**‘Yes, and’ and ‘No, although’; inviting dissent and difference towards agency as part of multi-representative practice in actor training**

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UK based actor trainings often emphasise the acceptance of offers from others, ensconced in the common facilitation of ‘yes, and’. Additionally, there is frequently an assumption that trainings will be unquestioningly consumed by students and will benefit their work as performers. But are these assumptions ethical, beneficial, and correct? What happens when actors are invited to dissent to trainings?

I argue that the assumption of consent is not always ethical, and that setting up a structure that invites dissent and difference allows for a return to agency in training. As such, this writing seeks to offer ethos of and practices for inviting dissent, difference and consent in actor training towards the recognition of narrative agency. I will analyse the use of these practices in a case study to demonstrate the use and impact of inviting dissent and difference.

These practices are ensconced in the addition of the phrase; ‘no, although’ with ‘yes, and’. ‘No, although’ is the recusal from one thing in lieu of a self-made suggestion. This invites dissent and choice, maintaining both participation and autonomy. Students self-define their roles in the making of work, and make sense of ways to participate, enabling them agency in work together towards a common creative goal.

In this is a broader need to dissolve structures of power that may present in the room, which helps invite the freedom to dissent and self-differentiate. As such, I will articulate intersectional feminist practices for community as a framework within which the invitation to dissent and self-differentiate are more easily received.

Keywords: agency, dissent, self-differentiation, consent, multi-representation, ensemble

We may assume that because students in actor trainings are present and, often, have paid to be there, that not only will they readily consume the trainings offered, but willwantto consume them as well. Students arguably say yes when they choose to walk into the training room, and agreement is notarised when they sign a contract with the institution to exchange currency for instruction. They ‘buy into it’ as ‘consumers of higher education’ (Brooks and Abrahams 2018, 185).

However, this assumption is not always ethical. Higher education is not a ‘normal consumer experience’ and students do not have a wholly agential role in the exchange (McGettigan 2013). Typically, consumers pay *after* services are rendered[[1]](#footnote-1), and are given a detailed analysis of what they are paying for: the menu lists the ingredients for each dish, the seller lists the specifications of the house, the plumber’s estimates are priced ahead of agreements made. In this, consumers are able to gauge the quality of service to their expected outcomes and benefits prior to payment (ibid).

The purchaser of a higher education ‘has little knowledge of the product and generally is unable to test it before deciding to buy’ (Greatrix 2011). Students are given an overview and, in some cases, a detailed analysis of their training practices and curriculum. This is indicative information; they typically do not receive detailed specifications of classroom practices and pedagogy, and class content is subject to change as research and practice develop. As consumers of higher education, ‘the benefits of the product become clear only later rather than during the process of consumption’ (McGettigan 2013). Students consent to trainings they are not wholly informed about, and the value of this training is not known before it is paid for. In this somewhat uninformed consent structure, students report a lack of agency, particularly given the complications[[2]](#footnote-2) of institutional dissent. Unlike other consumers, they are stuck with their ‘product’, even when the value of the training did not meet or only variably met their expectations.

I am not arguing for more detailed or homogenous pre-enrolment presentation of content, as it’s changeability is an arguably valuable indicator of our fluctuating industry. My aim here is to show that this institutional practice impacts student agency; they commit to programmes with relatively uninformed consent and difficult, if little recourse should they choose to dissent to some or all of the trainings. As such, it is useful to find localised ways that students can engage their agency: those which can be applied in the training room itself.

In the following, I will delineate a pedagogic ethos for and practices that invite agency through self-differentiation and dissent, what I call a ‘yes, and’ and ‘no, although’ framework. I will analyse my use of these exercises and their impact in a case study workshop, during which difference, dissent and consent were foregrounded as part of feminist practice. The purpose of this workshop was to explore dialogic practices for multi-representation[[3]](#footnote-3) (diversity and inclusivity[[4]](#footnote-4)), however agency, dissent, and self-differentiation were elicited and revealed here as crucial to multi-representation (Blackstone 2021). While my aims are for multi-representation, in this writing I will focus on agency and practices to

elicit this as part of a multi-representational framework. These practices were tested in a group devised piece where it became clear that self-differentiation, dissent, and consent were beneficial to individual actors’ agency, which in turn benefitted the group, its working practices, and the piece itself.

**Narrative agency**

The nature of agency as an ‘act of human will’ has been interrogated in multiple fields; from the social sciences to economics and philosophy; Immanuel Kant named ‘agency’ as ‘individual intention carried out as action’ (Watkins 2017). Classical conceptions of agency’s related concept; ‘autonomy’ have been defined by Plato as ‘rational self-sufficiency’ (Dryden n.d.), by Kant as ‘self-governing’ (Watkins 2017), and Rousseau as a ‘civil liberty’ (Dryden n.d.). These definitions connote and even endorse non-relational movement and unlimited choice. This is problematic as they do not take into account that we are conditioned by our social circumstances and socially constructed identities, including race, gender, sexuality, and ability. Further, these definitions do not consider our various limitations and accesses to socially constructed privileges and oppressions based on these identities (Lucas 2016, 13). As such, agency and autonomy have been problematised in feminist theories that argue for the recognition of our variability in accessing free will. The normalisation of women’s[[5]](#footnote-5) agency and related concerns of autonomy and sovereignty have been a throughline for most of these efforts across feminism’s history and multiple incarnations. To consider the relational and contextual qualities of agency, I will be pulling

from Sarah Drews Lucas’s conceptualisation of ‘narrative agency’ with specific reference to its conceptions of relational autonomy (Lucas 2016; Mackenzie and Stoljar 2000).

Lucas conceptualises narrative agency as, ‘the capacity to say 'I' over time and in relation to others’ (Lucas 2016, 3). As a first-person perspective, ‘I’ connotes a recognition of and assertion of self while acknowledging relationship with others, in the differentiation of ‘I’ and ‘You’. Differentiating ‘I’ entails a necessary reflection on one’s place in the world, what both Lucas and author Margaret Somers refer to as ‘meaning making’ (Lucas 2016, 12; Somers 1994, 607). Meaning making is a person’s capability for interpreting their world in relation to others. Meaning making gives the ‘capacity for meaningful action’ in this world (Lucas 2016, 12).

The world as ‘relational’ delineates that human beings[[6]](#footnote-6) are ‘*entirely constituted* through relationships’ (Lucas 2016, 13). This includes the conception of our own identities, as these are also formed in relation to other people; they are ‘socially constructed’ (Mackenzie and Stoljar 2000, 39; Lucas 2016, 15). Understanding these socially constructed identities through relation with others is to also understand our social privileges, powers, marginalisations, and limitations. We do not know our identities, nor do we know the proximity of our identities to power[[7]](#footnote-7) until this is passed on to us from others.

In this view, the transmission of cultural information, including norms and identity constructions, are ‘narratives’, defined as that of ‘the family…those of the workplace

(organizational myths), church, government, and nation’ (Somers 1994, 619; Lucas 2016, 16). Notions of identity and proximity to power are transmitted through these wider, institutional narratives. The narrative agent is able to transform these by making, ‘sense of her position in a world of other subjects’ (Lucas 2016, 13). In this, an agent creates their own narrative, a skill of ‘resilience’ that is ‘constant across time, space, and changing cultural conditions’ (Lucas 2016, 13, 36). This is the recognition of our ‘first-person perspective’ that makes us a distinct self; the ‘I’ Lucas refers to her in definition of narrative agency above (2016, 3). The agency of this ‘I’ is exercised when we understand and act on our capacity for differentiation and self-interpretation (Lucas 2016; Mackenzie 2008, 11). As such, narrative agency rests on the, ‘potential to create new meaning in the space between herself and other subjects’ (Lucas 2016, 50).

In this, social oppressions are acknowledged and thought to be transformed by the agent’s narrative, as an act of resistance to the incorporation of socially constructed limitations. This is to distance agency from classical, non-relational understandings of ‘free will’, while defining it as, ‘resilient in the face of …oppression and systemic marginalisation’ (Lucas 2016 13). This resilience is characterised by dispensing with the idea of a binary of freedom (‘we are either free, or we are not’) and recognising that ‘agency is possible’ regardless of our proximity to power (Lucas 2016, 13). Freedom comes in the capability of ‘moments of recognition’ of our narrative power while understanding that we (and others) are simultaneously, ‘embroiled in inescapable power relations’ (Lucas 2016, 13). This conceptualisation of agency acknowledges systemic inequalities while seeing them as surmountable.

*Narrative agency, community, and ensemble*

Lucas states, ‘exercising one’s capacity for narrative agency within a community that recognises one can allow even the most marginalised and subordinated subject to act’ (Lucas 2016, 29). The transformation of systemic inequalities is easier in community with others that recognise us. In her definition of ‘community’, intersectional feminist theorist bell hooks expands on this to name community as *necessary,* ‘for true liberation’ (hooks 2003, 197). She and ‘Black, lesbian, activist, warrior poet’ Audre Lorde[[8]](#footnote-8) similarly define community as both a tacit sense of [[9]](#footnote-9) and an entity intentionally built that acknowledges similarity and difference for the purpose of social transformation (Lorde 2017, 18–19; hooks 2003, 197). We do the work of building community together through connection with each other in our similarities and our differences (hooks 2003, xv, 197; Blackstone 2021). We do this work through ongoing dialogue with each other, our students, and the world (2003, xv–xvi). Crucial to the dialogue of community is the relational recognition of similarity and difference; where ‘I’ am and am not like ‘You’ (Lucas 2016, 3). This recognition of ourselves as similar and different allows us to operate as whole individuals in the room, recognising the capability for self and other to operate as narrative agents while in communion with the whole.

In ensemble actor training, I am conceptualising ‘narrative agency’ to mean that the individual stays a whole person while working in the group towards a common creative goal. John Britton positions this as ‘self with others’ in the introduction to his edited collection *Encountering Ensemble* (2013).Britton groups ensembles into ‘families’ of metaphors describing the function of the individual within the whole (2013, 11). In a metaphor of the ensemble as ‘body’, Britton names ensemble as, ‘a single body built from the individual bodies of the performers’ (2013, 11) [[10]](#footnote-10). In these conceptions of ensemble, each member [[11]](#footnote-11) maintains their ‘individual body’ or ‘I’, while remaining unified in work together (Britton 2013, 11; Lucas 2016, 3).

The conception of ensemble as a group of individuals in work together for a unified purpose describes the aims of my practices for agency; this is framed by bell hooks’s notion of work together in community as a ‘unity in diversity, diversity in unity’ (hooks 2003, 109). This describes a similar necessity of ‘individual’ (diversity) working towards a common goal with ‘others’ (unity). These notions are recognised in Britton’s ensemble practice of ‘Self with Others’, in which, ‘ensemble emerges from the relationship of each individual to each other individual’, again necessitating individuals in unity with others (2013, 314). While the perspective of individual self in work with others is like my own, Britton and I differ in how

and why we facilitate this sense: I through intersectional feminist practices and aims for community and agency, and Britton through a training regimen that seeks via negativa, or to

‘deconstruct blockages’ to impulse, and to ‘shape responses’ in a way that communicates

clearly to an audience (2013, 316, Blackstone 2021).

As such, I have adapted dialogic exercises for the express purpose of recognising similarity and difference towards a narrative agency in community; inviting the ‘diversity in unity, unity in diversity’ (hooks 2003, 109; Lucas 2016, 27). These exercises inherently recognise these aspects and as such, self-differentiation, or the ‘I’, is inherently, intentionally practiced. Additionally, the overall framework for consent and dissent, ‘yes, and’ and ‘no although’, allowed for students to dissent to these exercises themselves. This proved beneficial to the groups’ working practices and performance of a devised piece, as I will describe below. First, I will briefly discuss the ‘yes, and’ and ‘no, although’ framework.

**‘Yes and’ and ‘No although’**

‘Yes, and’ is a common part of theatre practice with roots in improvisation and improv work. ‘Yes, and’ means accepting and building on offerings from others (Leonard and Yorton 2015). This is done with literal, verbal use of this phrase and its variations, as well as in tacit agreements: use of a received prop or welcoming an unexpected event. ‘Yes, and’ allows actors a sense of teamwork and adaptability in the acceptance of each other’s offers, and creates flow and cohesion for the viewer (Leonard and Yorton 2015).

‘No, although’ is a term I use to sum up dissent and self-differentiation; ‘no’ equates to dissent, and ‘although’ equates to self-differentiation. ‘No, although’ is a recusal from participation that offers an alternative function; ‘I will not do that, but I will do this’. For example, ‘No, I will not act, but I will dramaturg’. Part of ‘no, although’ is the activation of self-driven research to support the role one has set for themselves; what Lucas would call ‘making sense’ (Lucas 2016, 16). Students are encouraged to gather information about their chosen functions of ‘No, although’ through personal reflection on their preferences and abilities, and research into their desired function of work. In the example above; they must reflect on their preference not to act, but to dramaturg, and research what these functions are. This can also mean autodidactic investigation of alternative theatre techniques. For example, ‘I won’t do emotional recall, but I will do Active Analysis’ requires students to generate an active independent learning to inform their consent/dissent to both of these techniques. ‘No, although’ covers preference as well as an ability-based need or want; ‘No, I won’t direct, but I will dramaturg’ can be equitable to ‘No I won’t run, but I will move with my chair’ or ‘No, I won’t engage in eye contact, but I will listen’. In this way, the framework embraces the abilities of all in the room and mitigates potential for othering.

This self-differentiation activates a practical narrative agency through the facilitation of the ‘I’ in relation to others (Lucas 2016, 3). Their ‘No’ acts as a self-interpreted boundary in community which can be celebrated with respect from others (Lucas 2016, 50; hooks 2003, 197). Narrative agency is further practiced through the ‘making sense’ of research and reflection in support of their ‘although’ (Lucas 2016, 16). These encourage relational autonomy by facilitating the choice to consent[[12]](#footnote-12), dissent, and self-differentiate roles in work towards a common creative goal (Lucas 2016, 12; Mackenzie and Stoljar 2008). This also allows the student a self-informed consent/dissent on a localised scale; facilitating their agency as consumers of higher education (Brooks and Abrahams 2018, 199).

**The workshop**

I focused this workshop on acknowledging both similarity and difference, and inviting dissent and differentiation towards community creation and agency. I did this from casting on, making efforts to engage a multi-representative ensemble[[13]](#footnote-13), framing workshop communications with consent/dissent at the fore, and facilitating exercises that engage with self-differentiation and self-celebration in groups. My methods of analysis were to look for evidence that students remain autonomous and agential as well as connected with others. This was reflected in self-differentiations and dissent; language such as ‘I will not do that, but I will do this’. This was also reflected in actions; opting out of exercises while still sitting close and listening, for example.

***The Exercises***

The following exercises, apart from the manifesto, were adapted from a personal development workshop called The Living Course (TLC), which seeks to help people ‘live

happier lives’ (Hosler, 2020). In TLC, these exercises are designed to celebrate ‘self with others’ (Hosler, 2020). I adapted these to recognise similarity and difference, as a practical way to enact hooks and Lorde’s similar concepts of community (Lorde 2017, 18–19; hooks 2003, 197; Blackstone 2021). As mentioned above, my initial aim was to use these for multi-representative practice, however, a practical narrative agency also emerged. Self-differentiation is inherently part of these exercises and caused further differentiations and dissents in the workshop. I will focus my analysis on the ‘No, although’ of three members as agents in the work together. First, I will describe and analyse the exercises.

*The manifesto*

The first exercise was the creation of a collaborative group ‘manifesto’ designed to facilitate the group’s autonomy in setting a collective vision for the workshop[[14]](#footnote-14). The ‘manifesto’ is a group-devised set of ensemble principles and agreements to support the physical and emotional space; i.e., practices for respect and communication, and practicalities like attendance and phone use (Blackstone 2021). The manifesto lays a framework with invitations and suggestions that set a vision for their time together, and which is readily visible throughout that time. There is evidence that making this manifesto helped to lay the foundation for narrative agency and served as a visible reminder of the right to say ‘Yes, and’ and ‘No, although’ throughout the day. The group explicitly used the words ‘it’s ok to say no’ and then laid a framework for what comes after ‘no’, ensconced in the manifesto to be open to, ‘exploration of differences-> Alternative perspectives’. They referred to their autonomy via choice of engagement by also framing the work as an, ‘Invitation-> delve deeper’ and by listing the ‘yes, and’ notion of being ‘curious’, ‘Curiosity-> move towards’. This led to a continuing practice of a framework of ‘Yes, and’, and ‘No, although’, which reiterated and validated it, and created the group’s holistic sense of choice, dissent, and self-differentiation.

*The ‘I’ exercise:*

I incorporated an exercise called the ‘I’ exercise, which is comprised of a public celebration of self with others via the presentation of ‘I’. Participants stand in a circle, and one by one we step in, make eye contact with the others in the room, open arms out to the side, and say ‘I’. The ‘I’ comes when we begin to sense an awareness of self and a connection with the others. The ‘I’ is celebrated in ‘relation to’ others via eye contact and connection (Friedman 2008, 36). I specifically used this exercise to affirm agency, help mitigate homogeneity, and to facilitate a physicalised celebration of difference in connection with others. The ‘I’ exercise is a public declamation of self, a practical way to embody the ‘I’ of narrative agency and be recognised as autonomous within the whole; the diversity in unity embodied (hooks 2003, 109; Lucas 2016, 3).

*The Gauntlet*

The Gauntlet is an exercise that directly targets recognition and acknowledgments of self and other. Students are invited to sit in two rows of seats facing each other in relatively close proximity. One is ‘Side A’, the other ‘Side B’. Maintaining eye contact, each side has 30 seconds to complete a clause that facilitates acknowledgment of the listening side in as many different ways as they can. They are invited to use what is true about themselves for this; what is true for one, may be true for another. I prompt the students that they are free to choose how they complete the clauses, and whether or not they absorb what is said to them.

The acknowledgment clauses are:

**1) Of similarity in general: ‘What I see in you that I see in me is’…**

This is done first to connect to each other through a recognition of similarity. I prompt them

with examples; ‘what I see in you that I see in me is someone who is passionate about

acting’, ‘what I see in you that I see in me is someone who sometimes needs support.’ This is

both an admittance of self, and an acknowledgement of a shared desire, need or state (hooks 2003, 110; Blackstone 2021). This clause directly engages the relational ‘I’, preserving ‘I’ in relation to others (Lucas 2016, 29).

**2) Of difference: ‘What you may not see in me is…’**

‘What you may not see in me is…’ is a recognition of difference; where we may diverge in experience from the listener. Lucas writes, ‘each acting subject is a unique ‘I’, in that the perspective from which she speaks or acts is different from any other ‘I’s’ unique perspective’ (2016, 29). The different other is not objectified, but recognised as another subject. This clause facilitates a narrative agency by allowing participants to respectfully recognise each other’s differences and maintain subjectivity of self and other. The terminology allows the speaker to reveal experiences they have that might not be common without blame or judgement, and enables the listener to hear the speaker’s experience with openness and curiosity.

**3) In loved qualities; ‘What I love about you is’…**

This is done to openly celebrate self and others. It is done last to connect and reenergize the

group; I model this clause in an energetic and uplifting manner and tone of voice to shift the

room from the depth of vulnerability invited in the second clause, and facilitate a

positive, joyful feeling. Audre Lorde writes:

the sharing of joy, whether physical, emotional, psychic, or intellectual, forms a

bridge between sharers which can be the basis for understanding much of what is

not shared between them, and lessens the threat of their difference. (Lorde

2017, 10)

This phrase is a way to ‘form a bridge’ between the students through joy-filled recognition that engages the agential ‘I’ as it relates to others (Lucas 2016, 3). Together the acknowledgement clauses facilitate a deeper understanding of self and other, and a desire to understand differences, which become a reduced ‘threat’ (Lorde 2017, 10).

There is one acknowledgement clause completed per round. It is a ‘round’ when each side

has had a chance to both speak and listen. I run each clause for 2-4 rounds, or about one

clause per third of the group, depending on size. After every round ends, the group is invited to stand, shift to the left, and sit, all at the same time. They are asked to do this silently, and with as little movement of the chairs as they can. This gives the group a common challenge and a sense of the whole in movement together, and is adaptable based on student need and ability.

In the following workshop, the acknowledgments of similarity and difference contributed to agency in role differentiation, which positively impacted group communications, devising, and performance. This was also evident in participant feedback regarding the adapted Gauntlet having created a curiosity towards and a ‘want’ to ‘meet’ other people’s differences (Ensemble, 2020).

*The first dissent*

After the manifesto and warm-ups, we moved into the ‘I’ exercise, followed by the Gauntlet. The group applauded each person’s ‘I’ in celebration; though I got the sense that I was driving this. Afterwards, we held an interesting discussion provoked mostly by a participant who I will call ‘Participant A’. I asked the students how that went. Participant A said, ‘I didn’t need the applause’, and asked what I was looking for, as I was the one who started off the applause (Blackstone, 2021). ‘I got the impression that some people weren’t looking for applause, saying “this is me”, alright. So, in a sense it feels like there’s some kind of uh goal. It felt like there was some sort of expectation. That’s what it felt like, so therefore, I wasn’t seeking applause’ (Participant A, 2020).

This participant is differentiating themselves, which may be interpreted as, ‘No, I won’t seek applause, although I will do the exercise’. In this, Participant A is expressing what they see as potentially problematic about mandating applause when the exercise is fundamentally geared towards a ‘celebration of self’ (Blackstone, 2021). This is problematic due to the potential for expectations of outside approval to affect their expressions. The ‘I’ is meant as a celebration of subjectivity and self, where ‘right’ is different for everyone, and is something they do with, rather than for others (Lucas 2016, 3; hooks 2003, xv). TLC emphasizes this point as well, ‘I’ is conceptualized as a celebration of ‘authentic self’[[15]](#footnote-15), and the clapping is seen as important feedback for a participant’s embodiment of ‘I’ (The Living Course 2021, Hosler 2020). Through this idea, Participant A may be interpreted as choosing not to assimilate the ‘expectation’ interpreted within the applause.

I asked the group if we should try it without the applause and suggested that we do the exercise again without the necessity to verbalize ‘I’; and with a self-chosen physicalization of

this self-celebration. I did this to encourage the diverse bodies in the group to feel comfortable expressing the notion of ‘celebration of self’, and to facilitate agency in enacting it. This led to a greater variety of embodiments of ‘I’ outside of the description given above: some dancing ‘I’, some simply walking in, saying ‘I’ and walking out. Their ‘I’s were noticeably more grounded than before; their voices were lower, and there was a tacit sense of presence (Blackstone 2021). The respondents overwhelmingly reported feeling more ‘present’, ‘less rushed’ and that this exercise created ‘the space for agency’ that affected later work (Ensemble 2020).

The group also mentioned an increased sense of connection and awareness of their relation with others, ‘it’s not ‘I’ taking up the space, but it’s them; with your eyes upon one person, it’s that moment of connection’ (Ensemble 2020). This participant is talking about a relational connection, that although they are the one in the middle, the others also take up space as they affect and are affected by each other (Bakhtin 1981, 424; Lucas 2016, 16). ‘I

think “I” in relation to others when standing in the middle making eye contact’ (Ensemble 2020). Here is evidence of agency as an act of ‘recognition and reciprocity’: this student took an action that arose from their relationship with others (Lucas 2016, 50). The ‘I’ is not alone, and stands with and in response to the others ‘as part of a greater whole’ (Lucas 2016, 27).

One participant explicitly recognised their narrative agency in being ‘seen’, specifically recognising their differentiations,

We’re all coming from very different experiences of being seen in our daily life.

And how we’re seen. And on what terms we’re seen. So then to come in and say

‘I’ would be the integration of all of that. We’re all coming in with ‘I’, and ‘I’ is

not, you know, objective, and ‘I’ is not universal (Ensemble 2020).

This participant acknowledges that each ensemble member’s ‘I’ is fundamentally different

because their lived experiences are different. It is their lived experience of relation to their communities in their ‘daily life’ that informs their ‘I’, as well as their physical expressions of it (Ensemble 2020). Understood this way, sharing the ‘I’ is a practical enactment of narrative agency within the context of community creation, via the celebration of difference (hooks 2003, 197; Lorde 2017; Lucas 2016, 3). To simply stand, see, and be seen by others in ‘plurality’ and informed by our lived experiences, can be an assertion of the relational ‘I’ (Lucas 2016, 27). Additionally, the release from the need to applause and be applauded in ‘being seen’ perpetuated agency in their determination of how they wanted to be recognised, and added depth to it; the moments of recognition were not broken with sound, but by their own initiative to leave the circle.

*Dissent and self-differentiation*

One student, who I will call Participant B, opted not to enact ‘I’, though they stayed engaged and in the circle, connecting with the other participants. Participant B explained their reasons for opting out, ‘…I have a tendency to support more than take space, which is just

something, I really…try to…struggle with it, like taking space, I like holding rather than

taking’ (Participant B, 2020). Here Participant B is enacting ‘No, although’ towards their narrative agency; they dissent to the exercise and express reflective information that supports their differentiated ‘I’. This is an assertion of a self that prefers to support, rather than take up space (Lucas 2016, 24). This self-differentiation as support became a throughline of their participation, which was honoured by the group and beneficial to their working processes, as I later describe.

One student responded with the suggestion that the group release the circle and spread throughout the room, ‘would you feel better if we were like, all in different spaces?’ Participant B declined, to which I reiterated that it is ‘all their choice’. I did this against my usual inclination, which would be to respond in the way the other participant did and suggest an alternative for Participant B. I understand inclusive practice to mean that ‘all are at the table[[16]](#footnote-16)’, and at times had conceptualised participation to mean that we are all at the table, and doing the same thing in a similar way. An equitable understanding of active participation understands that it looks different on different people, an ‘acceptance of alterity’ that is celebrated in intersectional practice (Peeren 2008, 14; hooks 2003, 197). This demands a perspective of agential equity rather than equality; the ways in which students engage may look different given their wants and needs, though all are thusly engaged.

*Engaged self-differentiation, a symphony in three movements*

A participant I will call Participant C stayed near the corner in the back while the others lined up for the Gauntlet. Participant C is autistic and was concerned, ‘is this an exercise with eye contact?’(2020). I informed them of exactly what to expect from this exercise, including the acknowledgment clauses and invitation for eye contact. We discussed that eye contact and participation in the given way is not required, and collaborated on options for their participation. Participant C chose not to sit in the exercise, but to sit and ‘listen’ to the exercise, about ten feet away from the set-up of chairs. This is another example of the engagement of self-differentiation and determination of ‘no, although’; a participation that looked different depending on their needs and skills. Like Participant B, they used their ‘No’ to dissent to an exercise that was difficult for them, and their self-reflective ‘although’ to design a participation for themselves that engaged a strength of theirs: listening to the ‘rhythm’ of it (Participant C 2020). In this they used narrative agency to differentiate themselves from the group, and make meaning to self-define their participation (Lucas 2016, 12; Somers 1994, 607).

Participant C continually referred to the ‘music’ of the exercise, listening to the flow of words, sounds, and breath coming from those engaged in the adapted Gauntlet. They analysed ‘the rhythm’ of the three clauses, eventually referring to the Gauntlet as a ‘symphony in three movements’; ‘What I see in you that I see in me is…’ was the opening movement, and allegro or ‘moderately fast’ (Participant C 2020). ‘What you may not see in me is…’ was ‘slow and largo, where voices were lowered in expressing the acknowledgments[[17]](#footnote-17), and the rhythm of words flowed into each other and ‘did not pop out’ (Participant C 2020). For Participant C, the third and final acknowledgment clause, ‘What I love about you is…’ was high energy, an ‘allegretto, like a Mozart Opera’ (Participant C 2020). Participant C’s dissent (no) and self-differentiation (although) to the exercise proved to be beneficial to the group. Their observation of the Gauntlet as a ‘symphony in three movements’ provided a framework for the group’s devised piece, which I describe below.

***Rehearsal and Performance; the dissents come to fruition***

After the adapted Gauntlet, I gave the ensemble thirty minutes to devise a ten minute

performance piece, around the theme of ‘metamorphosis[[18]](#footnote-18)’. Each dissenting person became integral within the devising process. Participant A performed, and Participant B continued their self-differentiated role as outside support, leading the group in an exercise of generating physical ‘shapes’ to enact their shared interpretations of metamorphosis. Participant C provided the framework for the piece based on their assessment of the Gauntlet as a ‘symphony in three movements’, as well as introducing a ‘textual musicality’ based on their observations of the rhythm of words within the Gauntlet (Participant C 2020; Blackstone 2021).

With Participant B’s provocations, the general shapes exercise accelerated to new physical discoveries they made as a community, and built to what they recognised as ‘flow’ (Ensemble 2020). Participant C helped shape the framework by leading the rhythm of the piece as a ‘symphony in three parts’ (2020). They did this through physical and verbal provocations with the varied paces of this symphony and lending ‘musicality’ by reading the definition of and synonyms for metamorphosis. Saying ‘yes, and’ to Participants B and C’s differentiated roles; the group slid into devising ‘organically[[19]](#footnote-19)’, easily and without apparent obstruction, as several participants stated (Ensemble 2020).

*Creating the diversity in unity/unity in diversity through difference*

The participants used their differences to create, adapting Participant C’s text in their native languages (Lorde 2017, 14). I heard yo and tu (Spanish for the English concepts of 'I' and

'you'), nosotros (a Spanish word for the English concept of ‘we’), todo (a Spanish word for the English concept of ‘all’), and kāi (a Chinese word for the English concept ‘to open’). Their language differences added vocal texture by reflecting the cultures represented in the room, subverting the dominance of English as the ‘primary’ language. In the context of this piece, the words were imbued with the meaning of ‘together’, and the varying languages used to express this notion were symbolic of difference as part of togetherness; a narrative agency and hooks’s notion of the ‘unity within diversity, diversity in unity’ performed (hooks 2003 109-110; Lucas 2016, 16).

*Further practice*

While this was a one-off workshop culminating in a short, devised piece, there are implications for use of the ‘yes, and’ and ‘no, although’ framework as part of a drama training practice. As consumers of this, students may re-engage their autonomy and agency as active learners through dissent and self- differentiation. In my application of this framework as a pedagogic practice, I have observed an initial and particular hesitance towards dissent in students. Invitations to dissent and self-differentiate may be new for them, especially coming from a teacher, a role that is often positioned as an authority. I find that offering consistent invitations to consent and dissent, and my positive reception to moments of dissent and self-differentiation help students understand that they can make this choice, in the same way that they can choose consent. In the understanding of this choice, students start to take ownership of their training experience.

In one recent instance, a student dissented to my proposed subject for one of the following weeks’ classes, which I readily accepted (Ensemble 2023). This student was interested in communication processes, and chose to research practices for this to create a short lesson plan as a counter proposal. This proposal was accepted by myself and the other members of the cohort, a negotiation consistent with collaborative practice. This student then gave a short class around specific practices for communication which proved beneficial and engaging for the cohort. We now have regular, timed self-led sessions during each class, along with my own pedagogic provocations. This cohort has described these sessions as ‘empowering’, ‘full of joy’ and ‘extremely engaging; we were all there!’ (Ensemble 2023). There is a sense of agency in their reported feeling of empowerment and a sense of motivation to ‘be there’, engaging in the lessons with ‘joy’(Ensemble 2023).

In the workshop, dissent and self-differentiation, or, ‘no, although’ worked in conjunction with ‘yes, and’ to facilitate a narrative agency for participants acting in a community that was intentionally built on similarity and difference (Lucas 2016, 3; hooks 2003, 197). The manifesto, the ‘I’ exercise, and the Gauntlet served to directly target self-differentiation and maintain relational connection in the group. While these were for the express purpose of facilitating multi-representative practice these exercises also fostered narrative agency. This is seen in the assertion of ‘I’ as both a function of the exercises and a practice of dissent and differentiation to them. This embodied narrative agency was beneficial to the group’s rehearsal and performance processes as well as the representation of performers in their chosen function.

This workshop also shows the impact of the ‘yes, and’ and ‘no, although’ framework as one that fosters multi-representation; the students were able to co-create as agents, enabling their own representation and that of others. Through this framework, both the workshop students and those in training engaged a self-driven learning in making sense of their chosen as well as rejected functions; a more informed consent/dissent. A ‘yes, and’ and ‘no, although’ framework is one potential way forward, towards the agency our students are seeking, and the multi-representation our academic communities require.

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1. This is variable according to pay structure and industry, I use this as an example of a generalised capitalist pay structure. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Here I reference the necessity to weigh the costs of leaving the programme without a certificate, and the power structures that inhibit change (Brooks and Abrahams 2008, 199). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Defined as, ‘the normalisation of the representation of all identities in performance works made and

experienced; rather than a typically cis-het, able-bodied, white male subject and cis-het, able-bodied,

white female object (hooks 1999, 125; Blackstone 2021, 11). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. I qualify these as they connote a central node to be ‘diverse’ from, and which does the ‘including’ (Kanu 2018; Blackstone 2021). These terms arguably perpetuate the standardization of cis-het, able-bodied white active male. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Here I define women as those assigned female at birth, trans-women, and all those who identify as woman. I also note that overarching feminist concerns have shifted to that of the intersectional. Rather than a strict focus on women’s freedom of choice, intersectional feminism focuses on the liberation of all people marginalised according to cisgender, heteronormative, white, able-bodied, middle-class, European male standards (hooks 2003). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Lucas utilises the term ‘subject’, which is a contested word in feminist practice in its use as one that either perpetuates or dismantles the primacy of active white male (Mulvey 1975; hooks 1999; Butler 1997). I will use this term interchangeably with ‘human’ or ‘human being’ to navigate and clarify this. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Defined as ‘freedom to act at will’ here. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Lorde introduces herself with her social identifications as an act of resistance to structures of white, cis-heteronormative patriarchy (2017, p. v). [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. As in ‘connection’, which is an aim in many actor trainings and performance practices; Maria Knebel emphases the role of ‘connection’ with a partner in the process of Active Analysis, Michael Chekhov describes aims for ‘ensemble feeling’, which he defines as an ‘open hearted contact’, or connection with each other (Knebel 2016, 125; Chamberlain 2013, 84; Blackstone 2021). [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. These are also metaphors of the ensemble as a social structure, described as a ‘community’ by Joseph Chaikin (1991, quoted in Britton 2013) or ‘family’ by director Giorgio Strehler (1996, quoted in Britton 2013), and metaphors of the ensemble in relation to music; a ‘symphony’ by director Peter Brook (1989, quoted in Britton 2013). [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. In *The Contemporary Ensemble: Interviews with Theatre Makers* Duska Radosavljevic expands on the definition of ensemble member as ‘performer’ to include all of those involved in creating performance; stage managers, lighting, set, and costume designers, props keepers, and directors (2013). I note this as an important part of feminist theatre making is collaborative practice that seeks a collapsed hierarchy and embraces all as agents. As my focus is on actors in training, for the purposes of this paper I conceive of the students as the ‘ensemble’ in question. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. This is similar to language used in intimacy coordination practices; a specialty skill set with a rigorous set of concepts and practices for choregraphing intimacy on stage and screen, much in the way that fights and stunts are choreographed. Though the terminology is the same, I use the terms ‘consent’ and ‘dissent’ for the purpose of self-differentiation, community, and agency in actor training rather than for staging intimacy. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. ‘I made a concerted effort to ensure that the ensemble was as multi-represented as possible, in order to explore these practices in a pluralistic group of people with a variety of backgrounds and identities. I reached out to industry contacts with the specific request for Black, Indigenous, Asian, Latinx, and Global Majority participants, and students with varied class, language, and ability backgrounds. I made sure the workshop was financially accessible by offering a remittance. I was careful to word my advert in a way that made it accessible for a wide variety of people, avoiding jargon and academic terminology as much as possible. I was fearful that my being fairly transparent about wanting a multi-representative group of people would be alienating in its potential for positive discrimination, particularly as I present as a white woman, and am a native English speaker. This may have been the case, although I did not receive any complaints, and the group was represented by a multitude of people with a variety of backgrounds and identities’ (Blackstone, 2021). [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. This is a practice I advocate for and use in all ensembles I work with for this purpose. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. When asked how the facilitator can tell when a student is being their ‘authentic self’ in this

exercise, facilitator Barb Hosler said, ‘It’s a difficult thing to define. It’s not about checking boxes…although I

do look at things like: if they have no energy, their voice is flat, shoulders are slumped, don’t make

eye contact, and arms are not up. There are two components that I use to determine if I think someone

has reached 100% of their authentic self: first, the reaction of the others in the room. When someone

hits it, the room erupts, they go crazy. They can just feel it. I can just feel when there’s that shift

inside. And, as I tell the students; when you are at ‘I’ at your 100%, you won’t want to stop doing it!’

(Hosler, 2020). [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. This idiom is additionally problematised to question who is doing the inviting, hence my wording indicating that all are already there. My research seeks a pluralistic response to this question through normalising multi-representative practice, for which the facilitation of agency is necessary. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. This is interesting, as this clause is one of difference and was initially difficult for participants. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. I chose this theme as it is interpretable in multiple ways; from adaptations of Kafka’s work to the high potential for personal resonance around the idea of transformation and change (Blackstone 2021). [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Their use of the term ‘organically’ seems best clarified by feedback that the devising ‘seemed to unfold by itself’ (Ensemble 2020). [↑](#footnote-ref-19)