

MATTHEW SHAFFER

RESEARCH STATEMENT

My research journey is guided by a central question: How can explorations of identity, loss, and personal experience deepen our understanding of how communities navigate grief, trauma, and belonging through artistic practice? As an interdisciplinary artist with a focus on storytelling, I use theater, film, dance, literature, and visual arts to examine the intersections of art, identity, family trauma, and grief. My creative process is systematic, beginning with observation, identifying key themes and details, asking questions to uncover patterns, and discovering the connections that shape the narrative foundation of my work.

Before pursuing my MFA, I was actively developing interdisciplinary work rooted in identity, performance, and social inquiry. This included collaborating with colleague Anthony M. Sannazzaro on *Identity: The POV Project*, an exploration of gender and casting that centered female-identifying artists performing nontraditional roles from the works of William Shakespeare. Using an ethnographic approach, we interviewed collaborators and documented both their creative processes and performances to examine perception, visibility, and representation. I also partnered with Columbia University scholar, fine artist, and combat veteran Paul Kaiser to investigate systemic and structural racism through spoken word and movement in the short film *Casual Vignettes of Gilded Vulgarly*. These collaborations expanded opportunities to work with organizations like The Trevor Project, reinforcing my dedication to exploring the complexities of identity, particularly within queer and underrepresented communities, while addressing socioeconomic disparities.

The devastating loss of my sister, Shiree, to Covid-19 during my graduate studies profoundly shifted the direction of my inquiry. While my earlier work centered on identity within the context of underrepresented roles, the grief surrounding Shiree's passing led me to examine how communities navigate loss and how grief reshapes personal identity. Seeking to understand how our relationship informs my artistic practice, I created the thesis project *Nostalgia Radio Hour Presents: Growing Pangs*. Beginning with an ethnographic process, I found myself alone in a dance studio in front of a camera, exploring themes and responding to songs from our shared past. This movement-based investigation evolved into an intricate process of writing, reflection, movement, and dialogue, helping me confront unresolved conflicts and lingering questions.

As I directed the one-act play in collaboration with a trusted cast, the full impact of the work unfolded. Witnessing the embodiment of my sister's character on stage provided a new perspective, allowing me to glimpse myself through her eyes. This became a pivotal moment in understanding the depth of my artistic exploration and the importance of examining identity and trauma through multiple lenses. My interdisciplinary MFA background serves as the foundation for my creative practice, blending elements of theater, film, dance, literature, and visual arts. This

multidisciplinary framework enriches my exploration of identity, enabling me to engage with diverse perspectives and methodologies.

Currently, I am expanding this exploration through a collaboration with poet Daniel Garcia, an artist living with cerebral palsy, adapting the play *Aktion T4!* into the novel *Aschoff's Fatherland*. Building from the original narrative, the project investigates the historical impact of Nazi Germany's Aktion T4 program while examining contemporary questions surrounding identity, disability, propaganda, and systemic oppression. My process for this work combines historical inquiry, ethnographic analysis, archival research, and interdisciplinary storytelling practices. This includes examining primary and secondary historical sources related to 1930s Germany, disability persecution, public health policy, and state propaganda, while also incorporating movement-based and narrative approaches to explore the emotional and psychological realities embedded within the material. Much like my movement-driven inquiry, my writing process involves identifying patterns, contradictions, and human behaviors that reveal how individuals and communities navigate fear, grief, survival, and identity within oppressive systems. Drawing on experiences from my earlier publications, *So You Want To Be A Dancer* and *Dancing Out of the Closet*, I continue to investigate how somatic practice, narrative, and artistic collaboration can foster dialogue, reflection, and community engagement.