

“Yet through such connection...”

Building Anti-Racist and Culturally Responsive Drama Programs in Rural Communities

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ABSTRACT

With the rise of white supremacist ideologies in the United States in recent years, the need for more place-based anti-racist teaching practices has become increasingly apparent, especially in rural areas where resentment towards ‘liberal,’ urbanized society is often embedded within the identity of rural folks. Educational theatre practices can help students in these places practice empathy and learn about the experiences of others outside of their own bubble of understanding. How can theatre classrooms, specifically in culturally hegemonically white, rural communities, teach in more intentionally anti-racist and culturally inclusive ways? In this article, the author outlines the process of creating a verbatim documentary theatre script, or ethnodrama, entitled Yet through such connection... based on interviews with teachers, parents, former students, community

members, and artists who were or are currently involved in high school theatre programs in rural Vermont that seeks to answer this question. Conversations with the community following the creation of the piece highlight the need to release the internalized shame some folks have living in a homogenous community, recognize student and community experiences, and create place-based, student story led performance opportunities that can open the door to anti-racist and inclusive dialogues.

BACKGROUND: RETURNING HOME

I grew up in rural, northern Vermont, in an area called the Northeast Kingdom. Usually the first images that are conjured when I mention Vermont are of a progressive utopia filled with Bernie-bro democratic socialists, Ben & Jerry's, and idyllic agricultural communities. While those things definitely exist, those images do not always line up with my own experiences growing up in a primarily working class, almost entirely white, rural community. Where I'm from is entrenched in ideals and ways of life that are noticeably different from what a more mainstream version of the U.S. believes is the norm. For instance, in my hometown the first day of deer hunting season is a good reason for an excused absence from school, it's not surprising to find hunting rifles and handguns in almost every home, there are more cows and covered bridges than people, and when civil unions for same sex couples was passed in Vermont in 2000, folks put up "Take Back Vermont" signs on the sides of farmhouses, barns, and tractors to protest it. I was in the fourth grade at that time, and deeply closeted.

Growing up in the Northeast Kingdom was an insular experience. Growing up as a queer kid in the Northeast Kingdom was especially isolating. There were not a lot of opportunities to learn about cultures or experiences outside of the hegemonic culture of the community. I experienced examples of blatant racism, xenophobia, and homophobia from family members, friends, teachers, and other members of the community daily in the form of slurs, jokes, and wildly offensive ideologies being stated as fact. These ideologies were considered the norm in this community, and were never questioned.

Rural Consciousness

At the same time, people who live in areas like the Northeast Kingdom know the perceptions that folks from outside of those communities (most of the time well-meaning, well-educated, and rich, white Democrats) have of them: ignorant, hicks, rednecks. To this day a lot of the folks I grew up with and around hold deep resentments towards a more urbanized and 'liberal' society, which they view as elitist and not caring of the issues that are important to their community. Wuthnow (2018) writes that these same factors have contributed to a hollowing-out of these communities which at one time saw themselves as the hard-working, moral backbone of this country, and that this has led to a feeling of being "forgotten" in mainstream society. Cramer (2016) in her book *The Politics of Resentment* refers to this feeling as an identity in itself that she calls rural consciousness. She goes on to describe rural consciousness as:

an identity as a rural person that includes much more than an attachment to place. It includes a sense that decision makers routinely ignore rural places and fail to give rural communities their fair share of resources, as well as a sense that rural folks are fundamentally different from urbanites in terms of lifestyles, values, and work ethic. Rural consciousness signals an identification with rural people and rural places and denotes a multifaceted resentment against cities (pp. 5-6).

It is this embedded identity of resentment in rural communities that causes folks in these areas to alienate and 'other' the rest of suburban and urbanized society, making hate, racism, and prejudice more accepted as the norm in these areas.

Rural consciousness also has its roots in racism. Silva (2019), in her ethnography *We're Still Here: Pain and Politics in the Heart of America* explains that workers unions in mid-twentieth century industrial America won protections for their workers by purposefully discriminating and excluding Black and Latino workers (p. 32). When an attempt to correct some of these discriminations came in the form of Democrat-led policies such as the New Deal Order, working-class white workers "felt that the party was protecting new groups at the expense of their constituents who built it" (Silva, 2019, p. 32). These workers saw BIPOC folks in their community earning rights they

“hadn’t worked for,” and saw the American government as protecting the interests of people who were “less deserving.” Silva (2019) goes on to explain that “this resentment sparked a reimagining of society’s fault lines: the ‘real Americans’ pitted against undeserving immigrants, racial minorities, and flag-burning, politically correct liberals” (p. 32). This attitude has been passed through generations of rural folks, and continues to contribute to the rural and urban divide in today’s politics with rural communities not being able to keep up with modern economies and growing rates of diversity in their communities due to immigration (Brown et al., 2021, p. 374).

Anti-Racism and Progressive Politicking in a Rural Community

So how can anti-racist practices disrupt rural consciousness and resentment? In his book *How to Be an Antiracist*, Kendi (2019) writes that “the opposite of ‘racist’ isn’t ‘not racist.’ It is ‘antiracist’” (p. 12). He goes on to say that an antiracist lens does not subscribe to a racial hierarchy and does not seek out problems among groups of people, but rather in systems of power and policies that uphold racist ideas. This lens suggests moving away from a neoliberal frame of viewing racism on an individual level, but rather viewing individualized outbursts of racist rage as a symptom of racist socio-economic decision making (Bouvier & Machin, 2021, p. 311).

This idea of collectively dismantling racism and systems of oppression on a power and policy level sounds like something rural folks could get behind, but in practice it does not always translate. On social media, studies have shown that heated discussions of racism and “call out culture” on platforms like Twitter further the blame of racism on individuals, making racism an issue of “flawed character” and generalize those lacking in the cultural capital, stoking polarization (Bouvier & Machin, 2021, pp. 316-317). In addition, as Baldwin (2007) writes, anti-racist work in hegemonically white, rural areas has often been seen as a “no-go” because it is often seen as not necessary or because there aren’t enough BIPOC people in the community to help do it, so inaction becomes the status quo. Indeed, I even felt trepidation as a white person to undertake a project with these themes, but as Baldwin (2007) highlights, it is a responsibility of white practitioners to employ anti-racist practices into their teaching and to do this work within our own communities. This communal approach aligns with what Hines (2021) argues, which is that in order for anti-

racism to work in rural towns, it cannot be a “one size fits all” approach.

Indeed, it is important to note that rural America is not a monolith. According to Junod, Salerno, and Scally (2020), there is a growing diverse population in rural communities, as more BIPOC folks migrate into rural areas of the country. We have also seen the rise of progressive organization and mobilization in these areas, such as the work of George Goehl and the People’s Action, an organization that does deep canvassing campaigns in rural areas to build bridges between those seeking progressive policies and rural, typically conservative, voters (Van Ness, 2020). In a New York Times op-ed, Goehl (2019) writes that the most common thing he hears in his discussions with rural folks over issues of poverty and racism is “Nobody ever asked me what I think.” This sentiment not only illustrates rural consciousness, but as Goehl (2019) warns, in many areas, that gap is being filled by white supremacist ideologies. What I want to know is, how can my own work as a theatre teacher, and the work of my colleagues in educational theatre, advance anti-racist efforts in these communities?

Educational Theatre in Rural Communities

One example we might look at is in the field of applied theatre. Kontolefa and Cannon (2020) describe a forum theatre workshop they designed and facilitated in communities in rural Wyoming entitled *Don’t Poke the Bear*. The performance centered around a white woman in a fictional rural town coming up against racial microaggressions from her community members towards her friend, a queer single mother and member of the Crow tribe, who has just moved to town. Kontolefa and Cannon (2020) explain that the use of forum theatre allowed enough aesthetic distance for participants to be able to identify with the characters in the piece, but also talk about issues of discrimination, power, and privilege without the defensiveness that sometimes arises when talking with white folks about race. Teaching with theatre can be a radical act, and can help build empathy in students by allowing them to explore stories and be confronted with experiences that are different from their own (Liao, 2018). At the same time, Kontolefa and Cannon’s (2020) approach is place-based by drawing from actual stories of hate and discrimination from the community, and by setting the play realistically in the community they were working in. Rearden and Bertling (2019) write that place-based educational practices (PBE), like

Don't Poke the Bear, allow for educators to be responsive to the needs of students' lived experiences and "provide an opportunity for critical reflection" (p. 50) that is so needed for anti-racist work to be done in rural areas.

Despite these efforts, a limited access to arts education persists, especially in rural communities (Donovan & Brown, 2015). While it was small and subsisted on minimal funding, my high school theatre program created a space where I was allowed to practice empathy and develop an understanding for the rest of the world. With the challenges these programs face, how can rural educators make anti-racism and inclusivity more intentional in their small town theatre classrooms? Do these ideas even matter to the stakeholders involved in these programs?

METHODOLOGY

In the summer of 2021 I decided to embark on an arts-based study that would help answer some of these questions. I followed the methodological framework of ethnodramatist and artist-researcher Joe Salvatore and his work in the Verbatim Performance Lab at NYU. My rationale for using ethnodrama and verbatim interview theatre was for audiences to hear directly from the voices of this community that has long felt forgotten and overlooked in the mainstream discourse, and to push through the resentment of rural consciousness by providing participants with a space to tell their stories and get across the needs of their community in their own words. Saldaña (2005) writes in *Ethnodrama: An Anthology of Reality Theatre*: "the artistic project is not only aesthetic, it possesses 'emancipatory potential' for motivating social change within participants and audiences. Ethnotheatre is a manifesto that exposes oppression and challenges the existing social order through an artistic rendering of moral and political discourse" (p. 3). My intention with this project was to unleash this emancipatory potential for rural communities by hearing directly from their voices and experiences. In addition, I set out to use a professionally directed and filmed performance of the ethnodrama as a portable, place-based educational tool that I am able to bring back to these rural Vermont communities and use to facilitate a dialogue with teachers, students, parents, administrators, and community artists. Salvatore (2020) writes that his ethnodramas serve as more of a "meditation on my findings

than as an authoritative statement or a positivist truth” (p. 1045). By bringing the piece back to those communities, those folks then have the opportunity to collectively contribute to this meditation to form meaning and collectively generate answers to these questions.

Interview and Scripting Process

I began this inquiry with two guiding questions: *Based on the experiences of teachers, parents, former students, and community members, what are the successes and challenges of high school theatre programs in rural, working class Vermont?* and *In what ways do these educators and advocates report that their programs work to teach social empathy and combat white supremacist ideologies within their communities?* In this methodology, the research questions serve to guide every aspect of the process from the creation of interview prompts to the selection and scripting of material. In this way, the researcher can allow for nuanced answers to those questions to emerge. Salvatore (2020) writes that “the ethnodramatist must resist the urge to force the data to say something that they want it to say because this can lead to a myopic view of the subject being explored” (p.1050). This allowing of a myriad of perspectives and responses guided every aspect of my process in creating this work.

I interviewed 24 drama teachers, parents, former students, and community artists from rural Vermont both over Zoom and in person using a structured interview protocol. I interviewed each participant only once. Below is the interview protocol I curated for this project:

- 1) How would you describe your community?
- 2) Describe the curriculum of your theatre program.
- 3) Describe a moment of success you’ve experienced in your theatre program.
- 4) Describe a moment of challenge in your theatre program.
- 5) Describe an experience of racism or xenophobia that you have witnessed in your community.
- 6) Describe a time when your theatre program worked against the norms of your community.
- 7) Describe your understanding of what it means to be anti-racist.
- 8) Describe aspects of your theatre program that you would call anti-racist.
- 9) What would you need in order to make your program more anti-

racist?

10) Is there anything else we haven't talked about that you think I should know?

11) Do you have any questions for me?

These open-ended prompts were chosen for this project to provide an engaging and compelling dialogue with the participant, encourage the participant to tell specific stories related to their experiences, and to encourage responses that answered my research questions. I did not stray from this structured protocol. According to Salvatore (2020), "a structured protocol also allows for the researcher to focus on listening and observing rather than being distracted by the added process of assessing where to guide the interview next" (p. 1050). In order to allow the participant to answer each prompt genuinely and as they saw fit, and in order to maintain uninterrupted transcripts of each participant's response, I informed participants at the top of the interview that I would ask them a question and sit back to allow them to respond. Finally, once an interview was completed, I took detailed field notes based on my observations of noticeable gestures or movement, what the participant looked like, and their physical surroundings.

I recorded each of the interviews, and selected three 2- to 3-minute sections of each interview to transcribe. I chose these sections based on which best contributed to the answer to my research questions and which stories told by the participants were most dramatically compelling. I then created scored transcripts of these sections. According to Salvatore (2020), a scored transcript indicates where a participant paused or had a break in their speech pattern, and includes all filler words like ums and uhs. In this way, the ethnodrama would not only depict WHAT rural folks had to say, but also HOW they said it. I then coded these scored transcripts based on themes that stood out. Then, as Salvatore (2020) explains, "the script began to emerge as a series of sections directly related to those bins" (p. 1053). As I began structuring the script in this way, the voices of participants that would become characters in the ethnodrama began to come forward by eliminating transcripts that repeated similar ideas and bringing forward ones that illustrated those ideas in dramatically compelling ways (Salvatore, 2020, p. 1053).

Ethical Considerations

Because of the sensitive nature of the material, and the vulnerability required from the performative nature of verbatim documentary theatre, I put much thought into the ethics of creating this piece. The project and the context for which their interview would be used was thoroughly explained to the participants during the recruitment process and throughout the interview. This included explaining what verbatim performance is and the process by which their interview could be worked into the final script. Participants also signed a release form ahead of the interview, and were given multiple “outs” throughout the process, including having the option to not respond to any particular prompt and having the option to end our interview at any time. Participants were also encouraged to choose their own identifier, either their actual name or a pseudonym, and to change the names of specific places, people, or organizations mentioned in the interview (Salvatore, 2020, p. 1048).

Part way through the interviewing phase of the project, it became apparent that some of these ethical considerations did not go far enough. Rural Vermont is small in terms of population, and the community of drama teachers and theatre artists there is even smaller. It became evident that even if participants used a pseudonym, they could still be easily identified based on some of the content of their interviews, or even how their gestures and speech patterns were presented in performance. In order to protect the identities of the participants, I decided to create composite characters that combine multiple participant voices into one speaker based on similar codes, ideas, or stories. Saldaña (2011) writes that “the composite character is a fictional creation that nevertheless represents and speaks the collective realities of its original sources” (p. 17). The composite voices that emerged ended up in the creation of four characters: The Teacher, The Artist, and two student voices based on specific stories that were told in the interviews: The Student in the Locker Room and The Unfortunately Cast Student.

Casting and Performance

These ethical considerations were carried through into aesthetic choices for performance. I cast four actors, all of who were trained or had experience with verbatim performance, to each play one of the

composite characters. In casting actors to portray these composite characters, I purposefully cast actors who did not align with the identities disclosed by the characters in the stories they tell in the script. For instance, in a story told by The Student in the Locker Room they self-identify as a cis-het, white man, but I cast a female-presenting Taiwanese actor to portray him. Salvatore refers to this choice as “casting across identity,” and go on to say “its purpose is to heighten an audience’s awareness and understanding of the content of a participant’s spoken words and to allow an actor to investigate and empathize with the lived experience of another” (Vachon and Salvatore, 2022, p. 6). This method forces audiences to experience a form of cognitive dissonance and question their own biases when listening to stories coming from a book with an unlikely cover, and to find meaning in the difference.

In rehearsal with the actors on these composite characters, I followed Burch’s (2019) lead in that we would “not physically represent an individual interviewee but instead create an easily identifiable but unique character profile” (p. 33). I coached actors into creating this character profile by providing them with the field notes I had written of the participants that made up each of their composite characters, and encouraged them to pull gestures, costume possibilities, and ideas for vocal qualities to bring into the performance. The final performances were then a comprehensive mix of those participants’ interviews, and representative of their voices without disclosing their identities.

DISCUSSION

The result of this process is an ethnodrama entitled *Yet through such connection...* which you can view for free [here](#). In this section I will briefly discuss some of the findings that have emerged from taking this work back to the participants in Vermont and sharing it with them, some excerpts from the script, and some suggestions that have arisen from those conversations towards a more intentionally place-based, anti-racist rural drama pedagogy.

As they watched the performance, I asked participants to consider what pieces made them “lean in,” and what made them “lean back.” An overwhelming sentiment that was expressed, especially for those who had moved away from the area, was a need to distance themselves from the people they had grown up around, and from rural

consciousness itself. One participant went so far as to say, “I can’t go back there.” Others recognized that themselves, the folks they grew up with, and their students are products of the environment they are raised in.

THE TEACHER (4:04)

And even so I think about um
an African American student that I had who said to me
that um
that black people scare her
and and I paused and I went
now I don't know that I'm breaking news to you, but
I I think you should know that you
happen to be black.
And she said, oh yeah yeah I know but
think about where I grow up
think about where I am
I don't know
people who are black or black culture
really in
in a real way
in a real relationship
and I that floored me.

In this excerpt we can see that the customs, traditions, norms, and ways of life in a community like those in rural Vermont are a part of an individual's identity and inform the way they see and move through the world, like any cultural background. A lot of those norms are entrenched in whiteness, and for many of the young people in these communities, even for a young Black student, it is the only reality they know. In order to build a culture of anti-racism in rural communities, we must have the humility to meet folks in our shared humanities, and be responsive to their local knowledge.

In rehearsals, the actors talked about feelings of internalized shame that crept in when they performed some of the stories folks told about their students, or about moments of racism they experienced in rural Vermont. This is evident in many excerpts where interviewees' speech patterns break:

THE STUDENT IN THE LOCKER ROOM (5:50)

Um

And

I don't even remember what the hell,
the the the specific thing that he said was, but
we were in the locker room one time, just after gym class and
he just
out of the blue
fired off
some

Um

It was like the I mean
I'm sure you've heard
this
before, but like the um
uh
It was some variation on the
um what can a park bench do that a Black man can't
kind of thing.

THE TEACHER (12:26)

But it's also really tough because
a lot of kids when we raised the Black Lives Matter flag they felt
um
they felt like personally attacked,
you know
they felt
and they felt that they weren't
listened to
and they were told like this is how you have to feel about this,
and if you don't feel this way you're racist
um
and so
it was a difficult process.

The participants expressed that same trepidation about being honest with where their students or where they themselves are in their thinking about race, and about the very real experiences that they've had with race relations in their community. It is a truth to accept,

however, that many folks in rural communities don't have the foundation, the language, or the access to even begin this work. Because of that, participants also spoke about fear of judgment from those outside of their communities. Many of the participants leaned back from this excerpt:

THE UNFORTUNATELY CAST STUDENT (7:58)

I I usually when people are like oh, but people are just ignorant I'm like
like
no
because saying that they're ignorant is sort of like a shield
to not say that they're racist
and I just
hated that
because I was like no they're being racist
and
I think that people need to know that,
yes, racist is an insult in itself, but
if you're just going to focus about who called you racist rather than
what you said
then that's like the conversation is not going to be
Like
advancing at all.

In addition to the fear of judgment from the outside, participants also expressed fear of pushback they would receive from the dominant culture they were teaching in. Indeed, by laying the policy-based issue of systemic racism onto a small community we are opening the door for defensiveness and mistrust by enforcing a neoliberal idea of racism as an individualized issue. The resentment of the rural consciousness becomes activated in these moments. Participants expressed this fear by leaning back from this excerpt:

THE TEACHER (13:41)

It's really tough because,
because we need to do so much to help
these
kids
you know

because they're indoctrinated
 from their families
 at a young age,
 and it is very much along the lines of poverty
 um
 and sort of
 and then it's a lot of the kids who
 like school is the enemy,
 and so then you
 you um
 you push up against their beliefs
 and then school is even more the enemy
 so it's really hard to think like,
 how do you win
 you know
 I mean, how do you win with these kids?

Participants responded here to the perception that teachers are attempting to “force views” on students and their families. For many arts teachers in rural areas, they set the tone for what the arts look like for their students and families, and for the community. Much like Goehl (2019) suggests, what happens when we ask students and their families what they think? One participant, a parent of a former drama student, suggested that drama programs create more ethnodramas or devised pieces with students and members of the community around issues of inequity they face. Projects such as this could open the door to talking about wider systemic issues, and create anti-racist theatre that is maybe not as direct, but is a responsive, place-based model for how to have those conversations. One participant in our conversation referred to this method of teaching as “calling out so folks will listen.” I am inclined to think that this student story-led approach is the right direction to move in.

Finally, participants expressed in our conversations that drama teachers in rural areas are in survival mode, and that a big part of making rural drama programs more intentionally anti-racist will include administrative and systemic support in terms of providing training opportunities, funding, better access to material for them to work with, and making art class curriculums a well-funded and integral part of the school day so that they can actually provide a scaffolded, anti-racist,

and place-based curriculum to their students. *Yet through such connection...* is only the beginning of this conversation and work. I specifically chose an arts-based method for this inquiry because performance provides an inherent democratization and portability of data. I encourage you to watch the performance, and to join us in this meditation.

SUGGESTED CITATION

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