

Radio Play(s) Writing Residency Portrait

Slough Farm | September 2022

Radio Play(s) is like a stage-performed podcast. Each episode unpacks a timely theme(s) through a collection of real-world stories told through the spoken word, music and theatrically projected sand animation.

Episode 1, *Resistance & Resilience*, juxtaposes an American Black teen evading his parents' strictures by seeking the freedom of a dance party in 1980's Chicago, with young Hungarian Jews serving the resistance and escaping from a WWII Romanian work camp; A European immigrant's strain to preserve dignity contrasts a Black father's advice to his son about navigating a society stacked against him.

Episode 2, *Rail | | Road*, asks "what is the human cost of immigrating/naturalizing/being born into a legal system premised on the power-story of race? In what ways does the ideological/cultural/political/legal concept of race distort the stories we tell about one another?"

An Ottoman Jewish couple's US immigration hinges on legal definitions of their race—and, on court documents, their race shifts from "Turk," to "Mexican," "Hebrew" and, finally, "White"; A young Black man wrestles with assumptions about a Chinese-American woman whose ancestor helped build the American railroad; and the story of Onesimus — an enslaved New Englander written out of historical records despite saving countless Bostonians by introducing Smallpox inoculation — challenges historical assumptions about New England's relationship with race.



Before we can delve into episode writing, composition, and sand storyboarding, the themes must be determined. Extrapolating, honing and articulating such themes can be a slow process when carried out between two people. In the past, arriving at these themes has been a matter of weeks of conversation between Regie and me. Including additional creators in the process would take even longer, and may not have been possible at all, given our full schedules.

We arrived at Slough Farm knowing that we shared a common interest in myths. But what we wanted to do with those myths in Episode 3 remained to be decided. We had our work cut out for us: We set out to accomplish this theme-devising process not with two creators but — for the first time — with four.

Thanks to the generous time, environment and resources at Slough Farm instead of weeks it took two days.



Alison, Regie, Chris and I often think best when moving. The beautiful landscape around the farm made for great morning walking meetings, not to mention nighttime sojourns.



Sometimes our meeting notes became part of the landscape.

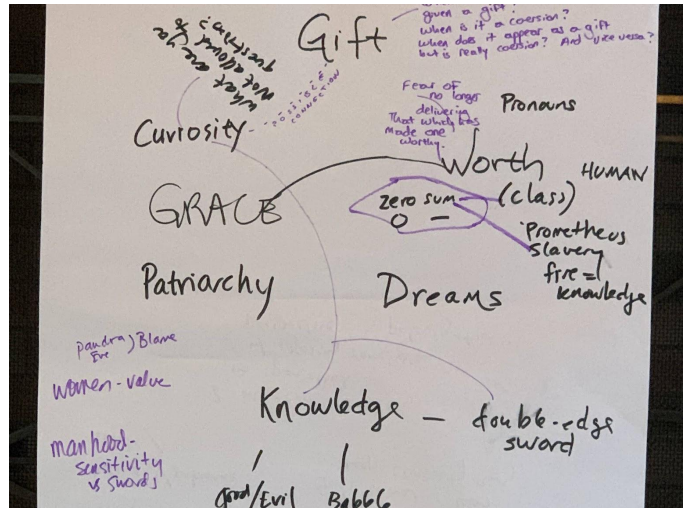


Though they didn't stay long.

Thanks to long stretches of uninterrupted time, together with being so well cared-for, Slough Farm allowed a sustained

depth of inquiry difficult to achieve with a group when interruptions and schedules pull us in different directions, however meaningful those directions may be.

We utilized various Farmhouse spaces, together with processes for group exploration and decision making to ensure everyone's perspective was heard and properly considered.



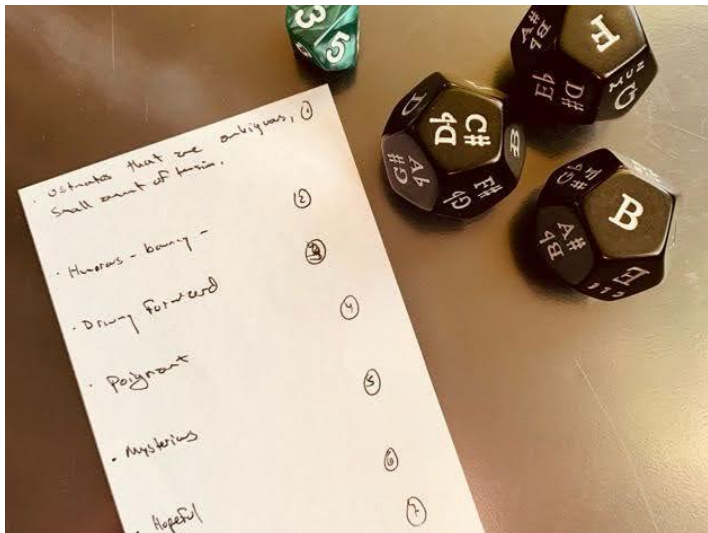
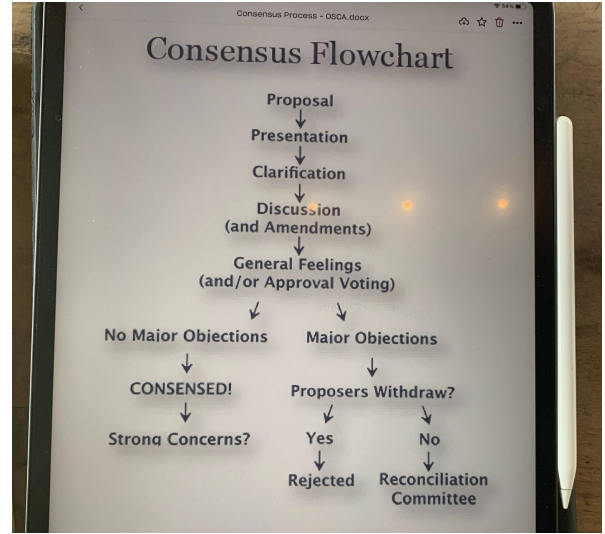
We settled on thematic questions like “what do myths tell us about people’s worth, or status — and what happens when we turn the myth’s criteria for who is ‘worthy’ on its head?” “When is a gift really coercion? When is a challenge a gift?” “What are the implications of so many myths that treat knowledge as dangerous, or to be denied to certain people, and what happens when such myths are inverted?”

Once we articulated the themes that felt most resonant to us, we sought stories that felt alive and allowed potent possibilities for exploring those themes from a variety of perspectives. We explored the idea of using myths from multiple cultures that illuminate how ancient stories still affect modern actions and interactions in society. However, the more we questioned and conversed, it became apparent that, for the lessons drawn from the story to be most impactful, a listener would need to have some familiarity with it. So, we landed on the popular foundational myths and figures of Western and Near-East Cultures: the Greco-Roman and Sumerian myths (and culturally influential tales) which we felt would be most familiar to Radio Play(s) audiences, such as Pandora, Prometheus, Gigamesh and Cinderella. These, and other related stories that to some degree normalize sexism, unworthiness and enforced social roles, subtly underpin the psychology of many

powerful segments of US society. Our hope is that if we retell these stories in creative ways, using humor, irony, and other tools, we will bring our audience to experience a series of “What if...” moments. And, in such moments, they might question the social and cultural assumptions they’ve come to accept as normal.

Cupid + Belle		✓	✓	✓	(S)
*Prometheus		✓	✓	✓	(S)
*Pandora		✓	✓	✓	(S)
Thor vs Giants		✓	✓	✓	CH
Thor's prophecies		✓	✓	✓	
Levi + bull		✓	✓	✓	
Bay - Devil		✓	✓	✓	
Gilgamesh		✓	✓	✓	
Seth + Shale		✓	✓	✓	
Orion		✓	✓	✓	
Anansi		✓	✓	✓	
Hercules		✓	✓	✓	
Cinderella version		✓	✓	✓	

Handwritten notes include: "FOUNDATIONAL FAMILIAR TALES", "shake up", "manuscript", "revised", "narrative", "woman", "prime", "high", "Grace".



With this architecture in place, it was time to get to solo writing. Alison and Regie worked on texts. Chris and I composed. To break out of habits, I played composition games with dice. For example, to generate ideas, a roll of a ten-sided die yielded a mood or compositional “mission.” In this image, the green die’s 3 directed me to create a “driving/forward motion.” A roll of musical dice offered a key scheme. In this case, for instance, F to Bm to C#m (the last two are keys in which I would not instinctively improvise). And then the piano and I were off!



Another opportunity Slough Farm allowed was for writers to partner. Especially with the pandemic, it has been rare for me to *just play* with another musician. Sessions tend to be rehearsals, with music already written and time just to polish. On the other hand, Slough Farm allowed time for multiple free improvisations with Chris, something we hadn’t been able to do in years. We recorded ourselves to review later for usable material. Show-writing aside, the opportunity to engage in a real musical conversation with someone is so welcome and humanizing! For Regie and Alison, opportunities to read to one another, and listen to their writing being read aloud by the other, were quite valuable.

It is unusual indeed to engage in a residency so focused on creative process; and to be supported by an organization that

understands that artists create based on what we take in — in terms of nourishing local food, to be sure, but also psychically, and spatially. Environment reflects in the creation. Slough Farm’s vibrant health, natural beauty, craftsmanship, the stars, the ocean, the quiet, the magical acoustics of the silo, together with the kindness and generosity of program and farm staff, informs both what we made and also how we made it.

— **Guy Mendilow, co-director, producer, composer & performer/educator for Radio Play(s) series**



A residency at Slough Farm provided me with the two things I need in order to be an effective artist and educator: periods of both stimulation and seclusion. At Slough Farm my colleagues and I found space for the uninterrupted stimulation of ideas mined from our collaborative processes; and the seclusion I require to take those ideas and consider how best to transform them into art.

At Slough Farm, I was able to deepen and further the work on our latest episode of Radio Play(s) which focuses on foundational myths of western culture. I began work on sketches for retellings of well-known myths such as that of Pandora (the woman held responsible for the evils of the world) as well as a verse-dialogue between the Titan Prometheus and the Olympian Zeus (two immortals with differing views about the value and potential of humanity). My residency at Slough allowed me to hone my ideas, focus and research the characters in depth, and experiment with fresh ways of capturing voices in both spoken word and song. In addition to being able to get farther along than I otherwise would have, my residency at Slough Farms enabled me to submerge myself in the pastoral setting of a working farm — which was a much needed respite. As I was raised in a city and am used to light pollution and a lot of noises, it was wonderful to be able to connect with the natural world by day, and look up at the Milky Way at night. In one of my songs, I have a refrain that says:

*Here we are in a Sea of Stars
Somewhere between Venus and Mars
Short-lived hominids hanging about
Doing our best to figure it out*



I am so grateful that Slough Farm exists so that artists can have space and time to do so.

— **Regie Gibson, co-director, literary performer and educator for Radio Play(s) series**

Sometimes to think clearly you need distance from all distractions. Slough Farm is distant. The vastness of the property, edged by sand and waves, insulates the place, providing a graceful retreat. We met as a group, either clustered around the fireplace, or at the table, and immediately were able to focus in on the piece we were creating. The kitchen provided such ease in caring for us nutritionally, that we could let go and take creative risks with little effort. For solo work, we had our beautiful bedrooms, but I chose to work on the landing in a single comfortable chair. Yes, there are outlets everywhere. Yes, there is wifi. The showers are fantastic. All basic needs are met with such attention to detail that the mind can truly unhook and release into deep creative work.



— Alison James, scriptwriter and educator for Radio Play(s) series



Slough Farm provided an extraordinary space to think and create on a deep and meaningful level. Every amenity we could have hoped for was made available to us. The location was stunning, the staff remarkably helpful, and the opportunity to engage with other teachers, artists, and community leaders from Martha's Vineyard during our stay, made the residency feel all the more impactful. The farm is an ideal place to foster ideas and community, and I suspect that the creative energy I absorbed there will continue to pulse through my veins long after leaving the island. The organization is providing an invaluable resource to the artistic community and beyond. I'd return in a heartbeat.

— Chris Baum, composer and violinist for Radio Play(s) series



[*See the residency photo album*](#)