

Jordan Resnick

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Research Begins in the Library, Learning Continues in the World

I started my paper like any other: by going on lib.umd.edu. Having a vague idea about performance as ritual, I began using keywords to find articles and books of interest. When this brought up new results I perused the research, reading until I found an example that caught my eye. Reading more about the nature of ritualistic performance, I was fascinated by the wide breadth of material from across the globe, but for the sake of my paper had to narrow my scope in order to germinate my own focused research angle. When I hit a brick wall and the search results were not adequate to my research application, I was spurred to probe deeper into what it was I was actually interested in examining with my research. Thinking of a new angle -- i.e. switching our “healing performance” for “ritual” -- I would begin my search again and dive into new material. This process was repeated on the database JSTOR once I’d found adequate supply from the University’s sources.

As a Michelle Smith Performing Arts Library employee since Fall 2019, I am quite familiar with the treasures held within her walls. If anything, despite the length of my tenure -- Covid sabbatacle aside -- pursuing my line of research had me exploring new depths of the library’s treasures. Getting out of class with fresh ideas for where I wanted to learn more, I went straight to the library and as I walked along the perimeter of the densely stuffed shelves, one spine seemingly jumped out at me like a fish into my hungry net. This turned out to be one of my most trusted guidelines throughout the writing process, Diana Taylor’s fabulous *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas*. Initial stack of books in my weighted arms, I checked out and began to read.

As is no strange occurrence to researchers, sometimes what initially appears as sparkly nuggets materializes as Fool’s Gold when the research fails to bring up fruitful avenues of thought coalescing with where the ideas want to flow. My eagerness to jump right in to the deep end quickly proved to be a shallow endeavor when my exultant literary smorgasbord turned belly up. I put my paper on the back burner and let my mind be filled with more pressing priorities.

Faster than a Great White Shark, I was reeled into rehearsals for *Hookman*, the Theatre department’s main stage production. I was ordained as Assistant Director months prior, but

getting started was daunting. Mentally drowning from a personal loss, the first two rehearsals were a blur as I anxiously watched the clock yearning to run home and bury myself in bed. Then, as if the clouds cracked open under the sun's watchful eyes, it dawned on me that these people in the rehearsal room were depending on me and I needed to be present. Working with the actors and the director, Nathaniel Claridad, we vivisected the play to its themes of loss, abandonment, trauma, and grief. Being able to talk through these topics and then enacting them on stage, the play spoke to me in a new light that helped begin to sterilize and cauterize my wound. When the production ended six weeks later, I knew this was where my research was leading me.

Needing new research materials, I reflected on my other classes thus far. The previous semester I had taken COMM250: Introduction to Communication Inquiry and recalled how performance is just another way of communicating to be understood. In Fall 2021, I was taking COMM401: Interpreting Strategic Discourse and was nonplussed to connect the synchronicities of my class readings with my research. Dusting off the books I checked out at the beginning of the semester, I was delighted to discover I found performance movements we were covering in TDPS458E before we covered that topic in class.

As the semester began its descent into final papers and exams, I saw the threads pulling together from a multitude of areas of my academic career and had a deep felt sense that I was on to something real. In my paper I write of synchronicities, the idea of outward and inner worlds aligning. As I wrote this paper, I felt a clear connection between my thoughts materializing on the page and the research acting as conduit for my truth. An unexpected discovery to be made, the more focused I was in pursuing my line of research all the proper sources elegantly wove together leading me to answers that came to me as the only obvious conclusion. Looking back to where I started questioning last September, convoluting my mind to *think of the immediate answer* served to stunt my creative process until I had to physically put the books down and allow my mind to wander elsewhere, an unexpected route that led me to the right answers without forcing it. A large takeaway is that alongside my research, I learned to trust the flow of thought to guide me to where I need to be and continue pulling in the proper support.