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De-Centering the West in the Costume Curriculum: Educators Share Their Experience

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Abstract

This paper presents and examines responses to the survey of costume educators/artists in American institutions of higher education conducted by the author in December of 2022. The educators were asked, in a series of individual semi-formal interviews, to talk about their process of shifting their pedagogies away from centering Western aesthetics, ideas, and conceptions of linear time in any costume courses, including design, history, construction, and costume crafts; to attempt to pinpoint specific obstacles to their work; and to offer ideas of how institutions—academic departments and programs, but also, colleges and universities as a whole—may better support these efforts. There were six interviewees from six different institutions, ranging between a small private liberal arts religiously affiliated college and an R-1 state land-grant university. At the time, all respondents served theatre departments, schools, or programs that presented a production season which was a major curricular component of the students' educational experience. Respondents self-identified as having recently changed their teaching with the specific purposes of dismantling Western supremacy in the ideas and content presented in their courses and adapting their instruction and assessment methods with the same goals in mind. Respondents were not selected based on academic rank or whether or not their appointments were faculty or staff.

Though each educator's approach to the work took on characteristics suited to their specific academic and production environment, a pattern emerged in how the work originated, who its main champions were, and what barriers remained despite general statements and verbal commitments made by institutions at large.

Background

Artists and scholars of American Theatre have long attempted to bring awareness of its complicity in institutional racism, sexism, and lack of equitable representation in American culture (Howe, 2017); however, only after national protests against injustice in policing as well as industry standstill due to the COVID-19 pandemic, did the national and regional organizations begin to broadly issue statements of acknowledgment of these issues and support for their champions. Institutions of higher education, and theatre programs therein, also issued statements of various lengths and scopes stating commitments to addressing these problems. Those statements and commitments tended to be of a generalized nature and offered little in the way of actionable goals or ways to achieve them.

Theatre programs in American institutions of higher education, particularly those that offer any curriculum in technical theatre and costumes more specifically are unique among many other academic programs. In them, a large percentage of instruction happens not in classrooms but on stage and in the studios and the shops that produce a fully realized, outside-facing product in the way of the production season. Students are fully immersed in the culture of "learning by doing", and many choose where to attend based not on the institution's or department's academic metrics, but instead on the quantity and quality of opportunities they expect to have to participate in the production process. Such programs focus a lot of attention on industry preparation, and students are evaluated at certain points in their degree progressions on the strengths of their production resume and creative portfolio, which often supersede academic achievement in the form of GPA. The unique challenge with this model is that classroom curricula and production models sometimes come to be at odds with each other, and creating structural changes in both is a particularly difficult undertaking, which requires unilateral commitment from all involved, including the students.

Recent reviews of higher education show that the students entering American colleges, including theatre programs, as a group exhibit different characteristics than in previous decades, which include demographic and economic backgrounds. The term "non-traditional student" lacks a singular definition but applied in its broadest sense, such as students who have to maintain outside employment, students who are entering later in life, students who have caretaking responsibilities, or students attending after military service, it described more than 70% of all college students in 2021 (MacDonald, 2018). The majority of students are

female, and more of them are non-white (*COE - Undergraduate Enrollment*, n.d.). Though theatre programs are still overwhelmingly white (*General Drama & Theater Arts / Data USA*, n.d.) and increasingly female-dominated, students are expecting, and sometimes demanding, that the stories they tell onstage and the work they do in their classrooms do a better job reflecting the entire cultural landscape of America and the world outside it. They are no longer content with accepting the word of “dead old white men” as the final authority on the subject of the human condition.

The shift in modalities of how college education is delivered to students accelerated greatly when, in 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic forced most educational institutions online. This move revealed a host of opportunities for universities to attract students whose generation is a lot more comfortable with learning online than previous ones were. This presents a challenge for the arts, since the online and in-person learning experiences are in no way equivalent. Even though educators in theatre technology came up with some ingenious ways to keep learning going in this distance model, most agree that those methods worked mainly as stop-gap measures (Viker, 2022). For high-level administrators of higher education who want to reduce operating costs of their institutions by streamlining their offerings, programs that don't easily fit into the online paradigm, such as theatre, can become obvious low-hanging fruit. Since it has been shown that Americans do tend to place a fairly high value on the arts in the abstract, but not on the artists who do the work of making art (What We Value, 2021), such decisions, though verbally protested, are seldom or never reversed. Innovative and inclusive pedagogy is one way in which academic theatre departments can become visibly and obviously indispensable to the learning communities where they are housed.

Costume educators collaborate with students in a number of unique ways. Aside from serving as classroom instructors, they supervise and mentor students in developing technical skills related to working with fabrics and other garment and accessory-making materials and tools. They also collaborate and guide student performers during the processes of fittings, rehearsal, and performance, all potentially high-stress environments. Issues of personal traumas and challenges tend to surface for students because clothing is a manifestation of identity (Duffly, 2016). Costume professionals must be keenly aware not only of possible triggering issues or themes in any given performance script, but also of how those may manifest for each performer individually, and especially for those who live and work in bodies that have historically been marginalized, exoticized, or misrepresented.

Seeking to better understand the process by which American educational theatre can become more diverse, inclusive, and responsive to the needs of current and future generations of students, I interviewed six educators who work within the discipline of theatrical costumes in theatre programs of American institutions of higher education about their experiences up to

the end of Fall 2022. Though this survey is qualitative, and findings are not generalizable, the respondents' reported experiences provide important insights into the issues of adapting curricula, inter- and intra-departmental relationships, and the ongoing work of addressing structural inequalities within both theatre and higher education.

Research Questions

This survey was designed to capture the experiences of educators of costume-related disciplines in American institutions of higher education who self-identified as having changed their curricula and teaching methods in response to the issues outlined above. It was meant to bring attention to the work necessary to move the American theatre toward a more diverse, equitable, and inclusive future through disciplinary education in theatrical costume. The research questions were:

1. Is the work of transforming pedagogy driven by institutions, academic departments, theatre programs, or the educators themselves?
2. Do changes in curricula primarily concern course content, instruction and assessment methods, or both?
3. What does the commitment of time, as well as personal and institutional resources, look like for educators hoping to begin or continue this work?
4. What are the most obvious challenges and obstacles that educators are faced with when transforming their pedagogy? How can institutions better support this work?

Review of Relevant Literature

Research into instruction methods of costume-related disciplines in college theatre programs in America tends to focus on preparing students for successful entry into the theatre industry. Therefore, it primarily relates to practicing skills such as design, rendering, collaboration, and representation of historical dress. In turn, the subject of dress and fashion history is examined through the lens of material culture history, art history, or anthropology, with research methods aligning with those respective disciplines. The particular approach to teaching history of dress within theatre programs of American institutions of higher education remains largely unexamined. It therefore becomes challenging to glean much about any theoretical framework of the "traditional costume curriculum", other than lists of course titles included in student major catalogs, which vary considerably in how institutions choose to name them even if they are meant to deliver similar content and experiences.

Curricular development is further obscured by factors attributable to the positioning of the costume curriculum as relatively inferior to other disciplines within theatre programs, such as performance, theoretical studies, or scenic design and technology. One can observe this inferior positioning in the fact that, compared to history, theory, performance, or scenic

disciplines, costume educators are less likely to be tenured or receive support for research, thereby leaving inquiries into their practice under-developed (*ATCA2023 Participants*, n.d.). Nevertheless, there is scholarship that explores some of the same problems in education that were chosen for consideration in this survey. This literature review attempts to summarize a few of them in order to position the project within the body of educational research.

Theatrical costume educators in American college theatre programs who chose to adapt their instruction in order to de-center Western perspectives and make way for educating a new generation of theatre artists for a future that is more equitable, global, and anti-colonial and anti-racist are innovators in every sense of the word. The way they approach their work can be analyzed as attacking the problem from three different angles: the lens of diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI); the application of advancements in educational research; and the training and dissemination of practical skills required of graduates entering the industry.

The work of DEI concerns the content of courses that discuss the history of dress, theatre history, visual storytelling conventions and styles, and broader movements within the performing arts, both historical and contemporary. In choosing to highlight histories and works of non-Western and marginalized artists and communities, costume educators directly challenge the paradigm that the West (with the added implication of affluent, white, male, democratic) invented things such as fashion, theatre, dramatic literature, etc., and therefore anything outside what has been traditionally defined as Western deserves nothing more than a cursory mention, if any. In adapting course design models to incorporate flipped learning, scaffolding, experiential learning, and discussion-based assessment, costume educators apply findings in educational research that help students engage with the material and develop connections and proficiency in demanding and challenging topics. Finally, since the overall learning goals for the theatre programs of the educators surveyed are broadly geared toward developing professional theatre makers ready to enter the entertainment industry, they remain engaged in the demands of said industry to train students to be proficient in using the mix of traditional and new technologies that technical theatre relies upon.

In seeking literature that sheds light on the research questions of this project, I focused primarily on the first two angles (DEI work and innovative teaching methods), because practical skill training was not the primary focus of the research questions. Nevertheless, I mention it here because it is ultimately inextricable from technical theatre curriculum and served as a kind of anchor for all the other work that the educators have done.

In the book *Europe and the people without history*, Wolf (1982) speaks to the false narrative of Western dominance that was prevalent in the history classrooms where all major innovations and inventions of humankind were seen through the lens of European genius, with

everything outside of Europe mentioned cursorily, if at all, and often misattributed entirely. Jasper and Roach-Higgins (1987) bring this point to the realm of teaching of fashion history. They examine the origins of teaching the history of clothing as part of home economics programs, existing for a specific purpose in a highly gendered, racially segregated, and class-stratified society. The authors point out that part of this origin included strong theoretical foundation in since disproven and harmful theories of social evolution, and that, however implicitly, the biases of those theories were still observable in the way the history of Western fashion was taught at the time of their writing. In their book *Fashion history: A global view*, Welters and Lillethun (2017) question assumptions that fashion as a social practice is a solely Western endeavor and provide evidence to the contrary. Costume educators interviewed are part of the movement toward a global and inclusive pedagogy, in the fashion history classroom and beyond.

Transforming their curriculum and pedagogy in order to de-center Western perspectives in higher education can be thought of as teaching diversity (Gordon et al., 2023). According to Gordon et al., undergraduate faculty see many benefits in teaching diversity; however, there is no clear definition of what exactly it means or looks like in any given classroom. Consistent with responses to the current survey, a lack of institutional support, particularly in allocating resources of time and further training was cited as one of the most common challenges to teaching diversity. In Gordon et al.'s research, respondents felt that they were left to navigate sensitive and sometimes difficult topics on their own, occasionally facing resistance or fearing resistance due to lack of coherent strategies and institutional guidance. The need for specificity in setting actionable learning goals and dedicated resources was very present both in Gordon et al (2023) and responses to this survey.

Undergraduate theatre programs today are more diverse than before (*General Drama & Theater Arts / Data USA*, n.d.), and discussions of DEI topics are much more important to the current generation of students. De-centering the Western perspectives in the costume curriculum is one way to engage in culturally responsive teaching, defined by Gay (2010) as "using the cultural knowledge, prior experiences, frames of reference, and performance styles of ethnically diverse students to make learning encounters more salient to them. It teaches to and through the strengths of these students." (p. 31) Giving students of diverse backgrounds a chance to include their knowledge and cultural histories in their educational experiences in the costume classroom can significantly contribute to their sense of belonging while they practice the essential skills needed in their future professional endeavors (Hutchison & McAlister-Shields, 2020). Hutchison and McAlister-Shields noted that though student diversity increased, the same was not the case for faculty. Notably, two respondents to this survey talked specifically about this problem.

The costume curricula in college theatre programs come with the advantage that project-based and experiential learning are built into coursework as inextricable aspects of practicing the art and craft within scenarios that mirror production processes as they occur in professional settings. It is also customary for student work to be included, directly or indirectly, in the production seasons of their respective theatrical programs. Therefore, there is an emphasis on the work being collaborative and community-facing—a crucial part of experiential learning (Li-Grining et al., 2022). This type of learning contributes to the overall goals of transformative social-emotional learning, and has been shown to benefit minoritized students, though researchers acknowledge that when it comes to SEL and adult learners, more research is needed. Thus, incorporating project-based and generative learning into those parts of the costume curriculum that were traditionally presented as knowledge transfer/test model, is transformative along all three main angles (DEI, application of educational research, and skill training).

Costume educators are increasingly aware of the fact that more and more undergraduate students can be identified as non-traditional, meaning that they are older, have more employment and caretaking responsibilities, and did not enter college immediately upon completing secondary education (MacDonald, 2018). De-centering Western perspectives and working toward a more inclusive pedagogy in the costume curriculum helps these students establish their voices in the classroom and engage with the subject matter and topics at hand in a way that is both responsive to their needs and rigorous as appropriate to the learning process.

Research Methods

Participants were recruited through a series of social media posts and personal emails. Individual semi-structured interviews were conducted with respondents who self-identified as educators of costume-related subjects within theatre programs in American institutions of higher education. Participants were asked the following questions:

1. What course have you changed or are you in the process of changing in any way to center non-Western perspectives?
2. Does this change affect primarily course content (what you teach), your methods (delivery or presentation of content, types of assignments), or both?
3. What was, or is, the general time frame for you to make this change? Was/is it dictated primarily by personal or institutional factors?
4. What do you see as the largest obstacles to creating or adapting courses related to theatre, costume, art, and other material/visual histories from global/decolonial perspectives?
5. What changes (if any) would you like to see take place in your departmental or programmatic goals?

There were six participants from six different institutions, ranging in size and scope of theatre programs from small private colleges to R2 and R1 state institutions. Interviews were recorded, transcribed, and de-identified. Transcripts were manually analyzed for common themes.

Explanation of Methods

In the book *On Being Included*, Ahmed (2012) argues in favor of a phenomenological lens through which “diversity work” can be examined in order to draw attention to details that, though hard to notice and not generalizable, are what compose the complex and multi-layered realities of daily work and interactions between students, educators, and institutions. Accordingly, individual semi-structured interviews were selected as the most suitable way to capture the nuance of the wide range of experiences that this kind of work entails.

Respondents were asked to self-identify as educators of costume disciplines in institutions of higher education who have or are in the process of transforming their pedagogy in order to de-center the West in their course content as well as make their classrooms more equitable and accessible, which right away meant that the sample size would be limited. The goal, however, was to talk to educators who teach in a wide range of theatre programs when it comes to size, degree programs offered, foci of courses taught, and whether or not their institutions were designated as having significant research presence. It is worth restating that in American higher education institutions, theatrical design and technology educators in general have a tendency of being under-classified as staff, lecturers, professors of practice, or other non-tenure-track designations.

Educators of costume disciplines are at an added disadvantage, because, according to an industry survey, 83% of costume workers identify as female, and whereas no specific research could be found on the percentage of costume educators being classified as tenure-track compared to other disciplines within departments, the overall discrepancies in earnings between men and women suggest that female-dominated disciplines, such as costumes, are not valued equitably (*USITT WDS Final 0921.pdf*, n.d.). With these structural inequities in mind, respondents were not selected based on academic rank or whether or not their appointments were faculty or staff. Furthermore, neither their total teaching nor industry experience was used as a selection factor.

Survey Responses and Findings

Is the Work of Transforming Pedagogy to De-Center Western Narratives Driven by Institutions, Academic Departments, Theatre Programs, or the Educators Themselves?

All respondents indicated that the main impetus for actively working on changing their teaching to include global and marginalized perspectives originated with themselves. Though they referred to outside influences, such as student demand for more diverse content, and all respondents mentioned institutional acknowledgements of DEI goals, those calls to change remained broad and un-specific, which means that in the respondents' institutions they were easily de-prioritized. It was therefore these respondents themselves who took on the task of fully reviewing, and in many cases completely reworking their instruction in terms of both curriculum and pedagogy. Two respondents talked about specific resources that the institution provided, such as additional funds through a Teaching Center workshop and course release being granted upon request; however, the burden of finding and applying for these resources was still upon each educator individually:

Ex. 1: "It's definitely not institutional. Do you hear what I mean, I think people are like, oh that's nice, But I mean, like, I'm in a small school, there is not a..."

Ex. 2: "...but my motivation for doing those...course rewrites were my own."

Ex. 3: "They will support faculty who say, this is what I wanna do..., but it's not like they're advertising, hey, we'll give you course release to develop this class because this is a goal we have."

It is evident from the experience of these respondents that institutions, regardless of size and resource availability, are reliant on the initiatives of individual educators to address the issues of adapting their teaching in order to meet DEI objectives. Five out of six have not been provided with deadlines, pathways, or financial resources by the institution directly; with the remaining respondent only gaining access to them upon voluntary participation in a pedagogy workshop. Notably, even in those cases where resources were available and granted, they did not come from within the theatre programs. Instead, costume educators had to work directly with their broader institutions. This shows that theatre departments, though many had made sweeping statements in support of DEI post-2020, have not prioritized the work enough to empower educators to make immediate and obvious shifts to how they approach their disciplines in the classrooms and production environments. Based upon the responses to this survey, the work of transforming costume pedagogy to include non-Western and marginalized perspectives is driven by the educators themselves, frequently despite, rather than with the support of, the theatre departments in which they work. This issue will be addressed in more detail below.

Do Changes in Curricula Primarily Concern Course Content, Instruction and Assessment Methods, or Both?

When asked to name the courses they have changed, educators responded as follows. Exact course names were condensed for clarity. Not all respondents taught all of the courses listed; loads and responsibilities varied by each institution and program:

- Costume history: whether taught as Period Styles, which includes a broader view of material culture, or as its own course, five of six respondents reported changing these courses. Of these five respondents, four reported a significant overhaul that involved writing completely new syllabi and course planning.
- Costume design: five of six respondents reported making changes. Of the five, all reported that the changes were mostly driven by script selection for design projects, which then drove the specifics of both research and rendering.
- Costume construction/crafts technique and skill classes: three of six respondents reported making changes. Depending on specific courses the changes were: readings on technique origins, working with indigenous artisans, attention to intentional representation of a variety of skin tones, hair, and body types, and use of specialized tools.

All respondents acknowledged deep connections between course content and instruction methods; however, the degree to which they approached changing each of these aspects of their teaching varied significantly. Of the six respondents, none were exactly alike. If there is a generalization to be made here, it is that educators feel that they are responsible for making sure that their instruction answers the specific needs of their programs, their institutions, and their students. One respondent conjectured that it is possible to change one without the other, whereas the rest felt that changes in course content inevitably affect teaching and assessment methods:

Ex.1: "...then I've found that it's, it's actually for me, a little bit difficult to tear those two away."

Ex.2: "I think that one is going to naturally change the other... By changing your content, you are going to change your teaching style."

Three respondents indicated that in the context of teaching costume history within theatre, the lecture format is outdated and uninspired, and they devote considerable time to designing practical learning activities.

Ex. 1:

...like I will talk about something, then we will put it in practice in terms of an activity as a group. Um, so they have to engage, it means less like I can just check out in the back of the room and do other homework while she's yapping at me.

Two respondents talked about their use of the flipped classroom approach. All expressed a genuine interest in moving their students away from being consumers of knowledge and onto producing their own knowledge, though some also stated that this was a difficult task, and one that requires a lot of support from the students' other academic authority outside of the costume, and indeed, the theatre space.

Four of the five respondents who teach any version of costume history or period styles talked about changing their courses completely. Due to significant shifts in learning objectives, these changes included new content, new assessment methods, new grading policies, as well as new adoption and adaptation of learning technologies. Two respondents addressed the issues of identity of those who hold certain knowledge, and the need to have this knowledge taught by the holders themselves, rather than being represented by instructors.

All respondents also teach, or have taught, courses in what can be broadly categorized as “costume practice”. Those are courses meant to train students in specific skills required for the post-college job market in the field, such as script analysis for production, visual research, rendering, garment-making, and fiber manipulation. Respondents revealed that de-centering Western perspectives in the costume practice courses was an easier task, since the change in the learning objectives wasn’t as radical. At heart, these courses remained focused on honing specific skills listed above. However, because much of the curriculum in those courses is based on dramatic texts, simply by choosing plays by non-Western authors and those representing minoritized and marginalized communities, educators engaged learners with topics and perspectives outside of the established canon:

Ex. 1:

The costume design classes, it was really just more of a, it's been more of a changing or, or choosing different scripts. Honestly, the scripts drive that class for me. So it changes how we research it. Changes what we research. It changes oftentimes the point of the project, but it... once you change the scripts that directs everything else.

Ex.2: “The conversations have really changed, and they've moved away from a textbook.”

I argue that this represents a shift in neither the content nor the pedagogy: content is still centered on practiced skills, while pedagogy is rooted in experiential and project-based instruction. What changed, however, was the context, and this change was described as both intuitive and profound. This is an unexpected but welcome development in this research, and it will be addressed in the Discussion and Implications section.

What Does the Commitment of Time, As Well As Personal and Institutional Resources, Look Like for Educators Hoping to Begin or Continue This Work?

All respondents acknowledged that the commitment of time is potentially significant. As one respondent put it, “our own education was not global. We're having to play catch up as well, in order to deliver that material adequately to our students.” This commitment was quantified by respondents thus:

- Three of six respondents reported that the significant overhaul of their curricula took around two years.

- One respondent stated that completely re-envisioning their course took about a year from conception to implementation, including a semester-long, institutionally organized workshop.
- One respondent reported that the full overhaul of their course was made possible by the pandemic-related break from production work and therefore took a little over one semester.
- One respondent participated in a summer syllabus-creation intensive workshop, which also involved course content acquisition and assignment preparation. Their estimated timeframe was around 80 hours total for the costume history course and 20 hours for the costume design course due to the possibility of using certain materials in both classes.

Not surprisingly, instructors communicated that the courses that required a shift in learning objectives also required more time, as changes affected both curriculum and pedagogy (see above). Script and skill-based courses were easier to adapt, because, as one respondent explicitly stated, they could refer to the research they have already done for history-based courses, as well as lean on script and project selection. Nevertheless, the undertaking is significant, and, in those cases where instructors don't receive, or are not eligible to receive course release or other institutionally and departmentally approved leave, it becomes extremely hard to navigate on top of already overwhelming loads:

Ex.1:

...listening, and people talking about the reframing and then going, 'Here's some books to read!' And me getting books, and reading books, and going, 'Oh! Yeah, why aren't we talking about all of this, why aren't we talking about these parts of all of it? Why do we start here?'

This obscures true time requirements and makes the commitment hard to quantify with precision.

Institutional, programmatic, and disciplinary resources are even harder to quantify. Two respondents directly addressed the lack of appropriate textbooks that are broad enough in scope, rigorous and current in research, yet affordable to students. Books on global dress that are available tend to be geared toward education in either fashion or history and anthropology; the problem with the former is its approach to history as a tool for the contemporary apparel industry, the problem with the latter is academic language unfamiliar and unnecessary to the theatre student and lack of sufficient illustrations. Both skew toward rare, out of print, and not affordable. Therefore, instructors spend a lot of time and financial resources reviewing and selecting learning materials, not all of which are adequately compensated.

What Are the Most Obvious Challenges and Obstacles That Educators Are Faced With When Transforming Their Pedagogy? How Can Institutions Better Support this Work?

Respondents were asked the first question directly, and their responses are summarized as follows:

- Four of six respondents noted resistance or indifference from other faculty.
- Four of six respondents noted lack of comprehensive resources, such as textbooks, or dedicated budgetary commitment.
- Three of six respondents identified the production canon and perceived industry standard as continuing to be at odds with the goals of inclusive pedagogy.
- Three of six respondents reported student resistance to experiential and project-based learning, though one respondent acknowledged this as anecdotal rather than personal experience.

All respondents identified time and workload challenges: since the changes are self-motivated, institutional support such as course release, even if available, is not readily advertised and is up to individual educators to navigate.

When costume educators shift pedagogy to be more inclusive and with explicit goals to de-center Western perspectives, it is often done in a program where the production season is still adhering to a Western canon, for a variety of reasons, most of which are outside of the educators' immediate control. For students and other faculty, this often creates a dissonance: Ex.1: "We are teaching to what we are producing, rather than we're teaching to what the students could produce."

This shows that the largest obstacle to change can be summarized as the overall culture of American Theatre. In theatre departments and programs, this culture is still reflected in perceived and actual industry standards, perceived and actual student expectations, and perceived and actual audience demands. The distinction between perceived and actual deserves to be made, because the former has just as much power over the culture of any given department as the latter and is often perpetuated by people who hold positions of greater authority within an institution.

A big part of curricular challenge is the dominant position that the production season occupies within the American collegiate theatre education system. This dominant position is inadequately represented by academic transcripts. Participation in the production season is mandatory for an overwhelming majority of American theatre majors and minors, though exact details vary greatly by degree and program. A theatre student who is cast in a production spends anywhere from 20 to 40 hours (on average) per show each week, yet this experience is rarely represented as anything more than three credit hours on academic transcripts, with one credit hour being the most common. It is not uncommon for theatre students to devote much more of their time and effort to productions, which, from an administrative point of view,

sometimes appear nearly extra-curricular, than classroom learning or course assignments—an academic experience which is vastly different from that of students of most other majors.

Further complicating matters are consideration of audiences and how the production season is financed: one respondent reported working in a program whose entire season is financed strictly by ticket sales. From an administrative perspective, such arrangements exist because they reflect a small percentage of the students' overall transcript credit hours. In the students' experience, however, the production season is a culmination of their learning goals and achievements, their creative laboratory, and often, the reason they choose one theatre program over another.

Costume educators are disempowered when it comes to season selection: they are more likely to be non-tenured and are not always included on committees. This position of precarity as a characteristic of feminization of their labor (Zheng, 2018) means that their work in the classroom is still struggling to find enough support in the production season for students to fully gain the necessary experience within the practicum environment of fully mounted works on the stage. Respondents referred to a number of allies within their departments, but none reported that any significant majority of other theatre faculty were prioritizing de-centering Western perspectives in their classes and productions to the extent that would be required for ushering in a departmental culture of the theatre where diversity, equity, and inclusive pedagogy would take hold.

Respondents pointed to institutional and departmental goals as an important place to unite faculty, staff, adjunct instructors, and guest artists around commitments to better pedagogy and DEI goals. From their perspective, being able to refer to those specific learning goals and objectives would give them a way to justify requesting resources to facilitate their work, as well as provide them with talking points when arguing in defense of the work with doubters such as administrators, students, and other instructors.

Ex.1:

...then it becomes like something you budget for them too, right? ...that's when I'm on a board and we always say... our budget is a moral document, so we prioritize... if you want diversity, you have to budget for diversity, right?

Discussion and Implications

De-centering the previously dominant narrative in any classroom can feel subversive and carries with it a complicated set of emotions. Educators surveyed came to this work from the feeling of needing to correct a long line of systemic injustices, in which they found themselves inadvertently complicit. Straddling the worlds of academia and industry, these instructors ultimately chose to question the basic frameworks of their training and

professional experience and realized that their students needed both theoretical orienting and practical skills to prepare them for creating art and working in and for an increasingly global and justice-minded society.

This survey shows that, in the absence of a unified curriculum, theatre educators have few pathways to action when they feel that the curriculum needs updating. The overall frustration, stemming from a combined feeling of responsibility and disempowerment (Miller & Struve, 2020), is the feeling that each educator is left to “reinvent the wheel” on their own. Faced with uncertainty about the future in face of drastic cuts of programs in higher education across the arts and humanities sector, they are looking for ways to improve what they can as they are able, on their own initiatives and with varying levels of support. When examined through the lens of DEI efforts, in order to support these educators’ initiatives and carry them across other disciplines within college theatre programs, institutions need to articulate concrete goals, and those goals have to include, if not a metric, then at least a sense of what meeting them would look like. They need to include specific language relating to season selection and training in cultural competency, anti-racism, and inclusivity. Creating costume curricula that are inclusive of global and marginalized perspectives can then take place within a culture that demonstrates its commitment to grow representation and give voice to previously disregarded communities in ways that members of such communities have proposed on forums such as WSYWAT (*Statement—We See You W.A.T.*, 2020).

Some of the most immediate changes in classroom experiences regarding de-centering Western-dominant narratives came when the educators reported changing neither the content nor the methodology of their instruction, but rather, the context in which both of them have occurred. In classes that combine discussion with practical skill training, such as costume design or construction classes, by changing the stories that were being used to train students both in theoretical and practical applications, educators created contexts that allowed for deep re-examination of cultural and artistic ideas. Since training students in theatre is achieved by immersing them in a literary tradition, re-examining this tradition from an anti-racist and anti-colonial perspective in practice-based courses takes on a central role. For educators of costume disciplines, this can—and does—begin with choosing specific texts on which to base instruction.

Further Inquiry

A number of educators of costume disciplines in American college theatre programs are beginning or continuing to work on de-centering Western narratives in their classrooms. Their experiences vary significantly, due largely to the fact that the programs and institutions where they work also vary significantly in how this work is approached, valued, or ignored. The very position that costume educators occupy within institutional hierarchies is largely an

experience of precarity (Zheng, 2018) where no two places seem to be alike, which carries with it additional complications in the form of underrepresentation, resource scarcity, and job insecurity. Costume workers in the theatre and broader entertainment industry are subject to widespread discrimination because their contributions are perceived as feminized labor, which carries over into academic spaces due to the role that industry credentials play in the hiring processes. More accounts of their experiences, from a broader swath of institutions, are needed to better understand potential effective approaches to de-centering the West in the costume curricula of American college theatre programs. A further focus on this work as DEI work may be helpful in order to understand the challenges and barriers to its development and implementation. A separate project is needed to better understand student resistance to change in the content, pedagogy, and context of their classes.

The impact of changing context in which both curriculum and pedagogy remain generally scaffolded along familiar lines is worth investigating. From a theoretical standpoint, it is urgent to examine whether it is possible to truly de-center the West within the parameters of a program that exists in a Western institution and whose goals are to prepare students for an industry aimed broadly to shape and be shaped by a culture where the grand narrative of the West as pinnacle of intellectualism and creativity is firmly in place. If it is possible, what might this new framework entail?

Within the landscape of immense changes faced by both higher education and the entertainment industry in America, experiences of individual educators of extremely specialized disciplines provide important insights. Through their repeated interactions with students' work, aspirations, and identities, these educators are keenly aware of both student needs and industry demands. Their commitment to continue to improve every aspect of teaching and learning is stalwart, and their knowledge of putting their plans into action can be informative across the disciplinary spectra.

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About the Author

Anastasia Y. Goodwin is an interdisciplinary education scholar whose work is informed by experiences across cultures, institutions, languages, and creative modes. As costume designer, artisan, facilitator, and fabricator, she worked professionally in theatrical and film costuming for nearly sixteen years. She designed, painted, dressed performers, and stitched in the Pacific Northwest, Midwest, New York, Santa Fe, and Russia; and she taught costume history, design, and construction as a full-time university educator for six years. Recently, Anastasia was one of the recipients of the USITT Herbert D. Greggs Honor Award for outstanding publication for her article “The costume history classroom as laboratory” (*Theatre Design & Technology*, Fall 2022). A native of the former Soviet Union, Anastasia immigrated to the United States in the early 2000s. She holds an MFA in Costume Design from the University of Washington. Currently, Anastasia is pursuing doctoral studies in Teaching and Learning at Vanderbilt University.

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