

MATTHEW SHAFFER

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RESEARCH STATEMENT

My research journey is fueled by a central question: How do personal identity and lived experiences, particularly my relationship with my late sister, inform and shape my artistic practice? Rooted in an interdisciplinary approach, I draw from various disciplines to explore the intersections of art, identity, family trauma, and grief. As an artist, my curiosity propels me to delve into the complexities of storytelling while fostering equitable exchanges within society.

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.

The catalyst for my research occurred organically in my childhood, marked by a fascination with a toy robot named Casey. Disassembling Casey ignited my lifelong commitment to observation as a point of entry into my projects. From large-scale musicals to collaborations with organizations like *The Trevor Project*, I employ a systematic approach. Identifying key facts, themes, and questions, I uncover patterns and connections that become the narrative foundation of my work.

The devastating loss of my sister, Shiree, to Covid-19 during my graduate journey shifted the focus of my research. Seeking to understand how my relationship with her informs my artmaking, I crafted the thesis project *Nostalgia Radio Hour Presents: Growing Pangs*. Through an intricate process of reflection, movement, and dialogue, I navigated unresolved conflicts and discovered the profound impact of personal experiences on artistic expression.

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 realization marked a pivotal moment in understanding the depth of my artistic exploration.

Expanding upon my previous practice-led research, which delved into gender in casting alongside colleague Anthony M. Sannazzaro, and investigated systemic and structural racism in collaboration with scholar, visual artist, and filmmaker Paul Kaiser, my dedication to delving deeper into the complexities of identity and socioeconomic disparities remains resolute.

Currently, I am working on a collection of poetry and conversations, delving into the themes of grief and moving forward after the loss of a sibling. These dialogues will accompany my research, culminating in a narrative self-help book that incorporates somatic practices discovered during my journey.

In future research endeavors, I am motivated to engage with communities at both micro and macro levels. Collaborating with artists and educators, I aim to facilitate conversations on queer identity, family trauma, and grief. Through diverse mediums such as movement, art, writing, theater, filmmaking, music, and yoga, I seek to explore healing and foster understanding.

Curiosity remains my driving force, and I believe that research should tell its own story. Utilizing patterns, motifs, repetition, movement, dialogue, music, media, and art, I continue to examine and develop stories that illuminate the connections, identity, and shared experiences that unite us in life.