

Re-Writing the Declaration

Curriculum Connection Guide – Spring 2024



What happens when a class of young people of color take a trip to 1776?

A collage of time and space, a blend of character and self — the ensemble of *Re-Writing the Declaration* exists in both today and yesterday in order to change tomorrow. Believing that the founding fathers and documents never intended to include us, we consider the impacts of that founding on our lives today & realize it's time to re-write the Declaration of Independence. On this journey, we visit some troubling moments in our collective past, while celebrating Blackness on the path towards freedom.

“It is their right, it is their duty, to throw off such Government,
and to provide new Guards for their future security.” --
The Declaration of Independence

Presented by GovState [Theatre and Performance Studies](#)

Created and Directed by Quenna Barrett, EdD

[Friday, November 1, 2024 at 7:30PM](#)

[Saturday, November 2, 2024 at 7:30PM](#)

[Sunday, November 3, 2024 at 2PM](#)

TICKETS: \$15

GENERAL ADMISSION

PERFORMED IN [SHERMAN HALL](#)

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Table of Contents

Project History and Context	4
Disciplinary Connections	6
About Devised Theater	6
About Participatory Theater	6
About the Creator/Director	7
Class Activity: “We Come From” Group Poem	9
Related Media Links	11
References	12

PROJECT HISTORY AND CONTEXT

Synopsis

Re-writing the Declaration, a participatory play that invites the audience to re-write the Declaration of Independence, seeks to leverage the multicultural value of theater, but only after it first seeks to affirm, recognize, and celebrate the lives that are too often systemically devalued. It is a call for social equity and offers community tools through its audience participation and engagement. Merging social direct action with theatrical performance, it serves as a space for collective inquiry and collective intervention.

History

Re-Writing the Declaration was first developed and premiered in the fall of 2020, during what many penned as the “twindemic:” the intersection of the covid-19 pandemic and the global uprisings stirred by systemic and racial injustice. It was developed, in part, as the director, Quenna Barrett’s, culminating doctoral project.

Led by Barrett, a multi-racial, queer, and femme ensemble from both New York and Chicago gathered via Zoom to devise or create a participatory play that sought to celebrate people of marginalized identities.

The resulting narrative was of a high school class field trip to 1776, where the students realize the issues and identities the founding fathers left out. Through interactive healing journeys of meditation, movement, and music, characters learned from ancestral wisdom, and the audience built community with strangers, and re-wrote the Declaration through games. A recording of that 2020 production can be found [here](#).

The 2020 production was made possible by the [Program in Educational Theatre at NYU Steinhardt](#), [Free Street Theater](#), and [Speranza Foundation](#).

Barrett’s personal, artistic work has always existed at the intersection of theater and justice. Her artistic practice is multifaceted, with her as work a theatre educator a strong and necessary component of that practice. Re-Writing the Declaration seeks to combine her experiences as an artist, activist, and educator, using participatory theater as an exploration to make new worlds collaboratively.

The next section (Context) is comprised of key summaries in her first-person voice that highlight the origins and questions of the development of this project.

Context

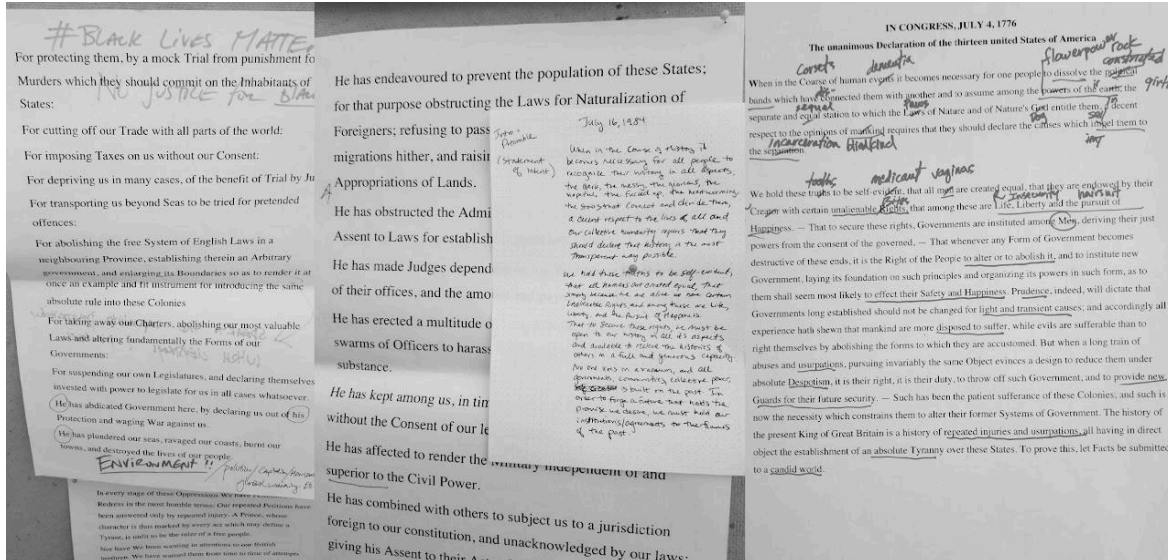
THE CATALYST

“We’re not free until we’re all free,” is a refrain I began to hear often, starting about nine years ago. After Trayvon, after Mike, probably in the midst of Rekia and Sandra, but before Laquan, I literally followed protests and marches on Twitter until my feet found them in person. I used tweets to locate where these demonstrations were happening, and kept showing up until I found the ones actually led by young, black people. Creatives, poly-sci students, grassroots organizers, educators, young people who truly cared about what happened to people who looked like them, who could connect the police violence on black and brown bodies to historical divestment from the communities in which they lived, and who knew that freeing the most oppressed among us -- the black, queer or trans person -- was (and is) the only way to free us all. Following on twitter led me to my tribes: BYP100, or the Black Youth Project 100, and the #LetUsBreathe Collective. Through them, I began to see the world through a black, queer, feminist lens, which sits between and across critical race, queer, and feminist theories, and understands the compounding oppression that those who contain those identities hold.

THE PROJECT

Organizer and prison-abolitionist Mariame Kaba presented me with the initial charge for conducting this project. We were riding a bus either to or from Cleveland where we attended a convening of the Movement for Black Lives (often referred to as the Black Lives Matter movement). At the end of the convening, as hundreds of black and other organizers of color were exiting the campus where the convening took place, the police tried to arrest a young, black male for some innocuous reason like being asleep on the bus stop that I can’t quite remember. What I do remember is that we weren’t having it.

After successfully de-arresting the young man using organizing tactics and strategies, we headed back to the bus to return to Chicago. It was either in this moment, or two days before any of this began, that I was engaged in a conversation around the fact that many current policing strategies and judicial system are still informed by our nation’s founding documents, including the Declaration of Independence. Kaba turned to me and said, “You’re an artist, you should re-write it.”



In early workshops of Re-Writing the Declaration, Barrett hosted community based workshops, where she and artists would creatively and collectively investigate the Declaration of Independence, develop proposals for alternate manifestos for governance, and commit to actions of justice.

THE PURPOSE

As I read the Declaration of Independence, I realized that the United States of America's founding documents were never intended to include many of the people who call this country home. The justice system doesn't protect black and brown people for many reasons, in large part because it wasn't designed to. Because of these and other shortfalls, I wondered what would happen if I were to rewrite the Declaration as an artistic, performative, and participatory rendering of a new and more inclusive document, utilizing participatory performance, photography, and theatre-based workshops.

The purpose of this arts-based study was to explore the re-writing of the Declaration of Independence, particularly within a community of artists and activists of color through a participatory play and process. Utilizing a black queer feminist lens, the creation and articulation of this play is designed specifically to celebrate and amplify the stories of queer, black, indigenous and other women of color—communities that have historically been pushed to the margins. This collaborative, arts-centered sought to interrogate:

- a. the relationship of the act of re-writing a founding document to more just, social practices, and
- b. the potential writ large of participatory theatre for collective action.

Disciplinary Connections

- Theatre and Performance Studies
- Humanities
- Social Studies
- Social Justice
- Criminal Justice
- Sociology
- Political Science
- History
- Philosophy

About Devised Theater

Johnston and Paz Brownrigg (2018) define devised theater alongside ensemble-based processes as “a way of creating theater that welcomes the ideas and contributions of everyone in the room, that relies on a collective vision rather than a singular vision of a playwright or a director” (p. x). Devised theatre could be viewed as building theatre from the ground up; there is no script when rehearsals begin, often just a seed of an idea around which a group of artists has gathered to collaboratively explore. As such devising necessitates an ensemble approach to theatre, wherein “artists [are] dedicated to working fluidly and passionately together, and extracting the best artistic efforts from each other” (Cohen 2011, p. 22).

About Participatory Theater

Participatory theatre can look like engaging and activating audiences with pre- and post-show experiences where they re invited to add their thoughts to boards and walls, as well as during the show prompts to discuss with neighbor audience members, or play games that give them a chance to apply the action of the play to their own lives. Participatory theatre can be very Brechtian. German theater practitioner Bertolt Brecht calls for the audience to be fully aware that they are watching a play to aid in the critique of the systems that are being dramatized on stage. In participatory theatre, there is no fourth wall; or, it's broken so much that it may as well not exist. The cast talks to and with spectators; they become active players. It is an active and intentional engaging of the audience before, during, and after the play, where their contributions might help to drive the narrative, or connect it concretely to their own lived experiences.

About the Creator/Director

Quenna Lené Barrett (EdD) is a theater artist + practitioner, whose work gathers folks of diverse backgrounds, centers marginalized identities, learns from Black radical wisdom, and then dreams collectively to act boldly through those learnings. Quenna is an Associate Professor of Applied Theatre at Governors State University. She has developed participatory, theater-based programs at the University of Chicago's Arts + Public Life and Goodman Theatre, where she recently served as the Associate Director of Education and Engagement. As a director, performer, educator, facilitator, and writer, she has worked with a number of organizations including Paramount Theatre, NYU Steinhardt, Oklahoma State University, Ohio State University, Chicago Children's Theatre, Sojourn, The Theatre School at DePaul, Free Street, Pegasus, Court, eta, Theater Unspeakable, and For Youth Inquiry performance company with the Illinois Caucus of Adolescent Health, where she is a company and board member. She is an Associate Artist with [Pivot Arts](#), an adjunct professor at DePaul University, and a member of the new leadership circle of the [Center for Performance and Civic Practice](#).

Class Activity: “We Come From” Group Poem

“We Come From”: A Recipe for Belonging

The following is a recipe for a participatory poem. The text of the poem is taken from Re-Writing the Declaration workshop and survey participants, with the themes boiled over and cooked up out of their raw responses to questions of “places and times you felt you belonged”, and an interactive theatre game entitled “I Come From” (Paz and Brownrigg, 2019). All of the words are the participants own. The chef just arranged them to fit this plate, according to thematic resonance. The activity sort of works as a mad-lib, which is one of the participatory actions that a workshop participant offered up as potential structure.

Ingredients

Consenting audience members/class/group
Printed half sheets as printed below the line

Step 1 - Invite group members to find a partner. Whoever’s next to them works well.

Step 2 - Invite them, in whatever order you choose, to tell a story of a time or place where they felt like they belonged.

Step 3 - Invite the listening partner to JUST LISTEN - this is hard, they will mess it up, but the end result will still be glorious and tasty - and record notes from their partner’s story on the half sheet.

Step 4 - Give them the same amount of time. Let the first partner know when they’re about halfway done, and when they’re finished. Encourage them to switch. Repeat.

Step 5 - Invite the group to add in from the notes they took when you get to the corresponding number in the poem, perhaps adding “I come from” to the beginning of their statement.

Step 6 - Begin reciting the poem. Pause when you feel like it to invite group participation, making some verbal or physical gesture to cue them in.

Step 7 - Thank them, and relish in their collective awesomeness.

Listen for the following in your partner’s story and notate them here.

1. Places:

2. People/Relationships:

3. Activities:

4. Things people said or did:

5. Food:

6. Qualities/Characteristics/Senses:

“We Come From” Poem, Created by the 2020 Ensemble of *Re-Writing the Declaration*

1

I come from the Southside of Chicago.
I come from, B street.
I come from motown
From Howard
From poetry clubs in college
From queer women of color film fests

2

I come from moving around a lot.
from communities of artists and organizers
I come from working class
from a family of autodidacts and entrepreneurs.
I come from, my mother being like the rebel and the outspoken one and like the one who's gonna live for life.
I come from playing outside and then having to be inside by the time street lights are off.
I come from the back seat of my dad's truck.
From 5th grade teachers embracing my creativity
I come from a dad who was chased out of Bridgeport.
I come from my grandmother.
I come from white people in Minnesota.
I come from going outside on my porch to watch police officers arrest Black men
From friends and family visiting when I had issues coming out, ensuring that i knew i had support and comfort and home
From theatre teachers who always made us feel like we had a home in the theatre

3

I come from home schooling aunts.
I come from family dinners with the TV off.
I come from not trusting the police.
I come from being listened to by my parents.
I come from hating most plays, but still going to them.
I come from meditation.
from libraries
from sitting with my friends. And that presence yielding, better communication and better accountability
From high school choir

4

I come from my mom's stories of being told in college that even though she earned an A, her white professor told her you're going to get a C at best, you're not going to show up white children.
I come from my dad telling me that he loved me.

From a fellow queer friend of color saying: You know, you can dress whatever way you want, right?"
From coming out to my mother and her saying "i already knew" and making me feel that i could breathe
in my skin in the most intimate space, my home

I come from the news sources in the US.

I come from Uber drivers in other cities asking me how safe I felt living on the southside of Chicago.

I come from my mom's sex positivity but staunch heteronormativity.

I come from my aunt saying " you know. I really, you know, I tried to use the pronouns for Freddie's
partner. I tried"

I come from never being called the "n-word" in public, but having people my age who were.

I come from non profits. That're too scared to cut the dead weight off the board.

From "yes, and"

5

I come from house music

from summer cookouts family gatherings abundant food.

from Chicago in the summer.

From hosts saving me Memphis Style BBQ

From dinners with my playwriting group

From thanksgiving with my partner's family and being trusted to make my damn good pecan pie

6

I come from forgiveness where it's placed inside an envelope. I come from feeling deep fondness for
humble park and, uh, like deep deep deep wells of knowing in the mountains of Puerto Rico.

I come from oceans.

from Black Women

From people who look like me

From feeling at ease in dyke bars

from intentional circles.

from blessing grounds where you get up in the morning. Where you know the sun is always going to be
there. Even if it gets a little bit shy, the clouds are there.

I come from really long hugs, where you don't rock the person's back. but you just hold them.

Related Media Links

[Full Recording of 2020 Virtual Play](#)

2017 Blog post from Barrett: https://sfai.org/blog_declaration/

Santa Fe Art Institute “SFAI140” short performance by Barrett "[The Image of Justice](#)"

Interview in Sixty Inches From Center:

<https://sixtyinchesfromcenter.org/beyond-the-page-quenna-lene-barrett/>

Southside weekly coverage of 2020 production: <https://southsideweekly.com/back-to-the-future/>

Book Chapter

Barrett, Quenna. “Re-Writing the Declaration: Healing in Theater from A Black, Queer, Feminist Lens”. [Contemporary Black Theatre & Performance: Acts of Rebellion, Activism, & Solidarity](#). Methuen Drama | Agitations: Text, Politics, Performance Series. 2023.

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