



CAWRI

Creativity and Wellbeing Hallmark Research Initiative

The Othello Theatre in Education Project - Fostering creativity and wellbeing in the face of high levels of violence against women.

Final report

20 December 2022

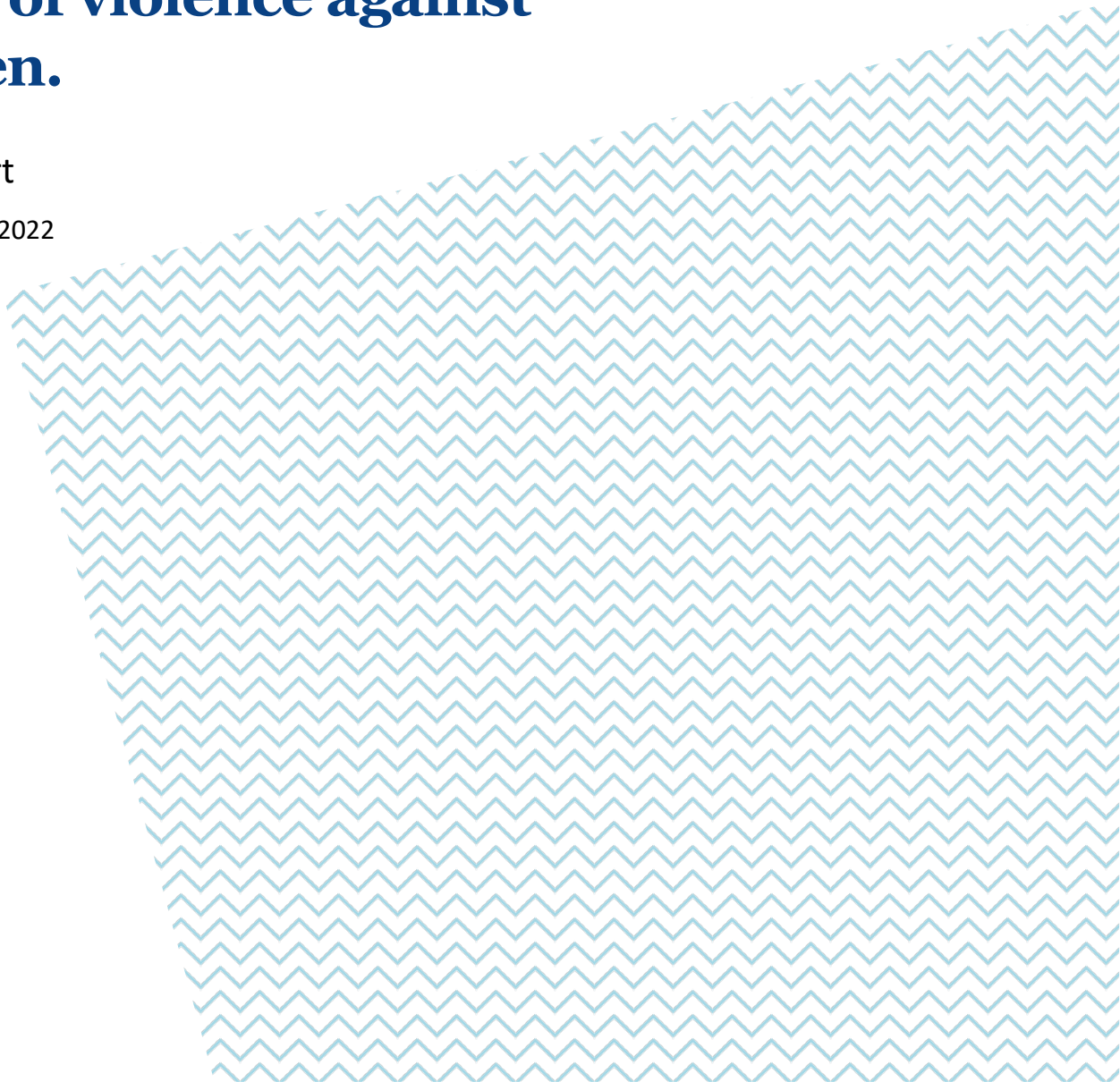


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Project summary

The first premise of wellbeing is being and staying alive. Without life, wellbeing is obsolete. This youth theatre in education project targets what has been called, in the wake of the most recent Australian family killings, ‘the most pressing issue of terrorism our society faces – where at least one woman is murdered each week’ (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2019).

Seeking to promote healthy relationships for young people, especially young women, the project creatively challenges the gendered relations that underpin these homicides. It also aimed to equip early career educators with a strategy for engaging in issues of gender related violence.

During the pandemic lockdown in Melbourne, this project explored how theatre and creativity at home can help improve healthy relationships and wellbeing, especially during a global health crisis that optimised conditions for intimate partner violence. The project staged a play on Zoom and in a drama studio at the University of Melbourne, focusing on how creativity can enhance young women's sense of safety and wellbeing *and* prompt conversations in educational settings about gender related violence in contemporary Australia. The aim was to understand the relationship between creativity and wellbeing and how it can be used to promote positive change.



Through what was learnt from these activities we devised new inter- and transdisciplinary approaches to the design of a performance-based educational research that provides opportunities for nurturing and optimising emotional wellbeing through creative practice.

Image1: Othello on Trial opening scene (Still shot from recording), December 6, 2023.

Key Questions:

- What emerging research practices in creativity and wellbeing can support a pedagogical shift to enable early career educators to cultivate critical gender and race literacies in the classroom?
- How can early career educators use practice-led projects to support meaning-making across disciplines?
- How does the performative nature of a theatre-led STEAM arts integration allow young people to trouble ethical societal issues such as those related to gender and race? And with what effect?

This CAWRI funded project ran from March 2021 - December 2022. The project received further funding from The Victorian Women's Trust in 2021 to extend it until December 2022. 'Othello in Trail' continues to develop at the Melbourne Graduate School of Education in 2023.

Research team

- Kathryn Coleman Melbourne Graduate School of Education, University of Melbourne
Academic, activist and educator interested in the intersection of art, digital spaces, practice, and culture and data.
- Adrian Howe Faculty of Arts, University of Melbourne
Academic, writer, campaigner against violence against women. Designer of Othello on Trial Theatre in Education project.
- Sarah Healy Melbourne Graduate School of Education, University of Melbourne
Melbourne Postdoctoral Fellow working with social listening tools and sentiment analysis to chart shifts in the affective dispositions toward children's engagement with digital technologies.
- Ana Ward-Davies Melbourne Graduate School of Education, University of Melbourne
Ceramicist, practitioner-researcher and teacher who is interested in the liminal spaces between art and science.
- Scott Welsh College of Arts & Education, Victoria University, VIC
Academic, actor and theatre-based researcher utilising creative writing and theatre-making practice.
- Richard Sallis Melbourne Graduate School of Education, University of Melbourne
Academic playwright, theatre director exploring ethnodrama, drama/theatre education, diversity and inclusion in education.

Partners

Cherian Jacob, Cicero's Circle Theatre Company

Cicero's Circle was founded by Cherian Jacob Payyapali and a group of professional and aspiring theatre practitioners with the sole purpose of producing cultural pieces that would:

- Provide a platform for Australian multicultural artists, both on and off stage and to give Australian audience and visitors the opportunity to experience culturally rich theatre.
- Build relationships and synergy between artists from different fields (design, dance, music, choreography, lighting, sound) to facilitate free exchange of knowledge and skills.
- Integrate environmental sustainability as an underlying philosophy for production creation.
- Promote and acknowledge that inclusion and cultural diversity as a philosophy leads to creation of works that are of richer artistry and socially relevant.
- Build cultural leadership through presenting new perspectives on Australian and International works.

Acknowledgements

Othello on Trial is a SWISP (Speculative Wanderings in Space and Place) signature project. SWISP is led by Kathryn Coleman and Sarah Healy; interdisciplinary practitioners working in the fields of speculative a/r/tography, digital creativities, digital childhoods, digital methods, digital education, and digital scholarships in the humanities, arts and social sciences. SWISP seeks to speculate as activist a/r/tographers about reparative futures in the midst of climate collapse.

SWISP acknowledge the Traditional Owners of the stolen land on which we practice, research, teach and learn. We offer respect to all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Elders, past and present. In the spirit of reconciliation, we acknowledge the Traditional Custodians of Country throughout Australia and their continuing connections to land, sea, sky and community.

This project was funded by the Creativity and Wellbeing Hallmark Research Initiative of the University of Melbourne and the Victorian Women's Trust.

Background

Research context

This research design adopts an inter- and transdisciplinary approach, combining STEAM practices with Respectful Relationships and critical race and gender literacy to explore ethical societal issues. The Respectful Relationships program, which promotes positive attitudes and behaviors related to respect and equality, provides a strong framework for this research. Additionally, the work of artist-in-residence Dr. Adrian Howe, who has used iterations of *Othello on Trial* to dramatise cultural bias around race and gender-based discrimination, is drawn upon to explore effective early interventions for critical literacy development.

Through creative and affective metho-pedagogies, this research seeks to trouble societal issues relevant to current curricula in the classroom. By using theatre as a STEAM arts intervention, students can engage with the performative nature of storytelling and playmaking, making dialogue accessible and empathetic while maintaining separation from reality. This approach allows for the cultivation of critical literacies pertaining to race and gender, and early career teachers can use the principles of transformative theatre to facilitate these discussions in the classroom.

The significance of this research lies in its ability to provide a relevant and accessible approach to cultivating critical literacies that pertain to race and gender, while also addressing current curricula standards. This study is important not only to the field of arts-based educational research but also to the Victorian curriculum and has the potential to inform global educational research on the intersection of STEAM interventions, Respectful Relationships, and critical literacies. It represents a continuation and support of Howe's ongoing engagement with the topic (see Howe, 2014, 2015, 2016, 2017, 2019, 2021).

The project's interdisciplinary approach is reflected in its methodology, which is a digital and speculative a/r/tographic inquiry that involves sustained creative practice. The researchers, artists, and early career educators co-design and co-create the research, bringing together their respective expertise and experiences. The project generates data through multiple methods, including playwriting, filming research events, and collaborating with early career educators. The resulting

dataset is intended to inform future research and contribute to the development of effective strategies for addressing issues such as violence against women and privilege. The project's focus on Othello offers a platform for discussing these complex issues in schools, and the development of a teaching resource using OMEKA and Figshare ensures that the research findings can be widely disseminated and utilised. Overall, this project represents an innovative and collaborative approach to addressing important social issues through interdisciplinary research and creative practice.

Project aims.

1. Foster and nurture young people's creative thinking and wellbeing in the face of high levels of men's fatal violence against women and girls
2. Enhance an understanding of the prevalence of violence against women and assist in creating a feminist imagination in forthcoming generations to better equip them to understand how to tackle it
3. Demonstrate the power of theatre to nurture and enhance a sense of wellbeing and the effectiveness of theatre as a creative vehicle for the attitudinal changes needed to successfully challenge the gendered relations underpinning all forms of violence against women
4. Provide a springboard for young people to engage with and participate in urgent conversations about high rates of intimate partner violence

The CAWRI digital and speculative a/r/tographic inquiry aims to build upon previous studies conducted by Dr Adrian Howe on the transformative impact on young people of putting Othello on Trial for murder. Specifically, to elaborate on initial studies explored through performances of 'Othello on Trial' in Melbourne (2015/2016) and in London (2015/2018) by Dr Adrian Howe, which indicated the play's transformative impact and effect on young people.

This study brings together practitioner-researchers and teachers from across education, theatre and performance, feminist, and cultural studies to develop a STEAM co-designed arts integration that promotes creativity and wellbeing by questioning and reflecting upon the complexities of 'Othello on Trial' through a series of zines.

The objective of this iteration is to develop a STEAM co-designed arts integration that promotes creativity and wellbeing by critically reflecting upon the complexities of the play through a series of zines.

The inquiry brings together research practitioners from education, theatre and performance, feminist, and cultural studies to explore the potential of speculative a/r/tographic renderings as organisers, informers, and speculations for collected, created, and curated data in teacher education. As part of their teacher training, a group of students used emergent methods to co-create speculative zines in response to a challenge posed by Dr Adrian Howe.

The zines are being compiled into a teaching resource for early career teachers and are accessible on the OMEKA platform at <https://omeka.cloud.unimelb.edu.au/the-othello-project/>.

The aim of this resource is to facilitate critical engagement with complex societal issues related to race and gender through creative and affective metho-pedagogies.

Methodology

This project is an example of a transdisciplinary approach that incorporates creative practice and speculative research design. The use of a/r/tographies, which integrate analogue, digital, and virtual sources, allows for the activation of all senses and movement on site; the sustained artistic or creative practice is the research. The focus is on youth theatre in education, and the project collects texts, visual images, and filmic artifacts that are curated in digital collections using OMEKA and Figshare, enabling sustainable digital co-participatory study. The play is informed by socio-legal research on intimate partner femicide cases and defenses to murder, feminist legal theory, critical Shakespeare scholarship, and critical race studies. The play also deploys theatre-based techniques that acknowledge diversity in the classroom and address the pivotal race question in *Othello*. The research study involves artists, researchers, and teachers as co-designers who practice together, integrating theory and practice through a process of praxis.



Image 2: Othello on Trial post-performance discussion with A-I-R Dr Adrian Howe, December 6, 2021.

Cross-disciplinary collaborations/connections

This project drew together experts from and theatre and performance studies, education, and criminology utilising their interdisciplinary knowledges to investigate the relationship between the creativity of theatre and wellbeing in the fraught context of widespread media reporting of high levels of violence against women during a global pandemic. Bringing together early and mid-career interdisciplinary and multi-faculty researchers, the project built new professional learning communities, promoted cross-disciplinary collaboration to undertake new collaborative research agendas in the SWISP agenda.

Through an emerging and innovative methodology, the team responded to the question: How do new forms of dialogue and emerging research practices in creativity and wellbeing enable a shift in cultures of acceptability around violence by highlighting rationales used to justify and to sanction it?

This research project draws on interdisciplinary perspectives to address the issue of lethal violence against women. Insights from criminology have highlighted the need for long-term primary prevention measures to tackle this issue, beyond just protective measures for high-risk cases. From education, past research has shown that school programs can play a crucial role in changing commonly held misogynistic views. However, it is important to consider how these ideas can be effectively incorporated into schools and how pedagogical approaches can create space for students to explore complex issues such as misogyny, race, sexual violence, respect, femicide, and gendered violence. For example, many schools include Shakespeare's *Othello* in their English curriculum, which can offer a platform to discuss these issues. One such resource is the Catherine McAuley Secondary English online unit on *Othello*. By drawing on a range of interdisciplinary perspectives, this project aims to contribute to the development of effective primary prevention measures to address lethal violence against women.

KATE: OK, OK! Quick summary:

Othello is a general employed by the Venetian state. He's a Moor, a Muslim, or maybe a Christian convert. It's unclear. But he's definitely black. Anyway, he marries a noblewoman, Desdemona. They're very happy but not for long. The villain, Iago, hates Othello. He calls him 'an old black ram' who is 'tupping' [*hand gesture*] a 'white ewe', Desdemona. Filled with resentment, he tricks Othello into believing Desdemona is having an affair with another man! Othello falls into a jealous rage and plots to kill her. Refusing to listen to her pleas of innocence, he suffocates her. Too late he discovers Iago's deception and Desdemona's faithfulness. He kills himself. Iago also kills his wife Emilia when she refuses to obey him, by the way, but let's stick with Othello.

What I want to know is ...if Othello was tried for murder today would he be found guilty? Or would he get away with the lesser crime of manslaughter?

And that, my friends, is for you to decide. Because you're the jury!

I've put out a call for actors. Let's see who turns up.

[lights down]

Key findings

This research-creation project involves three key activities that generate data.

1. data is produced through playwriting, with Dr Adrian Howe acting as artist-in-residence in studioFive.
2. data is generated through filming multiple research events in Zoom and in studioFive. Finally, emerging data is co-produced in collaboration with teacher candidates to explore topics such as violence, micro-aggressions, performativity, white privilege, guilt, the politics of affect, relational and affirmative ethics and more.

This data is intended for use in learning and teaching, with the aim of creating a better understanding of these complex issues. Together, these three activities generate a rich and diverse dataset that can be used to inform future research and contribute to the development of effective strategies for addressing issues such as violence, privilege, and ethics.

The project highlights the importance of ethical conduct and care for participants in research, especially in the context of a pandemic where the wellbeing of participants and performers becomes a priority. The use of digital platforms and protocols for theatre and arts education speculative research activities is also emphasised.

The project aimed to advance critical race and gender literacies among early career educators and facilitate discussion on issues such as misogyny, race, sexual violence, respect, femicide and gendered violence. It also aimed to develop effective primary prevention measures to address lethal violence against women by creating a better understanding of these complex issues amongst young people and offering a strategy for addressing them in educational settings.

The digital exhibition of research data on University of Melbourne-supported digital research platforms (OMEKA and Figshare) ensures the creative outputs are easily updated and open access, facilitating and supporting ongoing engagement with the project. This adheres to principles of digital research management that require outputs to be citable, sharable, discoverable and reusable. This not only aligns with best practice in digital scholarship but also represents value for money for the funding bodies; the project lays the foundations for rich and needs-based research to be co-designed around the needs of the community and to offer direct action through practice from these collaborations.

Project outcomes

Journal articles:

Howe, A. & de Pasquale, S. (forthcoming). 'Reformist Tinkering, The Queensland Law of Murder and Other Disasters' *Griffith Law Journal* 10(2) 18-47

Howe, A. (2021) 'White Angst meets Othello - Casting Conundrums, Leaning into disequilibrium' *Journal of Artistic and Creative Education* 15(1)

Creative Works: Play

Howe, A. (2022) *Othello on Trial*.

Conference presentations:

Howe, Adrian (2022): Pecha Kucha: Othello on Trial. The Climate, Art, and Digital Activisms Festival of Ideas (Melbourne/Narrm 21-23 November 2022). University of Melbourne. Media. <https://doi.org/10.26188/21754319>

Howe, Adrian (2022): 'No-platforming Shakespeare – Othello's Theatre in Education Project, a case study', *Philosophy of Education*, Sydney December 2022

School visits:

Invitation to observe English teacher develop the Othello Project with Year 10 students, Springwood High, NSW July 2022

Data Sharing

The co-produced digital and live exhibitions are creative modes of sharing project outcomes with the public. They draw on the experience and expertise of the co-CIs in creating compelling digital and live performance works.

OMEKA <https://omeka.cloud.unimelb.edu.au/the-othello-project/>

Figshare (2022). Othello on Trial

<https://melbourne.figshare.com/account/home#/projects/155930>

Forthcoming

In 2023 with further funding from CI Coleman and The Victorian Women's Trust we will communicate our results in four modes:

- 1) Dr Adrian Howe book launch studioFive University of Melbourne to coincide with new performance and data collection (zine workshop).
- 2) Written outputs including a book chapter and 1 journal article.
- 3) Conference presentation at The Australian Association for Research in Education (AARE) in November, 23
- 4) Digital exhibition of research data, metadata links to data repositories and existing archives launch.
- 5) Live performance and further data collection.

The live performance and further data collection at studioFive University of Melbourne includes a multimedia gallery for sharing elements of the digital exhibition in OMEKA and Figshare.

Discussion, implications and future directions

This CAWRI and Victorian Women's Trust (who provided additional funds) theatre in education project uses drama to engage young people in the global movement against continuing high levels of men's violence against women and girls through an innovative co-designed curriculum with early career educators. Emphasising the critical importance of primary prevention and attitudinal change, 'Othello on Trial' targets the continuing salience of culturally mandated excuses for hurting and killing women — she was unfaithful, she disobeyed, she made me do it. The first play in a planned trilogy, *Othello on Trial* (or the Tragedy of Desdemona, the Wife), utilises Shakespeare's *Othello*, read as an uncannily timely play, in order to dramatise the cultural questions raised by the high number of women killed by male partners and former partners today (one woman is killed each week on average by a male partner or former partner in Australia, two a week in England and Wales) (AIHW 2019).

The writing and performance of the play *Othello on Trial* by artist-in-resident, Dr Adrian Howe in *studioFive* has been informed by socio-legal research conducted on intimate partner femicide cases

and defences to murder; by feminist legal theory, critical Shakespeare scholarship and critical race studies.

Crucially, Dr Adrian Howe's play deploys theatre-based techniques that acknowledge diversity in the classroom, querying assumptions about Shakespeare's universality and 'colour-blindness.' It addresses both the pivotal race question in *Othello*, deploying casting models that clearly frame the actors' race and gender so that a play about intimate partner femicide can be translated effectively to different cultures and locations.

Despite pandemic-led constraints that affected the project and more broadly, the arts world, we sought to utilise expertise to develop the dramaturgical methodology that explores and assesses how creativity can be linked to wellbeing in the context of violence during the pandemic. On December 6, 2021, a socially distanced performance took place in *studioFive*. This performance recognised that the persistent media-mediated narration of intimate partner femicide can be experienced as trauma by young women, thereby compromising their sense of wellbeing, and demonstrated how a wellbeing benefit can be delivered through theatre by offering a creative Shakespearean-inflected form of that narration in its post-performance discussion.

Why a youth theatre project? In the light of consistently high levels of lethal violence against women by their intimate partners, transformational educational resources pitched at young people are essential. As arts educators in higher education, we know that theatre is a well-established means of promoting creativity and critical thinking, providing a space for experimenting with new ideas, playing with concepts and behaviours. *Othello on Trial* does this by putting *Othello* on trial for murder.

Why Shakespeare? Simultaneously reproducing and unsettling conventional prejudices, Shakespearian drama works as cultural transgression raising questions about dominant cultural values. In play after play from *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, *Much Ado about Nothing*, *Othello*, *Cymbeline* to *The Winter's Tale*, Shakespeare queries men's possessive and murderous rage against women. *Othello*, read as problematising a wife's adultery as excuse for her murder, is the project's obvious starting point, foreshadowing as it does legal defences deployed by wife-killers over the next 400 years in all Anglophone jurisdictions.

Othello on Trial has been performed and developed in Melbourne, Australia and London, UK. It was first performed in Australia at La Mama Courthouse Theatre in partnership with Fitzroy Legal Service in 2015-16. The 2016 performances at La Mama were supported by grants from Melbourne University, the Law Foundation and by a generous \$10,000 grant from a Victorian Women's Trust donor. Performances in London have been supported by Queen Mary University of London in 2015, by Birkbeck University Law School in 2018 and by a law firm and NGO in London.



Delayed due to Covid, the implementation of this grant in 2021 supported a new script, a performance and, more importantly, a filming of the performance to enable further development of the project in Victorian secondary schools.

Key questions arising from the project's development include:

1. What research practices in creativity and wellbeing can enable early career educators to cultivate critical gender and race literacies in the classroom?
2. How does the performative nature of a theatre-led arts integration project allow young people to engage with the pressing issue of violence against women?

The co-design Othello on Trial as a school-based curricula intervention is to be further developed and completed in 2023 with researcher Ka Lai (Kelly) Chan joining the team. The continuation of the project will further support student creativity, critical thinking and sense of well-being, trouble ethical societal issues and cultivate critical literacies that pertain to race and gender.

The overall goal of the project remains that of developing an educational recourse that contributes to substantial change around violence against women, focusing on excuses and legal defences for intimate partner femicide.

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More information

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For more information about CAWRI, visit <https://research.unimelb.edu.au/creativityandwellbeing>