. My first performance was a competition that was pretty stressful. But I was one of the youngest kids that was competing. I didn't win, but I remember I had a lot of fun doing it; it was exciting for me, because I'd always seen my sister performing, and it was something that I finally was able to do.

The participant profiles provided serve as an entry point into my analysis of how South Asian female-identifying performing artists navigate the intersections of culture, family, and career in the performing arts.

Emergent Themes

In this section, I introduce emergent themes. The following table presents the three key themes that emerged from the data analysis. Each theme was developed through open and axial coding and reflects recurring ideas found across participant interviews as data. Following the table is discussion about this.

Table 4*Emergent Themes*

Number	Theme	Data	Evidence
I	Early Arts Exposure	<p>Participation in arts activities occurred at competitions, cultural events, religious events</p> <p>Participants shared emotions of excitement, nervousness, pride</p> <p>Early arts experiences were supported by parents, family, teachers</p>	Participants recalled first arts experience as joyful; while being nervous, they also felt seen and praised.
II	Cultural and Familial Expectations	<p>Participants described mixed messages from families; even though they may have introduced children to the arts, they discouraged professional pursuit.</p> <p>Participants described an inner struggle of stability in conflict with passion, and success being equated with job security and financial success, not passion.</p> <p>Participants described that families prioritized survival, education, and respectability, which shaped their perceptions of viable career paths in the arts.</p>	Participants spoke about either or both the pressure of financial stability and family influence on their decisions and family pressure that the arts the lacked prestige as a profession.
III	Barriers to Access	<p>Physical barriers were a challenge, which included distance and transportation; parents had to work and could not always bring participants to where they needed to go.</p> <p>Financial barriers were prevalent because families did not have the funds for their children to participate in the arts at a young age.</p> <p>Emotional barriers existed in the form of a fear of failure, disappointment, and not living up to expectations.</p>	Participants spoke about financial cost of participation in theater activities, the challenges of traveling to participate in the arts, and fear of instability.

Note. This chart was created to visually summarize the connection between themes and the participant interviews.

Theme I: Early Arts Exposure

Many participants recalled their first encounters with the performing arts as moments of joy and discovery, often rooted in childhood experiences. Susan described her first experience, saying:

I remember enjoying it a lot. I don't remember feeling scared. I don't think I was nervous at all. I remember I competed the following year at the same competition in the same category, and I did win first place for that one. I don't remember the specifics, but I do remember feeling excited that people were watching me. I felt good knowing that people were clapping for me because it was a solo performance, and it felt very new. I do remember getting ready because the costumes were very elaborate. Especially at that age, I was just aware of the fact that I was getting dressed up for what felt like a big deal for me. And, you know, my mom was putting on makeup, and I had never worn makeup like that before. I was, like, getting my hair done and all that stuff.

Martha shared her first experience, which was in India. She recalled:

I got to do the role of Krishna killing a snake. It was Kathakali dance. I really loved that whole thing. When I got on the stage, I was shivering. Once you get on the stage and the curtain opens, and that's when I think it felt like floodlights into the stage. And the thing is, you cannot see the audience over that light. In those days, you are glaring into a huge flat light. Then, you do not know what is behind that. Nobody ever told me that's how you're going to feel. So, you stand there, and I think for us, you know, once the music started I was frozen. Then I started the dance; I finished the dance, and in between I had a costume malfunction. The whole thing fell off at the end, because I was jumping. That is when my face changed into a crying fit. They had closed the curtains. I could hear people

clapping somewhere. So, I was thinking, “Oh, I am doing a good job.” I think that’s what I remember about that whole thing.

Aurora shared her first performing arts experience from elementary school. She said:

In elementary school, we had the opportunity to join choir in the fourth and fifth grade—we kind of had to do it. I had only really been singing in church. I had never really sung in public or on my own. We were going over parts in my music class, and my music teacher was calling everybody to come up in front of everybody to kind of go through one part. And so, that was probably the first time I had sung something in front of people. And I remember he told me that he thought I did really well, I had a strong voice. And so that probably started the journey for me. I was 9.

For Susan, the excitement of costumes, applause, playing dress up and her mother’s involvement framed performance as a moment where she felt recognized. Martha’s experience emphasized how cultural traditions introduced her to the stage through classical Indian dance. Aurora’s recollection highlighted the influence of supportive teachers, who not only introduced her to performance but also affirmed her abilities in ways that sparked confidence.

These narratives illustrated the importance of early arts experiences. Early arts experiences not only serve as foundational moments that shaped participants’ involvement with the arts but also serve as opportunities to promote positive emotional development (Glass et al., 2022; Holochwost et al., 2021; Zarobe & Bungay, 2017) and academic and social growth (Holochwost et al., 2021; Winsler et al., 2020; Zarobe & Bungay, 2017). The New Victory Theater (n.d.-a) in NYC created the SPARK program (an acronym for schools with performing arts reach kids) to reach schools with no arts programming or no arts teachers and introduce the arts as an essential part of the school’s curriculum. They targeted schools where 90% of the

students received free or reduced lunch (New Victory Theater, n.d.-a). Their impact report shared early arts exposure develops the ability to work as a team, helps develop problem-solving and critical-thinking skills, and improves self-confidence, among other qualities (New Victory Theater, n.d.-b). The participants shared that families seemed to discourage careers in the performing arts, they valued participation to preserve culture and engage in religious practices. It is important for theatre education programs to build on these early experiences to engage families more deeply.

Theme II: Cultural and Familial Expectations

Although participants' experiences often sparked a love of the performing arts, they were not always accompanied by familial endorsement. For some participants, family encouragement was tempered by concerns about stability and respectability, revealing tensions between cultural values and artistic aspirations. It is not unusual for conflict to arise between cultures, impacting the identities of emerging adults (Polenova et al., 2018). In fact, traditional assimilation theory states over time, ethnic distinctions change, and immigrants, in some ways, assimilate into U.S. society (Casarez et al., 2022). This duality and early encouragement, balanced with cultural expectations of financial security, underscored how families both nurtured and constrained participants' artistic identities. With respect for the performing arts, Aurora described these sentiments, saying:

I think it's a fun job to have. It's something idealistically, I always told myself if money didn't matter, it'd be something I'd want to pursue. But being the culture that I was, it was definitely, "That's not a goal you go for, it's a hobby; it's not a job." I can see how it would be difficult to get a job in the performing arts, but I still think that it's a valuable job, and it's a necessary job. I was raised in an Indian household with the same values,

where you kind of grow up to work to live—you want to survive. My parents were both immigrants. They came here; they worked really hard to provide a good life for myself and my siblings, and so in their mind, doing something in the performing arts doesn't really earn you that much money, so you can't really be successful. You can't live based off that. So, that was kind of imposed on me, as well. You want to work hard now; you go to college, you get a good job, you can provide for yourself. You can live comfortably, so on and so forth.

For the participants' families, success was equated with financial gains.

This theme is connected to the transnational context, which is considered in relation to the immigrant experience (Museus & Iftikar, 2013). When considering the experiences of colonialism and imperialism in their home countries and applying that to their immigrant experiences, one can understand better the desire to prioritize stability and the desire to maintain a respectable career for children of the next generation being raised in the United States. Parents' levels of success of adapting to a new culture and their experiences of adapting profoundly impact how emerging adults adapt to the new culture (Polenova et al., 2018). Susan described dealing with a more internalized duality. She said:

I remember wanting to pursue a more professional career in the arts. I do think, for me, the biggest stressor was finances. I think I knew I didn't have the discipline, I think, at that age, to make sure that if this is something I'm gonna rely on for giving me income, I didn't want that to be something that stressed me out, and I think I knew at that age that that would be my drawback, where I didn't want it to feel like I was obligated to do this. Because I needed it to sustain me financially. And so, it was really after college where I was like, okay, maybe this is not necessarily meant for me to do, but purely because of, I

think, finances. And I think it would have been hard for me to explain that to my family, who's so driven by academics, also. And to say, "Hey, look, I'm gonna not pursue what I was actually studying in college." I don't regret it in the long-term sense because I, luckily, I had the self-awareness at that age, even though I was a lot younger, to know what my drawbacks were. My drawbacks were definitely the fact that I knew I would feel stressed about the money aspect of it. Even now, to this day, I do have a stable professional career. I think it would have stressed me out too much. Or I would have lost the enjoyment of the art itself, and it would have been more about just making sure I have enough money to sustain me and not about the enjoyment.

Susan's statements indicated the impression left on her as generational impact from the transnational context that was passed down. J shared about familial expectations. She said:

My older sister really wanted to be a music teacher, and she was shot down real fast by my parents and by others, and again, being an immigrant, you know, our family is not from here. They are from India, and for them, they had never heard of such a thing, and it, it seemed just, not a stable profession. She really wanted to pursue that. And they were like, "No." She ended up going into computer science, and then that derailed. And she went into teaching, as well. So, seeing that she was 7 years older than me, it [getting music certification] was just not even an option.

Polenova et al. (2018) found this idea of family obligation as a recurring theme when researching children of immigrants. J also talked about her own personal experiences when it came time for her to choose a path, her struggle negotiating what she wanted to do, and familial expectations.

She recalled:

I did really well in high school, and because of that there were certain expectations, like, you are destined for great things, and great things could really only amount to the medical field. Why would you lower yourself to become a teacher in the humanities. It was like a degrading thing to do, and I did feel like I owed it to my parents to pursue physical therapy initially, and I will say they were very supportive. My mom saw more than my dad. Not that my dad wasn't, but I think he also struggled with the fact that I was supposed to do physical therapy, and then I just changed, and it was hard to swallow. It was a 6-year program, and it was just a really good opportunity, and I gave up a full scholarship.

Participants' families played dual roles, which included their roles as supporters who introduced participants to the arts and also their roles as gatekeepers, shaped by cultural values, immigration struggles, or economic realities.

For some participants, pursuing a career in the performing arts conflicted with expectations of stability and professional prestige. These accounts shared the contradiction of familial influence. Polenova et al. (2018) also found, when studying Asian American immigrant parents, many were openly vocal about the importance of going to medical school, and children did not even attempt to pursue another pathway due to feelings of family obligation. Parents were often the ones who introduced participants to the arts, but there were boundaries around the arts as a legitimate career.

This duality reflects the contradiction of values inherent in the immigrant experience, where stability, security, and respectability often take precedence over artistic risk. For Susan, financial concerns included shaping self-perceptions of what was considered stable. For J, family expectations directly blocked opportunities, as seen in her sister's experience pursuing a music

certification to be a teacher. Negotiating these tensions became central to participants' identity formation as they balanced loyalty to family obligations with desires for self-expression.

Theme III: Barriers to Access

Across interviews, participants described structural obstacles that shaped their access to the arts. Red recalled the financial strain of affording lessons and extracurricular programs. They said:

We did one community theater show. Me and my sister were both in it. It was like \$150 per kid, which was crazy. Rehearsals started right after school at 3 o'clock, and we did not live near there. We were like maybe 30 to 40 min away from there, and both of my parents were working parents, and so getting us there was like, super challenging.

Martha noted the geographic limitations of her hometown, where opportunities in Indian dance training required transportation her family could not always provide. She said:

So, that place was about 1 1/2 hour or so from where we lived, and transportation in those days was different, so I had nobody to take me there. My parents arranged with a bus driver going in that direction. He will pick me up at a certain time, and he'll be paid to drop me off. Not smack in front of the school; I had to walk about another 10–15 minutes alone to the school. So, there was a coffee shop where they arranged for the coffee shop owner to come and get me from the bus at this time on certain days, and he will pick me up, and then a boy who was a messenger boy for them would pick me up. He must have been 13- or 14-year-old boy. He will walk me all the way to the school. I went there, and that place was actually a place where they taught Kathakali.

These experiences highlighted the geographical barriers and financial barriers that existed to access the arts and resources. Red shared how the cost of community theater, combined with the

logistics of two working parents, created barriers that made consistent participation nearly impossible. Martha's story illustrated the geographic inequities of arts access requiring complex arrangements. These experiences highlighted how participation in the arts is determined by who can access it.

Interpretation and Implications

Based on these interviews, there seemed to be an underlying theme of perfectionism measured by success (i.e., financial success), prestige, or academic strength, but the arts did not play into that picture of success. Participants also described experiences where people assumed they did not have to work hard because they were part of the model minority and Asian Americans being considered an "honorary white" or a threat, depending on the majority need (Museus & Iftikar, 2013). This reflects how many South Asian women continue to experience how whiteness defines their success.

These stories illustrated how South Asian individuals are perceived as inherently hardworking, intelligent, and successful. For example, J shared that oftentimes her talents were dismissed as something with which she was born, rather than something at which she worked hard. She also noted professional peers often had the impression Indians had an advantage over their white peers, yet J noted there remained an assumption that they were not the same. This duality is what I discussed previously as my feeling of the fifth space. By interrogating the model minority myth, these narratives exposed the racialized dynamics that continue to shape who is seen, supported, and celebrated in the performing arts.

Sensemaking

Sensemaking can be described as the continuous act of constructing and making sense of reality (Chace et al., 2021). Shenoy-Packer (2015) discussed the challenges of navigating

microaggressions in the workplace, which often can be difficult to recognize initially.

Microaggressions can leave the person on the receiving end revisiting and reevaluating what just happened (Shenoy-Packer, 2015). Weick's (2022) idea of the sensemaking model notes it is retrospectively that one might process past events and apply what was learned from the event to future events. Through an AsianCrit lens, these narratives illustrate how racial triangulation and gendered expectations shape self-perception and belonging in artistic and educational spaces.

These stories offered insight into the idea of sensemaking for South Asian female-identifying performing artists in predominantly white spaces. Aurora's story included this idea of the fifth space, in which she felt never fully white, but also was judged as not Indian enough. Casarez et al. (2022) noted race, ethnicity, and nationality impact how an individual interprets their own identity. J's experience highlighted the isolation of being one of the few South Asian English teachers, where the idea of the perpetual foreigner othered her. This illuminates the importance of developing inclusive environments that affirm cultural identity.

Each of these stories reveals how participants negotiated identity in the context of the dominant culture's whiteness. Umaña-Taylor et al. (2006) suggested the importance of interaction in the ethnic group, familial interaction, and identity formation. These also are significant in developing skills to manage racism (Umaña-Taylor et al., 2006). Aurora's and J's experiences emphasized feeling invisible and deterring a sense of belonging. Ashley's account pointed to how the ideals of beauty are racialized. These impacted the ways participants engaged in acts of developing their senses of self.

Performing Diversity

Red discussed the experience of being the safe minority, which aligns with several aspects of the model minority myth. The model minority myth frames Asian Americans as

academically and professionally successful and has essentialized the diversity in Asian American communities, often causing harm and eliminating agency (Yi et al., 2020). Red's experience highlights how some DEI efforts in predominantly white institutions stop at optics, rather than really addressing the issue. Yoo et al. (2022) noted Asians are not considered Black or white by dominant culture standards, which highlights the injustices and privileges they experience. Although these opportunities increased visibility, they also reinforced Red's marginalization by limiting their role to representation, rather than artistic agency.

This illustrated how performative diversity initiatives can be in predominantly white institutions, where inclusion is often conditional and not designed to dismantle structural inequities. J's account highlighted a different layer existing in Asian communities, which is that performance itself can become a form of tokenized achievement. She observed peers who pursued music with little passion because of parental pressure to excel in this area. This form of tokenism is tied to the performance of résumé building. These stories showed that it is not only about being the only one in white-dominated spaces, but also about how cultural expectations shape participation in ways that may erase individuality and authentic expression. These dynamics reveal how true representation is important.

Beauty and Bias

Ashley raised colorism as an issue in the South Asian community, revealing a connection to DesiCrit and its dialogue on colorism, which also connects to anti-Blackness (Haque, 2025). *Colorism* refers to the privileges that come with lighter skin over darker skin in racial or ethnic groups (Aggarwal & Ciftci, 2021). Ashley described how colorism functions in South Asian arts spaces, shaping the environments and perpetuating anti-Blackness. She observed choreographers and directors favoring lighter-skinned dancers, reinforcing the idea that proximity to whiteness

equates to beauty. Colorism reflects not only aesthetic preference but also inequities, where performers are judged against white ideals of beauty.

DesiCrit further highlights how these dynamics have emerged from histories of colonization and migration, embedding racialized beauty norms into cultural practice (Haque, 2025). Ashley's reflections illustrated how these deeply rooted norms impact both artistic spaces and self-perception. For many South Asian performers, beauty standards informed by colonial hierarchies have continued to define what is valued and visible onstage. Ashley went on to discuss the message this definition conveyed in terms of beauty standards. Ashley's reflection revealed how beauty standards rooted in Western ideals have influenced artistic spaces, prioritizing light skin, certain body types, and facial features over skill and expression.

DesiCrit further highlights how these dynamics have emerged from histories of colonization and migration, embedding racialized beauty norms into cultural practice (Haque, 2025). Ashley's account highlighted the presence of colorism. She further discussed her frustrations with the cultural appropriation she had experienced. She observed that when white dancers performed South Asian art forms, they often received more recognition and visibility than South Asian performers themselves. This imbalance underscored how whiteness continues to be centered, even in cultural forms that originate outside of Western traditions.

South Asian artists continually negotiate identity, belonging, and value in spaces shaped by whiteness and colonial legacies. The tension between authenticity and acceptance reflects an ongoing process of interpreting one's place in systems that both include and marginalize. For participants like J, seeing a relative "paving her own path" or being supported by family members who valued the arts provided an important model of resilience. They demonstrated how cultural and familial mentorship fosters belonging and empowers artists to challenge

exclusionary norms. The implications for theatre education and arts organizations are clear. Programs must critically examine how Eurocentric aesthetics and racialized standards persist in casting, teaching, and production practices. Equitable arts education should cultivate spaces that affirm identity, celebrate diverse aesthetics, and confront colorism and appropriation directly.

Conclusion

Paper I of this dissertation focused on the career trajectories of South Asians in performing arts with the research question, How do female-identifying South Asian performing artists navigate social, cultural, and familial dynamics while pursuing a career in the performing arts? Major findings revealed participants in this study had to manage challenges. It was apparent there was early exposure to the arts. Parents did encourage participation in the arts, but not as a profession. The reasons revealed came from their own experiences as immigrants. The idea that financial stability is a priority was essential. Although the arts may be a prestigious hobby, it does not appear to be a satisfactory profession. There was a huge sense of family obligation and reluctance to question these perceived norms. Arnab Banerji (Culp et al., 2023) brings up in a panel discussion the idea that even he did not consider focusing a major in the performing arts would not lead to anything successful in terms of salary and career growth.

Other factors illuminated by this research study underscored the processing of individual lived experiences. Often, participants articulated the struggles they felt and the disservice it did to them as the model minority. These stories resonated with me. One example I can share is that I have often been told in my career as an arts educator and working in higher education, I have been told I speak English well. Being born and raised in New York, I did not really understand why this was so surprising. The theme that emerged is the role the model minority has contributed to perpetuating the struggle with South Asians' proximity to whiteness as having

advantages and disadvantages. Additionally, there has been a clear struggle with identity in terms of being American, Indian, or Asian, and a frequent idea of not being Indian enough or American enough. The ideas of settling for mentorship in different spaces because that seemed to be all that was available and taking what could be rather than seeking out what was needed also emerged. Haymon (2023) discussed that she often wonders how different her professional journey may have been if she had mentors who “looked like me talked like me or hurt like me, how different my life would have been” (p. 187). I often wonder the same thing.

The key takeaway for me was the challenges that come with cultural expectations and a confused sense of belonging. It is essential to understand the distinct experiences of South Asians to support their resilience against oppression (Yoo et al., 2022). What has been revealed in this study is not only important to hone as a perspective in the performing arts but also in higher education. Now that this information is shared, it is crucial to determine how it can be effectively utilized. Although there has been literature that discusses the implications of the Asian American experience, there is less on South Asians and even less on South Asian females, particularly specific to the performing arts. Paper II opens an examination of female performing artists from racially and ethnically diverse communities as I explore how theatre education programs can actively disrupt the model minority myth rather than unintentionally reinforcing it.

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Paper I Appendix: Interview Protocol

Opening

Hi – Participant, thank you for taking the time to meet with me today.

During this interview, I would like to learn about your experiences as an artist, your journey in the arts, the support you received, and whether it connects with your current professional journey.

Relationship Building Questions

What interested you about the study, and what is your motivation for agreeing to be interviewed?

Do you have any questions for me about the research so far?

Confidentiality Statement

Since we will be discussing very personal information, I encourage you to do the following:

- Use headphones
- Use a private computer/and or device
- Complete the interview in a private space

During this Zoom meeting, I enhanced all the security settings to ensure privacy and confidentiality. I will record the interview questions; please confirm that it is ok. [WAIT FOR RESPONSE AND TURN ON RECORDING IF AFFIRMATIVE]

Thank you again for meeting me today and participating in my dissertation research. During our interview, I would like to learn more about your personal or professional experience in the performing arts and how it connects to your current professional journey. I would also like to hear your thoughts on representation and racial and ethnic diversity in the performing arts.

Questions

1. Please describe your first performing arts experience.

2. Discuss your perception of the performing arts as a profession.
3. Please describe your professional journey.
4. Does your performing arts experience connect to your current professional role?
5. Please describe a moment when you felt proud in the performing arts and how you celebrated with others.
6. Please describe any challenges you have experienced in the performing arts and how you overcame them.
7. Describe the support you felt in the performing arts as you developed professionally.
8. When you reflect on your professional journey, describe any moments you might return to, and encourage yourself to think differently about a choice or make a different one.
9. Describe any mentors you have had and share any advice you received.
10. Were you able to connect with mentors?
11. Did your mentoring experience connect with your identity?
12. Describe how you might have or might not have seen yourself represented in the performing arts.
13. Describe how you understand your own identity in connection with the performing arts?

14. Describe how your identity connects to your professional journey.
15. Describe your journey decentering whiteness. How has your identity been shaped by your proximity to or distance from whiteness in the performing arts?
16. Describe a moment in your performing arts journey when you became aware of how whiteness influenced perceptions of your identity. How was your sense of belonging in performing arts spaces impacted
17. What strategies have you used to navigate, resist, or redefine norms shaped by whiteness in your performing arts journey?
18. How do you describe fulfillment, and do you feel fulfilled in your professional role today?
19. Describe any regrets you may have or anything you might have done differently.
20. Describe any advice you might give your younger self, or a young person interested in entering the performing arts as a profession?

Is there anything else you'd like to share?

Thank you!

Follow up Questions

If follow-up questions are needed, they will be limited to: Please tell me more about that.

Please share in more detail what you are discussing.

Please share more about how it made you feel.

PAPER II: CENTERING IDENTITY FOR HIGHER EDUCATION THEATRE
TEACHER PREPARATION

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My first experience attending a performance reminded me why theatre matters so deeply. It was when I was about 6 years old. I went to see *Annie* on Broadway. We had seats all the way at the back. I loved the lights, the music, and everything about it, and when I saw Annie, a little girl like me, come on stage and sing, I distinctly remember thinking, “I can do that too; I want to do that too.” I didn’t notice that Annie had red hair and white skin. But during the performance, I noticed that she was a little girl like me, and when she sang, everyone listened.

Around the same time in my life, I also was engaged as a performer. My first experience in the performing arts as a performer was when I was 5 or 6 years old. I played the role of Mary in our church’s retelling of the Christmas story. I was the only girl of South Asian descent among the entire cast of children. We went to a church in the suburbs of New York City. I was not happy being Mary. During this performance, I really wanted to be an angel, just like my friends who wore shiny costumes. But instead, for this telling of the Christmas story, I had a costume that my parents spent many nights sewing together. The one line I do remember is of my first solo in church. I sang a few verses from a popular Christmas song, and then the adult and youth choir joined in. I remember thinking, *everyone is listening*, as I sang the lyric, “Go tell it on the mountain, over the hills and everywhere.” For the first time, I experienced the power of my voice.

Those early moments on stage planted the seeds that inspired my dissertation research. In Paper II of my dissertation, I examined experiences of female-identifying performing artists from racially and ethnically diverse communities. Assumptions of an universal female experience have been critiqued and there are arguments against treating all women the same (Mohanty, 2003; Ahmed, 2017). I agree with this, as all women’s experiences are shaped by factors such as race and culture, for example, and cannot be reduced to a single story. Women’s stories should

be uplifted in recognition of their diverse experiences, and their stories should be celebrated. I acknowledged these unique differences and further examined the barriers that exist, precluding female-identifying performing artists from racially and ethnically diverse communities in the performing arts from having representation in the field. This ethnodrama was informed by my experiences as a first-generation South Asian woman and performing artist, as well as interviews with artists from various racial and ethnic backgrounds. This research offered insight to support the development of the VOICE reflective framework for teacher training programs in higher education in theatre education to reflect on their equity practices. The guiding question for this paper was: How have the personal, cultural, and professional experiences of female-identifying performing artists from racially and ethnically diverse communities influenced their contributions to the performing arts?

Literature Review

The arts often are positioned as transformative spaces, yet female-identifying performing artists from racially and ethnically diverse communities still face inequities. Women represent 51% of the U.S. population but make up only 28% of artists, and those from racially and ethnically diverse communities account for only half of that number (Topaz et al., 2022). This underscores how performing arts communities tend to privilege certain groups. Workforce demographics in the performing arts show that most leadership, staff, and board roles in U.S. performing arts organizations are held by white professionals (Stein, 2020). Findings from this research will impact the development of the VOICE reflective framework and its applicability to theatre education teacher preparation programs in higher education to engage the challenges and current conversations in theatre education.

Female Performing Artists

Women's experiences are shaped by the intersection of multiple identities, including gender, race, class, sexuality, and ability, among others (Ahmed, 2017; Butler, 1988; Crenshaw, 1991). As a South Asian female theatre educator, this is meaningful in understanding how my lived experience, as well as the lived experiences of my participants, are valuable in challenging the dominant structures that historically have excluded our voices. The scholarship on female performing artists from racially and ethnically diverse communities has revealed gaps in representation.

Whitfield (2019) used the idea of frames to shape individuals' understandings of the lens through which they look at art. For example, she described frames as spaces that mark a transition between two points, and this "frames" how art is viewed when it lands in the middle. Whitefield (2019) advocated for a new approach, or a new frame, as she put it, and pointed out that musical theatre, in particular, traditionally has been taught and shaped by whiteness and male-dominant narratives. In the same way, Lee (2023) presented the idea that representation is not produced only through casting choices but through the idea of authorship.

The book *Latinx Actor Training*, edited by Santos and Espinosa (2023), highlighted scholars who discussed training in acting as essentially defined by Eurocentric practices that discourage a multicultural lens. So, for example, Latinx artists are not encouraged to bring bilingual storytelling or their culture into their practice, and then, in turn, the performing arts do not reflect their heritage at all. Lockett and Shaffer (2017) added to this discussion by stating that acting cannot be separated from culture and lived experience and suggesting pedagogical practices that center history and community at the core of performance training.

Hughes (2024) discussed in *Redface*, the act of portraying Indigenous traditions through cultural appropriation. Essentially, it is dehumanizing, perpetuates stereotypes, and contributes to erasure. These performance traditions also deny Indigenous performers the opportunity to have their heritage reflected in the work (Hughes, 2024). Additionally, in a conversation with Culp et al. (2023), Culp gathered a panel of Asian theatre scholars who discussed how non-Western theatre traditions often are lumped together in a single discussion of non-Western traditional theatre. This discussion contributes to my dissertation research by uplifting the importance of cultural knowledge and representation for South Asian female-identifying artists, who also have navigated performance spaces shaped by whiteness and gendered exclusion. By engaging with these intersecting frameworks, my dissertation advances current scholarship by centering South Asian women's lived experiences.

Theoretical Framework

Reflecting on my lived experiences, I realized we cannot disengage from the steps we have walked. Knowledge is “supposed to be based on experiences” (Harding, 2004, p. 7). Feminist standpoint theory states that oppressed groups can examine their own experiences of oppression to better understand how their perspectives can support managing the dominant group (Harding, 2004). Feminist theory explores how systems of oppression shape gender, influence identity formation, and perpetuate power structures (Ahmed, 2017; Butler, 1988).

Feminist theory examines diverse experiences, identifying societal challenges while fostering collaborative and transformative research approaches (Ahmed, 2017; Mohanty, 2003). Critical engagement with feminist theory requires an examination of feminism's evolution, identity formation, and intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1995a; hooks, 2000). The upcoming sections address these areas as they connect with feminist theory. Ahmed (2017) emphasized the

importance of producing theoretical work that applies to lived experiences, rather than work that exists solely in academic spaces without practical impact. This perspective resonates with the impetus for this three-paper dissertation, as it underscores the necessity of connecting theory to lived experiences and reinforces the real-world applicability of this study.

Feminist Theory

Feminist theory examines the circumstances that shape women's experiences, while emphasizing the ongoing process of learning and unlearning (Ahmed, 2017; Butler, 1990). It provides a framework for recognizing systemic inequities and developing strategies for meaningful change (hooks, 2015b). It also positions researchers as active participants in their studies, with their positionality shaping data collection and analysis (Creswell & Poth, 2025). Ahmed (2017) emphasized the importance of starting with one's own experience. In this ethnodrama, the theoretical lens framed how I approached data collection and interpretation while acknowledging that my positionality as a South Asian woman and theatre educator influenced how I made meaning from the shared stories. It also informed the importance of centering participants' voices not just as data but as valuable understandings of the performing arts.

Feminism

Feminism is a political movement (Ahmed, 2017) dedicated to promoting gender equity, challenging patriarchal systems, and amplifying women's voices (Butler, 1988; hooks, 2015a). As Hirudayaraj and Shields (2019) noted, feminism consists of various political and societal ideals that promote gender equity. Ahmed (2017) framed feminism as a practice focusing on living in an unjust world, fostering equal relationships, and supporting those in need. This framing also reflects the ever-changing landscape of feminist thought and its adaptation to social,

cultural, and historical contexts (Hirudayaraj & Shields, 2019). These ideas highlight feminism's role in continually interrogating systems of power. Feminist theory shapes this research by grounding it in narrative inquiry and the belief that storytelling can challenge power structures, which informed the analysis of my participants' stories, centering their experiences as female-identifying performing artists.

Feminism emerged in the late 19th and early 20th centuries as a movement advocating for women's recognition as legal entities, including the rights to vote and own property (Hirudayaraj & Shields, 2019). By the 1960s, the second wave of feminism had gained momentum, paralleling the Civil Rights Movement in the United States and expanding the feminist agenda to issues of social, economic, and reproductive justice (Hirudayaraj & Shields, 2019). During this period, feminism in the United States often was referred to as "women's lib" (hooks, 2015a, p. 18), and activists demanded equal rights, access to opportunities, fair wages, bodily autonomy, and protections against sexual harassment (Hirudayaraj & Shields, 2019). This period of feminism focused on equity and representation, much like the exploration I present of how female-identifying artists continue to challenge exclusionary systems in theatre and higher education today.

Mainstream feminist discourse during this era predominantly centered on the experiences of white, middle-class women and often neglected race and class as intersecting factors of oppression (hooks, 2015b). hooks (2015a) discussed how bourgeois white women advocating for women's rights often favored simplistic definitions for practical reasons. The danger of this exclusionary framework and focusing on white middle-class women only is that it marginalizes the voices of Black and Indigenous women and other women of color, reinforcing the need for intersectional approaches that account for multiple acts of oppression (hooks, 2015b). These

ideas connected to my research by emphasizing the importance of centering female-identifying performing artists whose voices often have been excluded from feminist and performing arts discourse.

The emergence of third-wave feminism in the 1990s sought to address the limitations of earlier feminist movements by challenging the broad application of women's issues and emphasizing differences among women based on race, class, sexuality, and other intersecting identities (Hirudayaraj & Shields, 2019). In response to critiques that mainstream feminism centered on white, middle-class experiences, third-wave feminism embraced intersectionality, acknowledging that women of color experience oppression differently (Crenshaw, 1991; hooks, 2015a). Expanding the definition of feminism, hooks (2015a) asserted:

Feminism is the struggle to end sexist oppression. Its aim is not to benefit solely any specific group of women, any particular race, or class of women. It does not privilege women over men. It has the power to transform in a meaningful way all our lives. Most importantly, feminism is neither a lifestyle nor a ready-made identity or role one can step into. (p. 27)

Although framing women as a homogeneous category has sometimes provided cohesion, it ultimately erases the diversity of women's backgrounds, lived experiences, and intersecting identities, including race, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status (Butler, 1988; Crenshaw, 1995a). This is important to understand because it reinforces the importance of intersectionality by amplifying voices that often have been overlooked.

Many women have challenged feminism's early definitions, recognizing their limitations in addressing the full spectrum of women's experiences (hooks, 2015a). For an inclusive feminist movement, it is essential to uplift counternarratives of those whose narratives often have

not been centered (hooks, 2015a). Solórzano and Yosso (2002) noted that because dominant voices tell stories of privilege, these narratives become perceived as normal. Ahmed (2017) underscored the urgency of challenging these systems of power. As hooks (2015a) mentioned, “Radical feminism is working to eradicate domination and elitism in all human relationships” (p. 19), which reinforces the importance of considering intersectionality in these discussions.

Scholars have since expanded its application, particularly in critical race theory (CRT) and feminist studies on sexual orientation (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). hooks (2000) highlighted feminism as having the power to end sexual oppression, but these forms of oppression cannot be separated from racism and the lasting effects of colonial histories, including slavery. Ahmed (2017) built on this perspective, emphasizing the need to dismantle deeply embedded power structures. In its fourth wave, feminism was reshaped by digital activism and global movements (e.g., #MeToo), which addressed issues including sexual harassment, body shaming, and workplace discrimination, thereby amplifying intersectional feminist discourse (Hirudayaraj & Shields, 2019; Lewinsky, 2025). This discussion impacted my research by situating my participants’ stories in a broader feminist movement that challenges oppression and amplifies intersectional voices.

Feminist Standpoint Theory

Feminist standpoint theory (FST) is the idea that historically oppressed communities have unique standpoints or perspectives because of their outsider positions (Harding, 1991). Collins (2022) discussed for example, Black women’s lived experiences generate a distinctive standpoint that challenges dominant systems. Collins’s (2022) concept of a Black feminist perspective emphasized lived experience as central to understanding the experiences of Black individuals (Collins, 2022). Hartsock (1998) also added that there are multiple layers of understanding these

perspectives and referred to it as a “duality of levels of reality” (p. 108). Standpoint theory asserts that the experiences of women of color are not only personal but also significant in shaping meaning, offering insight into inequities often overlooked in intersectional dialogue (Collins, 2019; Harding, 1991). Collins (2019) connected standpoint theory and an intersectional lens. FST contributes to a deeper understanding of how race, gender, and class intersect (Collins, 2019; Harding, 1991).

Butler (1988) challenged traditional understandings of gender, arguing that gender is a social construct, and society should not essentialize people’s identities. The lived experiences of each person influence how they are affected by patriarchy. Feminist standpoint theory also questions what knowledge is (Harding, 2004). In many ways, FST emerged in the 1970s as a way to empower oppressed groups and contributed to the development of a research method that centers women’s perspectives (Harding, 2004). This leverages the position as an advantage rather than approaching the position from a deficit mindset. In Table 1, I compare feminist theory and feminist standpoint theory.

Table 1*Side by Side Visualization of Feminist Theory and Feminist Standpoint Theory*

Element	Feminist theory	Feminist standpoint theory (FST)	Connection to research
Definition	A theoretical framework that centers gender equity, challenging patriarchal systems and uplifting female voices (Ahmed, 2017; Butler, 1988; hooks, 2015a).	A theoretical framework that positions the historically oppressed as having a unique perspective that can be leveraged to understand the dominant culture (Collins, 2019; Harding, 1991).	My research integrates these definitions to center racially and ethnically diverse female voices in the performing arts, using their lived experiences to reveal inequities in gendered and racialized systems.
Approach	Shaped by histories, politics and intersectionality (Ahmed, 2017; Butler, 1990; Crenshaw, 1991; hooks, 2015a).	Shaped by a specific vantage point to obtain knowledge and empowers historically oppressed groups (Harding, 2004).	My research integrates feminist inquiry to explore how intersecting identities shape experiences and uses standpoint theory to position participants as knowledge creators whose experiences inform systemic change.
Scholars	Sandra Ahmed bell hooks Chandra Talpade Mohanty Judith Butler Kimberlé Crenshaw Patricia Hill Collins	Sandra Harding Nancy Hartsock Patricia Hill Collins	These scholars informed my theoretical and methodological framing.

Note. This chart was created as a visual representation for understanding.

Intersectionality

Crenshaw (1991) introduced the concept of intersectionality to highlight how the experiences of Black women's discrimination often were overlooked in both feminist and antiracist movements (Ahmed, 2017; Collins, 2019; Crenshaw, 1991). Initially emphasized in the 1990s by feminist scholars, intersectionality became central to third-wave feminism (Hirudayaraj & Shields, 2019). Delgado and Stefancic (2017) defined intersectionality as the examination of

the intersection of race, sex, class, national origin, and sexual orientation. Collins (2022) said everyone has the right to be part of the various participating identities that make a person whole. Evi Stamatiou (2020) pointed out that, when connecting intersectionality to the performing arts, oppressive narratives can impact performing artists by reproducing stereotypes unconsciously in their own work. True inclusion in the performing arts must include intersectionality; otherwise, multiple identities will not be acknowledged (Stamatiou, 2020). My reality is tied to being a daughter of immigrants, an educator, a South Asian woman, and an artist. I often found my gendered experiences could not be separated from cultural expectations tied to race, ethnicity, and family roles.

Intersectionality provided a lens through which I interpreted participants' stories and how various systems of privilege and oppression had shaped their journeys as artists. At times, I felt feminist spaces did not fully capture the weight of cultural obligations, and professional spaces often failed to acknowledge the multiple dimensions of my identity. This led me to recognize how my intersecting identities left me feeling othered in white feminist spaces and in South Asian spaces that required managing cultural expectations. Feminist theory, by centering gender, provides tools to explore how race and gender intersect, offering a framework to illuminate power structures that perpetuate injustice and to amplify women's voices in artistic and educational spaces (Ropers-Huilman & Winters, 2011). Mohanty (2003) argued intersectional feminist analyses produce differences in perspective, highlighting the need for more nuanced intersectional approaches (Ahmed, 2017). This framework guided my research by interrogating how systems of power shape representation, artistic opportunity, and leadership.

Collins and Bilge (2020) referred to the unique perspectives of women of color as a missed opportunity to engage "knowledge creators" (p. 92), and Collins (2022) stated that she

centered the experiences of Black women and referred to it as “taken for granted knowledge” (p. 342) that the experience of this group provides a unique perspective. Adding yet another layer, Crenshaw (1995a) introduced the concept of political intersectionality, highlighting how women of color frequently navigate conflicting political agendas, thereby further complicating their experiences of oppression. Crenshaw (1995a) argued the needs of women of color cannot be met by looking through one primary lens. Understanding these multiple dimensions is essential in understanding knowledge as truth (Harding, 1991). Political intersectionality informed how I examined these performing artists’ experiences in the performing arts by understanding their narratives and reflecting on how cultural and gendered experiences shaped their access in artistic spaces. In this way I uplifted the value of their lived experience to challenge the dominant narratives in both the performing arts and theatre education.

Constructing Identity

Understanding intersectionality plays a significant role in comprehending identity (Collins & Bilge, 2020). Although individuals constantly strive to make sense of their experiences, politics and society profoundly shape how identities are constructed (Aggarwal & Ciftci, 2021; Butler, 1988). However, understanding one’s own identity is essential for survival (Collins, 2022). For me, understanding my own identity has been an evolutionary journey that has involved navigating South Asian and U.S. spaces. Crenshaw (1995b) further emphasized that racism and sexism often are treated in isolation, erasing intersectional experiences of individuals whose identities embody both. Women of color, for example, frequently are reduced to being either “women” or “people of color” (Crenshaw, 1995a, p. 357), a binary that limits the visibility of their multidimensional identities.

I understood the intersectional tension of being raised in a community where stability and respectability were valued above taking risks, such as in my artistic profession. At the same time, I was drawn to the arts as a space I wanted to pursue. I was also confronted with expectations that I should present myself as quiet, docile, or compliant, which often conflicted with my own desire to have a voice and speak up. It was not until I began learning more about feminist theory and CRT that I started to understand my past experiences, which previously left me feeling defeated.

Yoo et al. (2022) took this a step further by addressing the frequent erasure of Asian American experiences and highlighting the need to recognize the particular challenges faced by South Asian women. I have often felt invisible in broader conversations about women that tend to center white women's experiences and within the wider South Asian narrative, where I was considered not "Indian enough." This exploration of identity reflected my research, which investigated how female-identifying performing artists from racially and ethnically diverse communities navigate the intersections of culture, gender, and belonging in the performing arts, showing how identity formation becomes both a personal and political journey.

Mohanty (2003) highlighted the historical movements that have influenced the numerous paradigm shifts and the evolutionary nature of feminist discourse (Ahmed, 2017; Mohanty, 2003). Dillard (2012) noted that many scholars examined the past to bring meaning to their present. When individuals are challenged by their identities, it often prompts deep reflection, leading them to question who they are and even to reassess their sense of self (Kanji & Cahusac, 2015). This is especially true for artists, whose personal histories, identities, and lived experiences shape how they express themselves and interpret the world (Ahmed, 2017; Tran,

2023). For me, the stage has often been the place where I felt safe, allowing the many facets of who I am to come together through voice, movement, and storytelling.

For women, making sense of who they are involves a reflective process (Kanji & Cahusac, 2015). While sensemaking is often linked to organizational settings, it also plays an important role in the artistic process, helping artists interpret the complexities of their identities (Kanji & Cahusac, 2015). Kanji and Cahusac (2015) noted that sensemaking is typically discussed in relation to social processes within organizations. However, in the context of female artists, the sensemaking process offers a framework for expressing complex identities through their work (Weick, 2011). Sensemaking involves interpreting experiences and reclaiming identities in spaces where voices have been underrepresented. These voices challenge dominant narratives as acts of resistance (Toliver, 2020).

The past is crucial in understanding one's identity and cannot be separated from who one is (Dillard, 2012). Understanding familial and cultural backgrounds is critical to comprehending this decision-making process, as these backgrounds profoundly influence each individual's sense of self (Kanji & Cahusack, 2015; Weick, 2011, 2022). As Rowe (2009) suggested, the desire for belonging is universal (Kanji & Cahusack, 2015; Rowe, 2009). Each person's unique experiences shape how they navigate the world (Kanji & Cahusack, 2015; Weick, 2011, 2022). This process of sensemaking parallels my research, as female performing artists from racially and ethnically diverse communities continually interpret and reframe their identities in performance spaces that historically have overlooked their voices.

Methodology

Toliver (2021) highlighted that stories are sources of knowledge. Storytelling preserves lived experiences and serves as a means of resisting dominant narratives that historically have

excluded diverse voices (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). Ahmed (2017) further asserted that feminism enables individuals to take ownership of their past. Through this process, women may begin to recognize how their spaces have been minimized, and through feminist approaches, they may permit themselves to occupy more space, expanding their presence and influence (Ahmed, 2017). Performance becomes a reclaiming of that space.

Unfortunately, in the United States, theatre has remained stagnant due to its exclusion of narratives that challenge the dominant white-European, hetero-male-dominated stories (Cross, 2024). Arts-based research also enables the researcher to connect their experiences to their research (Leavy, 2020). Leavy (2020) noted there is alignment between the artistic process and the research process. Through these narratives, theatre can provide a platform for diverse voices. This emphasis on storytelling directly aligns with my arts-based methodology, as the ethnodrama in my research transformed participants' lived experiences into performance, using narrative as both data and resistance to dominant structures in theatre education.

Arts-Based Research

Leavy (2020) discussed how arts-based research emerged from the unique parallel between arts-based practice and research practice: it can teach, reveal human experiences, challenge ideas, evoke understanding, and make information more accessible. It is a multidisciplinary approach to research (Leavy, 2025). Bagley and Castro-Salazar (2019) noted the value of critical arts-based research lies in the content being performed, the process of staging the performance, and the impact it has on participants, who are positioned as collaborators, artists, and audience members. Arts-based research involves using visual art, music, dance, theatre, or any combination of these (Barone and Eisner, 2012). However, as Leavy (2020) calls on arts-based researchers to know something about the arts but not

necessarily have extensive training as she states, “arts-based research is not for arts sake” (Leavy, 2020, p. 1). Arts based research helps make meaning and knowledge more engaging, serving the public that conventional research might overlook (Barone & Eisner, 2012).

Narrative Inquiry

Narrative inquiry encompasses various approaches that share the goal of transforming data into narrative formats (Saldaña, 2011). As an arts-based methodology, narrative inquiry values storytelling as both process and product and emphasizes meaning making through lived experience. Storytelling gives new perspectives and develops empathy (Leavy, 2020). Clandinin and Connelly (2000) noted the importance of narrative inquiry in “creating a research text” (p. 124), illuminated by stories. This process of transforming data into stories allows researchers to reveal emotion (Leavy, 2025). Researchers who use narrative inquiry often prioritize humanity and portraying lived truths in their work (Leavy, 2020). Theatre offers a powerful medium, fostering dialogue and inspiring change (Tran, 2023). Narrative inquiry and theatre overlap to create spaces where stories can be collectively interpreted by audiences, artists and researchers. By sharing stories, performers cultivate compassion from their audiences and in themselves (Saldaña, 2011). This aligned with my research by having narrative inquiry and ethnodrama transform participants’ lived experiences into performative.

Ethnodrama

This study employed ethnodramatic performance, or ethnodrama, a performative research methodology that combines study and performance to illuminate individuals’ lived experiences, where researchers transform data into scripts (Ackroyd & O’Toole, 2010; Saldaña, 2005, 2011). Ethnodrama is one of the most used performance-based research practices (Leavy, 2020).

Ethnodrama is an oral history that highlights multiple voices (Salvatore, 2025), many of which have previously gone unheard. Qualitative research is the data or source material needed to develop the ethnodrama (Salvatore, 2025). Vachon et al. (2019) highlighted the distinction between ethnodrama and ethnotheatre, with the former involving dramatized data and the latter using fieldwork to develop a theatrical production.

Also known as research-based theater, ethnodrama involves artists collaborating directly with researchers through the process of theatre making (Cox et al., 2023). Excerpts from interview transcripts are used for play development (Saldaña, 2011, 2021). For example, developing composite characters, characters developed based on data from multiple sources, can highlight multiple stories (Toliver, 2021). Salvatore (2025) noted that an interview, in itself, is a performance and constitutes “performance ethnography” (p. 8). However, when it is re-performed, it becomes an ethnodrama (Denzin, 2018; Salvatore, 2025). This engages the participant as part of the performance process and also as a creative contributor. Experiencing a performance actively engages the audience in the meaning-making process (Salvatore, 2025). The terms *ethnotheatre* and *performance ethnography* often are used in place of one another and speak to the theatrical sharing of a script that was developed based on qualitative data, such as the interviews (Leavy, 2020). I used ethnodrama to share participants’ words as interview data as a performative script that amplifies their voices. By doing this, I merged research and performance to illuminate the stories of participants.

Ethnodrama aligns well with narrative inquiry because it uses narrative structures to present experiences (Andrews et al., 2013). Toliver (2021) emphasized the importance of alternative genres in conveying meaning, rather than relying solely on written research. To connect this with ethnodrama and this research, the idea reinforces the value of performance as

scholarship that invites audiences and artists to witness participants' stories. By incorporating performance into the research process, I link Toliver's idea to emphasize storytelling as a legitimate mode of scholarship.

This methodology offers researchers a creative way to engage wider audiences and sustain the conversation. Ethnodrama adds to the dialogue when social responsibility is emphasized (Ackroyd & O'Toole, 2010). Although narrative inquiry focuses on analyzing and interpreting stories for written academic understanding, ethnodrama centers on performance and creating scripts aimed at actively engaging audiences. Salvatore (2025) highlighted two key attributes necessary to define an ethnodrama: having a research question that guides the creative process and sharing a performance to disseminate findings. Ethnodrama serves both as a method and a process to better understand participants' narratives through a staged dialogue. By dramatizing these lived experiences, I use performance as a form of analysis and activism.

Research Method

The methodological approach for this research study was narrative inquiry, specifically ethnodrama. I chose to develop an ethnodramatic performance due to my multiple roles as a director, actor, scholar, and researcher. Bhattacharya (2014) noted that arts-based educational research differs significantly from traditional research formats. Ethnodrama allowed me the opportunity to merge artistic practice with qualitative research, which aligned my belief that stories performed on stage can uplift deep truth. Ethnodrama provided a way to transform participant narratives into a performance piece. My approach was to create a space for evocative dialogue that amplified the insights revealed in this research. This method also aligned with my positionality as an artist-scholar committed to social justice by allowing me to analyze and present data through performance as both research and activism.

Data Sources

For this paper, I conducted interviews with female-identifying performing artists from racially and ethnically diverse communities. 21 respondents fit the criteria for this paper based on survey responses, and of those, 16 participants were willing to participate. Six people then responded to the email invitation, and they were invited to participate in interviews. I followed an interview protocol (see Appendix A). Interviews were recorded on Zoom and subsequently transcribed for research purposes. Participants were asked to participate using a pseudonym.

Data Collection

Data collection aligned with the theoretical framework of feminist theory. Feminist research values shared authority between researcher and participant, so I approached each stage of data collection with care and respect. Survey responses were reviewed to identify participants who met the criteria, and those who expressed interest were contacted for interviews. There were 21 female-identifying performing artists from racially and ethnically diverse communities who responded. Of the 21, 16 agreed to be interviewed. Consent forms were sent, and six people responded. Once the consent forms were received, an email was sent with a Calendly link, allowing participants to schedule their interviews. All interviews were recorded through Zoom. The established protocol and interview questions were the same as in Paper I. Files were stored on a password-protected, secure drive and will be destroyed 6 months after the publication of the dissertation to maintain participants' privacy. Throughout the process, I used journaling to capture my insights and reflections, and I used the journal entries as another data source for the study. These practices highlighted feminist theory's emphasis on researcher positionality, recognizing that knowledge is coconstructed and shaped by the researcher's standpoint.

Data Analysis Part I

This second paper of the dissertation examines themes of power, oppression, and intersectionality through interviews with female-identifying performing artists from racially and ethnically diverse communities. As with Paper I, in Paper II, I began with open coding to capture participants' words and stories (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Saldaña, 2011). During this phase of coding, I again used the DELVE software. I began by analyzing the words of the participants into initial codes. Two examples of initial codes based on quotes from participants are as follows:

Code: Typecast

I think it's interesting because I am a light-skinned Latina, but the minute they hear my name it changes, you know, I can literally dye my hair blonde . . . and the minute they find out I'm Latina, it turns around, and I'm typecast.

Code: Immigrant

I am mixed race, so I'm like Dominican and Italian, and I never really belonged anywhere, because I was not enough of something to be considered.

I then moved into the axial code phase (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Saldaña, 2011) further categorizing them. As an example, using the participant quotes and codes from above, typecast, performing arts, and belonging became visibility. Finally, thematic coding enabled key themes to emerge. So, for example, visibility and role model became representation and feeling less than and who am I became identity. Table 2 includes participant quotes connected with the emergent themes.

Table 2*Participant Quotes Connected to Emergent Themes*

Participant Quotes	Emergent Theme	Notes
“I am mixed race, so I’m like Dominican and Italian, and I never really belonged anywhere, because I was not enough of something to be considered.”	Representation	Participants connected casting with whiteness.
“I think it’s interesting because I am a light-skinned Latina, but the minute they hear my name it changes, you know, I can literally dye my hair blonde . . . and the minute they find out I’m Latina, it turns around and I’m typecast.”	Identity	Participants described their identity formation being impacted by a sense of belonging.

The research question in Paper II was, How have the personal, cultural, and professional experiences of female-identifying performing artists from racially and ethnically diverse communities influenced their contributions to the performing arts?

Participant Profile

To honor the voices in this study, I begin with an overview of the participants whose lived experiences formed the foundation of the ethnodrama. Each participant brought a unique combination of artistry, professional roles, and cultural identities that informed their perspective. Presenting their profiles side by side in Table 2 highlights the range of experiences, age groups, artistic disciplines, racial and ethnic identities, and career pathways of the participants. This overview provides context for the data analysis. The profiles are listed in the order in which they were interviewed.

Table 3*Overview of Participants for Paper II*

Pseudonym	Age range	Artistry	Race	Current professional role	Notes
YH	35–44	Director, actor, musical theatre, stage manager	Asian	Teaching artist, arts administrator	Transitioned from performance to arts education/administration. Values process, inclusion, and advocacy for representation.
Cordy	45–54	Director, musical theatre	Other	Teaching artist, arts administrator	Directing focus, advocating for diverse representation, and merging artistry with administrative leadership.
Casey	45–54	Director, actor, other	Asian	Artist	Balances directing and acting; uses theatre to challenge stereotypes and celebrate cultural heritage.
Gail	25–34	Actor, musical theatre, other	Black	Teaching artist, arts administrator	Advocates for equity in arts education; balances performance background with leadership in administration.
July	35–44	Actor, dancer, playwright, scene designer, light designer, props	Native American	Artist	Multidisciplinary theatre artist uses performance and design to amplify Indigenous voices and preserve culture.
Zelda	45–54	Director, actor, other	Black	Arts administrator, higher education	Brings artistry into academic leadership; advocates for equity and access in theatre and higher education.

Note. This chart was created as a visual representation for understanding.

YH

The first participant was YH. YH was female-identifying and between 35–44 years old at the time of the study. Her artistry was directing, acting, musical theatre, and stage management. After pursuing musical theatre in college, YH navigated the challenges of being an Asian performer in a field that often confined actors to stereotypical roles.

Cordy

Cordy was between the ages 45–54 and identified as Hispanic. She began her artistic journey as a performer but soon found her voice in directing. As a Hispanic artist and educator, Cordy had consistently navigated the challenges of representation in theatre.

Casey

Casey was between 45–54 years old and was an artist. She identified as Filipina, and her artistry was directing and acting. As a Filipina artist, she often found herself navigating spaces where her identity was either overlooked or narrowly defined. She worked as a director and an actor.

Gail

Gail was 25–34 years old at the time of this study. Her artistry was acting and musical theatre. As a young Black woman navigating the theatre industry, she often had to confront systemic barriers, particularly the lack of authentic representation and opportunities for artists of color.

July

July was 35–44 years old at the time of this study. Her artistry was acting, dance, playwriting, scene design, lighting design, and props. As a Native American artist, July

navigated an industry where Indigenous voices historically had been underrepresented or misrepresented.

Zelda

Zelda was 45–54 years old at the time of the study. Her artistry was directing and acting. As a Black woman in higher education, Zelda was deeply aware of the systemic challenges that shape the experiences of artists and educators of color. She used her leadership roles to advocate for equity, access, and meaningful representation in theatre and education programs.

Researcher Profile

Stories begin with the storyteller. Just as I shared the profiles of my participants, I also share my own story. I offer a profile that parallels what participants shared. At the time of this study, I was in the 45–54 age range. As an artist, I am an actor, director, and musical theatre artist, deeply in love with devising theatre based on social issues, especially involving young people. I was a teaching artist for 12 years. My professional career began in television news, shaped by early beliefs that a career in the arts would not be financially sustaining. In the same way that my experiences shaped the perspective with which I approached this work, so did the stories of the participants, which drove the ethnodrama.

Data Analysis Part II

This section of data analysis focused on the performative aspect of the ethnodrama. My Artistic Lab class acted as a part of the process where devising and discussion took place. *Devising* is a collaborative process where theatrical material is produced by improvisation, storytelling, and play (Kaufman et al., 2018; Saldaña, 2011). Applying *Moment Work*, defined below, as part of this analysis allowed me to examine how participants' experiences could be reimagined theatrically to convey emotional truth. Through this process, performance became

another layer of analysis. This process aligned with my artistry and my commitment to arts-based scholarship, and it provided an avenue for integrating my creative practice as part of this process. To further develop this, I integrated an opportunity to develop my work with the Artistic Lab class, which gave me an unique opportunity to develop the performance piece and discuss the emerging themes.

Artistic Lab I

In addition to the research, I used my artistry in devising theatre to lead the artistic process in developing an ethnodrama (Saldaña, 2011, 2021). As an instructor in the graduate program in educational theatre at The City College of New York, during the fall of 2025, I engaged my graduate students in exploring some research content as part of the ethnodrama development process. This class sought to use this time for teacher candidates to center their artistry. We used the hour each week to play as artists. When I taught it I used devising techniques to explore social issues. So, for example, in the past we have started with current events found in newspaper articles or obituaries of people to devise theatre. Rather than using excerpts from obituaries in The New York Times or articles focused on current events, as I have done in the past, during this semester, I used excerpts of text from my script as I continued to develop it.

I used this class as an opportunity to utilize the ethnodrama script I had developed as a text while teaching the Tectonic Theater Project's Moment Work technique (Kaufman et al., 2018). *Moment work* is a devising technique in which the researcher develops moments based on data collected, using the elements of the stage (e.g., lights, sound, props, architecture) first, rather than going to the text (Kaufman et al., 2018). *Devising* can be defined as a creative process in which one uses the element of play to create performance or, in this case, moments (Kaufman et

al., 2018). These devised moments then are linked to develop vignettes, which become the backbone of the script. Having the opportunity to use the script I developed in this class allowed me to hear, see, and gain an outside perspective on what I had developed and continue to refine it. It also provided participants in this process with the opportunity to engage in discussions about the topic.

Moment Work is the devising process developed by Tectonic Theater Project, where theatre is built using theatrical units referred to as moments. These moments are devised using the elements of the stage, namely gesture, props, sound, lighting, movement, and text, and then ultimately are sequenced into a full play (Kaufman et al., 2018). The first class was a basic introduction to moment work (Kaufman et al., 2018). This introduction included using the elements of the stage to develop staged pieces rather than going straight to the text.

I always began class with an improv activity where the class engaged with the architecture in the space, starting each scene as the Tectonic Theatre Project does, with an “I begin” and “I end” (Kaufman et al., 2018). What happened in between those two bookmarks in the scene was an improvisational space and was up to the actors involved (Kaufman et al., 2018). We then moved to integrating props and lighting in a scene with text from the ethnodrama script. However, the direction I gave was to use the text from the script but develop a scene using the elements of the stage without any actors. After they created the scene, I directed them to include actors. This process allowed for an exploration of the elements of the stage and the topic of the script.

The Moment Work helped me develop the script to the ethnodrama by allowing myself to engage in conversation with the topic about what they were devising. I decided to use this class as an opportunity to develop my ethnodrama script because, as an artist, I work well as a

collaborator, devising material. After we shared the moments each group developed and talked about the script a little more, I brought the first draft of the script to the class. I not only received feedback but also engaged in dialogue about the topic. Comments such as, “We see the data, but what’s the story?” prompted me to consider how individual scenes (i.e., moments) connected to create a story. Questions like, “Who are they talking to?” and “Why are they talking to each other?” guided me to reexamine relationships and transitions between moments, strengthening the story’s emotional throughline and cohesion. I continued to refine the script until its current state. We planned to have a reading of it at the end of the Fall 2025 semester.

Conference Experience

To make the research study strong, I presented the proposal at two research roundtables at two national conferences in March and June 2025. I asked session attendees to give feedback on the following questions: (a) Do my methodological approaches align well with my research goals? (b) How does my research contribute to current conversations in theatre education? and (c) What potential impact do you see this research having in higher education? My hope was to ensure that the method and initial outcomes and feedback resonated with the broader field addressing gaps in equity-focused research in theatre education. The feedback, often in the form of questions, included, “Why are you doing this?” “Why is this important?” “What do you hope to gain from this?” “How do we go beyond just changing content?” and “What does functioning more equitably mean?” These questions helped me refine how I articulated the purpose of my work. During this process, I was surprised at how many participants had a “one and done” mentality, as though the small changes they made in their practice relieved them of any more responsibility. I was hoping to gain insight into the impact the research could have and feedback

on the reflective tool I was in the process of developing. The response reiterated the importance of my goals of developing a reflective tool to consider equity-driven work.

Role of the Researcher

I served as both the researcher and artist in this research study. I am a South Asian American female theatre educator. I chose to develop this ethnodrama as part of my dissertation. My role was that of the researcher, playwright, and director. My artistic philosophy is rooted in collaboration, where I devise and engage all the elements of the stage. I used devising techniques, writing, directing, and performance as methods to convey the insights gained from the research.

Findings

This paper presents findings by sharing the ethnodrama *Beyond the Spotlight*. An ethnodrama is a form of research-based theatre that transforms interview transcripts and personal reflections into a performative script (Saldaña, 2011; Salvatore, 2025). By presenting the findings as a script, the research provides an opportunity to have meaningful dialogue with audiences (Saldaña, 2011; Salvatore, 2025). This ethnodrama uplifts the experiences of those who participated in interviews for Papers I and II.

Using the principles of endarkened storywork and ethnodrama, this process began with open coding to group participants' words into similar, broader categories. From there, I moved on to axial coding to further refine the coding. I then revisited the interviews and listened to them again. Next, I returned to the axial codes to develop an outline for a script, from which evolved composite characters based on the participants I interviewed. Composite characters are created by combining excerpts from multiple participant interviews to form a single fictional character (Salvatore, 2025). From this step, I started to see scenes and themes emerge. After writing the

short scenes, I recognized the themes I wanted to focus on. I then introduced the script to the Artistic Lab I class. After spending a few weeks devising moments, revisiting the script, and making edits, the class and I began rehearsals for a reading scheduled for December 2025. Throughout this process, we discussed not only the script itself but also the themes that emerged, and I look forward to continuing the conversation with them as we rehearse and present to audiences.

BEYOND THE SPOTLIGHT

Beyond the Spotlight is the title of the ethnodrama and emerges from a space where personal experiences become political, and storytelling becomes data. This is an ethnodrama based on the research discussed in my dissertation. It amplifies the voices of female performing artists from racially and ethnically diverse communities, whose experiences in the performing arts have often been silenced, misread, or unseen.

Set in a waiting room before an audition, the piece transforms an ordinary space into a site of reflection. The characters' voices are drawn from lived experiences. These stories collectively represent how these female performing artists construct identity within systems that both shape and silence them. This work seeks not to offer resolution but to illuminate process.

Cast of Characters

JORDAN: (early 30s) A Black actress. Sharp and magnetic.

LISETTE: (mid 40's) A Latina performer. Her humor masks overt exhaustion. She navigates colorism and typecasting daily.

MINA: (early 20s) A Korean American actress and teaching artist. Witty. Constantly looking for the right insta shot. She grew up performing in predominantly white spaces. First time auditioner.

LEELA: (mid 30s) A South Asian dancer, musician, and teacher. Very hopeful. She remains driven by art but prioritizes stability.

TAIMA: (mid 40s) A Native American multidisciplinary artist. She is pragmatic and centers her history in her work.

STAGE MANAGER: (mid 50s) A character with a thick Queens accent. A whirlwind of clipboard chaos. She's been running audition rooms for decades, convinced she's discovered half of Broadway. She is loud and eccentric.

Place

A waiting room outside an audition studio in New York City.

Time

Early in the morning, early fall.

Scene 1

Five mismatched chairs line one wall. A sign-in table holds pencils, sanitizer, and a stack of sides labeled COOKIES. A humming fluorescent light flickers. A loud clock ticks above. A door upstage bears a handwritten sign: CASTING - DO NOT ENTER

Stage manager opens with kinetic, comic energy and drives rhythm; the performers react in silence and glances. Ticking clock under dialogue. Seated Leela, empty chair, Lisette (in that order). Jordan is off rehearsing lines. Taima sort of has an ear in the seated conversation. Mina enters the room. Stark fluorescent tones transitioning to amber warmth as stories surface. Allow silences and overlapping voices, layered breath, and organic movement.

STAGE MANAGER

(heavy Queens accent) Alright darlings, listen up! Sign in, staple top left...top left, not diagonal...don't get creative, the copier hates that! Keep it down, thin walls, big egos next door; we don't wanna wake the castin' gods. *(She claps twice, adjusts her bracelets.)* Oh, my gawd, look at yous all beautiful, all sweatin' through ya headshots. Love it! Cookies scene! Adorable. Very off-Broadway daycare chic. *(Leans toward Jordan.)* You got a face that says 'Cookies' ya

know that? Real commercial. That's a compliment, sweetheart. *(She exits in a swirl. The others settle; the clock ticks louder.)*

MINA

Hi. *(Walking in, makes eye contact, nervously looks around)* Hi. *(To stage manager)* Where do I sign in? *(Sits in between Leela and Mina and looks at Leela, This is my first audition. (Looks around. Looks at Leela).* Hi. I'm nervous. *(Pause)*I went to Musical Theater College with a lot of people who, like from the age of 3, were in tap shoes. They like went to a lot of like very elite performing arts schools, and had private voice lessons, and all of that *(Leela smiles, Lisette can't be bothered and rolls eyes, Mina engages from across the room, Taima looks up but ignores her).*

JORDAN

(Innocently practicing a line from sides) Did you eat too many cookies? *(whispering)* Did you...eat too many cookies? *(serious and proper)* Did... you... eat too many cookies?

LISETTE

(Overhears Jordan rehearsing, looks at Leela and Mina) This is the line that's gonna change our lives, huh? *(Looks at Mina)* So how long have you been doing this?

MINA

*(nervously)*I didn't actually do theater until middle school and did like a community theater production because I had a crush on a boy, and he was like, I'm doing this thing you should do. *(Lisette rolls her eyes and is sorry she asked)* And I was like, Okay, great. I'll be there. I am not a particular type that exists in the musical theater landscape, so it hasn't been easy. I think like, especially when you're Asian American. But I thought I'd give this one a try. There's always hope right?

JORDAN

(Overhearing) Well it's not just ethnicity. Sometimes it's even just the lack of female roles; there'll be like 12 men in the cast, and 3 women, you know. So, you're fighting with more women on that audition line to get seen, and there's always less men in the in the world.

MINA

Yeah and the roles that you're playing are often like very stereotyped, very demure. *(Lisette responds to the stereotype with a facial expression)* Yeah, and it is a very different landscape now, and I'm very appreciative of that. But I think at the time it was like, unless you could play Kim in Miss Saigon, no one really knew what to do with me until, like Avenue Q.

JORDAN

(Again, but different) Did you eat too many cookies? *(Again, but different)* Did you... eat too many cookies? *(Again, but different)* Did... you... eat too many cookies?

MINA

(Mina gets uncomfortable and she tries to break the awkward silence) So how was it when you got started?

LISETTE

Well, in the beginning, I guess I was a bit of a dreamer. So, I was like, I want to do it. But I really had no correct guidance, because I was already battling my parents, who didn't want me to do anything near the arts. So, I was working with just my hopes and dreams.

LEELA

I was raised in an Indian household with the same values, where you kind of grow up to work to live. Like, my parents were both immigrants, they came here, they worked really hard to provide a

good life and so in my family's mind doing something in the performing arts you can't really be successful. It's like you are letting them down. But here I am.

TAIMA

I think that as a profession it is volatile and not promising and I think it's not for the weak. And I just feel like it's also a bit exclusionary.

LEELA

I always told myself if money didn't matter the performing arts would be a great profession. But like my parents said that's not a goal, it's a hobby, it's not a job. I mean I really never had a mentor.

MINA

I think I felt like I spent 4 years as a theatre major in my undergrad with teachers who weren't teaching me well, because they didn't know what to do with me, because I'm Asian and so I felt like I was watching my peers, who were white, who were thin, who were more traditional, getting better material to work on, getting like so much mentorship and guidance, because the professors knew what to do with them.

TAIMA

Theater is all about who you know and who you're connected to. So, I think it's not a perfect industry, and I feel jaded by it. I feel hurt by it, you know, but also still hopeful cause I want to make art, and that's why I'm still here auditioning.

JORDAN

(Again, but different) Did you eat too many cookies? *(Again, but different)* Did you... eat too many cookies? *(Again, but different)* Did... you... eat too many cookies?

LEELA

(Overhearing Jordan) There's always one line that lives forever. *(Pause)*

TAIMA

Yeah. Usually said by a man. The same one who gets the grant for explaining my story back to me. *(They laugh. Stage Manager enters, coffee in hand.)*

STAGE MANAGER

Update! Castin's on a *(does air quotes)* 'creative pause' means lunch, but they don't wanna sound lazy. Yous are shinin. I can feel the talent. HOT. Might need SPF 50. *(Exits. Fluorescents flicker. Sound: ticking clock grows louder.)*

Scene 2

A few minutes later. Same location. This scene reveals identity issues, and each memory should feel spontaneous but truthful. Encourage overlapping lines; create texture and breath. Each pulls out something to do (nails, scrolls phones, returns calls except Jordan who is still pacing and thinking about the lines. They are more free to get to know each other. It is a new scene, showing a more reminiscent scene, with a shift in lights.

MINA

(Awkwardly trying to make conversation) My very first performance, I was five years old, I was playing Mary in the Christmas story. My parents were so proud. And Joseph was a year younger and cried the whole time. And Baby Jesus was a doll, with two different color eyes. One blue and one brown. Creepy. I was sitting on this large toy horse with wheels, and Joseph was supposed to pull me down the aisle, but he was crying so much. *(Everyone responds to this story by turning, nodding, acknowledging the story).*

LISETTE

My first performance was well, I was in 5th grade, and we did *Annie*. I was an orphan. Not *Annie*. I remember being so nervous, I almost peed myself. I was ten. And I was heartbroken,

because I was the best singer in the class. And because the girl who *was* cast as Annie couldn't really sing, they made me take her first song. (*singing softly*) Maybe far away, or maybe real nearby... So, I sang those first lines because the real Annie couldn't. And I was *so* proud, cause like, 'I'm singing Annie's parts!' Honestly, back then, I think it was because I'm Afro-Latina, I didn't look like Annie. And there was no other version of Annie at that time. It was just the redhead, Annie. So, they picked a white girl. (*Responses from everyone, almost as if they have experienced it too*).

TAIMA

I grew up dancing at powwows, and it's sort of a spectator sport, where it's mostly people watching us dance. And I think since about the 4th grade, we were doing dance performances in schools. Teachers called it 'cultural day.' It was sort of like an education for white people about native culture. And we would do dance performances, and then we would speak a little bit about our outfits, and we would answer questions, and it was always stupid questions like, Do you live in a teepee? You can tell that they only know stereotypes of native people. (*Everyone responds, by rolling their eyes, but Leela really comes over and commiserates as she gets ready to speak*).

JORDAN

(*Again, but different*) Did you eat too many cookies? (*silently keeps rehearsing*)

LEELA

My first performance was also a competition that was pretty stressful. I was one of the youngest kids that was competing. I was 6 years old. I did Bharanatayam, which is, like, a traditional Indian art form. And I remember getting ready, because there's a lot of makeup, and the costumes are very elaborate and my mom was putting makeup on me, and I had never worn

makeup like that before. I loved it. I remember thinking that was so cool. *(Everyone responds, Taima smiles and engages with her)*

TAIMA

(Speaking directly to Leela) Oh and then I was also a model for Kmart. I felt very proud. It was kind of funny to me all of the ignorant questions I would get and growing up on the settlement. So that's my tribal community. And then there's border towns. And so, like we experienced racism. *(Everyone looks over and reacts showing either a physical reaction or facial reaction to this).*

JORDAN

(Again, but different) Did you eat too many cookies? *(Again, but different)* Did you... eat too many cookies?

LEELA

You know what else I remember, being jammed in the corner, me with my flute, my sister and brother playing the violin, and one of our friends playing the piano at our church. I also remember the first time we were asked to play for someone's wedding. And that was really cool, you know, and I was maybe at that point 10 or 11. So it really wasn't that old. But they wanted us to play for their wedding, and I was like, you want us to play for your wedding? You know, 150 people were there. So that was really cool, that I could do something I loved with people that I was close to, and it was in front of a lot of people, and they seemed to appreciate it *(Mina and Leela respond, Lisette is afar and sort of listening, Jordan is listening but rehearsing).*

STAGE MANAGER

(re-enters mid-laugh) So big news... Bathroom's a key sit-u-a-tion, hydrate responsibly. *(Exits. Silence returns.*

Scene 3

A few minutes later. Same location. It gets sort of messier as people have been waiting longer. Lighting shift. Fluorescents fade to warm amber. Sound: heartbeat begins. Allow silence to stretch. This scene breathes. Encourage stillness as resistance. Light should feel sacred, sound nearly absent. They stand in a half-circle. Soft blue light.

JORDAN

(Again, but different) Did you eat too many cookies?

TAIMA

(to herself) Every room like this decides who gets to belong, way before we even walk in.

Pause. A few beats.

MINA

Yeah and sometimes I forget what it feels like to be chosen.

JORDAN

(Again, but different) Did you eat too many cookies?

LEELA

And some of us live our whole lives waiting. *Pause. A few beats.*

JORDAN

Maybe the waiting was never about them choosing us, maybe it was about us remembering we were already here.

Scene 4

Quick tempo. Natural light. Same location, a few minutes later. It ends in a shared golden wash extending into the audience. Continuous clock ticking sound. Blackout ends in silence. Ensemble seated; stage manager moves constantly because she is busy. Gradual reconfiguration of chairs into a circle to show that they are building toward community (Act II, Scene 3). There is

flexibility to stage this in a way that makes sense. Balance humor with vulnerability. Allow silences.

Play rhythmically: overlapping voices, layered breath, organic movement.

JORDAN

(Pacing) Did you eat too many cookies? *(Pause, thinks, tries it again in a whisper)*

STAGE MANAGER

Good news, honeys, they're ready for one at a time. *(Bad news face, talking to everyone or anyone who will listen)* By 'one' they mean 'not you specifically.' It's a 'type thing.'

LISETTE

There it is. The T-word. Type. I know that feeling. I remember when I auditioned for Cassie in A Chorus Line as a senior, in high school. My teacher came up to me later and said, 'Great job on the audition, you are the best singer,' so I thought I definitely got cast. But the cast list went up and it wasn't me. So, I asked my teacher why I wasn't cast as Cassie, and he said, 'Cause I wanted a blond'.

MINA

Ugh, typecasting. Ethnically ambiguous, like a coupon nobody honors. That's why I've only had a few auditions. *(Pause)* I haven't even had anyone to ask, no mentors either. I have been in, you know, mentorship events where I'm trying to connect with other potential mentors who are Asian women and I don't feel that same connection to them, because my experience as a mixed-race person is just different, so while the reasons why I don't perform full-time are because of the lack of representation, the fact that I'm here now I wouldn't change a thing.

LEELA

Or I get ‘Can you make it more ... Bollywood?’ or ‘You aren’t Indian enough’, what does that even mean? I grew up in a town with mostly white kids. The irony is with the South Asian community I feel like an outsider. I just never felt like I fit in.

JORDAN

As a kid, I was leaning in to being as close to whiteness as possible, because that was what was surrounding me. I have been told by my friends who are lighter-skinned or like white presenting, well, you’re not really Black. And then you start to maybe believe that? And you start to think, oh, I guess we aren’t different. And then there have been things that have happened to me that I didn’t realize was really racist. Hello identity crisis. It’s just bullshit.

MINA

Yes. It’s like, as long as you like do your makeup in a certain way for the audition you can pass. Sometimes I just want it so bad. But I didn’t necessarily see myself represented, and then, I think, especially in terms of like my Asian identity when I was represented. It was just gross like in musical theater. There’s just so much, you know. There’s the King and I, South Pacific and the Miss Saigon’s, and things like that.

TAIMA

Yeah I get ‘Can you be more ... Native?’ Yeah I can try, I can try to be more myself.

LISETTE

I feel like I became aware of my own identity when I started to become aware that if I wanted to do roles that were not Latina, that I was going to have to start hiding. I’m gonna be frank, and it’s not like something I’m proud of. But I started to dye my hair blonde. I started to not tan. I started to do anything, so I can get the opportunity to perform. Yeah. *(Starts scrolling on phone)*

LEELA

Yeah I started to shorten my name. I know it's an unusual name and long but I thought if I could make it sound more white maybe I'd get called in for more auditions. I even tried to bleach my face, so my face would look lighter on my headshots. I thought it would bring me work and that is what I needed to do feel more successful.

JORDAN

Well, the biggest challenge I found is to work out my schedule, to go to this audition that's lasting all day long, that I might miss work and not get paid. So, it's motivation. Also, it's like money. I need money, and sometimes you give up on the performing part because it's not promised, and it takes a lot of unpaid time and sometimes you just can't. You have to survive. So, it's also the choosing money over your passion, and I've often found myself choosing money, so I can just do a little bit of my passion. *(Gets distracted by scrolling on phone)*

MINA

It didn't look good out there for me either. I was often like being cast in West Side story as a shark and I feel like often people would tell there's a great role for you, and it was somebody of a completely different ethnicity. And I think, like at some point, those things started to make me very uncomfortable, and I was actually like, I don't really feel comfortable playing something that is outside of my identity in this way. *Jordan and Lisette are scrolling on their phones. The glow from their phones lights their faces, they go from scrolling to apparent disappointment.*

LISETTE

(to Jordan, annoyed) You saw this, right?

JORDAN

(annoyed laugh) Of course I did. Another white girl cast as a person of color . . . again. A role one of us should've been seen for.

LISETTE

(shakes head) It's like they don't even hear themselves anymore.

JORDAN

They do. They just don't care.

STAGE MANAGER

(Overhearing, she reacts, half-whispering to herself.) Oh boy ... they don't teach ya this at Juilliard, do they?

Scene 5

Overlap dialogue. Use the soundscape of ticking and breath. Each line should feel like breaking glass.

JORDAN

I learned to make myself liked or invisible. Either way, palatable. *(then, steady)* Did you eat too many cookies?

MINA

My college director said I wasn't the right type for my show my final year. My face said otherwise 'I'm the only one of me.' It was so disappointing.

LISETTE

I shrunk to fit. But, no more. My experience as an actor of color is not unlike being a queer person, which is that you have to keep reclaiming your identity, and come out again and again, and again. And be seen again and again, and again, and tell your story again and again. I shouldn't have to sacrifice one identity for another. I should be able to live at the intersection of all my identities at once.

LEELA

Straight up, I'll say with confidence, I never had a South Asian mentor.

JORDAN

All my classmates in undergrad were white. And I had this professor. I don't remember everything he said, but he did say that as theater makers, we toil and toil and, before the current project is even done, we're already starting the next one, and we toil and toil, and we toil. And I was just like, oh. Yeah. And then it was like this perception shift. And I wasn't looking at a sea of white people. I was looking at a sea of theater makers, of people who were just like me, it was like, Oh, these are my people. And and then so I stayed in the theatre program.

TAIMA

We built our own show; we started to create our own version of a production from scratch. I think that was like the most fulfilling, because we were able to use our creativity and bring in our own people and lift everybody up. And at the end you just felt accomplished being able to tell an honest story. Where, like I said, the other one is like you're telling somebody else's story. It's beyond your control. You know, you're just working within a system that's already against us.

Scene 6

The fluorescent buzz is gone. The room is quieter now. The sound of distant laughter filters through the hallway.

STAGE MANAGER

Ok ladies. One by one be ready to go in, yours up. Lisette, Leela and Taima you are on deck. Then Mina and Jordan, if you need to use the little girls room, this is the time yours after that.

LISETTE

You know what's funny? After all that waiting, I don't even wanna go in anymore.

LEELA

Yeah I won't go unless I can bring all of me.

TAIMA

I used to think I had to leave pieces of myself outside to get through that door. Now I'm just tired of doing that. I'm bringing all of me in or not going at all.

MINA

Same. I spent years trying to be somebody else. Now I just want to be me.

JORDAN

(laughs softly) We've been performing this whole time, even in the waiting room. Guess that's what we were taught to do. *(They all sit back at once and sigh together. Then silence. The silence is comfortable for once. A breath passes through the circle, glance at each other and smile).*

STAGE MANAGER

(Surprised and sort of shocked, they don't seem to want to go in.) You's been waiting here this long, come on don't give up now. Go in when I calls you.

LISETTE

I won't go unless I can be me.

LEELA

I can bring all of me.

TAIMA

I'm done hoping, asking, begging to be seen.

MINA

I just want to be me.

JORDAN

I don't need them to see me anymore, I see me.

ENSEMBLE

We are not a type. We are enough. *A pause. The air feels full but calm. The Stage Manager has a clipboard in hand.*

STAGE MANAGER

(poking her head in) You can go in now. *(beat)* Or don't. Honestly, you do you.

JORDAN

(gentle laugh) Guess we finally stopped waiting. *(pause)* Do we even need the cookies?

TAIMA

Should we just leave, I'm so over this. LISETTE

Let's get coffee?

LEELA

I'm game! *(to Mina, inviting her in)* You coming?

MINA

(To Leela) Do they serve justice with coffee? *(they both laugh)* No I'll stay. Let me get through my first audition. If you are at the coffee shop downstairs. I'll meet up with you.

LEELA

Ok. *(Leela leaves). Mina pulls out her sides and starts to practice.*

STAGE MANAGER

Oh, they left. Well just ups your chances. Get ready, your next.

MINA

(beat, she thinks about it, looks at her watch, settles in to rehearse with script in hand, long pause) Who am I kidding? The audition happened the moment I walked in. Screw this. *(she runs out. Blackout).*

END OF PLAY

Emergent Themes

In this section, I introduce emergent themes. The following table presents the two key themes that emerged from the data analysis. Each theme was developed through open and axial coding and reflects recurring ideas found across participant interviews as data. Following the table is discussion about this.

Table 4*Emergent Themes*

Number	Theme	Data	Evidence
I	Representation	Participants connected casting with whiteness and reflected on the power structures that define who is seen and who is silenced.	Participants often equated success as part of the performing arts with looking like the dominant culture or what was expected of them. Participants also discussed not seeing themselves or anyone who looked like them in any productions and did not think there were ample roles for them. Participants often were typecasted and, therefore, were put in a position where they were trying to pass as white. These narratives illuminated how power operated through exclusionary casting, reinforcing systemic oppression and the dominance of whiteness.
II	Identity	Participants described their identity formation being impacted by a sense of belonging and by intersecting experiences of race, ethnicity, gender, and class in systems of oppression.	Participants described constantly being described as or feeling different, whether based on race, ethnicity, or gender. The characters' reflections on colorism, cultural expectation, and socioeconomic pressure demonstrated intersectionality.

Note. This chart was created to visually summarize the connection between themes and the participant interviews.

Theme I: Representation

The ethnodrama highlighted how early encounters with the performing arts sparked both hope and disillusionment. For example, the introduction described my first experience of seeing Annie on Broadway and how it gave me that innocent hope that young people have. This is compared with the moment in the ethnodrama script where Lisette describes how her hope was diminished by a casting choice in which, rather than casting her as Annie, they opted to select someone who was white and less talented. This moment shows how her hope was diminished by racialized casting practices.

Early encounters with representation reveal the importance of performing artists seeing someone like themselves on stage. Representation in performance affirms hope and possibility, concepts that align with FST, which emphasizes how experiences of oppression produce a unique perspective (Collins, 2000; Harding, 1991). Throughout the ethnodrama, there are moments when all the characters discuss how they felt oppressed in the performing arts. For example, Lisette says:

My teacher came up to me later and said, “Great job on the audition, you are the best singer,” so I thought I definitely got cast. But the cast list went up, and it wasn’t me. So, I asked my teacher why I wasn’t cast as Cassie, and he said, “Cause I wanted a blond.”

Another time this character brought it up was when Lisette said, “I started to dye my hair blonde. I started to not tan. I started to do anything so I can get the opportunity to perform”. Lisette’s story highlighted how colorism has impacted beauty standards, which stem from Eurocentric norms. This is an example of oppression. Again, colorism is defined as discrimination based on skin tone, where light skin is privileged over dark skin in the same racial or ethnic group (Sicre, 2024).

Another example is a moment shared by Taima where she said:

We were doing dance performances in schools . . . Teachers called it cultural day. It was sort of like an education for white people about native culture. And we would answer questions like, “Do you live in a teepee?” You can tell that they only know stereotypes of native people.

This is an example of oppression with the idea of having her artistry reduced to a stereotype that was not appreciated as an authentic expression of her artistry. By the end, in a reclaiming of their own identities, they each made a choice to leave an audition where they all were being pitted against each other for the same role, which ultimately would have been given to another “type.”

Theme II: Identity

There are several moments where the idea of altering identity to align with the dominant culture surfaced. This was connected to the idea that to be successful, you had to fit the mold set by the dominant culture. There were several moments where the idea of altering identity to align with the dominant culture surfaced. This was connected to the idea that to be successful, you had to fit the mold set by the dominant culture. For example, Leela described how she started to shorten her last name and even tried to bleach her face so it would look lighter on headshots. She believed that this would bring her more work.

Another example is when Jordan shared the story where she said, “As a kid, I was leaning in to being as close to whiteness as possible, because that was what was surrounding me.” These moments highlighted how these performers felt they had to reshape their identities to be successful. This demonstrated the lack of representation in the performing arts. The stories shared in the ethnodrama act as counternarratives, challenging practices that privilege proximity to whiteness and continue to restrict who is valued onstage.

Leela also shared, “I won’t go unless I can bring all of me,” which is a moment of reclaiming her identity. Feminist theorists have noted belonging is shaped by gender and race (Ahmed, 2017; Crenshaw, 1991). Crenshaw’s (1991) framework of intersectionality illuminates how gender and race simultaneously constrain opportunities, producing unique forms of oppression for women of color in general and as applied to the performing arts. These early performance experiences function as key moments of identity formation. The ability to remember and then retell these experiences is an example of reclaiming identity by uplifting stories of oppression (Bhattacharya, 2017; Dillard, 2012). Using ethnodrama uplifts counternarratives and offers alternative ways of understanding identity (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002).

Interpretation and Implications

The ethnodrama revealed barriers that impacted participants’ journeys in the performing arts. I identified them under two themes, representation and identity, which offer audiences an opportunity to witness counternarratives that disrupt the dominant narratives in the performing arts (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). For example, Jordan’s repeated struggle to pass as white and Leela’s decision to shorten her last name illustrated how structural expectations of whiteness dictate access and opportunity. Lisette’s experience of losing a role to a blond despite being the stronger singer introduced the idea of who determines who belongs on stage and who determines those standards. These themes align with feminist theory and its critique of structures that limit opportunities while privileging dominant identities (Crenshaw, 1991). By connecting these stories with feminist theory, the ethnodrama documented the female experiences of individuals from racially and ethnically diverse communities, highlighting the need for the performing arts to be more inclusive.

Conclusion

The ethnodrama revealed themes of representation and identity, directly aligning with the central research question: How have the personal, cultural, and professional experiences of female identifying performing artists from racially and ethnically diverse communities influenced their contributions to the performing arts? This ethnodrama contributed to scholarship by addressing a topic that fosters the creation of more equitable spaces in the performing arts by positioning performance as a mode of knowledge production. Through characters' experiences, for example, Leela's reflection on bleaching her skin to look lighter on her headshots and Lisette's story of being denied a role because her teacher wanted a blond, the ethnodrama exposed how biases define who is seen and celebrated on stage. These narratives showed how female artists from racially and ethnically diverse communities navigate barriers. In alignment with arts-based research, rather than limiting participants' voices to interview transcripts, the script brings participants' voices to life and allows audiences to be part of the dialogue (Barone & Eisner, 2012).

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Paper II Appendix: Interview Protocol

Opening

Hi – Participant, thank you for taking the time to meet with me today. During this interview, I would like to learn about your experiences as an artist, your journey in the arts, the support you received, and whether it connects with your current professional journey.

Relationship Building Questions

What interested you about the study, and what is your motivation for agreeing to be interviewed?

Do you have any questions for me about the research so far?

Confidentiality Statement

Since we will be discussing very personal information, I encourage you to do the following:

- Use headphones
- Use a private computer/and or device
- Complete the interview in a private space

During this Zoom meeting, I enhanced all the security settings to ensure privacy and confidentiality. I will record the interview questions; please confirm that it is ok. [WAIT FOR RESPONSE AND TURN ON RECORDING IF AFFIRMATIVE]

Thank you again for meeting me today and participating in my dissertation research.

During our interview, I would like to learn more about your personal or professional experience in the performing arts and how it connects to your current professional journey. I would also like to hear your thoughts on representation and racial and ethnic diversity in the performing arts.

Questions

1. Please describe your first performing arts experience.
2. Discuss your perception of the performing arts as a profession.
3. Please describe your professional journey.

4. Does your performing arts experience connect to your current professional role?
5. Please describe a moment when you felt proud in the performing arts and how you celebrated with others.
6. Please describe any challenges you have experienced in the performing arts and how you overcame them.
7. Describe the support you felt in the performing arts as you developed professionally.
8. When you reflect on your professional journey, describe any moments you might return to, and encourage yourself to think differently about a choice or make a different one.
9. Describe any mentors you have had and share any advice you received.
10. Were you able to connect with mentors?
11. Did your mentoring experience connect with your identity?
12. Describe how you might have or might not have seen yourself represented in the performing arts.
13. Describe how you understand your own identity in connection with the performing arts?
14. Describe how your identity connects to your professional journey.
15. Describe your journey decentering whiteness. How has your identity been shaped by your proximity to or distance from whiteness in the performing arts?
16. Describe a moment in your performing arts journey when you became aware of how whiteness influenced perceptions of your identity. How was your sense of belonging in performing arts spaces impacted?
17. What strategies have you used to navigate, resist, or redefine norms shaped by whiteness in your performing arts journey?
18. How do you describe fulfillment, and do you feel fulfilled in your professional role today?
19. Describe any regrets you may have or anything you might have done differently.
20. Describe any advice you might give your younger self, or a young person interested in entering the performing arts as a profession?

Is there anything else you'd like to share? Thank you!

Follow up Questions

If follow-up questions are needed, they will be limited to: Please tell me more about that.

Please share in more detail what you are discussing. Please share more about how it made you feel.

**PAPER III: THE VOICE REFLECTIVE FRAMEWORK: ADVANCING EQUITY IN
HIGHER EDUCATION THEATRE TEACHER PREPARATION**

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Building on Papers I and II, this paper, Paper III, offers the VOICE reflective framework I developed for theatre education programs in teacher training, designed to help programs reflect inward, recognize their strengths, and identify areas for growth. The intention is to support theatre education programs in creating pathways to the performing arts by way of training theatre educators. Higher education institutions are uniquely positioned to address systemic inequities that continue to impact students and educators from racially and ethnically diverse communities. However, with increasing attacks on higher education, campuses often revert to patterns of exclusion and unwelcoming environments (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017; Steele & Rickards, 2021). Frederick V. Engram, Jr. (2024) emphasized that the first step toward liberation is understanding the past. Paper III of this qualitative research study focuses on the question, What are theatre education programs doing to create access and opportunity for performing arts practitioners from racially and ethnically diverse communities, and how effective are these efforts in fostering systemic change at higher education institutions?

Problem of Practice

The research I conducted in Papers I and II, focused on the experiences of South Asian performing artists and female identifying performing artists, respectively, along with the data and analysis in Paper III, has positioned the role of teacher training programs in preparing teacher candidates to consider expanding access to the arts by adopting equitable practices in teacher training (Getha-Taylor et al., 2020; Gopalan & Brady, 2019; Stazyk et al., 2016). Grounded in my study's focus on the experiences of racially and ethnically diverse performing artists, this discussion posits how theatre education programs can serve as catalysts for systemic change when they intentionally center equity and representation in curriculum design and pedagogy.

This means teacher training programs at higher education institutions must ensure they prioritize equity in ways that are not performative (Engram & Mayer, 2023; Mohammad Al-khamaiseh et al., 2024). It is important to note that context, identity, and relationships influence ethical decision-making in the evaluation process (Gates and Li, 2025).

Purpose of the Paper

Inspired by my personal experiences as a South Asian female performing artist navigating cultural and systemic issues, the framework I present is designed to encourage reflection in theatre teacher training programs on visibility, opportunity, identity, community, and empowerment, which I refer to as the VOICE reflective framework. This framework directly emerged from the findings of my research, which explored how female-identifying performing artists from racially and ethnically diverse communities experience barriers and envision pathways toward equity in the arts. By translating those narratives into actionable strategies, the VOICE reflective framework bridges the gap between lived experience and institutional practice. Rather than normalizing the dominant narrative that limits individual participation in the arts (Bhattacharya, 2014), this paper offers a lens through which to examine practices that increase access.

Literature Review

This literature review situates the research in the context of higher education and theatre education. The literature review in Paper III identifies inequities in higher educational institutions and builds on the findings from Paper I, which uplifted stories from South Asian performing artists through an AsianCrit lens, and from Paper II, which explored experiences of female-identifying performing artists from racially and ethnically diverse communities. Paper III

aims to apply the findings to practice. My literature review informed every part of the process and the development of the VOICE reflective framework that came from the research.

Higher Education-Related Focus

Recognizing the intersections of race and ethnicity with identities such as gender, (dis)ability, migrant status, and class is important in integrating social justice (Bernard & Talbot, 2023). Intersectionality is often missing from discourse concerning diversity, equity, and inclusion (Bernard & Talbot, 2023). It is essential that all categories (e.g., the parents' academic achievement, the student's immigrant generation, and the country of origin of the parents) be examined (Mukherji et al., 2019). For this reason, it is not only important what programs in teacher training programs in higher education teach but also how they function, their decisions and priorities, and how they approach their students with an understanding of each student's unique needs.

Personal identity influences teachers' beliefs and values (Metz, 2018), and teachers directly affect the students they teach; the same applies to teacher education. Faculty members need to find meaning in their work to remain engaged and interested. When work connects with identity, faculty are more likely to invest deeply in their teaching and institutional contributions (Buss et al., 2023). Oftentimes, faculty are charged with conducting research. When research connects with their own identity, the researcher also invests deeply (Collins, 2022; Gee, 2001).

Theatre Education Teacher Preparation Programs

Looking at the practices of theatre education programs through the work of scholars in these programs provided a foundation for this study, as it helped me better understand how these programs enacted their pedagogical praxis. Taiwo Afolabi (2021), Lauren Gorelov (2022), Jonathan P. Jones (2023), Roxanne Schroeder-Arce (2023), Nancy P. Smithner (2010), and

Sobha Kavanakudiyil (2024), just to give a few examples, all of whom have completed work grounded in theatre education programs and performing arts experiences, discussed teacher preparation in theatre education and the impact on identity formation in performance spaces. These scholars provided insights into how inequities persist and should be addressed in teacher training. These studies guided the development of the framework I offer by identifying successes of theatre education practices, areas of improvement needed, and how programs can be more intentional about supporting artists from racially and ethnically diverse communities.

For example, Schroeder-Arce (2023) from the Theatre Education Program at UT Austin (n.d.) stated that theatre education programs must move beyond surface-level recognition of privilege by training white practitioners to interrogate their positionality, avoid performativity, and approach cross-cultural storytelling as an ethical responsibility, while Jones (2023) from New York University's (NYU) Program in Educational Theatre (n.d.) highlighted the importance of drama educators recognizing that teaching is activism and to prioritize socially responsible practices. Another example from NYU's Program in Educational Theatre (n.d.) is Nancy Smithner's (2010) exploration of *The Women's Project*, which also highlighted this point and how theatre making allows women to interrogate culture and identity as socially responsive artists and teachers. Kavanakudiyil (2024) from the Graduate Program in Educational Theatre at The City College of New York - CUNY (CCNY Educational Theatre, n.d.) also emphasized that theatre educators must intentionally bring their own identities into their pedagogical practice, as identity shapes how teachers understand their students, their curriculum, and their responsibilities in learning spaces.

In addition to educational theatre research, emerging performance pedagogy programs, such as those at the University of Pittsburgh (Performance Pedagogy at Pitt, n.d.), Loyola

Marymount University (Performance Pedagogy LMU, n.d.), and Texas Tech University (Performance Pedagogy at Texas Tech, n.d.) share similar practices to culturally responsive, identity-centered training. Scholarship from these programs has highlighted the importance of decolonial pedagogies. As Banerji (2018) noted, performance pedagogy also must urge students to recognize how performance practices are shaped by social, political, and cultural histories. These ideas helped situate the VOICE reflective framework in a broader national dialogue toward more equitable practices in theatre preparation programs. Insight from scholars in educational theatre and performance pedagogy programs provided a foundation that supports the recommendations developed in the VOICE reflective framework.

This paper intentionally centers my scholar–practitioner lens, drawing on my 25 years of experience as a theatre educator, having been part of the founding faculty and currently serving as the program director, while integrating research from educational theatre and performance pedagogy programs across the country. By positioning myself in the specific context of the CCNY Educational Theatre Program, the VOICE reflective framework becomes a tool designed for continuous growth and evolution in my own institutional setting. For example, using VOICE as a framework to guide equitable practices in this theatre education program, I noticed a few things.

First, at CCNY we do not do enough to minimize costs, which includes the huge financial burden student teaching places on those who may need to give up day jobs, such as teaching artistry or substitute teaching, to student teach. Additionally, we should do more to connect with the community by offering more opportunities to engage with the performing arts. In the past, we offered free drama classes taught by our graduate students, allowing the students to gain experience and an opportunity for the community to engage in drama classes for ages 2–5 and 6–

10. We also hosted the theatre festival where we offered free family engagement complete with lobby activities for three theatre for young audiences performances, but these have yet to return post pandemic due to funding cuts.

We also can integrate more conversation into our class about engaging families while our candidates are in their own classrooms (i.e., not just in the productions that they are doing but also in the field by educating them and sharing resources). By placing CCNY's context in dialogue with the theatre education field at large, this paper acknowledges both the specificity and the transferability of this work, offering insights that can inform equity-centered practices across a range of higher education theatre programs in teacher education.

Faculty Diversity

Increasing the racial and ethnic diversity of faculty must be a priority, as a diverse faculty can shape the need for change with consideration to accessibility and inclusivity of theatre teacher training (Getha-Taylor et al., 2020). Data from the U.S. Department of Education Digest of Education Statistics, a 2014 report that found 86% of full- and part-time teacher education faculty were white (Metz, 2018). Female faculty from racially and ethnically diverse communities often face additional barriers. The solution is not just about hiring more female faculty of color, but also about ensuring they have the support they need. When female faculty from racially and ethnically diverse communities are employed, the same biases that made it difficult to get hired may cause further harm (Carlson & LaVenja, 2023).

For example, female faculty of from racially and ethnically diverse communities often face different standards, are perceived as lacking authority, and are judged more critically than their peers on student evaluations (Choi, 2023). They are often not as strong at self-promotion, a skill that is necessary in the academy, especially as we consider the tenure and promotion

process (Võ, 2012). Carlson and LaVenía (2023) highlighted lack of support, isolation, and feelings of not belonging as factors that can be barriers for female faculty of color. Choi (2023) noted that many female faculty from racially and ethnically diverse communities take on mentoring and advisement as a vital part of supporting their students and setting them up for success. However, the disproportionate share of one-on-one mentoring and advisement undertaken by female faculty of color is less valued than more traditional requirements (e.g., publishing, service to the campus community) in tenure and promotion decisions (Carlson & LaVenía, 2023).

This mirrors my experiences with administration requesting community outreach programs, which ultimately help the university connect with the community, without offering sufficient compensation for faculty and students participating. Teaching is inherently political; when institutions fail to prioritize social justice, they are making a choice. Faculty cannot focus on social justice if they do not feel prioritized or see connections to their work (Patterson, 2020). This does not imply any group is devalued; it simply emphasizes that creating equitable spaces must be a priority.

Higher education institutions play a crucial role in shaping society; we have seen examples of this play out in the United States since the presidential administration changed in 2025. For example, since Donald J. Trump took office in 2025, higher education institutions have had to eliminate offices that support diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) initiatives (Chronicle of Higher Education, 2025). Additionally, institutions have seen grants terminated, and executive-level administrators have been put in the position of choosing between federal funding that supports the institution as a whole or programs that support access to education (Harper, 2025). Although it may come at a cost, higher education institutions must prioritize

equity and inclusion in ways that are not performative (Engram, 2023; Mohammad Al-khamaiseh et al., 2024).

Equity and Inclusive Campus Models

Campus communities must address social injustices and move beyond performativity (Engram & Mayer, 2023). First, it is essential to acknowledge that racial inequity persists before moving forward (Museus, 2014). Museus (2014) proposed the culturally engaging campus environment (CECE) model, which illustrates the connection between the institutional environment and a successful student experience (Museus & Chang, 2021). This model of cultural integration emphasizes the importance of integrating academic, social, and cultural aspects of students' lives into their higher education experiences. Steele and Rickards (2021) echoed Museus (2014), noting that recognizing this cultural integration can guide universities toward transformative change.

Another model of inclusivity that can be examined is that offered by Hurtado et al. (2012). Hurtado et al. (2012) offered the diverse learning environment (MMDLE) model. Hurtado et al. (2012) noted this model evolved from the earlier racial climate and diverse learning environment models, shifting from an examination of representation and campus climate to an integrated framework that considers how individual, institutional, and societal contexts interact to shape student experiences (Hurtado et al., 2012). The MMDLE model is a framework for racial and ethnic diversity in higher education that draws on diverse populations and highlights the experiences of American Indian, Asian American, Black, Latina/o, and Native American students and faculty (Hurtado et al, 2012). Hurtado et al. (2012) identified the impact of “socio-historical context, policy context, institutional context, and community context” (p. 48) on student experience. They noted that the institution itself does not exist in a vacuum, but rather

as part of community and institutional structures that influence student outcomes (Hurtado et al., 2012).

Both of these models place significant value on culture and community (Hurtado et al, Museus, 2014). Both the CECE and MMDLE models emphasize that meaningful inclusion in higher education should reflect the community it serves, with intentional integration of culture and community into institutional practices. These frameworks both highlight that a successful experience for students includes fostering a strong sense of belonging, and both are deeply connected to the environments created on college campuses, noting that these experiences need to be inclusive of and value diverse identities as central to learning (Hurtado et al., 2012; Museus, 2014). The VOICE reflective framework builds upon these models by extending their principles specifically into the field of theatre education. Although the CECE and MMDLE frameworks emphasize institutional and environmental factors that shape student success, the VOICE reflective framework translates these ideas into actionable practices for theatre teacher preparation programs. It does so by centering visibility, opportunity, identity, community, and empowerment, which are the key pillars to the VOICE reflective framework.

College Campus Experiences

College-bound students often have hope for higher education opportunities, but they may not anticipate the challenges of racialization in higher education (Yosso et al., 2009). Students from racially and ethnically diverse communities often find themselves in unsafe spaces in higher education institutions (Templeton et al., 2016). Many of these institutions were not created to be inclusive of diverse voices (Engram, 2024). Often, the first in their families to attend a university, college students from historically oppressed groups utilize the skills they

have acquired to overcome the daily barriers they face to achieve success in higher education (Yosso et al., 2009). It can take an emotional toll.

Experiences of racism impact how a young person sees themselves (Kohli, 2009). When students do not see themselves represented it can have a profound impact on them (Kohli, 2009; Kohli & Solórzano, 2012). College students from racially and ethnically diverse communities often have similar experiences to those in K–12 education (Yosso et al., 2009). Many students spend their formative years not seeing a teacher who looks like them. In theatre education, this absence of representation extends beyond the classroom to the roles available and the theatre educators in those spaces. Kohli (2009) stated, “In 2004, the National Collaborative on Diversity in the Teaching Force found that 90% of all public-school teachers are white, and that more than 40% of schools do not even employ one teacher of color” (p. 237). This lack of representation connects to my research, which examines how theatre education programs can disrupt these inequities by preparing teacher candidates, particularly those from racially and ethnically diverse communities.

When students see teachers from the same background, they tend to experience increased academic achievement (Kohli, 2012; 2009). Additionally, it can have a profound impact on students promotes predominantly white cultural perspectives (Kohli, 2009). Miranda Haymon (2023) makes the point that many theatre programs have predominantly white faculty, and whiteness is reflected in their syllabi with very little space for diverse scholars. It is also essential to avoid the presumption that because a teacher can relate with students with whom they share a similar racial or ethnic background, the teacher is well-equipped to work multiculturally (Kohli, 2012; 2009). Teachers from these communities also must be prepared to work in multicultural

settings, and instruction for this work should begin during their time in teacher preparation programs (Kohli, 2012).

Microaggressions

Yosso et al. (2009) noted that the subtle nuances of racial microaggressions are a prevalent form of racism on college campuses. *Microaggressions* first emerged in the 1970s (Sarsar et al., 2023) and are defined as daily verbal, behavioral, or environmental indignities that project negativity toward people from racially and ethnically diverse communities (Banks et al., 2025; Sarsar et al., 2023). Microaggressions stem from stereotypes associated with perspectives toward a particular group; anyone can engage in this behavior (Banks et al., 2025). However, microaggressions often are not considered connected to racism (Kohli & Solórzano, 2012).

In fact, Banks et al. (2025) stated that there are three types of racial microaggressions: microassaults, which are acts of racism; microinsults, which involve making negative comments; and microinvalidations, which are indirect expressions of racial bias (Banks et al., 2025). Studies also have highlighted that when college students experience microaggressions regularly, they can have a negative effect on both mental and physical health and have been linked to stress, anxiety, depression, and posttraumatic stress disorder, as well as physical health issues like high blood pressure and weakened immune function (Nepton, et al., 2025).

Newton (2023) stated that racism is only one of several factors that can negatively affect the college experiences of female college students. Gendered microaggressions also exist on college campuses (Gartner, 2021). Gendered microaggressions are rooted in patriarchy (Gartner, 2021). These microaggressions often can lead to sexual violence, leading to feelings of being unsafe on college campuses, and are a form of discrimination rooted in the intersection of both race and gender, particularly in historically and predominantly white institutions (Newton, 2023).

Newton (2023) noted that, for example, Black undergraduate women often feel othered on campus due to microaggressions, lack of support, and white-centric student services, which emphasizes the need for an intersectional lens.

These findings parallel the experiences described in my research, where female-identifying performing artists from racially and ethnically diverse communities shared how racial and gendered microaggressions shaped their senses of belonging and professional identity in the broader performing arts field. By situating these experiences in higher education, my study focuses on how institutions and life on college campuses can change these systems. Research has suggested that frequent, everyday microaggressions may cause greater harm than select acts of discrimination, contributing to emotional distress (Nepton et al., 2025). It also can lead to feelings of being “othered” (Yosso et al., 2009).

Nearly all adolescents and young adults of color experience racial discrimination, with studies showing that 91% of Black and 94% of Latinx youth have encountered unfair treatment based on their racial or ethnic identities (Sarsar, et al., 2023). Yosso et al. (2009) offered examples of microaggressions, such as saying to a native English speaker, “You speak such good English,” or “You speak without an accent” (p. 661) because they appear to be non-native English speakers. On college campuses, this can impact the experience of both faculty and students alike (Banks et al., 2025). For example, a teacher may make assumptions about a student’s intelligence, and that can lead to comments about how surprised they are when the student may not perform to those expected standards, or it can lead to students who are perceived to be more intelligent not receiving the services needed to support their learning. Both circumstances can impact the student’s sense of belonging (Banks et al., 2025). Renaming is also an ongoing practice (Kohli & Solórzano, 2012) where ethnic names are altered or erased to

facilitate easier pronunciation by the dominant culture. I have experienced all of these comments about my ability to speak “good English,” comments about my ability to “speak with no accent,” and the never-ending challenges with my name. Many parents from racially and ethnically diverse communities opt to name their children with more American sounding names to avoid these situations; however, this practice often contributes to the child feeling cultural distance from their home culture (Kohli, 2012). These same microaggressions surface in theatre education through casting choices, mispronunciation of names, and assumptions about knowledge, whether language or culture. Unfortunately, this sends a message about who belongs on stage. To this day, I frequently feel discomfort and disillusionment when hurt by a microaggression from those I greatly respect, without either of us realizing the lasting impact it has had on my own sense of self and identity.

Sense of Belonging

One important factor to consider is examining students’ senses of belonging. In the performing arts, belonging extends to the rehearsal room, classroom, and performance space. I found evidence of this in Papers I and II. Gopalan and Brady (2019) highlighted that students’ sense of belonging directly correlates with college outcomes. Each dimension of campus climate (i.e., “historical, compositional, organizational, psychological, and behavioral” [Hurtado et al., 2012, p. 49]) impacts the student experience. Students have a stronger sense of belonging when they have access to people they can identify with (Museus & Chang, 2021). Museus’s (2014) culturally engaging campus environment model specifies that vast “external influences shape individual influences” (p. 121) and that students who encounter more culturally engaging campus environments have a greater sense of belonging.

Informing the Framework

Theatre education teacher training programs in higher education are uniquely positioned to lead this expansion through improvements in program management, curriculum, pedagogy, advisement, mentorship, and recruitment (Getha-Taylor et al., 2020; Gopalan & Brady, 2019; Stazyk et al., 2016). In this dissertation study, I focused on graduate theatre education programs that trained theatre teachers and teaching artists as a starting point to impact change in the performing arts. This qualitative research study contributed to teacher training programs in theatre education and institutional transformation in higher education by developing a framework for theatre education programs to consider. As the programs focus on engaging more performing artists from racially and ethnically diverse communities, this in turn will contribute to necessary changes in the performing arts, as theatre education is a small part of the performing arts context.

In 2020, it was apparent that shifts were needed in curriculum design and classroom practice, where theatre educators began reexamining whose stories were centered and how those narratives shaped teaching and learning. Many trainings that occurred at the time moved toward integrating antiracist pedagogy, culturally responsive coursework, and artistic practices that challenged hierarchies in the performing arts. These actions reflected a broader awareness that change must be embedded in these processes. Art Equity (n.d), Daphnie Sicre (2023), Karl O'Brian Williams (2023), and Nicole Brewer (2018, 2019) developed decolonizing pedagogies in theatre practice to extend beyond the stage to institutions (Brewer, 2018, 2019; Brewer & Skiles, 2021; Sicre et al., 2023). The VOICE reflective framework aligns with and extends these pedagogies by focusing on the adaptation to higher education teacher-training programs focused on theatre education.

Art Equity

Art Equity (n.d.) is a community organizing, arts-based nonprofit geared toward organizational change. Their programming offers leadership development and support for leaders in the arts sector with a focus on the needs of Black, Indigenous, and people of color artists and arts leaders (Arts Equity, n.d.). They offer a web series, resources, and training. The VOICE reflective framework extends these ideas by focusing in a reflective tool for theatre education programs teacher training programs in higher education only.

We Are the Cannon

The trainings developed by Daphnie Sicre (2022, 2023) and Karl O'Brien Williams (2022, 2023) offered pedagogical shifts in theatre education. These trainings examined the traditional theatre canon and promoted decolonizing practice (Sicre et al., 2023). Sicre (2023) and O'Brien Williams (2023) have been at the forefront of antiracist theatre pedagogy in actor-training and higher education contexts. Their workshop series *We Are the Canon* invited participants to interrogate practices in theatre education. Sicre (2023) and O'Brien Williams (2023) argued that antiracist training must go beyond representation to challenge institutional norms and foster active accountability in theatre programs. The VOICE reflective framework builds upon and extends these approaches, not by developing a training but by offering a reflective tool for theatre education programs, specifically those that train theatre teachers and teaching artists.

Antiracist Theatre

Nicole Brewer's (2018, 2019) training is called *Antiracist Theatre* (ART). ART offers an antiracist model with a focus on theatre education (Brewer, 2019). Brewer (2018, 2019) introduced the ART framework to confront systemic bias, and her work emphasizes

accountability and community care as cornerstones of artistic practice. These ideas align with the inclusion and community pillars of the VOICE reflective framework, which advocates for change in the community and promotes faculty engagement.

Art Equity, We Are the Cannon and ART address the experiences of Black, Latinx, and Afro-Latinx practitioners (Brewer, 2018, 2019; Sicre et al., 2023). The VOICE reflective framework builds upon these foundations by introducing a lens centered on South Asian women in theatre education, a group frequently excluded from mainstream discourses of equity in theatre education. Through its five interconnected pillars, the VOICE reflective framework provides a structured process for institutional reflection.

Federal and State Challenges

The current presidential administration (i.e., the Trump administration) has targeted universities to repeal DEI programs through executive orders, federal funding threats, and the regulation of curriculum (e.g., dismantling programs such as women's studies or Asian studies; Akomodi, 2025; Casey, 2025). Diversity in education is essential for creating learning environments that foster critical thinking and promote equitable learning spaces (Akomodi, 2025). The ideas of America First and Make America Great Again (MAGA), which reflect nationalism that is rooted in white, Christian norms, have positioned the United States to move away from global inclusion (Casey, 2025). These ideas include exaggerating perceived left-wing extremism (Brint, 2025). The Trump administration has rejected both diversity of thought and diversity in the makeup of America's culture and communities (Haider Bukhari et al., 2025; Ng et al., 2025). Data have shown a reduction in the number of students from racially and ethnically diverse communities enrolling in higher education (Akomodi, 2025). DEI offices have been framed as unfair, and increasing alignment with the ideas of MAGA and Project 2025 has been

encouraged (Casey, 2025; Ng et al., 2025). These right-wing ideas, supported by Christian nationalists and greedy billionaires, perpetuate racism while stripping fundamental civil rights (e.g., free speech) from many, including Black, Brown, and LGBTQ communities (Foster, 2025; McManus, 2025).

At the state level, these federal attacks have inspired a wave of bans on legislation targeting DEI infrastructure in public higher education. More than 80 anti-DEI bills have been introduced across dozens of states; for example, Texas Senate Bill 17 dismantled cultural centers, banned diversity training, and eliminated diversity positions (Briscoe, 2024; Johnson et al., 2024). Currently, many U.S. states have laws that restrict the teaching of intersectionality, race, gender, and other identity-based frameworks in higher education settings (Chronicle of Higher Education, 2025). These state policies mirror national efforts by restricting academic freedom, suppressing race-based research, and threatening faculty who teach or study race, racism, or equity (Brisco, et al., 2025; Briscoe & Jones, 2024; Pedota, 2023). The consequences of these state-level bans also are evident among students who report feeling isolated and unsafe, while faculty also are afraid due to lack of clarity about what they can teach legally (Johnson et al., 2024). Scholars also have warned that these laws prompt universities to dismantle DEI-related programs (Pedota, 2023).

The implications of these federal and state challenges are particularly detrimental to theatre education programs, which relies on storytelling, identity exploration, and culturally grounded dialogue. This connects to my research because it threatens any progress made in creating equitable environments in higher education institutions. Research has confirmed the benefits of DEI in higher education are necessary and eliminating DEI would be harmful (Harper, 2025). Theatre education programs that create spaces for dialogue focused on social

change now face pressure across the country. The VOICE reflective framework I offer enables progress to continue and encourages it to emerge from within these programs themselves. By emphasizing visibility, opportunity, identity, community, and empowerment, the framework offers theatre education programs a structured pathway to sustain equity-centered practices. The VOICE reflective framework provides an internal structure to support continued growth.

Data Collection

For this research paper, I conducted a focus group with higher education faculty. I identified 16 participants from the survey for the focus group for this paper. Of those 16 respondents, 14 participants agreed to be interviewed. Of these 14 participants, three responded to an invitation email and contributed to the focus group. The inclusion criteria were to engage faculty in higher education programs in theatre education. Consent forms were sent, and once they were returned, an email invited participants to the focus group. I followed an IRB-approved protocol for the focus group (see Appendix A).

Data Analysis

The third paper of this dissertation offers a framework helping programs gain insight into current practices. This paper, through the focus group, examined the question: What are theatre education programs doing to create access and opportunity for performing arts practitioners from racially and ethnically diverse communities, and how effective are these efforts in fostering systemic change at higher education institutions? Data collected for Papers I and II were also used to develop the reflection framework in Paper III. For Paper III, I invited higher education professionals in teacher training programs in theatre education to participate in a focus group. The rationale for this decision was to facilitate dialogue among faculty allowing participants to listen to each other, as well. Much like Papers I and II, I started with open coding to capture

participants' words and began with the DELVE software. I then moved participant words into initial codes. Example codes include the following:

Code: Diverse faculty

“The hiring of diverse faculty need to happen all across the board . . . people stay in their jobs forever . . . because tenure is a thing.”

Code: Student makeup

“creating structural opportunity for the students, like contributing cultural knowledge . . . like a reverse curriculum . . . where we learn from them.”

I then moved them into axial codes, grouping the data even further (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Saldaña, 2011). Finally, thematic coding enabled key themes to emerge. An example of this would be going from an open code with diverse faculty, administrative support, and recruitment to the code faculty. Then moving from faculty and program support to the emergent theme of program approach and student body and student voice to the emergent theme of student agency. Table 1 includes examples of data connected with the emergent themes.

Table 1

Participant Quotes Connected to Emergent Themes

Participant quote	Emergent theme	Notes
“The hiring of diverse faculty need to happen all across the board . . . people stay in their jobs forever . . . because tenure is a thing.”	Program Approach	Participants brought up the need for more diverse faculty.
“creating structural opportunity for the students, like contributing cultural knowledge . . . like a reverse curriculum . . . where we learn from them.”	Student Agency	Participants shared the incorporation of students' cultural knowledge.

Findings

In this findings section, Table 2 presents key themes that emerged across all three papers, drawn from interviews in Papers I and II and the focus group in Paper III. The findings informed the development of the VOICE reflective framework, which connects participant narratives to actionable strategies in theatre education. Each theme illustrates how participants' experiences revealed both barriers and opportunities in the performing arts. For example, participants described early exposure yet noted that cultural expectations and financial challenges often limited participation. Others emphasized issues of representation, identity, and institutional challenges. These insights were translated into actions such as increasing faculty diversity, parent engagement, and recognizing emotional labor in faculty evaluation processes.

Collectively, these findings center participants' voices and align with the five foundational pillars of VOICE. These pillars are visibility, opportunity, identity, community, and empowerment. These pillars guided the framework's evolution and its application in theatre education.

Each theme represented in Table 2 highlights priorities that are needed in theatre education programs. The first two themes, Early Arts Exposure and Cultural and Familial Expectations, are connected to the VOICE pillars of opportunity, identity, and community, underscoring how cultural norms and family perceptions influence artistic participation. These findings highlight the importance of program flexibility and curriculum design that support students navigating cultural expectations while balancing family and professional responsibilities. The theme Barriers to Access aligns primarily with opportunity and community, calling for tangible interventions (e.g., grant-writing instruction, scholarship advocacy) to reduce financial obstacles. Representation and Identity are directly linked to visibility and

empowerment, emphasizing the need for culturally competent curricula and mentorship that affirm students' identities and expand the narratives reflected on stage and in classrooms. The themes Program Approach and Student Agency emphasize changes connected to community and empowerment, where teacher candidates, adjunct faculty, and students are not only participants but c-creators in shaping more inclusive educational practices. Together, these themes form the foundation of the VOICE reflective framework, translating participants' lived experiences into a sustainable model for reflection, assessment, and transformative action in theatre education.

Table 2*Overview From Data to VOICE*

Finding	Theme	VOICE pillar	Action	Rationale
Participants expressed families valued the opportunity for early exposure to the arts; they did not perceive the arts as a viable career path due to concerns about prestige or financial barriers.	Early Arts Exposure	Opportunity	Model flexibility in program structures to accommodate students balancing work and family. Recruit and support female faculty from racially and ethnically diverse backgrounds.	Flexibility in program operations supports retention of teacher candidates with familial and professional obligations. Diverse faculty representation and an inclusive curriculum ensure voices historically excluded are centered while also modeling the importance of this.
Participants voiced concern over the need for stability over passion, and a sense of not wanting to let the family down.	Cultural and Familial Expectations	Identity, opportunity, community	Discuss with teacher candidates how to navigate legitimate artistic careers and cultural expectations to help families better understand opportunities in the arts. Integrate units on parent education. Prepare students with financial literacy and the arts.	Prepare teacher candidates to possess the language and understanding necessary to support them in preparing for careers in the arts. Prioritize discussions on how to engage families to participate in artistic performances. Teacher candidates can be prepared to better equip themselves financially.
Participants shared the financial challenges, which include costs connected with performing arts training, challenges in transportation to classes, and work obligations.	Barriers to Access	Opportunity, community	Integrate units on grant writing into teacher preparation programs. Advocate for scholarships specifically for teacher candidates.	Expanding access to scholarships and grant resources alleviates financial barriers.

Finding	Theme	VOICE pillar	Action	Rationale
Participants shared concern over a lack of representation in roles, typecasting, and mentors with no connection to the cultural community.	Representation	Visibility, community, identity, empowerment	<p>Model using content that reflects the representation of diverse voices.</p> <p>Discuss how to have more cultural competency in production choices.</p> <p>Support teacher candidates in developing practices that uplift historically oppressed voices.</p>	Preparing teacher candidates to model inclusive practices helps broaden artistic narratives and build stronger connections with students, families, and communities.
Participants felt confusion about their sense of belonging in the performing arts.	Identity	Visibility, community, identity, empowerment	<p>Evolve curriculum to validate community voices and guide teacher candidates in how to do the same in their future classrooms.</p> <p>Evaluate if program fosters a sense of belonging among the community.</p>	Encouraging the development of a sense of self is vital in identity development.
Participants shared the idea of revisiting how programs function.	Program Approach	Visibility, identity, community	<p>Incorporate more intentionality behind placing student teachers, with consideration to the communities in which they are working.</p> <p>Integrate more adjunct faculty into conversations about the program's functioning, including compensation.</p> <p>Advocate for the requirements of tenure and promotion to include advising and acknowledge the emotional labor it imposes.</p> <p>Evaluate steps taken toward constantly diversifying the faculty.</p>	Implementing the engagement of more diverse voices needs to be prioritized.

Finding	Theme	VOICE pillar	Action	Rationale
Participants suggested including more student voice by integrating their cultures and communities, also referred to as reverse curriculum.	Student Agency	Visibility, identity, empowerment	Incorporate students' cultural knowledge. Prioritize getting to know the student community. Evaluate professors continuously. Integrate opportunities to get to know and to connect with the community in which the higher education institution is situated.	Prepare teacher candidates to understand the importance of getting to know their students and using the experience as a way of preparing teacher candidates for success.

Note. This chart was created to summarize the findings and connections to the themes.

Researcher Profile

It is important to share my own experience in higher education, as it contributed to the perspective I brought to the development of this framework. At the time of this study, I had 24 years of experience in higher education and 25 years of experience in theatre education. I had worked part-time for a private institution and a public institution and had been working full-time at a public institution for 15 years. These experiences inform this research.

Participant Profile

Paper III involved a focus group that included faculty in higher education. I begin with an overview of the participants for the focus group (see Table 3), followed by discussion.

Table 3

Overview of Participants for Paper III

Pseudonym	Age range	Artistry	Working in the arts	Full time/part time	Number of years in higher education	Private or public institution
Anyname	25–34	Dancing	Yes	Full time	Less than 5	Private
XXX	35–44	Directing, acting, playwriting, other	Yes	Part time	6–10	Private
L	45–54	Directing, acting, playwriting, musical theatre	Yes	Was full time/ currently part time	Less than 5	Public

Note. This chart was created as a visual representation for understanding.

Anyname

The first participant was a dancer who still worked in the performing arts. This participant worked full time at a private institution and had been working in higher education for

less than 5 years. This participant uplifted the idea of giving more agency to students in higher education. Anynone said:

Artists of diverse spaces, gender, and . . . listening to music, and dancing from all over the world . . . the support come from the students individually. For example, I have students who come with some music, some song, so we used their beats in class. . . .

Like, contributing their cultural knowledge . . . almost reverse curriculum, learning from them and continuous evaluation, students to evaluate the faculty . . . also diverse faculty, and guest artists.

This participant suggested considering the content but took it a step further by having the students teach the professors about their communities. This participant identified this method as a reverse curriculum. This idea of a reverse curriculum highlighted more collaborative and learner centered teaching models. Having students as contributors of knowledge could help challenge dominant narratives often found in higher education. It also connected with the opportunity and empowerment pillars of the VOICE reflective framework by encouraging student agency. These ideas connected with critical pedagogical practices that privilege lived experience and community knowledge as central to teaching and learning in the arts (Bhattacharya, 2014).

XXX

The second participant had experience in directing, acting, and playwriting. This participant had been working part time at a private institution and had 6–10 years of work experience in higher education. This participant introduced the idea of the trusted messenger and encouraged consideration to where student teachers are placed to engage more participation in the performing arts. They said:

I was just gonna talk about the idea of a trusted messenger. We support them in going back into their communities. And saying, like, “Hey, I participated in this thing, I joined this program, I was part of it,” by ensuring that where you are placing those student teachers is an opportunity to also recruit students.

The participant also suggested diversifying the professors of these programs, both part time and full time. They said:

And then in terms of faculty, I think there is an awareness of a need to have a variety of faculty. It’s not necessarily being done, because they will often default to the same people because it’s just easier to do that.

Additionally, the participant noted the importance of engaging more adjunct faculty voices. This participant also identified the need for more intentionality behind the recruitment efforts of teacher candidates. Their attention to faculty diversity revealed an awareness of structural inequities in hiring and retention practices in higher education. This perspective aligned with the visibility and opportunity pillars of the VOICE reflective framework, calling for intentional recruitment practices that ensure diverse educators can thrive. The participant’s comment underscored how systemic barriers (e.g., reliance on adjunct faculty, tenure systems) limit equity and representation in theatre education programs.

There also has been thought behind tenure and the disadvantage it places on opportunity for more diverse candidates. XXX said:

People stay in their jobs forever. In the meantime, because tenure is a thing, and . . . the hiring of more diverse faculty needs to happen, all across the board, but, you know, so how do we make space for that? . . . where our diversity came from was from our adjuncts.

This concern reflected ongoing tensions between institutional stability and transformation, like tenure, which can perpetuate the status quo. In the VOICE reflective framework, this tension highlights the need to reimagine opportunity, which would ensure that diversity efforts are not limited to adjunct faculty. This participant also discussed the importance of paying adjuncts for their time, as adjuncts were paid only for their teaching hours, so the budget would have to include payment for these meetings. The idea of the trusted messenger mentioned previously reflected an approach that centers community. This connected to the community and visibility pillars of the VOICE reflective framework. It also echoed Museus's (2014) culturally engaging campus environment model, which highlights the importance of cultural connection and trust in supporting student belonging and access.

L

The third participants had less than 5 years of work experience in higher education. They had previous employment experience at a public institution and worked part time at a public institution at the time of the study. This participant had experience in directing, acting, playwriting, and musical theatre. This participant noted the importance of diverse faculty. They said, "Right now, due to just where we are as a country systemically, having diverse faculty would engage more diverse students. I can't say it any better than that." This participant also discussed the importance of full-time faculty of color being in a position to be a voice for students of color, but they also noted the emotional labor this requires, which often goes unnoticed. L said, "You are sort of a representative for those students where they felt like they were seen and that they were heard for the first time. It is extra labor to take on."

This participant also discussed that these extra moments of advising and the emotional labor are not factored into tenure and promotion. The duties are not compensated. The participant's insight

connected directly to the identity and empowerment pillars of the VOICE reflective framework, showing how faculty embody both advocacy and exhaustion in inequitable systems.

L explained:

Unfortunately, what I think we've seen over these past 5 years is that there were a lot of hires that were made during that 2020 time, and now we have swung so far the other direction. So, I was hired around the time of George Floyd, when everyone was sort of on the diversity, equity and inclusion train. They wanted me to fix the problem... But they weren't prepared to give me the resources needed to.

The participant also echoed the importance of hiring diverse faculty. They said:

They have different perspectives, absolutely...I mean, if you look at the research, it's a certain age of white men who are teaching in those programs. So, you're not getting a variety of perspective when we look at performing arts programs.

This participant also echoed the need for more diverse teaching methods. They said:

I feel teaching methods, too. I feel we can encourage students to bring in elements from their backgrounds, music, reading, movement. There was a time when we were really making sure that we had diverse voices...professors of color...a big push to do shows by playwrights of color, to incorporate different styles of dance...to get women.

The words of these participants showed how theatre educators are reimagining curriculum, pedagogy, and institutional practices through equity-centered approaches.

Emergent Themes

Following the coding process, key themes began to emerge, including the importance of student agency and intentionality behind how the program functions (e.g., more diverse content) and the purposeful placement of student teachers and more diverse faculty (see Table 2). These

themes, along with emergent themes from Papers I and II, were the foundation of the pillars for the reflection tool.

Student Agency

Participants often brought up the idea of integrating students' voices and cultural identities into the learning process. One participant even referred to this as a form of reverse curriculum. This idea focuses on learner centered spaces. Participants described incorporating students' cultural knowledge (e.g., their music and stories) into classroom activities as a way to make learning more inclusive and relevant. They also identified the importance of getting to know students as individuals and understanding their communities as an important part of teaching. Additionally, participants discussed the value of students continuously evaluating professors, a practice that encourages reciprocal feedback and shared accountability.

Collectively, these perspectives reflected the opportunity and empowerment pillars of the VOICE reflective framework by affirming that agency and collaboration foster a more equitable and responsive learning environment in theatre education.

Program Approach

Participants also reflected on the need to revisit how theatre education programs function structurally and programmatically to better support equity and inclusion. They introduced the idea of the trusted messenger, emphasizing that student teaching placements should be intentionally connected to communities that reflect the populations programs aim to serve. This community-centered approach highlighted the community and the visibility pillars of the VOICE reflective framework, reinforcing the idea that representation and trust are foundational to meaningful engagement. Participants also underscored the importance of engaging adjunct faculty in decision-making processes, suggesting that institutions should allocate time, funding,

and space in the budget to compensate adjunct faculty for their contributions. In addition, participants called for reexamining tenure and promotion requirements to acknowledge the emotional labor of advising and mentorship, which are work responsibilities, often carried by faculty of color and women, that remain undervalued in formal evaluation systems. The participants further expressed a need for more diverse faculty representation and offered strategies for strengthening community connections. These ideas connected with identity and community from the VOICE reflective framework (see Table 4).

Table 4

Emergent Themes

Number	Theme	Data	Evidence
I	Student Agency	Participants suggested including more student voice by integrating their cultures and communities, also referred to as reverse curriculum.	Participants shared the incorporation of students' cultural knowledge. Participants identified the idea of getting to know students as a priority. Participants shared the idea of students continuously evaluating professors.
II	Program Approach	Participants shared the idea of revisiting how programs function.	Participants shared the idea of the trusted messenger. This was linked with student teaching placements and being more intentional about the communities in which student teachers are placed. Participants shared the importance of engaging adjunct faculty into more conversations about how the program functions and programmatic decisions, which would mean allotting time, money, and space for this in the budget. Participants brought up reexamining tenure and promotion requirements to include the emotional labor of advising. Participants brought up the need for more diverse faculty. Participants shared their ideas of ways to connect with the community.

Note. This chart was created to visually summarize the connection between themes and the participant interviews.

The VOICE Reflective Framework

VOICE (see Appendix B) is a reflective framework created for theatre education programs to reflect on and improve their equity and inclusion practices. VOICE (visibility, opportunity, identity, community, and empowerment) encompasses the foundational pillars guiding this process, highlighting the importance of centering voices from racially and ethnically diverse communities. I hope it also serves as a model for the broader campus community.

The themes that emerged from Papers I, II, and III were as follows: early arts exposure, cultural and family expectations, barriers to access, representation, identity, program approach, and student agency. Considering these themes, I began to wonder how a theatre education program might support greater engagement of female-identifying performing artists from racially and ethnically diverse communities and uplift their voices. I began the process by considering the foundational elements that would support the framework, serving as a starting point for theatre education programs to use when considering changes. These foundational pillars are visibility, opportunity, identity, community, and empowerment, and were informed by the themes that emerged from the data collected in all three papers. Table 5 outlines the concepts underlying these pillars, followed by discussion.

Table 5*VOICE Reflective Framework*

Pillar	Description
Visibility	Understanding the importance of representation in leadership, curriculum, artistry and fostering a sense of belonging.
Opportunity	Reducing barriers to resources, financial support, and functioning in a way that is prioritizing administrative functions in an equitable manner.
Identity	Integrating culturally responsive pedagogy and critical conversations about race, gender and power in all aspects of course work.
Community	Validating the cultural community both reflective of the diverse voices and the community where the institution is situated; as well as an understanding that mentoring, advising and service learning are essential.
Empowerment	Moving toward agency and ensuring that racially and ethnically diverse voices lead the reimagining of theatre education.

Note. This chart was created to visually show the pillars that are the foundation of the framework.

The VOICE reflective framework emerged from the analysis of participant narratives and personal lived experience and emphasizes reflection to create transformation in higher education. The framework has five pillars that are important to sustaining equity practices in theatre education programs. Together, these pillars reflect how programs can move beyond performative diversity efforts toward practices that are sustainable.

Visibility

Visibility centers on representation and belonging across leadership, curriculum, and artistry. Participants' stories revealed visibility extends beyond demographics; it includes being seen, valued, and affirmed in institutional spaces (Ahmed, 2017). Representation among faculty and leadership creates pathways for students to imagine themselves in roles of authority and

artistry, aligning with Museus's (2014) culturally engaging campus environment model, which emphasizes the importance of cultural validation and belonging in student success.

Opportunity

Opportunity focuses on dismantling barriers that prevent equitable access to resources and professional advancement. Participants described structural inequities that mirrored broader patterns of exclusion in higher education in funding, hiring, and program operations (Engram & Mayer, 2023). Drawing from Hurtado et al.'s (2012) diverse learning environment (MMDLE) model, this pillar emphasizes the need for equitable administrative processes and financial support to ensure that theatre education programs function in ways that reflect institutional values of diversity and justice.

Identity

Identity highlights the integration of culturally responsive pedagogy and critical dialogues about race, gender, and power into all aspects of coursework and artistic practice. This pillar draws from feminist standpoint theory (Butler, 1990; Harding, 2004;) and critical race theory (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002), affirming that personal and cultural identities shape how individuals experience the process of learning.

Community

Community validates both the internal and external communities that shape theatre education. Participants emphasized that mentorship, advising, and service learning are critical components of sustaining inclusive practice. This pillar aligns with Bhattacharya's (2014) argument that authentic community engagement requires reciprocity and care and with Museus and Chang's (2021) idea of the importance institutions integrate with communities in which they are situated.

Empowerment

Empowerment serves as the activating pillar, representing agency, leadership, and transformation. Participants stressed that racially and ethnically diverse voices must be included in the field of theatre education. This principle echoes hooks's (1994) call for education as the practice of freedom and Ahmed's (2017) insistence that institutional change requires the courage to challenge systemic inequities. Empowerment in this framework signifies not only personal growth but also collective movement toward justice in arts-based learning spaces.

Each pillar is connected to the themes that emerged. Table 6 shows how the themes that emerged from the participant narratives align with the five pillars of the VOICE reflective framework. Each theme reflects a different dimension of how theatre education programs can create more equitable and inclusive learning environments.

Table 6

Pillars Connected to Themes

Theme	Pillar
Early Arts Exposure	Opportunity
Cultural and Familial Expectations	Identity, opportunity, community
Barriers to Access	Opportunity, community
Representation	Visibility, identity, community, empowerment
Identity	Visibility, identity, community, empowerment
Program Approach	Visibility, identity, community
Student Agency	Visibility, opportunity, empowerment

Note. This chart was created to summarize the connection between themes and the pillars visually.

From Paper I, the theme of Early Arts Exposure connects primarily to the pillar of opportunity, as participants emphasized the importance of access to resources, funding, and exposure to the arts from a young age. This reflects broader inequities in access that often determine who can pursue artistic education and careers (Museus, 2014). Cultural and Familial Expectations aligns with identity, opportunity, and community, reflecting how personal, cultural, and familial contexts shape students' decisions and sense of belonging in the arts. These experiences parallel research on intersectionality and identity negotiation in educational spaces (Ahmed, 2017; Crenshaw, 1991). The theme Barriers to Access connects to opportunity and community, as participants discussed systemic challenges (e.g., limited financial support, lack of mentorship, institutional barriers). This theme underscores the need for programs to build structural and relational support systems that reflect the communities they serve (Hurtado et al., 2012; Museus & Chang, 2021).

In Paper II, Representation and Identity both intersect across multiple pillars including visibility, identity, community, and empowerment, which shows how representation operates not only as visibility in leadership or curriculum but also as a catalyst for empowerment and community building. Participants noted representation impacts both students and faculty by influencing belonging, mentorship, and the ability to imagine oneself in the field (Bhattacharya, 2014).

In Paper III, Program Approach reflects visibility, identity, and community through participants' calls to reimagine how theatre education programs function—from diversifying faculty to embedding culturally responsive pedagogies into curriculum design. These reflections mirror Museus's (2014) culturally engaging campus environment model, emphasizing how institutional culture and structure influence inclusion. Student Agency embodies visibility,

opportunity, and empowerment. Participants advocated for more participatory learning models where students' voices and cultural knowledge inform teaching and program design. This theme directly reflects the empowerment pillar of the VOICE reflective framework.

The Four Phases

The trustworthiness of this tool was assessed through peer debriefing with colleagues who work in theatre education programs at higher education institutions and cultural organizations. The roles these peers hold at these institutions include full-time faculty, part-time adjunct faculty, teaching artists, theatre teachers, directors, and executives. A question that kept resurfacing as part of the feedback was, "How do we know growth is happening? How do we measure success?" This tool was intended to be a circular process, not a linear one. It is important to assess continued growth. Another topic that continued to emerge was how to manage people's feelings. Often, emotions and ego act as a barrier to growth, and although the intention might be to seek change, this barrier often stops any progress. As I met with my peers, the tool evolved and went through multiple iterations until finally landing where it is now.

The framework has four sections: awareness, assessment, acknowledgement, and action. It is recommended that all faculty members in the theatre education program, including adjunct instructors and administrative staff, complete the VOICE reflective framework together. When all stakeholders engage in reflection together, the process encourages open dialogue and reduces hierarchical barriers, aligning with feminist and constructivist approaches that value collective sense making (Bhattacharya, 2014).

It does not all have to be completed at once. It was brought to my attention that lack of time is always overwhelming when working in higher education, making it difficult to identify time to be reflective. A suggestion was to do a little at a time, for example for ten minutes at a

faculty meeting, if that is the case. It is also important to integrate student voices by inviting students to participate. Comparing answers and then discussing reflection questions is essential when moving through the four A's (i.e., awareness, assessment, acknowledgement, and action) that outline the framework.

The awareness section begins with reflective questions, providing an opportunity for a foundational discussion. The assessment section is the evaluation portion of the tool on the program or department's VOICE, supporting more equity in the performing arts. Each statement has a point value, and instructions are provided on how to assign points and calculate a score. Each section of VOICE has a score that is then combined to form the final score. The reflective questions embedded within the VOICE framework were determined through a data-informed process. Drawing upon the emergent themes from Papers I, II and III and foundational concepts from AsianCrit and feminist theory, each set of reflection questions was developed to guide theatre education programs toward growth. The reflective questions were designed to stimulate critical reflection and dialogue. They are a way to examine how theatre education programs are aligned with equitable practices. I also included peer debriefing in the development of the VOICE reflective framework reflective questions.

The acknowledgment section allows participants to attach some meaning to their scores. The VOICE reflective framework uses a four-point Likert scale ranging from 4 as Strongly Agree to 1 as Strongly Disagree. I chose a four-point structure that eliminates a midpoint to encourage respondents to take a position and engage critically with each statement. Finally, the action section is designed to enable the program or department to consider changes, outline the steps needed to implement those changes, and assign tasks to individuals who will complete the

steps by specific deadlines. The tool is also designed with a suggested reading list and easy-to-print pages.

Conclusion

Higher education institutions can play a vital role in promoting equity and inclusion. The reflection framework I developed can be used to create a roadmap for implementing intentional strategies. This is based on the findings from the dissertation research (see Table 5). I had witnessed firsthand New York City's status as a cultural hub. Yet, despite this vibrant environment, significant inequities remained in the performing arts. This conversation has been further complicated by the current U.S. presidential administration, which has shown resistance to any diversity and equity efforts (Engram, 2025; Warner, 2025). The current administration wants to destroy any progress made in diversity and equity in higher education (Engram, 2025; Warner, 2025). These shifts have intensified the need for intentional and sustainable equity-centered practices in academic and artistic spaces. As Bhattacharya (2014) and hooks (1994) argued, this tension demands that educators reaffirm their commitments to justice, not retreat from it. With this reflection framework, I aimed to provide a systematic process to guide programs in considering best practices that foster greater racial and ethnic diversity in the performing arts. By encouraging ongoing reflection through the pillars of visibility, opportunity, identity, community, and empowerment, the framework offers higher education programs a way to operationalize equity in daily practice.

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Paper III Appendix A: Focus Group

Opening

Hi – everyone, thank you for your willingness to support my research and the field.

Before we begin, I want to discuss confidentiality. What’s shared in this group stays in this group, and I ask you all to respect that. While I, as the facilitator, will keep everything confidential and de-identify any information used in research or reporting, I ask that we all respect each other’s privacy and not repeat anything shared here outside this space.

Can I get a thumbs up to show that everyone is okay with that?

We want to learn about your experiences in higher education during this focus group.

Confidentiality Statement

Since we will be discussing very personal information, I encourage you to do the following:

- Use headphones
- Use a private computer/and or device
- Complete the interview in a private space

I enhanced all the security settings during this Zoom meeting to ensure privacy and confidentiality. Based on the information we discussed or the informed consent form, do you have any other questions?

Please change your name on Zoom to a pseudonym you’d like to use and eliminate any identifiers to your university.

I will be recording this session only for transcription and analysis purposes. Your name or identifying information will never be used in my final work. If you're ever uncomfortable, you can choose not to answer or ask to stop the recording at any time.

I'd like to confirm you have changed your name to a pseudonym and eliminated any identifiers to your university.

[GIVE TIME FOR EVERYONE TO CONFIRM PSEUDONYM NAME AND ELIMINATE ANY IDENTIFIERS]

Please give me a thumbs up so I know you are ready and agree to proceed [WAIT FOR AFFIRMATIVE RESPONSE FROM ALL].

I will now turn on the recording [WAIT FOR RESPONSE AND TURN ON RECORDING IF AFFIRMATIVE].

Thank you again for joining and participating in my dissertation research.

I would like to learn more about your theatre education programs during this focus group. I'd love for us to set a few group agreements to support respectful and open dialogue.

- "One mic" (one person speaks at a time)
- Speak from your own experience
- No judgment or interruptions
- Step up, Step back
- Okay to pass Follow up Questions

If follow-up questions are needed, they will be limited to:

- Please tell me more about that.

- Please share in more detail what you are discussing.
- Please share more about how it made you feel.

Relationship Building Questions

What interested you about the study, and what is your motivation for agreeing to be interviewed?

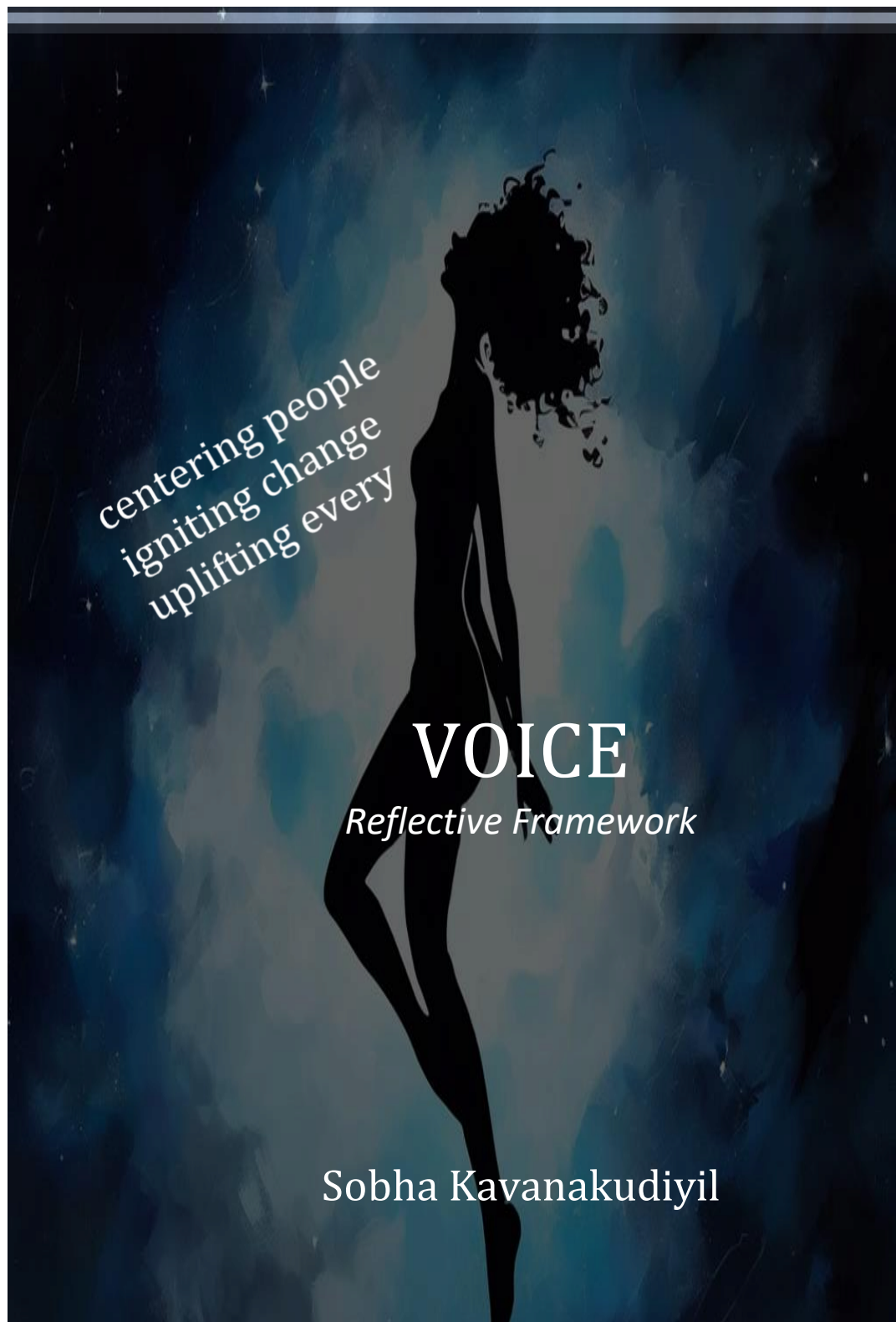
Do you have any questions for me about the research so far?

Interview Questions

1. Share with us about the racial and ethnic diversity of your programs.
2. Please discuss some of the ways in which your program introduces culturally sustainable pedagogy.
3. How would you describe some of the culturally sustainable practices of your program?
4. Please describe how your program actively engages in decentering whiteness.
5. Please share strategies you use to uplift all identities in your programs.
6. Please describe any areas of improvement you would like to further develop.
7. Describe the support you feel from the administration.
8. Describe the support you feel from the institution.
9. Describe any recruitment efforts you practice or think about.
10. Describe what you continue to wonder when it comes to this?

Is there anything else you'd like to share? Thank you!

Paper III Appendix B: The VOICE Reflective Framework



centering people
igniting change
uplifting every

VOICE

Reflective Framework

Sobha Kavanakudiyil

What is the VOICE Reflective Framework?

VOICE is a framework for theatre education programs to reflect on and improve their equity and inclusion practices. VOICE (visibility, opportunity, identity, community, and empowerment) encompasses the foundational pillars guiding this process, highlighting the importance of centering voices from racially and ethnically diverse communities. This framework was developed as a culmination of research that focused on the barriers that impede the inclusion and advancement of female-identifying performing artists from racially and ethnically diverse communities in the performing arts. As themes emerged during my analysis process, I considered that these themes inspire theatre education programs to assess their practices.

VOICE is a framework for theatre education programs to assess reflection and progress in equity and inclusion practices. VOICE is a foundational pillar guiding this assessment process, positioning faculty and teacher candidates to understand the importance of centering voices from racially and ethnically diverse communities. As themes began to emerge during my analysis process, I began to consider how I could better understand how these themes could inspire theatre education programs to assess their practices.

Why Theatre Education Programs in Higher Education?

Higher education is uniquely positioned to drive change in the performing arts by preparing future educators who will shape the field. Considering the role of teacher training programs in theatre education in equipping teacher candidates to expand access through the spaces they create, the idea behind this reflective framework is to support higher education programs in evaluating their equity and inclusion practices.

OVERVIEW OF RESEARCH

Title	Research focus	Research question	Emergent Themes
Paper I: Illuminating South Asian Female Identity and its Implications for Theatre Education in Higher Education	This research paper examines the South Asian experience through an AsianCrit lens, analyzing themes such as sensemaking, the model minority myth, and cultural influence on career trajectories in theatre education.	How do female-identifying South Asian performing artists navigate social, cultural, and familial dynamics while pursuing a career in the performing arts?	Early Arts Exposure Cultural and Familial Expectations Barriers to Access
Paper II: Centering Identity for Higher Education Theatre Teacher Preparation	This paper is an ethnodrama that presents the experiences of female-identifying artist educators from racially and ethnically diverse backgrounds. This paper will focus on themes of power, oppression, and intersectionality, using performance to engage audiences in broader conversations about systemic change in higher education.	How have the personal, cultural, and professional experiences of female-identifying performing artists from racially and ethnically diverse communities influenced their contributions to the performing arts?	Representation Identity
Paper III: The VOICE Reflective Framework: Advancing Equity in Higher Education Theatre Teacher Preparation	This paper is a strategic plan that evaluates institutional practices in theatre education programs and proposes concrete strategies to increase representation, equity, and access for racially and ethnically diverse communities.	What are theatre education programs doing to create access and opportunity for performing arts practitioners from racially and ethnically diverse communities, and how effective are these efforts in fostering systemic change at higher education institutions?	Program Approach Student Agency

ASSESSMENT DESIGN

The themes that emerged from Papers I, II, and III of the three-paper dissertation were as follows:

- Early arts exposure
- Cultural and family expectations
- Barriers to access
- Representation
- Identity
- Program approach
- Student agency.

These themes inspired the development of the framework's foundational pillars. The VOICE framework serves as a tool for reflection and progress. Considering these themes, I began to wonder how a theatre education program might support greater engagement of female-identifying performing artists from racially and ethnically diverse communities and uplift their voices. I hope this also serves as a model for the broader campus community. The VOICE framework has four stages. These stages are Awareness, Assessment, Acknowledgement, and Action. Below is a more detailed description of the thought process behind this, starting with an overview of the dissertation research.

Below is a table that shows how the VOICE framework aligns with the emergent themes.

VOICE Alignment Table

Emergent Theme	Foundational Pillars
Early Arts Exposure	Opportunity
Cultural and Familial Expectations	Identity, Opportunity, Community
Barriers to Access	Opportunity, Community
Representation	Visibility, Identity, Community
Identity	Visibility, Identity, Community
Program Approach	Visibility, Identity, Community
Student Agency	Visibility, Opportunity, Empowerment

Here is a more detailed definition of the VOICE framework.

Framework	Description
Visibility	Understanding the importance of representation in leadership, curriculum, artistry and fostering a sense of belonging.
Opportunity	Reducing barriers to resources, financial support, and functioning in a way that is prioritizing administrative functions in an equitable manner.
Identity	Integrating culturally responsive pedagogy and critical conversations about race, gender and power in all aspects of course work.
Community	Validating the cultural community both reflective of diverse voices and the community where the institution is situated, as well as an understanding that mentoring, advising and service learning and community are essential.

Empowerment Moving toward agency and ensuring that racially and ethnically diverse voices lead the reimagining of theatre education.

Four Stages of VOICE

There are four stages of VOICE. These stages are Awareness, Assessment, Acknowledgement, and Action.

Stage	Description
Awareness	Reflecting on and understanding the successes and gaps of current practices.
Assessment	Evaluating current practices.
Acknowledgement	Understanding successes and gaps of current practices.
Action	Identifying action steps to move to more inclusive practices to uplift female identifying artists from racially and ethnically diverse communities.

VOICE AWARENESS

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

WHAT INTERESTED YOU IN USING THIS FRAMEWORK?

DOES YOUR PROGRAM'S MISSION STATEMENT ALIGN WITH THE INSTITUTION'S MISSION STATEMENT?
IF SO HOW, IF NOT, THEN WHY NOT?

DOES THE PROGRAM'S VALUES ALIGN WITH THE VALUES OF THE INSTITUTION? IF YES HOW, IF NO, WHY NOT?

VOICE ASSESSMENT

VISIBILITY

STATEMENT

STATEMENT	STRONGLY AGREE (4 POINTS)	AGREE (3 POINTS)	DISAGREE (2 POINTS)	STRONGLY DISAGREE (1 POINT)
The faculty in theatre education include women of color in full-time and leadership positions.				
Guest artists affiliated with or working with our program represent a diverse range of racial, cultural, and gender backgrounds and teacher candidates see their identities reflected in the curriculum, productions, and materials.				
Theatre education program at this university creates a strong sense of belonging for students from diverse cultural identities.				
			Final Score: (divide total score by 4 to obtain final score)	

**OPPORTUNITY
STATEMENT**

The cost of participation in artistic opportunities is not a barrier for teacher candidates to participate; this includes not taking them away from paid opportunities.

Theatre education program provides paid opportunities for teacher candidates (teaching assistant, internships, work-study, grants, scholarships) and there are specifically paid opportunities to uplift female identifying theatre educators racially and ethnically diverse communities.

Schedules are flexible with consideration to the needs of teacher candidates balancing personal and/or work responsibilities.

STRONGLY AGREE (4 POINTS)	AGREE (3 POINTS)	DISAGREE (2 POINTS)	STRONGLY DISAGREE (1 POINT)
		Final Score: (divide total score by 4 to obtain final score)	

IDENTITY

STATEMENT

STATEMENT	STRONGLY AGREE (4 POINTS)	AGREE (3 POINTS)	DISAGREE (2 POINTS)	STRONGLY DISAGREE (1 POINT)
Curriculum in theatre education includes works by female identifying artists from racially and ethnically diverse communities.				
Courses encourage critical conversations about race, gender, and identity in the arts.				
Faculty integrate culturally responsive teaching methods into their pedagogy as well as functioning in a way that understands various lived experiences.				
			Final Score: (divide total score by 4 to obtain final score)	

**COMMUNITY
STATEMENT**

Female identifying teacher candidates from racially and ethnically diverse communities have access to mentors who understand their cultural experiences and whose mentors are formally recognized in their workload and promotion criteria.

Advising includes discussions about navigating cultural/familial expectations around career paths.

Program considers how to connect with the community around the college and utilize opportunities for service learning.

STRONGLY AGREE (4 POINTS)	AGREE (3 POINTS)	DISAGREE (2 POINTS)	STRONGLY DISAGREE (1 POINT)
		Final Score: (divide total score by 4 to obtain final score)	

EMPOWERMENT

STATEMENT

Leadership pathways are equitably available to female identifying faculty and teacher candidates from racially and ethnically diverse communities.

Teacher candidates are invited to bring their lived experiences into coursework.

There are paid opportunities to uplift female identifying theatre educators racially and ethnically diverse communities.

STRONGLY AGREE (4 POINTS)	AGREE (3 POINTS)	DISAGREE (2 POINTS)	STRONGLY DISAGREE (1 POINT)
		Final Score: (divide total score by 4 to obtain final score)	

Reflection Questions

1. Share an example where your program has (or has not) amplified the voices of female-identifying artists of color.
2. What practices could strengthen fostering a sense of belonging for teacher candidates from racially and ethnically diverse communities?
3. What are you learning about your own identity and sense of belonging?
4. What financial or logistical barriers exist for teacher candidates in your program? How could these be reduced?
5. Describe how mentorship in your program supports students navigating cultural or family expectations around their career choices.
6. Share an example of how your program engages with the community in which it is embedded.
7. How do you integrate community engagement into teaching practices?
8. How does your curriculum engage diverse artistry?
9. How does your curriculum connect to the students from diverse communities in your program?
10. Are spaces created for conversations about racially and ethnically diverse communities?

VOICE ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

FINAL SCORE

WRITE IN YOUR TOTAL SCORE FOR EACH SECTION	
VISIBILITY	
OPPORTUNITY	
IDENTITY	
COMMUNITY	
EMPOWERMENT	
TOTAL ADD THEM ALL UP	
FINAL SCORE divide total score by five	

<i>What does it mean?</i>	FINAL SCORE
SUSTAIN AND SHARE Your program prioritizes equity and inclusion; your work should be shared!	4
STRENGTHEN Your program prioritizes equity and inclusion, but there is room for improvement.	3
REPAIR Your program does not consider equity and inclusion much.	2
REIMAGINE Your program does not prioritize equity and inclusion.	1

VOICE ACTION

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

What did you notice about your score?
 How does your score align with your values?
 What are the strengths that you see?
 What are the gaps that you see?

SUGGESTIONS

If your score was...	Then you...	Recommendations
4	Prioritize inclusive practices, with a focus on uplifting female voices from racially and ethnically diverse community.	Continue current practices and document successes as models. Share practices with colleagues. Consider mentoring others.
3	Prioritize inclusive practices, but there is room to grow.	Consider specific VOICE pillars to set as a goal. Identify action steps.
2	Do not prioritize inclusive practices on a consistent basis.	Engage in facilitated reflection sessions with faculty and students. Set small, achievable action steps aligned with VOICE pillars
1	Do not prioritize inclusive practices at all.	Use the VOICE framework as a starting guide for transformation. Articulate a commitment to. Commit to the work needed to change.

NEXT STEPS:

WHAT IS THE BIG PICTURE GOAL FOR THIS ACADEMIC YEAR?

BRAINSTORM IDEA FOR THE YEAR.

WHAT ARE THE BARRIERS THAT YOU ANTICIPATE?

THEN COMPLETE THIS:

GOAL	ACTION	VOICE ALIGNMENT	TO BE COMPLETED BY (NAME)	ANTICIPATED BARRIERS	COMPLETE BY (DATES)

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- Butler, J. (1988). Performative acts and gender constitution: An essay in phenomenology and feminist theory. *Theatre Journal*, 40(4), 519–531. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3207893>
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THE END

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DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

WHAT INTERESTED YOU IN USING THIS FRAMEWORK?

DOES YOUR PROGRAM'S MISSION STATEMENT ALIGN WITH THE INSTITUTION'S MISSION STATEMENT? IF SO HOW, IF NOT, THEN WHY NOT?

DOES THE PROGRAM'S VALUES ALIGN WITH THE VALUES OF THE INSTITUTION? IF YES HOW, IF NO, WHY NOT?

VISIBILITY

STATEMENT	STRONGLY AGREE (4 POINTS)	AGREE (3 POINTS)	DISAGREE (2 POINTS)	STRONGLY DISAGREE (1 POINT)
The faculty in theatre education include women of color in full-time and leadership positions.				
Guest artists affiliated with or working with our program represent a diverse range of racial, cultural, and gender backgrounds and teacher candidates see their identities reflected in the curriculum, productions, and materials.				
Theatre education program at this university creates a strong sense of belonging for students from diverse cultural identities.				
			Final Score: (divide total score by 4 to obtain final score)	

OPPORTUNITY

STATEMENT	STRONGLY AGREE (4 POINTS)	AGREE (3 POINTS)	DISAGREE (2 POINTS)	STRONGLY DISAGREE (1 POINT)
The cost of participation in artistic opportunities is not a barrier for teacher candidates to participate; this includes not taking them away from paid opportunities.				
Theatre education program provides paid opportunities for teacher candidates (teaching assistant, internships, work-study, grants, scholarships) and there are specifically paid opportunities to uplift female identifying theatre educators racially and ethnically diverse communities.				
Schedules are flexible with consideration to the needs of teacher candidates balancing personal and/or work responsibilities.				
			Final Score: (divide total score by 4 to obtain final score)	

IDENTITY

STATEMENT	STRONGLY AGREE (4 POINTS)	AGREE (3 POINTS)	DISAGREE (2 POINTS)	STRONGLY DISAGREE (1 POINT)
Curriculum in theatre education includes works by female identifying artists from racially and ethnically diverse communities.				
Courses encourage critical conversations about race, gender, and identity in the arts.				
Faculty integrate culturally responsive teaching methods into their pedagogy as well as functioning in a way that understands various lived experiences.				
			Final Score: (divide total score by 4 to obtain final score)	

COMMUNITY

STATEMENT	STRONGLY AGREE (4 POINTS)	AGREE (3 POINTS)	DISAGREE (2 POINTS)	STRONGLY DISAGREE (1 POINT)
Female identifying teacher candidates from racially and ethnically diverse communities have access to mentors who understand their cultural experiences and whose mentors are formally recognized in their workload and promotion criteria.				
Advising includes discussions about navigating cultural/familial expectations around career paths.				
Program considers how to connect with the community around the college and utilize opportunities for service learning.				
			Final Score: (divide total score by 4 to obtain final score)	

EMPOWERMENT

STATEMENT	STRONGLY AGREE (4 POINTS)	AGREE (3 POINTS)	DISAGREE (2 POINTS)	STRONGLY DISAGREE (1 POINT)
Leadership pathways are equitably available to female identifying faculty and teacher candidates from racially and ethnically diverse communities.				
Teacher candidates are invited to bring their lived experiences into coursework.				
There are paid opportunities to uplift female identifying theatre educators racially and ethnically diverse communities.				
			Final Score: (divide total score by 4 to obtain final score)	

FINAL SCORE

WRITE IN YOUR TOTAL SCORE FOR EACH SECTION	
VISIBILITY	
OPPORTUNITY	
IDENTITY	
COMMUNITY	
EMPOWERMENT	
TOTAL ADD THEM ALL UP	
FINAL SCORE divide total score by five	

<i>What does it mean?</i>	FINAL SCORE
SUSTAIN AND SHARE <i>Your program prioritizes equity and inclusion; your work should be shared!</i>	4
STRENGTHEN <i>Your program prioritizes equity and inclusion, but there is room for improvement.</i>	3
REPAIR <i>Your program does not consider equity and inclusion much.</i>	2
REIMAGINE <i>Your program does not prioritize equity and inclusion.</i>	1

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. Share an example where your program has (or has not) amplified the voices of female-identifying artists of color.
2. What practices could strengthen fostering a sense of belonging for teacher candidates from racially and ethnically diverse communities?
3. What are you learning about your own identity and sense of belonging?
4. What financial or logistical barriers exist for teacher candidates in your program? How could these be reduced?
5. Describe how mentorship in your program supports students navigating cultural or family expectations around their career choices.
6. Share an example of how your program engages with the community in which it is embedded.
7. How do you integrate community engagement into teaching practices?
8. How does your curriculum engage diverse artistry?
9. How does your curriculum connect to the students from diverse communities in your program?
10. Are spaces created for conversations about racially and ethnically diverse communities?

NEXT STEPS:

WHAT IS THE BIG PICTURE GOAL FOR THIS ACADEMIC YEAR?

BRAINSTORM IDEA FOR THE YEAR.

WHAT ARE THE BARRIERS THAT YOU ANTICIPATE?

THEN COMPLETE THIS:

GOAL	ACTION	VOICE ALIGNMENT	TO BE COMPLETED BY (NAME)	ANTICIPATED BARRIERS	COMPLETE BY (DATES)

CONCLUSION

In this three-paper dissertation, I examined the barriers that preclude female-identifying performing artists from racially and ethnically diverse communities from engagement in the performing arts by asking pointed questions in each paper, Table 5 revisits an overview of all three papers. Together, these papers revealed how identity, representation, and institutional structures shape student and faculty experiences and support continuous reflection for improvement. In Paper I, I focused primarily on the South Asian experience. The findings from this paper illustrate how higher education programs can more intentionally recognize the cultural, familial, and social pressures that shape the experiences of South Asian students, highlighting the need for advising models, mentorship structures, and curricular practices that acknowledge these complexities.

In Paper II, I uplifted the voices of female-identifying performing artists from various racially and ethnically diverse communities. The insights from Paper II point to implications for higher education practice by emphasizing how theatre teacher preparation programs can consider identity affirming artistic processes into coursework and fieldwork. This paper also highlights a need for future research on how arts-based storytelling and ethnodramatic methods can influence teacher identity development within university settings. These two papers examined the personal, cultural, and professional experiences that shaped identity and access in the performing arts.

Paper III aimed to use this information to develop a reflective framework for theatre education programs at higher education institutions. This framework enables introspection on existing inequities, identifies areas of success in their programs or departments, considers strategies for change, and reimagines the approach to the performing arts. The findings from Paper III directly inform higher education practice by offering a reflection tool called the VOICE reflective framework that programs can use for reflection on equity practices in their programs.

This work extends the anti-racist pedagogies and ideas behind their trainings to the work of Art Equity (n.d.) Daphnie Sicre (2022, 2023) and Karl O'Brien Williams (2023) in *We are the Cannon* and Nicole Brewer (2018) in ART.

Theatre education is one aspect of the performing arts. Teachers have an opportunity to be changemakers, and theatre education programs uniquely train teacher candidates. This is where this framework begins to address the issues of inequity in the performing arts. The problem of practice this dissertation sought to address was the lack of racially and ethnically diverse representation in the performing arts by engaging theatre education programs in higher education to reflect on their practices. It encouraged teacher training programs to center equity to address this deficiency in the performing arts (Engram, 2023; Getha-Taylor et al., 2020; Mohammad Al-khamaiseh et al., 2024). This paper sought to use storytelling as a tool to make meaningful change (Bhattacharya, 2023). By uplifting the voices of the participants in Papers I and II and by hearing about the experiences of faculty in higher education in Paper III, I sought to understand these experiences and use that information to support theatre education programs.

Taken together, the implications across these three papers underscore that higher education theatre programs must not only diversify representation but also transform the structures, pedagogies, and cultures that shape teacher preparation. Future research should examine how equity-centered frameworks like VOICE are adopted across different institutional contexts, how faculty resist or embrace reflective change, and how identity-conscious pedagogy impacts teacher candidates' readiness to confront inequities in the performing arts.

Below is a table revisiting the research focus of each paper as well as the findings aligned with the paper. Following is a discussion about this table.

Table 5*Overview of Three-Paper Dissertation*

Title	Research focus	Research question	Finding
Paper I: Illuminating South Asian Female Identity and its Implications for Theatre Education in Higher Education	This research paper examined the South Asian experience through an AsianCritical lens, analyzing themes such as sensemaking, the model minority myth, and cultural influence on career trajectories in theatre education.	How do female-identifying South Asian performing artists navigate social, cultural, and familial dynamics while pursuing a career in the performing arts?	<p>Participants expressed families valued the opportunity for early exposure to the arts; they did not perceive the arts as a viable career path due to concerns about prestige or financial barriers.</p> <p>Participants voiced concern over the need for stability over passion, and a sense of not wanting to let the family down.</p> <p>Participants shared the financial challenges, which include costs connected with performing arts training, challenges in transportation to classes, and work obligations.</p>

Title	Research focus	Research question	Finding
<p>Paper II: Centering Identity for Higher Education Theatre Teacher Preparation</p>	<p>This paper was an ethnodrama that presented the experiences of female-identifying artist educators from racially and ethnically diverse backgrounds. This paper focused on themes of power, oppression, and intersectionality, using performance to engage audiences in broader conversations about systemic change in higher education.</p>	<p>How have the personal, cultural, and professional experiences of female-identifying performing artists from racially and ethnically diverse communities influenced their contributions to the performing arts?</p>	<p>Participants shared concern over a lack of representation in roles, typecasting, and mentors with no connection to the cultural community.</p> <p>Participants felt confusion about their sense of belonging in the performing arts.</p>
<p>Paper III: The VOICE Reflective Framework: Advancing Equity in Higher Education Theatre Teacher Preparation</p>	<p>This paper was a strategic plan that evaluated institutional practices in theatre education programs and proposed concrete strategies to increase representation, equity, and access for racially and ethnically diverse communities.</p>	<p>What are theatre education programs doing to create access and opportunity for performing arts practitioners from racially and ethnically diverse communities, and how effective are these efforts in fostering systemic change at higher education institutions?</p>	<p>Participants shared the idea of revisiting how programs function.</p> <p>Participants suggested including more student voice by integrating their cultures and communities, also referred to as reverse curriculum.</p>

Overview of Emergent Themes

I used a narrative inquiry approach in this dissertation. I had the opportunity to speak to participants about their experiences in the performing arts, integrate my own experiences, and uplift these voices not only through research but also through the ethnodrama. My hope is that the stories these participants inspired will center this much needed dialogue.

Paper I

The themes that emerged in Paper I revealed the impactful influence of family and cultural expectations, as well as barriers to access. Additionally, another theme that was revealed was that most first time experiences were shepherded by parents or familial influence; however, when the time came for participants to select career pathways, the performing arts did not seem to present financial stability or cultural acceptance (Malhi et al., 2009; Tummala-Narra et al., 2024). Participants often navigated tension between honoring cultural obligations and artistic passion. Lack of connection to various communities influenced identity development (J. L. Young et al., 2022). These insights impacted my research focus on how identity and culture intersect within theatre education. In applying these findings, I used them to ensure that cultural influence, familial expectations, and access barriers were integrated into strategies for equitable arts education. These findings highlight why higher education theatre programs must cultivate advising, mentorship, and curricular structures that acknowledge how cultural and familial expectations shape students' pathways into the arts. Teacher preparation programs can better support emerging artists by validating these identity-based tensions and designing coursework that explicitly addresses cultural negotiation, belonging, and access.

Paper II

This paper involved a similar coding process to Paper I. However, during the axial coding phase, I also began grouping codes to aid in script development. Paper II involved scripting an ethnodrama. This ethnodrama was part of the data analysis. I also had the unique opportunity to use text from the script in one of my graduate classes, Artistic Lab I. This process allowed the class to engage in conversations about this topic. The ethnodrama offered a storytelling approach, where participants' stories revealed themes of representation and identity. Through this process, I discovered how performance can serve as a space that allows participants' lived experiences to expose systemic inequities in the performing arts. For higher education programs, these insights demonstrate the value of using ethnodrama to help teacher candidates examine inequities as lived realities. Integrating performance inquiry into coursework can deepen students' capacity to recognize structural barriers and prepare them to teach with a more justice-oriented lens.

Paper III

Paper III involved a focus group that included faculty in higher education. The key themes to emerge included the importance of student agency and the intentionality behind how programs function (e.g., inclusion of more diverse content, purposeful placement of student teachers and diverse faculty). This paper integrated all the themes to create a framework for reflection, organized into VOICE (i.e., visibility, opportunity, identity, community and empowerment). The intention behind this framework was to provide theatre education programs at higher education institutions with a structured process to move through the four stages outlined as awareness, assessment, acknowledgement, and action. The reflective framework aims

to encourage theatre education programs to identify their strengths, acknowledge gaps, and consider action steps to foster change toward equity in the performing arts.

These themes underscore how theatre education programs in higher education function as pivotal sites where identity, curriculum, and institutional values converge. Because theatre educators shape the future arts landscape, higher education programs must intentionally embed equity-driven decision making into course design, program culture, and faculty development. The VOICE reflective framework offers a practical structure for institutions seeking to realign their programs with more inclusive practices. There were seven themes that emerged across all three papers. Paper I highlighted early arts exposure, cultural and familial expectations, and barriers to access, illustrating how family influence and cultural norms shaped participants' early engagement with the arts while also revealing inequities in access and opportunity. Paper II centered on representation and identity, showing participants' lived experiences in the performing arts. Paper III introduced the themes of program approach and student agency, demonstrating how theatre education programs can reimagine practices to foster greater equity. Together, these themes informed the development of the VOICE reflective framework. See Table 7 for an overview of emergent themes.

Table 6*Overview of Emergent Themes*

Paper	Themes
I	Early Arts Exposure Cultural and Familial Expectations Barriers to Access
II	Representation Identity
II	Program Approach Student Agency

Note. This chart was created to clearly identify the emergent themes from each paper.

Interpretation and Implications

Higher education institutions have the unique opportunity to inspire change. Teacher training programs can impact future generations by preparing teachers who, in turn, influence the young people they teach. It is also important to note the challenges higher education faces and the significant impact these institutions have had on societal change. Although the current presidential administration seeks to silence institutions, it is essential to note that voices should not be silenced. Education, in particular arts education, has served as a space for social change (Bhattacharya, 2014). Institutions should support uplifting all voices as central to intellectual thought, community, and cultural acceptance. Theatre education programs train teacher candidates, nurturing the next generation of performing artists. The spaces that are created in a theatre classroom are sometimes the only outlet for young people. Programs must be intentional about training teacher candidates who recognize the need for more performing artists and leaders in the performing arts, as well as theatre education from racially and ethnically diverse communities. This dissertation has added to the conversation about why it is necessary to

prioritize equity in theatre education programs. The insights from all three papers directly inform how higher education can reimagine theatre teacher preparation. Each paper has illuminated barriers that collectively shape a more equitable higher education landscape.

The reflective framework I developed (VOICE) provides a process to identify actionable steps (see Table 7).

Table 7

VOICE Reflective Framework

Pillar	Description
Visibility	Understanding the importance of representation in leadership, curriculum, artistry and fostering a sense of belonging.
Opportunity	Reducing barriers to resources, financial support, and functioning in a way that is prioritizing administrative functions in an equitable manner.
Identity	Integrating culturally responsive pedagogy and critical conversations about race, gender and power in all aspects of course work.
Community	Validating the cultural community both reflective of the diverse voices and the community where the institution is situated; as well as an understanding that mentoring, advising and service learning are essential.
Empowerment	Moving toward agency and ensuring that racially and ethnically diverse voices lead the reimagining of theatre education.

Note. This chart was created to visually show the pillars that are the foundation of the framework.

Future Research

Participant recruitment was conducted through my professional networks, which was a limitation, as the invitation to participate in the study may not have reached potential participants outside of my network. I did have challenges in engaging faculty for Paper III and wondered if this was a strong example of that limitation or a sign that creating space to dialogue about social

justice issues is not a priority in higher education. One recommendation I have for future research is to expand beyond female-identifying performing artists from racially and ethnically diverse communities and consider other identities (e.g., individuals who identify as queer, individuals with disabilities). My hope is the VOICE reflective framework can be adapted to meet these needs and other needs at higher education institutions.

Another recommendation is to use the tool beyond theatre education programs to encourage reflection in arts education, including music education, dance education, and visual art education. This is not to say that this work is not already being done, but that this tool can help continue the ongoing practice through reflection. This would provide a wider lens through which to gain a comprehensive view of arts education as a whole and its equitable practices (or lack thereof). Additionally, future research should examine how higher education structures, for (e.g., advising models, curriculum review processes, accreditation expectations, faculty workload policies) support or fail to support the implementation of equity-centered frameworks like VOICE, offering deeper insight into how institutional systems shape (and sometimes limit) justice-oriented teacher preparation. Finally, I recommend a study to gauge the limitations of institutional support using the VOICE reflective framework. For example, different theatre education programs could use the framework for one year to compare and contrast successes and challenges. Although programs may strive to do more focused work with equity and inclusion, a limitation is the challenges that varying levels of institutional support may present. While an institution's effort might be constrained due to financial constraints, showing a budget line to support these efforts shows commitment. Further research should examine this barrier.

Final Reflections

The processes of completing doctoral studies and writing this dissertation have been deeply personal. As the daughter of immigrant parents, a South Asian female-identifying theatre artist, and a faculty member in higher education, I was reminded by this research that historically silenced voices need to be uplifted and are foundational in fostering a deeper understanding of the strong communities we should strive to build. Theatre education has the capacity to transcend barriers when it puts an end to normalizing exclusion and embraces racially and ethnically diverse communities. It encourages growth in developing a sense of self and identity formation for everyone.

Returning to school after 20 years was not part of my planned journey, but it rewarded me with the gift of exploring my personal identity. I have embraced reflecting on my journey as a South Asian woman in the arts, in higher education and on my own development as a scholar and practitioner. This process has also made me intensely aware of my role in perpetuating inequities and how I have benefited from privileges due to racist systems established to separate, rather than unite, where dominant powers strive to keep others down. This new approach celebrates creativity, centers empathy, and prioritizes intentionality behind uplifting voices that need to be heard. Because of this, I have gained a new perspective on how I approach my work as an artist, educator, and scholar.

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Appendix A: Initial Survey

Q1 Dear artists, either by passion and/or profession, My name is Sobha Kavanakudiyil, I am a student in the EdD in Higher Education Program at Fairleigh Dickinson University in NJ. I am conducting my dissertation research which will explore the experiences of performing artists from racially and ethnically diverse communities. This includes artists who are working professionally in the performing arts and those who are passionate about the performing arts and hold professional roles outside of the performing arts. Your insights are invaluable in helping to illuminate these experiences and contribute to a more racially and ethnically diverse landscape. I would be grateful if you could take 10 - 15 minutes to complete my survey. Your participation is entirely voluntary, and all responses will be kept confidential. If you know others who might be interested in contributing, please feel free to share this with them. Thank you in advance for your time and support. If you have any questions, please don't hesitate to reach out at xxxxx@student.fdu.edu.

Q34 You are being asked to volunteer for participation in a research study because this project is being completed for a doctoral dissertation. This research is studying what theatre education programs can do to increase racial and ethnic representation in the performing arts. Here is information about the study: Study Title: Beyond the Spotlight: Illuminating South Asian Female Identity to Transcend Barriers and (Re)imagine Theatre Education Principal Investigator/Researcher: Sobha Kavanakudiyil Faculty Mentor: Dr. Frederick V. Engram Department/School: Peter Sammartino School of Education, Fairleigh Dickinson University You must be 18 years or older to participate in this study. Purpose The purpose of this study is to support increasing racial and ethnic representation in the performing arts. A framework for theatre education teacher training programs will be developed to support racial and ethnic

representation in the performing arts. Participation It is estimated that between 50-60 people will complete the survey. This is a three-paper dissertation. You are being asked to participate in the survey and may be asked to participate in an interview or focus group. I will have approximately 6-12 interviews total and approximately 3-6 people for the focus group. The survey will take between 10-15 minutes to complete. After completing this survey, if you are asked to participate in an interview or focus group, they will be between 60-90 minutes. All interviews and focus groups will be held on Zoom. Your participation is voluntary. Those who participate in an interview or focus group will be compensated with a \$10 Amazon gift card. You do not have to participate any further than the survey if you do not want to. You also have the right to withdraw from this study at any time without penalty. The information shared during this study will be kept confidential. There will be no disclosure to anyone else of your personal information except the primary researcher. If at any time you do not wish to answer a question or you wish to withdraw from the study you may. IP addresses will not be collected by the research survey site.

Risks This project is minimal risk, and you will not experience anything above what would occur in your everyday life or in completing a standard medical or psychological evaluation. No information is being collected that will identify you. To enhance your privacy and confidentiality, please complete this on-line survey on a personal computer or mobile device. If you use a work issued computer or device, your confidentiality may not be protected.

Benefits There is no direct benefit to you from participating however, it is hoped the knowledge gained will be of benefit to others in the future.

Alternatives Your alternative is to not participate or allow the use of your data for the research.

Reimbursement for Participation You will not be reimbursed for participation in completing the survey. If using Qualtrics a separate form collecting contact information must be used to ensure identifiers and contact information are

NOT linked to responses. The researcher will not receive any identifying information about you. Those who are invited to participate in an interview or focus group will be contacted directly and will receive a \$10 Amazon gift card within 24 hours of their participation in the interview or focus group. Contact Information If you have any questions about the study or experience any study related risk or discomfort, please contact: Sobha Kavanakudiyil, Principal Investigator at xxxxx@xxxxxx.xxx or faculty mentor: Dr. Frederick V Engram, Jr, Sammartino School of Education at xxxxx@xxxxxx.xxx. If you have any questions regarding your rights as a subject in this study, please contact the Fairleigh Dickinson University IRB Administration via e-mail at: xxxxx@fdu.edu or phone at (XXX) XXX-XXXX. By completing this survey, I give this researcher, Sobha Kavanakudiyil, permission to use this survey for education research. I give my consent and would like to continue with the survey.

- YES (1)
- NO (2)

Skip To: End of Survey If You are being asked to volunteer for participation in a research study because this project is be... = NO

Q25 What kind of performing artist are you (select all that apply, including if you do not have a professional role in the performing arts)

- Directing (1)
- Acting (2)
- Musician (12)
- Dancer (13)
- Musical Theatre (3)

- Playwriting (4)
- Scene Design (5)
- Light Design (6)
- Sound Design (7)
- Costume (8)
- Props (9)
- Stage Manager (10)
- Other (please describe) (11)

Q38 Are you still practicing your art form?

- Yes (2)
- No (3)

Skip To: End of Block If Are you still practicing your art form? = No

Q23 Number of years practicing your art form (even if not professionally).

- Less than five years (1)
- 6-10 years (2)
- 11-15 years (3)
- 16-20 years (4)
- 21-30 years (5)
- Over 30 years (6)
- Other (7) _____

Q40 Please describe how you practice your art form, including if you are not working in the performing arts professionally.

Q41 Do you currently hold a professional role in the performing arts?

- Yes (2)
- No (3)

Skip To: End of Block If Do you currently hold a professional role in the performing arts? = No

Q24 Current professional role in the performing arts (check all that apply)

- Teaching Artist (1)
- Certified Theatre Teacher (2)
- Arts Administrator (3)
- Higher Education (4)
- Director (5)
- Playwright (7)
- Stage Manager (8)
- Lighting Designer (9)
- Sound Designer (10)
- Scenic Designer (11)
- Costume Designer (12)
- Other (please describe) (13)



Q22 What level of encouragement and support did you receive from family/friends to pursue a career in the performing arts?

- I felt very encouraged (1)
- I felt somewhat encouraged (2)
- Neither encouraged or discouraged (3)
- I felt somewhat discouraged (4)
- I felt very discouraged (5)

Q28 Please move the dial to the point on the scale to reflect how much you agree with the statement with 100 being the strongest in agreement to 0 being the least amount of agreement.

Strongly Agree Agree Neither Agree or Disagree Disagree Strongly Disagree Not Applicable

0 10 20 30 40 50 60 70 80 90 100

I am satisfied with my current role professional role. ()	
Changing the ethnic and racial diversity landscape of the the performing arts is important to me. ()	
It is important that I make the performing arts more accessible to ethnically and racially diverse communities. ()	
I use culturally sustainable pedagogy (engaging learners whose cultures and experiences have been excluded from traditional content areas) in my practice. ()	
I feel supported by my place(s) of employment in evolving my practice. ()	

Q18 What is your highest level of education?

- High School (including GED) (1)
- Some college (no degree) (2)
- Technical Certification (3)
- Associate's degree (4)
- Bachelor's Degree (5)
- Master's Degree (6)
- Doctoral Degree (7)
- Professional Degree (JD, MD) (8)
- I prefer not to say (9)

Q19 I majored/minored in an area of performing arts for my undergraduate degree

- Yes (1)
- No (2)
- Other (please describe) (3) _____

Q32 My current level of income

- Under \$50,000.00 (1)
- Between \$50,000.00-100,000.00 (2)
- Between 100,000.00 - \$150,000.00 (3)
- Between \$150,000.00 - \$200,000.00 (4)
- Above \$200,000.00 (5)

Q33 Do you work in higher education as part of the teaching faculty?

- YES (4)
- NO (5)
- Other (6)

Skip To: End of Block If Do you work in higher education as part of the teaching faculty? = NO

Q34 Which currently describes your position in higher education?

- Full-time (1)
- Part-time (2)
- Other (4)

Skip To: Q37 If Are you a full-time faculty member or an adjunct instructor? = Part-time

Q35 What is your current title/rank?

- Adjunct (1)
- Lecturer (2)
- Doctoral Lecturer (3)
- Assistant Professor (4)
- Associate Professor (5)
- Professor (6)
- Staff (7)
- Other (please describe) (8) _____

Q36 Do you have tenure?

- Yes (1)
- No (2)

Q37 How long have you been at the institution?

- Less than five years (1)
- 6-10 years (2)
- 11-15 years (3)

- 16-20 years (4)
- 21-30 years (5)
- Over 30 years (6)




Q38 Is it a private or public institution?

- Public (1)
- Private (2)

Q45 Please move the dial to the point on the scale to reflect how much you agree with the statement with 100 being the strongest in agreement to 0 being the least amount of agreement.

0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0

It is important to decenter whiteness in the performing arts. ()	
I have seen my race and ethnicity represented in the performing arts. ()	
Racial and ethnic representation is important in the performing arts. ()	

Q12 Age

- 18-24 years old (1)
- 25-34 years old (2)
- 35-44 years old (3)
- 45-54 years old (4)

- 55-64 years old (5)
- 65+ years old (6)

Q13 Gender Identity

- Female (1)
- Male (2)
- Transgender (3)
- Nonbinary (4)
- Other (please specify) (5)
- I prefer not to say (6)

Q14 Please check all that apply

- Native American (1)
- African American (2)
- Asian (3)
- Bi-racial (please specify) (4)
- Black (5)
- Hispanic or Latino (6)
- Multi-racial (please specify) (7)
- Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander (8)
- South Asian (9)
- East Asian (10)
- White (11)
- Other (12) _____
- Prefer not to answer (13)

Q8 Thank you so much for your time and for supporting my doctoral research. You have reached the end of the survey. If you have any questions or thoughts, please email me at xxxxxxxxx@xxxxxx.xxx. Would you like to be contacted for an interview for my doctoral research?

- YES (4)
- NO (5)

Skip To: End of Block If Thank you so much for your time and for supporting my doctoral research. You have reached the end... = NO

Q35 First Name, Last Name

Q10 Email: _____

Q11 Cell Phone (only to be used if needed after initial email giving

permission): _____

Appendix B: Participant Flyer

Seeking Performing Artists to Participate in Research Study

This research study aims to offer strategies to foster racial and ethnic diversity in the performing arts.



Criteria for participants to complete SURVEY:

Looking for participants to fill out a survey for a three-paper research study.

- Are you a female-identifying performing artist?
- Are you a South Asian female-identifying performing artist?
- Are you faculty in a higher education teacher training program in theatre education?

Did you answer “YES” to any of these questions? Please complete this survey. It will take 10-20 minutes. Participants who complete the survey will be entered into a raffle!

**ALL DATA
COLLECTED WILL BE
CONFIDENTIAL**

*ENGLISH PROFICIENCY
REQUIRED TO PARTICIPATE*

SURVEY LINK



Criteria for participants for INTERVIEWS:

Interview participants should fit into at least one category below:

- Female-identifying performing artist from a racially and ethnically diverse community
- South Asian female-identifying performing artist (by profession or passion)
- Faculty from higher education teacher training programs in theatre education

Looking for 20 participants for a three-paper research study for a 60-90 minute interview. Participants will be invited via email and compensated for their time with a small token of appreciation.

QUESTIONS?

Contact:

Sobha Kavanakudiyil
Doctoral Student
Fairleigh Dickinson University
s.kavanakudiyil@student.fdu.edu

Appendix C: Invitation to Participate in Interview

Dear XXXX,

Thank you again for filling out my initial survey. Through this research, I aim to increase racial and ethnic representation in the performing arts. I will develop a framework for theatre education teacher training programs that will support this. As a thank you for your time and insights, participants who complete the interview will receive a \$10.00 Amazon gift card.

I would like to invite you to an interview. I have attached the consent form. Once I receive the consent form, I will send a Calendly link for you to schedule the interview. The consent form is attached.

The interviews will be recorded on Zoom for transcription and research, and I will use the Voice Memos application on the iPhone – voice recording as backup. Names will be kept confidential, and anonymity will be respected. I ask that you please change your name on Zoom to your selected pseudonym prior to your arrival and eliminate any identifiers associated with your affiliation to any organization or institution. I also ask that you have your camera turned on for the duration of the interview.

While the interview will be semi structured, here are the questions I plan to discuss during the interview:

1. Please describe your first performing arts experience.
2. Discuss your perception of the performing arts as a profession.
3. Please describe your professional journey.
4. Does your performing arts experience connect to your current professional role?
5. Please describe a moment when you felt proud in the performing arts and how you celebrated with others.

6. Please describe any challenges you have experienced in the performing arts and how you overcame them.
7. Describe the support you felt in the performing arts as you developed professionally.
8. When you reflect on your professional journey, describe any moments you might return to, and encourage yourself to think differently about a choice or make a different one.
9. Describe any mentors you have had and share any advice you received.
10. Were you able to connect with mentors?
11. Did your mentoring experience connect with your identity?
12. Describe how you might have or might not have seen yourself represented in the performing arts.
13. Describe how you understand your own identity in connection with the performing arts?
14. Describe how your identity connects to your professional journey.
15. Describe your journey decentering whiteness. How has your identity been shaped by your proximity to or distance from whiteness in the performing arts?
16. Describe a moment in your performing arts journey when you became aware of how whiteness influenced perceptions of your identity. How was your sense of belonging in performing arts spaces impacted?
17. What strategies have you used to navigate, resist, or redefine norms shaped by whiteness in your performing arts journey?
18. How do you describe fulfillment, and do you feel fulfilled in your professional role today?
19. Describe any regrets you may have or anything you might have done differently.

20. Describe any advice you might give your younger self, or a young person interested in entering the performing arts as a profession?

Is there anything else you'd like to share?

If follow-up questions arise and are asked, you will be able to refuse to answer and end the interview at any time. If our conversation runs over time, we will not continue without your consent, and you are in no way obligated to continue.

Again, attached is the consent form required for participation in the interview. Once I receive confirmation of your interest in participating and the consent form a Zoom link will be sent. If you have any questions, feel free to contact me. I am grateful for your time and thank you for participating in this study.

Thanks so much for your time, Sobha

FDU IRB Approved: 06/23/2025 Expires: 06/24/2026

Appendix D: Invitation to Participate in Focus Group

Dear XXXX,

Thank you again for filling out my initial survey. Through this research, I aim to support increasing racial and ethnic representation in the performing arts. I will develop a framework for theatre education teacher training programs that will support this. As a thank you for your time and insights, participants who participate in the focus group will receive a \$10.00 Amazon gift card.

I would like to invite you to a focus group with other colleagues from Theatre Education Programs at Higher Education Institutions. The focus group will last 60-90 minutes. It is scheduled for [INSERT DATE/TIME]. I am interested in engaging us in a discussion about theatre education programs for my dissertation research.

The interviews will be recorded on Zoom for transcription and research, and I will use the Voice Memos application on the iPhone – voice recording as backup. All names of institutions and participants will be kept confidential.

Prior to joining the focus group, please eliminate any identifiers from your university (backgrounds, etc.) and to change your name to your pseudonym prior to joining.

Discussion prompts will be used. However, this will be a semi structured discussion. I plan to discuss during the focus group: *(some of these prompts may evolve based on initial insights from interviews and survey)*

1. Share with us about the racial and ethnic diversity of your programs.
2. Please discuss some of the ways in which your program introduces culturally sustainable pedagogy.
3. How would you describe some of the culturally sustainable practices of your program?

4. Please describe how your program actively engages in decentering whiteness.
5. Please share strategies you use to uplift all identities in your programs.
6. Please describe any areas of improvement you would like to further develop.
7. Describe the support you feel from the administration.
8. Describe the support you feel from the institution.
9. Describe any recruitment efforts you practice or think about.
10. Describe what you continue to wonder when it comes to this?

Is there anything else you'd like to share?

Other questions will be asked as they arise, and you can refuse to answer and end the interview at any time. If our conversation runs over time, we will not continue without your consent, and you are in no way obligated to continue.

Attached is the consent form required for participation in the focus group. Please return your consent form at least 24 hours prior to the scheduled time. Once I receive confirmation of your interest in participating and the consent form a Zoom link will be sent. If you have any questions, feel free to contact me. I am grateful for your time and thank you for participating in this study.

Thanks so much for your time, Sobha

FDU IRB Approved: 06/23/2025 Expires: 06/24/2026

Appendix E: Interview Protocol

Interview Protocol:

Opening

Hi – Participant, thank you for taking the time to meet with me today.

During this interview, I would like to learn about your experiences as an artist, your journey in the arts, the support you received, and whether it connects with your current professional journey.

Relationship Building Questions

What interested you about the study, and what is your motivation for agreeing to be interviewed?

Do you have any questions for me about the research so far?

Confidentiality Statement

Since we will be discussing very personal information, I encourage you to do the following:

- Use headphones
- Use a private computer/and or device
- Complete the interview in a private space

During this Zoom meeting, I enhanced all the security settings to ensure privacy and confidentiality. I will record the interview questions; please confirm that it is ok. [WAIT FOR RESPONSE AND TURN ON RECORDING IF AFFIRMATIVE]

Thank you again for meeting me today and participating in my dissertation research.

During our interview, I would like to learn more about your personal or professional experience in the performing arts and how it connects to your current professional journey. I would also like to hear your thoughts on representation and racial and ethnic diversity in the performing arts.

Questions

Please describe your first performing arts experience.

Discuss your perception of the performing arts as a profession.

Please describe your professional journey.

Does your performing arts experience connect to your current professional role?

Please describe a moment when you felt proud in the performing arts and how you celebrated with others.

Please describe any challenges you have experienced in the performing arts and how you overcame them.

Describe the support you felt in the performing arts as you developed professionally.

When you reflect on your professional journey, describe any moments you might return to, and encourage yourself to think differently about a choice or make a different one.

Describe any mentors you have had and share any advice you received.

Were you able to connect with mentors?

Did your mentoring experience connect with your identity?

Describe how you might have or might not have seen yourself represented in the performing arts.

Describe how you understand your own identity in connection with the performing arts?

Describe how your identity connects to your professional journey.

Describe your journey decentering whiteness. How has your identity been shaped by your proximity to or distance from whiteness in the performing arts?

Describe a moment in your performing arts journey when you became aware of how whiteness influenced perceptions of your identity. How was your sense of belonging in performing arts spaces impacted

What strategies have you used to navigate, resist, or redefine norms shaped by whiteness in your performing arts journey?

How do you describe fulfillment, and do you feel fulfilled in your professional role today?

Describe any regrets you may have or anything you might have done differently.

Describe any advice you might give your younger self, or a young person interested in entering the performing arts as a profession?

Is there anything else you'd like to share?

Thank you!

Follow up Questions

If follow-up questions are needed, they will be limited to:

Please tell me more about that.

Please share in more detail what you are discussing.

Please share more about how it made you feel.

FDU IRB Approved: 06/23/2025 Expires: 06/24/2026

Appendix F: Focus Group Protocol

Opening

Hi – everyone, thank you for your willingness to support my research and the field.

Before we begin, I want to discuss confidentiality. What’s shared in this group stays in this group, and I ask you all to respect that. While I, as the facilitator, will keep everything confidential and de-identify any information used in research or reporting, I ask that we all respect each other’s privacy and not repeat anything shared here outside this space.

Can I get a thumbs up to show that everyone is okay with that?

We want to learn about your experiences in higher education during this focus group.

Confidentiality Statement

Since we will be discussing very personal information, I encourage you to do the following:

- Use headphones
- Use a private computer/and or device
- Complete the interview in a private space

I enhanced all the security settings during this Zoom meeting to ensure privacy and confidentiality. Based on the information we discussed or the informed consent form, do you have any other questions?

Please change your name on Zoom to a pseudonym you’d like to use and eliminate any identifiers to your university.

I will be recording this session only for transcription and analysis purposes. Your name or identifying information will never be used in my final work. If you’re ever uncomfortable, you can choose not to answer or ask to stop the recording at any time.

I'd like to confirm you have changed your name to a pseudonym and eliminated any identifiers to your university.

[GIVE TIME FOR EVERYONE TO CONFIRM PSEUDONYM NAME AND ELIMINATE ANY IDENTIFIERS]

Please give me a thumbs up so I know you are ready and agree to proceed [WAIT FOR AFFIRMATIVE RESPONSE FROM ALL].

I will now turn on the recording [WAIT FOR RESPONSE AND TURN ON RECORDING IF AFFIRMATIVE].

Thank you again for joining and participating in my dissertation research.

I would like to learn more about your theatre education programs during this focus group. I'd love for us to set a few group agreements to support respectful and open dialogue.

- “One mic” (one person speaks at a time)
- Speak from your own experience
- No judgment or interruptions
- Step up, Step back
- Okay to pass

Follow up Questions

- If follow-up questions are needed, they will be limited to:
 - Please tell me more about that.
 - Please share in more detail what you are discussing.
 - Please share more about how it made you feel.

Relationship Building Questions

What interested you about the study, and what is your motivation for agreeing to be interviewed?

Do you have any questions for me about the research so far?

Interview Questions

Share with us about the racial and ethnic diversity of your programs.

Please discuss some of the ways in which your program introduces culturally sustainable pedagogy.

How would you describe some of the culturally sustainable practices of your program?

Please describe how your program actively engages in decentering whiteness.

Please share strategies you use to uplift all identities in your programs.

Please describe any areas of improvement you would like to further develop.

Describe the support you feel from the administration.

Describe the support you feel from the institution.

Describe any recruitment efforts you practice or think about.

Describe what you continue to wonder when it comes to this?

Is there anything else you'd like to share?

Thank you!