What can theatre and art, more broadly, teach us? For some, the joining of art and scholarship may seem like an unlikely marriage between two separate, unrelated worlds – the creative realm and the academic realm; however, for artist-scholar Naila Keleta-Mae, art and pedagogy are irrevocably intertwined.

"I talk about being an artist hyphen scholar simply because that's the language that I think makes clearest to people what I do, but I think of them as being the same thing," she says.

As a theatre artist, performance poet, singer-songwriter and an Assistant Professor in the Department of Drama and Speech Communication at the University of Waterloo, Dr. Keleta-Mae endeavours to be useful.

"I want it to be useful to the people who are experiencing it, including myself," she says of her work as a performer, adding, "I want to feel a little bit scared. If I've put together a set where there's nothing about it that gives me pause, that makes me second-guess, then it's not useful – for me, and I doubt it would be useful for anybody else."

While her scholarly interests include researching theatre and performance, particularly in the context of what it means to be black and female in Canada, the overarching aim of both her scholarly and artistic practice is to uncover and challenge dominant discourses that serve to marginalize bodies deemed 'irregular' by white society.

The constraints of her own experience as a black female living in Canada contribute to her desire to use theatre, literature, music and scholarship as vehicles for seeking justice. However, she seeks justice not only for herself, but also "for anyone who, for whatever reason, is in the space where there is not a strong history or strong representation," she says.

Of her own experiences, she relates,

"As discombobulating and difficult an experience it was for me to have gone through the public schooling system with such little representation and such violent misrepresentation, it taught me and others like me at a very young age that we could not afford to believe the official narrative. So, you had to question because the official narrative in no way lined up with lived reality or experience or the other modes of knowledge that we had, that I got from my parents, from my various communities. I knew it wasn't true, so I had to learn really early that, yeah, you go
to school and you do well and learn and pay attention and be able to mobilize the knowledge and synthesize it, etcetera, etcetera, but you couldn't trust all of it. You couldn’t believe that it was truth because I knew that it wasn't. I think that that developed a really important skill set and valuable skill set, because I was able to translate it outside of the classroom to so many aspects of life."

The violence of exclusion and misrepresentation provide motivation for Keleta-Mae's artistic philosophy.

"I think that art for art's sake is a luxury," she says. "I'm interested in some luxuries, yes? Let's be clear," she adds, with a quiet chuckle. "But it's not a luxury that I'm interested in artistically. I think it's a luxury, and I think it's a privilege. So, the art that I’m interested in being a part of needs to be [] there has to be a sense of urgency to me, a sense of 'I have to tell this story' or 'I have to be a part of telling this story' or 'We have to tell the story, we have to disrupt this story'. There has to be something at stake beyond aesthetics."

One of the ways she explores art's ability to speak the unspeakable, to educate, and to spark conversations we may be too afraid to engage in is through her involvement with Project Groundings.

Launched in July 2011, Project Groundings is a two-year SSHRC-funded transnational research project, investigating how the arts, particularly theatre, can be used to bring awareness to the causes and effects of youth violence in Canada and Jamaica.

"I went to Jamaica last year for the Jamaican launch of the project, and I went as a researcher at that point and did some performance exercises as part of the research that was being done. There were youth forums that were done in Jamaica, both in Kingston and Woodside, Jamaica. And I did some performance exercises to think about what can be learned about community, or about situations, through performance that you may not learn through words," she explains. "And then youth and scholars came from Jamaica to Canada for the Canadian launch in January of this year."

Along with her role as researcher and co-applicant of the project, Dr. Keleta-Mae also served as director and dramaturge of a production called Breaking News, which was created from data collected from the Toronto youth forums and round table discussions. The production was performed in collaboration with Toronto youth this past summer in preparation for a subsequent exchange between youth and scholars in Jamaica and Canada.

"Breaking News was actually an effort to investigate and push research data through performance," she explains. "There's something in the process of rehearsing, in creation, that can push, that can reveal other areas of data, of knowledge, of information, of experience. And so I really wanted to use what had been collected in that verbal form of the youth forum, while people sat around the table for the most part, and to see what happened when we tried to

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mobilize it. What other questions came out of it and what other things would be revealed in that process of not just performance, but of rehearsal."

"There was a consensus in the data that the media wasn't representing in a meaningful and thoughtful way the nuances of the realities. So through the process of this production, we addressed some of those untold stories," she says.

As a way of refuting the stereotypical images of black youth as under accomplished and ineffectual, the play opens with the two lead male and female characters receiving scholarships at Toronto universities for their achievements as community artists and scholars. This opening scenario was inspired by the real-life experiences of some of the youth involved in the project who felt that the media and the city under-represented the successes of black youth.

"What is also discussed in that opening piece, where they are in front of an audience receiving these prestigious full scholarships, is that the person giving it to them says, almost as an aside, that they will also be expected to work four times as hard as a 'regular' person ... in order to have access to the same things," she explains. Not only will the youth have to work four times as hard compared to 'regular' people, but they will also be expected to participate in all discussions pertaining to race and oppression, being the representative black students in their classrooms. And should they fail, no other black person will receive these scholarships ever again.

Such intense scrutiny, she points out, "are pressures that are specific to being black and specific to being youth."

Keleta-Mae's artistic vision for the piece to articulate untold stories speaks to the utility of theatre to create new narratives of possibility, and to why she has such a passion to express herself artistically in general.

"If a poem frightens me or a play or a concept or a scene scares me, then I know that I'm onto something because it means that I'm saying something that I feel hasn't been said a lot," she says. "Those are the stories that I'm interested in telling and experiencing in my body as a performer or as a director, witnessing that, the telling of those stories."

Her vision and passion for teaching is similar in that she strives to encourage her students to avoid complacency and to, instead, constantly question the status quo. "I want to challenge their notions of all kinds of hierarchies of power," she says.

Part of the challenges and rewards of her work, she says, is "to teach students how to leap, to put the infrastructure together so that they can leap. Sometimes you need bridges and sometimes I feel like I just want them to leap. How do you encourage someone to leap, go, just go to the edge of that thing and look at it, though you've never had to look at it before?"

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She insists, however, that she learns just as much as her students do. "This is not altruistic work, this is an exchange."¹

While Dr. Keleta-Mae acknowledges that there are certain added pressures of being a black female in academia, she recognizes that being a role model is fundamental to her work.

"I can count probably on one hand the number of teachers and professors I've had through my elementary and undergraduate school who did not fit 'regular' - the Canadian definition of 'regular'. And so I need to be there for other students, and I need to be there for myself."