

# MATTHEW SHAFFER

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## RESEARCH STATEMENT

My research journey is driven by a central question: How can my exploration of personal identity and the experience of losing my sister inform a broader understanding of how communities navigate identity and grief through artistic practice? As an interdisciplinary artist with a focus on storytelling, I use theater, film, dance, literature, and visual arts to explore the intersections of art, identity, family trauma, and grief. My creative process is systematic, beginning with observation, identifying key facts and themes, asking questions to uncover patterns, and finding the connections that create the narrative foundation of my work.

Before pursuing my MFA, I collaborated with colleague Anthony M. Sannazzaro on a project examining gender in casting, working with a group of female-identifying artists. Using an ethnographic approach, we interviewed collaborators and documented their performances in nontraditional roles from the works of William Shakespeare. 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 Vulgarity*. These projects expanded my opportunities to partner with organizations like The Trevor Project, solidifying my dedication to exploring the complexities of identity, particularly in queer and underrepresented roles, while addressing socioeconomic disparities.

The devastating loss of my sister, Shiree, to Covid-19 during my graduate journey profoundly shifted the focus of my research. While my earlier work centered on examining identity within the context of underrepresented roles, the grief from losing Shiree led me to explore how people in society manage grief and how it impacts their identity. Seeking to understand how our relationship informs my art, I crafted the thesis project *Nostalgia Radio Hour Presents: Growing Pangs*. Starting with an ethnographic process, I found myself alone in a dance studio in front of a camera, exploring themes and reacting to songs from our shared past. This movement-based research led to an intricate process of writing, reflection, movement, and dialogue, helping me navigate unresolved conflicts and questions.

As I directed the one-act play, collaborating with a trusted cast, the full impact of my research unfolded. Witnessing the embodiment of my sister's character on stage provided a new perspective, allowing me to glimpse myself through her eyes. This marked 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 work, blending elements of theater, film, dance, literature, and visual arts. This multidisciplinary approach enriches my exploration of identity, allowing me to engage with diverse perspectives and methodologies.

Currently, I am building on this exploration through a collection of poetry and conversations that question how we navigate grief and move forward after significant loss. My writing process, much like my movement-driven research, involves posing questions and responding by first noticing commonalities and patterns. Drawing on the experiences from my earlier publications, *So You Want To Be A Dancer* and *Dancing Out of the Closet*, where I investigated identity and the intersection of personal and professional experiences, I continue to explore how art can serve as a response to personal conflict. The research gleaned from these books, particularly in understanding the role of somatic practices and narrative in processing identity and conflict, informs my current work. This collection will culminate in a narrative self-help book that integrates poetry and somatic practices discovered during my journey, with the intention of building community-based guided somatic writing and movement workshops.