

## **The Empathy Project (Working Title)**

**co-conceived, co-developed, and co-authored by resident writers at Roly Poly Productions:  
Janet Bentley and Bruce Jones**

### **Type of piece:**

Experimental, devised, multimedia, stylized movement

### **Summary of Project/Piece:**

The Empathy Project (Working Title) is an experimental, science fiction play set in Manhattan and Queens in the not so distant future that speculates on how society might devolve into a world where empathy is bred out of people by the negative physical and psychological effects of increasingly advanced Virtual Reality experiences. In this world, a heavily enforced caste system exists and it is feared (and eventually proven) that no more babies can be conceived and brought to term. However, in this barren and fractured society, it is in the poorest and most oppressed community that we find our one chance at salvation: a powerful, queer, intersex, empath born of an ancient line of African folk healers *is pregnant*.

These circumstances cause the deepening of borders between already-existing class/race/gender/environmental divisions. We have devised a social structure and speculative map that consists of four realms: Privilege 1: The Elite (those who are actually in power) located on high ground in Inwood, Privilege 2: The Sub-Elite (those who think they are in power) nearer the lake that was Harlem, Privilege 3: Civil Servants (those who actually do the work) the fortified coast of northeastern Manhattan, and The Lack: poor and disenfranchised, survivors of genocide, located on ever shrinking portions of Brooklyn (Smith & 9<sup>th</sup> Street and Brooklyn Heights). The reason that the Lack functions at all is because the Privileged go to The Lack for help with undocumented transactions and other Black Market activities.

The play begins with a sound collage in darkness that carries us through time from nature to the cities to the rising seas. This is followed by a series of projections, sounds, textures, and symbolic movement that sets up the layers of privilege in relation to levels of emotional connection to stimuli. Example: the most privileged gets the best drugs so they're most relaxed, the second level is very comfortable but occasionally haunted by shadows of emotion, the third level is essentially the working class of the privileged areas so they have enough contact with reality and less contact with drugs and leisure – the third level contains undercover advocates for the poor across the bay. The sound of the sea with close lapping waves guide us into the realm of The Lack where we meet Anjou and Olen slogging through water to find another place to set up camp. (See attached outline with sample draft scenes for a full breakdown of the play).

### **Our process:**

Our next step is to further fill out the scenes and cast the show. Constant research is happening in order to enhance the technological references, speculation, and ultimate theatrical methods for the production.

### **Collaborators:**

Sound and Video – Andy Evan Cohen and Janet Bentley (The Roly Polys)

Costume Design – Janet Mervin

Movement – Mary Baynard, Tatyana Kot

Co-writer/director – Janet Bentley

Co-writer/actor – Bruce Jones

Dramaturgical Support – Andy Evan Cohen, Theo Dage (medical expert & climate activist)