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Clowning workshops as emancipatory practice - a social and cultural anthropological analysis

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For all who believe in the power of play to heal and transform

ABSTRACT

GERMAN

Diese Masterarbeit untersucht Clownerie als soziokulturelle Praxis im Rahmen von Clown-Workshops, in denen Teilnehmende unter Anleitung die Rolle des Clowns verkörpern. Ausgangspunkt war die Frage „Warum werden Clowns von Menschen als lustig erlebt?“, die sich zu einer Auseinandersetzung mit Clownerie-Workshops als Orte der Selbstentdeckung, des kollektiven Spiels, der Subversion und Kulturkritik entwickelte. Auf Grundlage von teilnehmender Beobachtung, Interviews und der praxisbasierten Methodologie der “Ethnoclownographie” (King 2017) wird Clownerie als künstlerischer Ausdruck, gelebte Erfahrung und Form des Widerstands analysiert.

Das Verkörpern der Clownsfigur wird von Teilnehmenden als Gefühl von Freiheit beschrieben, das über alltägliche Rollen hinausgeht und auf einen kollektiven Raum basiert, der Verletzlichkeit willkommen heißt, und bildet damit den Ausgangspunkt der zugrunde liegenden Forschung. Obwohl weltweit in den letzten Jahrzehnten neue Formen der Clownerie entstanden sind – von CliniClown bis hin zu AktivistInnen-Clowns – bleibt die Forschung, insbesondere zu Clown-Workshops, fragmentarisch. Diese Arbeit trägt zu einer umfassenderen Clownerie-Theorie bei, indem die relationalen Dimensionen der Clownerie aus einer anthropologischen Perspektive herausgearbeitet werden.

Drei zentrale Fragen strukturieren die Arbeit: (1) Wie gestaltet sich die gegenwärtige Landschaft der Clownerie, global und lokal, untersucht anhand von drei verschiedenen Clown-Workshops? (2) Wie erleben Teilnehmende die performative Praxis des Verkörperns der Clownsfigur, und welche persönlichen Implikationen ergeben sich daraus? (3) In welcher Weise überschneiden sich diese individuellen Erfahrungen mit kollektiv geteilten und identitätsstiftenden Normen und Werten der TeilnehmerInnen?

In drei Hauptkapiteln wird der Beantwortung der Fragen nachgegangen. Das Erste verortet die Forschung in methodologischen und epistemologischen Debatten und reflektiert Nähe, Reziprozität sowie die Herausforderungen der Zusammenführung von akademischem Rahmen und verkörperter Praxis. Das zweite Kapitel zeichnet die historischen, etymologischen und anthropologischen Dimensionen der Clownerie nach und betont sowohl deren inhärente Ambiguität als auch die relative Abwesenheit von Workshops als Gegenstand anthropologischer Forschung. Das dritte Kapitel stellt die zentralen Ergebnisse vor und zeigt, wie Clownerie-Workshops als ritualisierte Räume fungieren, in denen

Teilnehmende Verletzlichkeit, Identitätsstiftung und Gemeinschaft verhandelt werden. Hier erscheint Clowning als emanzipatorische, befreiende, transformative und heilende Praxis: eine, die Scheitern neu bewertet, Spiel kultiviert, sowie sowohl Selbstwahrnehmung als auch kollektive Zugehörigkeit und Kulturkritik fördert. Indem Clownerie an der Schnittstelle von Kunst, Pädagogik, Performance, Kultur- und Sozialanthropologie und gelebter Erfahrung verortet wird, zeigt diese Arbeit, wie Workshops Räume des kollektiven Experimentierens eröffnen. Darüber hinaus wird gezeigt, wie Clownerie-Workshops durch die Rolle des Clowns Heilungs- und Transformationsprozesse auf der Ebene des Selbst fördern können, während sie gleichzeitig durch Parodie und Übertreibung die konstruierte Natur sozialer Normen offenlegen und so umfassendere Machtstrukturen in Frage stellen und destabilisieren. Letztlich soll eine neue Dimension der Clownerie sichtbar gemacht und zugleich Impulse für eine vertiefte anthropologische Auseinandersetzung mit der Clownsfigur, Humor und dem transformativen Potenzial von Performance gegeben werden. Clownerie erweist sich hierbei nicht nur als Unterhaltung, sondern als Praxis mit dem Potenzial, Wandel zu inspirieren und als subtile, aber wirkungsvolle Form des Widerstands zu wirken, die die Absurdität des Alltags widerspiegelt und gleichzeitig Möglichkeiten eröffnet, diese anders zu imaginieren.

ENGLISH

This thesis examines clowning as a socio-cultural practice through the lens of clowning workshops, where a group of people gather to experience the role of the clown under the guidance of a clown teacher. What started with the question "Why do people experience clowns as funny?" developed into an exploration of clowning workshops as spaces for self-discovery, collective play, subversion, and cultural critique. Drawing on participant observation, interviews, and the practice-based methodology of "ethnoclownography" (King 2017), the research examines how people engage with clowning as both an artistic expression and a lived experience, as well as a form of resistance.

Participants described embodying the clown as a feeling of freedom that transcends everyday roles and is rooted in a collective space that fosters vulnerability, which served as the starting point for the underlying research. While new forms of clowning have emerged worldwide in recent decades—from medical clowns to activist clowns—research, particularly on workshops, remains fragmented. This work contributes to a more comprehensive clown theory by exploring the relational dimensions of clowning from an anthropological perspective.

This study attempts to answer three central research questions: (1) What is the current landscape of clowning, globally and locally, as explored through three different clowning workshops? (2) How do participants experience the performative practice of embodying the clown, and what are the personal implications of this process? (3) In what ways do these individual experiences intersect with collectively shared and identity-forming norms and values of the participants?

Three main chapters explore the answers to these questions. The first situates the research within methodological and epistemological debates, reflecting on proximity, reciprocity, and the challenges of merging academic frameworks with embodied practice. The second chapter examines the historical, etymological, and anthropological aspects of clowning, highlighting both its ambiguity and the scarcity of workshops as subjects of anthropological research. The third chapter presents the key findings and demonstrates how clowning workshops function as ritualized spaces in which participants negotiate vulnerability, identity formation, community, and cultural critique. Here, clowning emerges as an emancipatory, liberating, transformative, and healing practice: one that revalues failure, cultivates play, and fosters both self-awareness, and collective belonging, as well as cultural critique. By locating clowning at the intersection of art, education, performance, social and cultural anthropology, and lived experience, this thesis demonstrates how workshops create spaces for collective

experimentation. Furthermore, it shows how, through the role of the clown, clowning workshops can facilitate processes of healing and transformation at the level of the self, while also, through parody and exaggeration, exposing the constructed nature of social norms—thereby questioning and destabilizing broader structures of power. Ultimately, it seeks to reveal a new dimension of clowning while offering impulses for further anthropological inquiry into clowning, humor, and the transformative potential of performance. Clowning proves itself not merely as entertainment, but as a practice carrying the potential to inspire change and act as a subtle yet effective form of resistance that reflects the absurdity of everyday life while opening up possibilities for imagining it otherwise.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

This thesis has been more than an academic endeavor—it has been a journey of transformation and revelation itself. Through it, I discovered identity and the self not as fixed entities, but as living, fluid, and ever-changing constructs. In this discovery, I learned to loosen the rigid boundaries I once held for myself, acknowledging personal agency in the social web, allowing for both individual and social change.

I owe deep gratitude to my supervisor, Maria, who not only introduced me to new theoretical landscapes but walked beside me with kindness, patience, and an open heart. Her guidance was never just intellectual, but always human—uplifting, compassionate, and free of judgment.

To my fellow clowns, I owe endless thanks. Their openness, playfulness, and uniqueness, and the shared moments of conversation and exploration, have brought lightness and depth to this work. My gratitude also extends to my friends in India and my fellow travelers across the world, who encouraged me in the decision to finish my studies and to create the documentary that accompanies this journey. And to CTL, I send heartfelt thanks for their tireless struggle to secure more support for students and their voices.

To my sister and my friends in Austria, thank you for making my return feel like a homecoming, for easing the readjustment, and for standing by me with emotional and mental support at every step.

Above all, I carry deep gratitude for every person who walked a part of this journey with me; this work is as much theirs as it is mine.

Introduction

Entering the field, or where it all started

The research journey that led to this thesis has been both lengthy and transformative. It began years ago with a simple but persistent question: Why are clowns funny? I often found myself puzzled when watching people laugh at clowns in public spaces, unable to fully grasp what they found amusing. This curiosity opened a path of questioning and exploration, shaped by my three central interests: the psyche, society, and the arts. From the outset, I knew I wanted to examine humor in relation to art and anthropology as these themes resonated deeply with me. During this early stage, I encountered the organization “Clowns without Borders”,[1] whose work captivated me, particularly the question of whether Austrian clowns are perceived as funny in cultural contexts far removed from their own. Yet, life took me in another direction. Personal challenges interrupted my academic path, leading me to pause my studies and embark on a journey of self-discovery through travel. Even as I stepped away from academics, the anthropological perspective and my interests remained with me. Eventually, it pushed me to finish my studies. A turning point came in 2021, when a friend casually suggested, “You should go to this clown workshop. I think you’d enjoy it”. At the time, the global pandemic had disrupted my travels and prolonged my stay in India from three months to over two years. While stranded, I built connections with kind people and other stranded travelers, creating a sense of home. This period became deeply nurturing. I explored various creative practices, including dance, theater, singing, drawing, and pottery. I have always struggled with indecision, but when my friend mentioned the clown workshop, I felt an unusual clarity and certainty, and I knew I had to attend. Determined to go, I contacted the workshop organizers, submitted my application, and took a four-hour motorbike ride to join a four-day clowning workshop. The workshop was held in Patnem, South Goa, in a shala, which is a bamboo and wood yoga studio. The walls were decorated with textiles and could be opened to reveal a stunning view of the beach and ocean beyond. This magical setting heightened the transformative experience. During those four days, I explored the vulnerability and depth of clowning, forming a strong connection to the practice. It was the first time I could grasp the nature of what a clown can be—about being human, vulnerable, and authentic. It was during this time that I decided to write my thesis on this approach to clowning and create a short documentary about the facilitators

[1] “Clowns without borders”, accessed 18 April 2025, https://clownswithoutborders.org

and their work. I vividly remember sitting on the beach after one session and asking the facilitators if they would be willing to collaborate with me on a documentary[2] and to interview them for my thesis. I asked what themes they found meaningful. Their openness and enthusiasm were inspiring, and we agreed to focus on the intersection of clowning and healing. Narrowing down a research question and developing a solid concept took much longer. After completing the documentary, I returned to Austria in 2022 as international flights resumed. Reintegrating into life in Vienna and the university environment proved challenging. The fast-paced, structured nature of academic work conflicted with the intuitive, free-spirited approach I had adopted during my travels. Luckily, my supervisor provided patient guidance and helped me gradually adapt to the scientific rigor required for my thesis, while allowing me considerable freedom and openness to my intuitive and fluid approach. At the same time, I started attending clown workshops in Austria and immersed myself in the local clowning community. Through these experiences, I discovered a wealth of knowledge and found a supportive network of like-minded people who shared their stories and agreed to be interviewed for my research. Returning to Austria and reconnecting with both the clowning scene and university was a process of rediscovery and reconciliation. These parallel journeys, diving into clowning and re-engaging with academia, helped me find balance and peace within the scientific framework. My motivation in writing this thesis was fueled by the experience that I encountered each time I experienced myself on stage as a clown in the context of clown workshops. There were an infinite number of possibilities to act out situations that I would act out differently as Julia in my daily life. This practice expanded my mind and brought me an awareness of the social roles I inhabit, such as daughter, sister, student, and employee, and their respective limits. In the role of my clown, anything was possible, which gave me a sense of freedom. Yet, this freedom only emerged within a safe space with an audience that can accept me for who I am on stage, whether it is sad, funny, angry, disappointed, or ashamed. This collective played a key role, as it needed the experience of being accepted first. It is precisely this interplay between individual vulnerability and collective acceptance that drew me to anthropological and performance theory, particularly the writings of Victor Turner (V. Turner 1967, 1968, 1969, 1982, 1985, 1986, 2004, 2009, E. L. B. Turner 2012) and Richard Schechner (Schechner 1985, 1986, 2002).

[2] For further information on the documentary, see chapter 1.3. “Making a documentary: A visual exploration of clowning." The documentary can be accessed on YouTube at the following link, accessed 7 July 2025: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RpLjxFPb88U&t=1045s

Guided by these personal and academic encounters, following key research questions emerged:

- » What does the current landscape of clowning look like, globally and locally, as explored through three distinct clowning workshops?
- » How do individuals engaging in these workshops experience the performative practice of embodying the clown figure, and what are the personal identity-establishing implications for them?
- » In what ways do the personal experiences within these workshops intersect with collectively shared norms and values?

Despite the widening of the field of interest in clowning in anthropology, I noticed a lack of anthropological research in the area that I was interested in, specifically the practice of clowning workshops for self-discovery. Most existing studies focus on clowning in specific contexts, such as hospitals (specifically children's hospitals) or elderly care institutions (Hendriks 2012; Rämgård, Carlson, and Mangrio 2016), emphasizing the clown's performance or improvisation as impactful on the audience. By contrast, this thesis examines the practice of embodying the clown and its implications for identity, community, and transformation. Elodie Kalb (2017) has noted the cultural significance of clown workshops and raises the question of how this phenomenon of clowning workshop for non-actors/non-actresses in the context of self-knowledge and self- discovery can be connected to the time, where society becomes more and more scientific and where the embodiment of clown as a counter-image to the pressure of success and function is needed to counteract the suppression of the self. (Kalb 2017, 197) Clowning programs and workshops can be seen as contemporary manifestations of clowns in communities today, serving as "a catalyst for individual and social transformation" (Proctor 2013, 3).

For this reason, and building on these insights, I aim to reveal a new dimension of clowning, a perspective on the socio-cultural practice of clowning workshops, and provide insights to inform further research on clowning and humor in anthropology. Locating this research in the fields of anthropology of theatre and performance (V. Turner 1967, 1968, 1969, 1982, 1985, 1986, 2004, 2009; Schechner 1985, 1986, 2002), I attempt to investigate the realms of performance, ritual (V. Turner 1969, 1992, 2004; Schechner 1986; Davis-Floyd and Laughlin 2022), improvisation (Bouissac 2015), liminality (V. Turner 1974; Turkle 2002), performativity (Bial, 2004; Fouweather and Bosma 2021; J. Butler 2004), identity (Appiah 1994 & 2019; Bourdieu 1984; Finke 2014; Hall 2011; Crenshaw 1991; Yuval-Davis 2006;

Baumann and Gingrich 2004; Harcourt 2022), the self (Sökefeld 1999), community (Grodzin Gold 2005; Amit and Rapport 2002; E. L. B. Turner 2012) and transformation (Freire 2001 & 2014; Boal 1992; Roy 2009; Carp 1998; Gordon et al. 2018; Bruhn et al. 2019; hooks 1994). Furthermore, I intend to draw on findings from other fields, such as psychology (Zumaeta 2012), psychotherapy and psychodrama (Stadler and Kern 2010; Gordon, et al. 2018; Bruhn et al. 2019; Carp 1998), theatre studies and pedagogy (Bouissac 2015; Kalb 2017; Freire 2001 & 2014; Boal 1992; L. Butler 2012) and performance studies (Bial 2004; Schechner 2002).

Methodologically, I engaged in participant observation (Flick 1995, 192) during multiple clown workshops across Austria, India, and Hungary: "3rd Nose assembly of tomorrow" in Hungary in November 2023, "FLINTA clowning" in Vienna, Austria November 2023 and "Building a personal mythology" in India January and March 2022, "Journey to sacred clowning" in Kärnten, Austria February 2024 and "4th Nose assembly of tomorrow" in April 2024 Vienna, Austria. I immersed myself in the field site, made notes to understand the dynamics among participants and facilitators, and wrote written protocols to recognize patterns and activities. To understand the values, expectations, perceptions, and experiences of the performative practice of embodying the clown in the workshop, I conducted qualitative interviews with workshop participants and facilitators, providing a space for them to express their thoughts and experiences, and fostering an openness to information. (Flick 1995, 177) Immersing myself in the world of clowning through dressing up, performing, participating in workshops, and engaging in informal conversations with clowns, facilitators, and individuals discovering their inner clowns helped create a "playful complicity" (King 2017, 10). I researched clowning not only as an "object of inquiry but as a means of inquiry" (King 2017, 9), as "a way of investigating, learning and communicating" (ibid.). In this sense, I employed clowning as a research approach, as defined by Barnaby King (2020) as "ethnoclownography" or "clown ethnography" (King 2017, 9). Throughout my research journey, I maintained a field journal that documented observations, frustrations, insights, and emerging ideas. (Flick et al. 1995, 171) Complementing this, I produced a short documentary as a way of capturing experience beyond words. Bruhn, Boscolo, Barboza, and Cruz (2019) aptly expressed, "How can we talk about an experience without killing it, suffocating it with right words and polite answers?" (Bruhn et al. 2019, 64). They suggested

this through excerpts from their field diary. For me, it was the making of the documentary.[3] Although I did not use the visual material for my analysis, it served to capture an experience differently than with words.

The thesis is structured as follows: In the first chapter, I examine the research process itself. This includes a detailed account of the methods I employed, which included Grounded Theory as a guiding framework, participant observation, and qualitative interviews. I also open the field to the approach of ethnoclownography as mentioned above. I reflect on the use of visual material, particularly the process of creating a documentary alongside this research, and discuss the specific epistemological challenges and opportunities that arise from working closely with the people studied. Here, I consider what it means to produce knowledge, drawing on the wider academic structures within which this work is situated, as well as the tensions I experienced between intuitive, embodied knowledge and the scientific expectations of anthropology.

The second chapter turns toward the state of the art in anthropological and interdisciplinary research on clowning. I begin by examining the stereotype of the clown, its broad definitions, and the multiplicity of names and figures associated with it across various cultures and historical periods. This includes an overview of the history of clowning. I then examine the state of the art, showing how clowning has been framed in academic discourse as ritual clown in anthropology and as an archetype in psychology.

In chapter 3, I present the findings of this research. I begin by analyzing clowning as a socio-cultural phenomenon through the lens of clowning workshops, where a group of people gather for a short period, such as days or weeks, to experience the role of a clown under the guidance of a clown teacher, and contextualizing its contemporary forms within the 20th and 21st centuries. Here, I consider influences such as the Human Potential Movement (Davison 2016b, 20) and practices of self-exploration, as well as broader sociohistorical shifts, including the aftermath of World War II, existentialist thought (e.g., Sartre), and the dynamics of late capitalism. From this broader contextualization, I move to the analysis of the clowning workshops that form the core of this study. I investigate how workshop settings differ fundamentally from staged clown performances, emphasizing the processes, atmospheres, and relationships that unfold in these spaces. Particular attention is given to the understanding of participants, facilitators, and the collective group as a whole. I then

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[3] For the documentary, see “Clowning as a way of healing” https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RpLjxFPb88U

discuss the workshop space as a ritual space. Drawing on anthropological theories of ritual, I define what constitutes ritual in this context and elaborate on the potential agency of participants in negotiating identity-establishing processes, experimenting with vulnerability, and experiencing the self in new ways. Within this framework, I introduce the concept of the clown state or clown consciousness—a mode of being distinct from everyday life, characterized by openness, playfulness, and authenticity (in the sense of self-awareness). Building on this, I explore questions of self, identity, and community as they emerge through the practice of clowning. I ask how individuals experience themselves differently in the clown state, how these experiences intersect with collective processes of group dynamics and communitas, and how clowning provides a liminal space for reimagining social roles.

Finally, I elaborate on the emancipatory, liberatory, transformative, healing, and therapeutic potentials of clowning. Drawing on both my ethnographic data and the relevant literature, I analyze the benefits that participants describe and reflect on the broader implications for anthropology, performance studies, and the social sciences. By examining these different dimensions, I aim to show how clowning workshops can serve not only as sites of self-knowledge but also as spaces of cultural critique and social transformation.

Having outlined my research journey, the research questions, my motivation, and the broader aims of this thesis, I now turn to the foundations of the research process itself.

1. The research process and methods

Designing the research process: Crafting the inquiry

The research design that aligns with my research follows the open approach of Grounded Theory, as established by Strauss and Glaser. (Strauss and Glaser 1967 cited in Kapuy 2008, 9) Grounded Theory is widely regarded as one of the most prominent approaches to qualitative research worldwide. Instead of beginning with a theory to test, this approach focuses on developing new theoretical concepts from data collected in the field. (Fitzgerald and Mills 2022, 1) Importantly, this does not mean that researchers lack prior theoretical knowledge. A key feature of Grounded Theory is the process of theoretical abstraction, which moves "beyond description and beyond the understanding of participants themselves, to extend the sociological usefulness of theory" (Fitzgerald and Mills 2022, 4). This abstraction ensures that the research offers meaningful insights to the broader discourse. Interviews are the most commonly employed method for data collection in Grounded Theory research. Fitzgerald and Mills (2022) highlight the added value of participant observation, emphasizing that its depth significantly enriches the understanding of the data gathered through interviews. (Fitzgerald and Mills 2022, 2) Both methods were employed in this research. In the next chapter, I will examine my ethnographic fieldwork by using the methods of participant observation and qualitative interviews. This combination of methods will allow me to explore the subject matter comprehensively while adhering to the principles of Grounded Theory.

1.1. Participant observation: Meaning and challenges

"Participant observation" is one of the most significant research methods in cultural and social anthropology. Although it has been criticized as unscientific or inefficient, participant observation continues to play an essential role in anthropology and across the social sciences, as DeWalt et al. note. (DeWalt, DeWalt, and Wayland 1998, 259) Despite its widespread importance, there is no singular, universally agreed-upon definition of the method. "The method of participant observation involves the explicit use in behavioral analysis and recording of the information gained from participating and observing" (DeWalt, DeWalt, and Wayland 1998, 259). While observation is a universal human activity, the scientific approach distinguishes itself through deliberate and systematic observation, which

is documented in field notes and protocols. (DeWalt, DeWalt, and Wayland 1998, 261; Hauser-Schäublin 2003, 37)

> “Participant observation is a method in which an observer takes part in the daily activities, rituals, interactions, and events of the people being studied as one of the means of learning the explicit and tacit aspects of their culture” (DeWalt, DeWalt, and Wayland 1998, 260)

The method demands more than just being present. It calls for active involvement and comprehensive presence that encompasses the physical, emotional, and energetic aspects, as Hauser-Schäublin (2003) points out. Rather than being merely a means of gathering data, this method is a social process based on empathy, connection and understanding. Therefore, it is based on the relationship between researchers and the individuals studied. (Hauser-Schäublin 2003, 34 & 38)

What does that mean in my field of interest? In the context of my research, participant observation was essential for understanding clowning as a phenomenon and the experiences associated with the clown role. Immersing myself fully in the field was unavoidable. My curiosity propelled me to experience firsthand what it is like to embody the clown. Actively participating in the workshops enhanced my understanding of the experiences of other participants and enabled me to build trust and connections. Without experiencing clowning, I would not have been able to identify questions and themes for the following interviews. This immersion also intensified my fascination with the transformative and liminal aspects of clowning, fueling my desire to explore the topic further. This method required my complete physical, emotional and energetic presence. Workshops typically began in the morning, included a lunch break and extended into the evening. Communal meals, whether at a restaurant or prepared together, left little time for immediate note-taking. As an introverted individual, the intensity of the workshop and the constant social interactions drained my energy, often leaving me exhausted at the end of the day. Despite this, I made every effort to document my observations during brief moments of downtime, such as before meals. My approach to participant observation reflects the multifaceted process that Justin Stagl (1995) describes as a “triple challenge” (Stagl 1995, 60): physical (fieldwork as an adventure), intellectual (fieldwork as a process of self-discovery) and moral (fieldwork as a process of identification). (Stagl 1995, 60) My experiences embody these dimensions, balancing the physical demands of intense workshops, the intellectual pursuit of understanding clowning and myself as a clown, and the moral responsibility to honor relationships with participants and facilitators. My fieldwork was typically short but highly intense due to the workshop formats, which ranged from four days to two weeks and

generally ran from 9 a.m. to 7 p.m. This structure posed challenges in defining the boundaries of the field itself. In many research contexts, having a clearly delineated field aids the research process. In my case, clowning training could occur anywhere, making it difficult to establish clear boundaries. To navigate this, I selected workshops based on proximity and accessibility, which led to a diverse array of locations across Europe and India. This pragmatic approach to workshop selection reflected logistical considerations and my desire to engage deeply with the phenomenon of clowning.

I attended following clown workshops in chronological order:

- "Building a personal mythology" with Amares Teatro[4] in India in 2022
- "3rd nose assembly of tomorrow" with N.a.to[5] in Hungary 2023
- "FLINTA clowning" with Anja Monden[6] and Leo Begeré[7] in Austria 2023
- "Journey to sacred clowning" with Francesca Zannier[8] in Austria 2024
- "4th nose assembly of tomorrow" with N.a.to in Austria 2024

While I managed to document observations during "Building a personal mythology", "FLINTA clowning" and "Journey to sacred clowning", the intensity and personal challenges of other workshops limited my ability to take notes. Nevertheless, these experiences remain vividly imprinted in my memory and have significantly shaped my perspective.

1.1.1. Journal, notes, and written words

Note-taking is described as "an essential Grounded Theory method" (Fitzgerald and Mills 2022, 11). Throughout my research journey, I maintained a journal in which I documented my thoughts and reflections, but also frustrations, confusions and emotional experiences. Serving as an outlet of self-expression and a record of my understanding, it accompanied me as I delved deeper. (Flick 1995, 171) Taking notes during observations is a crucial tool

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[4] "Amares Teatro", accessed 9 September 2025, https://www.amaresclown.com

[5] "N.a.to", accessed 9 September 2025, https://tdu-wien.at/n-a-to-nose-assembly-for-tomorrow/

[6] "Die Mondin Workshops" von Anja Monden, accessed 9 September 2025, https://www.diemondin.com/workshops

[7] "Theater der Unterdrückten Wien" Flinta clown workshop with Anja Monden and Leo Begeré, accessed 9 September 2025, https://tdu-wien.at/Veranstaltung/immer-der-roten-nase-nach-ein-feministisches-clown_innentraining/

[8] Francesca Zannier clown workshop at Gemse, accessed 9 September 2025, https://gemse.org/sl/externe-veranstaltung-journey-to-sacred-clowning/

for recalling memories, as it can mentally transport the researcher back to the events they observed. (Emerson 2001 cited in Fitzgerald and Mills 2022, 11) Despite their importance in the research process, it is crucial to recognize the inherent limitations of notes. Neither the researchers' observations nor their notes can fully represent what objectively happened in a specific place and time. (Fitzgerald and Mills 2022, 11)

> "Notes are re-construction of events, written from the perspective of their authors and in that author´s voice". (Fitzgerald and Mills 2022, 12)

This highlights the subjective nature of note-taking, as the researcher's perspective and bias inevitably influence the observations and subsequent documentation. (ibid.) Nevertheless notes play a vital role in the reflexive process. They provide an opportunity for researchers to critically evaluate their interpretations and assumptions and recognize how their positionality may have influenced their observations and conclusions. This reflective engagement is particularly important in qualitative research, where the researcher's subjectivity is both a strength and a challenge.

1.1.2. "Ethnoclownography"[9]: Clowning as a means of inquiry

Immersing myself in the world of clowning, dressing up, performing and taking part in workshops, discovering my clown persona, helped to establish a "playful complicity" (King 2017, 10). Following King, I was researching clowning not only as an "object of inquiry but as a means of inquiry" (King 2017, 9), but also as "a way of investigating, learning and communicating" (ibid.). In this sense, I interpreted clowning as a research approach, which Barnaby King (2017) defines as "ethnoclownography" or "clown ethnography" (King 2017, 9). Vulnerability, accompanied by "foolishness and failure" (ibid.), is a core attribute of the clown and can be an effective method for ethnographic research. When I consider lectures from ethnographers, it appears that some have already experienced being laughed at in environments where they need to learn societal norms, almost like a second language. This is especially relevant for those researching in fields that differ significantly (but not exclusively) from their own community's norms. In the Western hemisphere, mistakes are often judged as wrong and are mostly avoided, but they can yield great knowledge and potential. As "foolishness and failure are second nature of the clown" (ibid., 11), I recognized the researcher as a clown within myself, a realization that has shaped my approach. My

[9] The term „ethnoclownography" derives from Barnaby King 2017, 9.

research process has rarely followed a strict structure. Instead, it has been guided by intuition and a willingness to follow my heart. The research process was slow and exploratory, requiring significant time to delve deeply into specific aspects of the topic. This deep dive sometimes made things less efficient, leading to a collection of a lot of information that took a lot of work to sort out. Yet, with the guidance of my supervisor, the process found a balance between playfully getting lost in exploration and staying focused on structure. This mix of curiosity, getting lost in the detail and discipline to focus on what matters, characterized my research journey.

The method of participant observation and the method of “ethnoclownography” by Barnaby King (2022), aren´t that different after all. I recall the words of some clowns, who, in their approach to clowning, demonstrated the potential of this tool for engaging with people during travel. They described how observation and listening are fundamental to their clowning practice. Although they did not study anthropology, I noticed striking parallels between their approach and anthropological methods of engaging with and understanding others. Rather than imposing themselves on others, they spend time with the people, listening attentively to their stories and observing their interactions. They shared a story about an unexpected situation that unfolded in a Maasai community village. While walking, the person’s hair, who shared the story with me, got tangled in a tree branch. Rather than trying to hide the mishap out of embarrassment, they embraced the moment playfully by turning this situation into an improvised act. The people gathered around them began to laugh, and this spontaneous interaction created an opportunity for connection and conversation. This approach resonated with me as it highlights the humanistic aspect of both clowning and anthropology. Such occurrences serve to underscore the fact that all people are susceptible to a certain degree of social discomfort or personal awkwardness. What makes the difference is how one chooses to respond, whether we retreat in discomfort or lean into it with humor and playfulness. I do not suggest deliberately and artificially creating scenarios like this as a method of engagement. Instead, I propose a methodology that embraces humor and spontaneity as integral components of fieldwork. This approach fosters connection and demonstrates that research doesn’t necessarily have to be overly serious to be taken seriously. It can also embrace lightness and joy. The key difference, however, lies in the practice of scientific documentation. While anthropologists document their observations to contribute to academic discourse, clowns do not typically apply this systematic recording and theoretical reflection. Their work remains more performative and intuitive, focusing on the immediate connections rather than the production of scientific data. In this way,

"ethnoclownography" is interpreted in my research as a "practice-based methodology" (King 2017, 10) and an approach to communication and learning, as moments of failure lead to "moments of greatest learning" (King 2017, 10).

1.2. Qualitative interviews: Voices from the field

In order to understand the values, expectations, and experiences embedded in the performative practice of embodying the clown during workshops, I conducted semi-structured interviews with workshop participants and facilitators, allowing them to express their thoughts and experiences freely and encouraging openness. The English word "interview" is derived from the French term "entrevue", meaning "to see each other" (Lamnek 2010, 301) or "a planned gathering" (ibid.). A defining characteristic of an interview is its purposeful nature. It is a structured situation in which one person asks questions and the other person provides answers, creating an inherently asymmetric interaction. (ibid.) In the interviews I conducted, this asymmetry was disrupted by both the interviewees and me. Clowns, known for challenging conventional norms and settings, often extended this playful defiance to the interview process. They subverted the traditional interview dynamic by asking me questions, thereby transforming the exchange into a playful, circular dialogue rather than a unidirectional flow of information. This is why I do not find myself in agreement with the asymmetry described by Lamnek (2010), who implies a one-sided transfer of knowledge. In my approach, the flow of information was circular, allowing both the interviewer and interviewee to share, gain and exchange knowledge. I welcomed this dynamic reversal and responded openly to their questions. Forrest and Nelson (2022) discuss the concept of the "engaged interview" (Forrest and Nelson 2022, 106), contrasting it with the traditional "one-sided request of information" (ibid.). They emphasize that interviews can transcend data collection to become meaningful conversations. (ibid.) Lamnek (2010) distinguishes between two types of interviews: "vermittelnde Interviews" (Lamnek 2010, 304) and "erforschende Interviews" (ibid.), associating the one-sided information flow primarily with the latter, which is common in quantitative research. In contrast, qualitative interviews often involve a level of care that creates a space where emotional and social exchanges are just as significant as the information gathered. This sense of care was central to my interview process. The nature of qualitative interviews allowed participants to freely share their emotions and experiences, even if the information was not directly relevant to the research. What mattered was the relational dynamic and the

feeling of being heard. I employed the guided interview format. This approach involves using a set of pre-formulated questions while allowing flexibility in their order, wording and delivery. (Hopf 2019, 351) This openness encourages conversation while avoiding a rigid structure. The questions I prepared were informed by my own experience in workshops and by informal discussions with clowns and participants. At the end of each interview, I always asked if there was anything they wanted to share that had not been addressed, providing additional space for reflection and input. The interviews took place both in person and via Zoom. Out of 12 interviews, I conducted seven via Zoom and five face-to-face. For the in-person interviews, I visited participants at their homes, conducted one interview while traveling to a workshop and another immediately after a workshop. In total, I conducted interviews with 13 individuals. The duration of the interviews ranged from 30 minutes to three hours, yielding a substantial amount of material. The interviews were conducted in English or German. When I began studying anthropology in 2009, virtual interviews via platforms like Zoom, FaceTime, or Skype were not part of the ethnographic research toolkit; they didn´t even exist yet. Over the years, these technological advances have significantly reshaped research methodologies. While my training emphasized in-person interviews, I found virtual interviews equally rewarding. Trust had already been established during the workshops; however, since time and energy were limited within the workshop setting, interviews outside of the space became necessary. Online interviews offered immense flexibility. Rebecca G. Mirick and Stephanie P. Wladkowski (2019) highlight the opportunities provided by technologies such as Skype. They note that the internet has become an integral part of daily life and research practices. They emphasize that accessibility and flexibility are key benefits, enabling researchers to minimize travel costs and facilitating the participation of individuals who may face barriers, such as caregivers or people with disabilities. (Mirick and Wladkowski 2019, 3061) The free platform Zoom enabled 45-minute video calls at no cost, further facilitating this process. Half of my interviewees were not based in Vienna, residing in other parts of Austria or abroad, or were frequently on the move. Virtual interviews not only overcame geographical barriers but also felt natural, perhaps because the normalization of Zoom during the COVID-19 pandemic had familiarized participants with virtual communication. Additionally, online interviews offered practical advantages: I could keep both the Zoom call and my question notes open simultaneously, maintaining contact with participants while referencing my prepared materials. But virtual interviews also posed challenges. A stable internet connection was essential, and technical glitches—such as lost connections, frozen screens, or indistinct audio—occasionally disrupted the flow of conversations. On one occasion, I forgot to press the record button and lost an hour-long

interview, which was frustrating for both me and the participant. Moreover, nonverbal cues such as gestures and facial expressions were sometimes harder to interpret, and seeing oneself on screen could be distracting for both the interviewer and the interviewee. (Mirick and Wladkowski 2019, 3061)

Despite these challenges, I received positive feedback from participants. They appreciated the opportunity to reflect on their workshop experiences and articulate their thoughts more consciously. Personally, I felt inspired, connected, and fulfilled after each interview. These conversations not only enriched my understanding of their perceptions but also deepened my appreciation for the dynamics of clowning, embodiment, and human interaction. (Fieldnotes Mollnhuber 2024)

1.3. Making a documentary: Visual exploration of clowning

When I decided to research clowning in 2022, I was driven by a desire to incorporate visual material and create a documentary to complement my thesis. I have always been fascinated by films as a medium, finding it far more captivating and exciting than reading. Films have a unique ability to connect with audiences on an emotional level and convey meaning in ways that written words often cannot. During my time in India, a friend from Tamil Nadu, who is also a filmmaker, encouraged me to pursue this dream. As I was a complete novice, he introduced me to the basics of filmmaking, how to use a camera, what to focus on, and the technical details of capturing good footage. Fortunately, he agreed to accompany me as the cameraman for the documentary, providing his expertise and support through the entire process. His guidance was extremely valuable, not only in filming but also in the editing process. He taught me how to cut scenes using a specific software and gave me both technical and aesthetic tips. Bearing this support in mind, I decided to make a documentary with the clown collective “Amares Teatro”, whom I met in India and who kindly agreed to collaborate with me. They generously shared some of their visual footage from their travels, and together, we conducted several interviews to capture their knowledge and perspective, which they were eager to share. Their work inspired me deeply, and my desire to create the documentary was fueled not only by my passion for filmmaking but also by my wish to share their perspectives with a broader audience than the academic world. (Interview with André Singer 2016 cited in Panday 2016, 381) I also found myself frustrated by the traditional scientific emphasis on text-based knowledge production. I wanted to create something that conveyed more, something that spoke to the emotions and experiences behind the knowledge. As Denzin (2019) notes, film speaks the language of feelings and meaning.

(Denzin 2019, 423) Anthropology, unfortunately, still harbors a suspicion that this medium may trivialize the discipline. (Interview with André Singer 2016 cited in Panday 2016, 384) I agree with Singer (2016) and also with Panday (2016) when they talk about the great potential of films as a tool for increasing anthropology´s visibility and making the discipline more widely known to the public. Because greater public recognition, in turn, can open up new opportunities for funding and support and therefore strengthen the field. (Interview with André Singer 2016 cited in Panday 2016, 384) Making a documentary fueled my motivation and provided a fresh challenge to explore a new form of expression. Nevertheless, it's essential to recognize that documentaries are not simply representations of objective reality. Traditionally, have been seen as expressions of an unchanging reality, showcasing the world as it "really" is through naturalistic aesthetics, such as long shots, minimal editing, handheld cameras, and portrayal of people in "real" situations. This aesthetic creates the illusion of unfiltered access to reality. (Denzin 2019, 418) Vietnamese filmmaker Trịnh Thị Minh Hà (1992) suggests that documentary filmmaking should be reflexive. (Trịnh 1992 cited in Denzin 2019, 420) It is crucial to understand that my documentary does not aim to depict reality as it "really is". Instead, it is a construction of reality in which I, as the filmmaker, play an integral role. Documentaries involve framing decisions: what to include, which scenes to cut, and how to present words and images. It would be misguided to assume that what is presented in a documentary is pure reality because, in fact, it is merely one perspective on reality. Trinh encourages us to question this notion of documentary filmmaking by inviting the audience to ask critical questions and not to fall for the illusion of objectivity. (ibid., 421) In this sense, the documentary is not an attempt to present an unmediated reality, but rather a subjective perspective that seeks to engage viewers in a deeper reflection on the stories and ideas being shared.

I did not follow any specific anthropological guidelines or frameworks in creating this documentary and as such, it will not directly contribute to my analysis. Nonetheless, it remains important for me to include the process of its creation, as it plays a significant role in understanding the broader context of my research. The act of making this documentary was not just a means of illustrating but also an integral part of my journey as a researcher. Including this process allows me to reflect on the intersection of artistic and academic practices and the ways in which each shapes the other, providing a more holistic understanding of the work I have undertaken.

1.4. Friendship in research: Close but not too close[10]

Fieldwork relies heavily on the relationships formed between researchers and the people they study. Workshops are deeply personal spaces where participants develop close connections and often show vulnerability. Over time, I built friendships with fellow participants and facilitators. While some might argue that this closeness risks compromising analytical distance, I believe that the idea of complete detachment in fieldwork is an illusion. Relationships and empathy actually enrich rather than diminish the depth of research. Maintaining an ethical stance involves respecting dignity and avoiding exploitation, regardless of personal bonds. As Girtler (1991) notes, identification with the field can be a strength rather than a weakness. The concept of “friendship as method(ology)” (Owton and Allen-Collinson 2014, 284) challenges the traditional hierarchical gap between researcher and participant, promoting instead a more dialogical and collaborative research relationship. This approach shifts the dynamic toward mutuality, emphasizing empathy, emotion, and expressiveness as central elements of the process. By fostering reciprocity and care, the method aims to create a research environment where both sides feel valued and understood. (ibid., 285-287) A key aspect of this approach is recognizing that knowledge production is not a one-sided process. Rather than positioning the researcher as the sole authority or holder of knowledge, this method views research as an exchange—insights emerge from the shared experiences and perspectives of both the researcher and participants. That’s why it was important for me to present the thesis in a way that gives back to the community by providing an accessible overview of the field, relevant literature, and key insights. In this way, the research becomes a dialogue, exploring the field together and enriching understanding for everyone involved. The researcher learns from participants as much as they contribute, breaking down traditional power dynamics and fostering collaboration. (ibid.) This interrelation transforms both the researcher and the participants, creating a new order that hadn`t existed before. This perspective aligns with a pragmatist approach, where the distinction between object and subject becomes less relevant compared to the importance of dialogue and interaction. Inviting friendship into research can deepen the connection between researcher and participant, leading to more nuanced insights. This depth stems from trust and openness built on shared humanity rather than detached objectivity. The method also involves navigating complexities, including the

[10] The title derives from the journal article of Owton and Allen-Collinson (2014).

vulnerability that comes with forming close bonds. Researchers must be prepared to handle emotional and relational challenges that come with this approach. Balancing professional boundaries with genuine care and support requires self-awareness and reflexivity. Being close to the people I interviewed made me especially aware of the potential impact of my writing. I often asked myself: Could I unintentionally hurt someone with what I write? Because of this concern, it was important for me to ensure that everyone involved knew they could revisit their statements and change their minds if they felt uncomfortable with how their words were represented. Because of this concern, it was important for me to ensure that everyone involved knew they could always revisit their statements and change their opinion if they felt uncomfortable with how their words were represented. Since people constantly evolve, they may express a certain opinion in the moment, only to see things differently a year later, or they may say something they didn't fully mean at the time. It was important for me giving them the choice to revisit their words, ensuring that what was said is not set in stone. Recognizing that knowledge representation is not a one-time act, but an ongoing relational process, I remain open to revisiting the use of citations and representations with interviewees, even after the thesis has been finalized and made public.

Although I never deliberately applied this approach in my research, nor would I ever intentionally seek to become friends with the people I studied, these relationships developed organically. This unexpected dynamic compelled me to reflect on the evolving nature of my role as a researcher and the impact of these personal connections on my work. It raised important questions about the fluidity of researcher-participant boundaries and how these relationships shape both the research process and its outcomes. The friendship approach serves as a reminder that, at its core, research is a human endeavor, enriched by the values of reciprocity, care, and emotional engagement. Nevertheless, a certain degree of distancing through processes such as coding and interpreting the data is necessary for gaining a deeper understanding of the phenomenon. I will explore this necessity further in the next chapter.

1.5. Interpretation and analysis: Decoding laughter

One crucial component of qualitative research is the process of interpreting or analyzing the data. This process is not linear but rather a dynamic, cyclical journey that intertwines data collection and analysis, constantly informing and reshaping one another. In qualitative research, particularly when employing Grounded Theory, the analysis process involves several key steps and techniques. After conducting the first few interviews, I started transcribing them to initiate the analytical process. The first step in this process involves asking questions about the gathered data to uncover patterns, meanings, and relationships. I achieved this through the process of "coding" (Hildenbrand 2019, 36). Coding involves categorizing segments of the data that reflect particular themes or ideas. I applied labels or "codes" to pieces of data representing specific concepts or actions, providing a framework for later analysis. (Hildenbrand 2019, 36) Coding aims to make sense of the data by recognizing recurring themes, phrases, or patterns that may reveal underlying social processes or behaviors. As coding progresses, codes become more refined, enabling the making of connections between different pieces of data. This first phase of coding is commonly called "open coding" (Böhm 2019, 477), whereby researchers break the data down into discrete parts in order to analyze them from various angles. (ibid.) In the early stages, after the initial data collection and coding, researchers write "memos" (ibid.), reflective notes that explore their thoughts, interpretations, and insights. These memos provide a way of tracking the development of theory and exploring initial hypotheses before they are fully formed. (Böhm 2019, 477) This process of gathering data, coding it, and writing memos to guide further data collection is known as "theoretical sampling" (Merkens 2019, 296). As codes emerge, they inform decisions about what additional data to gather in order to deepen the understanding of emerging concepts. These steps occur in cycles, which allows me to refine the focus and adapt the research questions and methods as I go along. This flexibility is central to Grounded Theory, which posits that theory emerges directly from the data rather than being imposed from the outset. After openly coding the first few interview transcripts, I conducted another round of analysis to develop concepts—broader categories that go beyond individual codes and often capture abstract ideas or recurring patterns within the data. Multiple concepts may be grouped to form "categories" (Meinefeld 2019, 271). It is essential to acknowledge that categories created by a researcher are inherently influenced by their own perspective and understanding of the data. Therefore, the process of interpretation is always subjective because researchers can only understand others' categories through the lens of their own. From these categories, researchers develop

theories. (ibid.) In Grounded Theory research, theories are not predefined. Instead, they emerge inductively from the relationships between categories, providing a grounded explanation for the phenomena under study.

Furthermore, data collection and analysis are deeply interconnected, iterative processes. As researchers analyze the data through coding, memo writing, and concept formation, they may realize the need to adapt their research questions or methods to better align with the emerging insights. After transcribing and coding the first few interviews, I formed an initial impression of the emerging themes and adapted the interview questions accordingly. Thus, the research process continually loops back with further data being gathered to refine or expand upon the developing theory. It is therefore a circular process. (Hildenbrand 2019, 33) This approach enables a deeper and more nuanced understanding of the research problem as the theory develops based on data. There is an ongoing dialogue between the complexity of the data, the lived experiences of the participants, and the theoretical concepts, with which I attempt to reflect these practices in their meaning. Despite the richness of this method, time and resource limitations often restrict the depth of analysis. In my research, for instance, due to time constraints, I was only able to conduct open coding on six interviews and selective coding on two. However, the other interviews I did not code remain vivid in my memory and continue to shape my understanding of the research topic. Although they were not formally analyzed, they still contribute to the overall narrative and understanding of the study.

The analytical process finishes as a text. The social scientist Eduard Matt (2019) suggests that the “presentation of reality” (Matt 2019, 579) in qualitative research is always a “construction of reality”. (Matt 2019, 579) Researchers, through their coding and theorization, actively shape how reality is represented, meaning that every interpretation is, in some sense, a reconstruction rather than an exact representation of the world, as ethnographers are part of constructing reality. Despite this perspective, the attempt to make sense of or speak about this world should not be mistaken for offering a simple explanation. Instead, it should be recognized as an effort to acknowledge and reveal the complexity inherent in human experiences and the world around us. Such an approach seeks to uncover the layers of meaning that shape our understanding, rather than oversimplifying or reducing the nuances that define them. With that being said, this research represents an attempt to explore and unravel the complexity of one aspect of the clowning phenomenon. The goal is to delve into its multiple layers, considering the diverse meanings, practices, and contexts that shape it. By doing so, this research aims to provide a deeper, more nuanced

perspective on clowning, shedding light on its significance and the various ways it impacts people.

1.6. Epistemological considerations: Producer, process, and production[11]

Although I have already incorporated reflexive elements into the methodological chapters, I would still like to dedicate a whole chapter to the epistemological considerations. Jay Ruby (1980) breaks down the research process and the creation of any product into three sections: producer, process and product. (Ruby 1980, 155–56) The producer is both sender of the message and its creator. The process consists of the methods used to shape and transmit the message. The product is the final text received by the audience. (ibid.) It is essential to shed light on all of these aspects. In the past, revealing the producer and the process was often regarded as confusing or a breach of the illusion. Times have changed and today, it is crucial for researchers to critically engage with these dimensions. In the following chapters, I will discuss the system of knowledge production in which the research process is embedded, personal perspectives of the producer/researcher, and the nature of the field itself.

1.6.1. Constructing knowledge: Power, perspective, and playfulness

Playfulness, coupled with an openness to making mistakes, proved to be an invaluable asset on this journey. The practice of clowning inspired me to embrace the imperfections and uncertainties inherent in the research and writing process. As I continually grappled with how knowledge is produced within academia, clowning provided a valuable perspective on this, because it maintains an ambivalent relationship with questions of domination and production. As King stated, "Clown-thinking is an embodied practice of critical reflection [..]" (King 2017, 11). Through the method of "ethnoclownography" (ibid.), I discovered a way to recognize different forms of knowledge as it highlights practice as research and challenges traditional epistemological hierarchies by emphasizing embodied knowledge, or "know how" (Nelson 2013 cited in King 2017, 10), which arises through performative activities such as clowning. The concept of embodied knowledge disrupts traditional academic perceptions of

[11] The differentiation of producer, process, and production is elaborated by Jay Ruby (1980).

what constitutes knowledge. Robin Nelson (2013) distinguishes between three types of knowledge: “know-that” referring to academic knowledge, and “know-what” a more tacit awareness of how knowledge is defined and classified. (ibid.) Ethnoclownography engages with these distinctions while also incorporating a “hermeneutic of experience, relocation, copresence, humility, and vulnerability” (Conquergood 2013 cited in King 2017, 10). This perspective invites a critical re-evaluation of academic knowledge production and highlights the epistemic potential of embodied, performative, and experiential ways of knowing.

The need to critically evaluate academia is evident in the binary distinction between male and female, as some people I interviewed for my research identify as non-binary and use the pronouns “they” and “them”. When I began my studies fifteen years ago, these topics were largely absent from academic discourse. Today, it is becoming increasingly common for people to introduce themselves not only by name, but also by their preferred pronouns, which are sometimes included in email signatures. Queer anthropology provides a valuable perspective through which to critically examine such categories. A key feature of queer anthropology is its commitment to deconstructing what Margot Weiss (2022) refers to as “normative knowledge projects” (Weiss 2022, 239). Rather than being limited to the study of LGBTQ+ individuals, queer approaches aim to disrupt normative assumptions in research itself by questioning established categories, norms, and power dynamics. This approach resonates deeply with my perspective and experience. As an interdisciplinary field, queer anthropology examines various expressions of sexuality and gender and how these shape access to resources, status, and societal value. (Wilson 2023, 13–14) Anthropology has played a pivotal role in challenging Western interpretations of sexuality and gender that were once moralistic, evolutionary, and pathologizing. Rather than treating sex and gender as fixed or universal, anthropologists have demonstrated that particular cultural contexts influence them. Queer anthropology builds on this by examining how societies actively construct gendered and sexual subjectivities and regulate intimate relationships. This diversity reveals that hetero-normative categories such as “male” and “female” reflect particular worldviews, particularly of imperialist Western society. Historically, missionaries and colonial explorers encountered sexual practices and gender expressions, such as sex between men, premarital sex, and individuals assigned male at birth living in women´s roles, that were rejected by their Christian-European societies as sins. These encounters were often interpreted through a moralizing lens and used to justify colonial domination. (Morgensen 2011 cited in Wilson 2023, 2) While early anthropological explorations cannot be separated from their colonial history, they also documented cultural diversity, revealing

more variations in how sex and gender are expressed in other cultures. Following Darwin´s theory of evolution, explanations for such diversity shifted from religious to "scientific" paradigms, positioning sexual reproduction as central to human development, where practices were ordered in stages in a linear evolutionary model. The patriarchal nuclear family was presented as the most evolved form, while other arrangements were labelled primitive, savage or barbaric. By the mid-20th century, this evolutionary ranking had been rejected, and anthropologists began to ask why expressions such as homosexuality, premarital sex, or transgender identities were embraced in some cultures. William Willard Hill´s (1935) study of Navajo culture, for instance, describes how a transgender child was seen as a blessing and believed to bring success and prosperity to the family and community. (Hill 1935 cited in Wilson 2019, 3)

Anthropological research has shaped queer life today by revealing the power of norms and offering alternatives to Western models of gender and sexuality. This work has contributed to making life more livable for those who do not conform to the normative ideals that dominate personal life. In the 1960s and 1970s, subfields such as the anthropology of homosexuality and lesbian and gay anthropology emerged, eventually evolving later into queer and transgender anthropology. Explicitly anti-homophobic, these fields were influenced by broader social movements that drew attention to inequality and stigmatization. (Wilson 2023, 5–6) Gayle Rubin´s influential 1975 work framed sexuality as a "vector of oppression" (Rubin 1975 cited in Wilson 2023, 6), identifying how specific modes of sexuality (e.g. married, heterosexual) are privileged while others are marginalized. Her insights laid the groundwork for queer anthropology. (Rubin 1975 cited in Wilson 2023, 6)

In the English-speaking world, "queer" was historically used as a pejorative. (Wilson 2023, 6) In the 1980s, it was reclaimed as an empowering term, as seen in activist slogans such as "We´re here, we´re queer, get used to it!" (Wilson 2023, 6) and represented resistance "to regimes of the normal" (Warner 1993 cited in Wilson 2023, 6). Around this time, queer theory also emerged as an academic discipline aimed at "identifying a political relationship of subjects to dominant modes of power, usually understood as resistance - whether intentional or not" (Wilson 2023, 6). As Jagose (2002) emphasized, queer theory highlights that norms are ideological constructs rather than universal truths. (Jagose 2002 cited in Wilson 2023, 6)

The concept of queer is constantly evolving. In this sense, queer anthropological research[12] is called into question by processes such as globalization and colonialism, which destabilize the very notion of the "field" (Manalansan 2016, 596). Thus, acknowledging the lived complexities means embracing "the messy and often uncomfortable enmeshment of both anthropologists and the communities they study". (Manalansan 2016, 596) Queer anthropology is not about fixing or owning but "about dreaming of utopic world(s) to enable ways to imagine, think, or desire 'otherwise'" (Manalansan 2016, 596) and therefore "a desire that will always be frustrated, fall short, disappoint" (ibid.). Queer anthropology provides valuable perspectives for my thesis to understand how clowning disrupts social norms, much like queer practices that challenge heteronormativity and fixed identities. This allows for framing clowning as a queer practice of transformation and change.

1.6.2. The self in the field: Personal perspectives and academic inquiry

> "There are as many clowns as there are human beings.
> There is one way to stand, and infinite ways to fall.
> Intelligence is limited. Stupidity is infinite." (Fusetti 2025, no page)

As mentioned above, revealing the producer´s presence was historically uncommon and often considered "narcissistic, overly personal, subjective, and even unscientific" (Ruby 1980, 157). This exposure was thought to break the illusion, as audiences were not supposed to see behind the scenes. (Goffman 1959 cited in Ruby 1980, 157) In this chapter, I will reflect on how my character has influenced the research process, enabling and constraining particular approaches. Conducting research and writing a thesis presents a range of challenges, particularly for individuals whose cognitive and working styles do not align with conventional academic structures. My sensitivity, introversion, and a preference for detailed, reflective, or perfectionist work all shaped how I navigated this process. Reading and writing, especially in the formats required by academia, never felt like my natural mode of expression. Universities often seem designed for a specific type of thinker: those who thrive on analyzing text, written argumentation, and processing knowledge in those terms. This was not how I experienced the world. Once again, I found myself embodying a kind of clown persona that did not fit the typical academic mold. It is worth reflecting on the kinds of capabilities that researchers bring to their work and which types of scholars academia supports and facilitates while failing to recognize the strengths of those whose skills do not align with efficiency or speed. Under previous curricula, many students struggled with writing

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[12] Further readings on queer methodologies, see Browne and Nash (2010).

their theses and many ultimately abandoned the process, despite it being the final step toward obtaining their degree. The challenges of working in isolation, rather than as part of a team or on a structured project, as well as the profound personal and intellectual difficulties involved, are rarely addressed in university settings. Yet, they profoundly impact students´ ability to complete their research. Given the widespread nature of these struggles, further investigation into this issue is warranted. Despite these challenges, academic institutions have undergone significant changes over the past decade. Today, CTL[13] offers support services, psychological support groups exist for students, and curricula have been adapted to include thesis-writing courses early in the academic journey. Still, these resources remain relatively unknown and, in my view, should be better integrated and explicitly addressed within the curriculum.[14] Another major challenge in the research process is the interplay between time constraints, financial limitations and the expectation of high-quality academic work. Higher education institutions impose strict deadlines, often with financial penalties for those who fail to meet them, such as additional tuition fees. These institutional frameworks rarely take into account the personal circumstances that people are experiencing during their research. Research, much like personal life, does not always adhere to rigid timelines. Meaningful inquiry requires depth, reflection, and an organic development of ideas. For those who work in a meticulous and detail-oriented manner or struggle with perfectionism, these pressures can be particularly challenging to navigate. Nevertheless, anthropology offered a counterbalance to me. Its focus on empirical research, encounters in the field, and engagement with lived experiences resonated with me deeply. I genuinely enjoyed conducting interviews, listening to them repeatedly, and discovering patterns or themes through those conversations. The process of connecting with people, hearing their stories, and gaining insight into their perspectives felt far more natural and fulfilling than sitting in front of a blank page. In this way, I gradually found my path back to university. By embracing my clown persona, I discovered a way to integrate my playful, intuitive side with the demands of academic work. Anthropology´s emphasis on human connection and understanding provided a bridge, enabling me to reconcile my creative inclinations with the structured world of academia. My clown persona showed me how to embrace imperfection, to trust the

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[13] „Center for teaching and learning“, University of Vienna, accessed 9 September 2025, https://ctl.univie.ac.at/angebote-fuer-studierende/

[14] Further support in Vienna see the service of ÖH-Bundesvertretung, the legal representation of all students in Austria: “Gemeinsam statt einsam”, accessed 9 September 2025, https://www.oeh.ac.at/formulare/gemeinsam-statt-einsam-schreiben/ and “Mental health Gruppenangebot”, accessed 9 September 2025, https://www.oeh.ac.at/mental_health-gruppenangebot/ .

process and to make peace with the unique way I navigate the world of knowledge. (Fieldnotes Mollnhuber 2024) Perhaps one day, “ethnoclownography” or the clownesque approach will be recognized within academia and taught with the same legitimacy and rigor as Malinowski’s participant observation.

1.6.3. From place to practice: Where is my field?

While conducting my field research, I grappled with the boundaries of my research field. I engaged in discussions with fellow clown colleagues to explore different perspectives on the issue. This is a particularly relevant issue when researching phenomena that challenge the boundaries of cultural ownership and belonging. For instance, when exploring clowning workshops, questions arose as to whether this practice belongs to one’s own cultural context or derives from another. The concept of the clown feels familiar to me, both as a person and researcher, yet the clowning approach I studied in particular merged elements of Native American philosophy with Western clowning traditions. Although the teachers I encountered were socialized in countries such as Uruguay, Italy, the Czech Republic, and Germany, the language of clowning itself seems to transcend national borders. Clowning can be practiced anywhere, so where should I draw the boundaries? I began to ask myself, what defines whether a phenomenon can be considered part of one’s own culture? Is it tied to nationality, socialization, or shared values? In my case, I never felt like an outsider in this exploration. Perhaps it was because I found commonalities in the participants’ and clowns’ spirits that I met: the shared excitement of exploring the clown, the openness to trying new things, and the deep curiosity that united us. From this perspective, I could say that I was researching “my own tribe”. Analyzing the phenomenon solely through the lens of nationality would reveal a different picture. The cultural hybridity of the approach I studied reflects a blending of traditions, philosophies, and practices from diverse influences, which is a reflection of our increasingly globalized world. This raises important questions about how individuals navigate cultural intersections and how shared human experiences transcend these boundaries. Unlike traditional anthropology, which focused on specific “cultures”, more recent approaches examine the growing complexity and diversity of contemporary societies and the researchers’ cultural contexts. Instead of exploring completely unfamiliar fields beyond their cultural background, researchers started to analyze their own social and cultural surroundings. This involves the researcher deliberately creating a sense of analytical distance to critically examine how realities are constructed and produced socially, emphasizing a process of “methodological defamiliarization” (Lüders 2019, 390). Consequently, the focus has shifted towards researching the practices of reality

construction. (ibid.) Akhil Gupta and James Ferguson (1997) challenges the traditional notion of the "field" as a single, privileged location for anthropological knowledge. (Gupta and Ferguson 1997, 5) He advocates decentering the field and moving away from the idea that knowledge is produced exclusively in a fixed, bounded location. Instead, he proposes an approach based on Donna Haraway's (1988) "situated knowledge" (Haraway 1988 cited in Gupta and Ferguson 1997, 37), which acknowledges the interconnectedness of various socio-political spaces. She argues that rethinking the concept of the field is a crucial step toward practicing decolonized anthropology. This involves dismantling the distancing and exoticization that have historically shaped conventional anthropological fieldwork. (ibid., 38) They advocate for moving beyond "well-intentioned place-making" (ibid.) to embrace a more fluid and relational understanding of research sites, which critically examine how knowledge is produced across different contexts rather than within an isolated, romanticized "field" (ibid.). Given my doubts about my field, I found clarity in these texts, which challenge the traditional notion of fieldwork as being tied to a specific territorial location. Rather than viewing the field as a fixed, geographically or socio-culturally bounded space, these approaches emphasize a methodology that investigates how realities are constructed, negotiated, and experienced in different contexts. This perspective helped me to shift my focus from locating a singular, well-defined research site to examining the dynamic processes through which meaning and social realities are continuously produced. Throughout the research process and during numerous discussions with my supervisor, I came to understand ethnography as the art of revealing the complexity of a phenomenon. Instead of trying to define a single, fixed reality, this approach is used for exploring the different layers, perspectives, and contradictions that shape social life. As Akhil Gupta and James Ferguson (1997) suggests, ethnography is increasingly recognized as a flexible and adaptive methodology that does not simply document a static cultural or social landscape but instead diversifies and deepens our understanding of various places, people, and situations. This approach acknowledges that knowledge is never absolute or universal but is shaped through context, interaction, and interpretation. (Gupta and Ferguson 1997, 37)

2. Reimagining the clown: From stereotype to anthropology

„It´s hard to really catch the clown […]" (Interview with Amber, 5 July 2024, 24)

2.1. Etymological traces and defining the term clown

> "Clowning is phenomenological becoming, a constant process of being in motion; therefore, the clown cannot be fully defined under the cultural conserves of words. Some people say that the answer to the question 'What is a clown?' is harder than performing any of the incredible numbers at the circus. This is because the force of this art lies precisely there–on this mutant and spontaneous being." (Bruhn et al. 2019, 63)

The meaning of the term "clown" has proven to be notoriously difficult to define. Throughout history, the phenomenon of clowns has been known by many different names. It is a Western term that has spread globally, which can be attributed to colonization, Western imperialism, and globalization. (B. Johnson 2025, no page)

As there has been little substantial academic discourse on the various names and terms used to describe the phenomenon of clowns[15], I will present a selection of names, listed by B. Johnson (2025, no page) that may have been used throughout history and in different cultural contexts. This list by B. Johnson (2025) shall acknowledge the complexity and plurality involved in naming this phenomenon:

> "Auguste, Badin (Medieval France), Bobo (Spain 1500's), Buffoon, Cabotin (Italy 1500's), Cascaduer (France), Charlie (European Tramp Clown), Chou (China), Claune (France 1800's), Contrary (Native America Plains Tribes), Excentrique (Solo French Clown), Fool, Gleeman (England, medieval), Gracioso (Spain late 1500's), Grotesque (France, acrobatic clown, 1820-1850), Hano (Native American), Hanswurst (Germany & Austria 1700), Harlequin (Commedia Del Arte & English Pantomime), Jack Pudding (England 1600's), Jester, Joey, Jongleur (ninth century Europe), Kartala (Bali), Koyemsi (Native American Hope Tribe),

[15] Anthropologists have referred to the role embodied by individuals in so-called pre-industrial societies during certain rituals as "ritual clown" or "sacred clown". Little clarification is often provided as to why these specific terms were chosen, nor is there any critical reflection on the potentially imposing or reductive nature of such labels. (Observation documented in fieldnotes Mollnhuber 2024)

Merry Andrew (England, 1600 & 1700's), Minstrel (Europe, medieval, & America, 1800's & 1900's), Narr (Germany 1600), Newekwe (Native America Zuni Tribe), Nibhatkin (Burma), Pagliacci (Italy), Pantalone (Commedia Del Arte & English Pantomime), Pedrolino (Commedia Del Arte), Penasar (Bali), Pickle Herring (Holland & Germany, 1600 & 1700's), Pierrot (France), Rizhii (Russia, 1800's), Semar (Java), Skomorokhi (Russia 1000), Tramp (America), Trickster (mythology of many cultures), Troubadour (Medieval France), Vidusaka (India), Vita (India), Wayang Orang (Indonesia), Whiteface and Zany (Italy)." (B. Johnson 2025, no page)

It is important to recognize that the term "clown" originated in Europe. While the precise origin of the word itself remains unclear, there are three main theories (Kalb 2017, 15):

1. The term appears in William Shakespeare's "A Midsummer Night's Dream" (1596), where it is used to describe a rustic or fool-like character.

2. It is referenced in an 1817 flyer for a British equestrian performance troupe, suggesting its connection to theatrical and circus traditions.

3. The word may have originally been a derogatory term in English, used to insult peasants who were unfamiliar with the customs and social norms of urban life.

Etymological traces link the French word "colon" (meaning peasant) to its Latin root "colonus". According to one theory, the word originates from an equestrian performance troupe whose stage character was called "Claude the Peasant" (Kapuy 2008, 92). The transformation of "Claude" and "colon" gave rise to the term "Claune". Over time, this evolved into the English word "clown". (ibid.)

Another theory on the etymology of the term "clown" is that it appeared in the 16th century, according to Oxford English Dictionary, and originally meant "clod", "clot" or "lump" (Oxford English Dictionary no date cited in Handelman 2005, 1838), referring to the "coagulation of liquids" (Handelman 2005, 1838), "lumpish adhesion of materials" (ibid.) and "semisolid lump formed by congelation and coagulation" (ibid.). The term refers to the thickening of liquids, the sticking together of materials in a lumpy way, and the formation of a semi-solid mass through processes such as solidification and coagulation. This suggests "an entity that is unfinished or incomplete" (Handelman 2005, 1838), "one that hangs together in a loose and clumsy way" (ibid.). In this sense, a "clown is lumpish in its imperfect–but congealing and adhering–fusion of attributes" (Handelman 2005, 1838). Its consistency suggests a "processuality and dynamism rather than structure and stasis" (Handelman 2005, 1838), according to Don Handelman´s entry in the "Encyclopedia of religion" (Handelman 2005, 1838-1841).

The meaning of the word “clown” can vary depending on the context. For example, politicians are sometimes referred to as clowns, often as a derogatory term. This can offend professional clowns, who regard their profession as an honorable, very difficult, sensitive, artistic. (Paul 2013 cited in Kalb 2017, 16) In this way, the term clown has multiple meanings in different areas, according to Elodie Kalb (2017), such as (Kalb 2017, 16):

- a “clown act” (Kalb 2017, 16) in the context of circus,
- a “role” (Kalb 2017, 16) in the context of theatre,
- a derogatory term referring to a “social type” (Kalb 2017, 16) in specific social situations, like a class clown,
- a costume following “aesthetic codes” (Kalb 2017, 16), for example, in the context of the carnival.

The clown is often linked to figures such as the fool and the jester, both of whom Michael Bala (2010) identifies as ancestors of the clown. (Bala 2010, 55) An early example can be seen in the Fool card in the Tarot, an unnumbered card that holds an ambiguous position, representing either the lowest or the highest aspect. The fool may be depicted as “a traveler, an entertainer of children, a simple-minded or uncomplicated person without money, status, power or intellect” (Bala 2010, 56). Yet, it is precisely his role as an outsider that enables him to reveal hidden possibilities and express thoughts and ideas that others dare not voice. (ibid.)

Despite extensive research, I was unable to find a definition of the "clown" in any accessible anthropological encyclopedia at the University of Vienna[16]. This gap highlights a potential oversight in the field, suggesting that although the concept of the clown is culturally and socially significant, it may not have been thoroughly explored within anthropology yet. Nonetheless, I did find an entry on clowns in “The Encyclopedia of Religion” (Handelman 2005, 1838), as already mentioned above, which focused on ritual clowns in the context of religious performances. In ritual, clowns “are agents of change, mediators who dissolve and transform the fixity of categories of performance and narrative that boundaries organize and integrate” (Handelman 2005, 1840). They embody contradictions and shift between opposites, rarely belonging entirely to one side, and are therefore masters of the boundary.

[16] “Encyclopedia of Anthropology”, accessed 9 September 2025, https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/book/10.1002/9781118924396 ,

“The New World Encyclopedia”, accessed 9 September 2025, https://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Info:Main_Page,

“The Routledge Encyclopedia of Social and Cultural Anthropology” (Spencer and Bernard 2010)

They are figures of liminality[17]. (Handelman 2005, 1840) Their “ambiguous and ambivalent” (Handelman 2005, 1838) character is significant because it contains “holistically, albeit lumpishly” (ibid.) all attributes that contradict one another, making it not homogeneous. This “paradoxical figure […] is neither wise nor foolish, yet it is both without being wholly one or the other” (Handelman 2005, 1838). Referring to the etymological traces of the term “clown” mentioned above: “The clown is a construct with a sense of incompleteness, yet a whole (a lump), that is in a condition of transformation (congelation) but that is somehow out of place in context (a clod)” (Handelman 2005, 1838). The ritual clown[18] manifests attributes of “multiplicity and fluidity” (ibid., 1838) and is “continually in motion within itself” (Handelman 2005, 1838). They often appear at the transition of rituals, marking entry or exit points, physically and symbolically and they emphasize the shift between the ordinary world and the ritual space, or between the different stages of the ritual itself. These qualities of the ritual clown are distinct from those of the European circus clown and the traditional figures of comedy, who manipulate boundaries but lack transformative capacities. (Handelman 2005, 1839) In my research, several participants also emphasized the absence of transformative qualities in the mainstream entertainment clowning industry. They made a clear distinction between the specific clown workshop they attended, which they found deeply transformative, and other forms of clown training or formats that they felt were more focused on performance and entertainment rather than intentional personal or emotional growth.

In this thesis, I chose to use the terms “clown” and “clowning” for two main reasons. First, both terms were used by participants and facilitators. Second, they are widely recognized internationally, making the topic easier to identify. Occasionally, I refer to “clowning” to emphasize the process and activities rather than the clown figure itself.

Furthermore, clowns take on many more different forms than those of the anthropologically investigated “ritual clown”, such as shamanic/medical/hospital clowns (Hendriks 2012;

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[17] Liminality is a concept developed by Victor Turner (no date) to describe an in-between state or transitional phase where everyday rules, social norms, roles, and symbols are temporarily suspended, deactivated, or destabilized. This suspension allows for a reorganization or reimagining of societal structures, identities, and meanings. (V. Turner no date cited in Bachmann-Medick 2014, 116)

[18] The terminology of "ritual clown" has not been thoroughly analyzed or debated in any literature that I could locate. The term is often used interchangeably with "sacred clown" and "ceremonial clown," although these terms may emphasize different aspects of clowning practices. This interchangeable use suggests a lack of precise or consistent definitions. While the terms "ritual clown" and “ceremonial clown” generally highlight their function within structured rituals and ceremonies, the term "sacred clown" may underscore their spiritual and cosmological significance. (Observations documented in fieldnotes Mollnhuber 2024)

Rindstedt 2014; Rämgård, Carlson, and Mangrio 2016), activist/political/rebel clowns (I. Johnson 2006; Kapuy 2008; Bogad 2010; Course 2013; Sorensen 2015), female clowns (Hereniko 2023; Begeré 2018; Huntsman and Hooper 1975; Counts and Counts 1992; Barlow 1992; Mitchell 1992), and evil/creepy/horror clowns (Roth 2016; Singh and Sharma 2023; Christen 2016; Weihe 2016), among others that are not covered in this entry. I will further explore these variations of clowning in chapter 2.3 "Clown in research: sociocultural and psychological approaches". I want to emphasize that these types of clowns vary depending on the sociocultural context or purpose. There is no single definition of a clown or one definitive clown.

2.2. The history of clowning

The history of clowning is not understood as a linear progression aimed at defining a specific genre, type or art form. Instead, it is characterized by continual reinterpretation and adaptation to different social or cultural contexts[19]. (Kalb 2017, 17)

While researching the history of clowning, I encountered many vague interpretations, which left me frustrated as I attempted to write a chapter on the subject. Over time, I realized this frustration reflected larger issues in the current scholarly landscape surrounding the historical study of clowning. Davison (2013) notes a persistent anxiety surrounding the history of clowning, pointing out a lack of solid historical evidence and the dominance of generic, oversimplified stories, followed by a lack of new research to revise this history. Typically, the history of clowns unfolds like this:

> "[…] first came clowns in Ancient Egypt, then in Greece and Rome, then in the Middle Ages we had jesters, the Italians brought commedia dell´arte to the rest of Europe after the Renaissance, there were clowns in Shakespeare, Grimaldi was the greatest English clown ever, clowns had their golden age in the circus at the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th centuries, then degenerated post-second World War, but Lecoq and his followers rescued clowning and turned it into an art-form, and now its taught in drama schools. Oh, and other cultures have clowns, too." (Davison 2013, 18-19)

[19] In terms of clown history, the rhizome by Deleuze and Guattari (1995) offers a powerful analytical lens. The clown's evolution is marked not by linear succession but by rhizomatic entanglements, spanning geographies and temporalities, contributing to the clown's continued vitality. (Deleuze and Guattari 1995 cited in Sacchet 2009, 101) I will explore the rhizome further in chapter 3.4.2.2.2. "Resisting labels, identity and rhizome".

Victor Vladimirov[20] asserts that any progress in clowning requires a philosophy of clowning, which in turn depends on an understanding of its history. (Vladimirov 1993 cited in Davison 2013, 18) Tristan Rémy cautions that creating a chronology of clowns can be misleading, arguing that the history of clowns can only be fully understood in relation to broader histories, including cultural, social, political, economic, technological, and ideological contexts. (Rémy 1945 cited in Davison 2013, 19) To truly grasp what clowns do, one must examine how their roles and significance interconnect with the historical moments in which they exist. (Davison 2013, 19) Although I did not intend to challenge conventional historical summaries through original research—something that could fill an entire thesis—I have chosen to present a brief history of clowning. This overview is based on a mix of accessible online sources and well-known reference materials. By compiling this summary, I aim to provide context without undertaking an exhaustive, deeply original analysis of the topic. As Davison notes: "History can be used to reveal, to deceive, to inform, or to mislead" (Davison 2013, 17). It is worth noting that the history of clowning has been presented in various, sometimes essentialist, interpretations in a range of publications. This observation serves as a reminder that any recounting of history, including this one, is inherently shaped by perspective. This approach reflects the duality of history as both a tool for illumination and a potential instrument of distortion. Rather than attempting to establish a definitive historical record, this overview serves as a foundation for understanding how clowning has evolved and the diverse roles it continues to play in culture and performance:

2.2.1. Ancient times

Clowning can be traced back to ancient times, where comedic and foolish figures played an important role in rituals and community events. The earliest record dates back to around 2,400 B.C. in ancient Egyptian hieroglyphics from the Fifth Dynasty. Clowns in this period were believed to hold a socio-religious role, as priests often took on the role of clowns. (B. Johnson 1992, no page) Furthermore, ancient Egyptians hosted African Pygmies, known as "Dangas," who wore leopard skins and masks to entertain the royal families and Pharaohs with stories, imitations, and dances depicting the gods. (see Sandwell Museums and Arts 2020; Clown Bluey 2025)

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[20] Speech of Victor Vladimirov, Director of the Moscow State College of Circus and Variety Arts at the 1993 World Clown Congress", accessed 9 September 2025, https://brucecharliejohnson.com/2024/06/16/history-and-philosophy/

By 300 B.C., jesters served during China's Zhou Dynasty, providing entertainment and insight. “Yu-Sze” was one of China's most famous court jesters. He served under Emperor Ch`in Shin Huang-Ti, known as the commander for the construction of the Great Wall of China. (Davis 2016) The Great Wall was a costly project, both in terms of cost and human lives. When the emperor decided the wall should be painted white—a task that would take endless time and cost countless lives—no one at court dared to disagree. Only Yu-Sze was brave enough to speak out. Legend says he expressed his disapproval by painting an image of a penis on the wall. Though whipped for his defiance and given the task to whitewash the entire wall by himself, he cleverly avoided punishment by saying he wasn´t the right person to do the job because he was colorblind. Word of the confrontation spread quickly, prompting the nation to mock the emperor's folly and ultimately leading him to abandon his plan. As a result, Yu-Sze became a national hero. (ibid.)

In 100 A.D., India, clowns acted as interpreters, translating Sanskrit dramas that told epic stories, such as “Ramayan”, into the Prakrit language to make them accessible to the broader population, who spoke Prakrit, since Sanskrit was spoken only by gods, kings, ministers, and sages. The term “Vidhusaka” is either the Sanskrit word for clown or the name of a particular clown character. (B. Johnson 2025, no page)

> “According to a broad definition, the Vidushaka stands for the creative person who interacts with society and offers satirical comments on its happenings; he challenges the egotistical narratives of those in authority and works as a platform for the voice of the people.” (Sanathanan & Balakrishnan 2021 cited in Singh and Sharma 2023, 245)

Jesters have played an essential role in the Royal Courts of ancient India. One of the earliest jesters in North India is, for example, “Gonu Jha,” who served Mithila Hari Singh. Legend says Goddess Kali blessed him with extraordinary intelligence, which he cleverly used to outwit her, earning the nickname "Prottutpannamoti," meaning a quick-witted person. His sharp mind and humorous stories have made him well-known throughout North India. (Rakesh 1998 cited in Singh and Sharma 2023, 246) According to Pushpraj Singh and Preeti Sharma (2023), Indian jesters were “independent of the hierarchical court system” (Singh and Sharma 2023, 249). They supported the oppressed and challenged the authority of the wealthy and powerful. In this role, they served as “political humorists” (ibid.). Free from ties to the court system and without allegiance to any specific region, state, or religion, their advice was often seen as honest and trustworthy. Their main task was to hold the monarch accountable by satirizing political decisions and criticizing court life overall. (ibid.)

In ancient Greece, clowns became popular performers in theatrical shows. They were often depicted as bald and wearing padded costumes to appear large and comical, usually equipped with an exaggerated, artificial phallus secured around their waist. These clowns performed in plays, humorously mocking villains and engaging the audience by throwing peanuts. They brought the myths and stories of the time to life through their performances. (see Sandwell Museums and Arts 2020; Clowns.com 2025)

The ancient Roman clowns, featured in dramas, had four distinct types: Sannio, Stupidus, Scurra, and Moriones. (ClownAntics 2019, no page) “Sannio” was the most popular clown, celebrated for their mime performances. They weren´t wearing any masks, not like most of the time, to see their hilarious facial expressions and mimics. “Stupidus”, deriving from the Latin word for “mimic fool”, used slapstick, often imitating the serious actors in their troupe, and typically wore masks. The “Scurra” was a clown of the lower class, characterized by physical peculiarities. The word scurrilous derives from it, which refers to people with physical abnormalities or mental illnesses. Lastly, there were the “Moriones”, whose name inspired the term "moron”. Often uneducated and sometimes having disabilities, they were owned by the Courts. It was believed that they received special powers from the Gods and brought luck. (see Sandwell Museums and Arts 2020)

2.2.2. Middle ages

During the medieval period, fools and jesters were central figures in royal courts and town entertainment. Their role extended beyond simply making people laugh. They were instrumental in reinforcing religious and cultural values and even instigating shifts in social norms. By the 14th century, clowns like jugglers and fools began appearing in tarot cards, symbolizing new beginnings and the courage to explore unknown opportunities. (B. Johnson 1992, no page) “Rahere”, a notable jester at the court of King Henry I of England in the early 12th century, left an enduring legacy far beyond his role as an entertainer. During a pilgrimage to Rome, he fell ill with malaria and, amid his hardship, pledged that if he recovered, he would establish a “hospital for the poor” (ClownBluey 2025, no page). True to his word, he established a hospital in London, dedicated to St. Bartholomew. Although the priory was suspended under King Henry VIII, the hospital, now known as “Bart’s”, continues to operate as one of the world’s most renowned teaching hospitals. (ClownBluey 2025, no page)

In Turkey around 1440, a famous clown named “Nasr el-Din” gained lasting fame as a cult figure and folk hero, with countless humorous stories told about him over the centuries.

Serving as the court jester to Tamburlaine or Timur, the Mongol conqueror, Nasr el-Din was known for his blend of "cunning, naivety, buffoonery" (ClownBluey 2025, no page) and sharp wit. Renowned for his love of practical jokes and outsmarting others, he remains a legendary figure in comic folklore. (ibid.)

Among the most notable jesters in the East was for example "Bahalul", the jester of the great Caliph Harun al-Rashid of Iraq, famously associated with wisdom hidden beneath a facade of simplicity. Known for his sharp wit and lively humor, Bahalul once cleverly deflected a daunting task. When the Caliph asked him to compile a list of all the fools in Baghdad, Bahalul responded, "That would be difficult, oh Commander of the Faithful, but if you desire to know the wise men, the catalogue may soon be completed!" (ClownBluey 2025, no page)

2.2.3. Modern era [21]

Throughout European history[22], jesters have played significant roles as entertainers and social commentators, often enjoying unique privileges such as freedom of speech in otherwise restrictive societies. Their proximity to power brought both friends and enemies at court. For instance, "Archy Armstrong", jester to James I and Charles I, King of England, retired as a wealthy landowner despite being widely disliked. "William Summers", jester to the King of England, Henry VIII, earned admiration for his kindness and even survived the often-lethal environment of Henry's court, considering how many people he beheaded. (ClownBluey 2025, no page) "John Scogan", King of England's Edward IV's jester, was known for his scholarly background and practical jokes, though one prank involving feigned death led to his banishment. Unable to repay a large sum he had borrowed from the King, Scogan devised a clever ruse to escape his debt. He pretended to be dead, convincing his friends to dress in mourning attire and carry him on a bier as part of a funeral. The group eventually crossed paths with King Edward, who was moved by the apparent loss of his jester. The King spoke kindly of Scogan and even forgave the outstanding debt. At that moment, Scogan sprang up from the bier, declaring, "It is so revivifying that it has called me

[21] I can also refer to Jon Davison's thesis "The Self-Deconstruction of Clowning", which provides a more detailed overview and critically examines the history of clowning in Europe and America. (Davison 2016)

[22] Reading about clown history, I observed that these narratives often highlight figures and practices from European circus and theater, overlooking contributions from other regions or alternative clowning traditions. Expanding this inquiry could provide a more comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon of clowning beyond Europe. (Observations documented in fieldnotes Mollnhuber 2025)

to life again” (ClownBluey 2025, no page). Amused but not forgiving of the deception, the King promptly banished him to France. (ibid.)

One of the few recorded female jesters, serving in the court of Queen of England Mary I and Elizabeth I, was “Jane the Fool”. She probably had mental or physical disabilities. According to Nicholas Breton, this kind of fool was considered closer to nature and God, and therefore of high value to the nobility. (Breton no date cited in Stohrer 2020, no page)

Modern clowns trace their origins not only to court jesters but also to street performers, actors, and pantomimists. The term "clown" appeared in Shakespeare's works, referring to clumsy characters who combined wit, critique and humor to challenge authority. (B. Johnson 1992, no page) Later, Italian “Commedia dell’arte” influenced European comic, where characters like Harlequin and Columbine evolved. The Commedia dell'Arte tradition in Renaissance Italy introduced iconic clown characters, such as Arlecchino (Harlequin), Brighella, Pagliaccio, Colombina and Pulcinella, who were part of a larger ensemble of stock characters. Performers improvised around a basic theme, emphasizing physicality, humor and the exaggerated traits of their characters. Harlequin was equipped with a magical bat, allowing him to alter their surroundings and evade their pursuers amid chaotic and frenzied chases. With each dramatic "slap" of the bat, scenes would transform, giving rise to the term "slapstick" to describe this style of exaggerated comedic action. (ibid.) Traditionally, Harlequin wore a tight-fitting costume covered in a patchwork of brightly colored diamond-shaped patterns, often in shades of red, green, yellow and blue. The costume is typically paired with a black half-mask, which covers the upper part of the face, leaving the mouth and chin exposed. This mask often has a sly or cheeky expression. (ibid.)

Emerging in French adaptations of Commedia dell’Arte, Pierrot became the melancholic, lovesick clown. His white costume and face makeup inspired mime and theatrical clowning. (ibid.)

2.2.4. The circus clown

The modern clown, as many people know them today, emerged in the 18th and 19th centuries in circuses. In 1768, Philip Astley opened the first circus, his Amphitheatre, in London. It started as a riding show featuring horses performing tricks and later added clowns and jugglers. The circus has its roots in the Roman Empire, where physicality was central, evolving from brutal games to acrobatic spectacles. Later, many circus artists traveled, earning their living by performing and entertaining the common folk. (Clown Bluey 2025, no page) Joseph Grimaldi revolutionized the whiteface clown in the late 18th century, removing

the mask and introducing distinctive makeup, a practice that was soon copied by several others. His innovations established the foundation of modern clowning and clowns are still nicknamed "Joeys" in his honor. By this period, distinct clown archetypes appeared: the “Whiteface clown” and “Auguste clown”. (Clown Bluey 2025, no page) In the early days of the circus, white-faced clowns were the stars. Performers like “Dick Dewhurst” led groups of clowns in performances. From these roots came the “Whiteface Principal Clown”, dressed in sparkling costumes with a conical hat and elegant shoes. This clown was the leader, bossy, showing off talents like juggling, playing music and leading comic acts. (ibid.) Later, a new type of clown appeared: the Auguste. With big red noses, floppy shoes and baggy clothes, the Auguste was chaotic and funny, unlike the polished Whiteface clown. One famous story of Auguste’s origin involves Tom Belling, a young clown apprentice. He accidentally created the character when he wore a silly outfit and was pushed into the circus ring by his boss. The crowd loved his clumsy, funny movements and shouted “Auguste”, in German a term for “fool”. (Clown Bluey 2025, no page) Although historians debate the story, it remains a fun tale of how the Auguste clown originated. As circuses evolved in the 20th century, the Whiteface clown became less of the main star and started acting as a partner to the wilder Auguste. At the same time, mime performances gained popularity, inspired by traditions such as commedia dell’arte and the French Pierrot. Famous mimers like Marcel Marceau brought quiet, expressive humor to audiences. (ibid.) In America, the hobo clown emerged during the Great Depression, inspired by real-life tramps who traveled on freight trains. These clowns blended humor with sadness, reflecting the tough times they faced. Emmett Kelly’s “Weary Willie” is one of the most famous hobo clowns. (ibid.)

Clowning began to incorporate elements of theater, mime, and physical comedy, moving beyond the traditional circus. Influential figures like Charlie Chaplin and Buster Keaton brought clowning to film, creating more nuanced and emotional performances. (Clown Bluey 2025, no page)

After World War II, many large circuses struggled to survive and clowns found work in other places like children’s parties, TV shows and festivals. In 1946, clowns formed the “International Circus Clowns Club” to protect their traditions. They began painting clown makeup designs on eggs to distinguish each clown’s unique look, a tradition that continues to this day. The club also began an annual church service to honor Joseph Grimaldi, regarded as the father of modern clowning, and to remember clowns who have passed away. Today, clowns entertain audiences in diverse environments such as hospitals, schools, and prisons libraries. (Clown Bluey 2025, no page)

Historical overviews of clowning often conclude with the evolution of circus clowns, mentioning but leaving out developments in clowning during the late 20th and 21st centuries. This omission likely stems from the growing complexity and diversity of modern clowning, which has expanded far beyond its tradition. The emergence of new forms and approaches has made it challenging to present a comprehensive overview of contemporary clowning. (Observations documented in fieldnotes Mollnhuber 2025) Today, clowns are pushing the boundaries of performance, blending disciplines such as improvisation, physical theater, movement and even social or political commentary. These innovations have led to the creation of unique clowning practices that serve a variety of purposes and audiences. For instance, hospital clowning focuses on therapeutic humor, bringing joy and relief to patients in healthcare settings, particularly children. Research showed that laughing reduces anxiety and fosters connection in vulnerable situations. Another modern expression is the dance called "clowning", which emerged in the BIPoC[23] community in the USA and integrates elements of dance and movement with clowning to explore themes like vulnerability, absurdity and the human condition through the language of the body. Rebel Clowning, also known as activist clowning, employs a distinct approach by incorporating humor and clown personas into protests and social movements. This form critiques power structures, disrupts norms and draws attention to social and political issues, all while maintaining an element of playfulness. Additionally, contemporary clowns explore experimental and avant-garde practices, blending traditional clowning with interdisciplinary art forms. They work in theaters, independent performance spaces and digital media, continually redefining what it means to be a clown in today's world. The richness and diversity of these modern forms underscore how clowning has evolved into a multifaceted art form and sociocultural phenomenon. This complexity makes it difficult to encapsulate contemporary clowning in a single historical narrative, but it also highlights the enduring adaptability and relevance of clowns in the modern era. In this thesis clown or clowning is understood as a field where it is neither static nor fixed but dynamic and situational. The emphasis is less on a coherent art form or field and more on how clowning is performed in different contexts and for diverse audiences. It cannot be reduced to a uniform development or fixed definition. Clowns and their modes of expression are constantly reshaped in relation to specific situations, cultural and social context and the spectators they engage with. (Kalb 2017, 17)

[23] BIPoC means Black, Indigenous, People of Color

2.3. Clown in research: Socio-cultural and psychological approaches

Various disciplines explore or analyze clowns in the context of humor, including pedagogy, theater studies, philosophy, medicine, psychology, sociology, performance studies, humor studies, and cultural and social anthropology. (Kapuy 2008, 93) Nonetheless, the state of the art about clowns and clowning is narrow and patchy. (Kalb 2017, 113) Publications are either anecdotal knowledge about clowns without cross references to the sources, or scientifically generated knowledge presuming the arguments and state of the art. (Kalb 2017,113) They are descriptions of historic clown figures, such as Chaplin, reconstructing a history or tradition of clowning without a theoretical reference point. Most publications use a format that includes pictures, dedicating a book to the description of a specific clown type, such as the Harlequin. (Ibid., 114) It is common in some publications to suggest there is one type of clown that changes its appearance, behavior and stage through time, implying that it has always existed and in every culture. These perceptions overlook the importance of context, culture, and the individual, all of which influence how the clown is interpreted and reinvented. For example, the evil clown or rebel clown, which are new forms of clowning that emerged in the last decades, demonstrate how the figure evolves in response to contemporary societal dynamics. (ibid.) In the following chapter, I will examine the state of the art in anthropology, from early quests to contemporary landscape.

2.3.1. State of the art in anthropology and ritual clown

The slender interest in clowns in anthropology can be due to the neglect of comedy in most ethnographic writing and the stereotypical view of science being serious, as “it studies serious phenomena in a serious way” (Mitchell 1992, 6). Barbara Babcock (1984) argues that “clowning has not been taken seriously, as a structure of truth and reality” (Keisalo-Galván 2008, 44), even though it “reflects reality in a way that rational thought cannot, it reveals the arbitrary, constructed nature of the world” (Keisalo-Galván 2008, 44). The reason for its messiness can be seen in the field of interest itself, the clown, who is ambiguous and tends to confuse and blur. (Kalb 2017, 115)

2.3.1.1. Early anthropological quests on clowns

Clowns have been discussed in anthropology with a different focus since the late 19th century. Ritual and sacred clowns have been the main focus of anthropologists since the beginning of the interest in the field of clowning. (Kalb 2017, 126) The major literature on

sacred ritual clowns is primarily located in Native North America, where numerous ritual clowns are found in the region. (Keisalo-Galván 2008, 39) Early research about clowning was approached through the lens of functional explanations, which regarded clowns as a substitute for expressing repressed emotions and believed to satisfy both psychological and cultural needs by releasing “whatever the repressed elements are in a given culture” (ibid., 40-41). One of the first anthropological works and ethnographic descriptions about clowns was done by Julian Steward, published in 1929, who researched the Native North American ritual clown for his dissertation “The Clown in Native North America”. (Steward 1991 cited in Keisalo-Galván 2008, 40) He sketched out ritual clowning in North America and tried to connect it to humor as a universal and psychological attribute with different cultural expressions. (ibid.)

Elsie Clews Parson and Ralph L. Beals (1934) extended further research on clowns in Native Northern America, focusing on the Yaqui and the Mayo, which did not appear in Steward's study, and published their anthropological findings in their article “The Sacred Clowns of the Pueblo and Mayo Yaqui Indians”. (Clews and Beals 1934 cited in Keisalo-Galván 2008, 41) They offered a functionalist interpretation of the clowns as a “safety valve for repressed sentiments” (Keisalo-Galván 2008, 41).

The anthropologist John Honigmann published 1942 his article “An interpretation of the social-psychological functions of the ritual clown”. He argues that the ritual clown has a social and psychological function of release and ordering. Taboos create conscious or unconscious tensions in the individual.

> “Such tensions appear in unpleasant feelings of insecurity, helplessness, fear, awe, powerlessness, resentment, and frustration” (Honigmann 1942, 225).

When a large number of people in a society experience this tension, then institutionalized behavior such as ritual clowning arises to cope with these distressing emotions, which results in the release of this tension and in making the tabooed experience more acceptable. (Honigmann 1942, 226)

Lucile Hoerr Charles (1945) follows this approach in her article “The Function of the Clown” where she discusses the clown’s role in bringing repressed psychological aspects into awareness. (Charles 1945, 41) Her background wasn’t in anthropology, yet she debated different anthropological research and ethnographies, e.g., Julian Steward, John J. Honigman, William Ridgeway, R.L. Bunzell, and many more in her article. Clowns perform

a “ritual of induction into the consciousness of his audience, of relatively neglected elements in the life of the individuals in the community” (ibid., 33)

Social explanations replaced psychological ones in anthropological research in the 1970s, where the role of the clown was perceived as a conventionalizer and conserver of the behavior of the participants in a ceremony, by showing unethical behavior to educate how not to behave, and humor as a symbol and strategy (Keisalo-Galván 2008, 42; Kalb 2017, 128)

Louis A. Hieb (1977) published his article „The ritual clown: humor and ethics“ in 1977, which is based on his fieldwork about Zuni and Hopi Clowns. He investigates how the clown performance represents concepts of the Zuni culture. The Hopi clown performance educates by showing unethical behavior manners. He views humor as “symbol and strategy” (Keisalo-Galván 2008, 42)

2.3.1.2. Clowns and the anthropology of performance

This shift in perspective is also characterized by the paradigmatic shift, the performative turn, where clowns are regarded as a performative figure, and culture is understood as an ongoing performance. In this perspective, culture becomes a self-woven web of meaning, where individuals do not simply represent pre-existing meanings but actively create and discover meaning through the act of performance itself. (Bachmann-Medick 2014, 107; Kalb 2017, 24 & 28) A significant impetus for the performative turn in anthropology was provided by Victor Turner’s (1982) analysis of ritual. Until then, classical ritual theorists such as Émile Durkheim (no date) primarily viewed ritual as a sphere of the sacred and holy, closely tied to collective religious life. The performance approach expanded this understanding by incorporating secular rituals as explored by Sally F. Moore and Barbara Myerhoff (1977), everyday rituals examined by Erving Goffman (no date), and rituals as social drama[24] examined by Victor Turner (1982). (Moore and Myerhoff 1977; Goffman no date; V. Turner 1982 cited in Bachmann-Medick 2014, 111) Émile Durkheim conceptualized ritual as a process that reflects social relationships, “reiterates or reinforces traditional social ties, expresses social conflicts, or delineates social roles” (Moore and Myerhoff 1977, 5) In contrast, contemporary approaches emphasize that ritual does not merely mirror cultural

[24] Social drama is a term coined by Victor Turner and refers to any kind of conflict or dispute, e.g., between family members and states, such as rebellion, revolution, or war. Stages of the social drama are: 1. break, 1, crisis, 3. coping, 4. reintegration. (V. Turner no date cited in Bachmann-Medick 2014, 118–20)

and social arrangements but actively shapes them. Ritual can foster cultural ideas, but it also has the capacity to reorganize or transform those ideas. (Moore and Myerhoff 1977, 5) This expanded perspective situates ritual as an evolving and performative process while actively participating in the construction and transformation of social realities. A vital aspect of innovation is evident in this: the transformative playroom of the ritual, or the ritual itself as a transformative performance. The focus shifted to cultural change and transformation. (Rao and Köpping 2000 cited in Bachmann-Medick 2014, 112) From this perspective, rituals and ritual clowns are no longer viewed as a function for conventionalizing and stabilizing social structures. Instead, they are increasingly seen as agents of cultural change. Ritual clowns disrupt the social order, enabling communities to question existing structures and explore new cultural possibilities. (Bachmann-Medick 2014, 118) Victor Turner's work, along with his wife Edith Turner, who was initially seen as a wife and supportive partner, contributed significantly to the emerging field of the anthropology of performance, in collaboration with Richard Schechner. Their efforts laid the groundwork for the new approach in the late 70s and early 80s. (Frese 2024, 39–40) In this thesis, I will explore clowning within the framework of the anthropology of performance.

2.3.1.3. Research on ritual clown in the 21st century

More recent studies on ritual/sacred clowns, as well as explanations and classifications of ritual clowns, have been conducted by Barton Wright (2004 cited in Kalb 2017) and John Plant (2010). Barton Wright´s study "Clowns of the Hopi. Tradition Keepers and Delight Makers" (Wright 2004 cited in Kalb 2017) examines the role of clowns as performative figures in the southwest of North America of the Pueblo with particular focus on the ceremonial practices and performances of the Hopi people. In these ceremonies, sacred clowns play a dual role: they serve as custodians of behavior, conventionalizing social norms by exposing false or deviant behavior, by breaking taboos, while also acting as mediators between the upper world (associated with the Hopi way of life) and the underworld (the world of the spirits called kachina). (Kalb 2017, 128) Sacred clowns are believed to be close to the "kachina", which are spirits that influence the life of the Hopi people. During ceremonies, the sacred clowns create conditions that encourage the arrival of these spirits, primarily by sparking joy and amusement among participants. This connection stems from the belief that kachinas appear where there is happiness. In this way, the sacred clown embodies the roles of both "tradition keeper" and "delight maker" (Wright 2004 cited in Kalb 2017, 128-129). Wright (2004) further categorizes the sacred clowns of various Pueblo indigenous groups

based on their roles and functions during ceremonies (Wright 2004 cited in Kalb 2017, 129-130):

- “Tsukuwimka”: These are masked and costumed sacred clowns who intentionally disrupt the ceremonies held to create favorable conditions for their crops. E.g., walking headfirst on the houses symbolizes that they come from the underworld.
- “Paiyakyamu” (also referred to as “Kossa*”* or “Koshari*”*): These clowns are costumed but not masked. They participate in the same ceremonies, acting in absurd and socially unacceptable ways to serve as negative examples of behavior.
- “Koyemsi”: Although not classified as clowns, they act as intermediaries between the people and the spirits, conveying messages and taking care of the structure of the ceremony.
- “Piptuyakyam”: They embody a social type, closely resembling the European buffoon. Unlike the others, they appear outside of ceremonial contexts, engaging in events that are significant for the community.

John Plant classified ceremonial clowns, contrary clowns, individual or independent contraries, and reverse-reaction warriors in his historical study “The Plains Indian Clowns, their Contraries and Related Phenomena” (Plant 2010).

- *“Ceremonial clowns” or “contrary clowns”, also referred to as “Heyoka”:*

Each clown belonged to a specific organization like a cult or a society (clown society), “which fulfilled social or shamanistic obligations” (John Plant 2010, 4). Each tribe of the plains had different roles and obligations for the clown’s function. They perform exaggerated, absurd behaviors in rituals, such as engaging in inverse speech. “Yes” means “no” and “no” means “yes”, or do the contrary of what is being accepted, for example, singing outside of the rhythm or singing their version of a song. They receive their calling through a “supernatural thunder being or thunderbird” (John Plant 2010, 7) that comes in a dream or vision, which obligates the person to become a clown. To become a member of the clown society, a person must undergo a ceremony where their humiliation is considered an “important step in becoming a spiritual person” (ibid.). If the person neglects to perform, they will be haunted by the fear of being struck by lightning. (ibid.)

- *“Individual or independent contraries”:*

They, in contrast to the ceremonial contrary clown, who removes his role by removing his mask after their performance, live their opposition and contrary behavior daily, often isolated due to their constant reversal of societal norms, displaying bravery through acts

like facing enemies unarmed or enduring harsh conditions in unconventional ways. They are independent of clown society or a cult. They would, for example, go to a battle naked or even murder members of their own tribe, or they would pretend to feel cold and freeze when it's hot, or sit outside naked when it's cold, because they are feeling hot. Becoming a contrary was considered a “dreaded misfortune” (John Plant 2010, 16). John Plant considers the individual contrary as a social role rather than a performative figure because the individual contrary would sing songs for courtship to a woman, but far away from people and with the woman absent. (Plant 2010 cited in Kalb 2017, 133-134)

- *“Reverse-reaction warriors”:*

War was crucial for manhood in the Native American tradition, symbolizing rank and status. These reverse reaction warriors were part of the military organization and weren’t associated with humor. They had “bravery obligations” (John Plant 2010, 23), a form of bravery like standing firm in battle under enemy attack or using reverse speech. For example, if retreat was ordered, the reverse reaction warriors would charge. Of course, these reckless actions, where warriors put themselves in dangerous situations, often led to death by the enemy, which was very tragic. (John Plant 2010, 24)

Further research on ritual clowning has been regionally expanded by several studies in the South Pacific (Mitchell 1992), Mexico (Keisalo 2016), and Nepal (Toffin 2019).

2.3.1.4. Contemporary landscape of anthropological research on clowning

Research on clowning over the past 30 years has broadened its focus, both thematically and regionally. As mentioned above, studies on ritual clowning have expanded through research in the South Pacific (Mitchell 1992), Mexico (Keisalo 2016), Nepal (Toffin 2019), and others. Thematically, research has grown to include female clowns (Hereniko 2023; Begeré 2018; Huntsman and Hooper 1975; Counts and Counts 1992; Barlow 1992; Mitchell 1992), activist and political clowns (I. Johnson 2006; Kapuy 2008; Bogad 2010; Course 2013; Sorensen 2015; Göpfert 2022), evil, creepy, and horror clowns (Roth 2016; Singh and Sharma 2023; Christen 2016; Weihe 2016), as well as medical and hospital clowns (Hendriks 2012; Rindstedt 2014; Rämgård, Carlson, and Mangrio 2016). In the following chapter, I will provide a brief overview of the current state of clowning research in anthropology over the past few decades, structured into categories I have developed based on my literature review and the texts I have engaged with thus far:

» **Activist/Rebel clown**

With the rise of the “global justice movement” (Bogad 2010, 537) in the Western world, a new form of clowning, such as rebel clowning, emerged and became a field of exploration for anthropologists. Abingdon Bogad`s (2010) essay on clowning in an activist context focuses on the phenomenon he calls “tactical carnival” (Bogad 2010, 541 & 542), a form of protest that involves occupying public spaces with dance, costumes, music, bands, and puppets in a way that is not based on a calendar or specific location but is embodied by a “global, anti-authoritarian, and anti-capitalist movement” (Bogad 2010, 556). He applies Mikhail Bakhtin’s theory of the carnivalesque, which includes laughter as a liberating attribute for the “lower orders” of society (Bakhtin 1968 cited in Bogad 2010, 541). For Bakhtin (1968), the carnival represents potential for rebellion in its “joyous, outrageously humorous” (Bogad 2010, 542), ambivalent and celebratory condition.

Another study that explores the connection between activism and clowning was conducted by Joachim Kapuy (2008) on the Clandestine Insurgent Rebel Clown Army (CIRCA) in London, which is the first of Its Kind. He discusses power in the context of public spaces and how political protest, through street clowning, can help citizens reclaim their voices and transform oppression. In his fieldwork, he focuses on the clown as a rebel and critical voice. (Kapuy 2008, 89 & 152)

Further research on rebel clowning as a tactic in the “global justice movement” (Bogad 2010, 537) in the Western world has been done by Majken Jul Sorensen (2015) on the Swedish rebel clown army “Ofog”, which follows the concept of the Clandestine Insurgent Rebel Clown Army (CIRCA). She combines “Peacock's clown theory” (Sorensen 2015, 25) and her “concepts of play, otherness, incompetence, and ridicule” (Sorensen 2015, 25)—attributes found in all forms of clowning—with ethnographic data. She discusses how radical clowning attempts to communicate values of non-violence, negotiate space, and recognize the human in others, such as by reaching the person behind the police uniform. (Sorensen 2015, 30, 43)

Mirco Göpfert (2022) discusses the connection between humor and politics in his article. He has been conducting research with cartoonists in Iran since 2015, observing how politicians utilize humor practices to gain influence. He insists on anthropology "to unpack the absurdities of politics”(Göpfert 2022, 24), because humor is a “window into how people experience their lives – and into the politics, structures and hierarchies this humor depends on” (ibid., 23).

Another article that discusses the clown in the context of its political agency is by Johnson Irving (2006), who conducted research in Thailand. He observed the use of the clown figure from traditional Thai shadow plays in contemporary society, for example, in marketing materials such as commercials, books, t-shirts, and keychains. The clown in Thai Society is present in the shadow play, which consists of a white cloth creating shadows with puppets and light, and a puppeteer who manipulates the puppets while providing their voices, typically representing the working class and peasants from southern Thailand. They are depicted as loud and hedonistic, yet also possessing sacred power to grant wishes and dispense blessings. (I. Johnson 2006) Irving examines this ambiguity of the clown figure, which simultaneously critiques norms and values through symbolic inversion (Mitchell 1992 cited in I. Johnson 2006, 165), while also moralizing and supporting the conservative state (ibid., 166) Clowns have both a ritual role and are "politically charged figures who both dismantled the structures of cultural order but also reinforced them" (ibid., 167).

» **Female clown**

The book "Clowning as Critical Practice" by William E. Mitchell (1992) emphasizes the idea of clowning practices as inherently political, as reviewed by Don Handelman. (Mitchell 1992 cited in Handelman 1995) It presents important alternative visions of social order that support both the continuation and the transformation of society. (Mitchell 1992 cited Handelman 1995, 1021) The book is a collection of works by several ethnographers who researched in the Southern Pacific, with an emphasis on Papua New Guinea. Notably, clowning is often practiced by women. Examples are female clowning practices on gender hierarchy among the Murik of Papua New Guinea by Kathleen Barlow (1992), clowns performing as transvestites during transition rites among the Lusi-Kaliai by David R. Counts and Dorothy A. Counts (1992), female clowns at weddings on Rotuma by Vilsoni Hereniko (1992), and many more. This perspective on gender in clowning hasn't been discussed much in another research. Vilsoni Hereniko (2023) devoted a book to female clowns in Rotuma, Fiji, where he researched ritual clowning in marriage ceremonies and weaving. (Hereniko 2023)

Further study on female clowning was conducted by Judith Huntsman and Antony Hooper (1975) in Tokelau culture, located in the South Pacific, near New Zealand. Clowns are women who are often absent from public areas and possess attributes of mystical power. (Huntsman and Hooper 1975, 427) These female clowns are older women, "secured in their role as wives, mothers and sisters" (Huntsman and Hooper 1975, 427). They act as men, interestingly not as local men, but as foreigners, wearing European male clothes and

exaggerating male authority. Next to public female clowning, there are also other occasions, such as gatherings of women or when they work together, where spontaneous clowning can occur. (Huntsman and Hooper 1975, 428)

We often observe or feel compelled to classify gender as either female or male, a practice that can be criticized for overlooking the existence of many other genders and diverse identifications, as already mentioned in chapter 1.6.1 “Constructing knowledge: power, perspective and playfulness”. While it is essential to acknowledge these complexities, I also do not wish to downplay the importance of addressing specific issues, such as the underrepresentation of female clowns in research. At the same time, I would encourage further exploration of the relationship between clowns and gender fluidity. The clown, as a figure, inherently challenges rigid binary frameworks and embraces freedom of self-expression beyond conventional norms. This fluidity allows the clown to embody both female and male characteristics, transcend them entirely or highlight the performative and constructed nature of gender itself. Some might even argue that the clown exists outside the boundaries of gender altogether.[25]

» **Evil clown**

With the occurrence of evil clowns on the streets of America, the field of dark clowns became of interest to anthropologists. Christopher Roth (2016) writes in his article “The creepiest clown” about the portrayal of the creepy clowns in films and literature, such as Edgar Allan Poe’s mass-murdering jester in the 19th century, the comic book Batman and the Joker in 1940, and Stephan Kings “It” in the 80s. He writes about people dressed as clowns with axes or machetes acting out crimes and scaring citizens. He also discusses clown rumors and the “stalking clown” (Roth 2016, 2), as well as pranks that challenged the safety of professional clowns. (ibid.) The phenomenon of the evil clown is being discussed further by Lena Sharma (2016) and Matthias Christen (2016) in the interdisciplinary book “Über den Clown” von Weihe (2016). (Sharma 2016; Christen 2016 both cited in Weihe 2016)

» **Medical clown**

In the context of medical anthropology, clowning has been discussed by Ruud Abingdon Hendriks (2012), who did fieldwork in a day centre for people with dementia in the Netherlands. She discusses the impact of art-based practices such as “Creative Met Clowns”, which is a workshop that happened in the Netherlands weekly for 1,5 hours over

[25] Lisa Begeré (2018) combines queer theory, feminist theory and theatre studies to discuss the gender fluidity of the clown in the dissertation “Clown, Frau Clown, Clown_In”.

a period of four weeks. The task in this workshop is to dress a clown, who appears only in white underwear, like a blank sheet, inviting the participants to dress the clown. Ruud Abingdon emphasizes that art-based activities bypass cognitive losses and empower the participants' sense of self through embodiment, sensory, emotional conversations and play. (Hendriks 2012)

Over the past 30 years, research on clowning has significantly expanded both in terms of theme and region. Scholars have explored a wide range of topics, from the historical and cultural significance of clowns to their psychological and sociopolitical roles in various contexts. This broadening of focus reflects a growing recognition of the clown as a complex and multifaceted figure. It is essential to acknowledge that this review is not exhaustive, as numerous additional studies have contributed valuable insights into the field. This growing body of research emphasizes the richness and depth of the topic, offering fertile ground for continued inquiry and exploration.

2.3.2. C.G. Jung and psychological approaches: Association with the trickster archetype

Clowns can be associated with the trickster, as they share attributes of contradictory and paradoxical traits, as well as a fondness for play and humor. Despite these similarities, the clown has received comparatively less scholarly attention compared to the trickster and has been written about “rather sporadically” (Keisalo-Galván 2008, 39). Trickster in anthropology has been discussed with great interest and fascination due to its complex and dynamic nature, characterized by traits and behaviors that defy conventional categorization. Through their subversive, transformative and mediatory roles, tricksters challenge and reimagine cultural norms, embodying both the sacred and the profane, as well as order and chaos. This inherent ambiguity is precisely what makes them such enduring and fascinating figures in mythology and cultural analysis. Anthropological research on the trickster began in the 19th century, with a primary focus on myths and oral narratives. Much of the early material comes from the study of the trickster figure in the context of Native American and First Nations cultures, where these figures play significant roles. (Kapuy 2008, 96) Because of this, the common definitions of the trickster are derived from research on the Native American figure. The term “trickster” was first introduced into the anthropological discourse in the late 19th century. There is no single, uniform definition of the trickster, as studies have shown that their characteristics vary widely depending on the cultural and contextual framework. One of the most influential descriptions comes from Paul Radin (1956), who wrote that the trickster is “simultaneously creator and destroyer, giver and denier” (Radin

1956 cited in Kapuy 2008, 96; translation JM). He also notes that the trickster often appears in animal forms such as the raven, coyote or spider. This depiction highlights the trickster's fluidity and their resistance to fixed categories, reinforcing their role as figures that transcend binaries. (ibid.)

Hynes and Doty (1993) identify several core characteristics of the trickster figure, emphasizing its complexity and variability (Hynes and Doty 1993, 34–42):

- "Ambiguous and anomalous": The trickster resists categorization, embodying contradictions such as being both creator and destroyer, sacred and profane, wise and foolish, yet none of these labels fully define them. Rooted in a-nomos, outside normative structures, the trickster operates at the edges or beyond established boundaries and classifications, often engaging in activities that disrupt or subvert order. By "breaking down division lines" (ibid.), the trickster fluidly and impulsively crosses borders, often with apparent impunity. (ibid.)
- Deceiver and trick-player: In many cultures, the trickster is the "prima causa of disruption, disorder, misfortune, and improprieties" (ibid., 34). Their actions, which include lying, cheating, tricking and deceiving, may stem from different motives. Sometimes, the trickster is portrayed as an unconscious fool who blunders into chaos, while at other times, they are a malicious spoiler who intentionally creates havoc. This duality highlights the trickster's unpredictable and multifaceted nature. (ibid., 34-35)
- Shape-shifter: Tricksters are quintessential shapeshifters, capable of adopting various forms, roles and identities. This transformative ability is often used to deceive, adapt or navigate different circumstances. As shape-shifters, they alter their bodily appearance or persona to achieve their goals, symbolizing their dynamic and ever-changing essence. (Hynes and Doty 1993, 36)
- Situation-invertor: One of the trickster's defining traits is their ability to invert established norms, hierarchies and structures. No person, place, or belief—no matter how sacred—is immune to their subversive influence. The trickster turns what is bottom into top, what is outside into inside, and vice versa. They often transform a place of safety into one of danger and back again. (ibid., 37)
- Messenger and imitator of the gods: The trickster serves as both a messenger and imitator of the gods, embodying a mix of divine and human traits. They are mediators

who traverse and reset boundaries between life and death, the sacred and the mundane. In many myths, the trickster brings messages, punishments or cultural powers, such as fire, from the gods to humanity. By navigating these realms, they highlight the interconnectedness of divine and mortal domains. (Hynes and Doty 1993, 40)

- Sacred and lewd bricoleur: As a bricoleur, in the sense described by Claude Lévi-Strauss, the trickster is an improviser, innovator, and a "fix-it person" (ibid., 42), known for their ingenuity in transforming whatever is at hand into creative solutions. They take what others deem worthless and transform it into sacred objects, transcending or violating taboos related to sexuality, gastronomy or scatology. The trickster is driven to using tools or materials outside their conventional purposes to meet their inventive needs. This subversion of definitions and categories highlights their dual role as both disruptors and creators within cultural systems. (Hynes and Doty 1993, 42)

Further definition has been done by Mahadev Apte (1985), who developed four dimensions to define the concept of the trickster: origins and association, identity and form, behavior, actions, and personality. (Apte 1985, 224–227)

In my exploration of studies and articles on clowning, including perspectives from psychology, I encountered another approach to understanding the trickster figure. Many researchers draw on Carl Gustav Jung's archetype of the trickster when discussing the clown. Jung (1968 [1954]) defines the trickster as a figure "contradictory, ambivalent, of dual nature – animal and divine, with a fondness for jokes with a characteristic unconsciousness" (Zumaeta 2012, 11). He describes the trickster as embodying layers of the psyche that represent the "collective shadow" (Zumaeta 2012, 12). The trickster "stands in a complementary or compensatory relationship to the ego personality" (Jung 1968 [1954], 261 cited in Zumaeta 2012, 12) and highlights the shadow as a profound moral challenge:

> "The shadow is a moral problem that challenges the whole ego-personality, for no one can become conscious of the shadow without considerable moral effort. To become conscious of it involves recognizing the dark aspects of the personality as present and real. This act is the essential condition for any kind of self-knowledge, and it therefore, as a rule, meets with considerable resistance." (Jung 1983 [1951], 91 cited in Zumaeta 2012, 12)

According to this framework, the clown symbolizes the shadow aspect of the individual (Zumaeta 2012, 2). Rocio Zumaeta (2012) elaborates that:

> "The clown leads to disidentification with the ego and other fragments of personality such as the persona, the shadow, or fragmentary emotions." (Zumaeta 2012, 13)

Ann and Barry Ulanov (1987) expand on this perspective, emphasizing the clown's relationship with societal norms and ego-functioning:

> "The clown embodies the reverse of what convention holds up as the desirable, durable ego, capable of achievement, of placement in harmony with social goals. The clown presents the opposite of a well-ordered ego-functioning. He fails. He is weak. He is pitiable. He is anything but master of the situation. . . . He exposes the terrible vulnerability of the human condition, and especially of the person who will not acknowledge it." (Ulanov and Ulanov 1987 cited in Zumaeta 2012, 13)

When confronted with classifications such as “clown” or “trickster,” I aim to discuss the universality of these concepts critically and explore how one can address clowns and tricksters without resorting to essentialism. While anthropologists favor an approach that understands culturally specific practices, Carl Jung’s archetypes, such as the trickster, claim to represent universal patterns rooted in the collective unconscious of all humans. This framing invites criticism for imposing homogenized frameworks onto culturally diverse phenomena, potentially neglecting the specificities of local sociocultural contexts and the detailed, grounded work that is central to the social sciences, particularly anthropology. Thomas Belmonte (1990) voices similar criticisms, but he also proposes a reinterpretation of Jung’s archetypes. From this perspective, archetypes can be reinterpreted as “biosocial manifestation” (Belmonte 1990, 47), shaped by the interplay of biology and social systems. Drawing a parallel to DNA as a self-replicating code, archetypes can be seen as analogous to “self-healing code” (Claude Shannon no date cited in Belmonte 1990, 47). These systems are capable of maintaining coherence and integrity despite disturbances, suggesting that archetypes may serve as stabilizing elements within a culture’s symbolic system. Instead of a linear model, such as biology affecting the mind, which in turn influences culture, a cybernetic model would focus on feedback loops and interconnections among these domains. In this framework, archetypes are situated within their broader semiotic context, exploring how signs and symbols function as dynamic elements of a cultural system. While Belmonte critiques Jung’s approach, he also highlights the value of archetypes as adaptive and flexible patterns and their potential for reconciling universality with variability. Jung analogizes the archetypes with the “axial system of a crystal” (Jung no date cited in Belmonte 1990, 48): Crystals, like snowflakes or diamonds, can take on endless variations while adhering to the same underlying geometric principles. Similarly, archetypes have a core structure or meaning that remains constant, even though their concrete expressions (in myths, symbols or behaviors) can vary across cultures and contexts. Jung’s approach also

avoids genetic determinism (the idea that genes strictly dictate human behavior). Instead, archetypes are flexible frameworks that provide a basic structure for human thought and behavior, with their manifestations shaped by cultural and individual context. (Jung no date cited in Belmonte 1990, 48) This reinterpretation helps me understand why the clown frequently appears as an archetype in various research contexts. As I engage with studies and articles from psychology, it becomes essential to position my anthropological critique of Jung's approach alongside his broader influence, while also acknowledging the potential value of Jungian archetypes and classifications.

Some view the clown as a form of the trickster, while others see it as inherently different from it. Barbara Babcock (1984), for example, compares and differentiates the clown from the trickster, noting that the clown is a performer, whereas the trickster is a mythological figure. (Babcock 1984 cited in Keisalo-Galván 2008, 44) Tricksters and clowns share a profound connection that embodies duality, subversion and transformation. Both thrive on ambiguity, existing in liminal spaces where opposites—sacred and profane, order and chaos, strength and vulnerability—intersect. By disrupting the status quo and revealing the fragility of human constructs, they invite self-reflection and transformation. Whether through the trickster's cunning exploits or the clown's absurd failures, both figures engage in a playful yet profound critique of human existence, serving as catalysts for personal and collective transformation. Their shared ability to inhabit and reveal contradictions makes them enduring symbols of resilience, creativity and the potential for renewal. This thesis focuses on this subject.

In summary, an investigation was conducted into the definition of "clown," which revealed the complexities and challenges of establishing a precise and universal understanding. This exploration highlighted the multifaceted nature of clowning, both as a concept and a practice. Subsequently, we examined the existing body of research on clowning, focusing particularly on its treatment within the field of anthropology and the vast array of thematic aspects it encompasses. Now, returning to the central focus of this thesis: despite the growing interest in clowning within anthropological research, I identified a significant gap in the literature. Specifically, there is a noticeable lack of anthropological inquiry into the practice of clowning workshops as spaces for self-discovery and personal and social transformation.

In the subsequent chapter, a comprehensive discussion will be presented on clowning workshops as a frame, analyzing the setting, the experiences of participants, and how they can facilitate processes of self-exploration, agency, and healing. Through this exploration, I aim to illustrate the complexity and intricacies of how realities are experienced.

3. Clowning workshops: A socio-cultural phenomenon

As previously discussed in the reflection on the field in the previous chapter on the research process, the workshop space in this study can be understood as the field. In this chapter, I aim to examine the framework of the clowning workshop, the discourse on clowning pedagogy, the contextualization of clowning workshops, the role of the facilitator, the group, the establishment of safer spaces, and clowning workshops as a space of agency.

The phenomenon of clowning workshops remains a niche within the broader worlds of acting and comedy. (Davison 2016a, 13) According to the Oxford English Dictionary, the noun “workshop” originally refers in the U.S. to "a meeting or conference at which the participants engage in intensive discussion and activity relating to a particular subject or project" (“Oxford English Dictionary Online, ‘Workshop’” 2025). What makes the workshop space unique and also challenging for research is that it is not geographically fixed or locally bound. In my opinion, and according to my field notes, clowning workshops can be created anywhere, as long as some key elements are present: a knowledgeable facilitator, a group or audience in the form of engaged participants, and an appropriate (typically private) space. Clowning workshops, in that sense, are meetings where clowning is being experienced. The workshops take place optimally in a protected and safe environment where the group can explore clowning through direct personal experience, without the pressure of performing in front of a paying audience. The experience widely depends on the facilitator or teacher, their approach, the space, and the group. (Fieldnotes Mollnhuber 2024)

Elodie Kalb (2017) distinguishes between two didactic approaches to clown training or clown workshops:

- One approach focuses on skill development, drawing on traditional clown types, études, and fundamental principles of clowning. (Kalb 2017, 193)
- The other approach emphasizes learning through performative situations, in which key elements such as failure, like “the flop” (ibid.), “Nicht-Gelingen” (ibid.) (translated as non-functional), or the state of flow, is directly experienced. These elements can further form the foundation for the artistic clown persona and the development of clown acts. (ibid.)

The workshops that I attended, and which are the focus of this thesis, refer to Kalb´s second approach, where performative situations are experienced. Specifically, those workshops focused on self-awareness, in which participants explore themselves through specific exercises and observation of their behaviors, rather than performance skills or preparation

for a professional career as clowns. (ibid., 195) This distinction is also highlighted by participants who differentiate between entertaining clowning and deep clowning, which serves a more introspective or even transformative function, as several participants noted:

> "Das unterscheidet ihn von anderen Clowns, so wie ich den Clown da erlebt hab, anders wie zu den anderen Malen. Und das hat nicht zur Unterhaltung gedient, sondern zur Heilung." (Interview with Melanie, 7 June 2024, 20)

> "I liked it because it's also a distinction between, like, clown on birthday parties and with balloons and like, he, he, ha. And then for me, a sacred clown would be more about what we talked about just now, discovering layers of yourself and entering realms of symbolism, where stories can be told that words cannot tell, or things can be discovered. And there's a freedom, a freedom from judgment, playfulness, and intuition, all those things." (Interview with Amber, 5 July 2024, 15)

These insights emphasize that clowning, within the context of such workshops, is not only an act or a form of entertainment or professional training but a process of self-exploration, healing, and meaning-making. Jon Davison (2016) emphasizes that this approach, which involves seeking the inner clown and engaging in self-exploration, is the dominant approach in contemporary clowning and critiques it for adhering to an essentialist philosophy. He argues that this approach marginalizes other forms of clowning and hinders the development of an analysis and theory of clowning. (Davison 2016b, 9) While he rightly critiques the problematic aspects of essentialist philosophy, I argue that the search for the self in clowning workshops does not necessarily follow essentialist logic. In my fieldnotes, I observed that participants and facilitators may refer to a "self" or a "core" during the process, but this so-called essence is not understood as fixed or unchanging. Although the language used in these contexts can be confusing and may appear to imply a singular, stable identity or inner clown, this is not necessarily the case. (Fieldnotes Mollnhuber 2024) What participants often describe as a shared core experience in clowning is not an essential identity, but rather something deeply human: a sense of connectedness through emotional expression, vulnerability, laughter, and struggle. It is the experience of humanness—feeling sadness, joy, pain, and playfulness—that creates the impression of a common inner core. (Fieldnotes Mollnhuber 2024) The phenomenon of connection experienced in clowning workshops resembles what Victor Turner (1969) described as "communitas" (V. Turner 1969 cited in Bial 2004, 77). This term refers to a feeling of social bonding that can arise during rituals. (ibid.) Communitas is understood as a "feeling of group solidarity, usually short-lived, generated during ritual". (Schechner 2002, 62) V. Turner distinguishes between different forms of communitas, such as "normative communitas" (V. Turner 1982 cited in Schechner 2002, 62), which refers to institutionalized or formalized expressions of group unity—sometimes perceived as rigid or emotionally distant, like the communion in a Catholic mass.

In contrast, “spontaneous communitas” (ibid.) emerges in secular contexts, such as sports events, and is characterized by a genuine connection among participants. (ibid.) I argue that clowning workshops can be understood as instances of spontaneous communitas. This state fosters a sense of unity among individuals, where personal and social distinctions are temporarily suspended. (Schechner 2002, 62) V. Turner (1970b) conceptualized this experience as a moment of profound human connection beyond hierarchical roles. (Turner 1970b cited in Turkle 2022, 485) It is important to note that the shared experience always intersects with social and cultural layers of identity, such as gender, race, age, and sexual orientation, which shape how emotions and expressions are embodied and perceived. (Gardenswartz and Rowe 2003) Over 30 years ago, Kimberlé W. Crenshaw (1991) introduced the concept of “intersectionality” (Crenshaw 1991 cited in Milevska 2020, 16) to describe how different dimensions of identity intersect and affect individuals' lives. In a similar vein, Gardenswartz and Rowe (2003) proposed a model of diversity consisting of four layers, highlighting the endless variations and complexities of the social dimension that influences one's individual identity. (Gardenswartz and Rowe 2003, 31). I will explore these concepts in more detail in chapter “3.4.3. The self, identity and community”. In the liminal experience of spontaneous communitas, these distinctions are temporarily suspended and status is “abolished”. (Schechner 2002, 63) While I wouldn’t claim that status and layers of identity can be abolished, I would argue that they play a less central role and that they are less in focus. It is essential to recognize that everything around us is socially constructed and experienced. Only the single moment on stage, as a liminal space, may create a focus away from such categories to the feeling of connection and unity, of a shared human experience. Sherry Turkle (2022) notes:

> “In this space, people could see each other not in their traditional social roles but as human beings.“ (V. Turner 1970b cited in Turkle 2022, 485)

Turner described this as what he termed “communitas”. (Turkle 2022, 485) Both Sherry Turkle (2022) and Richard Schechner (2002) refer to Martin Buber (1922) who called this the intimate “I-you” dialogue, where “people encounter each other directly, ‘nakedly’, in the face-to-face intimate encounter” (Schechner 2002, 63; Turkle 2022, 485).

Participants and facilitators’ understanding of self and identity in these clowning workshops does not necessarily have to be essentialist. Debates in identity studies and academia show that identity can be discussed in non-essentialising terms. Identity is understood as fluid, contextual, and processual—an ongoing negotiation of being and becoming. (Hall 1996 cited in Hussey 2014, 203) This more dynamic perspective opens space for interpretations of the

self that are relational and evolving, rather than fixed and innate. I observed this notion of identity and self in interviews. I recall interviews before the workshop where people shared their desire to find their inner clown, as if it were something concrete and clearly defined. (Interview with Antonia, 11 February 2024) After the workshop, however, their understanding of this inner clown had shifted—becoming more fluid, open, and shaped by the process. Furthermore, the statement "The way I believe in my inner clown is my whole me, so my inner clown is everything" (Interview with Francesca, 13 June 2024, 24) illustrates a profoundly personal and holistic connection to the clown persona. This approach highlights the complexity of the self as it is expressed through clowning. Just as there is no singular, fixed clown type, there is no static or unchanging self—both are fluid, multifaceted, and constantly evolving. Therefore, Davison's (2016b) critique of the inner clown approach and its emphasis on self-exploration as inherently essentialist is, in my view, not entirely justified. Much depends on the facilitators and the specific workshop setting. According to my fieldnotes and interviews, participants were given considerable agency in shaping their journey. Clowning, in this sense, is fundamentally relational. The quality of the space created and the facilitation provided play a crucial role in how the experience unfolds. I did not encounter a rigid notion of a singular clown identity or an unchangeable inner self. Before discussing this topic further—I discuss this issue in more detail in chapter "3.4.3. The self, identity and community"—I will provide an overview of the history and contextualization of the inner clown approach in clown training and clowning workshops.

3.1. Societal contextualization of clown workshops in the 20th and 21st centuries

In the 20th century, a significant phenomenon emerged in which circuses began offering clown training programs. (Bouissac no date cited in Kalb 2017, 193) Most of these programs are provided by private schools, though the state officially recognizes some. In Germany, for example, "clown-actor" is recognized as an official profession. (Kalb 2017, 193) Since the 1990s, there has been an increasing professionalization of clown training in Europe and North America. This development is largely a response to the declining opportunities for performance over the past 25 years. One of the primary reasons for this decline is the centralization of theaters and circuses into larger institutions, reducing independent and small-scale performance spaces. (ibid.) This shift in training has led to an expansion of participants beyond aspiring professional clowns. Increasingly, people who are simply

interested in the concept of clowning started attending these workshops. Unlike the multi-year training programs for professional clowning, these workshops often last a few hours, several days, or weeks. Clown actors—though the facilitator does not necessarily need to be a professional clown actor—serve as mediators of this experience, offering it in the format of clown workshops. Further, the focus has shifted toward exploring the "inner clown," based on the assumption that engaging in the clown's performative state has a positive impact on the participant. (Kalb 2017, 194)

The discussion of clowning as a way of self-discovery started with Jacques Lecoq's clown teaching in the early 1960s, where the idea of the "inner clown" and clowning as a personal journey began to develop. (Davison 2016b, 9) Lecoq, who founded his school in Paris in the mid-20th century, sought to understand what makes comedic performance effective and why clowns elicit laughter from their audiences. To do this, he tried an experiment: he arranged his students in a circle around a stage and asked each to step forward, one at a time, and try to make the audience laugh. Even though they performed gags, tricks, and exaggerated antics, no one in the audience laughed. When each student left the stage, looking frustrated and embarrassed, the audience suddenly burst into laughter. This was the moment when the idea of "the flop technique" was created. Lecoq realized laughter wasn't caused by a specific clown character but by the performer's honest emotions, which were revealed and unguarded in failure. What was usually seen as a weakness became a source of comedic strength. This realization led to the development of the "personal clown" approach, emphasizing the search for one's inner clown as a means of artistic and personal discovery. By shifting the focus from external performance to deep self-exploration, Lecoq revolutionized clowning pedagogy, laying the foundation for a new understanding of the art form (Lecoq 2000 cited in Davison 2016b, 9). This discourse is also reflected in the clowning workshop that I attended:

> "The way I believe in my inner clown is my whole me, so my inner clown is everything." (Interview with Francesca, 13 June 2024, 24)
>
> "Ich habe für mich dann gemerkt, es entspricht meinem inneren Wesen" (Interview with Anja, 20 June 2024, 8)
>
> "Also es ist ja ein Teil von mir, es ist ja, es bin ja ich. Also irgendwie ist es ja auch mein ehrliches Innerstes." (Interview with Anja, 20 June 2024, 32)
>
> "Clown is a process toward myself, toward my inner self, my deepest part, my essence." (Interview with Francesca, 13 June 2024, 13)

Some interviewees described how, in contemporary society, we are accustomed to wearing masks in our everyday lives. They explained how these masks can be broken through the

embodied practice of the clown, allowing for a more honest and authentic expression of oneself.

> “We are not living in an authentic society. You know, we are used to have masks. That's why I clown through masks. And this work, it breaks this mask. And in the daily life, to be totally honest or express yourself what you feel and whatever you think, this is not a very social thing. It's not so acceptable, you know? And I don't say that we should all be like that all the time because it's not easy to.” (Interview with Francesca, 13 June 2024, 5)

Lecoq´s approach emphasizes the self, the personal, which until now shapes the discourse on clowning. Furthermore, Louise Peacock (2009) observes an increased “interest in clowning as a means of personal development” (Peacock 2009, 156), increasing self-awareness, as it may reveal strengths and insecurities, blocks and resistances, and links it to the centrality of self, which is connected to post-Freudian psychoanalysis and psychotherapy. (Peacock 2009, 155)

This defining notion of the self in the clowning workshop can be reflected and contextualized philosophically, psychologically, culturally, and economically.

3.1.1. Psychologization, self-exploration, counterculture, and human potential movement

Reflecting this approach of clowning, it has undergone a process of psychologization, particularly since the growing recognition of the psyche as a central aspect of human experience in the 19th century. (Kalb 2017, 195) Clowning is increasingly framed and interpreted as a means of accessing archetypal aspects of human existence. This perspective is influenced by Carl Gustav Jung’s concept of archetypes, which he describes as fundamental, universal structures shaping the human psyche. (ibid.) As previously discussed in chapter 2.3.2. “C. G. Jung and psychological approaches: Association with the trickster archetype”, the understanding of archetype in this thesis shall be critically understood as a flexible framework that provides a basic structure of human thought and behavior, with their manifestations shaped by cultural and individual context. (Belmonte 1990, 48) This approach has been frequently used as an explanation in the few literature sources I have found so far.

The inner clown approach can also be contextualized within the broader therapeutic landscape of the time, where techniques such as the "hot seat" gained popularity. This method, associated with Fritz Perls (1951) and Gestalt therapy, involved individuals publicly expressing their emotions under the guidance of a therapist, often in the presence of a group

or an audience (Perls 1951 cited in Davison 2016b, 155). Such techniques, though questionable from today's perspective, were seen as empowering, aiming to free the authentic self from the constraints of social conditioning. (ibid.) Jon Davison interprets the emergence of the "inner clown" approach as a reflection of the cultural and philosophical shifts of the 1960s, particularly the influence of the counterculture and the human potential movement. (Davison 2016b, 20) This period saw a growing emphasis on freedom, spontaneity, and individuality, which defined clowning as a tool for personal exploration and transformation. (Davison 2016b, 20) The Human Potential Movement emerged between the 1940s and 1970s. (Spence 2007, 255) It originated in the United States in the 1940s when Kurt Lewin (no date) developed human relations training programs for community leaders. These programs, conducted in small groups, focused on understanding group dynamics and mainly targeted corporate executives. (ibid., 257) By the 1960s, the focus shifted from professional education to personal development. Described as "group therapy for normals" (ibid.) the movement emphasized "self-discovery and the development of one's full potential" (ibid., 257). At the core of this approach was the belief that every individual possesses a deep-seated, positive drive toward growth, which Abraham Maslow (Maslow 1962 cited in Spence 2007, 256) referred to as self-actualization or psychological health. He believes that after basic needs like food, shelter, and parental love are satisfied, people become more motivated to develop their talents and abilities, which helps them move closer to their true selves. (Maslow 1962 cited in Spence 2007, 256) Carl Rogers (1961) further contributed to this movement by developing "encounter groups" (Rogers 1961 cited in Spence 2007, 258), which facilitated self-knowledge through heightened awareness and both interpersonal and intrapersonal exploration. (ibid.) Irvin D. Yalom (1975) described these groups as a "social oasis" (Yalom 1975 cited in Spence 2007, 257) where people could escape life's harsh realities, engage in genuine interpersonal exchanges, and openly discuss self-doubts and perceived weaknesses. (ibid.) Carl Rogers (1961) viewed mainstream society as restrictive, forcing individuals to conform to external norms rather than act in alignment with their authentic selves (Rogers 1961 cited in Spence 2007, 256). Consequently, he saw the therapist's role as providing what society often lacked: a warm, supportive environment characterized by empathy and non-judgmental understanding. (ibid.) According to R.G. Weigel (2002), encounter groups rapidly evolved "from being therapy to being the ultimate personal growth experience, to becoming a full-fledged social movement" (Weigel 2002, 192 cited in Spence 2007, 258). Wilhelm Reich's (2013 [1933]) theories also influenced this movement and, subsequently, the philosophy and discourse of inner clown workshops. Reich prioritized the unconscious over the conscious mind and argued that nature should

be liberated from societal constraints—an idea that resonated deeply with the countercultural movements of the time. (Reich 2013 [1933] cited in Davison 2016b, 152) Unlike Freud, who viewed the unconscious as a source of antisocial and destructive impulses, Reich saw it as inherently positive, believing that psychological distress stemmed primarily from societal repression. (ibid.) Curtis (2002) further emphasized Reich's view that freedom from these constraints was essential for a fulfilling life. (Curtis 2002 cited in Davison 2016b, 152) Sociocultural factors in the United States contributed to the movement's rise, particularly "an increasing sense of depersonalization and social isolation", alongside "a growing need to protect one's public image within a competitive, market-driven economy" (Spence 2007, 257). By the 1970s, the Human Potential Movement began to decline. (Spence 2007, 257) According to Spence, one reason for this decline was the lack of theoretical and analytical research, which prevented the movement from critically examining itself. The anti-intellectualism of the 1960s and 1970s reflected a widespread desire to break free from socio-political systems perceived as stifling individuality, including science (Weigel 2002 cited in Spence 2007, 259). Gordon D. Spence criticizes the movement for its lack of research, ethical codes, and open debate, which led to untested hypotheses, grandiose claims, and unethical practices. (Spence 2007, 260-261)

A parallel might be drawn between the lack of research on clowning and the broader absence of intellectualization in the field. Davison observes this gap in research on clowning workshops, criticizing the predominant focus on the search for the "inner self" as the central approach. He argues that this dominance even slows down the "evolution" of clown pedagogy and practice. (Davison 2016b, 10) By prioritizing this singular perspective, alternative ways of understanding and teaching clowning risk being marginalized or rendered invisible, thereby limiting its creative and theoretical potential. (ibid., 11) Davison advocates for more research and the development of a clown theory, emphasizing the need for critical analysis of clown training and discourse through systematic documentation of training methods. (ibid., 13)[26]

Despite the decline of the human potential movement, public interest in personal growth remained strong. This was evident in the booming market for self-help books and audio programs throughout the 1980s. By the 1990s, the breakdown of social networks across the

[26] In his doctoral thesis "The Self-Deconstruction of Clowning" (2016), Jon Davison proposes approaches for integrating research and theoretical frameworks into clown training.

Western world, coupled with rising living standards and increased social disconnection, created a growing need for alternative support systems. This demand fueled the rise of coaching and workshops centered on self-exploration, and, eventually, clowning workshops. (Spence 2007, 260)

In summary, I conclude that the emergence of the inner clown approach and the personal self-exploration in clowning workshops can be understood as influenced by the growing emphasis on the self in psychological and therapeutic contexts, the rise of the human potential movement, the counterculture of the 1960s, and the broader Zeitgeist of increasing depersonalization and social isolation within a market-driven economy in western countries.

3.1.2. Philosophical context: Gaulier, Sartre, freedom, and the flop

Another internationally renowned teacher of the inner clown approach next to Jaques Lecoq is Philippe Gaulier. A former student of Jacques Lecoq, Gaulier established his own school in 1987, further developing the concept of the flop and expanding on Lecoq's pedagogical methods. (Davison 2016b, 38) Gaulier emphasizes that mere foolishness is not enough. Rather, a clown must possess an immense desire to play the fool. He frequently employs terms such as "stupidity" (Gaulier no date cited in Davison 2016b, 40), and his influence has cemented the flop as a foundational concept in modern clowning. Despite his prominence, Gaulier has faced criticism for his abrasive and confrontational teaching methods. Ira Seidenstein (2013)—despite lacking direct experience with Gaulier—has described him as psychologically abusive, a claim echoed in reports from former students. (Seidenstein 2013 cited in Davison 2016b, 156) Gaulier's approach formalized Lecoq´s flop technique, which he described as an "encounter with Mr. Flop" (Gaulier, no date cited in Davison 2016b, 186)—an experience that, according to him, is inevitable. Failure is inevitable. This notion aligns with Sartre's assertion that failure is an intrinsic part of existence and that any human endeavor is ultimately doomed to fail. (Davison 2016b, 186) Interestingly, failure from the perspective of a clown can be read as success in making people laugh and providing a source of creative and humorous potential. As a result, Gaulier's philosophy resonates more closely with Sartrean existentialism, particularly the concept of freedom, than with the archetypes of Jung, who leans more toward an essentialist perspective according to Davison (Davison 2016b, 188). According to Jean-Paul Sartre, as human beings, freedom is inherent to our existence. (Sartre 1992 cited in Liu 2022, 186–87) We have the ability to reflect on and differentiate aspects of our being. With this capacity, the concept of choice emerges. As humans, we make choices every day, and these choices shape our sense of self and

identity. In this way, the self and identity are not fixed entities but ongoing processes of decision-making and meaning-making. There is no pre-existing subject—no fixed "self" that exists prior to making choices. Instead, the self is continually constituted through the act of choosing. It does not exist before or after choices but only in the process of making them. (Sartre 1992 cited in Liu 2022, 186–87) I will elaborate on the topic of self and identity as fluid concepts in the chapter 3.4.2. "The self, identity and community". This perspective diverges from the essentialist view presented in Jung's archetypes, offering an alternative understanding of clowning. In the existentialist perspective, freedom lies in the act of creating meaning through choices. Renxiang Liu (2022) refers to Dagfinn Føllesdal (1981) as following:

> "We are always free to constitute reality in several different ways" (Føllesdal 1982 cited in Liu 2022, 184)

Liu further elaborates that "we are *authors* of what the world and things within it *mean*, although meaning is less often beheld thematically than *implied* in action: for instance, the meaning I give to my bicycle consists in the way I ride it so as to move around" (Liu 2022, 184 [emphasis in original]). Meaning or truth about the world is not something waiting to be discovered. It is created, and it is unique and particular to each individual. As Liu (2022) explains:

> "[…] I choose (i.e., particularize) my character only in every action I take in concrete situations, just like skills of a language are exhibited only in speaking it, that is, in producing and comprehending concrete sentences" (Liu 2022, 188).

Stumbling upon this existentialist interpretation of freedom, self, and meaning-making, I was reminded of the performative approach, in which culture is understood as a self-woven web of meaning. In this perspective, individuals do not merely represent pre-existing meanings but actively create and discover meaning through performance—through action and the choices made. (Bachmann-Medick 2014, 107; Kalb 2017, 24, 28) With this in mind, the agency of meaning-making becomes essential, especially in spaces like clowning workshops, which is the focus of this research. I will explore this further in chapter 3.5.2. "Between laughter and liberation: The emotional and social benefits of clowning".

The emergence of existentialist thought in clowning can be further understood within its postwar historical context, where shifting perspectives on failure and shame opened new pathways to freedom (Davison 2016b, 200). Both Sartre's and Gaulier's clowning philosophies suggest that, rather than being paralyzed by the shame of failure, embracing failure can lead to a deeper realization of freedom. (ibid.) Patrick Baert (2011) provides an

interpretation of how themes of failure and freedom emerged during the transitional period following World War II in France. (Baert 2011, 2015 cited in Davison 2016b, 184-185) He discusses how the French grappled with the shame and guilt of their past, particularly their complicity in the German occupation, and how existentialist philosophy, especially that of Jean-Paul Sartre, provided a framework for understanding these emotions. Sartre's existentialist philosophy gained prominence at the end of the German occupation in late 1944, coinciding with a shift “from the silence of collaboration to the speaking out of liberation” (Davison 2016b, 185). Failure became a way to deal with guilt and trauma from the past, allowing for reflection and moving forward (Baert 2015 in Davison 2016, 194). By the late 1940s, French society began to view failure not just as something shameful, but as an opportunity for deeper reflection, political engagement, and regaining a sense of agency. (ibid., 199) The meaning of failure was transformed within French society. (ibid.) It's possibly no coincidence that those two influential clown teachers, Lecoq and Gaulier, are both French. In the context of clowning workshops and understanding their emergence through an existentialist lens, the grande flop technique is rooted in the concept of failure. The clown succeeds precisely because they are self-aware and acknowledge and even enjoy their failure to be a clown. Failure is not merely an obstacle but a defining element of success, as each moment of triumph is inherently linked to prior failure. The emergence of clowning workshops and the flop technique can be understood through Sartre´s existentialist philosophy on freedom and agency and the post-war context.

3.1.3. Late capitalism, Žižek, and relationality

Davison discusses further the inner clown approach in late capitalist society, drawing on Žižek´s theories of debt, failure, and the superego. (Žižek 2014 cited in Davison 2016b, 224-225) He raises the question of whether the concept of the "personal clown" operates within broader systems of power and control in late capitalism. As corporate liberalism expanded, its emphasis on conformity eventually adapted to market the uniqueness of individuals as consumers. (Spence 2007, 201) Clowning’s sustained relevance may have become aligned with the rise of self-help culture and the commercialization of personal transformation in the 1980s and beyond. (Davison 2016b, 157) He examines this intersection between corporate liberalism and the commodification of individual uniqueness, particularly as reflected in clowning and the discourse surrounding the “inner personal clown” (Davison 2016b, 201). He questions whether clowning, increasingly framed as a purely personal practice detached from social structures and conventions, risks losing its broader relevance. (ibid, 157) Unlike conventional societal roles, clowns reject predictability, calculation, and routine behavior.

Nevertheless, Davison (2016b) suggests that the notion of the “personal clown” may be susceptible to co-optation by the very capitalist structures it aims to resist. If everyone is a clown and failure is normalized within late capitalism — through resilience rhetoric, self-improvement narratives, and the embrace of imperfection — can clowning still function as a subversive force? In this sense, Davison raises a critical question: does embracing clowning empower individuals, or does it ultimately reinforce their complicity within an exploitative system? (Davison 2016b, 224-225) This perspective reinforces the idea that failure is not merely incidental but fundamentally embedded within the system itself. (ibid.) While the questions Davison raises are important, I argue that although the system holds significant power, the agency and capacity for meaning-making among individuals are equally substantial. Rather than being entirely determined by structural constraints, people actively navigate, challenge, and reshape the very systems in which they exist. I will explore this further through the Deleuzian lens in chapter 3.4.2.2.2 “Resisting labels, identity and the rhizome”.

The understanding of the notion of the self in clowning workshops, as reflected above, can be questioned and understood as inherently relational.

> “Moving away from paradigms of ‘clown as inner self’ towards clown as a mode of relationality, the training utopia proposed here educates a sense of ease with being *with* others and the courage to be different *from* others. Arendtian freedom rests on an image of a co-created world in which political action is possible for all“ (Saner 2020, 153 [emphasis in original]).

Clowning practices, therefore, can be understood as something that emerges through interactions with others, rather than merely through the self. In reference to Hannah Arendt’s concept of freedom, individual autonomy is not about isolation but about participating in a shared, co-created world. (Arendt no date cited in Saner 2020, 153) In this framework, true freedom arises through engagement with others, where people act and express themselves in ways that shape the collective space. Clowning, then, becomes a practice that trains individuals to navigate this relational world, helping them find ease in being with others while also embracing their differences. (ibid.) This potential of agency and space of negotiation will be discussed in depth in the chapter 3.3.3. “Performer training utopia–Clowning workshop space as a space of negotiation and of anti-structural agency”.

While it is impossible to provide a comprehensive history of clowning workshops, their countless teachers, and the various approaches they employ, I can refer to Jon Davison’s

doctoral thesis, “The Self-Deconstruction of Clowning” (2016), a highly critical and meticulous exploration of the "inner clown" approach in clown training.

This chapter attempted to delve into the emergence of clowning workshops and their underlying philosophical, psychological, cultural, and economic contexts, highlighting the importance of recognizing that clowning is historically specific and embedded in the socio-cultural and political context of its time. (Davison 2016b, 10-12) In doing so, I highlighted two well-known figures in clown training—Jaques Lecoq and Philip Gaulier—whose influence is also evident in the workshops I have attended. In the next chapter, I will discuss the settings of the clowning workshop and its framework.

3.2. The clowning workshop setting as ethnographic field

> “That's why the atmosphere that is created is so special as well. You come to this place, you meet maybe other ten people that you never saw before. And after a few days, it really seems you know them since their whole life. And we all recognize this because we all have the same fears, we all have pains, we all have things that we don't like about ourselves. It doesn't matter if we are different, but we are all the same.” (Interview with Francesca, 13 June 2024, 20)

As already mentioned in the previous chapter, clowning workshops can be understood as gatherings of people where clowning is experienced through the facilitation of a person. The focus of this thesis is dedicated to clowning workshops that focus on self-perception and self-awareness, in which participants explore themselves through specific exercises and observation of their own behaviors, rather than the development of a clown character or artistic skills, even though this might be a side effect of it, but not the primary focus. (Kalb 2017, 195) These workshops optimally create a protected and safe environment where participants can explore clowning through direct personal experience, without the pressure of performing in front of a paying audience.

In the following chapter, I will explore the differences between workshop spaces and staged performances with a paying audience. I will examine the key criteria for creating a safer space in clowning workshops, as well as the roles of the group, facilitator, and participants. These insights are drawn from interviews with both participants and facilitators.

3.2.1. Clowning behind closed doors: Clowning workshops vs. staged performances

The clowning workshop space is fundamentally different from performance spaces such as street acts or theatre performances, even though participants go on stage. One of the key distinctions is that everyone performs, and there is no passive audience that merely consumes the performance or pays for it. This reduces expectations and pressure for those on stage, creating an environment where vulnerability can be expressed more freely. Some participants express that clowning workshops are their preferred way to engage with clowning because they provide a safer, more experimental environment, alleviating the pressure to perform and entertain. The absence of a paying audience changes the dynamics, shifting the focus from performance to process, from entertainment to exploration.

Davison (2016b) highlights the distinction between the workshop space and the performance space as follows:

	Workshop	**Staged performance**
Group of spectators are:	Classmates	A paying audience
Participation is:	Equal. The spectators will also have to do the exercise at some point	Unequal. The spectators will not have to do clowning at any point
Teacher is:	Present and in control of the proceedings	Not present
Response comes from:	The teacher and the students	The audience
Feedback may come from:	The teacher and possibly some students	The audience formally or informally
The set up is created:	By the teacher explaining the exercises and rules	By the performance context prior to the audience arriving
Facilitation happens through:	The teacher	The convention exclusively for the performer

Figure 1 Comparison workshop setting and performance setting (© Davison 2016b, 256-257)

With this table, we can see some of the differences in creating a specific atmosphere in those workshop spaces studied.

3.2.2. Understanding participants in clowning workshops

> "The clown is not a character—it's first a state of playing where everyone has access to the key question: what is so funny about myself?" (Fusetti 2025, no page)

Clowning workshops attract a wide range of participants, yet they share certain commonalities in their curiosity, openness, or personal motivations. These workshops are designed for adults and not intended for children, because adults already have developed structured ways of thinking or behaving—whether through social conditioning, personal habits, or professional constraints.

While participants come from varied personal and professional backgrounds, many share an open-minded attitude and a tendency to question tradition and the status quo. Some participants described how many attendees position themselves between artistic expression and activism, referring to it as "artivism". They often possess strong communication skills and an awareness of group dynamics, and tend to respect different perspectives while aiming to balance their own presence within the group. Clowning may attract individuals who see performance as a tool for both self-exploration and societal reflection. Exceptions always exist, and workshops remain open to all, regardless of prior experience or personal approach. (Interviews with Maryna, 7 October 2024, and with Antonia, 20 June 2024)

Understanding the motivations behind why people join clowning workshops provides deeper insight into the diversity of participants. Drawing on my interviews, conversations, and the subsequent process of analysis (see also chapter 1.5. "Interpretation and analysis: Decoding laughter"), I identified various aspects that shed light on the reasons why people are drawn to clowning (Interviews with Amber, 5 July 2024; Anja, 20 June 2024; Antonia, 11 February 2024; Francesca, 18 June 2024; Kiara, 27 January 2025; Leo, 21 June 2024; Maryna, 7 October 2024; Melanie, 7 June 2024):

- *Seeking spaces of joy, playfulness, and laughter:*

  Some adults actively find spaces for play in a world where running around and playing games—as we did as children—are no longer widely accepted. Still, it seems unreasonable that growing up should mean the end of shared play and playful foolishness.

- *Healing and Self-Discovery:*

Some see clowning as a space for healing or transformation, whether from past traumas, rigid societal expectations, or personal struggles. They utilize the playful and non-judgmental nature of clowning to express emotions, reconnect with various aspects of themselves and with others.

- *Seeking Tools for Coping with Life's Challenges*:

Some participants turn to clowning as a way to navigate challenging life experiences, utilizing humor, play, and embodied expression as tools for emotional resilience and self-regulation.

- *Exploring Different Roles and Identities:*

Clowning offers an opportunity to experiment with new roles, personas, or ways of being. Some participants use it as a space to step outside of their usual identity and explore alternative versions of themselves.

- *Breaking Free from Cognitive Thinking:*

For many individuals, clowning serves as an outlet for improvisation, failure, and spontaneity, enabling participants to embrace mistakes and transcend rigid cognitive frameworks.

- *Breaking out of old patterns playfully:*

Whether due to personal stagnation or external pressures, some individuals seek clowning as a way to step out of their routine and engage in something spontaneous, interactive, and joyfully disruptive.

- *Artistic Expression and Performative Exploration:*

Some, who are interested in theater, performance art, or improvisation, seek a unique performative method.

- *Activism and social engagement:*

Some participants view clowning as a tool for activism, enabling them to gain a deeper understanding of themselves and develop strategies for effective activist engagement, such as demonstrations or street interventions, by utilizing humor, absurdity, and physical expression to challenge societal norms and raise awareness about social issues.

Participants may be seeking something beyond conventional forms of expression, whether for self-knowledge and healing, artistic exploration, or activism, and feel the need to break free from ingrained structures and behavioral patterns, disrupting these patterns creatively and playfully. Beyond these motivations, a fundamental question arises: Is everyone capable of clowning? Does clowning require a certain predisposition, or can it be learned by anyone willing to engage with the process? In the next chapter, I will explore the perspectives on accessibility and skill in doing clowning.

3.2.2.1. Clowning for everyone? Perspectives on accessibility and skill

> “Well, first things first, I think everybody can clown and everybody should probably clown.” (Interview with Kiara, 27 January 2025, 29)

A big question that arises in clowning discourse is: Who can be a clown? Is clowning a universally accessible practice, or does it require specific qualities, training, or talent? Some argue that clowning is open to all, while others maintain that not everyone can truly embody the clown and emphasize the need for training in specific skills. Laurel Butler (2012) argues that clowning is accessible to everyone, no matter their age or level of experience. (L. Butler 2012, 63):

> "Rather than subscribe to the notion that clowning requires a certain degree of mastery or virtuosity acquired at the end of a long period of theatrical training, I instead maintain that by locating clowning in the authentic body, or framing the clown as self, we actually render it vastly accessible" (L. Butler 2012, 63).

By reframing clowning as an inherently accessible practice, Laurel Butler aligns it with “the principles of critical pedagogy” outlined in Paulo Freire’s “Pedagogy of the Oppressed“ (Freire 1970 cited in L. Butler 2012, 63). In this view, according to L. Butler (2012), the clown acts as both a student and a teacher, encouraging critical awareness of social conditioning, creating meaning through questioning, and observing the world with empathy and hope. (ibid.) This perspective challenges traditional notions of individual virtuosity in performance, which can, in some cases, be disempowering. The emphasis on virtuosity suggests that clowning is an exclusive skill reserved for a selected few—those who are exceptionally talented, naturally gifted, or possess an inherent genius for performance. This creates a hierarchy in which clowning is framed as something that must be mastered through rigorous training, rather than a practice that is accessible to all. Such an approach can discourage those who do not see themselves as performers or who lack formal training, reinforcing the idea that only a privileged few have the right to engage in clowning. (ibid.) If clowning is understood not as a skill to be perfected but as a state of being—one rooted in openness,

curiosity, and the willingness to embrace failure—it becomes radically inclusive. This shift allows clowning to function as a space where anyone, regardless of experience, can engage in creative exploration, express their unique presence, and connect with others through vulnerability and play. Rather than upholding traditional artistic hierarchies, this perspective democratizes the art of clowning. (ibid.)

The workshops I attended emphasized accessibility and inclusivity. According to them, everybody can clown. Interviews revealed a debate within the field regarding the necessary skills and training required to be considered a clown.

> "Ich glaube, dass es eigentlich wirklich jeder Mensch kann und gleichzeitig verstehe ich diesen Ansatz von hey, wir können auch nicht bei allen sagen, ja du, wir sind einfach alle Clowns oder alle Malerinnen oder alle Musikerinnen, also irgendwie schon. Aber ich verstehe, dass andere so OK, wenn das alle sind, dann haben wir auch wieder ein Problem mit den Honoraren" (Interview with Anja, 20 June 2024, 11)

Two different opinions are prevalent in this discourse: On one side, some—particularly those who have undergone formal and professional clown training, such as learning acrobatics or physical theater—believe that clowning is a craft requiring specific skills, discipline, and practice. From their perspective, not everyone can step into clowning without proper training, as it involves more than just playfulness. It requires mastery of physical expression, timing, and audience engagement. On the other hand, some advocate for a more open approach, believing that clowning is an innate human capacity that anyone can tap into. For them, clowning is not about technical proficiency but about authenticity, presence, and the ability to embrace failure and vulnerability. They argue that clowning should not be restricted to only those with professional training but should instead be seen as a form of expression available to all. And then some fall between these two approaches. Beyond the philosophical differences, this debate also has practical implications. Questions arise about professional recognition, salaries, and the regulation of clowning as a profession. If clowning is something anyone can do, what does that mean for those who have dedicated years to training? Who gets paid and who defines the professional standards of a clown? Additionally, the issue of certification plays a role in how clowns are perceived. In many artistic fields, having formal credentials from a recognized institution can influence whether one is taken seriously, hired for professional gigs, or granted funding. Some argue that certification provides legitimacy and protects the value of clowning as a profession. In contrast, others see it as an unnecessary barrier that excludes those who do not follow conventional training paths.

> “Das geht dann mit dieser Diskussion zusammen, wieviel musst du lernen, um dich als Clown oder als Schauspielerin oder als Musikerin zu bezeichnen? Was musst du für ein Zertifikat haben und wann bezeichnest du dich selber und akzeptieren das die anderen auch?” (Interview with Anja, 20 June 2024, 10)

This ongoing discussion highlights the tensions between clowning as a free and inclusive practice and clowning as a professionalized art form with defined standards and qualifications.

3.2.3. Understanding the group and clowning as relational practice

> „Die Clownerie funktioniert halt nicht ohne das Publikum und dadurch gibt es halt immer schon eine Gruppe. Auch wenn du allein auf der Bühne stehst, geht es ja nicht nur um dich, weil du bist immer in diesem Austausch mit dem Publikum. Und das macht es halt auch so ganz besonders, dass halt immer das Publikum miteinbezogen wird und Teil von dem Stück ist, ohne das es halt nicht funktioniert. Und das allein, finde ich, ist schon so wertvoll an der Clownerie, also dass es das Publikum braucht und die Resonanz und den Austausch.“ (Interview with Leo, 21 June 2024, 15)

As already mentioned in the introduction to this chapter on the discourse of the self in clowning training and Jon Davison’s (2016b) critique of essentialism, I would like to elaborate on the relationality of clowning workshops. Clowning practices can be understood as something that emerges through interactions with others, rather than merely through the self, and is therefore deeply relational, which can be reflected in the importance of the group.

> “Yeah, you literally, you know, this fourth wall that doesn't exist. Like, this is about me, but this is also about you being with me.“
> (Interview with Amber, 5 July 2024, 9)

The non-existence of the fourth wall refers to the breakdown of the invisible barrier that traditionally separates performers from the audience in theater and performance art. In conventional performances, the fourth wall creates an illusion that the audience is merely observing a self-contained world, one that is disconnected from their own reality. In performances where the fourth wall is removed, the distinction between performer and spectator dissolves, inviting a more direct, immersive, and participatory experience. The quote emphasizes this idea by highlighting that the performance is not just about the artist but also about the shared presence and experience of the audience. It suggests a sense of relationality and co-creation, where the audience is not a passive observer but an active participant in the meaning and energy of the moment.

In this chapter, I will discuss the group as inherent in clowning workshops and the clown mode as a state of relationality.

3.2.3.1. From the self to relationality

Clowning exercises have been understood through the notion of the self, which originates from within. However, according to Purcell Gates (2011), this may actually arise from external influences, specifically, "from the clown's relationship with the world and others". (Saner 2020, 151) Within this, a self unfolds that is shaped through external negotiation, emerging in the dynamic space between performers, spectators, facilitators, the space and the group. (ibid.) As the performer's body conveys a self that elicits laughter from the audience—often without the performer being consciously aware of this exchange—a unique form of communication takes shape. (ibid.) Some facilitators or clowns referred to it as "channeling" or "what does the space need", referring to that state of relatedness to the space, the audience, the self, and environment in this specific moment. (Fieldnotes Mollnhuber 2024) Rather than being an expression of a pre-existing, internal self, the clown's identity emerges in a dynamic, relational process. This self is not simply revealed but negotiated externally. As the clown moves, reacts, and embodies different gestures, their body communicates meaning in ways they may not even be fully aware of. This unconscious exchange evokes laughter from the audience, reinforcing the idea that the clown's identity is co-created in the moment rather than being a fixed, internal essence. (Purcell Gates 2011 cited in Saner 2020, 151)

3.2.3.2. Clowning workshops as ensemble practice

Clowning is inherently relational and does not work in isolation; it thrives on the dynamic exchange between performers and audience. The reactions, energy, and interaction with spectators shape their performance. This interaction is not just an addition to the performance but its very foundation. As Richard Schechner notes: "No theatre performance functions detached from its audience" (Schechner 1985, 10). According to him, a space comes alive through the dynamic interaction between performers and spectators. This interplay is apparent in performances that require active audience participation. However, even in settings where the audience seems passive, like classical music concerts, their presence is far from inert. The audience elevates the performer, energizes their craft, and sustains them. (ibid.) Schechner (1985) further observes that this interaction creates a unique form of collaboration—a theatrical life that emerges collectively through shared experience. (ibid., 10-11) The audience is not just an external observer but becomes a co-creator of the moment, influencing the clown's timing, gestures, and improvisation. (ibid.) This reciprocal relationship makes clowning a deeply engaging and unpredictable art form.

The importance of this connection highlights that clowning is not merely a one-sided act of entertainment, but a shared experience built on resonance and mutual presence. Participants open up within the group when they sense acceptance within the group. It can be deeply powerful, creating a space where vulnerability is not only permitted but welcomed. When one person shares emotions on stage, this exchange extends beyond the performer—audience members can connect with those emotions, recognizing and allowing similar feelings within themselves. In this way, the group becomes a source of support, helping individuals feel seen and validated in their experiences. It can generate a unique energy that influences the experience for everyone involved.

In this sense, the workshop space is inherently shared, as clowning is not a solitary practice but an “ensemble practice” (Saner 2020, 152), reliant on interaction and exchange. This is evident in the way clowns engage with their audience, which occurs through maintaining eye contact, sharing their emotions continuously, and creating a dynamic relational flow. (ibid.)

> “[...] space is shared and brought to life by the interaction between performers and spectators [...]” (Schechner 1985, 10).

I vividly remember the impact of this practice: as a clown on stage, maintaining eye contact fostered a profound sense of connection. The training placed significant emphasis on exercises that involved eye contact, which facilitated emotional exchange, and breathing, which played a crucial role in keeping emotions in motion, deepening the connection with oneself, the audience, and the surrounding space. In these moments, a shared space emerged, where relatedness unfolded, and emotions flowed between the clown and the audience, shaping an ongoing exchange. A sense of flow became possible, where the "channels" seemed open, allowing impulses for action to arise spontaneously.

> “[…] to do one thing at a time, always sharing with the audience and keeping the cause or aim of each action transparent. It doesn’t matter if the solutions are ingenious; the aim here is to create a shared space […]” (Saner 2020, 151)

This raises a compelling question: Is the clown merely revealing their conscious or unconscious self, or could the clowning space function as a channel for something beyond the individual, perhaps a collective unconscious or a broader sense of shared experience, a collectiveness? In these moments, the clown may no longer feel like a distinct person but rather a conduit—a vessel for emotions, impulses, and shared affect, moving beyond personal expression into something deeply collective.

3.2.3.3. On creating a safeR[27] space in clowning workshops

The idea of safety is complex and personal, evolving beyond its traditional meaning of protecting from physical harm or immediate threats. While safety once mainly meant being free from danger, like not being threatened with a weapon or experiencing physical violence, its use has expanded in many contexts, particularly in conversations about emotional, psychological, and social well-being. In modern settings, especially within activism, therapy, and community building, safety often means feeling secure enough to be vulnerable, express oneself openly, and take risks without fear of judgment or harm. This change shows a broader understanding that threats are not only physical but also emotional and social. Feeling dismissed, invalidated, or pressured to conform can be just as upsetting as physical danger in some situations. The concept of a "safe space" emerged in the late 20th century within civil rights movements as a means to protect marginalized groups from systemic violence and harassment, while fostering collective power and resistance. Over time, the concept has been adopted in various fields—including education, activism, and environmental science—leading to its widespread use. As a result, scholars have criticized it as an "overused but undertheorized metaphor" (Barrett 2010, 1 cited in The Roestone Collective 2014, 1347), calling for more critical discussion. Safety remains deeply subjective. What feels safe for one person might not feel safe for another. Some people may feel safe in highly structured environments with clear rules, while others feel safest in open, fluid spaces without rigid expectations. Furthermore, safety is relational because it depends not only on individual perception but also on the collective atmosphere and interpersonal dynamics within a space.

In the following chapter, I will explore the criteria of a safer space in clowning workshops, shared by participants and facilitators. (Interviews with Amber, 5 July 2024; Anja, 20 June 2024; Antonia, 11 February 2024; Francesca, 18 June 2024; Kiara, 27 January 2025; Leo, 21 June 2024; Maryna, 7 October 2024; Melanie, 7 June 2024) What conditions are necessary for participants to feel safe to be vulnerable? What does it take to create such an environment?

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[27] The concept of “safeR space” replaces that of safe spaces, as it acknowledges that judgment and forms of discrimination can never be fully eliminated. As social beings shaped by our socialization, we may reproduce such dynamics unintentionally. Therefore, the current discourse emphasizes “safer space”, recognizing that a completely safe space is ultimately an illusion. (Queer lexicon, accessed 25 August 2025, https://queer-lexikon.net/2022/12/08/kummerkastenantwort-3-115-was-ist-der-unterschied-zwischen-safe-spaces-und-safer-spaces/)

- <u>Hierarchy, eye-level basis, and feedback-loops</u>

One key aspect that participants shared is fostering an atmosphere of equality. Teaching should happen on an eye-level basis, without rigid hierarchies. Facilitators are not supposed to be positioned as ultimate authorities but as co-learners, holding the space, acknowledging that participants are experts in their own lives, even if they have never done clowning before. Life experience itself becomes a resource that participants bring to the stage, making them knowledgeable in their own unique way. (Interview with Corinna, 9 July 2024) According to Davison, the space is orchestrated and even controlled solely by the teacher, placing them in a position of significant authority. (Davison 2016b, 147) This may often be the case, but in the workshops that I attended, students played an active role in shaping the space.

> "I mean, this is interesting about the clowning world, because in this clowning world I feel like and especially in this traditional clowning world, there is a lot of hierarchy, there is a lot of competitiveness and bad vibes. Certain, I would say, mainstream ways of doing things and less emotions, I guess less space for everybody and I don't know if I can say this like to be true, but I do have a feeling that FLINTA's [women, lesbians, intersex, non-binary, trans, and agender people] are socialized different and that means that very often there is more empathy and more care and I need that at this point in my clowning journey, to feel safe and to clown." (Interview with Kiara, 27 January 2025, 11)

This reflects the significant role that facilitation plays in shaping the structure and atmosphere of a workshop. While some mainstream clowning trainings tend to follow hierarchical pedagogical models and place less emphasis on emotional experience, the workshop specifically designed for FLINTA individuals offered a different kind of space—one where participants could feel safer. The role of the facilitator in this context will be discussed in more detail in chapter 3.2.4.

Participants were encouraged to co-create the environment by providing feedback, creating an opt-out option, and participating in check-ins, reinforcing the previously mentioned notion of relationality.

> "And they really give a space, a room for co creation. Somehow they sometimes can ask: 'This is what we thought. What about that? How do you feel? Do you feel like a break?' Like they feel also what other people feel and they go with that. They don't go with 'This is the plan.'" (Interview with Maryna, 7 October 2024, 4)

Some facilitators shared that they aim to cultivate a space where participants can actively engage through feedback loops, checking in on them, ensuring their needs are heard, and adjusting the setting accordingly. This method of periodic check-ins is viewed as highly valuable for maintaining an environment that remains open, flexible, and accountable,

according to The Roestone Collective[28] (2014), as participants can critically examine both the explicit and implicit inclusions and exclusions within their spaces. (The Roestone Collective 2014, 1355)

> "Also dass man eigentlich immer wieder Feedbackschleifen hat, sozusagen, dass da dann nichts irgendwie aus dem Ruder läuft, und also auch diese Kollektividee, dass vielleicht auch alle irgendwo ein bisschen verantwortlich dann dafür sind." (Interview with Anja, 20 June 2024, 26)

Participants appreciated this approach, as the space was collectively created. It highlights the importance of how facilitators shape a space, their approach, and whether they allow participants to co-create it, which can fundamentally transform the experience. In this sense, the space is co-created by facilitators, participants, the group, and the space itself, including the architecture of the room and its surrounding environment. Regular feedback sessions and check-ins with participants help maintain a sense of shared responsibility and openness.

- <u>Building trust and connection within the group:</u>

Building trust and connection from the very beginning is also crucial. Participants should engage with one another early on, creating a sense of belonging, understanding, and acceptance before stepping outside their comfort zones. Trust within the group can be strengthened through games that focus on being in the moment rather than on performance anxiety. Trust is also being cultivated on the side of the facilitator, who described this as follows:

> "I strongly trust in the process. Not in myself. I'm human, I can fail, I can be wrong. But I believe in the instrument I bring there. My role is to create a space where people feel that even if they break down, there is support. There is no judgment, and they are not left alone." (Interview with Francesca, 13 June 2024, 8)

This reflects the eye-level basis, that the teacher doesn't know everything and makes mistakes themselves too, but also that there is a trust in the process itself.

- <u>The framework and implicit agreement:</u>

A well-structured framework can contribute to creating a safer space, enabling participants and the group as a whole to engage more fully with their experiences and journeys. The following aspects emerged as components and tools of such a supportive framework:

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[28] The authors of the term "The Roestone Collective" are Heather Rosenfeld and Elsa Noterman. (The Roestone Collective 2014, 1363)

- *The inner observer*:

While clowning workshops can be deeply emotional and even transformative, they are not a form of therapy. Each participant is responsible for recognizing their own limits and speaking up if something feels overwhelming. This is where the concept of the inner observer comes in, as described by one of the facilitators: the internal, mature self that notices when personal boundaries are being overstepped. Participants should feel safe to explore vulnerability, but without losing themselves entirely in the role of the clown. (Interview with Corinna, 9 July 2024)

- *No harm*:

Another fundamental principle is to ensure that emotions—especially powerful ones like anger—are not projected onto others. Participants are encouraged to feel and express their feelings authentically, but without directing them in a harmful way at another person. To avoid this, facilitators suggest the philosophy that every clown on stage is allowed to shine. (Interview with Corinna, 9 July 2024)

- *Implicit agreement*:

Furthermore, there is a basic, implicit understanding that everyone is seen and allows themselves to be seen without harm. (Interviews with Amber, 5 July 2024; Antonia, 11 February 2024; Francesca, 18 June 2024)

> „And, like, there's, like, this basic agreement, like, we are going to see each other for what we are. And then there's part of all of us that don't see us or ourselves or each other for what we really are. And that's also there.“
> (Interview with Amber, 5 July 2024, 14)

- *Acceptance and compassion*:

Being accepted by the group is identified as a key part of this process. Clowning is based on principles of love, being seen, and connection. The focus is not on competition or hierarchy but on presence and play. (Interviews with Anja, 20 June 2024; Francesca, 18 June 2024)

- *The structure*:

The structure of the workshop itself also helps create a safer space. For example, when everyone is required to perform and there is no paying audience, there is no pressure to entertain, which removes the pressure of having to be funny or impressive. (Interviews with Kiara, 27 January 2025 and Leo, 21 June 2024)

> “That's the difference, like in terms of feeling like am I doing this for me? Or am I doing this for an audience? And as soon as you don't really care, it's more you're doing this for me and for the fun you are having with it.” (Interview with Kiara, 27 January 2025, 18)

> “Also für mich nimmt es auch ganz viel so diesen Druck raus, also weil ich so beim performen immer so mega aufgeregt war, was da jetzt alles passieren muss. Und im Endeffekt habe ich jetzt eher das Gefühl, alles was passiert ist okay. […] Und wenn es die schlechteste Show war, dann habe ich endlich mal die schlechteste Show gemacht.“ (Interview with Leo, 21 June 2024, 6-8)

- <u>The impact of mandatory participation and equality:</u>

As already mentioned above, one defining aspect of many clowning workshops is that everyone is required to go on stage and perform. This structure ensures that all participants have a voice and an opportunity to be seen, regardless of their usual comfort level in social or performative settings.

> “It's important that everybody has a voice in the group or that there's like opportunities where everybody like in the way Leo and Anya facilitate, there will be some kind of stage moments and then everybody has to go on stage, it's out of question. Everybody goes on stage, except if you want to go to drop out option.” (Interview with Kiara, 27 January 2025, 13)

> “If I don't feel like everybody's getting their moment kind of then I will not take my moment, this way also not be seen.” (Interview with Kiara, 27 January 2025, 12)

In many group dynamics, especially those involving performance or public expression, extroverted and confident individuals often naturally take up more space. At the same time, those who are more introverted or shy may withdraw. When participation relies entirely on individual initiative, quieter individuals might step back, either because they don’t feel entitled to the space or because they don’t want to compete for attention with louder, more dominant personalities. As a result, their presence and contributions can go unnoticed. (Fieldnotes Mollnhuber 2024)

> “Or a lot of times I was like, but I should take the space, and I should be more and I think I'm now seeing these different ways of facilitating, where I feel like actually it's so nice to be in a space where we know that everybody has a space and there's no need of like, ‘I take the space now and I am seen now.’ It creates a very different kind of workshop and all of these insecurities and thoughts of like, ‘Now I should go, because otherwise, I'm not seen.’ And everybody will be like. ‘Who's this invisible person?’ Just by the setting of the facilitation, it just changes the whole dynamics.” (Interview with Kiara, 27 January 2025, 12)

In clowning workshops where everyone is expected to step onto the stage, the responsibility to claim space isn't solely on the individual. Instead, the workshop's structure distributes that space equally. This removes the pressure to assert oneself to be seen, which can be a

barrier for those who are naturally more reserved. Since everyone takes turns stepping into the spotlight, visibility isn't just a privilege of the most outspoken; it becomes a shared experience. This structure helps dissolve hierarchical dynamics within the group. Rather than a division between performers and observers or between those who naturally take up space and those who hesitate, everyone becomes an active participant. The stage is not reserved for a select few but is a space where vulnerability, experimentation, and self-expression are encouraged for all. For those accustomed to staying in the background, this can be a transformative experience. Knowing that the expectation to perform applies to everyone equally can make taking the first step feel less daunting. Rather than having to fight for space or push past more dominant personalities, they can engage with performance in a structured way that allows them to be seen without the fear of competition. In this sense, mandatory participation creates a more inclusive and balanced environment, where visibility and self-expression are accessible to all, not just those who are naturally inclined to take center stage.

- Balancing Non-Judgment and competitiveness:

Facilitators aim to create a non-judgmental environment where competition, comparison, and evaluation are intentionally avoided. The focus is not on ranking, critiquing, or outshining participants, but instead on fostering an open space where individuals can freely explore, express, and play.

> “They do this for everyone, so I feel like, no one feels like, ‘Oh, I'm a great clown and I'm not a great clown’ but it's like we are all experimenting.” (Interview with Maryna, 7 October 2024, 8)

This does not mean that competitiveness is entirely absent.

> “I think the competitiveness in the game is like, at least for me, it turns off my brain and I am just there and like you can shut out the whole world and there's just a game. And it's so freeing to be free in just this, you know. And all the rest, everything else that goes on is just like turned off for a little bit, which is why i enjoy it a lot and i feel like also in clowning it helps me a lot to make things come out that are otherwise, you know, somehow restricted or tied back or somehow. And the other competitiveness is just too much of reality and too much of civil Kiara fighting, that comes out that is just blocking, I would say, like the one is really opening things and like letting this playfulness and this clown come out and the other is just like shutting down doors.” (Interview with Kiara, 27 January 2025, 14)

> “It's a world of difference, the one I love and the other I cannot do.” (Interview with Kiara, 27 January 2025, 14)

To sum up, these findings suggest two kinds of competitiveness: *the exhausting competitiveness of daily life*, where individuals constantly feel the pressure to outperform

others, prove their worth, or meet societal expectations; and *the playful competitiveness within the game*, which is not about dominance but about fully embracing the moment with passion and intensity.

> “I've been raised or like society also says like competitiveness is somehow a bad thing, and also I shouldn't be competitive and I think, as a child, i was very competitive. And it was also but not good for me, because it gave me a lot of pressure and a lot of anxiety. And in the clowning, I can just be so competitive and so enjoying, winning. And so in the Flinta clowning, what i love is there's always games. And one of the games is this very competitive game. And i win every time. And i love it so much.” (Interview with Kiara, 27 January 2025, 7-8)

The latter can be liberating, as it allows participants to drop the social mask of indifference or cool detachment and express their full range of emotions.

> “Dieses Selbstbewusstsein, so ich darf so sein wie ich bin und ich muss mich dafür nicht verstecken und alle anderen arbeiten auch so hart daran, irgendwo reinzupassen und es ist total absurd, wie viel Energie wieder rein verbuttern, weil es bringt uns nicht weiter. Ich glaube, genau das ist so das Wichtigste. (Interview with Leo, 21 June 2024, 7)

Many people are taught to hide intense emotions, whether it’s the desire to win or the frustration of losing. In clowning workshops, these emotions are not only accepted but celebrated. A participant can passionately declare, "I want to win this game, and I will give everything I have!" without worrying about being judged as too intense or too emotional. This creates a space where people can express what is often kept hidden in everyday life, allowing them to act out their desires, frustrations, and ambitions in a way that is both playful and cathartic.

> “Dann kann man sich ja auch selbst voll reflektieren in dem so ‚Oh mein Gott, es ist so arg.‘ Also ich merke dann immer so, ich bin so ein fucking fighter. Ein Fighter, also so am kämpfen, weißt du. Ich gebe alles. Und es ist so schön, das zu spüren, weil so oft tue ich so, ja, es betrifft mich eh nicht und nein, ich bin da emotional total distanziert. Genau und immer so schön formal soziale Regeln folgen.“ (Interview with Leo, 21 June 2024, 15)

- <u>Creating a Space of Compassion and Rest</u>

Another fundamental element of a safer clowning space is ensuring that the experience remains energizing rather than depleting, preventing exhaustion.

> “I think a safe space is also a space of non-exhaustion ideally.” (Interview with Kiara, 27 January 2025, 13)

Clowning should not become another space where people feel drained, pressured, or forced to push past their limits. Facilitators are mindful of the need for rest, slowness, and individual rhythm:

> “There was no rush. There were also enough of breaks. It just felt so flowy, like we were in a flow, and I felt that we had all the time that we needed. And somehow, there was space to breathe all the time. So the time was just passing by like this. It was also so much fun. It was just so fun. And I thought that it was enough space to just enjoy very little, small things like this kind of funny details.“ (Interview with Maryna, 7 October 2024, 2)

> “If I think, now of all the exercises, wow, it was lots of things. But at the same time, really, like in the end, I felt like, wow, I actually have so much energy. Usually, I'm so exhausted of people, and all of their needs and we try to decide who is right, who is wrong, who what kind of place wants to take? And there it was just like, everyone was happy.“ (Interview with Maryna, 7 October 2024, 4)

To support this, some workshops implement an opt-out option, which allows participants to step back when they feel overwhelmed or need a break. This does not mean leaving the space entirely, but instead shifting into a more observational role and remaining present without the pressure to actively perform. This respects individual boundaries and ensures that participation is always a choice rather than an obligation.

> “This like opt-out option is very important. That you sit on a chair and watch. Even though interestingly, I don't use this option. But it's important, that it's there.” (Interview with Kiara, 27 January 2025, 12)

- Gender dynamics and FLINTA[4] spaces:

Some clowning workshops I attended were specifically designed for FLINTA (women, lesbians, intersex, non-binary, trans, and agender people). This is because the presence of participants who have been socialized as men can fundamentally alter the atmosphere of a space, influencing how people feel and express themselves. For some participants, choosing a FLINTA facilitator is a conscious decision rooted in the need for safety. They may feel more at ease knowing that the space is free from the dynamics that often accompany mixed-gender environments:

> “There's no black and white. I don't think it has to be that every man is a bad facilitator. But I personally, like in general, already in life, I feel more safe with FLINTA people than I feel with men. And I think for me being taught by men is not always the easiest, because, especially in non formal education, where we bring in these hierarchies, it feels very often also already patronizing. And like you know, it creates certain hierarchies that we know from real life. And repeating or reproducing them in these spaces make it very hard to let this clown feel safe and come out kind of.” (Interview with Kiara, 27 January 2025, 11)

Society often raises FLINTA individuals with an emphasis on care, empathy, and emotional awareness. These qualities are not always as strongly encouraged in cis-male socialization. While these are broad generalizations that do not apply to every individual, many FLINTA people report feeling a different kind of atmosphere and relational dynamics in spaces where cis men are not present.

> “I do have a feeling that FLINTAs are socialized different and that means that very often there is more empathy and more care and I need that at this point in my clowning journey, to feel safe and to clown. You know, like Leo and Anya will always have this chair, where if you don't feel comfortable, you can go out you don't have to do anything, you know. And I like this is such a small tool that is crucial, so important, if you want to create a safe space. And again, i haven't been to a lot of workshops, but none of the men that were facilitating were giving this option.” (Interview with Kiara, 27 January 2025, 11)

One key reason for this is that many FLINTA individuals grow up learning to navigate social interactions with heightened sensitivity, often being conditioned to consider the emotions and needs of others before their own. This can create an environment where listening, mutual support, and emotional safety are prioritized. In contrast, in mixed-gender spaces, dominant social norms may still reflect competition, assertiveness, and a tendency to take up space, which can sometimes make FLINTA* individuals feel overlooked, interrupted, or dismissed. This is not to say that FLINTA* spaces are inherently conflict-free or that cis men cannot also embody care and empathy. Instead, it highlights how shared experiences of socialization can contribute to a feeling of mutual understanding, making these spaces feel safer and more emotionally nourishing for many participants. For others, the choice of a female or non-male facilitator is a matter of personal identification. Seeing themselves reflected in the person leading the workshop can create a deeper sense of belonging:

> “But after years of different experiences with different teachers, in a moment, I felt really the need to work with a woman, because till that moment, I only had male teachers, and I said, okay, but I'm a woman. I'm a clown woman. It's not about feminism or something like that, but it's like. It's a point of view. I'm a woman, and I'm a vision from a woman. So I would love to work in clown with a different vision of clown.“ (Interview with Francesca, 13 June 2024, 3)

At the same time, some facilitators and participants actively engage in political agency when shaping their workshops. They intentionally move beyond traditional gender categories, such as "male" and "female". In these environments, people who do not identify strictly within the binary can express themselves freely, without fear of judgment:

> “Das ist mir halt auch voll wichtig in dem, wie ich unterrichte oder auch das, was ich schaffen möchte, dass es halt so eine queere Geschichte sein soll, wo es eben nicht um Konkurrenz geht oder nicht um love story und nicht um toxische Männlichkeit, sondern halt so eine utopische Welt zu erschaffen, wo wir alle

> gemeinsam Dinge erreichen und wollen, dass es uns allen gut geht." (Interview with Leo, 21 June 2024, 6)

Criticism of the mainstream clowning scene also plays a role in shaping alternative workshop spaces. Some practitioners perceive the traditional clowning world as hierarchical, sexist, racist, heteronormative, and emotionally restrictive. In response, specific facilitators make a deliberate effort to create spaces that counter these patterns—spaces where participants are not subjected to the same exclusionary structures found elsewhere.

3.2.3.4. Safer space as a relational concept: The paradox

The idea of safety is not a fixed or absolute state but rather an ongoing process of negotiation, shaped by relationships, social norms, and power dynamics. If we see the binary of safe and not-safe as relational—something constructed and maintained through social interactions that differ across cultures, histories, and lived experiences—then there is a capacity for continuous renegotiation. (The Roestone Collective 2014, 1347 & 1350) This aligns with the work of "feminist geography" (The Roestone Collective 2014, 1360), which aims to challenge entrenched binaries and engage in the deconstruction and reimagining of space (Desbiens 1999, 184 cited in The Roestone Collective 2014, 1360). Creating a safer space is not a simple task. It is a complex, evolving process that demands ongoing reflection and adaptation. Considering the debate about including men in anti-rape marches—should they be welcomed as allies, or should women-centered spaces stay exclusive to those who directly experience gendered violence? Would separation foster a more profound sense of safety through solidarity and belonging, or would it unintentionally reinforce dividing lines? (The Roestone Collective 2014, 1353) To navigate these complexities, it is essential to recognize that no space is entirely free from power dynamics, privilege, or risk, and therefore, it is never entirely safe.

> "Safe space, as we interpret it, is not merely an attempt to create an abstract sense of equality, to smooth over differences, or to step outside of and ignore the dangers and injustices of the world. The work of producing safe space entails continually facing, negotiating, and embracing paradoxical binaries: safety/danger, inclusivity/exclusivity, public/private, and so forth." (The Roestone Collective 2014, 1355)

Teachers and students shall engage in and explore meaningful discussions to examine how privilege and power structures manifest within both the classroom and the broader socio-political landscape. (Ludlow 2004 cited in The Roestone Collective 2014, 1355) Safety is best understood as an ongoing, dynamic process—one that is continuously reshaped through dialogue, negotiation, and critical self-awareness. Thus, safe space turns into "a

euphemism for the processual act of ever-becoming, of messy negotiations" (Hunter 2008, 18-19 cited in The Roestone Collective 2014, 1355) A safe space in The Roestone Collective´s (2014) sense does not seek to erase differences or impose a false sense of equality by ignoring injustice. Instead, it requires an active and intentional engagement with contradictions: safety and danger, inclusion and exclusion, visibility and invisibility, public and private. (The Roestone Collective 2014, 1355) In this sense, the notion of a safe space aligns with Rose's (1993) concept of "paradoxical space" (Rose 1993, 137, 140, 154 cited in The Roestone Collective 2014, 1355), which "does not replicate the exclusions of the Same and the Other" (Rose 1993, 137, 140, 154 cited in The Roestone Collective 2014, 1355) but instead embraces the tensions of being simultaneously "safe and unsafe, inside and outside" (The Roestone Collective 2014,1355). Rose (1993) explains the paradoxical space as follows:

- It is a "site of [multidimensional] differences" (Rose 1993 cited in The Roestone Collective 2014, 1355 [emphasis in original]), highlighting the individual's diverse and intersectional identities. Feminist spaces, for instance, cannot be defined solely in terms of gender, as their experiences are influenced and shaped by intersecting factors such as race, class, sexuality, ability, and others. (The Roestone Collective 2014, 1355)
- It challenges "traditional (sometimes patriarchal or masculinist) mappings" (The Roestone Collective 2014, 1355), particularly those that reinforce binary distinctions such as masculine and public vs. feminine and private. (ibid.)
- It exists as a "bi- or multi-polar space" (The Roestone Collective 2014, 1356), where identities are not fixed but continuously negotiated. Safer spaces, in this sense, do not seek to solidify identities in a singular way but instead provide a setting where "marginalized identities are both embraced and destabilized" (The Roestone Collective 2014, 1356).

When discussing safer space, it becomes evident that there is a strong connection between identity and the feeling of safety. Kwame Anthony Appiah (2019) notes that identity functions on multiple levels, starting with labels and assumptions about their purposes and target audiences. Second, it informs our sense of how we ought to behave. Third, it influences how others treat us, and fourth, all these dimensions are subject to ongoing contestation—particularly regarding who is included or excluded. (Appiah 2019, 12) Thus, the way we define or perceive ourselves is closely tied to labels that, in turn, shape our social

experiences of safety. I will explore the aspect of identity in more detail in chapter 3.4.2. “The self, identity, and community”.

Rather than imposing rigid boundaries of safety, the work of cultivating a safer space lies in exposing the porous edges of societal assumptions and challenging the limitations of dominant frameworks. Safer spaces, in this way, may function as sites of resistance and transformation. While safer spaces have the potential to offer meaningful interventions against systemic exclusion, it is crucial to acknowledge that no single model of a safer space can be universally applied to all individuals or contexts. There is no definitive blueprint for safety, nor is there a formula that guarantees inclusion for everyone in every setting. (The Roestone Collective 2014, 1360) Instead, the work of fostering safer spaces is an ongoing process that requires reflection, responsiveness, and a willingness to adapt.

To summarize, non-hierarchical structures, the freedom to be one's authentic self, the removal of competitive pressures, and the establishment of a safer space as a radical act all contribute to an environment where participants can engage with clowning. This discussion highlights an important point: safety is subjective and relational. Clowning workshops are not inherently safe or safer spaces. Like any social environment, they are shaped by the people within them and the structures they uphold or challenge. By carefully choosing facilitators who align with their values, participants can foster spaces where they feel safe to create, express, and experiment with new realities. A safer space is not an endpoint but a practice that requires ongoing commitment to justice, relationality, and the understanding that safety is never absolute but always in development.

3.2.4. The role of the facilitator and teacher

> “So engaging in courses, and that's beautiful because you are co creating a space of learning with other people, and then there's the teacher who has a certain role. Sometimes they show you things, they take you places, and they also give you challenges in the form of nasty things. Because we are all human. We have our imperfections. And in that sense, you can also get exactly what you need to resolve a certain thing. That's a gift, in a sense, because ultimately, you are your own teacher.“ (Interview with Amber, 5 July 2024, 14)

Facilitating a clowning workshop is a profound responsibility, as it requires the ability to create and hold a safe space for vulnerability, emotional depth, and self-discovery. A skilled facilitator must not only guide participants through the technical and performative aspects of

clowning but also create an atmosphere where judgment is suspended and authenticity can emerge.

In the following chapter, I aim to discuss the role of the facilitator or teacher, how their approach influences the workshop environment, and the criteria for facilitating that help create a space conducive to transformation and healing.

3.2.4.1. The facilitators' approach to what a clown is supposed to do

Clowning is not a single, unified discipline. Instead, each practitioner, instructor, and facilitator develops their own understanding of what clowning is and how it should be taught. As Jon Davison notes in "Documenting Clown Training" (2016a), the definition of clowning is subjective: "It depends on who you ask" (Davison 2016a, 13). This illustrates the fluidity of the concept, as individuals create their own versions by exploring the idea of clowning in unique ways and adapting existing frameworks to develop their methods and techniques. It also reflects the social and cultural context of a particular time, where clowning is interpreted in specific ways. (ibid.) The facilitators I interviewed have gained their knowledge, methods, and techniques through various workshops and training sessions with different clowns, each bringing their own unique approach. Their learning is not confined to a single school or tradition, which makes their approach especially distinctive. Instead of following a standardized curriculum, their growth as clowns has been shaped by diverse influences, showcasing the many ways to engage with the art of clowning. The goal here is not to list all the teachers from whom they have learned but to emphasize that there is no single, standard path to becoming a clown. Different perspectives and methods influence each journey. (Interviews with Francesca, 13 July 2024, and Anja, 20 June 2024) A key aspect highlighting these various approaches is the fundamental question of what a clown is meant to do. Some argue that a clown's primary goal is to evoke laughter, while others believe clowning covers the full spectrum of human emotions. Some distance themselves from ideas like authenticity. Davison (2016a) compiled a list of various voices within the field that reflect these different approaches (Davison 2016a, 13-15):

> "A clown who doesn't provoke laughter is a shameful mime." (Gaulier 2007, 289)
>
> "It's okay not to be funny. Clowns do not have to make people laugh." (Simon 2009, 31)
>
> "The key feature uniting all clowns is their ability, skill, or stupidity to break the rules." (McManus 2003, 13)
>
> "[…] a quest for liberation from the 'social masks' we all wear." (Murray 2003, 79)

> "The main similarity between clown and Zen is that if you are thinking, then you are not where you want to be." (Cohen 2005, no page)
>
> "Clowning is about the freedom that comes from a state of total, unconditional acceptance of our most authentic selves." (Henderson 2008, no page)
>
> "This 'wisdom' magically acquired shows well that this is a question of the breaking of a taboo." (Makarius 1974, 63)
>
> "They can achieve what traffic police cannot, using artistic and peaceful actions rather than warnings and sanctions." (Toothaker 2011, no page)

The workshops I attended followed the inner clown approach, emphasizing the removal of social masks and allowing all emotions to be expressed freely.[29] This perspective is rooted in the idea that clowning is not about performing a fixed character but about revealing one's authentic self playfully and spontaneously. In this framework, everyone is seen as capable of clowning, regardless of prior experience. The facilitator's approach plays a crucial role in shaping the workshop space. It determines not only the atmosphere but also who feels invited to participate. By prioritizing emotional honesty and inclusion, these workshops often attract individuals seeking self-exploration and reflection, rather than those solely interested in perfecting comedic performance. Furthermore, the methods and techniques used, such as exercises focused on presence, emotional awareness, and improvisation, reinforce this ethos, ensuring that the space remains one of exploration rather than strict technical training.

3.2.4.2. Guiding the vulnerable: Authority, care, and challenge in clown training

One of the key exercises in clowning involves standing before an audience without a script or pretense, simply existing on stage until the state of vulnerability and honesty is reached. This moment can be profoundly transformative but also emotionally intense, as it requires participants to shed their social masks and embrace uncertainty. The facilitator plays a crucial role in ensuring that this process remains supportive rather than overwhelming, providing a sense of complicity, compassion, and care. This is particularly important given the inherent power dynamics in such a setting—when one person is vulnerable on stage, the others (audience and facilitator) hold the power of observation and response.

> "The work of the educator is to facilitate the applied procedure of arriving at this state, and to establish that procedure as a meaningful ritual end unto itself." (L. Butler 2012, 64).

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[29] One clowning approach that had a strong influence on the workshops that I attended comes from Richard Pochinko. For further readings, see Coburn, Veronika, and Morrison, Sue (2013).

The process of entering the clown state—a condition of heightened presence, emotional openness, and playful responsiveness—is not something that can be taught through instruction. It is an experiential and communal process, one that unfolds differently for each individual. (ibid.) I will elaborate more on this in the chapter 3.4.1. “The clown state”.

The facilitator’s role is to accompany participants on this journey, offering guidance without dictating outcomes. Because clowning often touches on deep personal themes, emotions, and even past experiences, facilitators may find themselves supporting participants through moments of personal crisis or intense self-discovery. The impact of a clowning teacher can be profound. Some shared that after encountering a particular teacher, they could no longer return to their old way of clowning. This illustrates how the facilitator’s approach, method, philosophy, and presence can fundamentally reshape a performer’s understanding of their craft.

> „The impact of the work was so strong for me, and this was in 2013, so eleven years ago was so, so strong that I couldn't go on acting or doing things with the clown that I had before because it didn't have any sense anymore. So I was like, after that, I cannot do clowning like I did till now.“ (Interview with Francesca, 13 June 2024, 3)

However, as others have shared, the learning process is not solely dependent on the teacher. Clowning can also be discovered despite, or independently from, the facilitator. Peers play a significant role in learning, as clowning is deeply rooted in exchange, interaction, and shared experience.

> “Even if nothing exactly is in the right place for you, you might still find something or you might find a taste of it or get closer to it. You might find it despite of a teacher. So you might say that partly that has been there for me. Because you also learn with your peers, of course, creating things.“ (Interview with Amber, 5 July 2024, 3)

Some participants develop resentment toward their teachers because they feel they have lost trust in their own intuition and personal truths throughout their life experiences. This process can lead to a period of unlearning, in which individuals work to reclaim their own agency and strengthen their personal perspectives, sometimes in opposition to their teacher’s influence.

> „Yeah, that's maybe a big story for me, that I come to mistrust my own intuitions and truths and because other people said that they were not true and. Yeah, so then you have to turn the process around. That's why teachers are so good for that.“ (Interview with Amber, 5 July 2024, 11)

> „Where you see that you don't agree with the teacher, and then you are challenged also to really look at what is true for me. I think that's a thing for me, like authority. And then you think you can really trust a person. And then there's points where

> you trust yourself. You can trust yourself more for what's true for you. That's always a big challenge.“ (Interview with Amber, 5 July 2024, 11)

Being a clown doesn't necessarily make someone a good teacher. Teaching clowning requires a deep understanding of group dynamics, emotional intelligence, and the ability to guide others without imposing one's own vision. A facilitator must be able to find the right balance between structure and freedom, encouragement and challenge, play and introspection. One of the effective criteria mentioned by the participants was creating an environment where participants feel supported rather than criticized, often using affirmative and constructive feedback instead of correction. Rather than telling participants what they are doing wrong, they focus on highlighting what is working and reinforcing strengths, fostering a sense of trust and creative exploration.

> “The way that they approach clowning is just very different from how other people approach clowning and it brings a different kind of facilitation. And it's. I cannot deal with a facilitation that makes me feel or that tells me this is wrong and you're bad at this and you're bad at this. And I need a positive facilitation. Maybe at some point, not anymore. I will be better at this. But now, like at the start of this clown journey, I feel like I need a lot of positive affirmation to also know, like, what is good about it.” (Interview with Kiara, 27 January 2025, 10)

> “And they always appreciate the growth because they always say, whoa, from this to this, you got so much better like so much connected with yourself, with your clown. So I always have this feeling no matter what happens with me on stage I will be cared by them.“ (Interview with Maryna, 7 October 2024, 5)

If more than one facilitator is present, how facilitators interact with each other also sets the tone for the space. When facilitators actively listen, support, and show care for one another, they create an atmosphere of trust and openness. In this setting, they may still provoke and challenge participants, encouraging them to explore emotions deeply. They do so while also holding space for these emotions, making sure participants feel safe to express themselves without fear of harm. They encourage participants to move through their feelings, recognizing that emotional expression is valid as long as it does not harm others. At the same time, facilitators closely observe participants’ physical and emotional states, noting how they breathe, move, and engage with the space. They may encourage participants to explore further, prompting them to connect more deeply with themselves and their emotions. They also emphasize the importance of not losing oneself on stage, teaching participants to stay present and in tune with their breath, gaze, and connection to the audience. A key part of this is normalizing discomfort. The feeling of discomfort is not ignored or dismissed but instead embraced as part of the experience. They reassure participants that their discomfort does not make them less valuable or appreciated in the space.

> “They're [facilitators] not shy like. ‘Okay, you didn't get it, it’s fine. Maybe next time.’ No, they're like, ‘Hey, no, look at us now. No, don't do all of this. Too many moves now. No, no, Don't do too many moves. No, calm down. Calm down. And just look at us. Look at us.’ So they like really insist on you connecting with yourself, not losing yourself on the stage.“ (Interview with Maryna, 7 October 2024, 5)

Despite these approaches to facilitation, there are also more authoritarian and even psychologically harmful teaching methods within the clowning world. Some facilitators, such as Philippe Gaulier, have gained notoriety for their harsh and confrontational approaches, as mentioned above. Ira Seidenstein (2013) described him as psychologically abusive. (Seidenstein 2013 cited in Davison 2016b, 156) In these situations, facilitators often exercise their authority in a manner that may make students feel disempowered or emotionally hurt. The power dynamic between a clowning facilitator and their students is particularly significant because stepping into the clown state requires a certain level of surrender. When participants enter this vulnerable stage, they must trust their facilitator to guide them through it. Because this process is so immersive, it is not always easy to step back and rationally analyze what is happening in the moment as described by a participant. It is a fluid back-and-forth experience, in which participants oscillate between playfulness and self-awareness. But if, upon reflection, a participant realizes that something felt inauthentic or forced upon them, they may experience overwhelm, frustration, or even anger. This kind of retrospective realization can be emotionally challenging to come to terms with.

> „It sounds easy, but it's not always easy. Apart from that, I don't think anyone has the ultimate truth because you're vulnerable. You enter in a vulnerable stage. You follow a certain person. So it requires a certain surrender. And then it's not always easy to be able to do a step back and rationalize or analyze that because that can also keep you from playing, trusting. So I guess it's a back and forth movement. And then, of course, if you have been in this playing and vulnerable and surrender state and there something came up that was kind of like hurtful or like it was not true for you then. And then you go back and you analyze and you see it. Then, of course, you can feel emotions and anger, but that's normal. And then you grow.“ (Interview with Amber, 5 July 2024, 13)

Some clowning schools emphasize the idea that a clown must have a strong sense of authority.

> “He needs an authority to be the clown. And I think my philosophy is a little bit different, like mine would be: Clown is about getting to that point where we don't accept any other authority than ourselves anymore in a very gentle way.“ (Interview with Amber, 5 July 2024, 13)

The tension between personal agency and external direction remains a key debate in clown pedagogy. To sum it up, I argue that the most effective clowning spaces are those in which participants feel both challenged and supported, free to explore but also secure in their

boundaries, guided but not overpowered by the facilitator's authority. Furthermore, when workshop participants experience the facilitation as supportive or positive, it has a direct impact on their personal process and overall experience of clowning.

3.3. Workshop space as ritual space: From the inner clown to the communal help to the space of agency

> "Because I mean, there were some kind of rules, right? I was not alone, there was a guy kind of like, not shaman, but someone who kind of knows how it should be. And then there was a goal. And then I felt like everyone brought some pain. And then it was kind of like an interaction with other people and also based on some kind of rules. And then in the end, there was a transformed pain for me. It is a ritual in a way how you confront with the problem, with pain. And then, through the communal help, it transforms this pain for me. I don't know the definition of a ritual, but this feels like a ritual." (Interview with Maryna, 7 October 2024, 11)

Richard Schechner (1986) draws parallels between ritual space and the workshop space as it is practiced in Euro-American theatre and dance. Specifically, he refers to the "workshop-rehearsal space" (Schechner 1986, 345)—a dynamic environment where artists and performers engage in experimentation, improvisation, and creative exploration to develop a performance. (ibid.) In this context, I argue that the clowning workshop space functions similarly because it serves as a rehearsal-like setting where clowns explore movement, emotions, and interactions. But what is a ritual?

A common misconception in industrialized societies is the belief that rituals primarily exist in so-called "primitive" cultures, while "modern" societies operate rationally and ritual only occurs in specific contexts like churches, ceremonies, etc. (Davis-Floyd and Laughlin 2022, 1) However, "all human cultures use rituals" (Davis-Floyd and Laughlin 2022, 1) as both "physical and metaphysical means for dealing with everyday life and the mystery and unpredictability of the physical, psychological, social, and cosmic realms" (ibid.). According to Robbie Davis-Floyd and Charles D. Laughlin (2022), rituals in anthropology have been primarily discussed in the context of religion. (ibid., 5) In this thesis, I adopt a broader view of ritual that also includes secular and non-religious practices.

3.3.1. Defining ritual

> “Rituals are performances in which cultures–and individuals–describe and display their deepest values and beliefs” (Davis-Floyd and Laughlin 2022, 3)

Rituals can be understood as performances that express and embody cultural and individual values and beliefs. Robbie Davis-Floyd (2003 [1992]) defines ritual as:

> "a patterned, repetitive, and symbolic enactment of cultural (or individual) beliefs and values." (Davis-Floyd 2003 [1992] cited in Davis-Floyd and Laughlin 2022, 6)

- » *Patterning and repetition:* Rituals follow structured, repetitive sequences. While this is obvious in religious ceremonies, parades, and formal events, it also applies to mundane activities such as traffic on the street. (Davis-Floyd and Laughlin 2022, 6)
- » *Symbolism:* Rituals communicate meaning through symbols. (Rothenbuhler 2006; Senft and Basso 2009 cited in Davis-Floyd and Laughlin 2022, 6) While ordinary traffic itself may not be inherently symbolic, the way people drive and the cars they choose can convey social or personal values. (Davis-Floyd and Laughlin 2022, 6)
- » *Cultural and individual dimensions:* While most rituals originate within social groups, individuals and families also develop personal rituals. Everyday activities, such as cooking, doing laundry, or choosing what to wear, can be seen as rituals, embodying personal or cultural significance. (Davis-Floyd and Laughlin 2022, 8)

In an anthropology lecture I attended in 2024, I was introduced to the idea that "everything is a ritual". If rituals are everywhere, why does it matter to recognize them as such? Many people are unaware of how rituals shape their behavior and social interactions. Understanding rituals and their “inner workings” (Davis-Floyd and Laughlin 2022, 13) allows us to become more aware of their influence and make informed choices about how we engage with and within them. To understand those inner workings, eight major characteristics are identified by Robbie Davis-Floyd and Charles D. Laughlin (2022):

> “1. the use of symbols to convey a ritual’s messages;
> 2. a cognitive matrix (belief system) from which ritual emerges;
> 3. rhythm, repetition and redundancy: ritual drivers;
> 4. the use of tools, techniques, and technologies to accomplish ritual´s multiple goals;
> 5. the framing of ritual performances;
> 6. the order and formality that often separates ritual from everyday life, identifying it as ritual;
> 7. the sense of inviolability and inevitability that rituals can generate;
> 8. the acting, stylization, and staging that often give ritual its elements of high drama, the fact that it is performed and that it often intensifies toward climax.”
> (Davis-Floyd and Laughlin 2022, 9)

While these characteristics outline the structure of rituals, not every ritual embodies all of them. (ibid.) The roles that rituals play in social and individual life are, among others, according to Robbie Davis-Floyd and Charles D. Laughlin (2022, 11):

> " - facilitating daily living
> - transmitting knowledge
> - acquiring information
> - transforming individual consciousness
> - engendering and solidifying belief
> - maintaining religious vitality
> - enhancing courage
> - effecting healing
> - cohering communities
> - initiating individuals into new social groups or new ways of being
> - preserving the status quo in a given society
> - and, paradoxically, effecting social change"
> (Davis-Floyd and Laughlin 2022, 11)

By recognizing and analyzing the rituals embedded in our everyday lives, we gain insight into how they shape our experiences, relationships, and social structures. Ritual is performative behavior (Schechner 1986, 353), and with this insight comes the agency to act differently and bring about change, whether individual or social. (Davis-Floyd and Laughlin 2022, 11) Workshop spaces take on the character of ritual spaces, offering opportunities to experiment with alternative forms of agency. Furthermore, ritual is not something fixed or concrete, but instead it is helpful to think of it as existing on a continuum. At one end are loosely patterned and weakly symbolic acts, such as casual conversations or doing laundry, while at the other end are highly structured and deeply symbolic events, like a Catholic Mass. (ibid., 7)

Because of the performative nature of human behavior, the boundaries between life and theatre become increasingly difficult to define. Augusto Boal (2002) captures this as follows:

> "Usually, people say that a truly artistic show will always be unique,
> impossible to be repeated: never will the same actors,
> in the same play, produce the same show.
> Theatre is life.
> People also say that, in life, we never really do anything
> for the first time, always repeating
> past experiences, habits, rituals, conventions.
> Life is Theatre." (Boal 2002 cited in Schechner 2002, no page)

Richard Schechner (2002), one of the pioneers in the field of performance studies[30], explores the fluid boundaries between life and theatre under the broader umbrella of performance. In performance studies, every behavior and action becomes a potential site of inquiry. His work was significantly influenced by and often in dialogue with anthropologist Victor Turner. (Schechner 2002, 11) As already mentioned above, ritual is defined as performances that express beliefs and values. But what does performance actually mean?

In everyday language, performance often refers to staged events such as plays or concerts. In performance studies, the concept is far broader. From this perspective, every action can be understood as a performance. (Schechner 2002, 30) Schechner (2002) writes:

> "From the vantage of the kind of performance theory I am propounding, every action is performance. But from the vantage of cultural practice, some actions will be deemed performance and others not; and this will vary from culture to culture, historical period to historical period." (Schechner 2002, 30)

Marvin Carlson (1996) also observes that recognizing repeated, socially accepted behaviors in daily life suggests that all human activity could be considered performance—or at least all activity with a self-aware aspect. (Carlson 1996 cited in Schechner 2002, 25). Schechner (2002) breaks down the concept of performance into four levels of engagement, "being, doing, showing doing, explaining showing doing" (Schechner 2002, 22):

- *Being*: which is "existence itself". (Schechner 2002, 22)
- *Doing*: which is the "activity of all that exists". (ibid.)
- *Showing doing*: which highlights, displays, or presents doing. (ibid.)
- *Explaining showing doing*: which refers to the critical reflection that performance studies engages in. (Schechner 2002, 22)

Thus, to perform is to mark identities, bend time, reshape and adorn the body, and tell stories. Performances are what Schechner (2002) calls "twice-behaved behaviors" (Schechner 2002, 22)—restored behaviors that people train for, rehearse, and repeat in art, ritual, business, technology, play, sports, and everyday life. Performance exists only in action, interaction, and relationships. (ibid., 24) While there are limits to what constitutes

[30] Performance studies itself is a dynamic and interdisciplinary field. It sits at the intersection of "theatre and anthropology, folklore and sociology, history and performance theory, gender studies and psychoanalysis, performativity and actual performance events" (Schechner 2002, 19). It is deliberately open, multivocal, and at times self-contradictory—lacking a single, unified body of knowledge, values, or subjects. (Schechner 2002, 19)

performance, performance studies propose that anything can be studied as performance. (ibid., 30)

Another distinction Schechner (2002) makes is between “make-believe” and “make-belief” (Schechner 2002, 35). Make-believe performances, like theatre, clearly differentiate between what is real and what is imagined. In contrast, make-belief performances, such as playing professional roles, embodying gender or specific identities, or shaping one’s public persona, create and reinforce social realities. These are not simply pretenses. They are powerful, identity-constructing acts (ibid., 35).

Richard Schechner (2002) further outlines seven functions of performance, each of which is relevant for understanding the various dimensions performance can serve:

“1. to entertain
2. to make something that is beautiful
3. to mark or change identity
4. to make or foster community
5. To heal
6. To teach, persuade, or convince
7. To deal with the sacred and/or the demonic”
(Schechner 2002, 38-39)

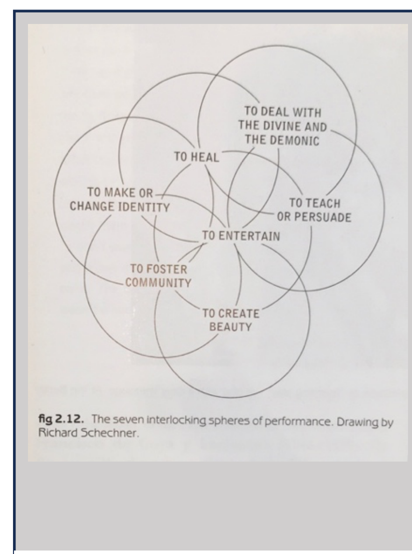

Figure 2 “Seven spheres of performance” (© Schechner 2002, 39)

Like Robbie Davis-Floyd and Charles D. Laughlin (2022) on ritual, Schechner (1986) describes a range of performances that extends from one end, where deep acting effortlessly merges into everyday behavior, such as a flight attendant’s practiced politeness, making performance feel natural and indistinguishable from genuine expression. At the other end are highly coordinated events, such as religious ceremonies, civic celebrations, and political pageants—performances that are clearly planned, scripted, and purposefully staged. (Schechner 1986, 366) Between these two extremes lies a zone of ambiguity, where performances shift between structured composition and spontaneous expression. This middle ground includes various forms of artistic performance and ritual, where improvisation coexists with formalized sequences, creating a dynamic interplay of order and unpredictability. In this space, performers navigate between discipline and freedom,

following specific rules while also embracing moments of creative rupture. (ibid., 366) From my observations, I also noticed the phenomenon of ambiguity that he describes for the rehearsal workshop space. In this setting, different layers of structure and spontaneity coexist, shaping the participants' experience.

3.3.2. The ambiguity of ritual and performance spaces in clowning workshops: From order to deconstruction, from structure to anti-structure

The workshop involved structured elements that resembled one end of the spectrum of ritual or performance. Specific activities were planned, requiring participants to follow the facilitator's guidance, adhere to a designated time frame (even though many usually arrived late), and respect the implicit rules of the workshop space. These rules, though not necessarily spoken aloud, were collectively understood and performed by everyone present. The physical space itself carried a sense of order. People entered the workshop knowing they were stepping into a setting with particular expectations, different from everyday life.

Additionally, the facilitators placed a strong emphasis on authenticity[31]. When a participant was on stage, they were expected to express their emotions genuinely, rather than pretending or playing a role. The facilitators would step in if they sensed inauthenticity, reminding participants to stay truthful in their expressions. This focus on sincerity extended to the audience as well. Spectators, or participants watching, were expected to respond authentically—forced laughter or polite smiles out of pity were discouraged. Attention and engagement were also expected; it would have been considered inappropriate to ignore the performer or getting distracted while someone was on stage would have been considered inappropriate. Although clowns are often associated with rule-breaking and rebellion, in this particular layer of the workshop, breaking the established rules would have been seen as inappropriate. For example, ignoring the facilitator's guidance, dismissing the audience, or stepping onto the stage while someone else was performing would have been viewed as disruptions rather than acts of creative rebellion. I remember a situation where a participant disregarded the facilitator's instructions, disrupting the entire environment, but in a way that felt uncomfortable and unsettling rather than freeing. Instead of creating a playful or

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[31] Authenticity in this sense is not referring to the notion of a singular authenticity, but "acknowledges the simultaneous co-existence of more than one parallel manifestation of authenticity in any given negotiation of the authentic" (Theodossopoulos 2013, 337). For further discussion on the use of the term authenticity, see Theodossopoulos (2013)

rebellious breaking point, the moment felt stagnant, as if we were stuck. I could tell that the act of rebellion wasn't constructive or appropriate in that context. In this way, the structured parts of the workshop created a ritualistic framework within which playfulness could develop, but only within set boundaries. At the same time, another layer within the workshop fostered a very different relationship with rules. Here, breaking conventions and making mistakes were not only accepted but actively encouraged as part of the creative process. This layer challenged participants to move beyond socialized behaviors and embrace uncertainty. The norms outside the workshop were deliberately deconstructed here, inviting a playful exploration of the unexpected. This can also be explained through Victor Turner's idea of "structure and anti-structure" (V. Turner 1969 cited in Bial 2004, 77). Rituals help maintain a balance between what he calls structure and anti-structure. Anti-structure refers to the temporary suspension or inversion of the normal social order during rites of passage. It contrasts with the organized, hierarchical nature of everyday life. V. Turner views structure and anti-structure as part of a dialectical relationship; ritual emerges in response to the limits of structure. While structure organizes society and fulfills material needs, anti-structure offers the space for equality, renewal, and reflection on community values. (Norbeck and Alexander 2025) One exercise that demonstrated this deconstruction involved renaming objects in unusual ways. Initially, we were asked to assign different words to existing objects, like calling a "tree" "sock" or a "wall" "bottle". This simple change in language already disrupted our habitual way of perceiving and naming things. Next, we took it further by inventing new names altogether, such as renaming a tree "heklu" or a sock "friap". This practice, known as gibberish, is a key tool in clowning. It disrupts normal communication, removing fixed meanings from language and inviting a more instinctive, playful, and embodied form of expression. Through gibberish, participants were encouraged to go beyond logical structures and instead focus on sound, rhythm, and emotional resonance in their speech.

Another exercise, the name game, highlighted the interplay between structure and the freedom to make mistakes. At first, participants formed a circle and introduced themselves one by one to learn each other's names. After this initial round, the game began: when someone called your name, you had to tap the back of your left or right neighbor without speaking. If you received a tap, you had to say the name of another participant. Mistakes were inevitable, and participants had to deal with the awkwardness of forgetting names, reacting too slowly, or saying a different name when their name was called. From my own experience, the urge to respond when your name is called is strong. (Fieldnotes Mollnhuber

2023 & 2024) The way mistakes were handled was crucial. Instead of avoiding or concealing errors, participants were asked to confront them directly. Those who made mistakes had to look into everyone's eyes and share their emotions—whether it was frustration, embarrassment, or disappointment. This moment of collective acknowledgment transformed the experience of failure from something to be ashamed of into an opportunity for connection and self-expression. By emphasizing openness to mistakes, the exercise encouraged participants to let go of their fear of failure and embrace playfulness—a core aspect of clowning. While certain aspects required discipline and adherence to form, others invited disruption and experimentation. In this context, clowns were encouraged to challenge social norms and taboos, playfully transgressing boundaries while still engaging with the facilitator's guidance. The ability to move fluidly between structure and improvisation, between sincerity and absurdity, defined the ambiguous space in which clowning unfolded. Through these exercises, the workshop highlighted an essential paradox: even in a space that celebrates rule-breaking, implicit rules still shape how playfulness is enacted. The challenge for participants lay in navigating these shifting boundaries—recognizing when to follow structure and when to subvert it, when to embrace discipline and when to surrender to spontaneity. In doing so, they engaged in a constant negotiation between control and freedom, between predictability and the unexpected. The paradox highlighted by Richard Schechner (1986) is that human beings possess an extraordinary ability to absorb, internalize, and embody learned behaviors so seamlessly that these behaviors become second nature—woven into their spontaneous actions as if they were innate rather than acquired. This fluidity in learning and adapting allows humans to integrate new ways of being effortlessly, shaping their identities and interactions in profound ways. (Schechner 1986, 367) This very capacity for conditioning carries with it an inherent duality: to be highly adaptable and conditionable is simultaneously to be free and to be vulnerable to control. On the one hand, the ability to internalize and enact learned behaviors grants individuals the freedom to transform, experiment with different identities, and navigate various social contexts. It enables improvisation, creativity, and the reinvention of the self. On the other hand, this same plasticity makes humans susceptible to external influences, including social norms, ideological conditioning, and even forms of oppression. What is learned and absorbed may serve as both a tool for liberation and a mechanism for constraint. (Schechner 1986, 367) Richard Schechner (1986) raises a fundamental question: what constitutes human behavior? If human actions and expressions are so profoundly shaped by socialization, conditioning, and cultural frameworks, can any behavior truly be considered intrinsic or natural? He suggests that rather than being fixed within rigid categories, human

behavior exists in a liminal, in-between space—neither wholly predetermined nor entirely free, neither fully structured nor purely spontaneous. It is a continuous negotiation between constraint and agency, adaptation and resistance, social expectation and individual expression. In this sense, human existence itself can be understood as fundamentally "betwixt and between" (V. Turner 1983 cited in Schechner 1986, 356), a phrase used by Victor Turner to describe the dynamic interplay between learned patterns and improvisational freedom, between structure and anti-structure, and the tensions that arise from inhabiting both at once. This "in-between" space is what Victor Turner (1970, 2004) identifies as the liminal phase, one of the three stages of the rites of passage–initiation rituals–first conceptualized by Arnold van Gennep. They are “rites which accompany every change of place, state, social position and age” (Van Gennep 1909 cited in V. Turner 2004, 79). These stages include: separation, margin or liminality, and aggregation. V. Turner focused his research primarily on the second phase, liminality, which he saw as accompanying any significant transition from one state to another. (V. Turner 1970a, 47) He defined state as a “relatively fixed or stable condition” (ibid., 46) which could be physical, ecological, mental, or emotional, etc. The liminal phase, by contrast, is a threshold condition in which individuals are “betwixt and between” (ibid.), “neither this nor that, and yet both” (ibid., 49). This phase is a condition where people “slip through the network of classifications that normally locate states and positions in cultural space” (V. Turner 2004, 79). Richard Schechner (1986) extends this framework by drawing a parallel between the ritual liminal phase and the rehearsal or workshop space in performance-making. He suggests that the creative and exploratory nature of workshops mirrors the ambiguity and potential of the liminal phase in ritual processes. (Schechner 1986, 58) My own research supports this interpretation: clowning workshops frequently produce moments of liminality. Specific exercises evoke this transitional state by positioning participants in an in-between space where established social categories and personal identities are momentarily suspended or reconfigured. (ibid., 57) If human behavior in general, and workshops in particular, open up spaces of liminality, then this ambiguous phase can be seen as a site of ongoing negotiation between constraint and agency, adaptation and resistance, social expectation and individual expression. This leads to a broader question: what kind of agency and freedom is made possible within liminal spaces such as clowning workshops?

3.3.3. “Performer training utopia”[32]: The clowning workshop space as a space of negotiation and of anti-structural agency

Göze Saner (2020), who examined different clown training methods, relies on Arendt’s ideas of political engagement and freedom to suggest that clowning constitutes a kind of “performer training utopia” (Saner 2020, 146). This practice involves a series of exercises aimed at and for freedom. Spaces like clowning workshops can thus be understood as arenas where freedom is enacted. (Gates 2011 cited in Saner 2020, 152)

The idea of performing freedom suggests that freedom is not merely a state of being but a practice—a set of actions and behaviors that must be cultivated and enacted. In this sense, clowning workshops can be seen as performative processes, rituals, and expressions of performative freedom. Arendt would likely advocate for such forms of performer training, arguing that to enact freedom in public spaces, one must develop the necessary skills through embodied practice. As Saner notes:

> “Given her emphasis on freedom as public performance and her recognition of the affinity between politics and the theatre, Arendt would encourage critically engaged citizens to undertake performer training in order to develop precisely the skills to enact their freedom and to perform everyday miracles.” (Saner 2020, 146)

Arendt speaks of the extraordinary potential within ordinary human actions to bring about change. She believed in the power of human initiative and the ability to create new beginnings. These "miracles" are not supernatural, but rather emerge when individuals step into the public sphere, take risks, and generate something new through their words and actions. (Arendt no date cited in Saner 2020, 146) In this light, clown training, workshops, and exercises become a form of freedom in action. (Saner 2020, 146) This is also where critical pedagogy comes into play, as elaborated by Laurel Butler (2012), Göze Saner (2020), and Paulo Freire (1970) pedagogy of the oppressed. Clown training can be seen as a form of critical pedagogy, a space for negotiation, and a site of transformation. (Saner 2020, 149) One of the participants mentioned the parallels of the theatre of the oppressed method and clowning:

> “You kind of rehearse this different reality, like this is a theatre of the oppressed saying, and it kind of comes for clowning also because you're testing things that in other settings or in, like in real context, it would be weird and then all of a sudden, it's not a weird thing.” (Interview with Kiara, 27 January 2025, 15)

[32] See Göze Saner 2020

Clowning can be seen less as a skill to be learned and more as a process of unlearning—a shedding of ingrained societal constructs and a return to a more open, curious state of being. It is about remembering the sense of wonder we had as children, as Laurel Butler (2012) notes, when everything was new and we did not yet know, but were instead immersed in constant discovery. (L. Butler 2012, 64) While this state is natural for children, reclaiming it as adults becomes a "radical act" (ibid.). Furthermore, Richard Schechner (1986) argues that workshop-rehearsal serves as a form of "myth-making" (Schechner 1986, 364), where performers not only refine their craft but also actively discover, invent, and rearrange meaning. The workshop space becomes a site of creative ritual, a place where narratives are broken apart and reassembled in new ways, mirroring the ever-evolving nature of both performance and human experience itself. (ibid.) He further refers to V. Turner, who "recognized in it a possibility for ritual to be creative, to make the way for new situations, identities and social realities by means of what V. Turner called 'anti-structure'" (Schechner 1986, 57).

In summary, to understand the clowning workshop as a ritual space, it is essential first to consider what ritual and performance entail. Within this framework, we can observe the dynamics of both structure and anti-structure unfolding in the workshop environment. Central elements of anti-structure, such as the liminal phase, highlight the workshop's potential to foster creativity and experimentation. These elements not only enable participants to reshape their own behavior but also open up space for agency, making the workshop a kind of utopia for performer training. Thus, the clowning workshop can be viewed not only as a ritual space but also as a site of negotiation, creativity, and empowerment.

3.4. The lived experience of clowning

> “Rituals are embodied […], sensory—and thus must be *experienced*.” (Davis-Floyd and Laughlin 2022, 157 [emphasis in original])

Rituals, as Davis-Floyd and Laughlin (2022) and Bell (2008) emphasize, are not objects we can simply observe or read about from a distance. (Bell 2008 [1992] cited in Davis-Floyd and Laughlin 2022, 157) They are embodied, sensory events that demand participation; they must be lived to be understood. Clowning, with its deeply performative and relational character, shares this quality. It cannot be fully captured in words alone. Still, in this chapter, I attempt to offer an interpretation of the expression of the experience of clowning workshops—aware that any description will inevitably fall short of the immediacy and complexity of the act itself. Wilhelm Dilthey (1976) reminds us that "reality only exists for us in the facts of consciousness given by inner experience". (Dilthey 1976 cited in Bruner 1986, 4) Events are experienced not only through cognition, but also through impressions, emotions, and sensations that are very subjective and can therefore not simply be observed from the outside. Experience is personal, self-referential, and shaped by an active, engaged subject who reflects on and narrates their experiences, giving meaning to them. It involves an active self that engages with and shapes actions, and it includes ongoing reflections about these actions. Despite its subjectivity, experience is culturally shared and constructed and embedded in what is called a hermeneutic circle: “life as lived (reality), life as experienced (experience), and life as told (expression)” (Bruner 1986, 6). Even though we might not experience the same way as someone else, we can share and exchange expressions of those experiences. Expressions can be words, text, performance, music, and so on. But not all experiences are easily narratable so Bruner—there is often a lack of vocabulary, narrative structures, or performative resources to express what has been lived fully. This creates a gap between reality, experience, and expression. In anthropological fieldwork, for example, expressions such as texts like fieldnotes can never fully capture the complexity of the lived experience. Notwithstanding, anthropologists persist in their endeavor to attain proximity to the field and the experiences they observed. (Bruner 1986, 6) There is a dialogical and dialectical relationship between experience and expression: we interpret expressions through our own self-referential frameworks. At the same time, experiences inform expressions, and expressions, in turn, shape experience. Neither stands alone. (ibid., 6) Furthermore, expression should be understood as a processual activity—not a static or isolated text. It is always rooted in a social context, involving real people within a particular cultural and historical setting. Expressions actively shape and constitute reality,

not merely through abstract texts but through the social practices that bring these texts to life. In this sense, the anthropology of performance can be considered a subfield of the anthropology of experience. (Bruner 1986, 7) Expressions are socially constructed units of meaning. Through framing experiences, people simultaneously construct them. Individuals are thus “active agents in the historical process” (Bruner, 1986, 12), continuously creating their own world (Bruner, 1986, 12). Following Myerhoff, they are authors of themselves (Myerhoff no date cited in Bruner 1986, 12). Cultural change, continuity, and transmission all occur through the experiential and expressive processes of social life. These are fundamentally interpretive acts, through which subjects come to know themselves. (Dilthey 1976 cited in Bruner 1986, 12) The discipline of anthropology has consistently examined how individuals understand themselves, their daily lives, and the cultural contexts in which they live. In this regard, anthropologists aim to understand the world as it is perceived and experienced by the subjects they study. By focusing on expressions—the articulations, representations, and formulations of lived experience—anthropology seeks to grasp the richness of human existence. (Bruner 1986, 9)

In the spirit of this approach, the following chapter explores clowning not only as a performance or ritual, but also as a lived, embodied, and relational experience—one that must be felt, sensed, and enacted to be genuinely understood and one that is expressed in the framework of this thesis.

3.4.1. The clown state

The clowning journey didn't start with the workshop exercises themselves. For many participants, it had already begun earlier—during a sense of being "called”. As several interviewees explained, clowning entered their lives at a time of personal upheaval. They were experiencing a crisis, depression, or a deep sense of disorientation—situations where their previous ways of living no longer worked, and change was needed. During these moments, someone—a friend or colleague—suggested they try clowning. This seemingly casual suggestion resonated deeply, planting a seed that grew into a transformative experience. For most, it was not just about engaging in a creative or theatrical activity, but about responding to something far more existential.

> „The sacred clown is kind of born or realized that they are or have to become it because they go through a very difficult, difficult thing in their life that they cannot resolve or a horrible emotional challenge or a place where they don't want to live anymore. And that's what drives them to becoming a sacred clown. That's

> something that I really recognize. That's something that I really liked about that.“ (Interview with Amber, 5 July 2024, 23)

> „For me, this is a calling. Like the day this teacher said, should you maybe try clown? That was my calling.“ (Interview with Amber, 5 July 2024, 5)

> „It´s like either death or that.“ (Interview with Amber, 5 July 2024, 5)

> „I do it because there's no other way. Every time I try not to do it, like, it comes back to me and it's, I guess, what brings me the biggest expansion that I can find.“ (Interview with Amber, 5 July 2024, 6)

In their stories, both participants and facilitators repeatedly referred to clowning not merely as an experience, but as a calling. It was not something they chose lightly or rationally—instead, it was something that chose them. In this narrative, clowning is not just something you do—it is a calling, a vocation. At some point, you no longer have a choice.

3.4.1.1. The clown consciousness: From panic to possibility

> “It is actually a bit scary, but also it's so exciting. I feel like it gives this adrenaline that kind of you really need, so you just go even for this adrenaline, and it's really nice when again, like something that you find like a peak, like it is appreciated through people's attention, and it is fucking scary.” (Interview with Maryna, 7 October 2024, 9)

> “Also like I think there's like it's like a bit of a stressful situation. So like all your endorphin or you get like a bit of adrenaline from this. So I think maybe your body also reacts, and maybe you also kind of boost the creative process in a way that your body responds to what's happening.” (Interview with Maryna, 1 November 2023, 11)

> “Irgendwie finde ich faszinierend, dass ich da manchmal das Gefühl hab, dieser Bewusstseinszustand ist ähnlich, vielleicht wenn man es messen würde wie irgendein meditativer Zustand oder irgendwas anderes oder aber ein manischer Zustand.” (Interview with Anja, 20 June 2024, 15)

Richard Schechner (1986) explains the workshop-rehearsal process in two phases: breaking down (*deconstruction*) and rebuilding (*reconstruction*). (Schechner 1986, 363-364) This process exists across cultures under different names but follows the same structure as the ritual process described by Arnold van Gennep (no date) and expanded by Victor Turner (1969). (Van Gennep no date and V. Turner 1969 cited in Schechner 1986, 363-364)

In the first phase, *deconstruction*, performers dismantle their habitual ways of moving, speaking, and interacting. These existing behaviors, often deeply ingrained, function as “ready-made” actions—patterns that the performer carries into the rehearsal space, just as an individual undergoing a ritual brings their former identity before transformation. In theater, these familiar behaviors are broken down into their most minor repeatable units, referred to as “bits” (Schechner 1986, 363). Once stripped of their original context, these bits become

fluid, adaptable, and open to reconfiguration. In this phase, artists may acquire this state through ergo-/trophotropic stimulation, submerged in experience. (Schechner 1986, 363)

The second phase, *reconstruction*, involves reassembling these fragments into new sequences. This is not a mechanical process but one that requires a sense of self-awareness and reflexivity. In contemporary experimental performance, the entire group often participates in discussions after an intense rehearsal session, reflecting on what happened through the process. (Schechner 1986, 364) For further elaboration on the deconstruction and construction process see also chapter 3.3.2. "The ambiguity of ritual and performance spaces in clowning workshops. From order to deconstruction. From structure to anti-structure". Schechner (1986) elaborates on this concept through his work with performers during their creation process. In the first phase, the people in the workshop entered a kind of trance where they experienced their own version of the Greek myth "Prometheus". In the second phase, participants transitioned into a cooling-down and decompression phase to unwind after the intensity of the preceding activities, during which they could reconnect with the present moment and adopt a more thinking-oriented, cortical state rather than a feeling-oriented, limbic one. (Schechner 1986, 364-365)

This idea aligns with the work of researchers like d'Aquili et al. (1979) and Fischer (1971), who suggest that learning involves both stimulation and immersion in experience, which they describe in terms of brain function, particularly the balance between "ergotropic" (active, energetic) and "trophotropic" (calm, absorbed) states. (d'Aquili et al. 1979 and Fischer 1971 cited in Schechner 1986, 358) Different states of consciousness can be placed on two spectrums: one ranging from perception to hallucination (left side of the figure 3) and another from perception to meditation (right side of the illustration*)*. Humans experience these levels of high and low arousal as different mental states. On the first spectrum (left), they range from normal awareness to creativity, psychosis[33], and ecstasy. On the second spectrum (right), they include meditative states like Zazen[34] and Samadhi[35]. (Fischer 1971 cited in

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[33] It is worth noting that, during interviews, the topic of the parallels between schizophrenia, psychosis, and clowning arose. (Fieldnotes Mollnhuber 2024)

[34] "Zazen, a form of seated meditation, is at the very heart of Zen practice. In fact, Zen is known as the 'meditation school' of Buddhism. Zazen is the study of the self. Master Dogen said, 'To study the Buddha Way is to study the self, to study the self is to forget the self, and to forget the self is to be enlightened by the ten thousand things.'" (Zen Mountain Monastery NYC, accessed 8 September 2025, https://zmm.org/teachings-and-training/meditation-instructions/)

[35] Samadhi is, "in Indian philosophy and religion, and particularly in Hinduism and Buddhism, the highest state of mental concentration that people can achieve while still bound to the body and which unites them with the

Schechner 1986, 358) The loop between ecstasy and Samadhi represents the natural shift that occurs when intense excitement (ergotropic arousal) leads to a calming meditative state (tophotropic state). (ibid.) The numbers 35 to 7 on the spectrum from “perception” to “hallucination” correspond to Goldstein’s measurements, which measure how EEG brain wave activity becomes more stable as arousal increases. (ibid.) The numbers 26 to 4 on the spectrum of “perception” to “meditation” represent different types of brain waves (beta,

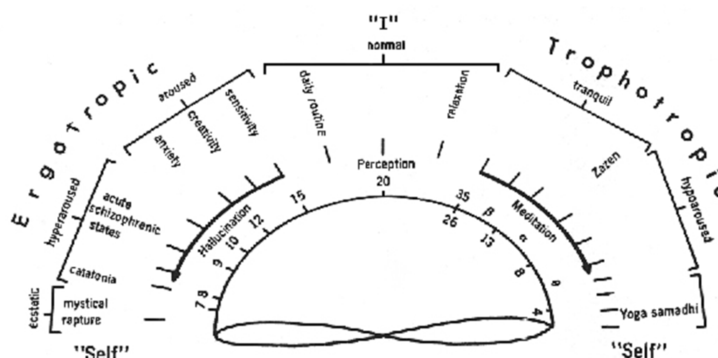

Figure 3 Fischer's (1971) "cartography of the ecstatic and meditative states" (© Fischer 1971 cited in Schechner 1986, 358)

alpha, and theta), which are commonly found during these states, though not exclusive to them. (ibid.) And then there is the phenomenon called “rebound to superactivity” (Fischer 1971 cited in Schechner 1986, 359), or “tophotropic rebound” (ibid.), which occurs in response to an intense excitement, the peak of ergotropic arousal. The person’s state of mind then goes back into a trophotropic, calm state, which is conceived as a physiological protective mechanism. (ibid.) People actively seek these experiences—the thrill of autonomic nervous system fluctuations and the intense high that comes from the rebound effect. They are coexistent with drugs, ritual, religious, and artistic practices, such as clowning. (Fischer 1971 cited in Schechner 1986, 359-361) I recall a conversation about the thin line between psychosis and clowning. This comparison no longer surprises me after reading about altered states of consciousness and their effects on the mind. Clowning, too, can evoke such intense sensations.

Being on stage as a clown can be both frightening and deeply challenging, while simultaneously unleashing powerful creative energy, as Sherry Turkle (2022) noted, “[…]

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highest reality.” (Brittanica, accessed 8 September 2025, https://www.britannica.com/topic/samadhi-Indian-philosophy)

new ideas are born in the crucible of this constructive disorder" (Turkle 2022, 485). This highlights the significant distinction between the clown's state of consciousness and that of everyday life.

3.4.1.2. The preliminal, liminal and postliminal: entering and exiting the clown state

I have already discussed the connection between the liminal phase and the clowning state in the chapter 3.3.2. "The ambiguity of ritual and performance spaces in clowning workshops. From order to deconstruction. From structure to anti-structure". According to Richard Schechner (1986), the "workshop rehearsal phase of performance composition is analogous to the liminal phase of the ritual process" (Schechner 1986, 58). Building on Schechner's argument, I suggest that clowning workshops can similarly be understood as liminal spaces within a ritualistic framework. Schechner (2002) draws on Arnold van Gennep's (1960 [1908]) concept of *rites de passage*, which he divides into three phases: preliminal (separation), liminal (transition), and postliminal (reincorporation) (Schechner 2002, 50). Arnold van Gennep was the first anthropologist to systematically study the significance of rituals that accompany transitional stages in a person's life. (Schechner 2002) Drawing on this framework, I argue that clowning workshops function as rites de passage in themselves—as liminal spaces that facilitate transformation. Within these workshops, participants engage in exercises that encourage them to shed their everyday civil identities, become more vulnerable, and experiment with new modes of being. These include following bodily impulses, acting on intuition, allowing emotions to surface, and performing these processes in front of others in the group.

In the following section, I will examine several exercises that support the transition into the clowning state, also known as clown consciousness. One of the first recurring rituals I observed in clowning workshops is the daily "check-in". As a structuring frame and giving a sense of security in a context where norms are challenged and suspended in several exercises, the check-in marks the beginning of the day. Participants are invited to share how they feel, what is currently present for them, and what longs to be expressed, while others listen attentively. (Fieldnotes Mollnhuber 2024) The facilitator employs this practice to gauge the group's emotional and physical state and to offer a caring, supportive environment. It becomes a kind of release valve—providing space for expression, containment, and mutual witnessing. Participants typically stand in a circle, listening when someone speaks and contributing when it is their turn. As Morrison and Coburn (2013) describe: "The function is

to check in, to release if necessary, to be seen and heard" (Morrison and Coburn 2013, 68). On the first day of the workshop, participants may also introduce themselves, share their names, and explain why they are attending.

Often, the check-in is preceded or followed by exercises focused on body awareness, such as guided movement or meditation. These practices serve to "arrive" in the space, encouraging participants to tune into their physical and emotional state. In some workshops, facilitators invert the order—beginning with bodily exercises to access genuine feelings before the verbal check-in. This sequencing varies depending on the facilitator's approach and the group's dynamic. (Fieldnotes Mollnhuber 2023 & 2024) As clowning is an embodied practice, the clown consciousness represents a distinct way of knowing and decision-making. The clown derives its knowledge from bodily wisdom and not from rational mind knowledge. The intention in the workshops is to train the students to trust their bodily wisdom and intuition. In this phase, they are prepared to listen to their bodily wisdom, because the body and embodiment play a significant role in clowning:

> "Also es ist halt unser Werkzeug. Und der Körper ist schlauer als der Kopf, sagen wir mal quasi und gibt halt die Impulse und der erzählt dann eigentlich auch meistens die Geschichten." (Interview with Anja, 20 June 2024, 27)

> "Und das andere ist aber eben der Körper gibt halt auch schon ganz viel vor natürlich. Also in welche Kostüme passe ich zum Beispiel oder wie sehen die dann an mir aus und an einem anderen Körper? Und diese Unterschiedlichkeiten von Körpern sind sehr interessant, finde ich, also damit auch zu spielen und spielen zu dürfen ist ein ganz großes Geschenk, und wenn man da auch einen sicheren Raum hat und Vertrauen hat und es auch zulässt und auch für die anderen zulässt, dann kann das, finde ich, auch sehr empowernd sein. Und eigentlich wünsche ich mir da noch viel mehr Körper-Kreationen, die auch in unseren Workshops sind und auch eben im Integrationsbereich sozusagen. Also Körper, die verschiedene Sachen können und verschiedene Sachen eben einfach nicht können, von denen wir aber dann manchmal ausgehen, die müssen das halt können so und damit zu spielen finde ich einfach, ist ein clowneskes Geschenk."
> (Interview with Anja, 20 June 2024, 27)

A recurring exercise involved walking with closed eyes and stopping just before reaching a wall. This simple task often becomes an emotional experience, revealing the extent to which participants can trust their bodily intuition. It evokes surprise and wonder, as many notice that their body seems to "know" when to stop. Participants received guidance such as: "Don't think too much, listen to your body, trust yourself, and breathe" (Fieldnotes Mollnhuber, 27 February 2024). Responses to the exercise varied widely: some stopped far from the wall, others walked diagonally, a few touched the wall, and some stopped 1–2 meters before it. Through this task, individual personalities and internal patterns become visible. The exercise becomes a metaphor for navigating personal challenges within the workshop and in

everyday life. In a second variation, participants are asked to run with their eyes closed toward the wall and stop when they feel they are close to it, further intensifying the experience. This shift illustrates a gradual suspension of cognitive control, allowing the body and intuition to take the lead. (Fieldnotes Mollnhuber 2024)

These exercises can be interpreted as Van Gennep's *separation* phase, in which individuals are symbolically detached from their ordinary social roles and made vulnerable to transformation. (Gennep 1960 cited in V. Turner 1967, 94) Asking someone to walk or run blindfolded toward a wall is profoundly counterintuitive; the socially conditioned self would never permit such behavior in daily life. The workshop, however, provides a protective framework that makes these paradoxical acts not only possible but also meaningful. It is a space to experiment where the experience itself is the focus. Peacock (2009) explains referring to Barner and Vermillion-Witt (1992):

> "For Barner and Vermillion-Witt, discovering and working with one's inner clown increases the ability to take risks and to trust to instinct. Clown can help in this way because the clown is curious rather than rational. Often in everyday life, people cling to what makes sense; they reason things out. Clowns are not rational characters. They are inclined to be open-minded and to respond with curiosity to the world around them." (Peacock 2009, 156)

As previously mentioned, the "name game" or "Mr. Hit" as Sue Morrison refers to it (Morrison and Coburn 2013, 69) is another exercise that engages with themes of exclusion and failure. Similarly, the "greeting exercise" challenges social norms: participants walk through the space and greet each other in unconventional ways, for example, by dancing or touching each other's backsides, rather than the standard handshake and verbal hello. These practices break the habitual and allow for embodied play and social reconfiguration. (Fieldnotes Mollnhuber 2024)

Another exercise involved five people walking in the space while the rest of the group observed their walks and movements. Then, the audience was instructed to select one individual to imitate their manner of movement by walking behind them. Afterwards, the person being imitated left the stage to observe. This underscores the significance of the body and the social construction of movements and attitudes. L. Butler's observations on this matter are noteworthy:

> "The gait is easily the most visible articulation of the mechanizations of the body. In the dynamics of walking—pace, rhythm, size, shape, directionality, and so on—one can identify a number of embodied patterns, habits, or socially constructed attitudes that, though unconscious to the performer, both affect and reflect the ways in which one inhabits and engages with the world." (L. Butler 2012, 65)

Another common activity is the game “Simon says” or “Jacques a dit” (Morrison and Coburn 2013, 70). Participants walk in a circle and must only respond when the facilitator begins a command with “Jacques a dit”. If someone reacts when the phrase is omitted, they are “punished” with a light slap with a stick. This playful mechanism introduces the themes of humiliation and consequence (ibid., 69). Regarding these exercises, it can be said:

> “The games are about humiliation & consequences and exclusion & failure but they are also about pleasure, the pleasure of being wrong. It is, according to Morrison, no fun being right all the time. It is good for people to give themselves permission to be wrong” (Morrison and Coburn 2013, 70).

These exercises are not about succeeding in the conventional sense, by showing how someone came close to the wall or won the name game. Rather, they center on the experience itself—on what it feels like to try, to fail, to notice one’s impulses, one’s intuition, and to learn about one’s own thresholds. Success is not defined by stopping closest to the wall or greeting someone most creatively. Coburn and Morrison point out the tendency of students in the exercise to overthink and overapproach and note that the students have other skills alongside their intellect, referring to “integrate the physical self, the intellectual self and the spiritual self” (Morrison and Coburn 2013, 74). Participants develop awareness of their emotional and somatic responses, gradually cultivating trust in their instincts and bodily intuition. These practices mark the beginning of each participant’s personal journey—a process of discovering what they need to know through these explorations about themselves. (ibid., 71)

> „It's this openness, non-judgmentalness. Acting, I wouldn't exactly say upon impulse, but most of all, intuition, because intuition can be like knowing that there's something there for you there and just do it. And then knowing that it has been enough. And then also act upon that and change your life. There is playfulness, I guess, there, and a lot of creativity and also, there was these worries of mine and shame and thinking, what am I doing? That I also had those phases.“ (Interview with Amber, 05.07.2024, 7)

The next stage in reaching clown consciousness is marked by an exercise called “Present yourself” (Morrison and Coburn 2013, 81), which I observed in several clown workshops. (Fieldnotes Mollnhuber 2024) First, the room is prepared by arranging the seats in a theatre-like configuration facing a stage. Then, a curtain is installed to mark the backstage area. Behind the curtain, there are several hats and several noses. The exercise begins with one person going backstage and intuitively choosing a hat and a nose. When the student is ready, he/she/they stamps on the floor three times. The audience then starts singing a song they agreed upon, and the student enters the stage as clown. Once on stage, the person

first looks only into the eyes of the facilitator, who will guide the experience. The following is an excerpt from my field notes to demonstrate the atmosphere:

> “The facilitator gently says to the person on stage with the hat and the red nose, ‘Hello, welcome,’ and ‘Breath’. The atmosphere is very calm and almost serious. There is no chatting, and there is tension in the room. Everyone sits quietly in their chairs and observes what is happening. Francesca, the facilitator, says ‘It's about what's between people when they look each other in the eye and allow the feelings and impulses that arise.’” (Fieldnotes Mollnhuber 2024)

After the facilitator feels that the person who just entered the stage is a bit more comfortable, she asks them to look into someone else’s eyes and feel what it does. The facilitator empowers them to follow their impulses: "Yes, do it! Go for it! Don't think! Do it!” If the person on stage waits too long, the facilitator says ”Now it's gone,” because impulses and feelings come in waves, and if the impulse is not acted on immediately, it’s gone. (Fieldnotes Mollnhuber 2024) In this exercise, participants reached the second phase, the *marginal/liminal* phase (Gennep no date and V. Turner 1969 cited in Schechner 1986, 363). A symbolic in-between state characterizes this phase. Individuals are temporarily removed from normative structures and are initiated into new roles or capacities—in this case, the clown consciousness. Ritual markers such as putting on a red nose and a hat serve as entry points into this transformative space. This stage is marked by “ludic recombination” (V. Turner 1983 cited in Schechner 1986, 360), a playful reordering of familiar elements. Participants are neither this nor that—in transition from one social identity to another, such as from a conventional self to the state of the clown. This describes a state of creative, fluid, and non-linear cognition, where the mind is detached from usual constraints and able to generate unexpected combinations of thought, perception, and emotion. It is a state commonly associated with imagination, altered consciousness, and ritualistic or artistic expression. (V. Turner 1983 cited in Schechner 1986, 359) When you're in the zone of the clown consciousness, you might reach a state of "flow". This happens when a person is so focused on the task at hand that he or she loses track of time and doesn’t think about anything else going on around anymore. Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (1975) also referred to it as a state of optimal experience. (Csikszentmihalyi 1975 cited in Schechner 1985, 11) It can be identified as a potential mental state in which an individual experiences a lacking sense of self and time, and environmental awareness may become obscured.

There are several exercises in which students can experiment with clown consciousness. The intention of these exercises is not to present the best version of yourself, but rather to learn how to feel without judging. (Fieldnotes Mollnhuber 2024) Sue Morrison, a famous

contemporary clown teacher, continues the work of Richard Pochinko, also known as the Pochinko technique:

> “With this exercise, it`s important to remember that it`s not about being funny. This exercise is about learning how to feel. What you feel is not a matter of choice. So you are learning how to feel and how to acknowledge that, own that, be comfortable with that, whatever it is, in front of an audience.” (Morrison and Coburn 2013, 84)

This exercise is challenging and exhausting for all the students and the facilitator. It usually takes around two days to give each student the space and time to be on stage and look everyone in the audience in the eyes. It is an exercise that goes against the conventional performance spaces, because the person on stage lays themselves bare without a script, character, rehearsal, or preparation. (ibid., 88) (Fieldnotes Mollnhuber 2024) The facilitator supports the person on stage by encouraging them to stay connected to themselves. Coburn points out what makes this moment special: a moment of stillness to witness another person’s beauty.

> “It is quite remarkable what is visible to the audience eye. The world is such a busy place. There is so much movement and activity. People are defined by what they do, their occupations and their actions. [..] It is rare to be given the opportunity to look and see someone for what they are. It is such a generous thing that the trainee clown gives us, to stand before us in ridiculous hat and nose and allow us to see him as he actually is.” (Morrison and Coburn 2013, 87)

Many participants talked about magic when discussing their experiences of feeling their emotions on stage as clowns.

> „Ich habe meine Tränen und meine Trauer gespürt und meinen Schmerz und ich habe nichts geredet und ich habe gesehen wie das Publikum genauso berührt war, einfach nur durch das, was in mir vorgeht, also diese Verbindung von uns allen, ja das war schon sehr magisch“ (Interview with Melanie, 7 June 2024, 18)

> „I love language and I love words. But the clown brings you to a realm where there's, like, symbolic thinking is almost a level deeper than where the words can go sometimes. Like, the realm of emotions and experience and truths, universal truths, going through things that you might not even dare to or really don't understand in the first place. That's where you go. It's really magical.“ (Interview with Amber, 5 July 2024, 9)

> “I feel like if you are pushing yourself outside of the routines, then it helps you to lighten up and not be gravitated in this routine and grayness and to kind of jump into the unknown and discover things there, and yeah, I think maybe this is magical.” (Interview with Maryna, 7 October 2024, 16)

> “I think it’s very magical to see other people like how they would bring something in a circle. It would be so heavy, and how piece by piece it would be like transforming. And it was so funny, and it was so nice to be part of this and be like a supportive power of it.” (Interview with Maryna, 1 November 2023, 10)

According to Morrison, “Present yourself” is the foundational exercise of clowning.

> “The first part is to be seen. For what we are, not what we would like to be. There is no right or wrong reaction from an audience. They react to what they see and they see, not necessarily what we would like them to see, this is not an exercise in presenting our best face to the world, it is not an exercise in best foot forward, the audience see what there is to see. Our shit. Our wonderfulness. Our vulnerabilities. Our humanity.” (Coburn and Morrison 2013, 86)

All kinds of emotions are welcomed in this space—not only the funny, but also the serious, the tragic, the gentle, the love, the tender, the hate and the horrified. The moral of this exercise is that there is beauty in everything, in the simple truth of the human condition. (Coburn and Morrison 2013, 93) The whole spectrum of emotions is embraced on stage, because it is their flaws that make people interesting. (ibid., 98) When the clown allows him or herself to feel discomfort on stage, the audience will feel it too and recognize their own vulnerability, to feel unsure and out of place. (ibid., 89)

Morrison and Coburn highlight an important aspect of being seen and allowing oneself to be seen, a concept that participants also described in their experiences.

> „They sometimes see things in you that you hadn´t seen before or that were dormant. […] Dormant, like sleeping, maybe there are things that you kept hidden and they already see it before you show it, or you feel safe enough to show it. And then I guess with the group also actually performing, maybe then you also get this power of people seeing you, and you let them. That's your part. You become vulnerable enough to be seen.“ (Interview with Amber, 5 July 2024, 14)

> „The people that you, you stand in front of them, they are your mirror.“ (Interview with Amber, 5 July 2024, 4)

> “I think there's also this kind of joy, of being observed and I think I learned a lot from this flinta clowns to be observed, to be fine and take my time and I think i enjoy the most when I actually really take time. When I manage not to like jump through it, but like be slow and kind of get lost a bit in this slowness and this kind of flirting with the audience.” (Interview with Maryna, 7 October 2024, 9)

There is a communication and connection between the audience and the clown, which Morrison and Coburn call "clown conversation" (2013, 83). Simultaneously, the clown keeps the connection to themselves. Schechner talks about the intensity of a performance when it takes off, and the audience is moved. Then, some collaboration is born, and collective energies are generated that don't exist in film or TV. (Schechner 1985, 11).

After looking into the eyes of everyone in the room, the clown walks back to the curtain, turns around one more time to say goodbye, and exits the stage. Backstage, the person removes the clown nose and hat, symbolically shedding their clown persona, and returns to

the stage as their 'civilian' self. Upon reentering, they are greeted by the facilitator with a warm embrace and the recurring question: “How was the experience?” (Fieldnotes Mollnhuber 2024) This emphasizes the central role of lived experience in the learning process, grounded in the belief that knowledge emerges through and is found in experience (Morrison and Coburn 2013, 98).

Participating in this exercise can be profoundly challenging, as it requires vulnerability, self-awareness, and a willingness to confront personal and emotional responses within a performative context.

> “This exercise is terrifying for people because they are asked to come out and do nothing and it is the start of several experiences. The first experience is being seen, the second is seeing and the third is standing in their own shit, in their own wonderfulness, recognizing their limitations without anything between them and the audience. No gag, no script, nothing, just them and the audience. That’s pretty big.” (Morrison and Coburn 2013, 97)
>
> “it's really nice when something that you find like a peak, like it is appreciated through people's attention and it is fucking scary when it is not then you feel like naked and then this kind of fear of isolation kicks in for me because I feel, ‘Oh my no one likes me ayah. No one wants me ayah I'm wrong and I embarrassed myself’ and thats scary.” (Interview with Maryna, 7 October 2024, 9)

Morrison and Coburn (2013) break down the journey into four phases:

> 1. “Present yourself. Let us, the audience see you.” (Morrison and Coburn 2013, 94)
>
> 2. “Bring Me Into Your World. See us, the audience, so that we can share in what is happening and stand in your world, your experience, with you.” (Morrison and Coburn 2013, 94)
>
> 3. “Transform Me. Affect me. Touch me. Move me. Make me aware of something I wasn’t aware of before or remind me of something that I had known but had forgotten.” (Morrison and Coburn 2013, 94)
>
> 4. “Bring Me Back To My World With A New Awareness. Complete the journeys for me. Leave the theatrical space so that I can return to my world with my new knowledge.” (Morrison and Coburn 2013, 94)

The last phase can be interpreted as Van Gennep’s third phase known as (r*e)aggregation*, which involves reintegration and the solidification of transformation. The newly acquired roles or identities begin to radiate through action and presence (Schechner 1986, 365-367). This phase may include ritualized forms of closure, such as a shared meal after a performance, serving to cool down and transition back into everyday life, where the individual is expected to act in alignment with established norms and standards.

In summary, I have elaborated on the different stages that lead to the clown state or clown consciousness. In the next chapter, I will discuss the self, identity, and community in the experience of clowning.

3.4.2. The self, identity, and community

While exploring the theme of community and identity in the experiences of participants and facilitators in the clowning workshops, I encountered a fundamental ambiguity that challenged my own conceptual understanding of these terms. Coming from a methodological tradition that emphasizes identifying a "field" and locating identities or communities within it, I initially struggled to make sense of the dynamics I observed. Over time, I began to realize that the very field I was studying—clowning as a relational and expressive practice—resists such clear delineations. Identity and community are undeniably present, yet they often appear in unmarked, fluid, and contested forms. This chapter examines the complexity of these concepts and how they are negotiated through the medium of clowning.

3.4.2.1. The self as the reflective center of experience

To discuss community meaningfully, we must inevitably address identity and, by extension, the concept of the self. The clowning workshops I participated in focused on exploring and expressing the self. However, the term "self" itself has a complex status in anthropological discourse. As Sökefeld (1999) notes, anthropology has often overlooked the concept of the self, frequently viewing it as a fixed, individualistic idea rooted in Western philosophical traditions. In Descartes' formulation, the self—the cogito, or thinking subject—is the fundamental source of knowledge and certainty. (Descartes no date cited in Sökefeld 1999, 417) Michel Foucault challenged this view radically by seeing the subject not as the origin of knowledge but as a product of historically dependent discourses and power structures (Foucault 1979 cited in Sökefeld 1999, 417). Ideas of difference and plurality have thus replaced the Cartesian model of a unified and similar self. This change forces us to rethink both self and identity, and their relationship. Sökefeld (1999) argues that while anthropology has produced rich discussions about identity, the idea of the self has been largely ignored or misunderstood—especially in cross-cultural studies. A main issue is the perceived impossibility of comparing "Western" and "non-Western" ideas of selfhood. The Western self, shaped more by philosophical traditions than by empirical accounts of lived experience, is usually described as bounded, autonomous, reflective, and goal-oriented (Sökefeld 1999, 418). Meanwhile, non-Western selves are often portrayed as unbounded, relational, and

collectively focused. These differences have led anthropologists to attribute “identity” to the cultural other, while denying them the capacity for selfhood—thus stripping them of agency and reflexivity. (Sökefeld 1999, 418) This imbalance is problematic because it reinforces colonial binaries between the independent Western self and the culturally embedded non-Western other. As Sökefeld points out, “there can be no identities without selves” (1999, 419). He criticizes earlier anthropological approaches (e.g., the Culture and Personality School) that depicted non-Western cultures as static, cohesive wholes, with little room for individual self-expression or change. (ibid.) Instead, Sökefeld offers a model that recognizes the self as a necessary, though culturally variable, dimension of human life. Using Hallowell’s (1955) work, he defines the self as the reflective center of experience—the ability to distinguish oneself from everything else. (Hallowell 1955 cited in Sökefeld 1999, 424) This reflexivity offers a basic, yet universal, framework for selfhood. While its cultural expressions may differ, this sense of distinction remains constant. The self is not the same as identity; rather, it’s the framework within which multiple and sometimes conflicting identities are held, navigated, and enacted. Importantly, this concept of the self also includes agency—the ability to start actions and give meaning. Following Arendt (1958), agency isn’t seen as pure independence but as the capacity to begin something new in relation to others. (Arendt 1958 cited in Sökefeld 1999, 427) Sökefeld’s research in northern Pakistan highlights how relevant this view is. He observed people managing conflicting social demands and multiple identities, struggling to keep a sense of self amid intense political and cultural pressures. (Sökefeld 1999, 419) He tells the story of a man from Gilgit who is getting married. As part of local custom, a large number of guests from the community are invited. The guest list includes both Sunni and Shia individuals, and there’s is a genuine concern that conflicts could arise if both groups attend the same event. To prevent this, the man arranges two separate celebrations—one for Sunni guests and one for Shia guests. This example illustrates how people handle multiple collective identities without fully identifying with any one of them in an absolute sense. The man doesn’t see himself as only Sunni or only Shia—instead, he adjusts his actions based on the social situation. His ability to manage contradictions demonstrates what Sökefeld (1999) refers to as the agentive self—a self capable of navigating and even holding together contradictions. Sökefeld (1999) uses this story to argue that anthropologists should move away from seeing identity as fixed or essential (e.g., "he is a Sunni, so he behaves like this") and instead see the self as a site of agency, which enables people to negotiate, perform, and sometimes manipulate their identities depending on the context. Such contexts illustrate the necessity of distinguishing between shared identities and the individual self that enacts them. The self is not passive,

nor is it reducible to the sum of its identities. Instead, it is a dynamic, evolving, and changing entity that interprets, mediates, and sometimes resists these identities. The self cannot be understood independently of identity or agency; each informs and shapes the other. While the self encompasses and coordinates a plurality of identities, it is not detached from them. Instead, it functions as a reflexive and integrative framework that enables the negotiation of diverse and sometimes conflicting identity positions. The self is subject to transformation as individuals engage with different social contexts and interact with others across shifting networks. (Sökefeld 1999, 430) As the contexts of interaction change, so too does the meaning of distinction from others—what sets a person apart in one situation may not apply in another. This fluidity, born from the coexistence of multiple and intersecting identities, opens up a space for individual agency. In this sense, clowning workshops have the potential to become a vibrant site for exploring selfhood. It offers space for playful experimentation, contradiction, and non-normative expression that often resist identity categories. While identities tend to be shaped by social expectations, stereotypes, and assigned roles, the clown-self operates in a more open field.

> “To meet myself, to encounter myself, to see myself, and to embrace all my different faces is a kind of big opportunity to give space to all what I am.” (Interview with Francesca,18 June 2024, 13)

Sökefeld’s framework ultimately calls for a dialectical understanding of self and society—not as separate entities, but as mutually constitutive —and therefore points out the necessity of elaborating an anthropological concept of the self. (Sökefeld 1999, 428) He proposes that the self, like culture, should be treated as a universal attribute of the human condition (ibid., 429). The question of whether someone is a person, then, “is less a question of cultural concepts than of particular ways of interaction between individuals positioned in a complex system of power relationships who struggle to maintain or to improve their position with regard to others” (Sökefeld 1999, 428). Selfhood is realized in these interactions, where individuals strive to maintain, negotiate, or alter their positions in relation to others. This perspective has important implications for understanding agency. If the self is seen only as a cultural product, we risk overlooking individual motivation, resistance, and creativity. Sökefeld (1999) argues that culture itself is shaped by the actions of individuals—by how people inhabit, contest, and reconfigure cultural norms. Considering that “culture can be seen as a condition that facilitates certain self-representations” (ibid., 443), people endure suffering and hardship not simply because culture dictates it, but because they are invested in particular self-images or aspirations that the cultural and social system doesn’t facilitate.

Culture, in this view, is a field of possibilities shaped by countless encounters with actual selves (Sökefeld 1999, 431).

3.4.2.2. The fluidity and multiplicity of identity

In the following chapter, I explore the concept of identity and how its fluidity and multiplicity posed challenges in my own research. The term identity carries a wide range of meanings, varying significantly across academic disciplines, political discourse, and popular media. Despite its ambiguities, identity remains a central concept for understanding how people make sense of the world and navigate social life. The etymology of identity, from the Latin idem ("the same"), underscores this paradox: identity implies sameness, yet in contemporary discourse it must account for multiplicity and transformation. (Harcourt 2022, 304) As Bernard Harcourt (2022) notes, identity politics often leans toward rigid conceptualizations of identity, reducing complex, fluid processes to fixed categories, which risks erasing the lived realities of people whose identities are intersectional and shifting. Broader historical and global developments also shape identity: it has been theorized as a response to globalization, uprootedness, disorientation, or isolation. In anthropology, identity is a key term and has been used to describe belonging, while also acknowledging difference and exclusion. (Gingrich 2011, 144) Although the term gained prominence in the 1970s, the underlying question "Who are we in relation to others?" is much older (Finke and Sökefeld 2018, 1), encompassing social, cultural, and biological dimensions. (Gingrich 2011, 144) The concept of the individual is an ethnocentric term originating from Europe and spreading globally. (ibid.) Gingrich (2011) argues that the term identity that separates the individual from the collective dimension should be avoided. (ibid) He argues that identities are co-constructed: individuals can form and influence their identity, but need to be acknowledged by others. Identity is thus both personal and collective. (ibid.) Also, Appiah (2019) argues that identities are neither entirely imposed by society nor freely chosen by the individual. (Appiah 2019, 18) As Finke and Sökefeld (2018) argue, identity serves as a key orientation device, providing individuals with expectations about behavior and interactions, and thereby offering a certain degree of security in a complex world. (Finke and Sökefeld 2018, 7) Identities are meaningful because they provide scripts for behavior, codes of belonging, and frameworks for mutual recognition. (Appiah 2019, 9 & 12) Yet they also constrain, as they tend to bring with them stereotypes and normative expectations about how one should think, feel, or act. (Appiah 2019, 10 & 12) Also, the participants and facilitators expressed some kind of frustration about the stereotypical clown, whom they don't identify with. While identity comes with labels and a sense of belonging, it can also give others reason to do things to

you and treat you in a specific way. (Appiah 2019, 10) Identity in this context becomes a matter of classification and categories, as Finke and Sökefeld (2018) note: “To be applicable, our perceptions of one another need to be fixed as labels to serve mutual ascriptions.” (Finke and Sökefeld 2018, 4) This becomes problematic, considering that identity is shaped by interaction, which allows for multiple, shifting identities based on gender, age, nationality, profession, and so on. Depending on the context, one identity aspect may take center stage while others recede into the background. In this way, identity becomes what Baumann and Gingrich (2004) call a mutable and inconsistent bundle of fundamental human life-forms (Baumann and Gingrich 2004 cited in Gingrich 2011, 145). Instead of viewing identity as a fixed state, Finke and Sökefeld (2018) highlight its performative, ongoing nature and advocate for the term identification instead of identity. (Finke and Sökefeld 2018, 6) As already elaborated in Sökefeld’s (1999) example of the wedding in Northern Pakistan, any interaction, perceived similarities, or differences may be downplayed or highlighted, depending on the social context and strategic needs. One might stress femininity in one setting and religious affiliation in another, underscoring the fluid, situated, and intersectional character of identity.

> “[…] our self-understanding is fluid and fragmented but it may also be conceptualized as a complex set of components that defines how we perceive ourselves in relation to multiple others without questioning our oneness as persons” (Finke and Sökefeld 2018, 4)

Appiah (2019) draws on Kimberlé Crenshaw’s (1989) concept of intersectionality, which helps account for the overlapping and interdependent systems of classification that shape identity. (Crenshaw 1989 cited in Appiah 2019, 19) This idea emerged from the intersection of feminism and gender studies. Difference is just as complex as sameness. Different differences cannot be viewed as separate from one another. Instead, they should be viewed as a network of interconnected and “intersecting relations” (Finke and Sökefeld 2018, 4).

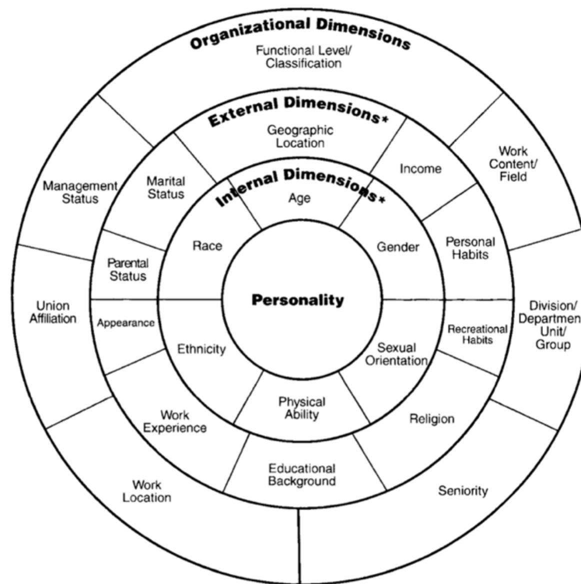

Figure 4 "Four layers of diversity" (©Loden and Rosener 1991)

The graph shows Gardenswartz's and Rowe's "Four layers of diversity" (Gardenswartz and Rowe 2003, 33). At the core lies "personality"—the inherently unique element that shapes our individual style and character. This central aspect influences all other layers of our identity. Surrounding it are a set of internal factors identified by Judy Rosener and Marilyn Loden as the "primary dimensions of diversity" (Rosener and Loden 1991 cited in Gardenswartz and Rowe 2003, 32). These include characteristics such as gender, age, and race—traits typically beyond our control. The next layer consists of "secondary dimensions" (ibid.), shaped by societal influences and personal life experiences. These may include one's place of residence, parental status, or religious affiliation. Lastly, "organizational dimensions" (ibid.) encompass factors related to one's professional environment, such as job role, seniority, and work location. Collectively, these four layers create an individual's "diversity filter" (Gardenswartz and Rowe 2003, 32) through which they perceive and interact with the world. (ibid.) Although all humans share fundamental needs, face comparable challenges in the workplace, and undergo similar life experiences, individual differences remain highly significant. These differences shape both the assumptions we make about others and the opportunities available to us. If we fail to reflect on and understand the various layers of diversity that shape our personal perspectives—or "filters"—we risk becoming subject to these differences, forming unconscious biases and facing invisible yet persistent barriers. Conversely, by recognizing the multitude of factors that contribute to our unique viewpoints, we gain greater agency in how we act and how we respond to others. (Gardenswartz and Rowe 2003, 31-32)

Further, identity can be understood through three tendencies discussed by Kwame Anthony Appiah (2019). The first is habitus (Bourdieu 1984), which reflects on "how central identity is to the way we deploy our bodies" (Appiah 2019, 21). Each person develops “a set of dispositions to respond more or less spontaneously to the world in particular ways, without much thought" (Appiah 2019, 21). Our ways of walking, speaking, feeling, and thinking are shaped and trained from early childhood. (ibid.) The second tendency is essentialism. Research indicates that a fundamental way we understand the world is by creating generalizations and categorizing organisms as if they possess an underlying essence. (Appiah 2019, 26–27). Interestingly, “humans are more likely […] to essentialize groups about which we have negative thoughts—and more likely to have negative thoughts about groups we've essentialized" (Appiah 2019, 28). The third psychological tendency underlying identity is clannishness, which involves distinguishing between insiders and outsiders (Appiah 2019, 31). As he notes, "we prefer our own kind and we’re easily persuaded to take against outsiders" (Appiah 2019, 31)—a tendency that may have had advantages in prehistoric environments. While such classifications can facilitate social navigation, they often become rigid and stereotypical, and can thus cause significant suffering. (ibid.)

While a general or stereotypical identity of the clown exists, most of the participants and facilitators in my fieldwork did not identify with the mainstream or stereotypical image of the clown as a mere entertainer, characterized by big shoes, white face, red nose, and a colorful wig. Instead, they embraced a more intuitive and affective understanding of clowning that opens spaces for feeling, pausing, breathing, and being without predefined roles or labels. At times, participants referenced concepts such as Native American concepts of the sacred clown or shamanic clown, probably having their roots in Richard Pochinko‘s methods. While there was expressed curiosity toward Native American philosophies of the sacred clown, no one directly claimed that identity. Instead, participants tended to identify with broader collective aspirations: they described their group as open-minded, curious, sometimes activist, and committed to social change and healing. Crucially, they emphasized that clowning is not a fixed identity reserved for a selected few—it is something anyone can and, arguably, should do. Thus, there were no clear markers distinguishing clowns from non-clowns. What emerged instead was a focus on shared humanity—a unifying sense of the human experience—that became the grounding element of their identification. (Fieldnotes Mollnhuber 2023 & 2024) This reluctance to identify with fixed categories reflects broader postmodern critiques of essentialist notions of identity.

3.4.2.2.1. Between being and becoming[36]: The paradox and politics of identity

While classifications and categories are indispensable for making sense of the world, identity cannot be reduced to fixed definitions alone. Rather, it must be understood as encompassing both stable and fluid dimensions—each essential in different ways. Contemporary debates in identity politics often emphasize fixed identities that are assumed to correspond with inherent traits. This view, however, leaves little room for the complexity and fluidity of lived experience. (Harcourt 2022, 306) Bernard Harcourt (2022) critiques this essentialist notion of identity, drawing on the work of the Combahee River Collective (CRC), who shift the focus from identity as a static category to identity as an action. For the CRC, shared identity—such as the term “Black”—does not emerge from uniformity, but rather from a collective history of being subjected to systemic oppression, such as colonialism and its enduring aftermath. In this sense, identity functions as a marker of shared experiences and social positioning. (Harcourt 2022, 306–8) In political contexts, identity is often necessary to reveal the ways in which different forms of oppression intersect—such as racism, sexism, and classism. (ibid., 299) These intersections illustrate how identity becomes a tool for resistance and visibility. Harcourt highlights that identity markers—such as “race”—are not fixed in meaning, but shift across contexts, sometimes being framed biologically or genetically, and at other times culturally or historically. This ongoing oscillation is not neutral, but deeply embedded in power relations and tied to power and “regime of truth” (Hall 2016, 2017 cited in Harcourt 2022, 306). Both the CRC and cultural theorist Stuart Hall emphasize the paradoxical nature of identity. Identity is at once sticky and slippery: it exerts real effects, often rigid and violent in their social consequences, while simultaneously allowing for fluidity, transformation, and resistance. This dialectic—the tension between the structural rigidity of social identity and the limitless potential for redefinition—lies at the heart of identity and identity politics. (ibid., 309) As Bernard Harcourt (2022) notes, identity can be externally imposed and have material consequences. People are discriminated against, marginalized, and excluded based on how their identities are socially perceived. These experiences are shaped by entrenched hierarchies that reproduce themselves through exclusionary practices. And yet, individuals are also capable of resignifying and reshaping their identities, of refusing the terms imposed upon them. (ibid.) In discussing the fluidity of identity, Harcourt draws on Foucault’s concept of “de-subjectification” (Foucault 1991 cited in Harcourt 2022,

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[36] See Harcourt (2022)

308), a practice of destabilizing understandings and concepts of the self and identity. This process, traced through thinkers such as Nietzsche, Bataille, and Blanchot, aims to unsettle normalized conceptions of identity and produce new ways of experiencing subjectivity. (ibid.) Harcourt (2022) calls for an approach that actively acknowledges the dynamic movement between being (fixity, structure) and becoming (fluidity, antistructure). While fixed identities may be necessary for political mobilization, the capacity to imagine and enact transformation—"becoming"—is equally vital. (ibid., 315) He argues that our identities are constantly shaped by shifting power dynamics and changing political landscapes. (ibid., 314) The challenge, then, is to envision a form of politics that does not remain stuck in rigid identity categories, but instead embraces the fluid and evolving nature of subjectivity—sliding between the realms of being and becoming. (ibid)

In this sense, clowning workshops may be a practice of "de-subjectification" as it gives space to subvert these scripts and expectations of rigid classifications. Performers may exaggerate, parody, or reject normative identities, thereby unsettling dominant ideas around gender, class, or authority. However, as some interviewees critically noted, clowning is not immune to reproducing sexist or racist patterns. Clowning practice per se is only a tool, and its outcome depends on the people who work with it; thus, clown shows can reproduce offensive content. For many participants in my research, clowning became a means to discover new facets of themselves. As Peacock (2009) argues, clowning opens space for risk-taking, vulnerability, and intuitive action. (Peacock 2009, 156) Because the clown is driven by curiosity rather than rationality, they offer an alternative to everyday modes of reasoning and behavior. (ibid.) In this sense, clowning can be seen as a practice of exploring who we are, outside or beyond fixed social scripts. Clowning can temporarily disrupt everyday identity scripts, allowing individuals to explore unfamiliar aspects of themselves. The clown identity here does not replace the usual identity but opens a space for fluid self-exploration and transformation between being and becoming, between structure and anti-structure. (Fieldnotes Mollnhuber 2023 & 2024)

> „Und da habe ich auch gemerkt, ich liebe es, wie auf sanfte Art und Weise so harte Strukturen geknackt werden können. Wie so, als würdest du Risse machen, aus denen dann schön langsam so das Licht raus sickert. Also das Bild hat mir dann so gut gefallen. All diese kleinen, kleinen, kleinen Boxen, in die wir uns stecken, in die wir gesteckt werden und die wir selber tagtäglich kreieren. Also ich nehme mich da nicht aus. Immer wieder kreieren wir Boxen und Clownen hilft die aufzubrechen. Es gibt mehr, es gibt mehr als all diese Boxen, in die wir uns da immer stecken wollen. Es geht gar nicht. Also das sagt mir die Clownerie dann immer wieder.“ (Interview with Melanie, 7 June 2024, 24-25)

3.4.2.2.2. Resisting labels, identity, and the rhizome

One expression of the fluid dimension of clowning can be observed in its refusal to be categorized and its active deconstruction of internalized behavioral norms. Clown training often involves exercises that challenge habitual ways of moving, perceiving, and communicating. For example, the use of "gibberish"—a non-semantic language—liberates participants from the constraints of rational speech and opens space for spontaneous expression. Other practices include perceiving everyday objects in unexpected ways or experimenting with unfamiliar forms of movement and social behavior. A useful framework for understanding this phenomenon is the "rhizome" (Deleuze and Guattari 1995 cited in Saccet 2009, 91-93), a concept developed by Deleuze and Guattari (1995). The rhizome stands in contrast to hierarchical or linear models of identity and history. It posits a multiplicity of entry points, connections, and evolutions—emphasizing lateral growth, unpredictability, and connectivity (ibid., 100). When applied to the clown, the rhizome disrupts the idea of a singular, fixed identity or origin. Instead, the clown emerges as a fluid, interconnected, and ever-becoming figure: adaptive, resistant to closure, and always in motion. (Sacchet 2009, 93) Empirically and theoretically, my research confirms that the clown resists rigid classification. Attempts to define or stabilize the clown often reflect a particularly Western preoccupation with taxonomy—an effort that can ultimately restrict our understanding and enjoyment of clowning (Sacchet 2009, 93 & 131). Rather than being pinned down, the clown acts as a "traveler of time," a "passenger inside out," who appears in many guises and participates in a "climate of escapes and daydreams" (ibid., 97). This nomadic quality mirrors the rhizome's non-territorial logic.

> „It´s hard to really catch the clown" (Interview with Amber, 5 July 2024, 24)

This idea is further elaborated in the notion of the "rizoma clownesco" (Sacchet 2009, 95)—a clown rhizome—which emphasizes the art form's capacity to transcend spatial, stylistic, and hierarchical boundaries. In this view, clowning is not governed by a single authority, tradition, or aesthetic. There is no definitive figure, style, or lineage that holds ultimate power. Instead, the clown exists through a multitude of interconnections: "a legion of eccentrics who connect and become permeable through the fluidity and survival of the art of clowning" (ibid., 97). Clowning, therefore, is a relational and decentralized practice, sustained by its openness to influence and change. Like the rhizome, clowning defies easy localization or classification. This lens helps us understand clown figures and their histories not as fixed or linear, but as complex, emergent, and interwoven (ibid., 131). This perspective aligns with

a striking metaphor offered by Sacchet (2009): the clown as a stray dog—cunning, adaptable, independent, and scrappy. While appearing unrefined, this clown can, when given space, transform into something captivating and humorous. Just as contemporary dogs are rarely purebred, the clown thrives precisely because of its mixed lineage—its openness to hybridity and improvisation ensures its survival. It evades capture by those who demand pedigree and purity. (ibid., 111)

The clown is also described as a figure of metamorphosis and resistance, situated "between worlds" (Sacchet 2009, 92). It is an art that resists domination by constantly transforming, blending, and reinventing itself. Its ambiguity is not a weakness but a strategic intelligence—a way to outlive the structures that would contain it. (ibid., 131) This transformational state, what might be called the clownesque state, is likened to sea spray: something diffuse, sensory, and immersive. It is not a single thing—neither smell, nor taste, nor water—but a whole mixture that permeates skin, hair, and breath. The clownesque state intoxicates and transforms; it is both real and ephemeral, grounded and elusive. (ibid., 113)

In terms of clown history, the rhizome again offers a powerful analytical lens. The clown's evolution is marked not by linear succession but by rhizomatic entanglements, spanning geographies and temporalities, contributing to the clown's continued vitality. The clown's permeability also extends to the facilitator or practitioner. Rather than adhering to a single school or method, the clown is shaped by multiple lineages, absorbing diverse teachings and aesthetic traditions. (ibid., 101) This leads to the concept of the clown as cannibal—one who consumes, digests, and blends various styles, repertoires, gags, and even audience reactions. This act of creative cannibalism is not theft, but a process of nourishment and reinvention. (ibid., 106) It is through this form of contagion—through borrowing, remixing, and transforming—that clowning remains alive and dynamic. (ibid., 131)

According to Deleuze and Guattari (1983), desire is the fundamental force that drives individuals to resist dominant authority, conceptualizing desire itself as a form of resistance (Deleuze and Guattari 1983 cited in Fouweather and Bosma 2021, 1800). Linstead and Brewis (2007) argue that Plato interpreted desire as a deficiency, a yearning to fill a void, unlike Deleuze who presents desire as a positive, productive, and creative force. (Linstead and Brewis 2007 cited in Fouweather and Bosma 2021, 1800) It is not rooted in lack but in vitality: a generative current that propels life forward. (Fouweather and Bosma 2021, 1800) Desire, in this framework, is not something we are missing or striving to possess—it is the energy that constructs relationships, behaviors, systems, and institutions. (ibid.) "[…]

desiring is central to life […]" (Fouweather and Bosma 2021, 1800) as the striving to exist (Spinoza cited in Fouweather and Bosma 2021, 1800) is innate in all beings to preserve existence. This drive is not limited to individuals but is fundamental to all forms of life, from single-celled organisms to complex socio-political entities, such as nation-states (Fouweather and Bosma 2021, 1800). Resistance, then, does not emerge from a sense of deprivation, but from the active, life-affirming impulse of desire to expand, create, and escape restrictive structures. Importantly, Deleuze argues that social formations—such as governments, families, or communities—are not external frameworks imposed upon passive individuals. Instead, they are co-produced by desire itself. The systems we inhabit are built and sustained by the very desires that flow through us. Our interests, goals, and attachments are shaped by the social structures in which we are already embedded (Fouweather and Bosma 2021, 1800). Desire, according to Linstead and Pullen (2006) serves as the "motor for social action" (Linstead & Pullen 2006, 1289 cited in Fouweather and Bosma 2021, 1801). It is transformatory, consistently "capable of derailing something, displacing the social fabric" (Deleuze 2004, 233 cited in Fouweather and Bosma 2021, 1801).

> "The forces that create repression are the same forces that bring about change, creating and constantly reconfiguring social formations. Organizing AND disorganizing. For Deleuze the primacy of desire means that change is inevitable: desires reconfigure the social formations that produce them." (Fouweather and Bosma 2021, 1801)

> "Power is not some external force controlling bodies. Identities, relations of power, and fixities (such as an individual or an organization) are confluences within the ongoing flow of desires. From this vantage point, no single being or relation of power can ever provide a foundation for life and practice. The individual finds herself entangled in a myriad of relations (self, family, community, organization, state) into which her own desires flow. Rather than power flowing from top to bottom, desire flows around a myriad of rhizomatic social formations. As a result, relations of power are in a constant state of flux, growing, shrinking, merging, dissolving. The state, the organization, the family are not maintained because of an external force or power, but through internal flows of desire." (Fouweather and Bosma 2021, 1800)

Once established, these systems tend to stabilize and protect themselves by suppressing the transformative potential of desire. This process is referred to as "antiproduction" (Goodchild 1996, 73 cited in Fouweather and Bosma 2021, 1800)—a mechanism that blocks desire's flow to prevent disruption. Capitalism, for example, redirects desire into consumption, career aspirations, or even commodified forms of rebellion, such as punk culture turned into fashion brands. In this way, systems can co-opt subversion, and individuals may even begin to desire their own repression by internalizing social norms, taboos, and values that limit their potential. Deleuze and Guattari (1983) state that "no

society can tolerate a position of real desire without its structures of exploitation, servitude, and hierarchy being compromised" (Deleuze and Guattari 1983, 116 cited in Fouweather and Bosma, 1800). Fouweather and Bosma (2021) further notice that Deleuze and Guattari (1983) recognize:

> "[…] if the body's desires were fully untethered from social formations, societies would collapse. To ensure that social formations are maintained, every society must control or repress individuals' desires. Using notions of good and bad, virtues and sins, taboos and guilt […]." (Fouweather and Bosma 2021, 1800)

Repression produces the sense that the subject is held in place, bound to a particular, fixed and stable identity and „battling flows of desire that it struggles to control" (Fouweather and Bosma 2021, 1801). Deleuze and Guattari (1983) note: "desire can be made to desire its own repression" (Deleuze and Guattari 1983, 105 cited in Fouweather and Bosma 2021, 1801). Desire is never entirely extinguished. Though it may be repressed or redirected, it continues to leak, resurface, and push for change. It remains in constant motion, destabilizing the very structures that attempt to contain it. Therefore, resistance is not merely possible—it is inevitable. Because desire is the primary engine of social life, subjects and institutions are never fixed; they are always in flux, always becoming. Even within the most stable systems, there lies an ever-present potential for transformation:

> "Deleuze reverses the relation between power and desire, it is out of desire that social formations arise, creating relations of power that then channel and thus repress desires. But desire is never destroyed. Without desire social formations evaporate. Power can never 'trump' desire. The two are entwined, desires create structures of power and power shapes desires, but it cannot destroy them." (Fouweather and Bosma 2021, 1801)

This ongoing process of becoming is neither strictly rebellious nor compliant—it is dynamic, encompassing both. When one's identity is constrained or threatened, the response is not necessarily to destroy the system but to reconfigure it creatively. Deleuze and Guattari (1983) refer to this as micropolitics: small-scale, performative acts that gradually reshape the social order. (Deleuze and Guattari 1983 cited in Fouweather and Bosma 2021, 1801) Linstead & Thanem (2007) refer to desire as "a form of resistance" (Linstead & Thanem cited in Fouweather and Bosma 2021, 1801).

> "[…] there is nothing inevitable about existing relations of power, save that new ones will emerge. Totalitarian regimes, megacorporations and familial dynasties will come to pass." (Fouweather and Bosma 2021, 1801)

Fouweather and Bosma extend this notion to language, arguing that "linguistic micro-processes" (Fouweather and Bosma 2021, 1798) can enact "performative resistance" (ibid.),

drawing on Austin's theory of performativity. (Austin no date cited in Fouweather and Bosma 2021, 1798) Here, language becomes a tool for "micro-emancipation, reflexivity, and change" (Wicker & Schaefer 2014 cited in Fouweather and Bosma 2021, 1799). In this sense, language does not simply reflect reality—it can transform it. For Deleuze, language is not a fixed structure but a processual and fluid entity, characterized by "originary freedom" (Fouweather and Bosma 2021, 1805). Like a rhizome—with no central root—it grows in unpredictable directions, always open to variation, transformation, and resistance. This is especially evident in the expressive practices of minority voices and experimental writers who destabilize normative language through irony, "stuttering" and non-representational forms. Their speech unsettles dominant discourses and introduces alternative truths. In doing so, they create cracks in the established order and open space for reconfiguration. At the same time, Deleuze and Guattari (1987) also acknowledge what Barthes called language functions as a tool of "intellectual imperialism" (Barthes no date cited in Fouweather and Bosma 2021, 1805). It territorializes meaning by producing roles, norms, and boundaries—statements like "boys don't cry" or "this is just how things are" serve to maintain systems of control. Through repetition, language draws lines between what is permitted and what is excluded, defining insiders and outsiders, as well as roles and hierarchies. Yet the performative power of language is inherently contextual. Words do not hold fixed meanings; their impact depends on how, when, and by whom they are spoken. A performative utterance derives its force from its social and embodied context. This illustrates that language is relational and temporal—it doesn't belong solely to the speaker, and its meaning is always open to reinterpretation. Just as language can performatively resist authority, I argue that performative arts—such as clowning—can also create spaces of resistance. Through embodied, playful, and subversive acts, clowning engages in a form of micropolitics that reconfigures social norms and opens space for alternative ways of being.

3.4.2.3. The clowning community and communitas

The term community evokes a wide range of associations, both in everyday language and academic discourse. In my interviews with clowning practitioners and facilitators, it became clear that there is no unified understanding of whether a community exists or whether individuals identify with one. Some participants described a sense of belonging, particularly in sharing the common interest of clowning. Many also expressed a reluctance to label or define their relationships in terms of a specific community. Initially, this ambiguity was confusing to me, particularly when I tried to define the field of my research. In conversations

with my supervisor, I came to understand that this ambiguity itself is a valuable ethnographic finding.

The term "community" originates from the Latin "munus", which encompasses meanings such as gift, duty, and sacrifice. (Grodzin Gold 2005, 3) In German, "Gemeinschaft" emphasizes identity, relationality, and solidarity. (ibid.) As Ann Grodzin Gold (2005) notes, community "evokes a group of people who have something in common and who are actively engaged with one another in a benign fashion" (Grodzin Gold 2005, 2) suggesting both morality and spirituality. Brow defines community as "a sense of belonging together" (Brow 1990 cited in Grodzin Gold 2003, 3) which arises from a subjective state—a combination of emotional (affective) and intellectual (cognitive) components that generate a shared sense of identity and solidarity. (ibid.) Despite its emotive appeal, the concept of community is also criticized for its analytical vagueness. Anthropologists Amit and Rapport (2002) argue that it is too imprecise to serve as a rigorous analytical tool. (Amit and Rapport 2002 cited in Grodzin Gold 2005, 4) Watts (2000) and Agrawal (1999) point out that the concept often masks internal heterogeneity and conflict, potentially glossing over difference, hierarchy, and negotiation processes within groups. (Watts 2000 and Agrawal 1999 cited in Grodzin Gold 2005, 4) Nevertheless, the existence of internal dissent does not necessarily undermine the capacity for collective or community action.

Among participants in my study, the term "community" was sometimes associated with large institutions, such as the "Red Noses"; however, there was no identification with these big, institutionalized forms. When participants did express a sense of community, it was more often grounded in shared practices, values, and intentions than in formal structures. Nonetheless, organisations like "N.a.to"[37] strive to provide a community without imposing a structure. Some participants explicitly identified as part of a clowning community. Others didn't. Thus, if a community exists among these practitioners, it is one centered on shared intentions such as healing or activism rather than on organizational affiliation. The interviews revealed both an affinity for and a wariness of the term "community". For some, the sense of connectedness—through shared values, practices, and affective resonance—was enough to constitute a feeling of community. For others, the concept was problematic, evoking ideas of exclusion, hierarchy, and fixed boundaries. As one participant remarked:

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[37] N.A.Toˇ is an international project that combines activism and clowning (Theater der Unterdrückten Wien, accessed 9 September 2025, https://tdu-wien.at/n-a-to-nose-assembly-for-tomorrow/)

> “I'm always a bit wary [...] when people call themselves a community. Because then they start defining what is and what is not. [...] I want to decide for me what it is, and respect what it is for others.” (Interview with Amber, 5 July 2024, 21)

Participants often expressed concern that defining a community could lead to the exclusion of those who do not fit specific criteria. This tension reflects a core value within clowning: to connect rather than separate.

> “It can be dangerous to think that I, or we would be special because the clown is also very much about this idea of like ‘Oh, I am like you and you are like me’.” (Interview with Amber, 5 July 2024, 20)

In this sense, what exists is a form of unnamed or unlabeled community—a bond that is informal, difficult to define, yet affectively powerful. Several participants noted the existence of an informal global network of clowns. Even without formal memberships or centralized structures, they described feeling connected to others across borders. Encounters with clowns in other countries often led to spontaneous collaborations or gestures of hospitality. This suggests a global form of solidarity—a loosely connected web of individuals united by shared playfulness, and emotional openness.

> “It's really nice to be with fellow clowns… but that's also what clown is about — being open to anyone.” (Interview with Amber, 5 July 2024, 22)

This highlights the clowning community as both a space of close connection and a practice of radical openness, one that aims for community without exclusion or gatekeeping, eager to engage the world with curiosity, vulnerability, and openness.

Another aspect is the feeling of togetherness that emerged in the clowning workshops. The notion of communitas, as developed by Victor and Edith Turner (2012), provides a valuable framework for understanding the affective connections described by interviewees. Communitas refers to a spontaneous, often liminal state of togetherness that arises when social roles are suspended. It is a “spring of pure possibility” (E. L. B. Turner 2012, 3), in which individuals meet as equals and experience a sense of unity. Clowning workshops can be understood as such liminal spaces or temporary containers where roles dissolve, ego fades, and emotional bonds are formed quickly and deeply:

> “Ich habe mich sehr verbunden gefühlt [...] auf einer sehr tiefen Ebene in kurzer Zeit.” (Antonia, 20 June 2024, 15)

Ritualized elements—such as changing clothes, lighting incense, or preparing the space—supported this shift into a different mode of being, echoing V. Turner’s observations on ritual transitions. Laughter emerged as a particularly powerful force in the formation of

communitas in clowning workshops among participants in my fieldwork. Moments of intense, shared laughter were frequently described as not only emotionally healing but also deeply bonding. These collective experiences of joy created a sense of equality and relational intimacy that transcended individual differences.

> Oh, it's so joyful. Well, yeah, I think you feel a very strong connection with the audience because what you're doing is usually something you want to do yourself. Then, when people also find it funny or show interest, you can see that they recognize it and are tuned in. That appreciation for what you are doing is very uplifting and inspiring. Yeah, it's very uplifting." (Interview with Maryna, 7 October 2024, 9)

Edith Turner (2012) noted a similar effect in her fieldwork among the Makushi forest people of Guyana, where laughter allowed people to "be friends without saying anything," achieving what she called "the sound of equity". (E. L. B. Turner 2012, 28) Laughter brings people close and emphasizes the pleasure of any shared experience. (ibid.) This notion of laughter as an equalizing force resonates with observations made by Richmond (1980), who studied Kutiyattam, one of the oldest theatrical traditions in India. (Richmond 1980 cited in E. L. B. Turner 1985, 239) In this form, a clown figure appears on stage with the unique freedom to critique all members of society, including royalty, irrespective of social status. Through this role, the clown temporarily subverts hierarchical structures, creating a sense of communitas wherein the clown becomes "a leveller of society" (Richmond 1980 cited in V. Turner 1985, 239) As Bouissac (2015) notes, laughing together reinforces existing social bonds and facilitates the formation of new ones. (Bouissac 2015, 210) This is supported by neurological research showing that laughter stimulates the dopaminergic system and activates the brain's reward centers, making it a profoundly gratifying experience. (Bouissac 2015, 208–211). In this way, laughter contributes to a shared emotional climate that enhances trust, cohesion, and mutual recognition. This experience can be also found in mythologies about the origin of life, where laughter is understood as a vital generative force. (Abreu 2015, 21) According to Vladimir Propp (no date), the beliefs and rituals of oral societies suggest that silence and tears are associated with death. (Vladimir Propp no date cited in Abreu 2015, 22) In contrast, entry into life is marked by laughter—along with the capacity to experience and elicit it. (Abreu 2015, 21)

> "It's just a soul pleasure that this feeling of us together laughing, so, I don't feel that I am laughed at. I feel like I am laughing because there is like a common energy and this clown very often starts with something small and then everything is just so funny. Even the small things like moving your eyes, and it's so so funny, and this energy of freedom and laughter, really, it feels like very liberating." (Interview with Maryna, 1 November 2023, 7)

Bouissac (2015) identifies multiple ways of laughter: it can serve as a release of psychological or social pressure (Bouissac 2015, 208), a mechanism for controlling deviance and guarding social norms (Bouissac 2015, 203), or as a facilitator of interaction in contexts of courtship, play, eroticism, or power dynamics (Bouissac 2015, 206–207). It can express irony, sarcasm, or self-deprecation, or emerge as a pathological reaction. (Bouissac 2015, 205) It may be involuntarily triggered by mechanical stimuli such as tickling, or more meaningfully induced by humor (ibid., 207). In the context of clowning, laughter is primarily provoked through humorous transgressions of cultural norms. The clown deliberately violates expectations in ways that are perceived as playful or absurd. As Bouissac explains, humor often arises from a violation of norms, which is experienced as funny only because such norms are internalized and their breach is felt as both shocking and harmless (Bouissac 2015, 209). These violations are culturally specific and subjectively interpreted. The comedic effect is often based on the interruption of mental prediction processes:

> "Unexpected outcomes following a familiar premise necessarily create a shock that suddenly blocks the prediction processes upon which our mental life is based" (Bouissac 2015, 209).

We navigate the world by constantly generating expectations; humor—and the laughter it elicits—disrupts this flow in surprising and pleasurable ways. But laughter is deeply embedded in mainstream Western culture as a predominantly positive phenomenon. (Musharbash 2008, 271) In contrast, among the Warlpiri people of Yuendumu in Central Australia, laughter is not necessarily perceived as pleasant, but can be associated with emotions such as weakness and fear. (ibid.)

In the clowning workshops studied, laughter is not merely entertainment. It is a deeply relational act that reveals the human condition in all its contradictions—absurd, fragile, and interconnected. Although many participants did not explicitly identify themselves as part of a clowning community, their narratives suggest a form of unspoken community—one that resists definition and formalization. Drawing on the concept of communitas, we can understand this as a temporary, affective experience of togetherness, rooted in play, vulnerability, and emotional openness. This kind of community is not institutional or strategic; it is lived in moments of recognition, in laughter, in liminal spaces, and in the refusal to draw boundaries.

3.5. Clowning as emancipatory AND liberating AND transformative AND healing AND therapeutic practice[38]

In the interviews conducted for this research, participants described the effect that clowning had on them using a wide range of terms. Together, we explored words like emancipatory, healing, transformative, and liberating, focusing on their connotations, implications, and how well they capture the interviewees' experiences. For the title of this thesis, I chose the term "emancipatory". The Oxford English Dictionary defines the term: "that emancipates a person" and "that sets a person free" ("Oxford English Dictionary Online, 'Emancipatory'" 2025). John Plant (2003) speaks of the emancipatory potential of clowning, asserting that "clowns cultivate creativity, open new social avenues, and serve as emancipators of the downtrodden". (Plant 2010, 31) Some interviewees felt that the term "emancipatory" was too heavily associated with political and ideological movements. Some criticized the word because clowning operates on a deeply personal level, offering internal shifts that resist codification. Labeling clowning as emancipatory, they argued, imposes an external framework that risks instrumentalizing it, turning it into a tool with predefined aims and specific expectations. Such framing could limit its fluidity and individual resonance and ultimately lose its power when used as a tool.

> "Emancipation sometimes comes with the expectation of what it should look like. So, there can be an overlap, but liberation feels more personal and more abstract, and free than emancipation. As we start, like when the political discourse comes up, then you might start to frame things again, and then it becomes less clown." (Interview with Amber, 5 July 2024, 18)

Additionally, the interviewee mentioned the risks that come with framing clowning as a tool:

> "It's like you kill the clown when you want to use it as a tool." (Interview with Amber, 5 July 2024, 18)

Some critiqued the term "emancipation" for its historical entanglement with white feminist discourse, pointing to its limited intersectional reach. While others embraced the term precisely because they experienced clowning as a means of subverting norms, confronting fears, and challenging socially constructed behaviors. They described clowning as a space where rules can be broken or redefined, having the freedom to question, disregard, or selectively respect normative expectations.

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[38] I capitalized the letters in the word "and" to reference the article of Fouweather and Bosma (2021) "The Desire to Rethink Power AND Performativity AND Process" (Fouweather and Bosma 2021), which I will discuss later in this chapter.

> “Because the clown is aware of social norms. Clowns learned already the social norms, but the clown is allowed to break them or question them, or, you know, disregard them or respect them.” (Interview with Maryna, 7 October 2024, 13)

The terms transformative, liberating, and healing were among the most frequently associated with clowning by interviewees. (Interviews with Amber, 5 July; Anja, 20 June 2024; Antonia, 11 February 2024; Francesca, 18 June 2024; Kiara, 27 January 2025; Leo, 21 June 2024; Melanie, 7 June 2024) Transformation can take many forms and is not always positive, as it may also involve discomfort, confrontation, or disruption. The Oxford English Dictionary defines the term “transformative” as ”having the faculty of transforming; fitted or tending to transform” (“Oxford English Dictionary Online, ‘Transformative’” 2025) and the term “transformation” as “the action of changing in form, shape, or appearance; metamorphosis” (“Oxford English Dictionary Online, ‘Transformation’” 2025) and as “a complete change in character, condition”. (ibid.)

As outlined above, some interviewees considered the term "liberating" to be more appropriate than “emancipatory”, albeit for different reasons. The Oxford English Dictionary defines “liberating” as “that liberates (in various senses)” (“Oxford English Dictionary Online, ‘Liberating’” 2025) and the noun “liberation” as “the action of liberating (esp. from confinement or servitude); the condition of being liberated; release” (“Oxford English Dictionary Online, ‘Liberation’” 2025) and as “freedom from restrictive or discriminatory social conventions and attitudes” (ibid.). While some associated “liberation” with broader systemic and intersectional forms of oppression and thus framing it as inherently political, others understood it as a more personal, internal experience, one that transcends established socio-political frameworks. For the latter group, liberation was seen as an opening of possibilities rather than a fight for rights within or against specific structures of power. As one interviewee stated, “clowning is beyond emancipation” (Interview with Amber, 5 July 2024, 18), because “clowning takes you to a world where those words hardly exist” (Interview with Amber, 5 July 2024, 18), referring to an imaginary realm where the language and logic of structural oppression does not exist and where a radically different mode of being is allowed.

Conversely, others viewed “liberation” as going beyond emancipation precisely through an intersectional lens. From this perspective, liberation does not focus solely on categories such as gender but involves dismantling multiple interconnected systems of oppression. In this sense, the term liberation was understood as fundamentally anti-colonial and anti-imperialist. Clowning, in this reading, was seen as uniquely capable of disrupting dominant cultural narratives and hierarchical norms. I argue that these seemingly differing

interpretations are not mutually exclusive but can coexist. They highlight the multifaceted nature of clowning, which can be experienced both as a deeply personal form of liberation and as a means of challenging broader political structures. These perspectives underscore the complexity of clowning´s perceived effects, ranging from the apolitical to the explicitly political. In the interviews, we further explored the term "liberatory", a term coined by bell hooks (1994). There was hesitation about appropriating the term, given its deep-rooted significance in Black feminist thought. The concern was not only about conceptual clarity, but also about respecting the historical weight carried by the term. The Oxford English Dictionary defines the term "liberatory" as "that liberates; liberating". ("Oxford English Dictionary Online, 'Liberatory'" 2025) Bob Berky and Claude Barbre (2000) describe clowning as "a kind of freedom from personal and cultural limitations which may inhibit life; we can begin to make room for creative experiences" (Berky and Barbre 2000 cited in Peacock 2009, 156). My interviewees also described a sense of freedom in clowning that allows for creative expression and the ability to perceive the world from new perspectives:

> "Für mich ist Clownerie eine ganz eigene Welt schaffen, also auch aufzuzeigen, dass es noch was anderes gibt und dass man alles ganz anders sehen und verstehen kann und könnte und dass es eine Freiheit auch gibt. Also für mich ist Clownerie Freiheit." (Interview with Anja, 20 June 2024, 8)

This sense of release from internalized constraints speaks to clowning´s potential to disrupt habitual modes of being, thereby enabling more creative and authentic forms of self-expression. Many emphasized a strong connection between liberation and healing:

> "I think there can be no liberation without healing" (Interview with Kiara, 27 January 2025, 30)

The term "healing" emerged as a significant and recurring theme in participants' reflections, indicating that many experienced clowning as a practice that provided some sort of emotional relief or revelation. Still, some questioned whether clowning could truly facilitate healing or if it created a temporary shift in mood or perception. The Oxford English Dictionary defines the adjective "healing" as "that heals or cures; curative; salutary" ("Oxford English Dictionary Online, 'Healing'" 2025), and as "of a wound: That cicatrizes or closes" (ibid.). The verb "heal" as "sound bodily condition; freedom from sickness; health" ("Oxford English Dictionary Online, 'Heal'" 2025), as "well-being, welfare, safety; prosperity" (ibid.) and as "spiritual health, well-being, or healing". (ibid.)

The term "healing" has etymological roots dating back to around 900 CE (common era), with early mentions in northwestern Europe. (Beeler and Jonker 2019, no page) Historically, it has been closely tied to religious and spiritual traditions. In anthropological discourse,

healing is often approached less through biomedical lenses but within frameworks such as cosmologies, religious beliefs, spiritual practices, rituals, deities, and symbolic systems. As Beeler and Jonker (2019) put it, “healing embraces all dimensions of human life: the physical, psychological, social and cultural”, highlighting its inherently holistic nature. (Beeler and Jonker 2019, no page) Healing can be understood as existing on a spectrum from the restoration of bodily functions to forms of healing that occur without any measurable physical improvement. Rather than being a singular, fixed phenomenon, healing appears as a set of resemblances, characterized by the transformation of “an individual from a current state into an improved constellation of one´s body, mind, and spirit within the context of one’s environment” (ibid.). Anthropological approaches to healing have examined various dimensions, including experience (Smart 1996 cited in Beeler and Jonker 2019), performance (Laderman and Roseman 2016 cited in Beeler and Jonker 2019), embodiment (Csordas 1994 cited in Beeler and Jonker 2019), symbols (Douglas 1970 cited in Beeler and Jonker 2019) and culture (Kleinmann 1988 cited in Beeler and Jonker 2019).

When asking the interviewees what healing meant to them, I got the following responses:

> “Heilung sind so Riesenprozesse, sich selbst so zu akzeptieren, wie ich bin und auch so ein Tempo zu akzeptieren und auch dieses Loslassen so zu üben. Ich finde das ist so ein ganz wichtiger Punkt bei der Heilung, loslassen von Bildern, die ich selbst von mir hatte. Und dass wir uns die Möglichkeit und den Raum geben, weiter zu wachsen und nicht denken, wir müssten so bleiben wie wir sind. Es kommt schon öfter auch so als Vorwurf dieses 'ich kenne dich gar nicht mehr‘. Dass halt eigentlich die Veränderung das Leben ist und nicht das Statische. Und das ist für mich dann auch so diese Transformation und Heilung, also dass wir immer mehr wir selbst werden dürfen.“ (Interview with Leo, 21 June 2024, 18)

> “It means to change narratives of struggles we have faced, or maybe not struggles, but traumas; to be able to deal with it, but also to change it. It's transformative in a way that, you know, we change how we deal with this and how we talk about this and how we feel about this.” (Interview with Kiara, 27 January 2025, 31)

> “Healing is not about making things easy or taking the easiest way or something. It's about being confronted with difficult things sometimes and then work and learn. Work yourself your way through that.” (Interview with Amber, 5 July 2024, 19)

> “Dass man sich traut, in dem eigenen Rhythmus zu bleiben, dann also den zu spüren, sich zu spüren. Und in diesem Rhythmus zu bleiben, egal was dann eben für ein Druck oder so ausgesetzt wird. […] Das ist auch eine Form von "Ich fühle mich sicher", weil ich ja dann sein darf. […] und das dann auch wiederum auf die Bühne zu bringen und zu zeigen und so ja genau, und wir können nämlich auch damit umgehen.“ (Interview with Anja, 20 June 2024, 18)

For the interviewees, healing was not mainly seen as eliminating symptoms or returning to a previous state, but rather as a deeply personal process of holistic growth. It involves accepting oneself in all one’s complexity, vulnerabilities, and imperfections. This acceptance is shown in allowing one’s own rhythm of being, moving away from external pressures and

normative timelines, and instead tuning into what feels authentic for oneself. Healing was also described as the capacity to face discomfort and struggle and to reframe personal narratives. Another core idea was the understanding of change as an ongoing unfolding. It's about becoming more aligned with who one truly is, while also releasing fixed ideas about who one should be or thought to be. In this way, healing, as described by the interviewees, appears as a dynamic journey of self-discovery and self-liberation that embraces ambiguity, imperfection, and transformation.

Kwame Anthony Appiah (1994) discusses healing of the self in terms of authenticity as understood as the ability "to express what we centrally are" and to demand "recognition in social life as women, homosexuals, blacks, Catholics." (Appiah 1995, 161) For him, healing involves undertaking the "cultural work to resist stereotypes" (Appiah 1994, 128) and constructing new, positive "life scripts" (ibid.) that challenge the restrictive narratives imposed on marginalized identities. Yet he also questions positive identity scripts and whether identities, both collective and individual, serve their purpose, as they may introduce new constraints and, in doing so, limit the uniqueness and originality of the individual, if they become "too tightly scripted" (ibid., 129). He proposes a "banal postmodernism" (ibid., 135), which means to "live with fractured identities; engage in identity play; find solidarity, yes, but recognize contingency, and, above all, practice irony" (Appiah 1994, 135). He proposes a sense of self that is not unified, but made up of different, sometimes conflicting parts such as gender, class, profession, etc., and that embraces complexity and contradiction. To engage in playfulness and experimentation with how and who we are, to explore and shift identity. (ibid.) In this light, clowning might be understood as offering a space in which identity is not fixed but fluid, where the self can emerge without the usual markers that define us in daily life, where contradiction and ambiguity are practiced. He encourages a light, flexible, and self-aware way of engaging with identity in a postmodern world. (ibid.)

With these various terms in mind, I propose understanding clowning as an emancipatory and liberatory and liberating and transformative, and healing practice. Rather than selecting a single term to capture its essence best, I deliberately choose to use all of them to reflect the complexity and multiplicity of what clowning can be or become in different contexts. This approach draws on Deleuze's concept of "AND" (Deleuze 1995, 45 cited in Fouweather and Bosma 2021, 1796), taken up by Fouweather and Bosma (2021) as the "logic of AND" (Fouweather and Bosma 2021, 1796), which resists hierarchical thinking in favor of embracing simultaneity and plurality. (Fouweather and Bosma 2021, 1795-1796)

> “AND is neither one thing nor the other, it is always in between, between two things; it’s the borderline, there’s always a border, a line of flight or flow, only we don’t see it, because it’s the least perceptible of things. And yet it’s along this line of flight that things come to pass, becomings evolve, revolutions take shape.” (Deleuze 1995, 45 cited in Fouweather and Bosma 2021, 1796)

Instead of asking whether clowning is either emancipatory or healing, either political or personal, I adopt a logic that allows for multiple, overlapping, and coexisting meanings. This choice reflects not only the diverse experiences of my interviewees but also the inherently fluid and multidimensional nature of clowning itself.

3.5.1. Healing AND therapeutic

> “Wie schön kann Heilung sein.“ (Interview with Melanie, 7 June 2024, 24)
>
> „Für mich war das Gruppentherapie, aber nicht nur für unsere Gruppe, sondern für die Menschen.“ (Interview with Melanie, 7 June 2024, 24)

Whereas many interviewees emphasized the healing potential of clowning workshops, facilitators often stressed that healing is not their primary intention. Many participants discussed the therapeutic potential of clowning environments, which surpasses that of traditional therapeutic settings. In this context of clowning, healing does not have to be a burdensome or painful process. This challenges dominant cultural narratives that link therapy and healing mainly with emotional heaviness, intensity, and struggle. Clowning workshops, on the other hand, often foster spaces where healing can be light, playful, and joyful. (Interview with Melanie, 7 June 2024)

Despite growing interest in the therapeutic potential of clowning, academic research on its role in self-knowledge remains limited, especially in anthropology. Most existing studies come from fields like psychodrama, drama therapy[39], and psychology, while anthropological perspectives on clowning's healing and social aspects are notably underexplored. (Peacock

[39] For a distinction between psychodrama and drama therapy, see Tahar Kedem and Felix Kellermann (Kedem and Kellermann 1996). In Austria, drama therapy is not recognized by the state as a form of psychotherapy, whereas psychodrama is an officially recognized psychotherapeutic school. (Universitätslehrgang Fachspezifikum Psychodrama, accessed 10 September 2025, https://www.psychodrama-austria.at/aus-und-weiterbildung/universitaetslehrgang-fachspezifikum-psychodrama/lehrgangs-information/)

2009, 157) As a result, I primarily drew on the limited body of psychological literature to investigate this connection, including works by Cheryl Carp (1998), Johanne Roy (2009), Rocio Zumaeta (2012) and Gordon, Pendzik, and Shenar (2018). Although the cognitive, social, and emotional benefits of humor and laughter are well recognized, there is still a notable gap in research on these themes across fields such as anthropology, psychology, drama therapy, and others. (Roy 2009, 18)

The therapeutic and healing dimension of clowning can be situated within the framework of the dramatherapy approach, although clowning still constitutes a niche within dramatherapy. Phil Jones (1996) identifies nine core processes in dramatherapy, which resonate with the dynamics I observed in clowning workshops and which Roy (2009) discussed in her research. (Jones 1996 cited in Roy 2009, 13-24) These processes are: “dramatic projection, playing, embodiment, role playing and personification, drama therapeutic empathy and distancing, interactive audience and witnessing, the life-drama connection, therapeutic performance, and transformation” (Gordon et al. 2018, 93; Roy 2009, 13-24). In dramatherapy, these processes are facilitated through creative practice. For instance, dramatic projection, described by Jones (1996), as an unconscious defense mechanism that projects unwanted feelings onto another person or object, is actively cultivated as a way to access and work with inner psychological material. (Jones 1996 cited in Roy 2009, 13) Techniques such as playing with objects, improvisation, and character creation provide a safe and imaginative space for this projection to occur**.** Within clowning contexts, according to Roy (2009), this mechanism functions similarly: the clown becomes a “creative and projective tool through which participants can discover and work unconscious contents”. **(**Roy 2009, 14)

From my own observations, clowning workshops often embody many of the same processes outlined by Phil Jones (1996). Moments of playful improvisation encourage projection and role exploration; the presence of an audience fosters witnessing, and other exercises create opportunities for distancing, allowing participants to engage with emotions and experiences from a shifted perspective. (Fieldnotes Mollnhuber 2023 & 2024) Later in this chapter, I will examine more closely how processes such as witnessing, distancing, and playing emerge in clowning practice, referring to Roy's research findings. (Jones 1996 cited in Roy 2009, 13-24).[40]

[40] I can further refer to Rocio Zumaeta (2012), who has researched the therapeutic and healing potential of clowning.

One of the few scholars addressing the healing aspects of clowning is Cheryl Carp (1998), who studies its use in psychotherapeutic settings. She identifies clowning as a medium that facilitates healing by connecting the conscious and unconscious aspects of the self. (Carp 1998, 245) According to her:

> ”The trickster, fool and clown, as emissaries of the Self, help create relatedness between the conscious and unconscious aspects of the personality. Directly touching the unconscious, they challenge identification with the ego, the center of awareness and activate what is most central to being, the Self.” (Carp 1998, 246)

In this context, “the creation of a clown character” (Carp 1998, 245) can function as a form of therapeutic intervention, referred to as “clown therapy” (ibid.). However, the term “clown therapy” can be misleading, as it is sometimes conflated with the term “medical clowning” [41]—a practice in which trained clowns visit hospitals to engage with patients, transforming the clinical environment into a momentarily playful, imaginative space that reminds the individuals (often children, but also adults) they are more than just patients. Clown therapy, by contrast, is a “process through which the clients are led to discover their inner Clown” (Gordon et al. 2018, 88), This has been explored in drama therapy by Jeff Gordon, Yoram Shenar, and Susana Pendzik (2018), drawing particularly on concepts such as Pendzik’s “dramatic reality” (Gordon et al. 2018, 89) and Landy’s “role theory” (Gordon et al. 2018, 89), including the identification of dominant and oppositional roles within a person’s personality. Through this approach, individuals are supported by a therapist in developing their clown as a way to explore and integrate different aspects of the self. The clown becomes a figure that facilitates the expression of inner contradictions and the expansion of emotional and psychological complexity. (Gordon et al. 2018, 89-90)

> “The clown’s presence imposes upon reality the freedom of liminality, the boundlessness of imagination, the containment of the potential space, and the flexibility of paradox.” (Gordon et al. 2018, 89)

Jeff Gordon, Yoram Shenar, and Susana Pendzik (2018) have been practicing clown therapy in addiction treatment for over a decade, mainly in rehabilitation centers across Israel. (ibid., 89) Their approach is group-based, but material from the group process can be used in one-on-one therapy settings. (ibid., 90) The workshops were conducted with diverse groups of 8 to 12 participants, including both mixed-gender and single-gender

[41] Clown therapy is often associated with medical clowning as discussed in the article “Some considerations on clown therapy” (Farneti and Tschiesner 2016). This often leads to confusion, which is why the authors Alessandra Farneti and Reinhard Tschiesner (2016) of this article avoid using the term clown therapy when referring to medical clowns. In this thesis, I follow this proposed guide.

groups. Participants ranged from ages 20 to 50 and came from different backgrounds, such as Israeli-born Jews, Jewish immigrants, Muslims, Christian Arabs, Druze, and Bedouins, all undergoing treatment for substance abuse in rehabilitation centers. (ibid.) Clown therapy was used alongside other therapeutic methods, and its effects were explored in their publications. One of their key findings is that the clown role helps embody paradox, a trait especially valuable in rehabilitation. “As an archetype, the clown is a carrier of opposites: it embodies paradox and symbolizes liminality”. (Gordon et al. 2018, 89) This ability to hold contradictions helps individuals navigate the complex emotional and psychological landscape of recovery. Additionally, the researchers noted that clowning can be particularly effective for individuals struggling with addiction, as many display oppositional or rebellious tendencies. (Bailey 2009 cited in Gordon et al. 2018, 89) Theatre games and clowning exercises may help overcome psychological resistance by providing a playful and indirect way to engage. (ibid.) The patients' ability to self-disclose, self-regulate, and their spontaneity also improved. (Zografou 2011 cited in Gordon et al. 2018, 89)

Further research on the healing potential of clowning techniques has been conducted by Johanne Roy (2009), who explored the recovery journey of four individuals with severe mental illnesses. In her qualitative study, participants engaged in ten drama therapy group sessions that incorporated clowning elements, intending to foster hope, healing, empowerment, and connection. (Roy 2009, iii) These sessions provided a space where participants could freely express aspects of their experiences with psychosis and living with this condition in a humorous way. (ibid., 55-56) Humor, in particular, played a cathartic role, offering an indirect but powerful way to address difficult issues. (ibid.) Also, Roy (2009) draws parallels between drama therapy and shamanic rituals, citing Snow (2000), who argues that drama therapy shares core elements with shamanistic performances. (Snow 2000 cited in Roy 2009, 56) In the clowning sessions, participants’ ability to laugh about themselves was encouraged, which not only offered relief but also created a sense of distance from the limiting identity of being a psychiatric patient. (Roy 2009, 50) For individuals with schizophrenia, who often struggle with self-observation due to being deeply immersed in their inner experiences, drama therapy helped to reduce this inhibition. In particular, the process of “de-roling” (ibid., 50), the “stepping out of the clown character and reflecting on the process” (ibid.), supported the development of a self-observing ego. (ibid.)

In her study, Johanne Roy distinguishes two healing notions of recovery: first, the idea that illness does not define the entirety of the self. It may be a big part of one’s identity, but not

its entirety. And second, the importance of reclaiming agency by becoming an active participant in one's own life. (Roy 2009, 9)

What stands out to me in these two notions is the implicit distinction between self and identity, particularly the potential for distancing oneself from a fixed or pathologized identity. As discussed in chapter 3.4.2. "The self, identity and community", identity is not inherent or stable, but rather relational, negotiated, and performed in ongoing interactions with others. In the context of psychiatric institutions, the identity of the patient is continually shaped and performed by interactions with doctors, nurses, and broader societal discourses on mental illness. These external attributions often become internalized, contributing to a narrow and stigmatized sense of self. Clowning, as introduced in Roy's study, may offer a space in which participants or patients can temporarily suspend or step outside of this psychiatric identity to explore parts of themselves that are not defined by diagnostic labels. I argue that this experience of encountering oneself beyond institutionalized roles and external categorization can be profoundly liberating and thus holds significant healing potential. The second aspect of Roy's framework, the reclamation of agency, can, I argue, be understood as the process by which individuals come to recognize and enact their capacity to shape, negotiate, and contest the identities attributed to them within social structure. This involves an awareness of one's ability to intervene in the narratives and roles imposed by institutions, cultural norms, or group dynamics. From an anthropological perspective, this aligns with the understanding that individuals are not merely passive recipients of cultural scripts or determined by them. While identity is always shaped in relation to others and must be socially recognized to be meaningful, individuals nonetheless possess agency in how they engage with, reject, or redefine these identity positions. Agency, in this sense, is not absolute autonomy but situated capacity to act within constraints, to reinterpret meaning, and to resist identity scripts. In the context of clowning and recovery, reclaiming agency may thus involve disrupting the fixed identity of the role as "psychiatric patient", experimenting with alternative forms of self-expression, and actively participating in the co-creation of one's self. This complex negotiation between structure and agency, between identity and self-authorship, will be explored in chapter 3.5.2.

A central question that emerges for me is: Do we need to heal from the process of socialization through which we are shaped, classified, and positioned within existing social roles and identity categories? Socialization is a foundational aspect of becoming a social being as it provides us with language, norms, and a sense of belonging. Yet, it can also be a source of pain, restriction, and alienation when the roles it assigns are experienced as

limiting, stigmatizing, or misaligned with one's sense of self. The example of psychiatric patients who internalize the identity of being ill, as explored in Roy's study (2009), is just one illustration of how cultural categories, mediated through institutions and relationships, can come to dominate a person's self-perception. But this dynamic is not limited to psychiatric settings. It is part of a broader social mechanism that affects everyone. Gender, for instance, is another powerful classificatory system that is assigned early in life and often reinforced through rigid norms and expectations. For many, the process of gender socialization has been a source of deep psychological and embodied harm, especially when one's lived experience does not align with the binary roles and scripts provided by society. From this perspective, healing can be understood not only as a personal process but also as a cultural or political act, an effort to reinterpret aspects of socialization that have caused hurt. This does not mean rejecting cultural systems altogether, but rather critically engaging with the ways in which cultural norms and institution shape our identity. Healing, then, may involve reclaiming agency over one's identity, creating new narratives, or inhabiting roles, such as a clown, that resist and subvert dominant social classifications.

Although the clowning workshops I participated in were not explicitly framed as clown therapy, nor facilitated by a therapist, I observed many conceptual and practical overlaps. For this reason, it is crucial to examine the principles, approaches, and goals of clown therapy in more detail, as they offer valuable insights into the healing and transformative potential of clowning beyond formal therapeutic settings.

Cheryl Carp (1998) outlined five principles of Clown therapy:

1. Every person has the capacity to access and "experience the qualities embodied by the clown." (Carp 1998, 248)
2. "Play, spontaneity, light-heartedness, humor and creativity are central elements of the healing process." (Carp 1998, 248)
3. The clown serves as "a creative outlet through which to discover and work with unconscious material." (Carp 1998, 249)
4. The body is the clown's expressive tool, "giving symbolic voice to the unconscious." (Carp 1998, 249)
5. "The relationship between the therapist and the client is an essential component" (Carp 1998, 249) for the process.

Cheryl Carp (1998) expands on the aims and results of clown therapy, similar to what I experienced in the clowning workshops I attended. For her "healing is a process by which an individual or group moves toward a greater understanding and acceptance of themselves

through the realization, clarification, and integration of unconscious content." (Carp 1998, 250) According to Van Blerkom (1995), the figure of the clown has historically been associated with psychological healing practices. (Van Blerkom 1995 cited in Roy 2009, 20) She determines that clowning originated in shamanistic performances as "both clowns and shamans mediate between order and chaos, sacred and profane, real and supranatural, culture and anticulture, or nature" (Van Blerkom 1995, 463 cited in Roy 2009, 20).

> "[…] Clown performances are metacultural texts, acts of communication about culture that invert cultural rules, thereby provoking emotional responses." (Van Blerkom 1995, 463 cited in Roy 2009, 20).

3.5.2. Between laughter and liberation: The emotional and social benefits of clowning

Cheryl Carp's (1998) findings reflect a range of therapeutic benefits associated with clown therapy:

- **Developing trust in oneself and in others** (Carp 1998, 250):

Clown workshops foster a sense of safety and closeness with others. As Emunah (1994) states:

> "The close relationship and trust developed in the group become a microcosm for what is possible in the world, reducing the deep sense of alienation with which so many people enter treatment" (Emunah 1994 cited in Carp 250)

Many interviewees spoke about the trust that developed within the group and with others, even among people who had never met before and knew nothing about one another's lives, such as whether they are married, had children, or what kind of work they did, yet still came to know each other in a deeply intimate way within the workshop settings.

> „Man kann fünf Tage zusammen sein und es ist nicht wichtig, wie du heißt und was du für einen Job hast und also wer du in der normalen Welt bist, sondern du lernst die anderen in so einer Tiefe kennen, wo es so, also genau da gibt es dann einfach so ein krasses Vertrauen. Es ist eigentlich alles andere egal, also wie viel Geld du hast, wie viele Kinder du hast." (Interview with Leo, 21 June 2024, 5)

- **Increasing spontaneity and playfulness** (Carp 1998, 253):

According to Cheryl Carp (1998), laughter promotes socialization, relieves stress, and increases the release of endorphins, creating an overall sense of well. (ibid.) Clown exercises may break patterns of thought and encourage participants to enter into a "clown logic" (ibid., 253), which embraces "new, possibly nonsensical, creative perspectives and

problem solving”. (ibid.) Also, Gordon, Shenar and Pendzik (2018) note that the clown “establishes a dynamic equilibrium that supports self-regulation, allowing individuals to free themselves from deviant behavioral patterns” (Gordon et al. 2018, 93) The underlying logic of the clown, as described by Marilia Meneghetti Bruhn, Kim Ouakil Boscolo, Rita Pereira Barboza and Lilian Rodrigues Cruz (2019), is rooted in “naivety, cruelty, simplicity, empathy, and affection” (Bruhn et al. 2019, 63) Dorneles (2003) refers to the clown as an “inverse visitor of the human world” (Bruhn et al. 2019, 63), often appearing as the antithesis of a persona who embodies balance, order and perfection. (Dorneles 2003 cited in Bruhn et al. 2003, 63)

- **Using the body as an expressive instrument** (Carp 1998, 250):

Clowning can help participants feel more at ease in using their bodies for play, experimentation, and exaggeration, reducing physical tension and encouraging embodied expression. (ibid., 250) In my research findings, the body emerges as a central element in the experiences of participants. Its role extends beyond physical presence, shaping interactions, perceptions, and the ways in which trust and connection are formed. I will return to this theme and discuss it in greater depth later in this chapter.

- **Tolerating paradox ambiguity** (Carp 1998, 251):

The clown is a paradoxical and ambiguous figure, neither bound to temporal, nor spiritual realms, yet existing in both. (ibid.) By evoking laughter from sadness, clowning creates spaces where joy can be found amid pain, and with this paradox, participants may learn to accept their own ambiguous and paradoxical needs. (ibid.) Landy (2009) defines a healthy individual as someone capable of living with “ambivalence, contradictory tendencies and paradox”. (Landy 2009, 73 cited in Gordon et al. 2018, 93) This capacity to hold ambivalence is central to Gordon, Shenar, and Pendzik’s (2018) argument regarding recovery. (Gordon et al. 2018, 89) They suggest that “the inner clown allows individuals to tolerate and live the paradox, instead of being stuck in a state of inner and outer conflict” (Gordon et al. 2018, 89) and serves “as a strategy for normalizing the paradox”. (ibid.) Drawing on Jung’s (1971) “transcendent function” (Gordon et al. 2018, 89) and Winnicotts (2005) “transitional phenomena” (Gordon et al. 2018, 89), they conceptualize clowning as a liminal process, where “neglected, shadowed and unconscious elements with prevailing conscious attitudes through the vehicle of his antics, his dress and his personality” (Bala 2010, 53 cited in Gordon et al. 2018, 89) can be united. This liminal experience enables the coexistence of opposites that might otherwise seem irreconcilable. (Gordon et al. 2018, 89)

- **Accessing unconscious contents** (Carp 1998, 252):

Through the exploration of a clown persona, participants may encounter reactions such as embarrassment, shame, surprise, resistance, heightened energy, or a sense of loss of control. (ibid.) Cheryl Carp interprets these responses as signs that “a connection between the unconscious and the consciousness is beginning to take shape”. (Carp 1998, 252)

Gordon, Shenar, and Pendzik (2018, 91-92) discuss the benefits of clowning in what they describe as the third phase of the therapeutic clowning process, which they term “integration” (Gordon et al. 2018, 91). In this stage, the insights and emotional shifts experienced during earlier phases are consolidated into everyday life. Clown therapy, they argue, enables participants/patients to perceive and engage with humorous and absurd dimensions of daily life, allowing joy to emerge even in seemingly banal situations. (Gordon et al. 2018, 91) By fostering a playful awareness of the present moment, clowning increases the pleasure to be fully present. (ibid.) Further, an open space for new patterns of communication was created, for example creating an inner dialogue with the clown persona as a symbolic guide. Such an internalized figure may offer counsel or encouragement, thereby strengthening the individual’s capacity to trust their own inner voice. (ibid., 91) In their research, this internal shift was enhanced by experiences of reciprocity in real-world settings. For example, when participants engage in clowning activities at a children’s hostel for those with special needs, they entertained and connected with the children, but also experienced themselves as valued contributors. This exchange, giving something meaningful and receiving appreciation in return, reinforced participants sense of agency and self-worth. (ibid., 92)

3.5.2.1. Further elaborations on the beneficial effects of clowning

Keeping in mind Cheryl Carp's (1998) and Jeff Gordon, Shenar, and Pendzik’s (2018) findings, as well as Phil Jones’ (1996) core processes outlined by Johanne Roy (2009), my own research extends these perspectives by weaving in the lived experiences of my interviewees. When speaking about clowning, interviewees repeatedly emphasized elements such as non-judgment, compassion, acceptance, connection, equality, and trust as essential conditions for both creating a safer space and enabling healing to occur. As discussed in the chapter “SafeR Space”, the creation of such an environment is a vital precondition for any sustained healing and transformative process. The workshops offered a setting where solidarity could emerge, where people found common ground through play and shared laughter. Yet, this solidarity is not a natural or permanent state, but something

shared by the specificity of time, place, and context. In this way, the healing and liberatory dimensions of clowning are inseparable from its relational dimensions. This resonates with Taylor's observation that our identities are dialogically shaped. (Taylor no date cited in Appiah 1994, 128) They come into being through ongoing interaction with others. In clowning, the self is experienced not as fixed but as an evolving presence, shaped in real time through interaction. The self is dynamically co-constructed between performer and audience. Göze Saner (2020) captures this dynamic: "What unfolds is a *self* that is shaped through external negotiation, emerging in the dynamic space between performer and spectator". (Saner 2020, 151 [emphasis in original]) In the workshops I observed, this co-creation was palpable as a participant might take on a mimic, a gaze, or a sound that seems small, but through the audience's attention and their reaction through laughter or empathetic silence, it grew into something charged with meaning. In these moments, something relational took shape.

> "It's just a soul pleasurable this feeling of us together laughing. So I don't feel that I'm laughed at. I feel like I'm laughing because there is like a common energy and this clown very often starts with something small and then everything is just so funny. Even the smallest thing like someone move their eyes and it's so, so, so funny and this energy of like freedom and laughtness really I feel like very liberating." (Interview with Maryna, 1 November 2023, 7)

This dynamic co-creation highlights the importance of the workshop setting and workshop ethos: they are not neutral containers, but active agents of relational processes that can support transformation. The design of the space, the structure of activities, and the relational ethos cultivated within it all contribute to making healing and transformation possible. (Fieldnotes Mollnhuber 2023 & 2024)

In the following section, I will elaborate on the beneficial elements mentioned above in more detail and expanded with my own findings:

- **Space of non-judgement:**

Several participants and facilitators highlighted the healing potential of clowning, opening up a space of acceptance and no judgment. If non-judgment is a key ingredient in relating to one another and identity can be fluid, traits we usually hide and that are deemed socially unacceptable may be expressed and embraced in those group settings. A self can be expressed, evoking laughter, understanding, connection, and liberation. (Fieldnotes Mollnhuber 2023 & 2024)

> "You can look at the other person without this judgment. When you open yourself and show yourself who you are, you create this free space, this neutral space

where everyone can recognize him or herself. Through that, the healing just happens. It's not about putting an intention to heal something or somebody. It just happened in the moment. You open a space, a free space, a neutral space where you allow yourself to be and at the same time, allowing the ones that are looking at you to be as well. And the power is because this freedom, because of this free space where first you're not judging yourself for who you are. Then, the one looking at you cannot judge you anyway, at the same time, because it's so strong to see a person that shows herself/himself in this vulnerability that we all can recognize that it's impossible that somebody looking at you is judging you in this moment. Because again, it's not anymore about who you are or who is the other one. There is this space in between that we can call it love, where everything is perfect, how it is. So, if you are exposed and you are there and showing yourself with your vulnerability, you feel a huge wave of love. And from the other side, let's say the audience, the ones that are looking at you, looking at something so big, so huge, this braveness, this courage to show yourself - maybe the person is not able to do this - but through you this person as well, will feel it, a huge healing. Yeah, because it's like looking at yourself in a mirror, so you recognize that, so you can do it through the other one. This is the power of healing in this kind of clown, in the clown work." (Interview with Francesca, 13 June 2024, 7)

„Clowning ist nicht transformativ, wenn es halt darum geht wer gut ist und wer schlecht ist, wenn Konkurrenz im Raum ist, und wenn es darum geht zu bewerten, abzuwerten, aufzuwerten." (Interview with Leo, 21 June 2024, 14)

The quality of this space and setting in those clowning workshops is not per se given. It is shaped by the people in the group and by the facilitator. The depth to which participants are able or willing to explore emotionally challenging or vulnerable themes depends to a large extent on the facilitator's ability to accept and hold these experiences without judgment. The facilitator plays a crucial role in guiding the process, setting the tone and maintaining a space that feels emotionally safe, inclusive, and open. Their capacity to hold the space, to allow for complexity, ambiguity, and emotional intensity, deeply affects how the experience of clowning can become. I discuss the role of the facilitator in chapter "3.2.4. The role of the facilitator and teacher".

Other studies also indicated that clowning helped people become less judgmental. For instance, a survey by the Ministry of Social Welfare Israel (Barnett 2010 cited in Gordon et al. 2018, 93) involving 70 clients from nine treatment centers who participated in clown therapy found that they became more open to others, displaying less criticism and judgment, while also boosting their self-esteem, as Gordon et al (2018) elaborate:[42]

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[42] Other positive results were: "improved relationships with their families" (Gordon et al. 2018, 93); "an enhanced sense of balance in their lives, reflected in a capacity to move beyond a constant conflict with themselves, those around them and authority figures" (ibid.); "greater emotional flexibility" (ibid.); "greater ability to cope with life changes" (ibid.); "an increased level of creativity, which can be applied to finding solutions to various life-challenges" (ibid.); "a newly found sense of achievement, including the discovery of strengths that they were not aware of" (ibid.); "an increased self-awareness paired with the ability to laugh at themselves and their former afflictions" (ibid.).

> “The interactions of the clowns allow for new patterns of communication to emerge between group members, breaking rigid power struggles, cynicism, overt criticism and judgmental patterns, and opening up participants to experience a more accepting, loving and compassionate approach to both themselves and others in the group” (Gordon et al. 2018, 91)

- **Welcoming and accepting emotions:**

> „Ich glaube, diese Clownsfigur hat uns oder ermächtigt die Teilnehmerinnen dazu, ihre Emotionen zu fühlen und zu zeigen. Und es ist leichter, das als Clown zu tun, anstatt als Person, als Mensch. Die Clownsfigur ist keine Figur, die sehr kognitiv lastig ist, sondern eher eben sehr körper- und gefühlslastig. Und indem man sich in diese Rolle begibt, kann man eben diese ganzen Emotionen fühlen und der Intuition folgen.“ (Interview with Antonia, 20 June 2024, 10)

Participants described the clowning workshop as a space where they could access and experience emotions that are often suppressed, considered unacceptable or uncool. Many noted that in daily life, emotions are clouded by shame and therefore not easily accessible, acceptable, or expressible due to fear of hurting others. During the workshop, the suspension of judgment allowed these emotions to be acknowledged and expressed, which some participants found to be deeply healing.

> „Und ich habe das auch beim Workshop so stark gemerkt, diese Emotionen, durch die wir da gegangen sind und wie alles seinen Raum hat und haben darf. Und du nimmst das und nimmst die Wut und steigerst sie bis zum, bis es nicht mehr geht und dann wandelt sich's, schwächt ab und ganz viel Integration findet statt in kürzester Zeit. Und das ist für mich so ein unglaublich magischer Raum, wie schnell da Heilung passieren kann.“ ((Interview with Melanie, 7 June 2024, 11)

Several also spoke about discovering new possibilities for emotional expression, particularly in performance contexts, where emotions are brought on stage. This included learning to articulate emotions in unfamiliar ways, observing others express difficult feelings on stage, and gaining insights and healing through this shared observation process. Interviewees reported developing greater emotional awareness: learning to identify, differentiate, and find ways to express them.

> „Bei mir hat das sehr viel geheilt und es war auch ein Grund warum ich halt auch in die Clownerie gehen wollte, damit ich lerne wie man sich noch ausdrücken kann und wie man Gefühle ausdrücken kann, vor allen Dingen und wie man Gefühle klärt, also eins vom anderen unterscheiden.” (Interview with Anja, 20 June 2024, 14)

Sue Morrison’s approach to sacred clowning explicitly aims to create spaces that embrace the full “ocean of emotions” (Coburn and Morrison 2013, 93, 97), because all emotions are valid. According to her, clowning teaches how to feel. (ibid., 85) In line with this, the Indian sage Bharata Muni, who lived between the second century BCE and the second century CE, states that performance can serve as a powerful tool for expressing emotions (Muni 200

BCE cited in Schechner 2002, 38). Similarly, Gordon, Shenar, and Pendzik (2018) emphasize the development of “emotional flexibility” (Gordon et al. 2018, 90) through deconstructing fixed mindsets and behaviors. One example of an emotion, especially among people socialized as female, is anger. (see Ciani-Sophia Hoeder 2021) In many cultural contexts, women are taught to suppress anger, a pattern reinforced by family systems where emotions are sometimes neither welcomed nor modeled. Conversely, the workshop may have offered a space where anger could be explored, embodied, and reframed. One participant recalled an early childhood experience involving heavier emotions like anger.

> „Es war ganz wichtig, immer gut drauf zu sein und lieb zu sein und nett zu sein. Und alle anderen Emotionen sind nicht anerkannt worden und auch nicht gewürdigt worden, sondern schnell musst du sie wieder wegtun.“ (Interview with Melanie, 7 June 2024, 22)

In the clowning workshop, she was able to embody this emotion through her clown persona. The audience’s positive response to her performance encouraged her to embrace her anger and discover new ways of coping with it.

> „Oder wie schön Wut sein kann. Boah, wenn du so wütend bist und das Publikum anschreist und das Publikum zerkugelt sich. Also das war für mich ganz ein neuer Zugang zur Wut. Also nicht so ‘sei jetzt still da’, sondern ‘her damit, mehr, mehr, wir wollen mehr sehen’. Also wie schön du da deine Emotionen leben kannst.“ (Interview with Melanie, 7 June 2024, 19)

Another participant offered a similar account of engaging with anger in a transformative way:

> “Das ist halt für mich so eine Emotion, die ganz wenig bearbeitet ist oder wenig Raum haben darf in meinem Leben. Und ich merke, wie ich so richtig Lust bekomme, wütexnd zu sein. Oder auch wie ich schon auch merke, dass so die künstlerische Arbeit, die ich die ganze Zeit mache, sehr viel als Ventil für meine Wut funktioniert. Und es ist so schön, was gefunden zu haben, wo diese Wut einfach hin kann.” (Interview with Leo, 21 June 2024, 6)

Several interviewees described transformative encounters with their own anger during the workshop. For them, art and clowning in particular, provided a channel through which this often stigmatized emotion could be acknowledged, explored, and expressed without fear of judgment or abandonment. Rather than being suppressed, anger was given room to exist to be felt in its full intensity, and to be recognized as a valid emotional response, because anger is also a source of energy and boundary. (Fieldnotes Mollnhuber 2024 and interviews with Antonia, 11 February 2024; Leo, 21 June 2024; Melanie, 7 June 2024)

- **Soul-pleasure: Embracing joy, play, and laughter**

> „Also wie schön kann Heilung sein? Diesen Gedanken können wir mal wegwerfen, dass das unglaublich schwer ist.“ (Interview with Melanie, 7 June 2024, 24)

Healing is often imagined as a weighty and serious process. Yet, as participants in the clowning workshop expressed, it can also be deeply joyful. Many reported moments of shared laughter. It emerged as a collective energy, fostering connection through shared moments of amusement, and as a personal resource, enabling individuals to laugh at themselves and find joy in the present moment. Participants associated these experiences with nurturing their soul, reconnecting with their sense of childlike playfulness, and reclaiming moments of carefreeness.

> “In this Flinta clown workshop for example, for me, when we had like the last round of the feedback, someone said that they feel it is a wellness experience. And I thought, yes, this is very well said. It was for me very like I was taking care of this activity that I was actually taking care of my soul, of myself, of my child-ness and my carelessness and my playfulness, just laughing a lot and really like, feeling this flow, looks so free that you laugh. And if you don't laugh, it's OK. If you laugh, when other people don't laugh, it's also OK. It's like somehow like this acceptance and this, like everything is allowed in a way, in the clown.” (Interview with Maryna, 7 October 2024, 6)

> “Dieses Lachen ist auch was extrem Heilsames, was auch so ein Gemeinsames schafft, was multipliziert wird durch die, die neben dir sitzen. Also es ist so was, dieses gemeinsame Geräusche machen, so auch sehr heilsam und magisch.” (Interview with Leo, 21 June 2024, 13)

Viktor Frankl (no date) as cited in Gordon, Shenar, and Pendzik (2018) emphasizes:

> “The patient should be instructed not just to accept his fear, but also to laugh at it. This requires the courage to be ridiculous“. (Viktor Frankl no date cited in Gordon et al. 2018, 88)

In a similar vein, they note that “[…] clowns have helped us to safely confront our human foibles and vulnerability while generating a cathartic laughter” and that such laughter can “release tension around issues of power and powerlessness” (Gordon et al. 2018, 88). They observed that when laughter arises from one’s ability to reinterpret previously painful situations with humor, it is “most liberating” (ibid., 90) and can reflect therapeutic progress. (ibid., 90) Humor is considered as universal, according to Roy (2009, 18): “The Association for Applied and Therapeutic Humor” (2000) describes “therapeutic humor” (Roy 2009, 18) as “an intervention that promotes health and wellness by stimulating a playful discovery, expression, or appreciation of the absurdity or incongruity of life’s situations.” (The Association for Applied and Therapeutic Humor 2000 cited in Roy 2009, 18) Laughter “can help us sleep better and bring a more positive, joyful attitude to our lives. It can help us think

better, get out of emotional ruts, connect with other people, and release emotional pain" (Benner no date cited in Roy 2009, 18).

> "Freude zu erfahren ist auch sehr heilsam. Einfach mit anderen Freude zu erfahren. Und über sich selbst zu lachen, kann halt so im depressiven Bereich einfach so was von heilsam sein." (Interview with Anja, 20 June 2024, 15)

Research shows that humor and laughter are particularly effective in supporting individuals with depression, obsessive-compulsive disorder, and other psychiatric conditions, with self-deprecating humor proving especially powerful in the latter group. (Roy 2009, 18-19) However, as Ed Dunkelblau (no date cited in Roy 2009, 19) cautions, humor should be used carefully in therapeutic settings: sarcasm, sardonic remarks, or humor directed at patients should be avoided, while humor directed at the therapist or counsellor can be encouraged. Furthermore, timing and appropriateness for specific patients remain crucial considerations. (ibid.) In Johanne Roy's study with patients with psychiatric disorders, the overarching goal of the clowning therapy sessions was to have fun, which participants/patients strongly appreciated. (Roy 2009) The use of self-deprecating humor allowed them to reveal vulnerable aspects of themselves and to connect with others through shared laughter and through sharing funny personal stories. (ibid., 51) Fun and play were found to support the recovery process by helping participants regain a sense of self and build resilience, while also fostering acceptance of their dysfunction without being wholly defined by it. (ibid., 51)

From an anthropological perspective, laughter isn't always seen as positive; in some cultural contexts, it can be considered dangerous or physically harmful, such as causing bellyaches, and therefore is being avoided altogether. This highlights that we shouldn't assume laughter holds the same value everywhere. (see Musharbash 2008)

In many therapeutic and creative contexts, play serves as a vital space for healing and change. Gordon, Shenar, and Pendzik (2018) reference Winnicott's (2005) statement that "it is in playing and only in playing the individual child or adult is able to be creative and to use the whole personality, and it is only in being creative that the individual discovers the self". (Winnicott 2005 cited in Gordon et al. 2018, 93) While play is naturally available to children, adults often require designated environments, like workshops, to allow themselves to play and express emotions freely. (Gordon et al. 2018, 93) Kasper (2004) similarly argues that "one of the logics of life that the clown invites us to experience is joy" (Bruhn et al. 2019, 65). And further that "clowning proposes to extend the joyful affections that promote encounters, movements and more possibilities of existences" (Bruhn et al. 2019, 65) According to Bruhn et al. playing games allow a process where action, thought, and

emotions are integrated. (Bruhn et al. 2019, 66) An essential part of playing is spontaneity, which fosters “a sense of freedom in the game and allows one to ‘travel’ to the world of imagination and, through it, recreate and discover new forms of action” (Monteiro 1994, 18-19 cited in Bruhn et al. 2019, 66). In drama therapy and psychodrama, play and fun are often identified as the most helpful elements in recovery, especially for individuals with psychosis, according to Cassons (2004) research with people with psychosis. (Casson 2004 cited in Roy 2009, 16-17) Play can help restore a sense of self that only emerges through engaging in play. (Casson 2004 cited in Roy 2009, 16)

- **Following the intuition, the body, not knowing and naivete**:

> „Dem Körper [und] Impulsen vertrauen ist einfach ein ganz, ganz großes heilsames Geschenk.” (Interview with Anja, 20 June 24, 14)

Whitehouse (1965) observes that we often conceive of the body as our possession, something we control, and it feels unfamiliar to allow the body to take the lead, like in clowning. (Whitehouse 1965 cited in Carp 1998, 253) Cheryl Carp (1998) elaborates that in clowning, this process involves “letting it happen”: fostering spontaneity and allowing unconscious material to permeate the body, which then finds expression through movement. (Carp 1998, 253) By “shaking out the webs” (ibid.) of ingrained habits and patterns, the individual opens themselves to “new information emerging from the unconscious through the body”. (Carp 1998, 252) In clowning, the body is accentuated as a primary medium of expression. It is “evidencing how the person is feeling here and now” (Bruhn et al. 2019, 66). Dorneles (2003) further notes that clown corporeality involves the amplification of physical presence through facial grimaces, posture, breathing, and gaze, each conveying meaning. (Dorneles 2003 cited in Bruhn et al. 2019, 66) The body is not a neutral vessel; it is inscribed with cultural, historical, and social meanings. De Beauvois (1974) and Merleau-Ponty (1962) describe the body as “an active process of embodying certain cultural and historical possibilities […]” (J. Butler 2004, 155). Similarly, Bourdieu’s (1997) notion of habitus frames the body as the site where external material and cultural conditions become unconsciously internalized, manifesting in posture, speech, and patterns of interaction. (Bourdieu 1997 cited in Novy 2014, 177) In this way, social structures of inequality live on through bodily dispositions. These bodily patterns can be observed in clowning, exaggerated and broken by trying new ways of moving. Gender is one way to observe these internalized patterns. Judith Butler (2004) argues that gender is materialized in the body through acts that obey historically specific norms, and that these acts constitute gender itself. (J. Butler 2004, 155-156) Gender, then, is not a role that expresses an inner essence; rather, it is

performative. (ibid., 162) Such an understanding opens up the possibility of cultural transformation through repetition, subversion, or re-imagination of these bodily acts. (ibid., 155) Paul Bouissac (2015) notes that the clown is „asexual but not ungendered" (Bouissac 2015, 147), and that circus clowns often play with stereotypical social behaviors in the societies where they perform. (ibid., 150) In the clowning workshops I attended, there was an openness toward non-binary and fluid understandings of gender. However, this should not be interpreted to mean that the entire clowning community shares such views. On the contrary, several interviewees voiced frustration with clown performances that rely on exaggerated gender stereotypes, at times reproducing sexist ideas rather than challenging them. More broadly, the clowning world is not immune to systemic issues such as sexism, racism, and homophobia; in fact, many performances continue to perpetuate these dynamics. In this context, relationality plays a crucial role, as workshop spaces can function as sites where concepts such as gender are negotiated. Several interviewees noted that they had deliberately chosen the workshops I attended because of their openness and queer-affirming atmosphere. At the same time, other clowning workshops continue to unintentionally reproduce heteronormative structures, limiting the potential for more inclusive and diverse expressions.

Another interesting aspect of clowning is its nonverbal communication. Clowning does not depend on linguistic exchange; it can transcend language barriers. This can be very fruitful in an intercultural context. One interviewee told her story when visiting a Masai community. The bodily expression opened up a communication beyond words. I elaborated the story in the methodological chapter "Ethnoclownography".

In the therapeutic context, the physical embodiment can be particularly impactful for people struggling with addiction, who may experience their bodies as untrustworthy, as researched by Gordon, Shenar and Pendzik (2018). Re-engaging the body in a safe, playful context can rebuild a sense of bodily trust and intuitive responsiveness. (ibid., 93)

Clowning further invites a re-approach to reality from a position of not-knowing, naivety, and openness. (L. Butler 2012, 71) The liminal stance of neither here nor there subverts the inner censor and instead privileges "intuitive, inquiry-based forms of knowing" (ibid.). As Peacock (2009) describes, "the clown offers the opportunity to reveal new facets of the self and therefore, to discover different ways of behaving" (Peacock 2009, 156). Barner and Vermillion-Witt (1992) suggest that connecting with one's inner clown carries substantial therapeutic value, as it encourages participants to embrace risk and to cultivate trust in their instincts. (Barner and Vermillion-Witt 1992 cited in Peacock 2009, 156) Unlike the rational,

sense-making tendencies that dominate everyday life, clowns respond to the world with curiosity, receptivity, and unpredictability. (ibid.)

> "It's maybe what I told you about what I do in the performance, like where those shadow sides - it's a process of getting there - no longer control me. But I have ownership over those things where I am the parts of me that did not trust their own intuition or knowing and instead betrayed herself in order to be accepted or to belong. That they are restored. That's a part of it." (Interview with Amber, 5 July 2024, 20)

Participants in Gordon, Shenar and Pendzik's (2018) study described learning to trust their inner voice through their clown, even seeing this figure as an inner guide. (Gordon et al. 2018, 92) In this sense, clowning may reframe the body as a site of intuitive wisdom, creative possibility, cultural transformation, but also as a projection of social norms.

- **Positive experience with failure**:

The revelation that failure need not be feared constitutes a significant step in the process of clown training. (Davison 2013, 309) Clara Cenoz (2011 cited in Davison 2013, 309) identifies the ego as the primary obstacle to accepting failure, describing it as a survival mechanism driven by fear and desire. In the experience of the clown, one comes to realize that no real danger exists, reframing what failure means. This insight often leads to a profound sense of liberation: when we recognize that there is, in fact, nothing to worry about, a sense of acceptance of ourselves and others is cultivated, often through an unconscious process of learning. In this way, according to Cenoz (2011), clowning becomes a means of overcoming the fear that gives rise to suffering. (Davison 2013, 309)

> „Und die [Clownin, note JM] hat mich gerettet, so dass das Scheitern für mich als Melanie kein Weltuntergang war. Ganz viele Menschen waren, deren Erwartungen ich nicht erfüllt habe. Meine Clownin hat super damit spielen können." (Interview with Melanie, 7 June 2024, 5)

Davison discusses the concept of the Gaulier's flop (Gaulier no date cited in Davison 2016, 38), a pedagogical approach in clowning that emphasizes learning through failure and minimizes direct instruction. (ibid.) In this context, failure is not only accepted, but actively embraced. A failed attempt to complete a task becomes valuable performance material, often generating laughter from the audience. In this way, failure is reframed as success, and the flop, a concept explored in chapter "3.1.2. Philosophical context: Gaulier, Sartre, freedom and the flop", becomes a generative force for clowning. (Davison 2016, 9)

> "[…] failure was encouraged in the workshops, it would be cheered on, or like, you would make a performance out of the failure and lean into that feeling. And for me, it didn't feel like failure anymore. And other things that feel like failure is where civil Kiara comes back. Where I start feeling nervous, or I start feeling like 'Oh, I cannot

> go and do this exercise. […]' This is the things that for me truly feel like failure. And in the clowning for me, failure has completely transformed. When I am really in the clown, there is no failure anymore somehow." (Interview with Kiara, 27 January 2025, 24)

Several interviewees described developing a transformed relationship to failure. In a societal context where failure is often stigmatized, with a culture of constructive engagement with mistakes largely absent, and failure is to be avoided whenever possible, such experiences can be particularly powerful. Reframing what counts as success and failure can generate a profound sense of liberation. (Fieldnotes Mollnhuber 2024 and interviews with Kiara, 27 January 2025; Leo, 21 June 2024; Melanie, 7 June 2024)

> „Ich glaube, das kommt durch dieses Öffnen, also sich selbst so angreifbar zu machen und auch das eben bei anderen zu sehen. Ich finde, das gibt ganz viel Mut, uns so zu akzeptieren, wie wir sind und dazu zu stehen. Es macht einfach eine ganz andere Art von Tiefe, wenn wir uns verletzlich zeigen und uns wo drübertrauen und mutig sind und gleichzeitig so eben das Scheitern umarmen können." (Interview with Leo, 21 June 24, 5)

- **Change of perspective:**

Another powerful aspect of clowning lies in gaining perspective through distance, which comes through laughter and play. It is a process that can reduce the perceived threat of a situation and make it easier to access and work with underlying emotions.

> „Die Clownin kann das halten, manchmal. Anteile, wo ich allein nicht dazu fähig bin in Kontakt zu treten, mit denen, kann die Clownin das halten und die Sicht von außen ermöglichen und dadurch habe ich dann auch die Möglichkeit in Kontakt zu treten. Und die Clownin macht die Brücke zu der Emotion, zu dem Erlebnis und durch dieses Brückenbauen kann ich es annehmen und auch sehen und merken es ist nicht bedrohlich. Ja also ich glaube Clowning kann gute die Gefährlichkeit herausnehmen aus unseren Dramen, die oft ganz schlimm sind und schlimm waren." (Interview with Melanie, 7 June 2024, 16-17)

Freire (1970) emphasizes that human beings are conscious of themselves and their world because they "exist in a dialectical relationship between the determination of limits and their own freedom". (Freire 1970 cited in L. Butler 2012, 67) By separating themselves from the world or a specific situation, they are able to transcend the conditions that constrain them. (ibid.)

> „Es gibt einfach die Möglichkeit aus einer anderen Perspektive draufzuschauen und du bist nicht mehr so gefangen in deinem eigenen kleinen Drama […]." (Interview with Melanie, 7 June 2024, 11)

In the context of clown therapy, Cheryl Carp (1998) describes distancing as a process in which the performer maintains a degree of separation from the character not to be completely absorbed by it. (Carp 1998 cited in Roy 2009, 14) This involves maintaining a

healthy balance between proximity and separation from others and oneself. (Roy 2009, 15) Drama therapy and clown therapy seem to provide a structured space in which to experiment with this continuum to find a functional middle ground. (Casson 2004 cited in Roy 2009, 15)

Jones (1996 cited in Roy 2009, 15-16) identifies a related skill in the alternation between performing as a clown and observing as an audience member. This shift in roles enables perspective and insight, training the ability to move fluidly between states of immersion and reflection. In this way, clowning cultivates the capacity to create and release distance, fostering both emotional engagement and critical awareness. (Jones 1996 cited in Roy 2009, 15)

- **Witnessing and allowing yourself to be seen in being yourself**:

> "Danke, dass du Zeugin bist. Also die Kraft dieser Gruppe und was auch die Kraft des Workshops war und auch die Kraft des Clownens ist, dass du Zeugen hast für deine Prozesse. […] So bist du gesehen worden, so richtig gesehen worden und du kannst dich selber sehen und es ist Teil dieses Heilsamen oder der Heilung, dass du Zeugen hast." (Interview with Melanie, 7 June 2024, 23)

Witnessing and allowing to be seen are potent tools in group therapy settings. Jones (1996) defines witnessing as an "act of being an audience to others or to oneself". (Jones 1996, 112 cited in Roy 2009, 15) One of its origins can be traced to Fritz Pearls' Gestalt therapy, where feelings are expressed openly in front of the group. (Pearls no date cited in Davison 2016, 153) The therapeutic potential of this practice is two-fold: First, the emotions expressed are often precisely those aspects of the self that society has rendered taboo; second, the group's reaction to not reject these emotions, but to accept, may facilitate a restructuring of internal patterns, enabling individuals to integrate and validate formerly unwanted aspects of the self. (ibid.) This dynamic reflects also Moreno's psychodramatic approach, which emphasizes the group as an active agent of healing.[43] (Ameln, Gerstmann, and Kramer 2009) The role of the group was strongly emphasized by participants in my research. Many noted that the audience's acceptance was crucial: the audience needed to be able to bear the emotions expressed without becoming overwhelmed. Only then could vulnerability feel safe. The healing process was described as reciprocal: for the person embodying the clown, it was transformative to be seen, heard, and accepted in their

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[43] Due to a lack of time, I wasn't able to elaborate on Morenos' significant input on group therapy settings. For more information, see: Ameln, Falko, R. Gerstmann, and Josef Kramer (2009).

emotional state, while for the audience, witnessing someone else's emotional expression offered the chance to connect with and allow those feelings within themselves. Carp (1998), in the context of drama therapy, similarly observes the transformative potential of witnessing, which can open space for new layers of the self to surface through clowning. (Carp 1998 cited in Roy 2009, 16) Another important dimension of being seen in clowning is the validation of one's authentic self, especially for those who have experienced oppression or discrimination. Several interviewees spoke of the sense of safety in showing who they are without fear of danger.

> „Yeah, we can say accept, but it's more embrace for me, like really embrace who you are. I saw different people that at least in this moment, they really register in the body, in the cells like, 'wow, I can be like that and everything is okay'. And this is something huge. It's not only healing, but it's something that the body registered. Then, in other situations in your life, I always hope that you can - I mean, your body will remember - so I always hope that once you recognize the memory of your body, then you can do a step more in your daily life and be as brave as you were in the clown workshop and do the same in your life. Maybe little by little, you can do it. Maybe in safe situations or in little situation, it doesn't matter." (Interview with Francesca, 13 June 2024, 11)

For individuals who constantly adapt to societal norms, and who cannot express themselves freely without risk of social sanction, whether from the family, work environments, school, etc., particularly when their difference challenges heteronormative expectations, this constant self-editing can be exhausting. In such cases, clowning was described as liberating: a space where one could celebrate difference, "weirdness" or other non-normative ways of being and experience acceptance.

> "Ich glaube, für solche Menschen hat es auf jeden Fall eine richtig tolle Kraft, aber ich glaube auch für alle anderen, weil also auch die, die innerhalb von diesen Normen funktionieren, für die ist das ja auch sauanstrengend. Also und deshalb ist es glaube ich für alle extrem befreiend, für die einen vielleicht eher zu feiern, das Losertum mehr feiern zu können und für die anderen halt dieses okay, ich darf mal einfach ich sein. Aber ich glaube dieses ich darf einfach mal ich sein ist glaube ich für alle voll heilend. Dieses ich werde so akzeptiert, wie ich bin." (Interview with Leo, 21 June 2024, 6)

Some interviewees spoke specifically about structural discrimination, noting that clowning offered them a rare space for free self-expression. Because the clown is inherently different, often positioned as an outsider, it carries the possibility of reframing difference in a loving and playful way.

> "[…] die Gewalt erfahren haben oder Unterdrückung aufgrund ihres Geschlechts oder ihrer Non-Binarität oder ihrer Neurodiversität, anders gestrickt sind im Kopf oder im Gefühl, wie auch immer. Also alle, die Unterdrückung da erlebt haben und erlebt haben, dass sie mundtot, also ausdrucksunfähig gemacht werden, dürfen

> beim Clownen eigentlich alles einfach wieder vergessen […].” (Interview with Anja, 20 June 2024, 25)

For some, clowning became a medium for exploring, experimenting with, and affirming their trans-identities, opening possibilities to question and subvert normative structures. Vulnerability and emotional openness were also perceived as having societal and structural implications, contributing to broader discourses, for example, on gender. (Interview Mollnhuber)

> „[…] für mich hat das eben voll dieses Potenzial von, also auch vor allem in Bezug auf Geschlecht diesen Möglichkeitsraum zu erweitern. Und ich glaube halt, dass durch die Clownerie so viel, eben diese Qualitäten von sich verletzlich machen und so Emotionen zeigen, voll helfen können, um diesen Diskurs auch gesellschaftlich so zu erweitern.” (Interview with Leo, 21 June 2024, 4)

Other participants described clowning as a way to reclaim parts of themselves that are socially discouraged, such as spontaneity, curiosity, and honesty.

> “The more I go outside of my friend circles where it's more maybe conservative people or job, then I'm not allowed to show things like this. Yeah, especially at work. It's kind of very clear what kind of behavior is accepted, what is not accepted. And I feel many of my things that I like, this kind of spontaneousity and curiosity and, honesty, they are not very welcomed in more working atmosphere.” (Interview with Maryna, 7 October 2024, 12)

Gordon, Shenar and Pendzik (2018) report similar findings:

> „Participating in the art of clowning has proved effective for improving the quality of life of people with disabilities, youth at risk, and other marginalized groups. Perhaps this is so because the liminality of the clown may offer a voice to those who find themselves in marginalized positions. Ultimately, since under certain circumstances every one of us can be an ‘outsider’ in need of self-acceptance and social inclusion, clown therapy can be an aid for all of us.” (Gordon et al. 2018, 93)

Similarly, Reisman (2016) describes clowning’s ability to help individuals move from an outcast role “into stronger, more capable and empowered roles” (Reisman 2016, 93 cited in Gordon et al. 2018, 90) In this way, specific clowning workshops may facilitate a collective space where difference is celebrated and social transformation can emerge.

- **Experimentation and creativity:**

> “It is only in being creative that the individual discovers the Self.” (Winnicott 1981, 64 cited in Carp 1998, 249)

Creativity by Levy Moreno (1997) can be understood as the human capacity “to adapt adequately to new situations or to propose new responses to old situations” (Bruhn et al 2019, 65). According to John Casson (2004) “it is through play, spontaneity and creativity that the self is rediscovered, reclaimed and reborn” (Casson 2004 cited in Roy 2009, 17).

Emunah (1983) further highlights improvisation as an ideal method for cultivating spontaneity. (Emunah 1983 cited in Roy 2009, 17) In a therapeutic context, a lack of spontaneity is often perceived as a symptom in psychiatric disorders. (Roy 2009, 17) The intention is to cultivate spontaneity to develop skills to look "beyond the present reality, to discover options" (Roy 2009, 17), and to build "the capacity for transformation" (ibid.). In clowning, creativity often takes the form of experimenting with and exploring unconventional ways of expressing emotions and behaviors, particularly on stage. Drama therapy and psychodrama value this creative dimension because it can offer more engaging and inviting alternatives to purely verbal approaches, such as talk therapy, particularly for those with a more open and imaginative mindset. In this way, clowning workshops that focus on self-exploration indirectly challenge the dominant position of psychotherapy as the primary or "most legitimate" path to healing, expanding the spectrum of therapeutic possibilities.

- **Authenticity[44] and authentic encounters:**

Clowning operates within a paradox: while the performer, in the context of the clowning workshops focused on personal transformation, depends on the audience's acceptance, the clown figure itself is unconcerned with approval. The clown embodies a kind of shamelessness, fully aware of social norms yet deliberately breaking or twisting them. And at the same time, looking for the love of the audience. One exercise illustrating this was the "gift exchange" exercise. (Fieldnotes Mollnhuber 2023 & 2024) Participants were asked to bring a small gift to present to another clown on stage, and the task was to respond authentically rather than politely. So, two clowns meet on stage and the audience witnesses how they gift each other a present, trying to be as authentic with their response as possible. The facilitator often guided this process because it was challenging to recondition those patterns. In everyday life, social etiquette demands gratitude, even for unwanted gifts. In the clown role, participants were encouraged to express their real feelings, whether joy, disappointment, or indifference. This required consciously unlearning ingrained social conditioning and allowed for a liberating degree of honesty. (Fieldnotes Mollnhuber 2023 & 2024)

Participants also described moments when they dared to express thoughts or emotions in clowning that they would never voice as their "civil" selves, often because such expressions would be considered anti-social, as one interviewee expressed it. (Interview with Melanie, 7

[44] For further anthropological discussion on the use of the term authenticity, see Theodossopoulos (2013)

June 2024) In these moments, clown encounters become a laboratory for reimagining social interaction. Moreno himself emphasized that encounters with others are central to the development of the self. (Moreno no date cited in Bruhn et al. 2019, 66) Because the self is inherently relational (ibid.), I argue that the encounter becomes a site of both personal and interpersonal, or social transformation.

An interviewee noted that conflict between clowns on stage can be particularly revealing. (Interview with Anja, 20 June 2024) Whereas everyday life often discourages open conflict, clowning welcomes the display of emotions such as anger, sadness, disappointment, etc. This makes the scene compelling precisely because it resists the social pressure to hide discomfort. Here, participants were indirectly asked through the role of the clown to rethink their understanding of dealing with social situations, and the audience witnessed this rewiring of social scripts. (Fieldnotes Mollnhuber 2023 & 2024) Even though the workshop aimed to facilitate a space of non-judgment, the participants reactions highlight that non-judgment is impossible. Audience members expressed divergent views on whether the clown's behavior was acceptable. For some, it appeared transgressive and unsettling, while for others it was perceives as playful and fun. The performance elicited sometimes strong emotional responses. What was experienced as liberating by some, provoked anger in others. (Fieldnotes Mollnhuber 2023 & 2024)

The attempt to connect to the emotions as clown on stage was not always easy. There were several moments when participants struggled to express their authentic reactions or emotions on stage. This "failure" differs from the failure or flop that clown pedagogy often celebrates. Instead, it is a moment when the performer is unable to feel themselves fully, and the audience senses the restriction. Sometimes, to elicit a reaction, the performer slips into inauthentic performance. This more difficult form of failure, when the self-connection is blocked, can be challenging to acknowledge, but it too can be accepted as part of the process.

Many participants also expressed a longing for authentic connection, to reach out to others in a genuine way and to build community.

> „Also mir geht es nicht darum, dass ich irgendwie der bekannteste Clown auf der ganzen Welt werde, sondern mir geht es eigentlich darum, dass so als Gemeinschaft zu verstehen, wie nährend diese ganzen Techniken für uns als Gemeinschaft sind, um einfach miteinander in Kontakt zu sein und sich auszutauschen." (Interview with Leo, 21 June 2024, 5)

While these experiences may appear deeply personal, they also carry broader social implications. Clowning can reveal the "socially embodied behaviors" (L. Butler 2012, 65) that

structure our interactions, often by externalizing them through exaggeration or absurdity. This resonates with Laurel Butlers (2012) notion of embodied pedagogy:

> “One of the most important components of the process of transforming from person to clown is identifying the social and cultural codes governing embodied behaviors and addressing them as such.” (L. Butler 2012, 65-67)

This leads to the next aspect, which is the interconnection of the social and the personal spheres. While these aspects mentioned above seem to be very personal at first sight, social elements are inherently ingrained, revealing the broader social context. This awareness of the socially embodied behaviors that arises through exaggeration and absurdity, can be experienced as very liberating. (ibid.)

- **Critical thinking and the interconnectedness of the personal and social and/or political**

Despite its deeply personal resonance, clowning cannot be disentangled from the broader structural and cultural frameworks in which it operates. The expression of certain emotions, such as anger, offers an example of this interconnection. In the accounts of participants socialized as female, a recurring theme was the suppression of anger. This pattern can be linked to social norms and structures that historically and systematically discouraged women from expressing this emotion. Through processes of socialization, whether in education, family upbringing, or work settings, women are often taught to be compliant, to allow tears but not anger. In contrast, observations revealed that participants socialized as male more frequently struggled to enter the vulnerable space of showing sadness or crying in their clown expression, while expressing anger or aggression posed little difficulty. (Fieldnotes Mollnhuber 2023 & 2024)

This awareness of our conditioning doesn’t mean that cultural and social structures determine humans, as Freire (2001) states: “[…] we know ourselves to be conditioned, but not determined” (Freire 2001, 26). In this context, bell hooks (1994) draws parallels from Freire to Thich Nhat Hanh, who speaks of the teacher as a healer. (Freire no date and Thich Nhat Hahn no date cited in hooks 1994, 17) Both approach knowledge as something to be actively called by students by “action and reflection upon the world in order to change it” (ibid.) Such processes provoke the “de-mechanization” (L. Butler 2012, 65): cultivating an understanding of how social expectations influence both the body and the mind. Something as seemingly simple as one’s gait can reveal deeply ingrained social codes, from pace, rhythm, posture, etc. (ibid. 65-66)

> "The gait is easily the most visible articulation of the mechanizations of the body. In the dynamics of walking—pace, rhythm, size, shape, directionality, and so on—one can identify a number of embodied patterns, habits, or socially constructed attitudes that, though unconscious to the performer, both affect and reflect the ways in which one inhabits and engages with the world." (L. Butler 2012, 65)

Laurel Butler draws on Augusto Boal's (1992) idea that the red nose functions as the "actual signifier of critical consciousness" (L. Butler 2012, 66). The red nose exposes the ridiculousness of social conditioning. (Boal 1992 cited in L. Butler 2012, 66) Wearing the red nose allows the performer to step outside conventional, socially prescribed behaviors and to engage in critical reflection on their position within these structures. (ibid.) In navigating beyond societal norms, challenging established rules, and questioning central principles of the social order, the clown occupies a distinctly political role. The opinions if clowning is political or not, differed widely among the interviewees. According to Curtis (2002) the personal transformation cannot be separated from the social transformation; the two go together. (Curtis 2002 cited in Davison 2016, 152) In an activist setting, clowning was perceived very much as political. They coined it as "artivism". In a parallel way, Paulo Freire describes the dynamics of emergence, the process by which individuals develop critical awareness and the capacity for creative intervention. (Freire 1970 cited in L. Butler 2012, 67) He defines this as a reflective engagement with one's situationality, an examination of the very conditions of existence:

> "[…] Men *emerge* from their *submersion* and acquire the ability to intervene in their reality as it is unveiled. *Intervention* in reality—historical awareness itself—thus represents a step forward from *emergence*, and results from the *conscientizacao* of the situation. *Conscientizacao* is the deepening of the attitude of awareness characteristic of all emergence. (Freire 1970 [emphasis in original] cited in L. Butler 2012, 67)

Laurel Butler's reading situates the clown's red nose as both a symbolic and practical catalyst for this process of emergence, enabling embodied critique of social norms through play, transgression and reflection.

Dwight Conquergood (2004) emphasizes the transformative potential of performance, framing performance studies as a form of intervention, radical research, and as a way of knowing—a knowledge that emerges through doing. For him, performance is an imaginative act, a model and method of inquiry, and a tactic of intervention. (Conquergood 2004, 318) He describes performance studies as artistry, analysis, and activism; as creativity, critique, and citizenship. It's mission, in his view, is not only the making of art but also the remaking of culture. This rests on the conviction that doing generates knowledge, which must then be articulated and connected back to the community. (ibid., 318-319) In my case, this praxis

takes the form of giving back to the clowning community through this thesis, contributing to a developing theory of clowning and sharing my observations and findings.

In a related way, Göze Saner (2020) conceptualizes clown training as an exercise in freedom. She proposes “an understanding of clown as relational, unpredictable, uncontainable and novel way of acting relationally and spontaneously” (Saner 2020, 146). Such practice, she argues, echoes Hannah Arendt’s (1960) notion of freedom, which emerges through the disruption of the habitual and the appearance of the unexpected. (Arendt 1960 cited in Saner 2020, 146) Clown training, in this sense, cultivates qualities central to Arendt’s vision of freedom, courage, natality, spontaneity, responsiveness, visibility, and the willingness to appear. I discuss her contribution in more detail in chapter 3.3.3.

Alongside these perspectives, Paulo Freire (2014 [1968]) offers another crucial lens by insisting on the co-creation of knowledge through dialogue. For him, education is never neutral: it either maintains the status quo or enables liberation. Proper education, in his view, fosters critical engagement with the world and the capacity to transform it. He critiques the “banking approach” (Freire 2014 [1968], 74) of education, in which students passively receive knowledge, and instead advances dialogue as a tool of liberation. Dialogue, however, is not mere conversation. It is a profoundly humanizing and collaborative process. Rooted in naming the world together, co-creating knowledge, and engaging in the mutual transformation of teacher and learner. In this sense, dialogue entails more than speech. It is a praxis, a shared process of reflection and action upon the world. It challenges systems of oppression, enables the oppressed to reclaim their voice, and fosters the collective construction of a more just society. As Freire writes:

> “To exist, humanly, is to name the world, to change it.” (Freire 2014, 88)

Dialogue, then, is the practice through which the oppressed assert their humanity and participate in transforming reality. Clowning workshops can be understood in this light. It is about connection, presence, and (un)intentionally the disruption of oppressive scripts, resonating with Freire’s dialogical pedagogy, which unsettles imposed meanings and opens space for transformation. True dialogue, according to Freire, requires love, humility, and faith (ibid., 91): an understanding of love as a courageous dedication to others, a willingness to engage in collective learning with humility, and a belief in humanity’s ability to shape and reshape the world. (ibid.)

As he insists,

> “Dialogue cannot exist, however, in the absence of profound love for the world and for people. […] Because love is an act of courage, not of fear, love is commitment to others. No matter where the oppressed are found, the act of love is commitment to their cause – the cause of liberation.” (Freire 2014, 89)

This intertwining of love, humor, and resistance is echoed in the words of George Mikes (no date):

> “In lands more familiar with oppression, a joke is necessary for one’s self-esteem. Laughter is the only weapon the oppressed can use against the oppressor.” (Mikes no date cited in Roy 2009, 50)

Aligning with Freire’s concept of dialogue, of naming the world together, bell hooks emphasizes that it is not easy to theorize or to name the pain. (hooks 1994, 74) For hooks, theory can function as a liberatory practice: a way of making sense of suffering and transforming it. Pain is never only individual; behind personal experiences lie collective dimensions, embedded in larger social structures. Others carry that pain as well, though in different forms. For instance, Black women may share experiences of racialized and gendered pain, though never in identical ways, while men often endure the pain of being denied access to emotions such as sadness or the possibility to cry. The burden of suffering is thus not borne solely by individuals. By theorizing pain as socially and structurally produced, bell hooks describes how this made it possible to lift part of its weight, to articulate it more openly, and to connect with others who share similar experiences. In this process, pain becomes not only more bearable but also a ground for solidarity and transformation. (hooks 1994, 74)

Participants described the clown’s ability to reveal underlying social norms in a gentle and humorous manner. This mode of exposure, rooted in playfulness rather than confrontation, allowed for a shared recognition that many personal struggles are not purely individual but are shaped by common social structures. Experiencing this insight collectively was often perceived as both pleasant and reassuring, fostering a sense of connection and mutual understanding among participants. (Fieldnotes Mollnhuber 2023 & 2024)

> „Jede von uns hat eine Facette von einem großen Ganzen verkörpert und auch gar nicht nur für uns selber und für unsere Geschichten gewirkt, sondern du hast so viel gesellschaftliche Themen einfach plötzlich drinnen gesehen, so Normen, die wir denken, die sind normal. Und dann durch das, dass dir das vor Augen gehalten wird, siehst du so „oh mein Gott“, also so auf sanfte Weise hat man sich wiedererkannt. Und ich glaube ich habe noch nie so viel gelacht, so viel geweint und so viel geschrien wie in diesem Workshop und bin aber ganz zufrieden Heim gegangen.“ (Interview with Melanie, 7 June 2024, 19-20)

Participants' intentions in clown work vary: some explicitly seek to challenge heteronormative structures, others focus on personal exploration, and others hope that personal transformation might ripple outward to effect social change or contribute to collective healing.

- **Agency, intervention, and imagination**

> "Joyous passions are affections that can increase our ability of acting and being" (Bruhn et al. 2019, 62)

Interviewees often described clowning as a practice that allowed them to step out of a victim position and into the strength of the clown. This shift was experienced as finding one's own way, doing things differently from others, and thereby discovering agency.

> "Die Clownsfigur ist halt kein Opfer bei Sachen die, dieses Clownswesen irgendwie nicht kann, sondern es ist eine Stärke. Und dann den eigenen Weg auch findet, wie man es dann macht, das ist ja dann auch noch eine ganz klare Clowneigenschaft so, ich finde halt meinen eigenen Weg, wie ich das jetzt mache und es kann ganz ganz anders sein als das wie ich es machen soll oder wie es die anderen machen und kommt trotzdem vielleicht sogar zu einem geileren Ergebnis." (Interview with Anja, 20 June 2024, 8-9)

Clowning can thus become a tool for engaging with and reflecting on societal discourses, for example around gender. Interviewees described how experimenting with trans-identity in clowning and enacting it within performance contexts opened up possibilities for also embodying it in everyday life.

> „Also ich traue mich jetzt z. B. mich als Mann zu verkleiden und so zu einer Gerichtsverhandlung zu gehen und dann zu merken, was so im realen Leben, was das einfach macht. Es sind 20 Leute im Raum, aber der Richter fragt mich, wer ich bin. Weißt du? Also wie du so im realen Leben auch mit diesem Status spielen kannst, je nachdem, wie du dich kleidest oder verhältst." (Interview with Leo, 21 June 2024, 8)

In this way, clowning provides a laboratory for testing out alternative identities, roles, and ways of being; possibilities that extend beyond the stage into the world outside the workshop's safe space. According to L. Butler (2012): "Through the use of 'clown logic' to negotiate or subvert arbitrary rules, the clown reveals the very arbitrary nature of rules in general, and implicitly destabilizes the prevailing values and social norms that established those rules in the first place". (L. Butler 2012, 66) As Donald McManus (2003) argues, "the relationship of the clown to the mimetic world has its correlative to the power structure of the non-theatrical world" (McManus 2003 cited in L. Butler 2012, 66). When engaged beyond the confines of workshops or theatrical settings—such as in clowning classes or public improvisations—the clown's capacity to disrupt extends not only to the fictional world of performance but also to the social norms that structure everyday life. (L. Butler 2012, 66)

Augusto Boal (no date) similarly recognized how clowning takes up a space that "cannot respect rules or timetables, proprieties or etiquettes." (Boal 1992, 295 cited in L. Butler 2012, 66) For Boal,

> "[b]y means of his own ridicule, he exposes the ridiculousness of others—our own!—which, without the clown, would pass unnoticed. We are so resigned to our own ridiculousness, that we no longer see it. We are all clowns, and the whole world is a circus—but in this arena there is no audience, everyone acts, no-one sees us. Step forward the true clown, our critical consciousness, and this is important: this clown comes dressed as one! We accept it because it has a red nose." (Boal 1992, 294-295 cited in L. Butler 2012, 66)

A parallel can be drawn to the drama therapeutic settings through the invoking of an alternative reality. The use of imagination is, both in social transformation and personal transformation, a resource in healing and agency. (Pendzik and Raviv 2011, 7) As Pendzik and Raviv (2011) note,

> "Drama therapy uses human imagination as a healthy psychological strength. It works by helping people put their imagination into action in ways that activate positive attitudes and outcomes." (Pendzik and Raviv 2011, 7)

In the context of hospitals, medical clowns temporarily co-create an alternative world with patients. Although the context of medical clowning situated within the structured and often rigid environment of hospitals differs from the clowning workshops I attended, similarities in the potential of the clown to subvert can be observed. Medical clowns introduce elements of play, imagination, and absurdity into a space otherwise defined by clear roles such as doctor, patient, nurse, and hierarchies. Through the clown's performance, they co-create a temporary imaginary world with the patient, one that subtly resists and reframes the norms of the hospital setting. By disrupting conventional roles and expectations, the clown offers patients a sense of psychological and emotional flexibility. The role of the "patient", often experienced as passive and disempowering, is transformed through the clown's playful engagement. This dynamic reintroduces a connection to their identity beyond the hospital walls. As Pendzik and Raviv (2011) write, the "medical clown is a revolutionary figure that challenges, shakes, and even changes conventions at the hospital site" (Pendzik and Raviv 2011, 17). The clown thus embodies a paradox. While embedded within the hospital system, they simultaneously conspire against its normative structures. This dual position allows the clown to expose the implicit power dynamics of medical care, offering moments of resistance, reflection, and healing through laughter and imagination. (ibid., 20) Similarly, clowning workshops create spaces of agency where participants can actively engage with and potentially reshape aspects of their lived experience. For example, when the experience of failing can be embraced in the clown role. Parallels can also be drawn to Moreno's

Psychodrama. With techniques such as sociometry, psychodrama seeks to construct a world of equal rights, spontaneity, and creativity. (Moreno 1996 cited in Novy 2014, 175) Its goal is to create conditions for constructive and healing interaction, to empower the voiceless, and to uncover agency even within power structures. (ibid., 176) Like clowning, psychodrama provides a stage on which society, social injustice, historical biography, and cultural patterns can be explored and reflected upon. (ibid., 171-172) As Novy (2014), citing Bourdieu (1997), writes: Das Soziale ist "durch das Handeln der AkteurInnen strukturiert und das Handeln der AkteurInnen strukturierend durchaus angelegt" (Novy 2014, 174).

Some participants suggested that clowning could serve as a model for politics, envisioning a political party of clowns, because politics itself could benefit from clowning's capacity to hold up a mirror and reveal the drama inherent in political performance, as well as serve the people in pursuit of a more just society. (Interview with Leo, 21 June 2024)

According to Laurel Butler (2012), "it is imperative to allow this improvisational experience with the nose" (L. Butler 2012, 68), referring to feminist theatre educator Ann Elizabeth Armstrong (2007) who highlights the "creative agency" (Armstrong 2007 cited in L. Butler 2012, 68) of the actors or in this context the clowns, when they have the freedom to engage with any of the range of stimuli available in the improvisation. (ibid.) "Such forms of improvisation draw upon the body and the environment as resources and eschew narrative structures that can create conditioned cause-and-effect responses" (Armstrong 2007 cited in L. Butler 2012, 68) This resonates with Richard Schechner's (1986) claim that performance collapses the distinction between real and acted emotion, since both are registered as affective experiences:

> "I would say that everything imaginable has been, or can be, experienced as actual by means of performance. And that, as Turner said, it is by imagining – by playing and performing - that new actualities are brought into existence. Which is to say, there is no fiction, only unrealized actuality." (Schechner 1986, 363)

Through myth-making, creative ritual, and narrative disruption, performance and clowning in particular, brings new realities into existence. (Schechner 1986, 364) I discuss this in chapter 3.3.3.

Creating a safe space itself is already an act of liberation, as The Roestone Collective (2014) argue, "cultivating safe space is simultaneously reactive and productive work, reconfiguring existing and context-dependent social norms" (The Roestone Collective 2014, 1360). SafeR spaces expose the seams of "dualistic or simplistic social norms" (The Roestone Collective 2014, 1360), resonating with the endeavor to "unhinge dualism" (ibid.) and to provide "a

sustained de(re)construction" (Desbiens 1999, 184 cited in The Roestone Collective 2014, 1360) of space. Clowning workshops, in this sense, are not free from reproducing social structures but can provide provisional counter-spaces where different behaviors and expressions are explored, practiced, and eventually transformed.

To summarize, clowning workshops may offer a wide range of emotional and social benefits that extend from self-knowledge to collective empowerment, if a space is facilitated that allows so. They foster trust in oneself and others, encourage spontaneity, playfulness, and embodied expression, and open space for embracing ambiguity, unconscious processes, and authentic emotional experience. Participants are invited into a non-judgmental environment where joy, laughter, and intuition can flourish, while failure is revalued as a positive and creative force. Through experimentation, creativity, and authentic encounters, clowning enables shifts in perspective and deep witnessing of self and others. At the same time, it strengthens critical reflection on the interconnectedness of the personal, social, and political, cultivating imagination, agency, and the possibility of intervention and transformation.

4. Conclusion and outlook

Reaching the end of this thesis, I return to the starting point of my journey: the insistent but straightforward question, “Why do people experience clowns as funny?” What began as curiosity about other people’s laughter evolved into a lengthy process of self-discovery, academic struggle, and ultimately, a profound encounter with clowning as a way of being. Personally, I found answers to this question. Integrating this straightforward question into academic inquiry, I developed three research questions.

- What does the current landscape of clowning look like, globally and locally, as explored through three distinct clowning workshops?
- How do individuals engaging in these workshops experience the performative practice of embodying the clown figure, and what are the personal implications for them?
- In what ways do the personal experiences within these workshops intersect with collectively shared norms and values?

This thesis unfolded across three main chapters, each building upon the others to illuminate clowning as a socio-cultural practice and as a site of anthropological inquiry:

In the first chapter, I reflected on the research process and the methodological approaches guiding this study. Drawing on Grounded Theory (Fitzgerald and Mills 2022; Flick 1995), I elaborated on methods such as participant observation (see chapter 1.1) (DeWalt et al. 1998; Flick 1995; Hauser-Schäublin 2003; Stagl 1995)—immersing myself in workshops, embodying the clown, and engaging with their physical, emotional, and intellectual demands—and qualitative interviews (see chapter 1.2) (Lamnek 2010; Forrest and Nelson 2022). I employed guided interviews (Hopf 2019), while remaining open to playful role reversals, and experimented with online formats such as Zoom (Mirick and Wladkowski 2019). I also suggested “ethnoclownography” (King 2017) as a practice-based methodology that highlights embodied knowledge and challenges conventional epistemological hierarchies (see chapter 1.1.2). I addressed the closeness that developed with participants, reflecting on friendship, reciprocity, and care as part of the research encounter (see chapter 1.4). (Owton and Allen-Collinson 2014, Girtler 1991) To counterbalance this, I turned to open coding (Böhm 2019; Hildenbrand 2019; Meinefeld 2019), moving from codes to categories and memos while acknowledging that the analytical text itself is a construction of reality (Matt 2019) (see chapter 1.5). Additionally, I briefly touched upon the creation of my documentary as a way of capturing experiences beyond words and its suspicion and

trivialization in the discipline of social and cultural anthropology (Denzin 2019; Singer and Panday 2016), although it did not directly contribute to the analysis (see chapter 1.3). I also engaged with epistemological debates and the problem of locating “the field,” shifting from a bounded notion of place to an understanding of dynamic processes (Ruby 1980; Gupta and James Ferguson 1997) (see chapter 1.6). In this context, I engaged with queer anthropology (Manalansan 2016; Weiss 2022; Wilson 2019), drawing on Weiss’s critique of “normative knowledge projects” (Weiss 2022, 239), for example, in relation to the binary of male and female. Finally, I situated myself in the research, reflecting on the challenges of working outside the conventional academic mold—navigating sensitivity, intuition, financial and temporal constraints—while recognizing these struggles as shaping my perspective and echoing aspects of the clown persona itself. (Ruby 1980)

In the second chapter, “Reimagining the Clown: From Stereotype to Anthropology”, I traced the etymological origins of the term clown (see chapter 2.1) and examined the challenges of defining it. My investigation revealed that many anthropological encyclopedias lack an entry altogether, while the Encyclopedia of Religion defines it only in relation to ritual clowning. (Handelman 2005) This absence reflects the complexity and ambivalence of the term. Furthermore, I elaborated on the meaning of the term “clown”, which can denote an act, a role, a derogatory label, or an aesthetic code. (Kalb 2017; Kapuy 2008; Bala 2010) I showed that defining clown proved difficult, as the figure resists labeling and is characterized by ambiguity and ambivalence. To illustrate this, I presented a list of terms for “clown” used across different times and regions, pointed out the origins of the word in Europe, and showed how clown figures have emerged in various historical and cultural contexts. I provided a historical overview (see chapter 2.2), noting that mainstream narratives disproportionally focus on European circus and theater traditions while overlooking those of other regions. Much of the available literature is vague and oversimplified. (Davison 2013) I outlined historic overview of clown figures from ancient times, such as Greece, Rome, India (100 A.D.), China (300 B.C.), Egypt (2400 B.C.), through to the middle ages, which appeared in the shape of jesters in the courts of England, Turkey, Iraq, the modern era, where clowns served as entertainers, social commentators, and bearers of luck, and the emergence of the circus clown in the 18th and 19th centuries, before turning to contemporary forms such as dance, activism, performance art, hospital clowning and other contemporary practices. (B. Johnson 1992; Stohrer 2020; Davison 2013, 2016b; Kalb 2017; Singh and Sharma 2023) Next, I examined early anthropological research on clowns (see chapter 2.3.1), which primarily focused on ritual and sacred clowns (Honigmann 1942; Charles 1945; Keisalo-

Galvan 2008; Kalb 2017). I then contextualized clowns and clowning within the anthropology of performance (Bachmann-Medick 2014; Kalb 2017; Moore and Myerhoff 1977; Miller and Syring 2023). From there, I discussed contemporary anthropological research in the 21st century: ritual clowns in Native North America (Plant 2010; Wright 2004), the South Pacific (Mitchell 1992), Mexico (Keisalo 2016), and Nepal (Toffin 2019). I also highlighted newer fields, such as hospital, medical, and shamanic clowns (Hendriks 2012; Rindstedt 2014; Rämgård, Carlson, and Mangrio 2016); political, activist, and rebel clowns (I. Johnson 2006; Kapuy 2008; Bogad 2010; Course 2013; Sorensen 2015; Göpfert 2022); female clowns (Hereniko 2023; Begeré 2018; Counts and Counts 1992); and figures such as horror or "evil" clowns (Roth 2016; Singh and Sharma 2023). Despite this growing diversity of research, I identified a significant gap in the literature: anthropological inquiry into clowning workshops as spaces for self-discovery and transformation remains scarce. Perhaps this stems from the fact that clowning is often not taken seriously, that it exposes the constructed nature of reality, and that the figure of the clown itself is inherently ambiguous and destabilizing. (Mitchell 1992; Keisalo-Galvan 2008; Kalb 2017) Lastly, I touched on psychological approaches (see chapter 2.3.2), particularly those associated with the trickster archetype, as per C. G. Jung, as it has been a dominant interpretive lens across multiple literatures. (Jung 1968 [1954]; Jung 1983 [1951]; Apte 1985; Ulanov 1987; Hynes and Doty 1993; Zumaeta 2012; Belmonte 1990; Keisalo-Galvan 2008)

In chapter 3, I presented the main findings of this research, which is differentiated into five sections: the clowning workshop as socio-cultural phenomenon (see chapter 3.1), the clowning workshop setting (see chapter 3.2), the workshop space as ritual space (see chapter 3.3), the lived experience of clowning (see chapter 3.4), and clowning as emancipatory, liberating, transformative and healing practice (see chapter 3.5).

In chapter 3.1, I began by situating clowning workshops as a socio-cultural phenomenon and as spaces for self-exploration, where participants seek to uncover different layers of themselves. Within clown pedagogy, I identified two distinct approaches: one that emphasizes the development of skills and fundamental clown principles, and another that focuses on the exploration of the self through the use of the flop technique—the latter being the focus of my research. To understand the origins of this emphasis on self-discovery, I contextualized the emergence of clowning workshops within their broader philosophical, psychological, cultural, and economic frameworks of the 20th and 21st centuries (see chapters 3.1.1, 3.1.2, and 3.1.3). This perspective underscores that clowning is historically specific and embedded within the socio-cultural and political conditions of its time. (Davison

2016b) In this context, I highlighted the influence of two key figures in clown training—Jacques Lecoq and Philippe Gaulier (Lecoq 1979,1987,1997 and Gaulier 2007, 2010, 2012 cited in Davison 2016b)—whose pedagogical approaches continue to shape the workshops I attended.

In chapter 3.1.1, I traced the development of clown workshops in the 20th century, from the professionalization of clown actors to the later psychologization of clowning. (Bouissac 2015; Kalb 2017; Davison 2016b; Peacock 2009) This shift emphasized self-discovery as central to the practice of clowning. The self becomes the source of entertainment for the audience, with authenticity grounded in self-awareness and the ability to acknowledge and even enjoy failure. I further elaborated on broader intellectual and cultural movements that influences this shift: the 19th century recognition of the psyche, Fritz Perls's "hot seat" technique aimed at liberating the authentic self from social conditioning, the counterculture and Human Potential Movement in the period from the 1940s to the 1970s in the United States, and the work of Kurt Lewin and Carl Rogers on group therapy, which evolved from therapeutic practice into a wider social movement. (Davison 2016b; Spence 2007) Social factors, such as depersonalization and isolation, along with rising living standards, contributed to the demand for alternative support systems, including coaching and workshops focused on self-exploration. (Spence 2007)

In chapter 3.1.2. I further examined the flop technique, a central element of clowning, tracing its roots to Sartre's existentialist philosophy on freedom and agency, as well as to the post-war context. Embracing failure became a liberating practice in the face of collective guilt after the Second World War in France. The grand flop illustrates that failure is not an obstacle but a defining condition of clowning: the clown succeeds precisely by acknowledging and even taking pleasure in their failure. (Davison 2016b; Liu 2022)

In chapter 3.1.3, I situated clowning within the context of late capitalism, where the question emerged whether embracing clowning empowers individuals or if it ultimately reinforces complicity within exploitative systems. (Davison 2016b, Spence 2007) I countered that rather than being entirely determined by structural constraints, individuals actively and creatively navigate, challenge, and reshape the very systems in which they live. (Saner 2020)

In chapter 3.2, I turned to the clowning workshop setting. I defined clowning workshops as gatherings in which participants engage in clowning through the facilitation of a teacher, within a collective group setting.

In chapter 3.2.1, I analyzed how these workshops differ fundamentally from staged clown performances, emphasizing process, atmosphere, and collective dynamics rather than spectacle. (Davison 2016b)

In chapter 3.2.2, I elaborated on the participants, who, in my case, were exclusively adults, and on their motivations for engaging with clowning. My findings revealed diverse motivations: seeking joy, playfulness, and laughter; breaking out of entrenched patterns; activism and social engagement; artistic expression and performative exploration; breaking free from cognitive thinking and perfectionism; exploring roles and identities; healing and self-discovery; and finding tools for coping with life's challenges. Furthermore, I addressed the criteria of accessibility and capability, noting tensions between clowning as a free and inclusive practice and clowning as a professionalized art form with defined standards and qualifications. This tension reflects competing understandings: clowning as a skill that only "talented" and professionally trained individuals (e.g., jugglers, acrobats) can pursue, versus clowning as an art that is open to anyone regardless of age or experience, drawing on principles of the pedagogy of the oppressed and questions of artistic hierarchy (Freire 1970, L. Butler 2012).

In chapter 3.2.3, I elaborated on the group and on clowning as a relational or ensemble practice. Shifting from the individual to the collective dimension, I examined how workshops create a shared experience among performers, spectators, facilitators, and the space itself. (Saner 2020; Schechner 1985) I elaborated that within this dynamic field, unique forms of communication and collaboration emerge. The audience is not a passive observer but a co-creator who shapes the clown's mimicry, gestures, emotions, and improvisations. Techniques such as maintaining sustained eye contact and practicing conscious breathing help sustain this relational connection. This raised further questions: Does clowning tap into a form of collective unconscious as a vessel for expression beyond the individual self?

Furthermore, I examined key conditions for creating safer spaces in clowning workshops, drawing on interviews with both participants and facilitators. These include non-hierarchical structures, trust-building, clear frameworks, mandatory participation with equality, implicit agreements, such as awareness of the "inner-observer", rules of non-harm, atmospheres of acceptance and compassion, the transformation of competition into playful rivalry, the cultivation of rest and non-exhaustion, and awareness of gender dynamics, including the creation of FLINTA spaces. (see chapter 3.2.3.3) I showed that such practices contribute to environments where participants feel able to engage deeply with clowning. Importantly, I emphasized that safety is not a fixed state but an ongoing and paradoxical process of

negotiation shaped by relationships, social norms, and power dynamics. (The Roestone Collective 2014; Appiah 2019) Clowning workshops are not inherently safe. Instead, their safety depends on the values and practices that facilitators, participants, the group, and the space uphold. By carefully choosing facilitators who align with their expectations, participants can foster spaces where they feel secure to create, express, and experiment with new realities.

In chapter 3.2.4, I turned to the role of the facilitator or teacher, who plays a crucial role in shaping the workshop environment. I showed that their understanding of what clowning entails—whether as an art of laughter or as an exploration of the full spectrum of human emotions—directly influences the participants' journey. (Davison 2016a) Teachers and facilitators constantly adapt existing frameworks and create new techniques, illustrating the fluidity of clown pedagogy. I also discussed the delicate balance facilitators must strike between authority and care, given that participants often enter vulnerable states during workshops. When facilitation is experienced as supportive, it has a direct and positive impact on participants' personal processes and their overall experience of clowning. (Seidenstein 2013; Davison 2016b)

In the chapter 3.3, I examined clowning workshops through the lens of ritual theory, analyzing them as ritualized arenas where participants negotiate identity, explore vulnerability, and re-experience the self.

In chapter 3.3.1, I introduced the concept of ritual in anthropology, understood as performances that express and embody cultural and individual values. (Davis-Floyd and Laughlin 2022) Rituals, like performances, are forms of restored behavior—"twice-behaved behaviors" (Schechner 1986 & 2002), that are trained, rehearsed, and repeated across art, ritual, business, play, and daily life. With this performative quality comes agency: the possibility to act differently and bring about change, whether personal or collective. I then introduced performance studies, emphasizing the porous boundaries between life and theatre and the multiple functions of performances—to entertain, create beauty, mark identity, build community, heal, teach, persuade, or engage with the sacred. (Schechner 1986 & 2002)

In chapter 3.3.2, I addressed the aspect of ambiguity within the clowning workshop frame and beyond. Rituals exist on a continuum between everyday behavior and religious ceremony. (Bial 2004; Schechner 1986; Turner 1983 & 2004 & 2009) I exemplified this ambiguity in the clowning workshops by describing some exercises that deliberately destabilize everyday norms, creating spaces of uncertainty and playful transgression, such

as gibberish. This resonates with Turner's notion of structure and anti-structure, where structured order coexists with temporary suspension of hierarchy, enabling renewal and creative intervention. (V. Turner no date cited in Norbeck and Alexander 2025) I showed that within workshops, discipline and disruption intermingled. Participants adhered to certain forms while being invited to challenge norms, guided yet not confined by facilitators. This paradox revealed that even spaces devoted to rule-breaking remain shaped by implicit rules. The workshop thus emerged as a site of ongoing negotiation between control and freedom, predictability and surprise, constraint and agency. Turner conceptualized such in-between states as liminality (Turner 2004 & 2009). Schechner (1986) extended this idea to performance, suggesting that rehearsals and workshops mirror liminality through their openness and experimentation. I confirmed this with my research: clowning workshops frequently evoked liminal states, where social categories and personal identities were suspended or reconfigured. These spaces could be liberating but also carried vulnerability, offering tools for resistance and reconditioning. I illustrated this dynamic through concrete workshop exercises.

In chapter 3.3.3, I discussed clowning workshops as arenas of negotiation and anti-structural agency. Drawing on Göze Saner (2020), I highlighted how clown training can be understood as a "performer training utopia" (Saner 2020, 146), rooted in Arendt's notion of freedom as action. (Arendt no date cited in Saner 2020) Here, freedom is not abstract but practiced and enacted: workshops and exercises become acts of freedom themselves. (Saner 2020) This resonates with critical pedagogy, particularly of Paulo Freire (2014 [1968], 1970, 2001) and Augusto Boal (1992), which frames learning as a process of unlearning. For adults, reclaiming the openness of play, which is typically reserved for children, becomes a radical act in itself. (L. Butler 2012) Finally, I draw on Schechner's notion of myth-making, where performers not only refine their craft but also invent, rearrange, and generate meaning. (Schechner 1986) Clowning workshops similarly function as creative rituals, sites where narratives are dismantled and reassembled, mirroring the transformative and ever-evolving nature of performance and human experience.

In chapter 3.4, I elaborated on the embodied and experiential dimension of clowning. I demonstrated that the motivation and curiosity to attend clowning workshops were often linked to personal moments of crisis, depression, or a need for change, and usually began before the workshop even started in the form of a calling. Further, in chapter 3.4.1, I discussed the concept of clown consciousness as a process of deconstructing habitual ways of moving, speaking, and interacting. (Schechner 1986) Exercises such as gibberish or

name games, which involve transitioning through ergotropic and trophotropic states, dismantle ordinary patterns, followed by a second phase of reconstruction, where participants cool down, return to the present, and reflect on their experiences. Being on stage as a clown, I observed, could be both frightening and deeply challenging, while simultaneously unleashing powerful creative energy as new ideas are born in constructive disorder. (Turkle 2022)

In chapter 3.4.1.2, I elaborated on the stages that led to the clown state or clown consciousness, showing how they combined deconstruction and reconstruction, separation and reaggregation, vulnerability and transformation, describing Van Gennep's three phases of separation, transition, and reaggregation within the clowning workshops. (Schechner 1986 & 2004) The stage of separation (preliminal) was reached through exercises, where participants were encouraged to shed their everyday identities, become vulnerable, and experiment with new modes of being through bodily awareness, intuition, and the suspension of cognitive control. I illustrated this process through concrete workshop practices. Exercises like "Mr. Hit" or the "name game" raised themes of exclusion and failure, while exercises like "Jacques a dit" addressed humiliation and consequences, as well as the pleasure of being wrong. The liminal or transition phase was characterized by the foundational exercise "Present yourself," which initiated participants into the state of clowning. I connected this to Morrison and Coburn's (2013) four phases of clowning. The last phase of (re)aggregation was characterized by cool-down exercises such as verbal reflections or a shared meal.

In chapter 3.4.2, I elaborated on the concepts of the self, identity, and community. I began by acknowledging that I initially struggled to make sense of the dynamics I observed as identity and community were present, yet often fluid, unmarked, and contested.

In chapter 3.4.2.1, I elaborated on the self as the reflective center of experience. (Sökefeld 1999) While anthropology often treated the self as secondary to sociocultural concepts, I showed that the self actively mediates, resists, and reinterprets identities. (ibid.) I elaborated on the notion of the self in clowning workshops, which, though often critiqued as essentialist, was experienced by participants not as a fixed core but as a shared sense of humanness—the capacity to feel a wide range of emotions and to recognize the commonality of struggle and joy. I showed that this connecting experience was closely tied to moments of spontaneous communitas. (E. L. B. Turner 2012) In these liminal phases, social and personal distinctions temporarily receded into the background, creating a sense of belonging, unity, and togetherness. Nevertheless, I pointed out that identity dimensions such

as race, gender, or class were never absent; they were simply less foregrounded in these experiences.

In chapter 3.4.2.2, I discussed the fluidity and multiplicity of identity and identity politics. (Harcourt 2022; Baumann and Gingrich 2004) I elaborated on the concept of intersectionality (Crenshaw 1989) and the four layers of diversity (Loden and Rosener 1991, Gardenswartz and Rowe 2003), and on Bourdieu's habitus concept. (Bourdieu 1984 cited in Appiah 2019) Furthermore, I drew on Gingrich (2011), Finke and Sökefeld (2018), and Appiah (2019) to argue that identity provides orientation, expectations, and frameworks for belonging, yet must be seen as performative and ongoing rather than fixed. Participants' frustrations with stereotypical images of clowns underscored this point: rather than identifying with the mainstream clown figure of big shoes and colorful wigs, they embraced clowning as an open practice of feeling, pausing, breathing, playing, questioning, resisting, and being. No one claimed a specific kind of clown identity directly. Instead, they identified with broader aspirations: openness, curiosity, activism, and social change. Furthermore, I elaborated on the resistance of interviewees to label identity or community. This reluctance to adopt rigid labels echoed postmodern critiques of essentialism. This was illuminated through Deleuze and Guattari's concept of the rhizome—a metaphor for multiplicity, lateral growth, and ongoing becoming. (Deleuze and Guattari 1995 in Sacchet 2009) I further elaborated on the role of desire as theorized by Deleuze and Guattari (1983). Desire drives both the reproduction and destabilization of social formations. Resistance in clowning thus did not arise from deprivation but from an affirmative impulse to expand, create, and escape restrictive structures. (Deleuze and Guattari 1983 cited in Fouweather and Bosma 2021)

Finally, in chapter 3.4.2.3, I turned to the theme of community and communitas by defining community. (Grodzin Gold 2005) Then I elaborated on how participants perceived their community, often being hesitant to define it too rigidly, as they wanted to avoid exclusion. Yet they described powerful experiences of connection—both in workshops and in informal global networks of clowns. Drawing on Turner's concept of communitas (E. L. B. Turner 2012), I interpreted these connections as temporary states of togetherness that suspended hierarchies and fostered unity. I demonstrated that laughter serves as a means of feeling a sense of belonging, a relational act that reveals human fragility and interconnection. (Fialho de Abreu 2015, Bouissac 2015) Even when participants resisted identifying as a "clown community", their practices suggested precisely such an unspoken community rooted in playfulness, vulnerability, and openness. (Fielnotes Mollnhuber 2023 & 2024)

In chapter 3.5, I reflected on the terms emancipatory, liberatory (hooks 1994), transformative, healing, and therapeutic potential of the work and art of clowning. (Peacock 2009; Beeler and Jonker 2019; Appiah 1994) I examined how participants resonated with those terms. I proposed an understanding of clowning as simultaneously and intersectionally emancipatory, liberatory, transformative, and healing. Rather than privileging a single concept, I deliberately employed all of them to reflect the multiplicity of what clowning can be or become in different contexts. This choice, as I elaborated, resonates with Deleuze's logic of AND, which resists reduction and holds space for plurality. (Deleuze 1995 cited in Fouweather and Bosma 2021). I demonstrated that special attention was given to the term healing. It was not understood as eliminating symptoms or returning to a previous state, but as a deeply personal and collective process of holistic growth. Interviewees described it as accepting oneself in complexity, vulnerability, and imperfection, and allowing one's own rhythm of being, away from external pressures and normative timelines. Healing also involved the capacity to face discomfort and reframe personal narratives, as well as an understanding of change as an ongoing, unfolding process. Furthermore, healing was also reflected on a collective level, pointing to the interconnectedness of healing. Thus, healing emerged as a dynamic journey of self-discovery and self-liberation, embracing ambiguity, imperfection, and social transformation. Furthermore, drawing on both ethnographic material and literature, I demonstrated how clowning workshops create opportunities for self-knowledge, sociocultural critique, and collective transformation. (Roy 2009; Carp 1998; Gordon et al. 2018; Bruhn et al. 2003) I connected these accounts to theoretical perspectives, such as Appiah (1995), framing the healing of the self as authenticity, which is the ability "to express what we centrally are" (Appiah 1995, 161) and "to demand recognition in social life" (ibid.).

In chapter 3.5.1, I discussed the two healing notions for recovery presented by Roy (2009): first, that illness does not define the entirety of the self, and second, that reclaiming agency through active participation in one's own life is crucial. These perspectives resonate strongly with my interviewees' accounts. I also raised the question of whether we may need to "heal" from the very process of socialization, through which we are shaped and positioned within social roles and identity categories. While socialization provides language, norms, and a sense of belonging, it can also generate pain and alienation when roles are experienced as limiting or misaligned with one's sense of self. Furthermore, I examined the therapeutic approach of clowning and found that it can surpass that of traditional settings. Healing in clowning does not have to be burdensome or painful. It can unfold through play, joy, and

lightness—challenging dominant cultural narratives that equate therapy mainly with heaviness and struggle. I further engaged with Cheryl Carp's (1998) principles of clown therapy, which highlight that every person can access clown qualities, that play, humor, and creativity are central to healing, and that the body serves as a symbolic tool for unconscious processes. These insights connect clowning to longer histories of clown figures associated with healing, including shamanistic traditions.

In Chapter 3.5.2, I elaborated on the potential emotional and social benefits of combining literature with my own findings: clowning workshops can foster trust in oneself and others, encourage spontaneity, playfulness, and embodied expression, and open a space for embracing ambiguity, unconscious content, and emotions. (Roy 2009; Carp 1998; Gordon et al. 2018; Bruhn et al. 2003; Saner 2020; Coburn and Morrison 2013; Schechner 2002; J. Butler 2004; L. Butler 2012; Novy 2014; Bouissac 2015, Peacock 2009; Davison 2013; Freire 2014 [1968]; Ameln, Gerstmann, and Kramer 2009; hooks 1994; Conquergood 2004; Pendzik and Raviv 2011; Rosenfed and Noterman 2014) Furthermore, according to my findings, I elaborated that participants can enter a non-judgmental environment where joy, laughter, and intuition can flourish, while failure can be revalued as a positive and creative force. Through experimentation, creativity, and authentic encounters, clowning can facilitate shifts in perspective and foster deep self-awareness and understanding of others. At the same time, I highlighted how these practices fostered critical reflection on the interconnectedness of the personal, social, and political spheres, cultivating imagination, agency, and the potential for intervention and transformation.

This thesis has explored clowning through the lenses of analytical aspects of community, identity, and transformation, while also raising questions that remain unanswered. Among these is the question of whether clowning taps into a collective unconscious, with the clown serving as a vessel for expressions that transcend the individual self. Such questions reach to the core of anthropology: how to understand the human being as both an individual and a social being. Further, within the limits of this study, the dimensions of healing, the self, authenticity, creativity, and play could only be touched upon, yet they remain crucial for further anthropological exploration.

Ultimately, this thesis aimed to reveal a new dimension of clowning as a socio-cultural practice, while also offering impulses for further anthropological inquiry into clowning, humor, and the transformative potential of performance. I sought to demonstrate that clowning is more than entertainment. Clowning workshops can be understood as a ritualized space of

experimentation, where participants engage in processes of self-discovery, vulnerability, collective play, subversion and cultural critique.

I aimed to ignite a fascination with the clown's potential, which lies in exposing the absurdities and injustices embedded in social structures, such as gender norms or neoliberal ideals of productivity, failure, and success. While my analysis began at the level of the self, these experiences were shown to be rooted in broader structures—for example, when those socialized as female experienced clowning as liberating, allowing them to express anger, an emotion often suppressed by gendered expectations. Such acts not only empower the individual but also critique structural forms of normativity. Through parody, exaggeration, and absurdity, the clown destabilizes norms by revealing their constructedness and thus creates potential for subversion. In this way, I showed that clowning can contribute to debates on power, resistance, and alternative world-making. Clowning workshops enable both individual and collective agency to challenge dominant systems, while also highlighting the need for broader structural change. Ultimately, the liberating force of clowning lies not only in personal healing but in opening possibilities for alternative ways of being, shifting the narrative from individual acceptance to the reimagination of norms as negotiable and open to change.

At the heart of this thesis lies a question that exceeds the scope of clowning itself: how can we effect change in the world? Clowning workshops do not offer a definitive answer to how we can effect change in the world. Still, they gesture toward the possibility that change begins when we dare to imagine otherwise.

5. List of references

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Interview with Antonia on 11 February 2024 & 20 June 2024, in Vienna, recorded JM

Interview with Anja on 20 June 2024, online via Zoom, recorded JM

Interview with Corinna on 9 July 2024, online via Zoom, recorded JM

Interview with Francesca on 13 June 2024 & 18 June 2024, online via Zoom, recorded JM

Interview with Kiara on 27 January 2025, online via Zoom, recorded JM

Interview with Leo on 21 June 2024, online via Zoom, recorded JM

Interview with Maryna on 7 October 2024 & 1 November 2023, in Vienna, recorded JM

Interview with Melanie on 7 June 2024, online via Zoom, recorded JM

Fieldnotes Julia Mollnhuber 2023, 2024, 2025