

~~all theatre~~
ARTSPRAXIS
~~political~~

VOLUME 5 ISSUE 2 | 2019

ARTSPRAXIS

ISSN: 1552-5236

GUEST EDITOR

Nancy Smithner, *New York University, USA*

EDITOR

Jonathan P. Jones, *New York University, USA*

EDITORIAL BOARD

Selina Busby, *The Royal Central School of Speech and Drama, UK*

Amy Cordileone, *New York University, USA*

Ashley Hamilton, *University of Denver, USA*

Norifumi Hida, *Toho Gakuen College of Drama and Music, Japan*

Byoung-joo Kim, *Seoul National University of Education, South Korea*

David Montgomery, *New York University, USA*

Ross Prior, *University of Wolverhampton, UK*

Daphnie Sicre, *Borough of Manhattan Community College, USA*

Prudence Wales, *National Institute of Education, Singapore*

James Webb, *New York University, USA*

ARTSPRAXIS provides a platform for contributors to interrogate why the arts matter and how the arts can be persuasively argued for in a range of domains. The pressing issues which face the arts in society will be deconstructed. Contributors are encouraged to write in a friendly and accessible manner appropriate to a wide readership. Nonetheless, contributions should be informed and scholarly, and must demonstrate the author's knowledge of the material being discussed. Clear compelling arguments are preferred, arguments which are logically and comprehensively supported by the appropriate literature. Authors are encouraged to articulate how their research design best fits the question (s) being examined. Research design includes the full range of quantitative-qualitative methods, including arts-based inquiry; case study, narrative and ethnography; historical and autobiographical; experimental and quasi-experimental analysis; survey and correlation research. Articles which push the boundaries of research design and those which encourage innovative methods of presenting findings are encouraged.

ARTSPRAXIS Volume 5, Issue 2 reflects on and responds to the issues raised during The NYU Forum on Performance as Activism (2018). This forum was part of an ongoing series NYU is hosting on significant issues that impact on the broad field of educational and applied theatre. Previous forums have been dedicated to ethnodrama (2017), educational theatre (2016), site-specific theatre (2015), teaching artistry (2014 and 2005), developing new work for the theatre (2013), theatre for young audiences (2012), theatre for public health (2011), citizenship and applied theatre (2010), theatre pedagogy (2009), Shakespeare (2008), drama across the curriculum and beyond (2007), ethnotheatre and theatre for social justice (2006), and assessment in arts education (2003).

The NYU Forum on Performance as Activism invited the global community to propose workshops, papers, posters, narratives, and performances to investigate how notions of performance as activism intersect, inform, and collide. Theatre and performance artists, scholars, and teachers were invited to come together to share ideas, vocabularies, strategies, and techniques, centered on the varying definitions and practices of performance as activism.

Key questions the Forum addressed included:

- How is activism defined and/or redefined in 2018?
- How can performance be used to spark dialogue and engage classrooms and communities in critical exchange?
- How can performance be used powerfully and effectively to promote social change?
- How do artists and educators present performance material that is inspirational and aesthetically driven while also having an enduring cultural influence?

Contributions were not limited to participants in the Forum. We encouraged article submissions from interdisciplinary artists and scholars across the many fields engaged in performance as activism. Our goals were to motivate a dialogue among a wide variety of practitioners and researchers that would encourage the transformative power of performance as activism.

Editorial correspondence should be addressed to Jonathan P. Jones, New York University, Program in Educational Theatre, Pless Hall, 82 Washington Square East, Rm 223, New York, NY 10003, USA. Email: jonathan.jones@nyu.edu

© 2019 New York University

ARTSPRAXIS

Volume 5 Issue 2

March 2019

| | |
|--|-----|
| Editorial | iii |
| Nancy Smithner | |
| <i>FORUM HIGHLIGHTS</i> | |
| NYU Keynote, 2018 | 1 |
| Ping Chong | |
| Deaf Talent: Richness within Our Stories | 9 |
| James W. Guido | |
| <i>Ximonik</i>: The Unbound Performances of Maya Women's Group Ajchowen | 18 |
| Chelsea Hackett | |
| <i>IDENTITY</i> | |
| Hope with Dirty Hands: Community Theatre Participation as Activism in Everything is Possible | 36 |
| Bridget Foreman | |
| Energize, Resist, Re-Purpose: An American Theatre Responds | 50 |
| Penelope Cole | |
| From the School to the Educating Community: Practices of Social Theatre in Italy as a New Form of Activism | 63 |
| Giulia Innocenti Malini | |
| <i>YOUTH</i> | |
| Leaping into the Disassociated Space: Unknowing Activism, Agency and Youth Identity in "Notes From Nowhere" | 80 |
| Gustave Weltsek and Clare Hammoor | |
| Illustrator: Kylie Walls | |
| Students as Arts Activists: Insights and Analysis from a Politically Engaged Assessment | 114 |
| Matthew Reason | |
| Inciting Solidarity through Plural Performativity and Pedagogical Aesthetics in Ethnodrama with Marginalized Youth in Toronto | 129 |
| Rachel Rhoades | |
| <i>PROTEST</i> | |
| Beyond the Wall: Borderland Identity through Puppets | 144 |
| Ana Diaz Barriga | |

| | |
|---|-----|
| The Aesthetics of Activism in Korea: The Utopian Performative and <i>Communitas</i> | 158 |
| Jisun Kim | |
| A Silent Shout: Metamodern Forms of Activism in Contemporary Performance | 169 |
| Tom Drayton | |
| <i>RESILIENCE</i> | |
| “It Did Get Rid of the ‘These People Are Old People’ Thing in My Brain”: Challenging the Otherness of Old Age through One-to-One Performance | 185 |
| Bridie Moore | |
| Inday Dolls: Body Monologues and Lullabies for Freedom in Prison: Scripting Possible Futures in Justice Art in Iloilo’s Correctional System | 202 |
| Ma Rosalie Abeto Zerrudo and Dennis D. Gupa | |
| Media Practice and Theatre in Conversation: Co-Creating Narratives for Positive Social Change | 225 |
| Jackie Kauli and Verena Thomas | |

Editorial

NANCY SMITHNER

NEW YORK UNIVERSITY

Last April, at the 15th annual Forum: Performance as Activism, I was heartened to meet practitioners, artists, educators and scholars from around the globe who were enthusiastically engaged in using the art form of theatre to address pressing social and cultural issues. This edition of *ArtsPraxis* includes fourteen inspiring and pertinent articles that report on activist theories and practices that have been initiated, explored and successfully implemented in communities and classrooms.

At the Forum, we asked, “How is activism defined or redefined in 2018?” Through panel discussions, workshops, performances and paper presentations we explored how activism can disrupt, subvert and transform dominant and social political narratives. More than sixty presenters from twelve different countries relayed inspirational and revelatory methods towards the goal of promoting enduring social change through aesthetic expression. In this global space of open dialogue and exchange, we, as activists learned about organizational methods, pedagogical tools, aesthetic devices that, in responding to the complexities of our time, push past boundaries and binaries to redefine cultural innovation.

FORUM HIGHLIGHTS

This volume begins with some of the highlights of the Forum, including the inspirational keynote speech from award-winning director and activist, **Ping Chong**, who discusses the complicated role of the artist as agent of social change. Encompassing puppetry, dance, documentary theater, sound, media and other experimental theater forms, his works have explored a wide variety of subjects from hidden genocide in Africa, to modernization in China, to the experiences of Muslim youth in post-9/11 America. Chong offers his unique artistic vision in reflecting on major historical issues of our times, and the need to focus on bringing unheard voices and under-represented stories to the stage, while maintaining a commitment to artistic innovation and social responsibility.

As one of the expert speakers on the Plenary Panel at the Forum, **James Guido** shares his thoughts and perspectives on the forum's guiding questions. Guido advocates for providing artistic theatre opportunities for Deaf students and emerging theatre artists, in order to promote and provide awareness and understanding of Deaf culture to the larger theatrical community. The next editorial discusses one of the outstanding and unique moments at the Forum—the colorful performance of *Ximonik*, an original play by the all-female Maya troupe Ajchowen. **Chelsea Hackett**, who organized and oversaw the company's trip to New York City, traces her relationship to Ajchowen, which then led to their involvement in the Forum. Hackett contextualizes Ajchowen's unique approach to performance as activism in Guatemala, examining the history of their company and their experiences as Maya actresses.

The following articles encompass examples of theoretical proposals, civic engagement, community activism, and performance as protest in various communities and classroom settings. While the themes in this volume overlap and intersect, I have organized them into four sections: Identity, Youth, Protest, and Resilience, with the hope of representing the great complexity and innovative variety of Performance as Activism.

IDENTITY

How can performance have an enduring cultural influence on the identity of a community? **Bridget Foreman** describes how the participation of 200 actors in a devised performance about suffrage inspired community activism in both the participants and the audience in York (UK). She discusses how the historical themes of the performance, such as female enfranchisement, democratic engagement and violent protest, resonated with and were framed by the contemporary cultural landscape and redefined identity in the community. In the United States, **Penelope Cole** reports on the remarkable transformation of a Colorado professional theatre company that was producing socially aware plays, into a social justice organization that now uses theatre as a platform, making ground breaking administrative and artistic changes in the community. Describing a process of creative democratization, **Giulia Innocenti Malini** explains how theatrical experiences in Milan are offering incentives for local educational policies. Through her analysis of the Franco Agostino Teatro Festival in Crema, and the Monteverlino “school without boundaries,” Innocenti Malini discusses how different representations of performative practices have promoted forms of active involvement of the local community and inspired changes in curriculum, educational systems and community identity.

YOUTH

How can performance be used to spark dialogue and encourage pedagogical and critical exchange? Offering a new way of thinking through multimodality in scholarship and pedagogy, **Gus Weltsek and Clare Hammoor** suggest an innovative possibility for understanding activism and self-formation in the drama classroom—dissociation. Using academic scaffolding and a playful graphic novel, the authors invite teachers, researchers, practitioners and learners to delve into a theoretical moment of disconnect, which they believe can hold hope for the development of individual agency, social justice and equity for young individuals on paths of self-discovery and creation. In a very different approach, **Matthew Reason** explores the experience of asking students to become, if only temporarily, political activists. Offering a variety of arts activist projects to undergraduate students in St. John’s University in the UK, such as “dialogical activism,” “culture jamming” and “quiet activism,”

Reason describes how the students articulated the impact of the module on their sense of social consciousness and relationship to political issues, thus revealing opportunities for “authentic learning.” Discussing how ethnodramatic performance with youth can engender a sense of hope and capacity to conceptualize and enact political agency and courageous resistance, **Rachel Rhoades** reports on her work with the Youth Artists for Justice program in Toronto, Canada, wherein socio-economically under-resourced, racialized youth conducted research and created an original play.

PROTEST

How can performance as activism be powerful and effective in creating social change? Reflecting upon the creation and implementation of a giant puppet performance and festival at the US/Mexico border in 2017, with community members on both sides, **Ana Diaz Barriga** describes her work with Jess Kaufman and their attempt to reframe the politically charged border wall. Barriga relates compelling details regarding the expansion of the festival via the inclusion of community leaders, to the actual event and performance with fifteen foot puppets built and operated by volunteers from various segments of the community. Exploring the notion of “communitas,” **Jisun Kim** analyzes the Ewha Protest and Candlelight Protest in Korea, wherein the performative and aesthetic power of the protests naturally altered the modalities of the community. Kim posits that the non-violent protest provided a space of creativity, whereby individuals were transformed through their solidarity, and were thus able to experiment with a new form of community and self-representation. Through his discussion of Mem Morrison’s *Silencer* and LaBeouf, Rönkö & Turner’s *#HEWILLNOTDIVIDEUS*, **Tom Drayton** examines the emerging concept of the metamodern in political and cultural spheres and how performance as activism can be (re)defined within the current political landscape. Drayton posits that these cases of politically engaged art may point the way for future performative engagement in contemporary culture due to their compelling metamodern oscillation between sincerity and irony, hopelessness and hope.

RESILIENCE

How can performative engagement engender resilience, promote trust and deepen understanding in the community? **Bridie Moore** reflects on age and aging, analyzing her one-on-one performance work in Sheffield, UK, using masks, proximity and subtle exchange as forms of quiet activism, thus challenging perceptions of the old person as “other.” Moore suggests that the contact facilitated in these sensitive performances can reduce prejudice against the “old,” as well as other marginalized individuals and groups. Also examining work with a vulnerable population, **Rosalie Zerrudo and Dennis Gupa** investigate the politics of freedom, space and body in an overcrowded woman’s prison in the Philippines. Zerrudo’s study examines the Iloilo women’s resilience, discovering compassion and community as they created stories, body lullabies and art, in the communal making of Inday dolls. **Jackie Kauli and Verena Thomas** explore the way in which indigenous knowledge systems and performances can be harnessed to co-create narratives and performances for community audiences. Using the model of Theatre in Conversation (TiC,), Kauli and Thomas discuss their work in Papua New Guinea around gender-based violence and sorcery accusation related violence, illustrating how narratives of strength and resilience can highlight challenges, create the conversations, and deepen understanding around sensitive issues.

I hope that you will be inspired by the following theories and practices offered in this volume, ranging from the metamodern to dialogical activism to personal resilience, and surrounded by artistic innovation.

SUGGESTED CITATION

Smithner, N. (2019). Editorial. *ArtsPraxis*, 5 (2), iii-viii.

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Nancy Smithner is a performer, teacher and director. She has been teaching Physical Theatre, Acting, Mime and Directing for the Program in Educational Theatre since 1986. She has also taught at many other venues such as Tisch School of the Arts; Playwrights Horizons, Circle in

the Square Theatre School, School for Movement Research, the New York Dance Intensive, the Berkshire Theatre Festival and Soongsil University in Seoul, Korea.

Recent directing credits include *Hear Them Roar*, a devised theatre piece about women's suffrage, *Tale of the Lost Formicans*, by Constance Congdon, *The Triangle Project*, a devised theatre piece about the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire, *Sonia Flew* by Melinda Lopez, *The Eumenides* by Aeschylus, *Mad Forest* by Caryl Churchill, *(m)body: Provocative Acts*, an original performance work on cultural interpretations of the body, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, and *Godspell*. Her company, The Ensemble of Movement Theatre, performs original works, most recently "...suddenly there came a tapping...", a retelling of Poe's "The Raven" at the Storytelling Series at the Provincetown Playhouse. Since 2003 she also curated, and directed three productions of "Voices of Women," original works by women on culture and identity.

Dr. Smithner chaired the 2018 and 2009 forums for the Program in Educational Theatre, "Performance as Activism" and "Theatre Pedagogy: Teaching the Art Form." She received the Steinhardt Teaching Excellence Award in 2005. Smithner has been a member of the Big Apple Circus Clown Care Unit since 1989, performing for children in pediatric settings, and giving workshops on clowning and physical comedy. For Steinhardt, she is the Director of Undergraduate Studies for the Department of Music and Performing Arts Professions. For the Program in Educational Theatre, she oversees the placement of student teachers in public and private schools throughout the city.



NYU Keynote, 2018

PING CHONG

PING CHONG + COMPANY

On the afternoon of November 6th 2016, I boarded a plane from LaGuardia Airport for Winston-Salem, North Carolina. I had a rendezvous with an audition the next day at Wake Forest University with my collaborator, Talvin Wilks. As you all know it was Election Day. By the time I arrived at my hotel, it was already dark and as my driver turned into the parking lot, the radium glow of a TV beckoned through a large window. The TV was tuned to the election. Once inside as I waited to check-in, the announcement came that the GOP had taken Kentucky. I didn't think much of it. It was a predictable win and as far as I was concerned all bets were off anyway. That night, drifting down sleeper's lane, my eye lids growing increasingly heavy, the telephone rattled me back to wakefulness. Without turning on the lights, my hand fumbled for the telephone. It was Talvin Wilks. His flight had just landed. Without preamble Talvin said, "I can't believe it, Trump took Michigan." The next day Wake Forest University was like a tomb. The air seemed to have been sucked out of the campus except for one place: the Student Union. There two white students ran tearing across the broad, expansive space

of the Union, shouting at the top of their lungs one word, and one word only, over and over again. It was the “N” word.

Talvin and I were in the right place at the right time. In fact the timing was uncanny. We were both prepping for the third incarnation of our production *Collidescope: Adventures in Pre and Post Racial America*. *Collidescope* was originally commissioned by the University of Maryland at College Park, it was followed by a production at the University of Massachusetts-Amherst a year and a half later and then Wake Forest University in 2017. It is a documentary theater work, a time machine moving back and forth in time displaying the violence perpetuated against Black people continuously throughout American history. However, *Collidescope* had a particular conceit: To view the layers of violent historical evidence from the point of view of an alien race the better to see things from a fresh perspective. We also occasionally cross gendered, cross color cast the actors with this same purpose in mind. If you have a black actor playing a white racist in 1861 at a ball in Charleston, South Carolina on the eve of Lincoln’s election for example, you are forced to look at the historical reality differently. If you have a scene taking place on the eve of the American Revolution in which a slave who is a Muslim is fighting for his freedom against the American Revolutionaries, you have to reconsider the meaning of that history. The purpose of the color blind, cross gendered casting was also to remind the audience that our fraught history belongs to all of us, to every American regardless of color or gender, living or dead. We are all in this psychic, leaky boat together and together we will have to plug the leaks sooner or later. Talvin and my idea for the show was to slowly awaken in the audience the horror and insanity of racism through the accumulation of irrefutable evidence from an objectified point of view, the alien’s point of view, to expose the lies of the official American narrative. We want to force the audience to see the cause and effect of this history as it continues to impact our collective, troubling present.

Whenever I am invited to mount a production with students it’s an opportunity not only to open their minds to the creative process and the craft of interdisciplinary work, but also to expose them to the history of injustice wherever it may be in the world. Raising the consciousness of students is of paramount importance to me. I knew that much of the history, whatever it may be, would be unknown to most of them and I was right. For example, in 2004 I was invited to Kent State, where the students primarily did musical theater, in other words escapist theater.

Instead, Michael Rohd and I created *Blind Ness, the Irresistible Light of Encounter*, a gritty and provocative work about the rape of the Congo by King Leopold of Belgium where 5 million people died from enslavement, starvation, murder and disease thanks to Western Civilization. I wanted the students to learn a new, interdisciplinary language of theater making and at the same time become aware of the consequences of historical events as it relates to the present. I wanted them to understand that this obscure piece of 19th Century history about a little known epic genocide was directly related to their lives in the present day. I wanted them to understand that the equally epic rape of the Congo in the present for its minerals including Coltan, which is indispensable in all their digital devices, was part of the continuing legacy of 19th Century colonialism into the present. More than 5 million people have died since the mid-1990's. All Islands Connect Under Water. And we are all responsible.

In 2007, I was invited to the Louisiana State University in Baton Rouge, a year after Hurricane Katrina. I was invited by a friend, Vince Licata who taught BioChemistry there, who also happened to be a playwright. We agreed to collaborate on a work about a real life hero/warrior named Krisana Krasintu, a Thai pharmaceutical chemist. She pretty much single handedly stopped the AIDS epidemic in Thailand. Who in America has heard of her? It is a rarity in the American theater to learn about a real life hero who is an A type woman, and an Asia woman at that, who made a huge difference in the world at the height of the AIDS epidemic. It is rare that Americans take an interest in, or are aware of the accomplishments of other worlds. I wanted the students to see first-hand an example of a human being of conscience who acted on her conscience to make a difference in the world against great odds. Bristol Myers Squibb sent 6 CEOs to intimidate her, claiming she did not have the patents for her work. At the same time they refused to lower their prices for their AIDS medication preferring to let the epidemic in Thailand spread at a catastrophic rate. Dr. Krasintu however, was not intimidated by Bristol Myers Squibb. She stood her ground. As it turned out they had lied about the patents. This was a David and Goliath story and David won. Dr. Krasintu was the first person to create a two pill AIDS regiment that saved thousands and thousands of lives. When *Cocktail* premiered in Baton Rouge, Dr. Krisana Krasintu was invited by the university as a guest of honor. The students had a chance to meet a real life hero. *Cocktail*, *Blind Ness*, and *Collidescope* are some

of the examples of how I bring activism into the classroom. Today I spend more time in University theater departments than in professional theaters because the young matter. They are the future and as we have seen recently they are capable of forceful activism. They are the hope of the future.

In both, *Blind Ness* and *Cocktail* what interested me most was the mystery of empathy. What made a lowly shipping clerk in Liverpool named E.D. Morel, and a British diplomat of Irish descent named Roger Casement empathetic toward the fate of the Congolese in King Leopold's so called Congo Free State, an euphemism if there ever was one? These two men help found one of the first international human rights movements in modern history. What made them see human beings where most of the West at the time saw savages? And Dr. Krisintu, why did she insist on moving forward with her AIDS research alone, when the Thai government laboratory where she was employed opposed and abandoned her? In Dr. Krisintu's case, she had personal models to emulate; her father was the barefoot doctor on the island where they lived. She often traveled with him on his rounds by donkey to the poor villages where peasants would pay him with bags of rice, a pair of ducks, or some yams. She often saw him serving the villagers for free when they had nothing to give him in return. She saw his example as a doctor and above all as a human being, but most of all it was Dr. Krisintu's Grandmother who had the greatest effect on her. She was a Buddhist nun who freed her slaves. It was Dr. Krisintu's Grandmother who taught her the need for compassion in a hard, hard world when she was knee high. As for E.D. Morel, who had a great deal to lose as a low paid clerk, nothing could stop him from his ferocious commitment to human rights, perhaps his Quaker roots was a key influence, but we will never really know for sure. In the case of Roger Casement, he may have been a British diplomat, but his ultimate loyalty was to his Irish roots, the roots of an underdog. Later in life he would be hung for sedition against the British. This and his personal secret as a homosexual may have made him more sympathetic to those framed as Other. Casement knew what oppression was. Maligned in life, he is now honored in death.

In 1992, I began a series of works collectively entitled, *Undesirable Elements* with each production yielding its own individual title. It is a series of interview-based theater works performed by the interviewees themselves. Each production allows community members to address the community in which they live on issues of racism, of intolerance, of

social justice, of marginality, and of identity. It is a work of documentary theater without actors, but members of a community from all walks of life. It is a dialogue within a community. It is a communion, a testimonial, a space for the marginalized and disempowered to have a voice. It is a bridge to understanding. It is the individual witnessing of history as performance. Undesirable Elements has been going on for 26 years across this nation and across the world. At its core is the question of empathy, to recognize that those who appear different from us in the end are more like us than we realize. Undesirable Elements is an opportunity for a community to meet members of their community they might otherwise not know, the better to recognize our common humanity. My staff and I have worked with people from hundreds of different cultures, children survivors of war, survivors of childhood sexual abuse, Congolese refugees, undocumented refugees, people with disabilities, marginalized youth, and as we speak, Native Alaskans and young Muslims.

I have been an artist for 46 years. I did not choose art, art chose me. It is my calling. It is my fate to have been called and it is my fate that I have always been Other, not by my own choosing, but by my societies constant, coded reminder of my marginality as a person of color, as an immigrant, as a bisexual man, and certainly as an artist. It has shaped my art. And in this time of fracture, of fragmentation, of micro-divisiveness even among like-minded people, we do well to move forward in a spirit of inclusion, of generosity and openness rather than repression. Our divisiveness will only weaken us against the fascist tide rising before us. It is essential that we move forward united against the darkness with all the people, of whatever color and gender wherever they may be.

Not too long ago in Champaign-Urbana, at a lecture I was giving about my work, an audience member raised his hand and asked about *Collidescope*, "Why is a Chinese man making a Black Lives Matter work?" My answer? Because I am an American and the problems of this nation are my problems, Because I am part of the solution or part of the problem, because I am an outsider to the Black and White divide, and an outsider's perspective can be valuable, because I am a human being just like you separated only by the myth of race which continues to divide us, and which we must all work hard to transcend, and finally because I am a human being who cares about the fate of our nation and our

common humanity.

On November 7th 2017 the day after the election, I received an email from a friend in San Francisco. The message was simple. It said, "Let there be light," and with it was the image of a lit candle. I forwarded it to my grieving friends. Talvin and I were privileged and fortunate to be at Wake Forest University that day. Without missing a beat we could as artists and educators act in the affirmative, to let there be light. On September 11th 2001, Talvin and I had a similar experience; that night we were to have had our first rehearsal for Undesirable Elements, Atlanta. That cast consisted of six young teenagers, from India, Nigeria, South Africa, Mexico, the Republic of Bosnia-Herzegovina and an African American. There we were young and old Americans, experiencing the same tragedy together. We were collectively impacted. My producer called me after Talvin and I had watched images of the smoking towers on TV that morning. She wanted to know if we were planning to rehearse that night. And I said yes, absolutely we would be rehearsing that night because that was the affirmative thing to do. The darkness was not going to snuff out the light.

After the election the despair in our nation was palpable. Today, the dread of what this new President might do has come to pass and yet the horror and the inhumanity has been with us all along since before the founding of this nation. It is only that the true savagery of it all is naked now and we can no longer pretend otherwise. The poor excuse of a president that we have now is only the boil that ruptured to reveal the aged rot beneath. Along with the despair that so many people felt about the recent election was the impatience to act, to fight back, to crush the bad guys NOW, but the enormous crimes of our forefathers and the continuing legacy of crimes into this century cannot be resolved so quickly. An appreciation of patience is in order, not passive patience, but active patience, the patience of water wearing down a rock, a stubborn patience that nothing can ever stop. My father who was a good man once said, "You cannot remove a mountain in one fell swoop. You must chip away at it patiently, relentlessly, a little bit at a time until it is flattened. There is no other way." Let everyone in this room chip away at the mountain because it is going to take a long time, let as many people as possible everywhere chip away at it. If we all do this together putting our differences aside we will finally inherit the truly just, fair and free society that was promised to us, the truly inclusive society that was promised to us instead of the hypocritical double talk we've had to

endure for 400 years. Let us be the water that wears down the rock and above all let there be light.

SUGGESTED CITATION

Chong, P. (2019). NYU keynote, 2018. *ArtsPraxis*, 5 (2), 1-8.

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Ping Chong is an internationally acclaimed artist and pioneer in the use of media in the theater. His theatrical works bring his unique artistic vision to bear on major historical issues of our times, and focus on bringing unheard voices and under-represented stories to the stage. Encompassing puppetry, dance, documentary theater, sound, media and other experimental theater forms, his works have explored a wide variety of subjects from a hidden genocide in Africa to modernization in China to the experiences of Muslim youth in post 9/11 America. Throughout, the common thread has been a unifying commitment to artistic innovation and social responsibility.

Since 1972, as founder and artistic director of Ping Chong + Company, he has created over 100 productions which have been presented at major theaters, festivals and museums worldwide. Major interdisciplinary works include *Collidescope: Adventures in Pre and Post Racial America* (with Talvin Wilks, 2013 University of Maryland, 2015 University of Massachusetts Amherst, 2017 Wake Forest University), *Throne of Blood* (2010 Brooklyn Academy of Music and Oregon Shakespeare Festival), *Cathay: Three Tales of China* (2005 the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts), *Kwaidan* (1998 Center for Puppetry Arts, Jim Henson Festival), *Deshima* (1990 Tokyo International Theater Festival), *Nosferatu* (1985/1991 La MaMa), *Angels of Swedenborg* (1984/2011), among many others.

In 1992, he created the first Undesirable Elements production, an ongoing series of community-based oral history projects, working with real people to explore issues of culture and identity. Representative works in the UE Series include *Difficult Lives* (2019, Tokyo Metropolitan Theater) *Beyond Sacred: Voices of Muslim Identity* (2015, LaGuardia Performing Arts Center and touring) *Inside/Out: Voices of the Disability Community* (2008, Kennedy Center), *Cry for Peace: Voices from the*

Congo (2010 Syracuse Stage) and *Gaijin* (1995 Yomiuri Prize, Tokyo Metropolitan Theatre.) His puppet theater work *Alaxsxaialaskai* premiered in August 2017 and continues to tour.

Theatre Communications Group has published two volumes of his plays, *The East West Quartet* and *Undesirable Elements: Real People, Real Lives, Real Theatre*. Ping Chong is the recipient of a Guggenheim Fellowship, a USA Artist Fellowship, two BESSIE awards, two OBIE awards, a Doris Duke Performing Artist Award, a 2015 Ford Foundation Art of Change Fellowship and a 2014 National Medal of Arts.

Deaf Talent: Richness within Our Stories

JAMES W. GUIDO

NEW YORK UNIVERSITY

ABSTRACT

Art, in all its many forms, has always given people the opportunity to express their inner thoughts and feelings. Art adapts to the person, and different people exploring the same material will lead to different artistic expressions of that material. As a person changes over time, art can change with them, allowing them to discover new ideas by letting their imagination run free. Theatre arts have always been a breeding ground for presenting new perspectives, since there are no set rules and anyone can present a story onstage. New ideas for presenting information are being discovered all the time, leading to a never-ending wellspring of ways to pass along knowledge. This paper advocates for providing artistic theatre opportunities for Deaf students and emerging theatre artists in order to increase access and representation, as well as promote mutual communication.

Art, in all its many forms, has always given people the opportunity to express their inner thoughts and feelings. Art adapts to the person;

different people exploring the same material will lead to different artistic expressions of that material. As a person changes over time, art can change with them, allowing them to discover new ideas by letting their imagination run free. Engaging with art broadens people's awareness of other people's perspectives and leads to more understanding and appreciation of their situations.

Theatre arts have always been a breeding ground for presenting new perspectives, since there are no set rules and anyone can present a story onstage. Cultural perspectives are one of the biggest influences in how art is presented, as every culture will tell a story through its own eyes. For example one of Broadway's most popular musicals, *The Lion King*, would not be the same if it was not influenced by the rich culture of South Africa (Paulson, 2017). However, not all groups have the same opportunities to present their perspectives through theater. The Deaf community is one such group. Traditionally, they have not explored artistic expression through theater due to a lack of exposure, awareness, and opportunities. The New York Deaf Theatre (NYDT) is working to help change that, by increasing the Deaf community's access to theater. Since 2012, I have been the Artistic Director for New York Deaf Theatre, a non-profit theatre company founded by a small group of Deaf artists in 1979. Our mission is to provide artistic theatre opportunities to Deaf talent, including actors, directors, playwrights, designers, and various positions in crew, to develop and show their work on and offstage. Producing a show through "Deaf eyes" showcases Deaf cultural experiences and perspectives.

The concept of showcasing Deaf culture in "Deaf art" is relatively new, as I discussed as part of a panel presentation facilitated by Dr. Nancy Smithner at the NYU Forum on Performance as Activism. Since I am Deaf, I responded in ASL and interpreters translated my response into English for audience members not familiar with the language.

Speaking of Deaf art, it's really a new topic. And Deaf talent is something we have to kind of find in the community because it's not something that people have expressed often because of the oppression that people have experienced. So we have to learn even through those oppressive experiences to show our whole heart towards our art and just to show all audiences what we have to offer. And I—it's interesting because I've seen some people who are more limited in their talent because they're afraid to be that vulnerable.

Working with the Deaf community—having them come and see our art—have them appreciate our performances—it may be the first time they see a performance that is offered in American Sign Language—and they don't have enough opportunities to see those types of creative efforts and so if we can create something that they can understand directly, then we've focused our efforts in the right place.

By providing a space for the Deaf community to engage in theatre, both as creators and audience members, NYDT is committed to expanding the opportunities for the Deaf community to participate in theatre and for the theatre community to see things from a Deaf perspective.

One of the opportunities I'm most proud of facilitating as NYDT's Artistic Director is a series of workshops that explore new ideas to showcase a Deaf perspective in theatre. At one workshop, the participants and I discussed the idea that to fully express their artistic vision it was helpful for Deaf playwrights to do so in their first language, ASL. As a result, we came up with the idea of a visual script, where Deaf playwrights can "write" their story in ASL. Since then we have worked on refining this idea. While it is still in development, the progress has been very exciting. Working with Deaf talent to overcome the obstacles they face led to a creative solution that could lead us to new ways of thinking about how to produce art. NYDT workshops and productions are not limited to Deaf talent. Indeed, we are open to working with everyone who is interested in Deaf theatre, learning a new visual language, and working as a team to discover a new artforms. Creative expression from the Deaf community is not just about discovering new ways to entertain, but also helping form new ways for everyone to express themselves, and provide an awareness of Deaf culture and an understanding Deaf perspectives to the larger community.

Allowing Deaf voices to be heard through theatre involves having FULL accessibility for audiences, both Deaf and hearing. Part of achieving this goal is presenting more theatre experiences in Deaf people's first language, American Sign Language (ASL), with translations provided for non-signers. Imagine yourself seeing a production in your native language. It is a rare occurrence for a production to be done entirely in ASL, and the chance to see a production in your native language can be a life-changing experience. Early NYDT productions were mostly presented with some actors using

ASL while other actors used spoken English simultaneously. One of my goals, as the NYDT Artistic Director, is encouraging the creative intermixing of ASL and English in our productions, including scenes with ASL and Open Captions in English, scenes with ASL and spoken English performed at different times, and even scenes without any language at all. These different presentations add a more realistic sense of how the Deaf and hearing communities interact. Deaf theatre is not limited to the incorporation of ASL and art can always be expressed without speech. For example, Charlie Chaplin became famous without ever speaking, relying solely on body language. Moreover, one of New York City's longest-running off-Broadway shows, *Blue Man Group*, is a perfect example of how a story can be expressive and entertaining without a single spoken word. More recently, the popular interactive theatre experience, *Sleep No More*, encourages the audience to follow actors around a building, submerging them into the world of *Macbeth* largely without spoken words. These artists and productions are prime examples of how theatre art can always find a way to creatively engage audiences of all types.

Art cannot only showcase and explore a culture, but also bring about change in how that culture is perceived. During the Performance as Activism panel discussion, Dr. Smithner asked the panelists to reflect on how activism can move society towards social change. I had a two part response:

Speaking of activism and deaf talent, I've been impacted by two big things. One is the hearing audience who are amazed to see deaf culture on stage—because so rarely do we see that. And that's not a bad thing; that's a great thing—that they can come to that realization. And I hope to be able to show that talent in a way that not all deaf people are the same. You do not portray every deaf person the same and I want hearing audiences to see that diversity within the community. And also being able to be a role model for deaf children. Deaf children don't have many role models out in society—Marlee Matlin may be the only one that comes to mind—but there are a lot of deaf people out there working but they just don't have exposure. And so if I can give exposure to people that children can see and know that they are here—they are in their communities, they are working, and then maybe those deaf kids won't think of deafness as such a bad thing. And if we stop talking

about an ability to hear and start talking about the culture and the language and the richness that exist within our stories, the deaf kids will be able to internalize that—and that's important.

Representation is important; seeing oneself in a character can give a person a feeling of belonging and provides children with a role model who they can aspire to emulate. The depiction of Deaf characters and the casting of Deaf actors are the keys to creating this type of representation. Unfortunately, not everyone in the modern film and theatre industries provides these opportunities to Deaf talent, even when there is a Deaf role in a story. In most cases, characters with Deaf backgrounds are performed by hearing actors who have a little or no experience with Deaf culture or ASL. For example, in 2015, the History Channel produced a mini-series, *Texas Rising*, based on the true story of the formation of the Texas Rangers during the Texas Revolution. It included the character Ranger Captain Erastus “Deaf” Smith, based on a real Deaf Texan soldier. Jeffrey Dean Morgan, a hearing actor with no record of experiences in Deaf culture, was cast in the role. In response, award-winning Deaf director Jules Dameron, used a social media protest with the hashtag “#Deaftalent” and wrote a blog regarding the mini-series and Mr. Morgan:

So ask yourself: is it okay for the production companies to allow a hearing actor to play an iconic historical deaf figure that holds so much significance to the d/Deaf community? Jeffrey Dean Morgan is a hearing man, talented, and he has a far greater privilege than deaf people will ever have, along with (assuming) most of the production company who have made this casting choice. Morgan is doing what he is supposed to be doing as a professional actor. Look for the best roles that will escalate his career. Deaf actors do not have that privilege, or not yet. They could if the system was different.

Hearing people should not own the decisions that revolve around representing d/Deaf people. They are already making decisions for people that they have not even the slightest understanding of. For starters, deaf actors are simply deaf. This does not mean that they are unable to act. It is #DeafTalent's standpoint that deaf roles are meant for deaf actors. Anyone who considers involving deaf

characters or stories about them should consider working with actual deaf people. Who said it was okay for hearing people to make decisions that determine deaf people's lives? Doesn't anyone find it a bit odd that sometimes people create films or stories that involve deaf characters, and never hire a deaf person to be involved?

Deaf people continue to be barred from opportunities to work in the industry. According to "CinemAbility" (a documentary directed by Jenni Gold) the fabric of the Hollywood industry does not have enough people of diversity/disability. They need access to resources and opportunities to become skilled actors. So of course, it's a genuine catch-22. No opportunities, no access to training or the industry, and no room for improvement. (Dameron, 2015)

#DeafTalent has been spread worldwide and is an attempt to show the hearing community just how tired Deaf people are of having their culture and language ignored or misrepresented when they are portrayed. In addition to giving Deaf roles to hearing actors, the creation of Deaf roles is often done without the input of Deaf people, leading to inaccurate representations of Deaf life. Without authenticity, a hearing audience will never understand how Deaf people grew up or recognize the differences in how we experience the world. A Deaf character that is a caricature doesn't fill children's need for Deaf role models. Roles that reflect the real experiences of Deaf people will help them accept who they are and inspire them to understand that they can do anything they want to. Stories that focus on a broad range of experiences, not just the well-worn conflict of being Deaf in a hearing world, are also needed. Deaf people do more than think about their deafness—we can fight like Dwayne Johnson, dance like Bob Fosse, and make people laugh like Charlie Chaplin. We're just asking for the chance to be seen and to be understood.

Achieving this goal of increased representation requires that the Deaf community gains the theatre education and experience needed to obtain these roles. In the United States, there are only a few universities that provide theatre courses accessible to Deaf artists. Providing more places for Deaf people to learn about theatre, even in small ways, will help people achieve their dreams. The earlier theatre is introduced to Deaf children the easier it is for them to develop the skills necessary to work in the entertainment business. I was lucky to be introduced to

theatre in high school, although I didn't receive actual theatre education until college where I studied theatre production at Rochester Institute of Technology. I credit my involvement in theatre productions for improving my writing skills and my ability to translate from English to ASL. The visual aspects of analyzing scripts, directing, and performing were key to these improvements. My theatre education is directly related to my improved ability to understand and communicate with others, especially those who do not use ASL.

Through my graduate work in the Program in Educational Theatre at NYU I have become convinced that visually-oriented educational theatre programs are essential to teaching Deaf children how to express and advocate for themselves. Cecily O'Neil once said, "... if students are unable to imagine things differently and consider the world from unfamiliar perspectives, they will be unable to bring about any change in their circumstances. The arts and drama in particular have always provoked these shifts of perspective" (Landy & Montgomery, 2012). One way to help students think about different perspectives is through process drama. As Philip Taylor writes, process drama involves a "structured improvisational activity in which teachers and students jointly contract to an imaginary world" (1998, p. 14). Using both their imaginations and the visual media of theatre helps Deaf students process concepts using a combination of sign language and written language. The use of ASL by the educator enhances the benefits that Deaf students receive (Strong & Prinz, 1997). Process drama is not only intended to help participants problem solve, but more importantly, open their minds to new ideas, express themselves, and meaningfully engage with the specific topic under investigation. As education professor Brenda Rosler explains "Integrating Process Drama into the curriculum changed the focus of the classroom to students, not textbooks. Dramatic dialogues provided my students an important opportunity to question and challenge each other" (Rosler, 2010). Process drama not only helps students with general knowledge acquisition but can also help them learn to listen to each other and work together. These skills are important for all children to learn to foster tolerance and acceptance of others.

Understanding and acceptance of the need of groups other than your own is at the heart of improving how the Deaf community is treated. Theatre education can help Deaf children learn to advocate for themselves and grow into artists whose work can help hearing people see things through "Deaf eyes." While the passage of the Americans

With Disabilities Act (ADA) has led to an increase in accessibility, its scope is limited. It's also important to remember that the burden of obtaining accessibility is on the person who needs the accommodation. Additionally, Deaf children are often born into a hearing family and sometimes it's hard for Deaf children to connect with Deaf culture. The lack of cultural connection can be very isolating.

Ultimately, as a student, professor, teaching artist, actor, Artistic Director, and activist, I want to emphasize that theatre can have long lasting effects on people, especially at an early age. Theatre give students a chance to learn more easily from a teacher who is engaging them visually and letting them use their imaginations to understand the perspective of others. It can help teachers become more aware and understanding of Deaf culture and the struggles their Deaf students may be going through. The effect of representation in media can also positively affect Deaf children and the Deaf community as a whole. Without Deaf role models or any art by Deaf talent, Deaf children will never able to view themselves with equal humanity to those groups who are represented. Deaf voices also have the power to change the way the hearing community views and interacts with the Deaf community. This can't be done without opportunities or giving roles to Deaf talent. Theatre gives Deaf talent a way to bring out their inner emotions and show them to everyone, both on and off-stage. Simultaneously, audiences, no matter who they are, have an opportunity to see the world from a Deaf perspective and be entertained in new ways. It's like killing ten birds with one stone. We just have to find the stone and give it to the right people.

SUGGESTED CITATION

Guido, J. W. (2019). Deaf talent: Richness within our stories. *ArtsPraxis*, 5 (2), 9-17.

REFERENCES

- Dameron, J. (2015). "[Why deaf roles are meant for deaf actors—'Texas Rising.'](#)" Tumblr, #deaftalents.
- Landy, R. J., & Montgomery, D.T. (2012). *Theatre for change: Education, social action and therapy*. New York: Palgrave

Macmillan.

Paulson, M. (2017, Nov. 15). [The 'Lion King' effect: How a Broadway smash changed South African lives](#). *The New York Times*.

Strong, M., & Prinz, P. M. (1997). "A study of the relationship between American Sign Language and English literacy." *Journal of Deaf Studies and Deaf Education*, 2 (1), p. 37-46.

Taylor, P. (1998). *Redcoats and patriots: Reflective practice in drama and social studies*. Portsmouth: Heinemann.

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

JW Guido is an actor, director, and the Artistic Director for the New York Deaf Theatre (NYDT). Since joining NYDT as the Artistic Director in 2012, JW has focused on creating opportunities for Deaf artists through productions, play development, and other performance and community events. He is also committed to providing accessible performances for both Deaf and hearing audiences. JW has a passion for acting and directing, and has performed in various cities around the US and Canada. Outside of theatre, he teaches American Sign Language in various locations and is the author of *Learn American Sign Language*, a beginner's guide to American Sign Language. Blending his love of theatre and education, JW has worked with TDF as a teaching artist, providing workshops to Deaf students who are preparing to attend Broadway shows. JW is currently a doctoral student in the Program in Educational Theatre at NYU.

***Ximonik*: The Unbound Performances of Maya Women's Group Ajchowen**

CHELSEA HACKETT

NEW YORK UNIVERSITY

ABSTRACT

This article describes Ximonik, an original play by the all-female Maya troupe Ajchowen which premiered in the U.S. at the 2018 NYU Educational Theatre Forum: Performance as Activism. This editorial traces the author's relationship to Ajchowen, which led to their involvement in the Forum. Further, it contextualizes Ajchowen's unique approach to performance as activism in Guatemala, examining the history of their company and their experiences as Maya actresses.

A STOP

In 2014, in Sololá, Guatemala, I experienced what Fels (2012) would call a *stop*: "a stop occurs when... we recognize absence, a gap, a dissonance, a possibility newly perceived" (p. 53). My long-term colleague and Executive Director of the girls' educational organization

Starfish: Her Infinite Impact (Starfish), Norma Baján Balán, had taken me through a cornfield to a local cultural center to see the play *Ixkik* by an all-female Maya theatre company called Ajchowen. Watching the performance, I bore witness to individual and collective embodiments of Maya women's experiences that were grounded, physically expressive, and deeply personal. Ajchowen's art illuminated their world in a way discourse alone could not. It was then that Norma, Ajchowen performers and I began to imagine ways in which their unique theatrical abilities could be shared with the young Maya girls that Starfish served, planting seeds for a partnership that has continued to grow for the past four years.

I have been working with Starfish since 2009 as an applied theatre consultant and researcher. When I first met the performers of Ajchowen, I was engaged in a Participatory Action Research (PAR) project with Dr. Beth Osnes of the University of Colorado at Boulder and Starfish to develop a *Vocal Empowerment*¹ program for Maya girls. PAR is a transformational research methodology; it is community-based and seeks to create a horizontal relationship between researcher/participant in which both learn from each other and work collaboratively toward a shared solution to a proposed challenge/problem (Walter, 2009; Weber-Pillwax, 2009). Applied theatre researchers often turn to PAR because of the similarities to Freire's (1993) axiology (McCammon, 2007). As Weber-Pillwax (2009) advises, "to engage in PAR, a researcher has to trust, has to have faith, has to be able to say, 'I want this' without knowing the end of the journey" (p. 57). At the outset of working with Starfish in 2009, I couldn't have known what our relationship would become; but I knew I wanted to find out.

Following her research with Maori people of New Zealand, Indigenous author Linda Tuhiwai Smith (1999) asked of researchers in Indigenous spaces: "Is her spirit clear? Does he have a good heart? What other baggage are they carrying? Are they useful to us? Can they fix up our generator? Can they actually do anything?" (1999, p. 10). As a white, Globally Northern, U.S.-based applied theatre practitioner and researcher, I have found myself returning to Smith's words in my work

¹ Drawing from theatre and voice therapy techniques, as well as local knowledges of our Starfish partners, the goal of the Vocal Empowerment program is create a spaces for young women "to engage their voices as they author, rehearse, and critique the various realities they envision for their lives, their communities, and the world" (Hackett & Osnes, 2016, p. 42).

with Starfish as I have developed the Vocal Empowerment program and worked to integrate Ajchowen's theatrical techniques into their school.

A SPACE TO GROW

While our interests in collaboration between Ajchowen, Starfish and myself began in 2014, they didn't grow roots until 2016 when I was commissioned to write the curriculum map for Starfish's brand new all-girls school. When crafting the curriculum, Starfish partners and I saw an opportunity to work with Ajchowen performers: Clara Alicia Sen Sipac Guarcax (Clara), Mercedes Francisca García Ordóñez (Mercedes), Yesica Lorena Poncio Tumax (Lorena) and Graciela Maribel Coz Cuy (Graciela) as artistic experts. We wrote a space of two modules within the curriculum to allow for a partnership with Ajchowen to address multiple artistic standards, focusing largely on theatre and dance. After developing the full curriculum, it quickly became clear that this partnership could also provide unique and generative spaces for inquiry that rests squarely in my field of study: applied theatre. For my doctoral dissertation, I conducted a PAR study on the collaborative development and implementation of the Starfish art curriculum, focusing on its potential as an example of effective intercultural education for Maya girls.

Ajchowen and Starfish opened their organizations to my research. The teachers at the Starfish Impact School invited me into their classrooms, trusted me as a co-teacher, and educated me on their unique approach to education for Maya girls. Clara, Mercedes, Lorena, and Graciela of Ajchowen give their time to the Starfish Impact students and helped to put into practice a project-based curriculum that situated the students' learning in their communities. They gave their feedback on the curriculum and offered suggestions for how it might grow and change in the future. Further they offered their experiences as examples of the many ways to be a Maya woman in Guatemala today. Their lived knowledge was essential to the success of our partnership and the learning and growth of the Starfish Impact students. Further, they welcomed me at one of their rehearsals and offered clarity on the Maya Cosmovision throughout my fieldwork.

RECIPROCITY

As a PAR researcher attuned to the unique experiences of working within Indigenous communities as a non-indigenous researcher, I felt that reciprocity was a vital aspect of my research and wanted to ensure that I was bringing not only my skills as an applied theatre practitioner to our partnerships, but also seeking to leverage my privileges as a Globally Northern, white researcher to serve the needs of both organizations and reciprocate the generosity they displayed throughout our time together. While I completed my fieldwork in 2017, our relationships continued and I sought to find opportunities for reciprocity whenever possible.

In 2018, I served on the planning committee of the Program in Educational Theatre's annual forum. The theme of the year's forum was "Performance as Activism" and Ajchowen's work seemed like an incredible example of just that. The committee invited Ajchowen to perform their play *Ximonik* at NYU as a part of the forum. While in New York, they performed their show twice. It was recorded by the *Hemispheric Institute*, a performance-focused organization housed at NYU that unites artists and activists across the Americas; the same institute also recorded an interview of Clara and Mercedes speaking about their work which they will host on their website alongside *Ximonik* in perpetuity.²

The remainder of this article describes *Ximonik* as it was performed at the 2018 NYU Educational Theatre Forum, traces the history of Ajchowen and the historical and current Guatemalan context, and finally outlines the actresses unique experiences of creating theatre as a form of activism for and by Maya women.

XIMONIK

An orange and yellow wash illuminates a single tree on a proscenium stage, wrapped in intricately woven fabric. A drum begins to play from offstage, signaling that *Ximonik*³ has begun. Three Maya women enter, moving and dancing in ways that match the intricately carved masks they wear: they are *B'atz* (Monkey), *Kan* (Snake), and *Ix* (Jaguar) and

² [View the recording](#) of *Ximonik* at the 2018 Forum

³ *Ximonik* is a Kaqchikel Maya word that translates to Spanish as *amarrar* and English as *to tie (up)*.

represent three of the twenty *nawales*, Maya energies that guide the Cosmos and people. Their arms swing across their bodies and they ground deeply into the floor with bent knees; the pace varies between them, but each woman brings the body of her animal to life with specificity and grace. Their movements evolve as the drumming that underscores them builds to a peak. *Kan* moves to the floor, places the backstrap of a loom around her lower back and begins to weave. The gesture of threading new colors over and under evokes a centuries-old practice. As *Kan* continues to layer the colorful threads, a fourth character enters. Cloaked in a brown-hooded habit, with a large wooden rosary and a sword, this masked figure is a walking representation of the Franciscan friars who arrived on this land 500 years ago.⁴ If there was any doubt of what this character represents, his⁵ words confirm it:

| | |
|---|--|
| Ejerzan dominio | Exercise dominion |
| Sobre los peces del mar | Over the fish of the sea |
| Sobre las aves del cielo | Over the birds of the sky |
| Y sobre todo ser viviente que se mueve | And above all living beings that move |
| Sobre la faz de la tierra. | Over the face of the earth. |
| | |
| Juristas y Teólogos | Jurists and Theologians |
| La consideran | Believe |
| Como justa causa para la conquista, | it is just cause for the conquest |
| Si los indios no pertenecieran a la especie humana, | If the Indians did not belong to the human race, |
| La evangelización no tendría sentido... | evangelization would not make sense |
| Gracias dios | Thanks be to God |
| Por darme la oportunidad de aplicar tan justa causa | For giving me the opportunity to apply such a just cause |

⁴ The first successful mission of Friars to Guatemala began in 1533. They came to establish religious schools and begin the conversion of the Maya people. The church continued this effort throughout the colonial period in New Spain (Habig, 1945, p. 330).

⁵ While represented by a female actress, this masked figure seemed to represent a gendered male Friar, and more broadly and embodiment of colonial patriarchy, and will heretofore be referred to as male.

| | |
|--|---|
| Y además, no son capaces de doctrina, Sus juicios son bajos y apocados No tienen artes Ni mañas de hombres, No quieren mudarse ni de dioses ni de costumbres Son cobardes como las liebres, sucios como los puercos Cruels, ladrones, haraganes, hechiceros... | And besides, the Indians are not capable of doctrine Their thoughts are low and dull They do not have talents Nor tricks of men They do not want to change their gods or customs They are cowards like hares, dirty like pigs Cruel, thieves, lazy, sorcerers |
| Facilísimamente se juntan con las mujeres como cuervos o víboras Las mujeres sin vergüenza muestran desnudas todos sus pecados, provocando los nobles instintos de nuestros pobres soldados. | How easily they “join” with women like ravens or vipers Women without shame who show all their naked sins, Provoking the noble instincts of our poor soldiers. ⁶ |

The three Maya energies move frantically at his arrival. They mutter urgently to each other in Kaqchikel,⁷ swerving away from his booming declarations. The Friar laughs and rides his sword like a horse around the stage, wailing pronouncements as he moves. The energies are frenzied as they flee from his presence. The Friar, armed with his sword, pays no mind to their frenetic movements. He grabs the top of *Kan's* head and beheads the snake, removing the mask and replacing it with a sheep's mask. *B'atz* and *Ix* placidly follow course, removing their own masks and forming a new herd. They are reduced to crouching, placidly following the motions of the Friar. They bleat and crawl, then pray in Spanish. They sing a song in Spanish that Evangelical audience members might recognize from Sunday mass. Their conversion seems complete. However, as tension builds, their submission cannot last.

⁶ Original and Translated text from *Ximonik*. Originally spoken in Spanish (Ajchowen, 2016).

⁷ Currently there are twenty-one Maya languages spoken throughout Guatemala. Of those languages, Kaqchikel is one of the most widely spoken and studied, with over 500,000 current speakers. It is the predominate Maya language of the region in which the Starfish Impact School is located (Rohloff & Tummons, 2017).

The former *Kan* resists the Friar, exchanging the sheep mask for the serpent's head once again, and climbs the tree that once anchored the loom. From there, she beckons one to the former Jaguar, *Ix*, signaling for her to remove her mask. With the removal, *Ix* becomes a Woman; as the Woman stands, *Kan* offers her a shining red apple. This scene evokes a different story: the Garden of Eden. The Woman (*Ix*) takes the apple, holds it in contemplation for a moment, and takes a deep bite. This Eve-like Woman, proudly bearing an apple from the Tree of Knowledge, offers the remainder to the final sheep, a stand-in for Adam in the Biblical tale this resembles. The final sheep removes her mask and moves downstage center. She passionately monologues in K'iche'.⁸ After a beat, Eve morphs back into *Ix*, the jaguar she once was, as the last sheep, emboldened with the apple's power, once again becomes *B'atz*, the monkey. Adam and Eve are lost, and the *nawales* are restored.

Having regained awareness of their existence and value, all three Maya figures resist the Friar, who, in the face of their power and suggested femininity, aggressively asserts that women belong in the home. Emboldened with the apple of knowledge, all three masked figures counter the Friar with a dance that grows incrementally stronger and larger, sending him to his knees in shame. They exchange his mask with a sheep's. With this gesture, they defeat the Friar and the colonial power he represents—recovering agency for Maya women and populace at large. As the play closes, *Kan* is once again at work on the loom, leaving the audience with a sense that the Maya Eve, if she was Eve, has been transported to an anti-colonial paradise, her epistemology and ontology fully restored (Ajchowen, 2016).

AJCHOWEN

Ximonik premiered in Sololá, Guatemala November 12th, 2016 and made its U.S. debut at the Frederick Loewe Theatre at New York University on April 21th, 2018. The cast comprised of four Maya actresses mentioned earlier in this article: Clara Alicia Sen Sipac Guarcax (Clara) as *Ix* / *Eve*, Mercedes Francisca García Ordóñez (Mercedes) as *Friar*, Yesica Lorena Poncio Tumax (Lorena) as *B'atz* / *Adam* and Graciela Maribel Coz Cuy (Graciela) as *Kan*. Despite

⁸ Another of the twenty-one Maya languages spoken in Guatemala.

Ajchowen being a group of female performers looking at women's issues, group members have continued to make an active choice to work with a male director, Víctor Manuel Barillas Crispin. Ajchowen is connected to and functions as a sister group of a larger cultural organization called Grupo Sotz'il (Sotz'il).

In 2000, the Guarcax family created Sotz'il and Sotz'il Jay, an interdisciplinary arts center in El Tablón, Sololá, as a response to the destructive acts that Maya people have been subjected to since the 16th century. Their name comes from the Kaqchikel word for Bat, which is also the symbol of the Kaqchikel people and is an emblem of Sololá. Sotz'il's founding leader Lisandro Guarcax is quoted in Aggaboa Thelen (2010) saying, "we don't do art for art's sake; we do it to recover the dignity of our people" (para. 3). In an effort to "recover the dignity of their people," Lisandro Guarcax and his colleagues innovated a theatrical model rooted in the exploration of extant Maya texts, artifacts, and knowledge held by community elders, with the goal of developing a new theatrical language. Their theatrical performances include physical dances aligned with each of the *nawales*, or symbols of the Maya Calendar—elements of these dances were used in Ajchowen's performance of *Ximonik* to portray *B'atz* (Monkey), *Kan* (Snake), and *Ix* (Jaguar). In 2015 Grupo Sotz'il published a manual outlining the movements and articulating their artistic manifesto, known as *Ati't Xajoj: Danzando con la Abuela* (Dancing with the Grandmother). The book is written in both Spanish and Kaqchikel, the Maya language used in the Sololá region and many of the Sotz'il and Ajchowen performances.

Ati't Xajoj (Grupo Sotz'il, 2015) eloquently articulates Sotz'il's position as an organization comprised of Maya people who embody persistence:

They said that our community didn't exist, that it died hundreds of years ago with the end of the great civilization, that our remains were discovered by the Spanish in their invasion of our lands. They said that we were forgotten. But we said that we were here now, in the present, in this place: in the hills, the lakes, the animals the trees in the words of our mothers, our fathers, in the energies that danced in the fires, in our blood, there is the wisdom, the knowledge linking us to the cosmos (p. 8).

Sotz'il's insistence on a clear presence and identity is at the heart of their

resistance efforts. The religious and cultural colonization by Spanish *conquistadors* embodied in *Ximonik* and referenced in the quote above was one of the greatest violations against Maya people. However, Sotz'il's creation was a response not only to violations committed in the distant past, but to a decades long conflict in Guatemala demonstrating a form of neo-colonialism that stripped Maya people of dignity and life, known locally as *La Violencia*—or the violence. To understand the creation of Sotz'il and subsequently Ajchowen, it is important to have a working knowledge of *La Violencia* from which they grew, and the ways in which their dignity was not lost, but stolen.

ALL TOO RECENT HISTORY

Throughout the early 20th century,⁹ Guatemala was ruled “by a series of autocratic leaders” (Rothenberg, 2012b, p. xxvi). One result of their leadership was the shaping of Guatemala into a Banana Republic with U.S.-based United Fruit Company owning a significant amount of workable land. In 1944, a coup was staged, pushing against the autocratic authorities and the results of their leadership. This coup led to ten years of what is known as the democratic spring. During this time, democratically elected Presidents Juan Jose Arévalo and Jacobo Arbenz passed reforms to improve daily life for the majority of Guatemalans, including policies addressing the redistribution of privately owned land (much of which lay in the hands of United Fruit Company) (Rothenberg, 2012b, p. xxvi). However, in 1954, the U.S. government orchestrated a coup to overthrow Arbenz and put military leaders in power. This began a period of instability and violence, leading to the eventual beginning of a civil war that lasted from 1960-1996.

To simplify a complex history, the conflict was fought between the Guatemalan military and various guerilla rebel groups, consisting predominantly of Maya people. While regimes changed multiple times throughout the three decades of violence, the U.S. continued to provide access to weapons, funding, and training for the Guatemalan military. Grandin et. al. critiqued the U.S. involvement, saying it “turned

⁹ I have summarized here an in-depth outline of recent Guatemalan history provided by Daniel Rothenberg in the introduction to *Memory of Silence: The Guatemalan Truth Commission Report* (2012b). I encourage the reader to refer to Rothenberg's chapter and the wider text for a thoughtful translation of the Guatemalan Truth Commission's report.

Guatemala into a laboratory for repression” (2011, p. 199). The 36 year-long conflict resulted in at least 200,000 casualties, 83% of which were Maya (The Center for Justice and Accountability, 2016). The majority of the atrocities committed by the government occurred between 1979-1982 under the leadership of first, General Romeo Lucas García and then General Efraín Ríos Montt. Major efforts to cool the conflict began in the early 1990’s with a series of talks and eventual Peace Accords (Rothenberg, 2012b, pp. xxvii–xxxi).

Ironically, the atrocities of *La Violencia* were diligently documented,¹⁰ a fact that continues to galvanize organized efforts to try members of the military for crimes against humanity in both the Guatemalan high court and abroad, without much success (Crowe, 2014). In 2013 in an emotional and illustrative moment, General Efraín Ríos Montt was found guilty of genocide and crimes against humanity by a Guatemalan court and sentenced to 80 years in prison. However, only ten days after his trial ended, the verdict was overruled by the Guatemalan Constitutional Court (Maclean, 2013). Montt was being re-tried in absentia when he died of a heart attack in April 2018 (Kinzer, 2018).

A notable exception to the lack of punitive action is a 2016 trial in which eleven Maya women testified against Guatemalan army colonel Esteelmer Reyes Girón and military supporter Heriberto Valdés Asij for their abhorrent acts of sexual slavery. They were sentenced collectively to 240 years in prison and the landmark case “is the first known example of the prosecution in a national court of the crime of sexual slavery during armed conflict as a violation of international humanitarian law” (Birchall, 2016, para. 4). The strength and resilience demonstrated by the Maya women who gave testimony in this case is a testament to the indelible spirit of Maya women.

A WARRIOR AGAINST THE INVASION

Resistance to the atrocities committed against the Maya people was present throughout *La Violencia* and despite the risk that it presented to many local leaders, the Pan-Maya movement began in the 1970’s in an

¹⁰ A recent discovery of an abandoned government warehouse found a stockpile of over 200,000 ID cards of those disappeared or known to have been killed during the Civil War. These artifacts are still being uncovered and catalogued (Weld, 2014).

effort to reclaim Maya culture and expand the rights of Indigenous people in Guatemala. Many formal and political organizations took part in this movement including:

Academia de la Lenguas Mayas de Guatemala (Academy of Maya Languages in Guatemala, ALMG), the Consejo de Organizaciones Mayas de Guatemala (Council of Mayan Organizations of Guatemala, COMG), the Consejo Nacional de Educación Maya (National Council of Maya Education, CNEM) and the Mesa Nacional Maya de Guatemala (National Maya Board of Guatemala, MENAMGUA). (Rothenberg, 2012a, p. 172)

Efforts by these and other organizations helped to push for Indigenous inclusion in the 1985 Constitution of the Republic of Guatemala, which came about during the transition from military rule back to democratically elected leaders. The Constitution states:

Guatemala is composed of diverse ethnic groups, among which indigenous groups of Mayan descent are prominent. The State recognizes, respects and promotes their ways of life, customs, traditions, ways of social organization, the use of indigenous dress for men and women, languages, and dialects. (cited and translated in Rothenberg, 2012a, p. 173)

Even after being constitutionally recognized, the Pan-Maya movement still fought for a full representation and reclamation of Maya life in all forms. Part of the driving ideology of the movement was that as Maya people, “they must first regain control over their past... before they can start to build their future” (Fischer, 1996, p. 64). In an interview conducted by Heidi Mckinnon (2016), Lisandro Guarcax described how his parents, grandparents and extended family members were active in the Pan-Maya movement, and were “like the ‘first front’ of community activism...they were under severe constant repression. This ‘front’—these organizations—opened many spaces...now we can project a vision of the future” (p. 17).

The creation of Soz’il and subsequently Ajchowen demonstrate the efforts to actualize the protections offered by the new Guatemalan constitution and create a world in which the Maya people and their ways of being and living are not only protected but respected. Many in the

Sololá community consider Lisandro Guarcax:

Un abuelo más de la cultura kaqchikel, guerrero desde la invasión y en la guerra que todavía sigue en este país, y que él defendió, recuperando las raíces ancestrales del arte maya, con una fuerte carga política, honestidad y valor.

[A grandfather and defender of the Kaqchikel culture, a warrior against the invasion and in the war that persists [in Guatemala]. He recovered the ancestral roots of Maya art, showing strong political commitment, honesty, and valor.] (“Rebellion,” 2010)

However, not everyone felt his work served their interests. Unfortunately, as many in Guatemala can testify, while *La Violencia* may have ended with the Peace Accords, violence in Guatemala did not. On August 25th, 2010, three days after the birth of his second child, Lisandro Guarcax was found dead. He was kidnapped, tortured, and killed for his outspoken advocacy on behalf of his people, as well as his efforts to preserve Maya culture (McKinnon, 2016, p. 21).

In the Maya calendar, the day of Lisandro’s death was a day of *Ajmaq*, manifested in the bee. According to Grupo Sotz’il (2015): “Es el reconocimiento de que todos los seres tienen voluntad y conciencia. También es el día que nos conecta con la otra dimensión, con los que ya no están con nosotros, con los ancestros” [It is the awareness that all beings have will and conscience. It is also the day that connects us with the other dimension, with those who are no longer with us, with the ancestors] (p. 162).

RESILENCIA / RESILIENCE

On the other side of Lisandro’s story, beside him in his life, and remembering him in his death is Clara Alicia Sen Sipac, who birthed her daughter and buried her husband. I met Clara after seeing her perform in *Ixxik* in 2014. In it she played the title character, Ixxik, a woman from the Maya creation text the *Popol Wuj*, also called the *Popol Vuh* or *Popol Vuj*, who must fight for the life of her pregnant child. She travels with the grandmother Ixmucane to the world of the spirits to battle for the life of her unborn child. I was taken by her strength and embodied performance

before I ever learned of her personal story. Through our time together, I have learned how Clara's pain was integral to the creation of Ajchowen. It is important that to the best of my abilities, I tell this story through Clara's words.

Lisandro's death activated Clara. It motivated her to begin working with Sotz'il in more capacities than she had been during his life. In 2011, while working for Sotz'il in an administrative capacity, she was asked to front an initiative for young women in El Tablón, Sololá. Through a partnership with an NGO and a local Centro Educativo Maya or Maya Educational Center, Clara and Mercedes Francisca García Ordóñez (who was already dancing with Sotz'il) organized 25 girls to take a series of workshops with the intention of forming an all-female artistic group. In these workshops, the entire group learned various forms of art-making: Dance, painting, poetry, sculpture, music, etc. After taking these workshops, the group decided to focus on *artes escénicas*, or scenic arts, integrating dance music and theatre. After this initial series of workshops, Clara and Mercedes continued to move forward in building a performance group that focused on providing a space for women and girls to create theatre around issues that impacted them. It wasn't a simple road. Attendance proved to be one of their greatest challenges. Despite starting with 25 participants, they were unable to assemble more than six at the end. With these six they created their first official performance: a dance-drama called *Ixmucane*. They didn't tour *Ixmucane*, but they did present it to the families of the girls who participated in its creation (personal communication, C. A. Sen Sipac, June 13th, 2017). When asked how she felt taking this on after Lisandro's death, Clara said:

En el caso de Ajchowen...cuando se inició...yo tenía mucho, mucho miedo aun, yo decía... "¿Que voy a hacer? ¿Será que voy a poder transmitirlo a un público? ¿Voy a exponerme públicamente?" Porque en ese entonces yo estaba como aislada...estaba guardada, estaba cuidándome...Yo tenía muchas dudas para hacer eso. ¿Será que mi vida no ha representado peligro? Y si hago eso la gente se va a dar cuenta y va a decir: "Ah, bueno, ella es la pareja de Lisandro y ella también nos está molestando o está interfiriendo acá." Finalmente...tuve que pedir ese apoyo espiritual para poder quitarme todo eso de la mente y empezar como a aliviar y a sanar. A partir del apoyo espiritual que

yo tuve, tuve un poco mas de valor, y yo dije, “Si aquí estoy, yo lo tengo que hacer. Si es el legado de él (Lisandro), pues hay que dar este seguimiento. No se puede quedar estancado... ¿Por qué no lo voy a poder hacer? Tal vez no hablar el nombre de él, pero sí expresarme con la esencia y el sentimiento de él. Lo voy a hacer.

[When Ajchowen started, I was very, very afraid. I said: “...What am I going to do? Will I be able to share this with the public?...Am I going to expose myself?” Because at that time I was isolated...I was guarded, I was taking care of myself...I had a lot of doubts about doing it... Would I be putting my life in danger? And if I did it, would people say: “Well she is Lisandro's partner and...she is bothering us too. She is interfering here.”...Finally I had to ask for spiritual support in order to clear my mind, get some relief and heal. With the spiritual support that I had, I had a little more courage, and I said, “If I’m here, I have to do it. It is (Lisandro’s) legacy, someone has to carry it on, it cannot stay stagnant... Why can’t I do it? Maybe I won’t speak his name, but I will express myself with his essence and his feelings. I will do it.”] (C.A. Sen Sipac personal communication, July 25, 2017)

After creating *Ixmucane*, Mercedes and Clara proceeded with their goal of building an all-female theatre group. Attendance was still a challenge and members continued to swap in and out of the group.

According to Mercedes, Maya women often face pressure from their families to stay home and care for children or are critiqued for performing and told they shouldn’t be focusing on art-making. In an article she wrote about Ajchowen, Starfish’s ED Norma Baján Balán (2016) cited a local female resident of Sololá who told her “Ajchowen should be ashamed of what they do. The community doesn’t value women in art...and most husbands don’t allow women to participate in such activities anyhow...It would make me feel embarrassed to participate” (para. 22). Despite these challenges, Ajchowen persisted and was able to produce a total of three original creations: *Ixmucane*, *Ixkik*, and *Ximonik* (M.F. García Ordóñez, personal communication, July 25, 2017).

THE POWER OF PERFORMANCE

Throughout the seven years that Ajchowen has been in existence, Clara has experienced a personal shift and grown through theatre. She said,

Siempre digo que...el arte, para mí, es una herramienta de sanación personal, porque eso se fue sanando poco a poco. Y entonces ya después dije, "yo tengo que seguir, yo tengo que hacerlo, tengo que hacer ahora ya no solo por Lisandro, sino por mí, por mí como mujer. Por lo que yo siento, por lo que yo tengo, lo voy a hacer por mis hijos, lo voy a hacer por las mujeres. Ya no voy a hacerlo solo por él... Ya detrás de todo eso, hay varias personas, hay varias razones, entonces si yo no lo hago, no sirve, no estoy contribuyendo nada. Si mi aporte es hacerlo desde el teatro, pues entonces que se sea. Lo voy a hacer desde el teatro.

[I always say that, for me, art is a tool for personal healing because, little by little it was healing me, and afterwards I said I have to continue, I have to do it, I have to do it now not only for Lisandro, but for me; for me as a woman, for what I feel, for what I have. I am going to do it for my children, I'm going to do it for women, I'm not doing it just for him now... Now behind everything (I do) there are many people, many reasons. If I don't do it, I am not serving them, I am not contributing anything. If my contribution is to make theatre, then so be it, I will do my part through theatre.] (C.A. Sen Sipac, personal communication, July 25, 2017)

Clara has shared her sense of purpose with the various members who have participated in Ajchowen throughout its existence. Sometimes, her collaborators don't have the same sense of the urgency of their work, which Clara attributes to the pressures they have in their lives and the difficulty of being a female artist. In those instances, Clara serves as a leader, telling them:

Miren, muchas lo estamos haciendo por una reivindicación, lo estamos haciendo porque queremos contribuir a esta transformación social...Al ser conscientes de esa parte, seguro que lo vamos a disfrutar mucho más, y ya no vamos a poner más 'peros' y ya no vamos a decir 'no puedo ensayar' o 'mejor me quedo,' 'eso ya me ha aburrido' eso ya no va a pasar sino que vamos a sentirnos

plenas y libres para poder realizar el trabajo colectivamente. Y eso es lo que hace falta.

[We are doing all of this for vindication. We are doing it because we want to contribute to social transformation...By being aware of that part, surely we're going to enjoy it so much more, and we're not going to have any "buts" or say "I can't rehearse" or "it's better I stay home" or "I am bored"...that won't happen anymore... We are going to feel fulfilled and free to carry out the work together. And that is what is needed.] (C.A. Sen Sipac, personal communication, July 25, 2017)

Clara's story encapsulates the spirit of Ajchowen: they stand amongst histories of erasure and make themselves known through theatre. Their work through *Ximonik* and their other performances is a form of activism that resists through its presence. I leave this article with a quote from Clara that demonstrates how she, and by extension Ajchowen, view the power of performance:

...Llevar a la escena es como que "Aquí estoy, Aquí me libero. Aquí trato la manera de también quitarme algunos miedos, y sanar todas esas heridas que llevo."

[...To put something on stage is to say: "Here I am. Here, I am liberated. Here I try to let go of some of my fears, and heal all of the wounds that I carry."] (C.A. Sen Sipac, personal communication, July 25, 2017)

SUGGESTED CITATION

Hackett, C. (2019). *Ximonik: The unbound performances of Maya women's group Ajchowen*. *ArtsPraxis*, 5 (2), 18-35.

REFERENCES

- Aggabao Thelen, C. (2010, September 1). [The significance and brilliance of Sotz'il: Embodying Maya liberation](#).
- Ajchowen. (2016, November). *Ximonik*. Performance presented at the

- Festival Ruk'u'x, Solola Guatemala.
- Baján Balán, N., & Saloj Chiyal, B. L. (2016, June 19). For female theater troupe in Guatemala, drama is platform for gender issues. (R. Khalsa, Trans.), *Global Press Journal*.
- Birchall, J. (2016, February 26). Guatemala court finds both Sepur Zarco defendants guilty international justice monitor. *International Justice Monitor*.
- Fels, L. (2012). Collecting data through performative inquiry: A tug on the sleeve. *Youth Theatre Journal*, 26 (1), 50–60.
- Fischer, E. F. (1996). Induced culture change as a strategy for socioeconomic development: The Pan-Maya movement in Guatemala. In E. F. Fischer & R. M. Brown (Eds.), *Maya cultural activism in Guatemala* (1st ed, pp. 51–73). Austin: University of Texas Press, Institute of Latin American Studies.
- Grandin, G., Levenson-Estrada, D., & Oglesby, E. (2011). *The Guatemala reader history, culture, politics*. Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press.
- Grupo Sotz'il. (2015). *Ati't xajoj: Danzando con la abuela*. (Chelsea Hackett, Trans.). Grupo Sotz'il.
- Habig, M. A. (1945). The Franciscan provinces of Spanish North America [Concluded]. *The Americas*, 1 (3), 330.
- Hackett, C., & Osnes, B. (2016). The hammer and the carpenter: Lessons from the field for effective professional development by teaching artists. *Teaching Artist Journal*, 14 (1), 41–45.
- Kinzer, S. (2018, April 1). Efraín Ríos Montt, Guatemalan dictator convicted of genocide, dies at 91. *The New York Times*.
- Macleane, E. (2013, May 21). Guatemala's constitutional court overturns Ríos Montt conviction and sends trial back to April 19. *International Justice Monitor*.
- McCammon, L. A. (2007). Research on Drama and Theatre for Social Change. In L. Bresler (Ed.), *International handbook of research in arts education* (pp. 945–964). Dordrecht, The Netherlands: Springer.
- McKinnon, H. (2016, Spring). Dancing with fire: The majestic and dangerous work of Grupo Sotz'il. *First American Art: Art of Indigenous Peoples of the Americas Magazine*, 6, 16–24.
- Rebellion. [Asesinan a Lisandro Guarcax, artista guatemalteco y líder comunitario](#). (2010, September 9). Retrieved May 14, 2015.
- Rohloff, P., & Tummons, E. (2017). [Kaqchikel](#). Retrieved February 22,

2017.

- Rothenberg, D. (Ed.). (2012a). *Memory of silence: The Guatemalan Truth Commission report*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Rothenberg, D. (Ed.). (2012b). *In Facing La Violencia: The importance of the Guatemalan Truth Commission*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Smith, L. T. (1999). *Decolonizing methodologies: research and indigenous peoples*. New York: Zed Books
- The Center for Justice and Accountability. (n.d.). [Silent holocaust: the Maya genocide](#). Retrieved May 16, 2016.
- Walter, M. (2009). Participatory action research. In *Social Research Methods* (pp. 1–7). London: Falmer Press.
- Weber-Pillwax, C. (2009). When research becomes a revolution: Participatory action research with Indigenous peoples. In D. Kapoor & S. Jordan (Eds.), *Education, participatory action research and social change: international perspectives* (pp. 45–58). New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Weld, K. (2014). *Paper cadavers: The archives of dictatorship in Guatemala*. Durham: Duke University Press.

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Chelsea Hackett is a PhD candidate in Educational Theatre at New York University. She is currently working with Starfish: Her Infinite Impact on her dissertation, assisting in and examining a partnership between a local theatre company and the Starfish Impact School. Her background is in Applied Theatre and she has spent many years in New York City working as a Teaching Artist.

Hope with Dirty Hands: Community Theatre Participation as Activism in *Everything is Possible*

BRIDGET FOREMAN

UNIVERSITY OF YORK

ABSTRACT

How might the forces at work upon artistic production, its contexts, and the circumstances of its making, exert dynamic influences on artistic processes and on participants engaged in them? Might they inspire participants to view themselves as activists?

Everything is Possible, performed by 200 community actors, told the story of the suffragettes of York (UK). Created in 2017 in the aftermath of US and UK elections, it addressed issues of female enfranchisement, democratic engagement and violent protest, the concerns of 1913 resonating with and framed by the contemporary landscape. This paper considers the extent to which the making of theatre can foster a debate that is both internal as well as external; where the intended effect on an anticipated audience results also in unintended consequences in terms of participants, artists, makers and institutions.

This paper considers the relationship between individual, community and institutional approaches to activism in pursuit of social

change, examining the processes of practice by discussing the commissioning, development and writing of the play from the perspective of the playwright. Finally, it considers whether participation may become a form of activism in itself.

LONDON, 1907

On April 16th 1907, the actor Kate Frye wrote a diary account of seeing *Votes for Women!*, by Elizabeth Robins at the Court Theatre (now the Royal Court) in London. She writes of the convincing characterization, the cleverness of the play, of being “beside myself with excitement” at parts of it. And then she addresses the question of whether “it would have any effect on people,” and concludes “I can’t tell—people are not so easily influenced, I fear, except in isolated cases” (Frye, 1907).

This question of influence—of theatre’s capacity to affect the thinking or behavior of its audience—has become one of the measures by which we assess what it can do. According to Joe Kelleher, its job—in the case of political theatre—“is to oppose the current state of consensus by provoking disagreements of various sorts” (2009, p. 7). Less often considered is the extent to which the work of making theatre can foster an internal as well as external debate, where the intended effect on an anticipated audience results also in unintended consequences and even disagreements between participants, artists, and institutions. There is, however, a growing understanding of the influence of material factors,¹ and a recognition that “labour has become visible in performance work” and “artistic processes have become an important part of the artistic production” (Klein and Kunst, 2002, p. 1). I shall be considering the ways in which we might turn Klein and Kunst’s observation around, examining how forces at work upon artistic production, its contexts, and the circumstances of its making, might exert influences of change on artistic processes, and on participants engaged in them.

¹See Knowles, R. (2009). *Reading the Material Theatre*. Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press

YORK, 2017

The subject for this proposition is *Everything is Possible—The York Suffragettes*, a large-scale community production staged in July 2017 by York Theatre Royal and Pilot Theatre. These two organizations functioned as producers for the show. There were two directors, and I was the playwright attached to the project.² I'll be considering the journey that the show took from theatrical statement to rallying cry, and of many of the participants from actors to activists. I'll be examining this in the context of the dialogue between a planned artistic endeavor and the incursion of global events, considering the dynamic impact of a shifting political landscape on production and participants. Finally, I'll be presenting some transformative effects—Peter Brook's indicator of immediate theatre: "theatre which does create change—either in individuals or communities" (1968).

York's history of community participation in theatre goes back to the medieval Mystery plays. This ancient tradition continues to this day, but alongside it, the city has developed a recent and thriving culture of community performances, telling the stories of the city and its people. These are created and produced by professional theatre organizations within York, working with local professional artists and performed by large-scale community casts, including one or two professional actors. The casts are made up of people of all ages (on *Everything is Possible* the ages ranged from 6 to 82), and while the shows inevitably attract regular participants and people who are culturally engaged, each production also seeks to extend participation.³

As Soyini Madison points out, "a public space is a promise of a democratic space, and a public performance becomes an open invitation to participate and (or) witness how democracy can be variously conjured and re-imagined" (2010, p. 6). Another feature of these performances—and part of the democratization that they represent—is that they have often been performed in non-traditional spaces: on the streets, or in museums and parks.

² For the purposes of this account 'we' refers to this core creative team of three people.

³ On *Everything is Possible*, we worked with a local charity supporting vulnerable women, some of whom became involved both as performers and in technical and design roles.

FIRST THOUGHTS TO FIRST DRAFT

The initial impetus for *Everything is Possible* grew out of a recognition that while most historically-based York community plays had told stories that were overwhelmingly male,⁴ the vast majority of the volunteer cast was female. So there was clearly a need to find stories about women, or that turned the lens onto the part played by women in times largely dominated by men. It was planned as part of a season “programmed...by an all-female group of actors and theatre-makers, looking to address the imbalance in women’s roles in both theatrical work and the industry as a whole” (Cruden, 2017).

It is worth noting that the primary goal was not Anthony Jackson’s “radical change in the social order,” nor even his less ambitious aim of producing “a change in action, behavior or opinion, or even just attitude” (2007, p. 12). It was more to do with a reclamation of space within the public domain, and with placing the female voice within that space. The central story was untold, put a clear focus on the actions of women, and would mark the forthcoming centenary of the 1918 franchise in which the first raft of women in the UK received the vote.

The theatrical intention was to create a dramatically effective play; a piece that, in Jackson’s articulation of aesthetic theatre “values entertainment, the artistry and craftsmanship that are associated with resonant, powerful theatre, and the aesthetic qualities that—by definition—will appeal to our senses” (2007, p. 27-28). In considering the social effects, there was undoubtedly a conviction - founded on the experience of previous community plays – that there were broad social benefits to participation. For Augusto Boal’s poetics of the oppressed, the “main objective” is “to change people” from “passive beings” into “subjects, into actors, transformers” (1979, p. 97). But while we certainly hoped that we might highlight women’s history within our community, and raise interest in political engagement, we weren’t expecting to effect profound and long-term change in our participants’ actions. This was partly because we were telling the historical story of a protest movement that had—ostensibly at least—achieved its objective. We aimed to remind people of the value of what had been won, and to raise awareness around broader ongoing battles of social justice and rights

⁴ For example, the previous community play, *In Fog and Falling Snow* (Foreman & Kenny), had focused on the mid-19th century building of the railways.

for women in particular, but there was no single or simple rallying cry in 2017 to match that of “Votes for Women!” in 1913.

After a period of collaborative research and development, I started work on a first draft, focusing on telling the local suffrage story in a way that could encompass a cast of over 150 community actors. The shared intention of everyone involved at both an organizational and creative level was that—despite its period setting—the play should speak to our contemporary situation. Exactly how it would do that—in dramaturgical rather than thematic terms—remained unclear.

Following the custom established by earlier community plays, the directors wanted to start the play in the streets. Partly this was instinctive; a gut-level understanding of Peter Handke’s assertion that “committed theater these days doesn’t happen in theaters (those falsifying domains of art where every word and movement is emptied of significance)” (as cited in Cohen-Cruz, 1998, p. 7-10). It was also a way of forging a material connection with the street protests of the suffragettes. Nevertheless, following a prologue, the intention was to take the audience into the 18th century auditorium of York Theatre Royal for the majority of the play. This proposal presented not only considerable practical challenges, but also the dis-spiriting prospect of embodying in one show Christopher’s Balme’s account of the rise of modern drama in “transform[ing] the theatre from a rowdy, politically explosive gathering into a place of concentrated aesthetic absorption” (2014, p. 3). Merely locating a part of the play on the streets was not going to generate a performance that acted—in Soyini Madison’s words—as “a subversive tactic to win hearts and minds in their efforts toward a more humane and democratic society” (2010, p. 1). Even the aim of creating an opening for the show that involved audience members as participants would not necessarily result in deeper engagement. As Peter Boenisch has pointed out, Jacques Rancière has “debunked the fashionable vogue of an interactive and participatory ‘hyper-theatre’ that wants to transform representation into presence and passivity into activity” (as cited in Fisher and Katsouraki, 2017, p. 84). Activist Jodi Dean goes further, criticizing artistic products for “buttress[ing] capital as they circulate political affects,” with the result that “spectators can pay...to feel radical without having to get their hands dirty” (2012, p. 11). This armchair activism was the exact effect we were determined to avoid. In the words of Annie Seymour-Pearson (the central character) at the start of *Everything is Possible*, what she is looking for is hope. “But

not the kind of hope that's just some distant wish. I want hope with dirty hands. I want hope that rolls up its sleeves and gets to work. Because that's what real hope looks like: hard work" (Foreman, 2017).

However, in spite of the play's call for action, its subject matter presented our audience with an account of a battle that had been won, and although we could argue in development (and we did) that many remain excluded, worldwide, from free democratic participation, or that the wider cause of women's rights was one that still demands our energy and attention, there was nevertheless a risk that the overwhelming tone of the play would be one of commemoration. But what happened during the latter stages of the play's development was to pull the project into focus in a way none of us could have anticipated.

SEISMIC SHIFTS

The international and national political landscapes shifted dramatically: first, in November 2016 with the election in the US of Donald Trump, then with the announcement of a general election in the UK to be held on 8th June 2017, just twelve days before the opening night of the show. Both elections delivered political upset, proving that the electorate could still surprise and be surprised, and that the voice and the vote are powerful forces. A global wave of women's protests followed the US election, resonating with the protests of the suffragettes: thousands of women marching, banners aloft, demanding gender equality. The connection was potent, and at a late stage in the play's development, this provided a dramatically powerful entry point, propelling the 1913 action through a contemporary frame and into a new dimension. For both actors and audience this was a way of engaging with the past as an act not of interest, but of necessity; of stepping into the shoes of an earlier generation, as described by Virginia Woolf in 1937:

We cannot understand the present if we isolate it from the past. If we want to understand what it is that [we] are doing now...[w]e must forget that we are, for the moment, ourselves. We must become the people that we were two or three generations ago. Let us be our great grandmothers.

The start of *Everything is Possible* cast the audience as participants in

a street protest, standing alongside agitators at a 2017 women's march, in the shadow of York's medieval Minster. As the audience arrived, there were protest songs and chants, placards were waved, there were genuine petitions being signed by audience members and information about actual charities that support women and girls being distributed. A woman stepped up to a microphone and started to speak. The exact moment at which the play began was difficult to identify. For participants, the line between their presence as individuals and as actors was extremely blurred until a soundtrack kicked in, and a crowd of 1913 suffragettes, also protesting, appeared through a cloud of smoke. Having initially joined a 2017 protest, the audience now stood shoulder to shoulder with the militant suffragettes of 1913.

This was not simply a theatrical device enabling us to step back in time, but an embodied statement of what Solga describes as the "(very feminist) notion that the past and the present are never separate" (2016, p. 59), and an invitation to audience members to self-identify as participants rather than spectators in the action that followed.

In 1907, director Harley Granville-Barker had employed a similar - and highly radical - device in the staging of *Votes for Women!*. The second act large-scale protest could not be accommodated on the small stage at the Court Theatre. Granville-Barker turned the onstage crowd to stand with their backs to the audience, breaking the fourth wall (along with 19th century conventions of stage realism) as the speakers addressed the crowd—and therefore the audience—directly. According to the lighting plot, only the speakers were lit, with the on-stage spectators and the audience in the auditorium sharing darkness. The result, as experienced by St. John Hankin, reviewing the show in *The Academy*, was that "WE were the real crowd and it was to US that the speeches...were addressed. We it was, who, sometimes following the stage crowd and sometimes leading it, laughed or cheered or dissented" (as cited in Shalson, 2017, p. 46-47).

CONFLICTS AND CREATIVITY

At the same time that the nature of the prologue to *Everything is Possible* was becoming clearer, the soft intentions of the play were growing harder in the changing political context. As Boon and Plastow observe, "what funders usually want is issue-based theatre...which is contained within clearly defined parameters" (2004, p. 5). The shifting parameters

challenged such containment, opening up a space in which an unforeseen debate was forced to take place. The commissioning companies resisted anything that appeared to commit them to any one political standpoint, and this playing into the shibboleth that neutrality is a function of legitimacy meant that—at their insistence—the opening protest had to be re-written without a party-political “position.” I resolved this by re-working the prologue so that it expressed frustrations with large ‘P’ politics, and with a socially disconnected political system, resulting in a protest where a sense of perceived (if not actual) disenfranchisement served as an effective connection with the suffrage protests of 1913.

In *Votes for Women!*, “the political awakening represented onstage through the character of Beatrice Dunbarton was one that those in the audience who were curious but not yet personally involved may have experienced as well” (2017, p. 47). Similarly, *Everything is Possible* charted Annie Seymour-Pearson’s journey from politically-disengaged housewife to York’s only suffragette to be imprisoned for her actions. She moves from passivity to action to activism; a construction of identity which, as Eve Katsouraki points out is “precisely part of the radical processes and practices of antagonism” (Fisher and Katsouraki, 1917, p. 290). In the words of Lois Gibbs (housewife and activist), “radicals and students carry signs, not average housewives” (as cited in Fisher and Katsouraki, 1917, p. 290).

For Annie, the challenge to reinvent her identity comes with a call to militancy; an issue that divided the suffrage movement, and that the play—through Annie—grapples with. In the final stages of rehearsal, two major terrorist attacks exploded this historical theme of violent engagement into the contemporary debate of the play. The bombing of the Manchester Arena on 22nd May in which twenty-three people died, and the knife and gun attacks on London Bridge on 3rd June, in which a further eight people were killed, thrust the issue of militancy to the foreground, and made it visceral.

RISKS AND RESPONSIBILITY

The directors were now seriously concerned about how the materiality of the opening street protest opening might play out, with its sound design, chanting and shattering glass, and were nervous of anything

within the play that appeared to endorse violence. Jenny Spencer has acknowledged the uncomfortable fact that—especially in our 24-hour televised, live-screened age—acts of terror can become their “own kind of political theatre,” and can raise “unfortunate comparisons to performance art” (2012, p. 1), while Jenny Hughes observes that “those engaged in war and terrorism have turned to the language and practice of performance and theatre...to legitimize and enact expansive powers” (2007). This understanding of the power of performance was one that the militant suffragettes employed to devastating effect. It was the attempt at a public, performative act that led to the death of Emily Wilding Davison under the feet of the King’s horse at the Derby in 2013—arguably creating the most shocking imagery of the struggle.

Faced with the possibility that the opening of the play might in some way legitimize acts of terror,⁵ the directors (under pressure from the producers) proposed abandoning the suffragettes’ chant of “Deeds not Words!”, in case it was interpreted as inciting violent action, and also insisted that slightly lumpy qualifying statements be inserted into the text clarifying that for the suffragettes, militancy was only to be employed against property and never against people. As has been indicated by Fern Riddell and others, the fact that there were no deaths as a result of suffragette militant action is most likely the result more of accident than design (Riddell, 2018). However, any historical ambivalence that the play might have reflected was being airbrushed by the re-framed terms of the present, as they were defined by the institutions involved. I argued that we could not erase “Deeds not Words!” from history—it was, after all, the most iconic motto of the entire suffrage campaign. But while this was conceded, it was clear that the changing landscape had also shifted the parameters within which decisions were made, and concerns which might at one point have been regarded as artistic were now being cast rhetorically as issues of accountability and even public security.

In order to mitigate against any possibility of confusion between performance and genuine, violent conflict, the 2017 protest developed into a tightly-choreographed flashmob-style movement sequence, and

⁵ There is an argument that the militant suffragettes were simply terrorists. “The combination of high explosive bombs, incendiary devices and letter bombs used by the suffragettes provided the pattern for the IRA campaigns of the 1970s and 1980s. Indeed, the first terrorist bomb to explode in Northern Ireland in the twentieth century, at Lisburn’s Christ Church Cathedral, was detonated not by the IRA, but by the suffragettes in August 1914” (Webb, 2014, Introduction).

the more disorderly action was rooted firmly in 1913, and performed by actors in period costume (including period police uniform). In the decisions that resulted from this debate, and in the apparent safety of the institutional position, we can see at work Sam Haddow's assertion that strategy that is "responsive" and "non-ideological," "precludes the capacity for a committed engagement with its subject" (2015). As the prologue became increasingly stylized, it felt as if its intended bite had been institutionally de-fanged. But the participants were not subject to the nervousness being shown by the producing companies.

HOLDING HANDS WITH HISTORY

While any perceived message of the production could be mediated at an institutional level, the experience of individuals could not. It was becoming clear that while external events were affecting the process, structures, and working practices of the project, a confluence of internal and external events was impacting participants, igniting a sense of possibility. The dialogue between global events and our theatrical intervention was revealing Alain Badiou's concept of a "'sequence,' an interrelated chain of historical occurrences that open up the possibility for radical change by historicizing the present and affirming that things are not only as they are now; that this is not the only way to be" (Haddow, 2015).

Through rehearsals, participants had inhabited the experience of people on all sides of the 1913 conflict. The physical experience of grappling with policemen, of struggling against force feeding, or of restraining someone in order to feed them, the sense of solidarity in linking arms and standing up to violence—even in re-creation, these acts exerted power. In Boal's poetics, the spectator "trains himself for real action...No matter that the action is fictional; what matters is that it is action!" (1979, p. 98). Boon and Plastow assert that theatre that challenges power and asks unsettling questions is "direct action [that] is at least a rehearsal for revolution" (2004, p. 10). Many participants started to conduct their own research and chose names for their characters in order to personalize their engagement. A few could even trace relatives who had been suffragettes—and took on their names, re-forging the inter-generational connection. One commented: "Being involved in the play made me feel close to my ancestors...I felt their

ghost or spirit marching alongside me as I marched the streets of York shouting ‘Votes for Women.’” What she and others experienced is Haddow’s “coalescing of past and present events into a congruent trajectory” (2015). This was undoubtedly awakened by the historical story of the suffragettes, but the daily ferment of political events—what was reported on the news and fed onto social media—carried participants forward into a deep engagement with the play’s contemporary horizon. Framed by the formal construct of a theatrical performance, participants projected themselves and their own concerns through action and character, opening up Lynette Hunter’s “moment of making difference” in which “the possibility for effective action becomes imaginable” (as cited in Lichtenfels and Rouse, 2013, p. 4). That ability to imagine the world as different to the way we experience it drives activism. The ability to imagine ourselves as drivers is what transforms us into activists. And participation in theatre equips us to make that imaginative leap.

FROM ACTORS TO ACTIVISTS

Lara Shalson has written of how *Votes for Women!* involved the audience in an act of political protest “by introducing theatrical techniques that blurred the boundaries between the world of the play and the world of political action beyond the play...For the uninitiated, such experiences had the potential to be a galvanizing force that could lead to action outside the theatre as well” (2017, p. 53).

For participants in *Everything is Possible*, it was among the “uninitiated”—those for whom participation in theatre was a new experience—that the impact was greatest. Confirming Shalson’s assertion of the power of the “fictional realm” to facilitate actions with “genuine political relevance,” one cast member wrote: “Being involved with *Everything is Possible* really did make me feel as if I was taking a stand about hugely relevant issues in society.”

Others concurred: “The play had a powerful and lasting impact on me...I do feel more of a feminist...more empowered to stand up for what is right as well, remembering all that women have gone through in the past.”

In effect, participants describe the act of participation as amplifying their understanding, and prompting a movement from knowledge into action and activism.

This newness to being involved in a play made me very inquisitive and open to what was going on, taking it all in. I took the script seriously and to heart.

I felt that these women in the play are talking through history, through this play to me and they are saying something important.

Anecdotally, it appears that for many cast members, participation in the play constituted a form of activism, albeit one that was facilitated by the event itself. It created a sense of empowerment, and it prompted action beyond the theatre in people who were new to activism:

I visited and joined the front line of the anti-fracking camps. There were obvious parallels with *Everything is Possible* and the peaceful protests of the suffragettes, but I was no longer acting...here I was really face to face with the police.

Boenisch has written of a powerful “interstice between performing, spectating and living” (as cited in Fisher and Katsouraki, 2017, p. 83). In making such direct links between her acting and her activism, and the fact that one led to the other, this woman expresses the experience of many participants, pointing to participation in theatre as both an end in itself—an act of activism—but also a means by which the practice and habit of activism may be ignited.

SUGGESTED CITATION

Foreman, B. (2019). Hope with dirty hands: Community theatre participation as activism in *Everything is Possible*. *ArtsPraxis*, 5 (2), 36-49.

REFERENCES

- Balme, C. (2014). *The theatrical public sphere*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Boal, A. (1979). *Theatre of the oppressed*. London: Pluto Press.
- Boenisch, P. M. (2017). An actor, but in life: Spectatorial consciousness

- and materialist theatre: Some notes apropos althusser. In T. Fisher & E. Katsouraki (Eds). (2017). *Performing antagonism—Theatre, performance and radical democracy*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Boon, R., & Plastow, J. (Eds). (2004). *Theatre and empowerment*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Brook, P. (1968). *The empty space*. New York: Atheneum.
- Cruden, D. (8 Mar 2017). Interview. York Press.
- Dean, J. (2012). *The communist horizon*. New York: Verso.
- Fisher, T., & Katsouraki, E. (Eds). (2017). *Performing antagonism—Theatre, performance and radical democracy*. London: Palgrave Macmillan
- Foreman, B. (2017). *Everything is possible – the York suffragettes* (Prologue).
- Frye, K. (1907). [*Diary*](#).
- Haddow, S. (2015). A rebellious past: history, theatre and the England riots. *Studies in Theatre and Performance*, 35 (1), p. 7-21.
- Handke, P. (1969). *Theater-in-the-streets and theater-in-theaters*. In Cohen-Cruz, J. (Ed.), (1998). *Radical street performance: An international anthology*. London: Routledge. 7-10.
- Hankin, S. (1907) Review. *The Academy*. Quoted in Shalson, L. (2017). *Theatre and protest*. London: Palgrave.
- Hughes, J. (2007). Theatre, performance and the ‘war on terror’: Ethical and political questions arising from British theatrical responses to war and terrorism. *Contemporary Theatre Review* 17 (2), p. 149-164.
- Jackson, A. (2007). *Theatre, education and the making of meanings*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.
- Kelleher, J. (2009). *Theatre and politics*. Basingstoke: Palgrave McMillan.
- Klein, G., & Kunst, B. (2012). Labour and performance. In *Performance Research*, 17 (6), p. 1-3.
- Lichtenfels, P., & Rouse, J. (2013). *Performance, politics and activism*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Rancière, J. (2007). *The emancipated spectator*. Quoted by Boenisch, P. M. (2017). An actor, but in life: Spectatorial consciousness and materialist theatre: Some notes apropos althusser. In T. Fisher & E. Katsouraki (Eds). (2017). *Performing antagonism—Theatre, performance and radical democracy*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.

- Riddell, F. (2018). *Death in ten minutes: Kitty Marion: Activist. Arsonist. Suffragette*. London: Hodder & Stoughton.
- Shalson, L. (2017). *Theatre and protest*. London: Palgrave.
- Solga, K. (2016). *Theatre and feminism*. London: Palgrave.
- Soyini Madison, D. (2010). *Acts of activism: Human rights as radical performance*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Spencer, J. (Ed.). (2012). *Political and protest theatre after 9/11: Patriotic dissent*. Abingdon: Routledge.
- Webb, S. (2014). *The suffragette bombers: Britain's forgotten terrorists* (Introduction). Barnsley: Pen & Sword.
- Woolf, V. (1937). *The Pargiters*. New York: New York Public Library.

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Bridget Foreman is a playwright/practitioner, and Teaching Fellow in scriptwriting at the University of York. She has also taught Literature and Creative Writing for Sarah Lawrence College at Oxford. She writes plays exclusively to commission for a range of companies, with work performed in the professional theatre across the UK and internationally. She is a graduate of Oxford University and is completing her PhD by practice at the University of York, with her doctoral research focusing on the practice of directive commissioning in theatre. She lectures and teaches playwriting to undergraduates and MA students, and supervises independent playwriting and dissertations.

Energize, Resist, Re-Purpose: An American Theatre Responds

PENELOPE COLE

ABSTRACT

Curious Theatre Company, based in Denver, Colorado, is currently celebrating their 20th anniversary. As stated on their website “The mission of Curious Theatre Company is to engage the community in important contemporary issues through provocative modern theatre.” Chip Walton, founder and artistic director, stated in a recent interview that their mission, in light of the current political situation in the U.S., remains unchanged but has been turned on its head; instead of aspiring to be a professional theatre company that produces socially aware plays, they now identify as a social justice organization that uses theatre as a platform.

Several organizational changes have occurred as a result of this spin on their mission including a restructuring of talk backs after performances, a re-evaluation of the process of both season selection and the commissioning of plays, to seeking ways to be flexible producers able to respond quickly to the rapidly changing political landscape.

In this article I will unpack the impact of the election of 2016 and the politics of the current administration on the ways in which Curious

Theatre Company is defining itself, engaging audiences, choosing programming, and changing production practices.

“Curious is ready for disruptive change; we are ready to change the way people experience theatre.”

Curious Theatre Company, based in Denver, Colorado, is currently celebrating their 20th anniversary. As stated on their website, “The mission of Curious Theatre Company is to engage the community in important contemporary issues through provocative modern theatre.” Chip Walton, founder and producing artistic director, stated in a recent interview that their mission, in light of the current political situation in the U.S., remains unchanged but has been turned on its head; instead of aspiring to be a professional theatre company that produces socially aware plays, they now identify as a social justice organization that uses theatre as a platform (Walton, personal communication, September 21, 2017).

Certainly, there are many theatre companies and organizations across the United States for whom social justice is a driving force in their work. Companies such as Penumbra Theatre in Minneapolis, Fringe Benefits in Los Angeles, Theatre of the Oppressed NYC, The Red Ladder Theatre Company in San Jose, CA, The Albany Park Theater Project in Chicago, Cleveland Public Theatre and The Foundry Theatre in New York, are just a few of the organizations that place issues of social justice at the center of their work, reaching out to and working within marginalized communities to affect social change. Many of these companies boast strong programs that work with youth under the assumption that this is where real change can occur. Many, although not all, of the productions produced by these theatres are devised, based on the community’s response to a social problem. Red Ladder for instance uses the tools of improvisation whereas Theatre of the Oppressed NYC employs the work of Augusto Boal to craft productions. There are also many examples of companies much like Curious that produce more traditional play scripts focusing on social issues and still others that collaborate with some sector of their communities to produce one-off productions addressing a specific issue.

Curious Theatre Company, however, seems to be unique in the way they are currently rebranding and reinventing themselves as an organization and as artists. While the engagement with contemporary social issues has always been a core value for the company, taking the step to first and foremost identify as a social justice organization and second, as a theatre company, represents a huge shift in philosophy, approach, and commitment. As stated in a recent grant proposal, “We are a social justice organization that prioritizes community engagement and activating audience members to take real steps to make a difference. Powerful theatre is the avenue through which we drive change forward” (Denver Foundation Leadership and Equity Grant Proposal, paragraph 59). Accordingly, several organizational changes have occurred resulting from this shift. Curious is actively seeking to redefine and restructure talk backs after performances, re-evaluate the process of both season selection and the commissioning of plays, and to search for ways to be flexible producers with the ability to respond quickly to the rapidly changing political landscape. Complementing these artistic and production modifications, Curious has also made a serious commitment to re-framing their place and role within the community in numerous ways, most significantly by creating a new administrative position tasked with generating relationships with a wide variety of social justice, political, and arts organizations. Additionally, the company has chosen to focus specifically on issues of racism, racial equity, and diversity, dedicated to supporting the voices of artists and citizens of color through their programming choices, as well as initiating and continuing public forums on race, community, and theatre.

In this article, I will examine the impact of the presidential election of 2016 and the politics of the current administration on the ways in which Curious Theatre Company is redefining itself as an organization through the lens of activism, with an emphasis on community engagement and the stimulation of social change. Walton and the staff of the theatre generously granted interviews and access to the most recent grant proposals and applications which provide the bulk of the information discussed concerning the company’s season selection process, the role of the newly hired Community Engagement Organizer, and the youth playwriting program, Curious New Voices, all of which will be considered in this article.

Founded in 1997, Curious Theatre Company’s first production was Tony Kushner’s *Angels in America*, produced in conjunction with Hunger

Artists, a now defunct, small Denver theatre company. From the beginning, this collection of eight curious theatre artists demonstrated a strong desire to engage in theatre that was timely, thought-provoking and contemporary; theatre that took on the issues facing American society head-on. Their second show, *How I Learned to Drive* by Paula Vogel, garnered the fledgling theatre company numerous awards for artistic excellence, including two best director awards for founding artistic director Walton, two best actor, and two best production awards, among others. With these two productions Curious' reputation for producing hard-hitting, contemporary American scripts with high artistic standards was established.

Chip Walton, in an interview on September 21, 2017, stated that by the summer of 2016 Curious had already been exploring ways in which they could grow and potentially re-purpose the mission that had been guiding them for nearly two decades. As more theatres in Denver and across the country started to "look like us," Walton, the artistic company, and the board of the theatre began to investigate a re-purposing, asking the questions "who are we" and "what can we do that is different"? At the company's retreat in August of 2016, still energized by Bernie Sanders' campaign and the energy of his supporters, they added the question "how can we energize [the community] over theatre?" The subsequent election of #45 as well as racially charged demonstrations and counterdemonstrations such as the one which occurred in Charlottesville, VA in August of 2017 accelerated and reinforced the company's need to define, commit to, and put into practice a new way of thinking about and creating theatre, and to initiate strategies to more directly engage both audiences and the Denver Metro communities.

I interviewed Walton twice, once in September 2017 and again in January 2018. Throughout both interviews, Walton adamantly reiterated that Curious Theatre Company has redefined itself as a social justice organization utilizing professionally produced theatre to bring about social change. Language embedded in a recent grant proposal foregrounds and expands upon this initiative stating that the company believes in "Theatre as a tool to bring about change and deepen discussion in community spaces" (Denver Foundation Leadership and Equity Grant Proposal, paragraph 1). Walton asserts that as a company they must be "unapologetic about being progressives" asserting their role as "citizens as well as artists...[and to]...transparently and loudly

position themselves in opposition to everything the new administration stands for” (Walton, personal communication, September 21, 2017). Stressing that this political stance does not need to be partisan, Walton declares they are not activists for any political party, but rather are advocates for social justice.

As reported in a [2017 press release](#), “Following the election, Curious pledged to double-down on their commitment to tell gutsy stories and push audiences to examine their contemporary world in new ways.” Two events in particular illustrate this doubling down. On the eve of the inauguration, January 19, 2017, Curious hosted a Ghost Light Project event, participating in a nation-wide invitation to theatres vowing “to stand for and protect the values of inclusion, participation, and compassion for everyone, regardless of race, class, religion, country of origin, immigration status, disability, gender identity or sexual orientation” (qtd in Moore, 2017, paragraph 3). Theatres in at least 43 states participated in The Ghost Light Project. Coinciding with the end of the Obama administration, the event was imagined as a pledge for theatres to be a light in their community, providing a safe space for conversation, discussion, connection, and change. This moment of advocacy was quickly followed up in February of 2017 by the commitment to produce Robert Schenkkan’s new play, *Building the Wall*, as one of five theatres participating in the Rolling World Premiere of the play sponsored by the National New Play Network (NNPN).

Building the Wall is a two-hander in which a former private prison supervisor, Rick, currently jailed for incidents surrounding the round-up and treatment of immigrants, is interviewed by a college professor, Gloria, seeking to understand the motivations behind his actions. The date is 2019, the prison supervisor is white and male, the college professor, black and female. As stated in press information about the play found on Curious’ website, “Rick finds himself caught up as the front man of the new administration’s edicts and loses his humanity. In a play that harkens George Orwell’s *1984* and the Nazi regime, *Building the Wall* is a terrifying and gripping exploration of what happens if we let fear win.”

Schenkkan, a Pulitzer Prize and Tony award-winning playwright (*The Kentucky Cycle*, *All the Way*), wrote *Building the Wall* before the actual election in response to what he saw as “Trump’s dangerous rhetoric and his reopening of the ‘authoritarian playbook’ which calls for the creation of a ‘constant state of crisis’ and the scapegoating of

‘minorities with appeals to nationalism, racism and isolationism’ (McNulty, 2017, paragraph 5). Written in about one week, in a well-documented “white-hot fury,” the play resonates with an urgency, a cry to pay attention, stay vigilant and really think about the ramifications of choices. This urgency is also reflected in the manner in which Schenckan released the play for production. He stated in an interview with Jennifer Levin in June of 2017:

I completely changed my business model. Instead of huddling with my agent and figuring out the play’s best possible trajectory and maximizing potential for royalties, I wanted this play out widely. I don’t care who produces it—big theaters or small, semiprofessional or nonprofessional. If a group wanted to do a stage reading instead of a full production, that would be fine too. (Levin, 2017, paragraph 2)

Mirroring this urgency was the way in which the theatres to first produce this play essentially shoe-horned an additional production into an already existing season. The Fountain Theatre in LA opened their production in March of 2017; *Curious*’ production opened on April 4, 2017.

In speaking about the decision to produce *Building the Wall*, Walton was candid about the can of worms that discussion opened and the realizations and discoveries the company made regarding just how “lumbering” the system of theatre making is in America. Some fundamental logistical questions that had to be immediately addressed included:

- “do we say yes now or six months later?
- do we play the show on off nights in rep, or move the previously scheduled (and contracted) show later?
- do we replace an already announced show?
- how do we fund another production?” (Walton, personal communication, September 21, 2017)

Ultimately, *Curious* chose to “say yes now” and ran the production on their dark nights, Monday-Wednesday for two weeks after opening, with a full week of performances the last week of the run.

The company learned several things through this production, including the value of hitting the political moment. Performances sold-out and shows had to be added to meet demand. Virtually every performance featured a community speaker integrated into the post show discussion with an estimated 70-85% of the audience staying for these talk-backs, a much higher percentage than any other show (Denver Foundation Leadership and Equity Grant Proposal, paragraph 32). On the other hand, the small staff of the theatre was stretched thin by the additional work imposed by the short time frame for production, leaving only two months between committing to the project and opening night.

Most importantly however, the action of producing this play in such a short amount of time brought into high relief just how inflexible and non-responsive production practices are in American theatre. Most theatre organizations work within a system whereby it is expected and often necessary to plan one, two, three or more years out. The commissioning of new scripts requires a long-term commitment which, in Curious' case led to the realization that a script commissioned two years previous had no place within their new mission. Long-term and lengthy fund-raising cycles also inhibit the ability of many theatres to make spur of the moment choices without severe financial ramifications. In both interviews Walton spoke about the need to "find a way to create and model a certain amount of flexible space in the current production model" (Walton, personal communication, September 21, 2017, January 18, 2018), all the while acknowledging that flexibility challenges all resources of the organization: financial, artistic and office staff, and space.

Although *Building the Wall* was highly successful in both Denver and Los Angeles with sold out performances and favorable reviews, productions in New York and Washington DC closed early and were rather scathingly reviewed. Terry Teachout's review of the NYC production begins with the following statement, "Once more, with feeling; Politics makes artists stupid" (Teachout, 2017, paragraph 1). In the September 2017 interview, Walton spoke at length about the perceived cultural elitism around theatres and current events. He feels there is an artificially imposed division between art and politics and remarked on the perception that the only good, or even great, art is an escape. Walton noted that many theatres declined to produce *Building the Wall* either because of the overt politics of the script and/or

institutional thinking and the dependence on older, more conservative audiences. For Curious, *Building the Wall*, offered a singular opportunity to rise to the challenge of living up to their redefined mission directly and declare themselves as “citizens and artists” (Walton, September 21, 2017).

In the interview with Walton on January 18, 2018, he spoke about many of the revelations the company had made in the first half of the season, as they strove to think, create, and respond to their work and the community in different ways. He also elaborated that a sense of urgency was still driving them, much like the urgency that led to the production of pieces such as *Building the Wall*. However, the fact they are not a company that creates devised work but rather works with playwrights means they are “hostage to what the playwrights are writing.” Even though there might be a lot of new, vital work in the pipeline Walton wasn’t finding “American playwrights responsive ...[in]... providing direct ammunition” with the same kind of urgency he and the company feel. Needing to readjust their thinking concerning season selection for 2018/19 Walton found more “fertile soil [in] playwrights writing about issues that have direct connections” to the concerns Curious wishes to address without the head on, naming names approach. One such play is Bekah Brunstetter’s play *The Cake*, the opening production of Curious’ 2018/19 season.

Not only are these theatre artists seeking to bridge the artificially imposed divide between art and politics but also the divide between art and action. To this end they have restructured the traditional post show “talk back” into a post-show discussion. Discussion questions are posed in the program and at least once a week a non-artist speaker or responder who brings a unique perspective to the shows and the issues raised is invited to speak. The hope is to give the audience members tools to continue to think and talk about, and, more importantly, translate into action, their response to the play and the issues within. Walton admits the company has endless conversations about these discussions. Patrons of Curious have been accustomed to the traditional talk-back since the company’s inception when it was unique to the Curious experience. Now many more theatres in Denver include some sort of after performance talk with the actors. It is difficult to steer the audience away from the desire to talk about character, the acting, the technical elements or the plot and use their experience of the production

to springboard into a discussion of the issues of the play. The community speaker helps in this transition, providing an outside eye on issues through which the shared experience of the play can be examined. As the season has progressed, the company has discovered that plays that seem to have a direct call to action rather than pieces that expose problems in a more passive way lend themselves more easily to a discussion of issues, which will inform their season selection process moving forward. As Walton stated, “we are not here to entertain, we’re here to engage” (Walton, personal communication, January 18, 2018).

The desire to provide calls to action has led the company to re-evaluate their role within the community. Two years ago, in an administrative overhaul, they created a new job position with the title, Community Engagement Organizer. There was no job description, just a title, and Jeannene Bragg continues to define her role in the company on the job. Over the past two years she has built relationships with 70 different social justice organizations in the Denver Metro area (Denver Foundation Leadership and Equity Grant Proposal, paragraph 34). She has often found herself the only arts representative in the room and has a hard time convincing some that she is there for more than selling tickets. These relationships, some of which began because Curious was doing a show about specific issues, are meant to extend beyond an individual production, allowing Curious a place at the table in addressing social issues. As part of the social justice community, Curious has begun to open the theatre on dark nights as a civic meeting place, hosting such events as the ‘Denverite on Topic: Homelessness and Housing Insecurity’ panel discussion on November 14, 2017, which was live streamed via [Curious’ facebook page](#).

Additionally, Bragg and Curious organize panels to take on issues like diversity onstage focusing on Colorado theatre specifically. In the Fall of 2016 Curious hosted three such panels, challenging the Colorado theatre community to stop making excuses and to find ways to be inclusive. These panels had an immediate impact on some of the attending organizations, including Creede Repertory Theatre. Located in the mountains five hours outside of Denver, their Executive Director noted:

We were energized and inspired by Curious’ diversity panels and immediately set to work on prioritizing diversity in all that we did. We could not use Creede’s remote location as an excuse any longer[...]

The following season in Creede, 30% of their actors were people of color, a noted increase from previous seasons. (Denver Foundation Leadership and Equity Grant Proposal, paragraph 77)

Diversity is a primary core value of Curious and “the Community Engagement Organizer has done a deep dive into the work of racial equity and diversity” (Denver Foundation Leadership and Equity Grant Proposal, paragraph 81) in the past year. Fully one third of Bragg’s working time was spent in training and creating relationships in these areas. Attending many conferences and meetings, she also participated in an intensive ‘Facing Racism’ training resulting in information and resources shared with all facets of Curious’ organization. The board membership has recently undergone a transformation with the addition of 4 women of color. In the last 10 years, 66% of the plays produced at Curious were written by people of color, LGBTQ or female playwrights. A shift in programming that increased the number of productions that focused on racial issues has created a 50% increase in non-white audience members from 2014-2017.

In 2004, Dee Covington, director of education at Curious, started the Curious New Voices (CNV) playwriting workshop for young people, ages 15-22. One of several outreach programs for youth, CNV was conceived at first as a three-week summer intensive. The program has grown to include multiple workshops throughout the year often affiliating with area schools for in-school playwriting programs. In 2014, the National Collective Program was added into the summer schedule. Partnering with professional theatres across the nation, companies such as Berkeley Repertory Theatre, Steppenwolf Theatre Company, Portland Center Stage, and Philadelphia Young Playwrights send selected students from their playwriting programs for a one-week intensive workshop at Curious.

Nationally known playwrights serve as mentors to the young writers, regardless of which workshop they attend. Students are paired with a professional director and professional actors who respond to their plays and ultimately stage a public reading of the new work. Curious New Voices provides a place for these young writers to “voice their opinions, with no trigger warnings” (Walton, personal communication, January 18, 2018). As one playwright said of her experience in the National Collective:

Curious presented my work to the world in the same way: unapologetic, uncluttered, bold, and life affirming. Curious told me theatre needs your voice. Now I can't escape it—the art of storytelling runs through my veins. No guts, no story—I wouldn't have it any other way. (National Collective, n.d.)

In the summer intensive of 2016 a young, biracial playwright, Lamaria Aminah, wrote her first play, *Black*. As stated on the theatre website, the play was “born of her involvement with Black Lives Matter 5280 and her desire to articulate a common problem she saw in our country – we don't know how to talk about race.” In the play, a black mother and a white mother have an emotionally charged conversation about the murder of a black 12-year old child—an act that the white mother finds bewildering, the black mother, inescapable. This 20-minute play has toured extensively to high schools, churches, and other community organizations. Directed and facilitated by black director and activist, donnie I. betts, each performance is followed by an extensive conversation about race, inspired by the “authenticity of voice, the voice of a young playwright to a young audience” (Walton, personal communication, January 18, 2018) and driven by the experiences of the people in the room. Aminah stated in an interview, “Each audience has been so different. In the spring at the Convention Center, the black people said they felt relief and connection. The white people said their perspective had been changed. How has this play changed me? It's given me purpose and shown me what my gift is to this world. It's our job to tell our stories, and to have these tough conversations” (Martin, 2017, paragraph 17). In terms of community engagement, *Black* epitomizes much of what Curious Theatre Company hopes to accomplish, using theatre to not only address issues of social justice, but to privilege underserved voices, start conversations, and activate audiences by providing tools with which to tackle these issues for themselves in their communities.

This transition from professional theatre company that focuses on socially aware plays to a social justice organization that uses theatre as a platform has not been an easy or smooth process and is an ongoing challenge. There is considerable risk of losing audience as well as artistic associates when a theatre declares themselves transparently and loudly “ideologically in opposition to everything the new

administration stands for” (Walton, personal communication, September 21, 2017). When producing *Building the Wall*, a silhouette of Trump was used in marketing. A conservative subscriber related that he almost didn’t come to see the show because of the marketing (Walton, personal communication, September 21, 2017). However, the reputation of Curious Theatre Company as a theatre that produces difficult, socially aware work with high artistic standards, has garnered a certain amount of trust from their audience members allowing them to make this radical shift without too much financial stress or loss of subscribers thus far. That conservative audience member who was turned off by the use of Trump’s image in marketing *Building the Wall* trusted his previous encounters with Curious’ work and saw the production anyway. He told Walton that “he was glad he came because it [the production] made him think.” (Walton, personal communication, September 21, 2017). This same reputation and their place on the national stage, through participation in organizations such as NNPN and TCG have provided the company a good foundation for successful fundraising. Curious Theatre Company secured a three-year Steinberg Grant, a transformational grant which the company intends to use to explore and build a flexible producing frame and to bring in artistic collaborators, both individuals and groups, that support their long-term goals of greater diversity, partnership with the community, and affecting social change.

Curious Theatre Company’s tag line for many years has been “No Guts, No story.” In seizing this tumultuous moment with both hands, proclaiming themselves as an organization primarily interested in social justice and making ground breaking administrative and artistic changes that put their money where their mouths are, this dictum rings true not just to the stories they choose to tell on stage but the story they are creating about themselves.

SUGGESTED CITATION

Cole, P. (2019). Energize, resist, re-purpose: An American theatre responds. *ArtsPraxis*, 5 (2), 50-62.

REFERENCES

[Black](#). (n.d.). Denver, Curious Theatre Company.

- Blankenship, M., & Coen, S. (2014, December 11). [14 theatrical plans to change the world](#). *American Theatre*.
- [Building the Wall](#). (n.d.). Denver, Curious Theatre Company.
- [Curious Theatre Company](#). (n.d.). Denver, Curious Theatre Company.
- Curious Theatre Company, (2017/18) Denver Foundation Leadership and Equity Grant Proposal. Walton, Chip and Administrative Staff of Curious Theatre Company. (unpublished)
- Levin, J. (2017, June 16). [The great divide: "Building the Wall"](#). *Santa Fe New Mexican*.
- Martin, C. (2017, Nov. 1). [Curious Theatre's "Black" addresses the racial divide ... and is sometimes uncomfortable](#). The Know, *Denver Post*.
- McNulty, C. (2017, Mar. 20) [Robert Schenkkan's 'Building the Wall,' set in Trump's America, imagines the unimaginable](#). *Los Angeles Times*.
- Moore, J. (2017, January 13). [Ghost light project: Theatres gather January 19 "to be a light"](#). Denver Center for the Performing Arts.
- [National Collective Festival](#). (n.d.). Denver, Curious Theatre Company.
- Teachout, T. (2017, May 25). ['Building the Wall' review: Delusional dystopia](#). *Wall Street Journal*.
- Walton, C. (2017, September 21). Personal interview.
- Walton, C. (2018, January 18.) Personal interview.

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Penelope Cole is an independent scholar. Most recently she was on faculty in the Honors Program at the University of Colorado at Boulder and previously taught at the University of Colorado, Denver, and the University of Denver, among others. She has presented papers at numerous national and international conferences and has articles and book reviews published in the *Journal of Irish and Scottish Studies*, *Theatre Research International*, and the *Journal of Dramatic Theory and Criticism*. She is currently co-editor of a special collection on site-based theatre to be published in *Theatre History Studies* in 2019.

From the School to the Educating Community: Practices of Social Theatre in Italy as a New Form of Activism

[GIULIA INNOCENTI MALINI](#)

UNIVERSITÀ CATTOLICA DEL SACRO CUORE

ABSTRACT

Interactions between political activism and performative practices are historically numerous in Italy but, recently, they appear somehow institutionalised. In this scenario, some social theatre initiatives, combining arts with care, education and social development, might constitute a new outlet for activism. After a brief introduction on social theatre, this paper seeks to establish the quality of its civic and political meaning through the analysis of two recent cases: the Franco Agostino Teatro Festival in Crema (Milan) and the Monteverlino “school without boundaries” in Milan, different instances of performative practices promoting forms of active involvement of the local community in changes of curriculum, education system and community identity.

Children, parents, teachers, staff, common citizens, social workers and local cultural activists participate as actors, authors and audience to theatrical and performative events and workshops, producing new

socio-cultural resources to be employed in local issues.

A new “educating community” might be emerging, able to reflect upon itself, devise new scenarios, build new relationships and transform people’s behaviours, starting within the school walls but spilling out into the community.

Even if this might not yet be indubitably identified as activism, here theatrical and performative experiences are becoming direct social action and a spur for local educational policies.

Italy can boast two quite spectacular examples of commingling between theatre and political activism. The first is Dario Fo, 1997 Nobel Prize for Literature, whose theatre was closely linked to political movements and protest from students, workers and the underclass in general during the 1970s and 1980s (Fo, 1973 and 1990; Meldolesi, 1978; Maceri, 1998; Behan, 2000). The second is the comedian-turned-politician Beppe Grillo who, after a television and theatre career, founded and led the Five Star Movement, the majority party in the last two general elections, currently in a coalition government with the right-wing Lega party (Ponte di Pino, 2014; Tarchi, 2015; Bernardi, 2015 and 2017).

It is clear therefore that the interactions between political activism and performative practices are so deeply rooted and variegated that it would be difficult to summarise them exhaustively here. For the purpose of this paper, it will suffice to mention three of its most relevant recent occurrences, describing the state of the art of experiences of activism that, originating from real life problems, use direct participation of common people to performative practices as one of their strengths.

The first is the on-going protest against the environmental impact of the TAV, the high-speed train connecting Turin in Piedmont and Lyon in France, under construction in Val di Susa (Caruso, 2010; Algostino, 2011). Here, performative actions, realised by artists and local people alike, support more usual forms of civic mobilisation.¹ In a totally different league are the theatrical and performative events routinely organised by the Libera Association Against the Mafias,² with the clear purpose of awakening consciences and commemorating past atrocities, in order to

¹ For example, view an [arts blog here](#) or a [Sky News report here](#), retrieved October 30, 2018.

² [Libera Association’s website](#), retrieved October 30, 2018.

express dissent, reinforce solidarity and educate to the fight against the mafias both locally and nationally (Bisicchia, 2011). And lastly, there are numerous performative events against femicides and violence towards women, which have established the use of artistic practices like flash mobs and installations in public spaces during major protest actions or in accordance with worldwide movements like One Billion Rising.³ These experiences may differ for objectives, involvement of citizens, roots in their territories, and type of performative practice chosen. What they have in common is, however, the value given to the end product of the performative process (be it murals, shows, or flash mobs).

To bring this introductory excursus to a close, a recent development of political theatre in the strict sense should be mentioned, that is, its steady institutionalisation, after the great resonance it had between the 1960s and the 1980s. This is the case, for example, of the satirical political theatre as expressed by the likes of Beppe Grillo, Sabrina Guffanti, Daniele Luttazzi and Paolo Rossi, which lends itself to:

An uncritical, gastronomical, hollow and conformist laugh, good as a weapon of the fittest against the weak, and so including a perfect reversal of the Rabelaisian comic, as well as of any true satire, which in its purest sense is always against the mighty, it is the device that the weak can use against the strong. (De Marinis, 2013)

The same trend appears to apply also to the narrative theatre, the civil theatre and the theatre of memory, equally turned into established forms, devoid of most of their original subversive and challenging power (Baliani, 2010).

From time to time, a teatrologist, more inclined perhaps to wishful thinking than to empirical observation, might presume to be discovering some native occurrence of a new Italian season of political theatre (Casi & Di Gioia, 2012, p. 15-32), laboriously emerging in the era of post-politics, post-truth and post-reality politics. However, more to the point is perhaps Ponte di Pino's remark (1996, p. 162-165 and 2003, p. 17-18), that the gradual appearance of social theatre at the end of the 1990s might be the new front where the political force of contemporary theatre would find its outlet.

³ For example, [a news article on Panorama.it](#); [another on Pratosfera.com](#); [an article on La Repubblica, Genova](#); [and another on Ansa](#), retrieved October 30, 2018.

To confirm this view, while the recognised forms of political theatricality were showing the first signs of crisis, there has been a wide spreading of social theatre and performances, acting on the social and cultural fields and producing civic changes, promoting community ties, improving people's life conditions. One can therefore suppose that contemporary social theatre might be taking on some of the civil and political responsibilities that used to belong to activist movements.

SOCIAL THEATRE

In Italy, great political and social impetus was given to the theatre during the 1960s and the 1970s. Revolutionary theatrical movements sought to go beyond its narrow institutional confines: during the 1960s, this was expressed through the experiences of the New Italian Theatre and the theatrical animation (De Marinis, 1987; Margiotta, 2013; Fiaschini, 2016), and in the 1970s through the theatre of grassroots groups, Eugenio Barba's Third Theatre (De Marinis, 1983; Barba, 1985), the spread of psychodrama (Schützenberger, 1970; Lemoine, & Lemoine, 1972), and the ubiquitous and prolific presence of Augusto Boal's Theatre of the Oppressed (Boal, 1977). All these movements underlined the social and political identity of the theatre, proposing and fostering innovative ways to do it. At the end of this revolutionary period, the theatrical movements were either institutionalised or marginalised.

Many new theatres were built everywhere, under the direction of civil servants who were keen to promote theatre productions to assist the cultural development of the area. These theatres were initially meant to be a public service for the local community, but as time went by, they lost the connection with the real needs of the local people and their cultural and popular resources (De Marinis, 1983 and 2010; Taviani, 1997).

This turning point transformed the majority of the Italian theatrical production into an experience where representations prevailed on performances and collective creative processes, professionals overruled amateurs and free participation, closed forms of communication replaced open ones and vision supplanted action. If during the 1960s and the 1970s theatre and performance had attempted to be active experiences for the relational, symbolic, imaginary, political self-development of the communities, as they were a cultural rite of social construction (Pasolini, 1968; Bernardi, 2004), then in the 1980s and

1990s they were predominantly reduced to promoting an aesthetical community of passive consumers of cultural products (Bauman, 2001).

In this scenario, the practices of social theatre emerging on the Italian socio-cultural scene during the 1980s ignored the theatrical system without seeking to change it, while also abandoning any political commitment and contestation. The first experiences were conducted in contexts marked by hardship and disadvantage such as prisons, mental hospitals, centres for the disabled, with the clear purpose of improving the living conditions of the people, groups and communities through their direct participation to the performing arts as actors, authors and spectators.

These theatrical practices, often facilitated by experienced trainers, combined the usual artistic objectives with care, education and social development: a phenomenon firstly defined “social theatre” by Bernardi (1998), a binomial entered into common use and recognised internationally (Schechner & Thompson, 2004a).

Experiences of social theatre spread rapidly in different social and cultural environments (Conte et al., 2003) and are now commonplace. For example, a survey in Milan in 2016 counted more than 60 groups, cultural companies and associations engaged in social theatre in a variety of contexts, from hospitals to prisons, schools of all levels, businesses, local services for the elderly and the disabled, canteens and shelters for people in serious conditions of poverty and homelessness and centres for immigrants and refugees.

Social theatre is now belatedly receiving public and academic recognition of its specific socio-developmental resources. Only in recent years research and studies⁴ are being undertaken in support of on-going projects, with training courses for specialised operators/facilitators with specific job profiles, and the identification of processes and criteria of evaluation.

⁴ See for example *Performare il sociale. Formazione, cura e inclusione sociale attraverso il teatro*, a national research project currently underway involving the Italian universities of Turin, Milan, Rome, Pavia, Genoa funded by the MIUR Italian Ministry of Education, University and Research.

BRIEF REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY ITALIAN THEATRE AND PERFORMANCE PRACTICES IN SCHOOLS

From the end of the 1960s and all through the 1970s, the Italian school system was in great turmoil. Crises were triggered by the social and cultural transformation produced by massive industrialisation processes, including those of the cultural production, and by mass schooling. These changes had a radical effect on the traditional school and on the forms of cultural transmission of the past, and radically undermined the social systems of the community (Cavallera, 2013). All these conditions short-circuited with the theatrical protest and renewal, so that theatrical animation (Rostagno, 1980; Puppa, 2001) became one of the most interesting “dilatations” (Scabia, 1973, p. 50) of the theatre and, at the same time, a way to dispose of theatrical tradition and experiment with new answers to some social issues. Theatrical animation in schools had three distinctive features: research and artistic innovation; a community approach (the school seen an active subject in, of and for local communities), and a political intention to change the social and school system.

At the end of the 1970s, when the innovative revolution collapsed and was reabsorbed, the theatrical animation gradually lost its identity, flowing back into mainstream youth theatre. This form of theatre dedicates particular care to the production of quality shows for children and young adults and it is generally able to keep up the dialogue with its audience and respond to its needs. In the meantime, some groups, often organised in cooperative societies,⁵ continued to propose theatre workshops for students and training courses for teachers in schools (Gagliardi, 1991; Bernardi & Cuminetti, 1998). In particular, the experience of the theatrical laboratory was used in schools to satisfy the main aims of teaching, both as an active way of learning and as a support for the achievement of wider educational objectives – e.g. acquisition of social and relational skills, health education – within the framework of programs introduced to address youth problems, such as the “Youth Project” launched in 1988 by a special parliamentary committee.⁶

These two forms were consolidated in the following years and,

⁵ See an article on the Italian cooperative movement on [the Italian Documentation Centre website](#), retrieved October 30, 2018.

⁶ *Progetto giovani: identità e solidarietà nel vissuto giovanile*, Roma, Ministero della Pubblica Istruzione, 1992.

during the 1990s, the institutionalisation process of the theatre in schools produced a series of agreements between the Ministry of Education, the Undersecretariat of State, the Italian Theatrical Authority and the universities (in 1995, in 1997 and in 2004), which strengthened a trend (Perissinotto, 2001) marked by the loss of its community approach and also of its political intention, and its closure in the theatrical show system and in the school education system (Fiaschini, 2014). This is confirmed by the “Strategic guidelines for the application of theatrical activities in education,” a document published by the MIUR (Italian Ministry of Education, University and Research) in 2016 following the promulgation of the so called “The Good School” Law 13 July 2015 n. 107, focused exclusively on a school closed to the wider community, which is in turn relegated to the role of mere financial, organisational and promotional partner.⁷

TWO CASES WHERE PERFORMATIVE PRACTICES PROMOTED FORMS OF ACTIVE INVOLVEMENT OF LOCAL COMMUNITIES

Within this framework, one can move on to analyse the more recent trends of social theatre and performance in schools, and how they appear to have created new forms of community engagement and civil responsibility. Chosen among the many important theatrical and performative experiences meant to encourage an active participation of local communities in school educational processes and to promote schools as a driving force of civil participation in a territory (of which there are exemplary projects in Lodi, Cremona and Mantova), I present two field studies that integrate a direct and almost ethnographic observation of events with their theoretical and methodological reconsideration.

To fully understand these examples, it is necessary to explain that in Italy the vast majority of school theatrical activities is still rather informally presented, because theatre has only recently been included in the national curriculum. Only in 2015 “The Good School” legislation claimed, despite the above-mentioned limitations, the important role played by arts and theatre in the curriculum, handing out specific norms to reorganise and recognise these activities.⁸

⁷ [View the document here](#), retrieved October 30, 2018.

⁸ [View the document here](#), retrieved October 30, 2018.

The first field study is the Franco Agostino Teatro Festival in the town of Crema, near Milan, founded in 1999 (Carpani et al., 2018). At first, it presented the typical features just explained: theatrical labs were organised in schools during the school year and a final festival took place in the town theatre, where the shows created by the lab groups were performed. All the activities took place within the closed boundaries of the school and theatre.⁹ In 2003, the festival organising committee, composed by volunteers, decided to open up the project to the town, aiming to involve the families of the schoolchildren along with public and private institutions and to build active citizenship and community engagement.

To achieve this, it was necessary to invest time, find new ideas, build a socio-relational network and a new organisation of the whole festival process, engaging different subjects—individuals, families, institutions, associations, theatre companies and so on—to co-project and co-fulfil the festival from its new beginning. To go beyond the old model confined in the school and theatre, the new enlarged committee devised and set up a collective event, more ritual than theatrical, open to the town's participation with different languages and performative acts. From then on, everyone was involved as actor, author and spectator throughout the event, without strict distinctions, and everybody could provide a creative contribution to feed the collective identity. The events—performances by young people, exhibits, expositions, parades, artistic installations, concerts and conferences—are all connected to a theme chosen every year among relevant socio-cultural local or global topics, and spread in the local context, hosted in non-theatrical spaces in the town: courtyards, streets, squares, parks, public buildings. Noteworthy examples include: “Which way do you go to school?” on the town-school-family relationship; “The school is open to everyone. Adults, children and the Constitution,” based on Article 34 of the Constitution of the Italian Republic; “We all fall down! Down with global warming!” on environmental good practices; “I trust you!” on the virtues of self-esteem and trust; and finally “Yummy! Sink your teeth into theatre!” on nourishment for body and soul.

In particular, the children's theatrical parade, invading the streets with masques and ephemeral stages accompanied by the local marching band, transforms the town into a “possible world where the

⁹ For a detailed description of the festival activities, see [the official website](#), retrieved October 30, 2018.

voice of the children combines with the voice of the parents and adults in a powerful invocation for change, for a better life and a more active, shared citizenship” (Fiaschini, 2014, p. 144). This is evidence of a long process of transformation from festival events into cultural and civil rights so powerful as to feed the relational heritage of the community and put the education and growth of the young back at the centre of the local political agenda.

The second field case is the Montevelino “School without boundary,”¹⁰ a small state multi-ethnic pre-school in Milan. Here, theatrical activities such as dramatisation and symbolic play are commonly used in teaching; parties and feasts are organised for Christmas, Carnival, Ramadan and at the end of the school year, while once a year a professional theatre performance is hosted.

Given the complexity of its neighbourhood, the school has designed, with qualified practitioners, a social theatre approach aimed at implementing ludic, dramaturgical and mimetic practices in order to foster the integrated development of the children (Innocenti Malini & Gentile, 2016), at the promotion of the intercultural and intergenerational community as well as at the educators’ theatrical training. These three objectives are achievable through participation in the theatrical experience (consisting of labs, performances and performative feasts), where both adults and children can be actors as well as authors. In particular, the parents’ participation has been growing progressively over the years. Initially, parents attended the shows as audience. Occasionally, they helped the feast organisers or took in the food and sweets for the breaks. In 2013 the activities of the lab began to interact more closely with the ordinary school time, building a ‘performative bridge’ between school and families, who were curious and engaged by the creative artefacts (installations, plays, choruses) made by their children assisted by educators and theatrical practitioners.

The connection was loose and hesitant to begin with, the parents were invited to participate in one specific theatrical-lab that, through expressive and theatrical work, led the group to compose symbolic scenic actions in which different cultural identities found opportunities for mutual recognition. The lab produced a show made by the parents for the children, other adults and parents, within the school feast. Later, this integration triggered the most recent evolution: the parents have been

¹⁰ See [Alchemilla Lab](#), retrieved October 30, 2018.

producing real performative animations in every class during ordinary school time. Symbolic and performative practices (for example, the making of bread, singing) have been selected transversally among different cultures and played in their ethnic variations. The performative outputs of the labs have formed the backbone of the dramaturgy of the final festival that opened the intra-school intercultural process to the whole neighbourhood, thanks to a great visual and emotional impact. The performative process with its lab and festival has contributed to promoting social integration and to developing educational and cultural policies shared by the school community (Gentile, 2016).

THE POTENTIALS OF SOCIAL THEATRE AND PERFORMANCE IN BUILDING AN EDUCATING COMMUNITY: A NEW FORM OF ACTIVISM

The most innovative aspects of the two cases analysed are the peculiarity of the performative practices used during the creative process and the active participation that they have generated. They present some typical theatrical practices (e.g. exhibition, dramatisation), and some performative and festive practices (e.g. baking, parade, procession), which are introduced into contexts, such as schools and communities, characterised by their own performances. The interaction between these different types of performance transforms the ordinary experience but also the extraordinary and festive one (Schechner & Thompson, 2004b; Colombo & Innocenti Malini, 2017). A performative innovation realised in an active and collective way stimulates community involvement and therefore the performance becomes the field where people can participate, go beyond their limits, discuss, imagine, project and improve the community's life. When some people, a group or an entire community explore their authorship and their power of acting, the theatrical and performative effects feed the collective symbolic creation of the social body. It is apparent that the propulsive thrust of these practices does not develop only in the system of the arts, but also, and above all, in that of social relationships: thus, the dimension of the product is always subordinate to the dimension of the process and the aesthetic value of the experience is closely connected to its value in terms of social change. When all this happens, the social theatre and performance activities empower an "educating community." It is a community that thanks to the contribution of everyone, from the

youngest to the oldest, in terms of authorship and actorality, takes charge of its responsibility in the growth and education of its own members. In this process, social theatre could well become a new, albeit unusual, form of activism.

This takes Ponte di Pino's intuition, focused primarily on the performance as an opportunity for marginalised people to gain visibility and as the occasion for the community to gather, thus seeing this as the political outcome of social theatre (Ponte di Pino, 1996 and 2003), one step further. The two examples described have highlighted experiences that have had an impact on local policies, both at the level of the participative processes of the inhabitants and at the level of the performative products of the events.

These public events were not planned to urge the institutions to act and solve problems. It was the people themselves who, through performative processes, entered into significant and collaborative relationships, shared resources and issues, and devised independent creative and collective solutions for their local problems. For instance, a common problem encountered by parents of small children is the after school pick-up, as the school day in Italy is usually short (mostly mornings only). Building on the new relationships forged during the workshops and theatrical and performative feasts, some stay-at-home mothers casually volunteered to support working parents, often sharing the charge, and breaking down prejudices.¹¹ Theatrical and performative practices produced social actions that truly changed the daily lives of the context instead of being simply a way to express people's dissatisfaction. This bottom-up change connects the different actors of the community and the social and symbolic dimensions. It is a transformation that increasingly affects also local policies, so much so that local politicians and administrators recognise its decisive efficacy and support both its process and the resulting innovation.

In this light, what happened in the Montevelino school is particularly interesting.¹² The theatre and social performance activities were introduced to satisfy the need for intercultural inclusion, as the school as

¹¹ Elisa Rota, social theatre facilitator in the Montevelino project, personal communication, June 3, 2018.

¹² The following information and interviews are taken from the document "Spring section and nursery school 'Montevelino': the building of a community school", presented by the headteacher and team to the Central Direction for Education and Instruction, Children Services Sector of the municipality of Milan.

well as the territory were being put under stress by difficult situations of cohabitation of people of different ethnic origin. These activities did not use the theatrical medium to express their demands or protests, nor did they fall prey of the ideological “fear of the stranger” which is common in mainstream media. Quite the opposite: they became the cradle of a new dialogue between families, teachers, children and school staff, leading to the creation and realisation of intercultural workshops for the children during school hours, and then of a series of feasts and events open to the community, based on their outcomes.

These activities had an important effect on the relationship between parents and educators, which has developed in the direction of increased cooperation and sharing of the educational processes: as one mother puts it, “after the initial perplexity and indecision, the fact of being in a shared space with other mothers and teachers was a special moment”; while another said that it was important “to see the teachers in plain clothes, without their ‘teaching hat’, bridging the gap towards the parents.”

The Montevelino school is changing under the thrust of these performative processes. The daily practices of reception of the children have been redesigned with an eye to different languages and forms of expression, especially non-verbal and gestural ones. The educators invest more time in relationships, for example “welcoming the children and parents into the classroom is a rule transformed into habitual and spontaneous practice” as one teacher said, and continued:

We have learnt to hug a lot from our Arab mums, who usually hug each other and praise the Lord during Ramadan. This happens even when they arrive late, giving us the opportunity to devise new strategies to explain the school and city rules to them. They give us food and gifts from their home countries, expressing the wish to be recognised as bearers of significance and knowledge.

It is a true performative exchange which becomes a practice of encounter and reciprocal inclusion, multiplying for everyone the opportunities to exchange tales and express themselves. In this subtle, ordinary and shared way, theatrical and performative activities are affecting the local prevailing symbolic system and its social representations.

The year 2015 for instance, was celebrated as “A year as good as

bread” in the Montevelino school and in its neighbourhood, echoing the theme of the Expo Milan 2015 “Feeding the planet.” All the school activities revolved around bread, seen as a common reference at the same time tangible and symbolic, an opportunity for workshops where different recipes and tales were exchanged, different breads prepared, different flavours experienced. The local community was invited to join in and share multi-ethnic songs and music, choirs and orchestras, shows and feasts.

In 2016 the Montevelino school began to perceive itself as a “community school” and plan accordingly, involving children, parents and local counterparts (associations, libraries, public services, trades) as authors and actors of its educational activities, creating the preconditions necessary to “fulfil the aims of the project by revealing hidden resources and abilities, in order to enrich the life of the community. To build up a common narration in which each one can feel not only actor but also author,” as described by the Montevelino headteacher. A community dramaturgy which has spread to local policies: after four years of experimentation, the municipality of Milan has decided to extend the model of community school born out of the Montevelino experience to other schools of the district, using it as a pilot for educational policies towards inclusion.

In conclusion, both experiences, despite some peculiarities, introduce an important innovation, beyond confirming the importance of the esthetical performative dimension in building and maintaining social relationships (Simmel 1896; Durkheim, 1912; Mukařovský & Corduas, 1971; Bourriaud, 2001). The fact that these social theatre processes are closely related to the social environment that produces them and to which they address themselves, constitutes an interesting performative innovation. This, however, does not imply or require the invention, apparent or otherwise, of new forms of representation of the dynamics of power existing in their context (Wolff, 1993; Born, 2010; Bourdieu, 1979 and 1997). What happens here is quite different: despite the fact that their meaning is linked to the interaction among performative practice, actors and spectators in a specific moment of a peculiar social process, they have managed to generate a form of “pragmatic reflexivity” (Turner, 1982, p. 100) through the exchange among different dimensions of human experience giving origin to a sort of “creative democratisation.” “The group or community does not merely ‘flow’ in

unison at these performances, but, more actively, tries to understand itself in order to change itself ” (Turner, 1982, p. 101).

For this reason, the process does not end with the event, the performance, the theatre lab or feast it was born out of. The innovations, imaginations, relationships created and experienced during the performative and theatrical process have developed year after year, have imbued everyday life and induced real change, transforming rules, roles and habits in schools as much as in the community interactions, producing an exercise of direct democracy in the definition of local policies.

Can this be clearly identified as a new form of activism? One cannot be sure, yet. What has been ascertained, however, is that direct performative participation has been the driving force in the co-creation of educational policies and that a new way in which theatre and performance mobilise relationships, representations and political actions has emerged.

SUGGESTED CITATION

Innocenti Malini, G. (2019). From the school to the educating community: Practices of social theatre in Italy as a new form of activism. *ArtsPraxis*, 5 (2), 63-79.

REFERENCES

- Algostino, A. (2011). *Democrazia, rappresentanza, partecipazione. Il caso del movimento No Tav*. Napoli: Jovene.
- Baliani, M. (2010). *Ho cavalcato in groppa a una sedia*. Corazzano: Titivillus.
- Barba, E. (1985). *Teatro, solitudine, mestiere e rivolta*. Milano: Ubulibri.
- Bauman, Z. (2001). *Community. Seeking Safety in an Insecure World*. Cambridge: Polity.
- Behan, T. (2000). *Dario Fo: Revolutionary theatre*. GB: Pluto Press.
- Bernardi, C. (1998). Il teatro sociale. In C. Bernardi & B. Cuminetti (Eds.). *L'ora di teatro*. Milano: Euresis Edizioni, 157-171.
- Bernardi, C. (2004). *Il teatro sociale. L'arte tra disagio e cura*. Roma: Carocci.
- Bernardi, C. (2015). *EROS. Sull'antropologia della rappresentazione*. Milano: EDUCatt.

- Bernardi, C. (2017). Lo scemo del villaggio. Rituali carnevaleschi e smascheramento del potere. Tradizioni e innovazione. In R. Flick, M. Koch & I. Rekatzy (Eds.). *Erinnern – Erzählen – Erkennen. Vom Wissen kultureller Praktiken*. Aufsätze (259-274). Leipzig: Leipziger Universitätsverlag.
- Bernardi, C., & Cuminetti, B. (Eds.). (1998). *L'ora di teatro*. Milano: Euresis Edizioni.
- Bisicchia, A. (2011). Teatro e mafia 1861-2011. Milano: Editrice San Raffaele.
- Boal A. (1977). *Il teatro degli oppressi: teoria e tecnica del teatro latinoamericano*. Milano: Feltrinelli.
- Born, G. (2010). The Social and the Aesthetic: For a Post-Bourdieuian Theory of Cultural Production. *Cultural Sociology*, 4 (2).
- Bourdieu, P. (1979). *La distinction. Critique sociale du jugement*. Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit.
- Bourdieu, P. (1997). *Méditations pascaliennes*. Paris: Seuil.
- Bourriaud, N. (2001). *Esthétique relationnelle*. Dijon, France: Les presses du réel.
- Carpani, R. et al. (2018). *Franco Agostino Teatro Festival 1999-2018. Vent'anni di teatro, festa, arti, educazione e comunità*. Crema: Fatf.
- Caruso, L. (2010). *Il territorio della politica: la nuova partecipazione di massa nei movimenti No Tav e No Dal Molin*. Milano: Franco Angeli.
- Casi, S., & Di Gioia, E. (Eds.). (2012). *Passione e ideologia: il teatro (è) politico*. Spoleto: Editoria & Spettacolo.
- Cavallera, H. A. (2013). *Storia della scuola italiana*. Firenze: Le lettere.
- Colombo, M., & Innocenti Malini, G. (Eds.). (2017). *Infanzia e linguaggi teatrali. Ricerca e prospettive di cura in città*. Milano: Franco Angeli.
- Conte, I. et al. (2003) (Eds.). *Teatro e disagio. Primo censimento nazionale di gruppi e compagnie che svolgono attività con soggetti svantaggiati/disagiati*. Cartoceto (PU): Edizioni Nuove Catarsi.
- De Marinis, M. (1983). *Al limite del teatro. Utopie, progetti e aporie nella ricerca teatrale degli anni sessanta e settanta*. Firenze: La casa Usher.
- De Marinis, M. (1987). *Il nuovo teatro 1947-1970*. Milano: Fabbri-Bompiani-Sonzogno.
- De Marinis, M. (2010). Appunti per una storia dei movimenti teatrali contemporanei. In P. Giannangeli, *Invisibili realtà. Memorie di Re*

- Nudo e Incontri per un nuovo teatro*. Corazzano: Titivillus, 9-29.
- De Marinis, M. (2013) in [*Culture teatrali. Studi, interventi e scritture sullo spettacolo*](#). Retrieved October 27, 2018.
- Durkheim, É. (1912). *Les formes élémentaires de la vie religieuse. Le système totémique en Australie*. Paris: Les Presses universitaires de France.
- Fiaschini, F. (2014). Theatre and schools: validations, critiques and the legacy of the Sixties. *Dramatherapy*, 36 (2-3), 135-146.
- Fiaschini, F. (2016). Le passioni tristi e l'eredità (rimossa) dell'animazione teatrale. *Il castello di Elsinore*, 29 (73), 75-90.
- Fo, D. (1973). *Mistero buffo: giullarata popolare*. Verona: Bertani.
- Fo, D. (1990). *Dialogo provocatorio sul comico, il tragico, la follia e la ragione*. Bari: Laterza.
- Gagliardi, M. (1991). Tendenze italiane. In B. Cuminetti (Ed.). *Teatro ed educazione in Europa: Francia*. Milano: Guerini, 85-98.
- Gentile, F. (2016). Il teatro: un laboratorio di socialità. *Bambini* 1, 46-49.
- Innocenti Malini, G. & Gentile, F. (2016). Like me: Mimesis and dramaturgic play in early childhood. *Comunicazioni sociali*, 38 (2), 249-260.
- Lemoine, G., & Lemoine, P. (1972). *Le psychodrame*. Paris: Laffont.
- Maceri, D. (1998). Dario Fo: Jester of the working class. *World Literature Today*, 72 (1), 9-14.
- Margiotta, S. (2013). *Il nuovo teatro in Italia 1968—1975*. Corazzano: Titivillus.
- Meldolesi, C. (1978). *Su un comico in rivolta: Dario Fo, il bufalo, il bambino*. Roma: Bulzoni.
- Mukařovský, J., & Corduas, S. S. (1971). *La funzione, la norma e il valore estetico come fatti sociali: semiologia e sociologia dell'arte*. Torino: Einaudi.
- Pasolini, P. P. (1968). [*Manifesto per un nuovo teatro*](#). *Nuovi argomenti*, gennaio-marzo, Retrieved June 4, 2018.
- Perissinotto, L. (2001). *Teatri a scuola: aspetti, risorse, tendenze*. Torino: UTET.
- Ponte di Pino, O. (1996). Per un teatro politico? *Patalogo*, vol. 19, 156-164.
- Ponte di Pino, O. (2003). Teatro politico. *Hystrio*, 16 (2), 16-18.
- Ponte di Pino, O. (2014). *Comico & Politico. Beppe Grillo e la crisi della democrazia*. Milano: Raffaello Cortina Editore.
- Puppa, P. (2001). L'animazione, ovvero il teatro per gli altri. In R. Alonge

- & G. Davico Bonino (Eds.), *Storia del teatro moderno e contemporaneo. Avanguardie e utopie del teatro: il Novecento*, vol. III. Torino: Einaudi, 859-865.
- Rostagno, R. (1980). Animazione. In A. Attisani (Ed.), *Enciclopedia del teatro del '900*. Milano: Feltrinelli, 342-343.
- Scabia, G. (1973). *Teatro nello spazio degli scontri*. Roma: Bulzoni.
- Schechner, R., & Thompson, J. (2004a) (Eds.). *Social Theatre*, monograph of *The Drama Review*, 48 (3).
- Schechner, R., & Thompson, J. (2004b). Why "Social Theatre"? *The Drama Review*, 48 (3), 11-16.
- Schützenberger, A. A. (1970). *Précis de psychodrame*. Paris: Editions Universitaires.
- Simmel, G. (1896). Estetica sociologica. In A. De Simone (2004). *Leggere Simmel. Itinerari filosofici, sociologici ed estetici*. Urbino: Quattroventi.
- Tarchi, M. (2015). *Italia populista: dal qualunqueismo a Beppe Grillo*. Bologna: Il mulino.
- Taviani, F. (1997). *Contro il mal occhio. Polemiche teatrali 1977-1997*. L'Aquila: Textus.
- Turner, V. (1982). *From Ritual to Theatre. The Human Seriousness of Play*. New York: PAJ Publications.
- Wolff, J. (1993). *Aesthetics and the Sociology of Art*, London: Macmillan.

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Giulia Innocenti Malini is a researcher in the Department of Communication and Performing Arts at the Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore, Milan Italy, where she is also professor of the workshop "Drama and performance" in the Faculty of Political and Social Science and coordinator of the higher education course for "Facilitator of social and community theatre." She has over 30 years of experience as social theatre facilitator and trainer in various contexts such as schools, psychiatric institutions, prisons and local communities. Her most recent publications concern social theatre, theatre in prison, mimesis and dramaturgic play in childhood.

Leaping into the Disassociated Space: Unknowing Activism, Agency and Youth Identity in “Notes From Nowhere”

GUSTAVE WELTSEK

INDIANA UNIVERSITY, SCHOOL OF EDUCATION

CLARE HAMMOOR

DENVER SOUTH HIGH SCHOOL

ILLUSTRATOR: KYLIE WALLS

ABSTRACT

As young people’s identities continue to be formed by social media, popular culture, and peer approval, mirrored representations of unquestioned ideals have taken center stage. Through an investigative inquiry into this practice, Weltsek and Hammoor emerge with a new possibility for understanding activism and self-formation in the drama classroom—dissociation. Using academic scaffolding and a playful graphic novel, the authors invite teachers, researchers, practitioners and learners to think into a theoretical moment of disconnect. It’s the moment young people talk about when they “let go” and are “consumed” by dramatic activities. The authors argue that moments of disconnect hold

hope for the development of individual agency, social justice and equity both for individuals on paths of self-discovery/creation, collective actions for communities that arise within the drama classroom, and for how we think about and share our scholarship. The graphic novel central to Weltsek and Hammoor's discussion offers a way of thinking into multimodality in scholarship and pedagogy.

"I decide, not you, ...don't tell me what I'm supposed to be or do."
(2016, post-performance student interview)

"I'm an African American, not the African American, being African American is only a part of who I am and how I act in the world. Doing drama lets me decide what I want people to see and how they see it. It's like a leap into the unknown." (2017, post-performance student interview)

AN INVITATION TO JOURNEY

As many in our field have noted, a strength of drama and theatre as art form, pedagogy, and research paradigm lies in the idea of multimodality (Wells & Sandretto, 2016; Lenters & Winters, 2013; Albers & Harste, 2007; Adomat, 2012; Schroeter & Wager, 2017). As Kress & Van Leeuwen, (2001) explain multimodality is "The use of several semiotic modes in the design of a semiotic product or event, together with the particular way in which these modes are combined..." (p. 228). Drama and theatre as performative events are inherently multimodal. When doing drama and theatre we use sound, visuals, physical movement, and engage emotions and the tactile senses. Saldaña (2010) has done a great deal to offer theatre and drama research performatively through ethnodrama. Yet even here when the work is shared outside of the immediate performative moment, reflection appears through one modality, the written word.

In the tradition of visual research (Emmel & Clark, 2011; Grady, 2008) as an attempt to disrupt mono-modality and embrace the multimodal nature of drama and theatre, we invite you to come on a graphic journey with us. Here we explore what we call the "dissociated

space,” a space in the process of becoming where an artist/participant/scholar becomes nothing and no “one” exists. It is a moment of rupture where time and space have no meaning and that thing called self is merely a sensation and not a thought at all. It is here, in this non-space that we imagine youth create themselves as the ultimate act of social justice and equity within and through drama. We posit this notion to provoke the idea that this space is the true space of inquiry and creativity where all drama for social action with, by and for youth must begin. It is the moment before youth identity emerges and connections are made. It is a moment for us “teachers” to step back, remove ourselves and avoid the insidious, misguided and somewhat arrogant imposition of our interpretations upon that becoming. It is an act of radical pedagogy grounded in the activism of students as equal partners in the creation of reality. It is the moment before the big bang. It is nothing—it is everything and exists!

COMING TO THE EDGE

In our conversations with colleagues about the non-space and the possibility of dissociation many have adamantly refused to even consider the idea that “nothing” as a concept exists. This refusal felt like fear to us. The fear to entertain the possibility, no matter how theoretical the above syllogism “if you can name nothing it is something, and therefore no longer exists as nothing,” encouraged us to wonder about unknown, of the absence of fixed reality to dive into the Event Horizon. In an old tale of education a teacher leads a reluctant group of students on a long journey with an undisclosed destination. Throughout the journey the students complain about the difficulty of the obstacles with which they are confronted. Yet through the teacher’s constant care, concern and genuine love the students persevere, that is until the final challenge. The teacher leads the youths to the precipice of a tall mountain and invites the students to leap off. The students, understandably, fear for their lives and refuse. The teacher encourages, cajoles and supports them to take the leap. The students continue to refuse. The teacher, as the tale goes, then pushes the students over the edge. Rather than falling to their death, the students take flight and soar into the unknown.

THE LEAP

As our species continues to struggle with issues of justice and equity resultant from divisive binaries, impositions to “be” and to “act” taking the leap into the unknown creation of self can be overwhelming. The questions, especially for young people, emerge “Who am I?” and “How am I supposed to be?” As we leap into the unknown journey of the creation of self, the discovery of who we are and who we want and may appear in many forms. Popular culture, media, friends, family and even passing strangers read us, name us and consciously and or unconsciously force identities upon us. Many scholars argue that young people form identities based upon what they see in social and popular media (Ferguson, 2001; Giroux, 2001; Dwyer, 2001; Hagood, 2008; Lesko, 2012). Across these studies, the ways in which youths made sense of the world (and the ways the world made sense of them) was posited in direct correlation to how others named them. This is to say that, on this journey in the unknown creation of self, we may very well find ourselves in a Baudrillardian dystopian nightmare of simulation and simulacra:

The territory no longer precedes the map, nor does it survive it. It is nevertheless the map that precedes the territory—precession of simulacra—that engenders the territory, and if one must return to the fable, today it is the territory whose shreds slowly rot across the extent of the map. It is the real, and not the map, whose vestiges persist here and there in the deserts that are no longer those of the Empire, but ours. The desert of the real itself. (1994, p. 1)

Baudrillard’s simulacra inverts the idea that art imitates reality into reality imitates art. In a climate where agenda-laden identity images are perpetuated across the socio-political spectrum, each with their own bigoted notion of who and what is right and wrong, youths in particular can find themselves, as Freire explains with a

[c]hoice between being wholly themselves or being divided; between ejecting the oppressor within or not ejecting them; between human solidarity or alienation; between following prescriptions or having choices; between being spectators or actors; between acting or having the illusion of acting through the action of the oppressors;

between speaking out or being silent, castrated in their power to create and re-create, in their power to transform the world. (1997, p. 48)

All this to say that, youths may consciously or unconsciously enact identities not of their own making. Rather, youths mirror representations of consumed popular cultural archetypes, strained reproductions of community elders, and contentiously mitigated peer imposed performances. A young person's ability to create their self based upon their own critical interpretation, analysis, and understanding of how they view the world, society, politics, and of issues justice and equity can place many youths in horrendous positions. Many are compelled to conform, deny their self and or exist in isolation due to an indefatigable commitment to a sense of emerging self.

SOARING IN THE UNKNOWN

Gus had been leading a series of diversity training workshops that had the goal of youths creating an original play around the topic of social justice and equity. Throughout the process he used Theatre of the Oppressed strategies as a way to encourage the youths to cross literal and metaphorical cultural borders. As Onye, a youth drama participant commented after his involvement in a year-long emergent theatre experience which:

The hidden explanation is that we as humans (especially ones who dedicate themselves in order to do so), challenge ourselves immensely to eliminate and avoid mediocrity or only repeating what we see other people doing, or other people telling us. (2017, E-mail message to Weltsek)

Onye positions his own becoming in direct opposition to those socially imposed and potentially oppressive archetypal portrayals of self. More, he saw this becoming as a personal challenge to the subversion of these archetypes.

Indeed, much work in the field of drama with youth, both practical and theoretical, is committed to this challenge. Examples include the work of Boal and Theatre of the Oppressed (1985), Kathleen Gallagher's work with urban female youth (2001), Javier Cardona's work using the

arts for rehabilitation in prison systems in New York City, and Carmen Medina and Mia Perry's use of process drama as embodiment for the examination of the oppressive colonial effects of popular media in Puerto Rico (2015). To make a comprehensive list of all the work being done in the area of social justice and equity work with youth through drama would be impossible. In this piece, we seek to add to these conversations a wondering into how drama may function to create moments of rupture where young people step back and take a critical look at the roles they perform in life. We ask "How might the moment of critical self-deconstruction actually take place within a drama?"

In *Conversations with God*, author Neal Donald Walsch, speaking of ultimate knowing, shares that "[y]ou cannot create yourself until you *uncreate* (italics original) yourself. In a sense, you have to first 'not be' in order to be" (1995, p. 27). Reflecting on the work we have done using Theatre of the Oppressed and devised theatre as a launching point, this paper wonders how individual and collective discourse might emerge. How is meaning/knowing through drama made; especially meaning that boasts being radical, liberatory and transcendent across the bigoted, unjust and inequitable socially imposed archetypical ways of being? Being the academic rascallions we are we thought we'd attempt to provoke what we see as a trend towards fixed and overly conservative approaches to thinking about the way our field plays with (and wonders about) drama as social action with, by and for youth. To that end in this article's graphic portion, *Notes From Nowhere*, we attempt to provoke an extension of the field's notions of pedagogy and qualitative inquiry away from what we see as an unhealthy preoccupation with drawing conclusions, making connections and ultimately making concessions for the fallibility of teaching and any model and analysis of the so called evidence.

We argue that educators and practitioners, must pay attention to this non-space, this space of non-knowing as a way to reinforce and reinvest in the intangibility of education, the fallacy of institutionalized racist, sexist and classist thought and the arrogant centrist positioning of teacher/researcher as authority versus teacher/researcher as equal partner in a journey of meaning making and wonder. As Freire explains:

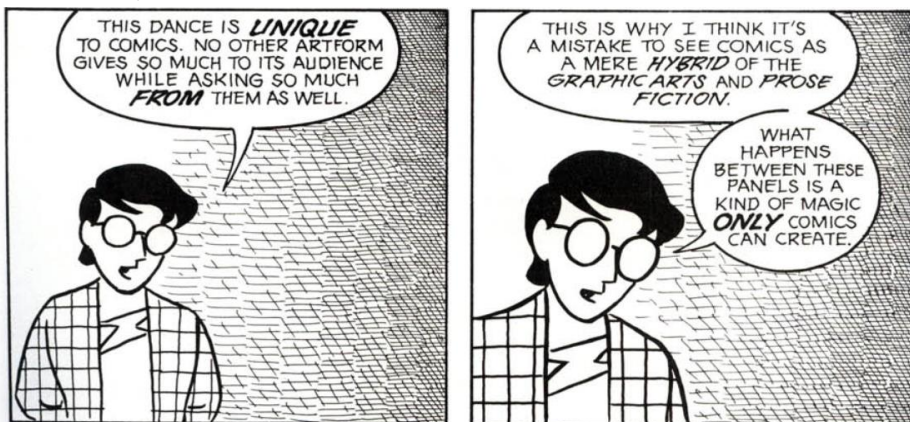
Whereas banking education anesthetizes and inhibits creative power, problem-posing education involves a constant unveiling of

reality. The former attempts to maintain the *submersion* of consciousness; the latter strives for the *emergence* of consciousness and *critical intervention* in reality. (1997, p. 79)

The challenge is to entertain the possibility that even with our best intentions to address issues of social justice and equity through drama with young people we may be duplicitous in merely perpetuating a banking method of education, albeit one where the deposit is radical and revolutionary. We ask, to carry the monetary metaphor, that we invest rather in the creation of spaces where young people may look at the multiplicity of possible agendas and decide for themselves how they will perform within a complex political socially constructed reality.

We see dissociated theory as a way to further provoke explorations within the great tradition of performance research, where we engage an audience in a dialogic experience. In a dissociated paradigm what is shared and learned from drama work as social justice and equity emerges within the moment and must dwell in the dissociated void. The goal of dwelling in the notion of inquiry as dissociated is to fully immerse oneself in the joyous event of epistemological preponderance and not to make connections, conclusions or concessions.

We have chosen the multimodal medium of a graphic novel for our leap in to the dissociated space. We feel the medium of sequential art allows us an opportunity to provoke inquiry and thought as we feel and experience the sensation of dissociating through the substyles of a visual and visceral literacy experience which provides a “Dazzling dance of the dialectic” (Ayers & Tanner 2010, p. XIV). As Scott McCloud reminds us,



(1994, p.94).

So, similar to the dissociated space, it is in the gutters, the space between the panels, the space between leap into the creative unknown of drama and emerging where student meaning is made. We believe, like William Ayers and Ryan Tanner that “We’re also playing off the subjective nature of not just comics but illustrations” (2010, p. XV). By embracing the graphic novel medium we free ourselves from forced static telling and rather dwell in a metaphor of images and words and in this way draw the reader into the dissociated space of the gutters where you are left to fill in the blanks. At one point we literally ask you to do just that in the hopes of actually experiencing our provocation of the possibilities for thinking about the dissociated space and having youth dwell there as they work towards exploring what it actually means to be and to be political.

We invite you to take a leap with us into the unknown of the dissociated space. Leave your self behind to create your “self” and your theory of drama and theatre education as essentially political in the act of self-creation. Our ultimate hope is that you embrace Freire’s notion that “The role of the problem-posing educator is to create; together with the students, the conditions under which knowledge at the level of the *doxa* is superseded by true knowledge, at the level of the *logos*” (1997, p. 79). We ask you to place aside your *doxa* and experience nothing.

①

NOTES FROM NOWHERE



Gus had been working in several research sites; one University, one High School and one Preschool each with its own unique focus on issues of social justice and equity. His role was to create and facilitate interactive arts based learning experiences that focused more on

individual student becoming than on the transmission of information. In the University an emergent theatre piece explored racism, in the High School a devised play focused on Cyber Bullying and in the Pre-School the problems with taking of other people's land through a Pioneer inspired process drama. Across Gus's experiences one constant emerged. The students all enjoyed, leaping into the unknown, letting go, going somewhere else.

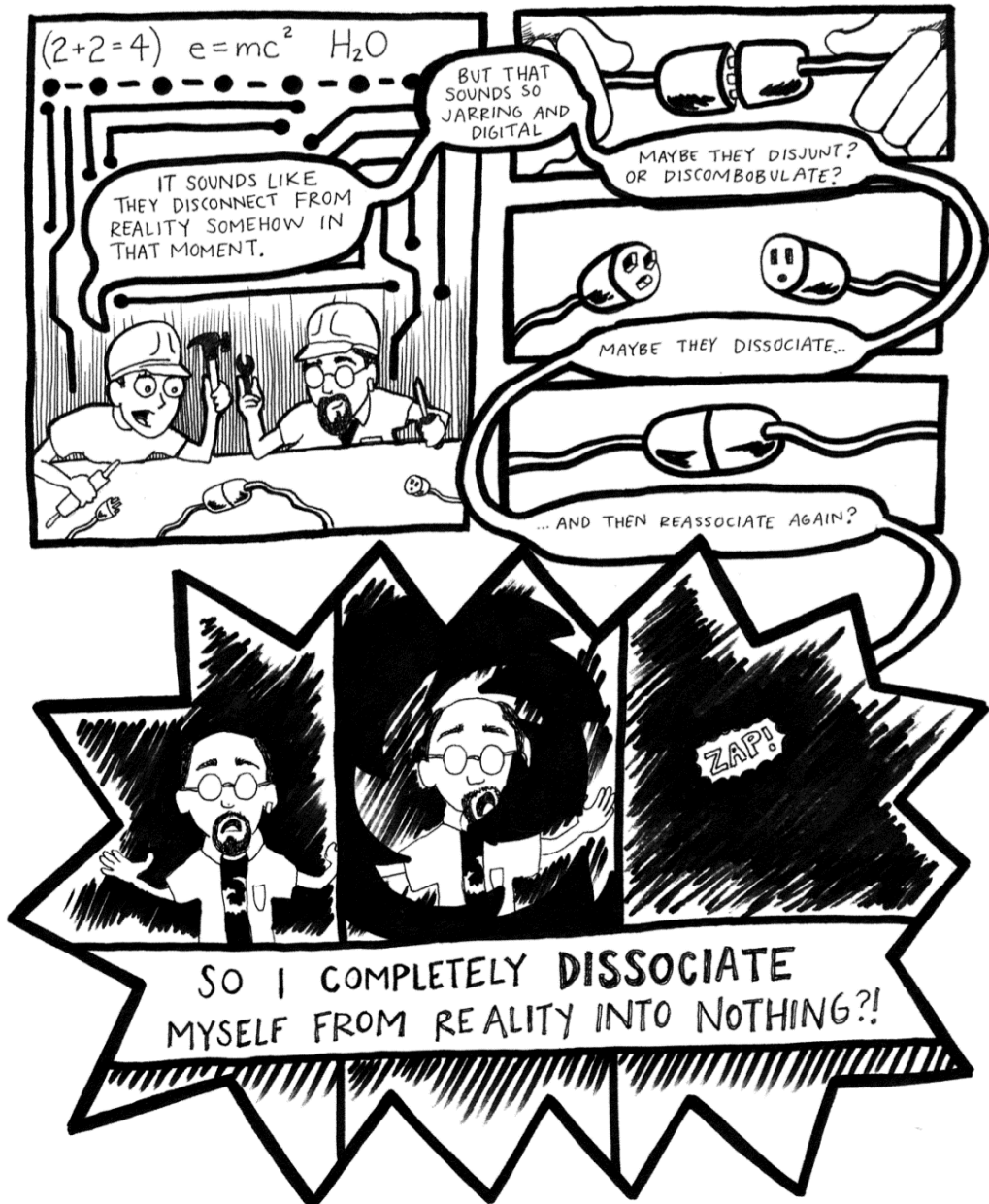
2)



We began to understand that what we were asking is how might creativity work to bring about an awareness of issues of social justice and equity with youth?

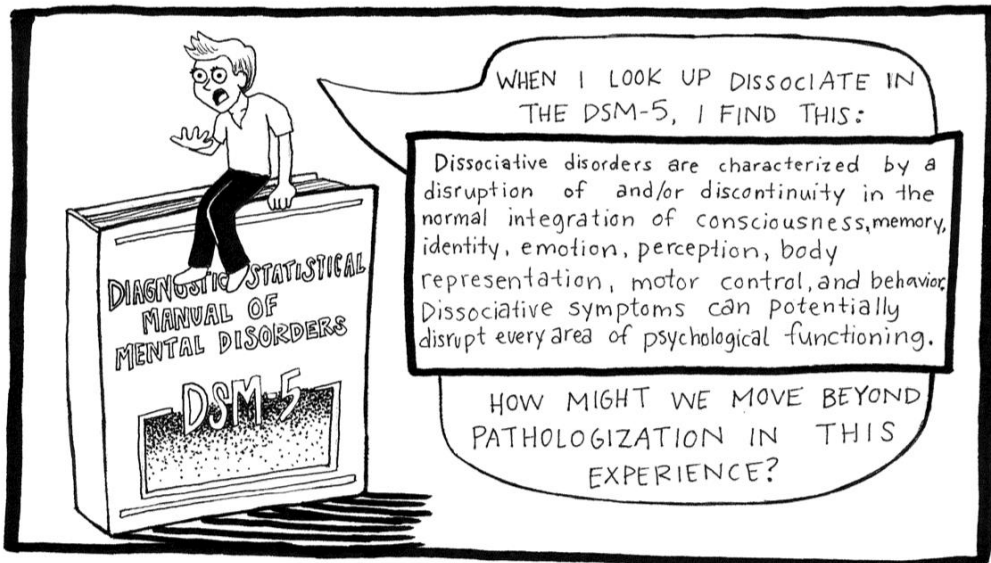
We imagined...

3)



Perhaps nothing as dramatic as that, yet we found value in the concept of the act of dissociation in a non-space. A space where we simply do not know. We began to struggle with that moment of awareness.

④



INDEED, CONSCIOUSNESS IS DEFINED BY INTENTIONALITY. BY INTENTIONALITY CONSCIOUSNESS TRANSCENDS ITSELF. IT UNIFIES ITSELF BY ESCAPING ITSELF.

THEY GRANT THE RIGHT NOT TO UNDERSTAND, THE RIGHT TO CONFUSE, TO EASE, TO HYPERBOLIZE LIFE: THE RIGHT TO PARODY OTHERS WHILE TALKING, THE RIGHT TO NOT BE TAKEN LITERALLY, NOT "TO BE ONESELF"; THE RIGHT TO LIVE A LIFE IN THE CHRONOTYPE OF THE ENTR'ACTE, THE CHRONOTYPE OF THEATRICAL SPACE, THE RIGHT TO ACT LIFE AS A COMEDY AND TO TREAT OTHERS AS ACTORS,



THE RIGHT TO RIP OFF MASKS, THE RIGHT TO RAGE AT OTHERS WITH PRIMEVAL (ALMOST CULTIC) RAGE - AND FINALLY, THE RIGHT TO BETRAY TO THE PUBLIC A PERSONAL LIFE, DOWN TO ITS MOST PRIVATE AND PRURIENT LITTLE SECRETS.

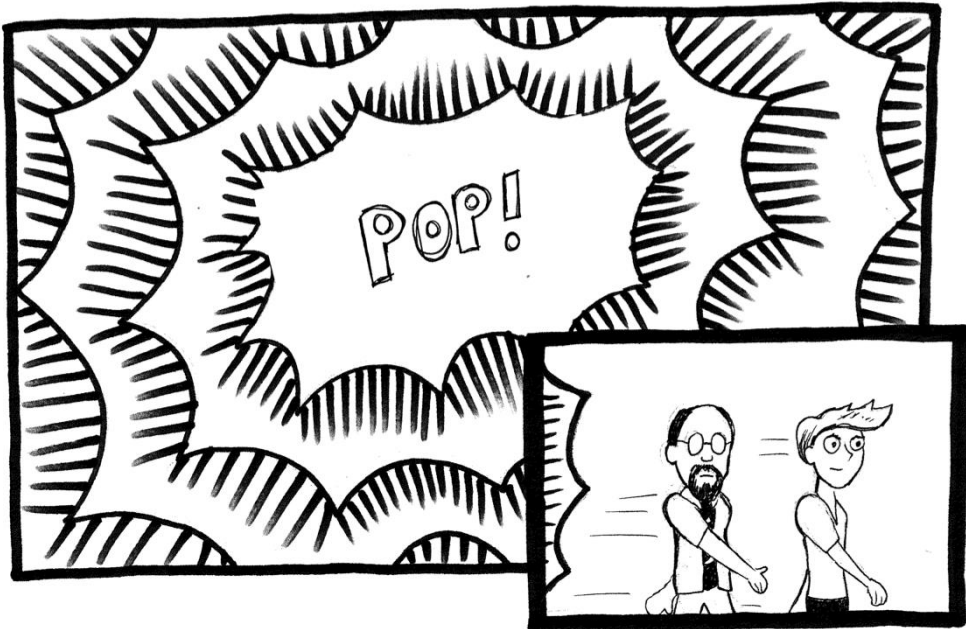
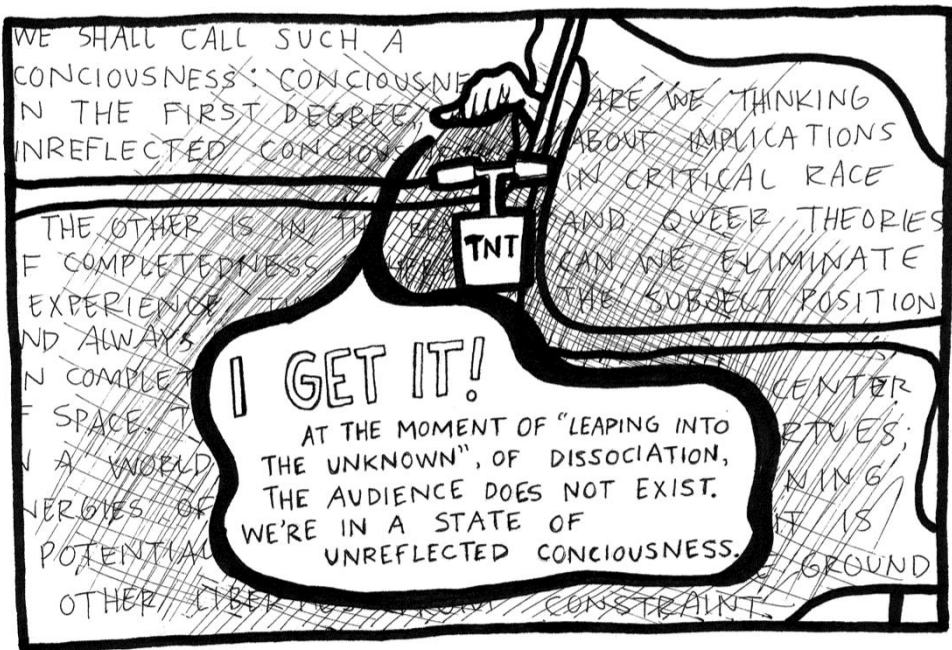
WAIT. WHERE WAS I?

I CAN IMAGINE THAT THE PERSON AS SUBJECT MIGHT DISAPPEAR TO THEMSELVES BUT WE'RE WORKING WITH THEATRE AND DRAMA. THERE'S ALWAYS AN OBJECT OR A SUBJECT - AN AUDIENCE EVEN IF IT IS THE SELF. THE OTHER THING I FOUND WHEN LOOKING UP DISSOCIATE IS A WARNING: "VOICES SHOULD NOT BE DISSOCIATED FROM THEIR SOCIAL CONTEXT"!

e/



7)



You see, Sartre calls this state the unreflected consciousness; a moment prior to human cognition or human ontological imposition of

meaning. For us this state is valuable not only as a way to reposition how we approach the sharing of our thinking about our data, it also becomes a state through which we imagine teachers might approach work with students to think about what it means to be, and ultimately what it means to be political. Sumara speaks of the interstices (2005) and Rosenblatt the transaction (1978). For us neither of these images worked for the type of rupture, of complete detachment, we were looking for. In Rosenblatt the idea of transaction loomed within a discourse of consumerism that implied a fixity where the personified data and the reader each brought some “thing” barterable—tangible. Sumara, although less capitalistic, still relies on the notion that the items have a fixity that they bring some “thing” to the moment that is then altered within an interstitial space, yet never speaks of the space itself. We needed an idea that provided for a moment before meaning, an absence of meaning, a nothingness as a way to disrupt positivistic thinking and the teacher/researcher as Messiah. The idea of dissociation into “nothing” and re-association imagines a space for self-awareness as personal agency, learning, research sharing, and meaning making these others models do not. To enter into any moment first from a position of not knowing yields possibility rather than imposition.

To play with the dissociated sensation we provide the following [bit of data](#) from one of Gus’s research sites. Human subjects approval was applied for and approved through Gus’ university for all material used. So no worries, dive in! Take a moment to linger with the data. Then read the prompt on the next page and play with the thoughts, feelings and sensations the data inspired in you.

DEAR READERS, PLEASE WRITE, DRAW, SCRIBBLE, DOODLE OR MAKE A
GUM SCULPTURE OF WHAT HAPPENED IN THE DISSOCIATED SPACE.

If we were with you in actual physical time and space we would all play with the data as a way to make this data live as a way for we as researchers to resist the presentation of a bounded “That which I know,” and rather share in the wonder of the phenomena with the hope that we as an intellectual collective imagine possibilities. What follows are a few bits created by human subjects approved graduate students and colleagues.

Figure #1 Participant’s dissociated re-associated moment

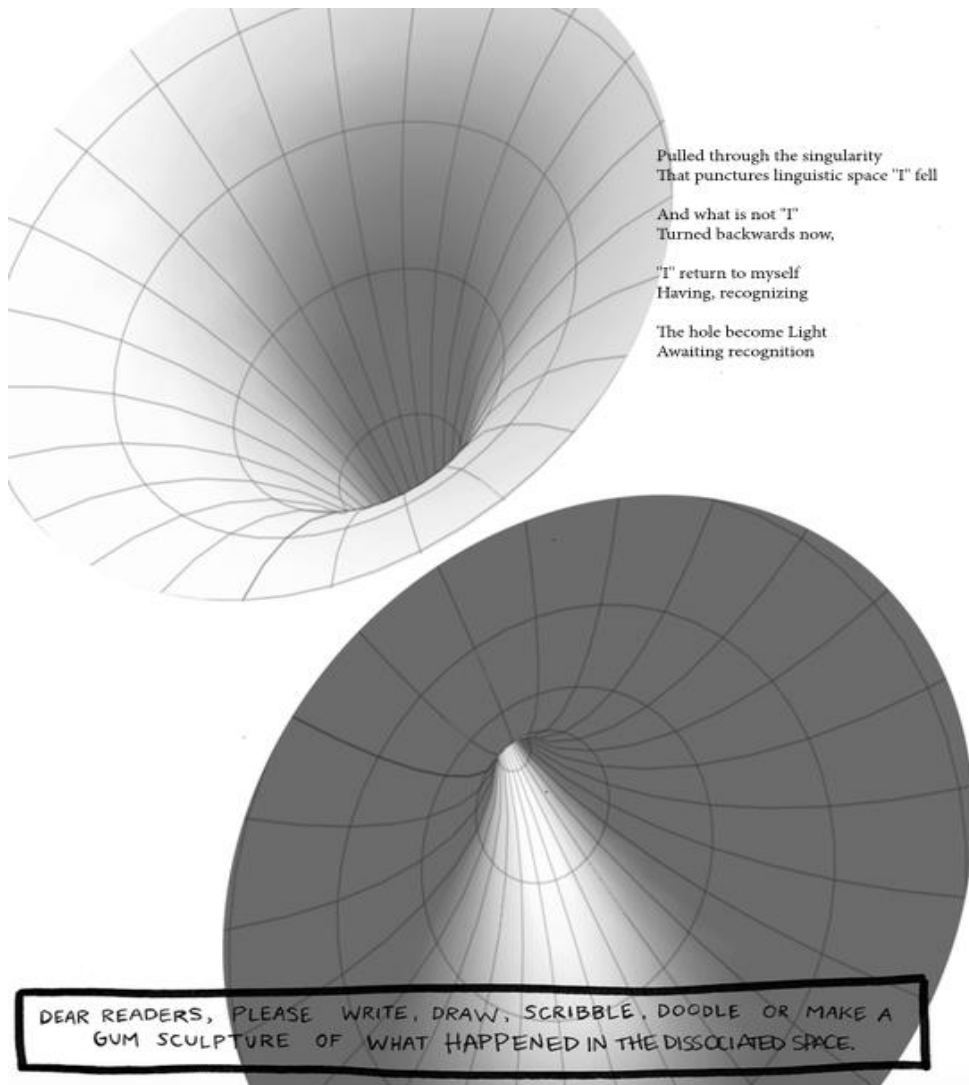


Figure #2 Participant's dissociated re-associated moment



DEAR READERS, PLEASE WRITE, DRAW, SCRIBBLE, DOODLE OR MAKE A GUM SCULPTURE OF WHAT HAPPENED IN THE DISSOCIATED SPACE.

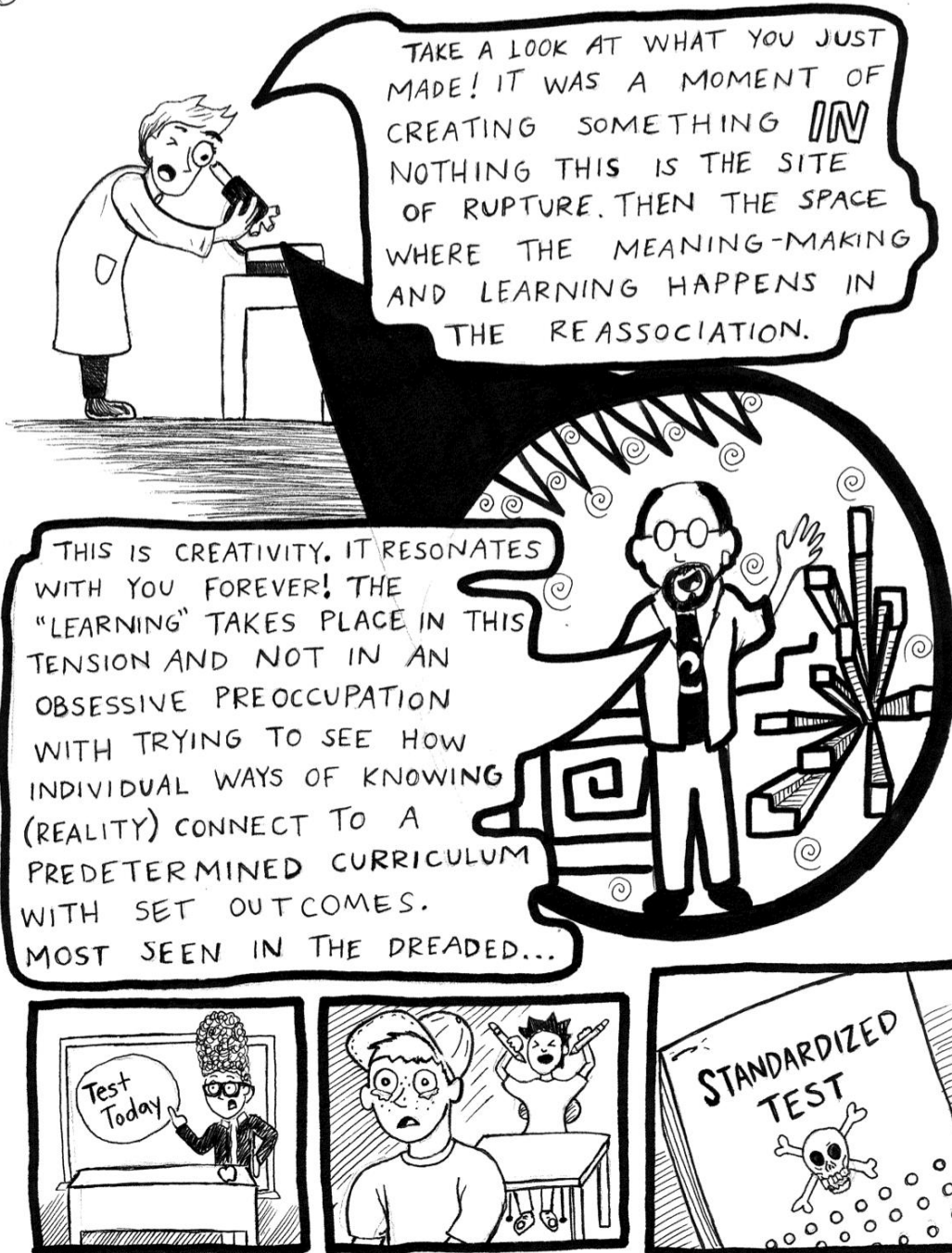
Figure #3 Participant's dissociated re-associated moment



As educator/scholars, these new imaginings with the data allow for further wonder about the complexities of meaning that may emerge within any one moment we term “educational” or wish to designate as “learning.” It is no longer the traditional positivist model of education/research “presentation” situated in refutation of presented

theories about data, rather it emerges as an honest event of interpretation of meaning situated within the students'/colleagues' playing with data that we found interesting. Similarly, these emergent interpretations represent the ways in which it is possible to resist the temptation to impose a meaning onto our students' experiences of a dramatic moment. Rather than imposing a critical interpretation as a way to promote a radical or reactionary agenda onto our students through drama, this dissociated example demands individual deconstruction, struggle with the ideas, and a re-imagining of the ideas or data in a way that is wholly unique to the individual. Teacher and or researcher voice is minimized in the challenge to the individual to make sense of the moment or the data. So now take a moment, if you did actually engage in our little experiment to . . . (dialogue taken up in the graphic panel).

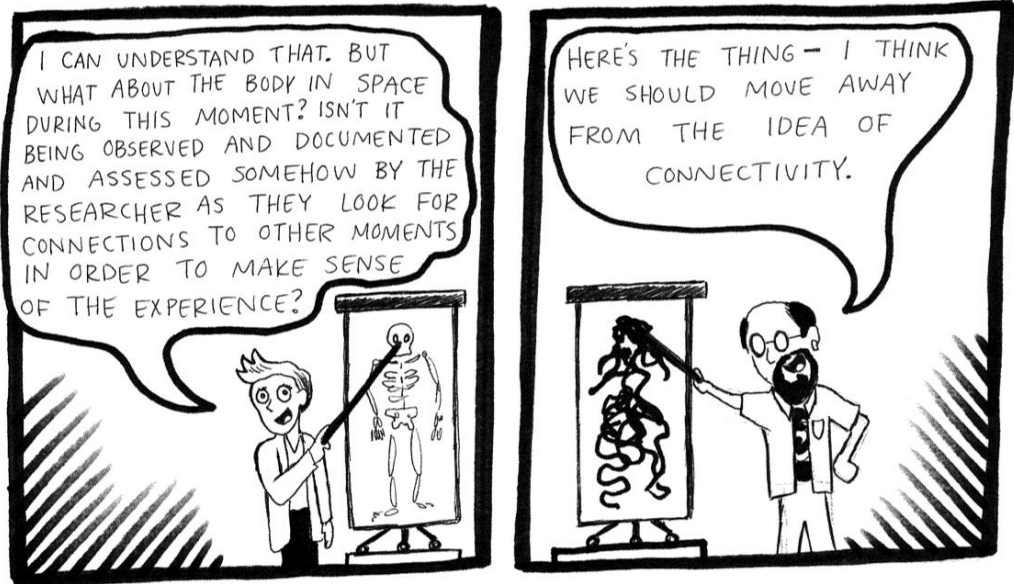
8)



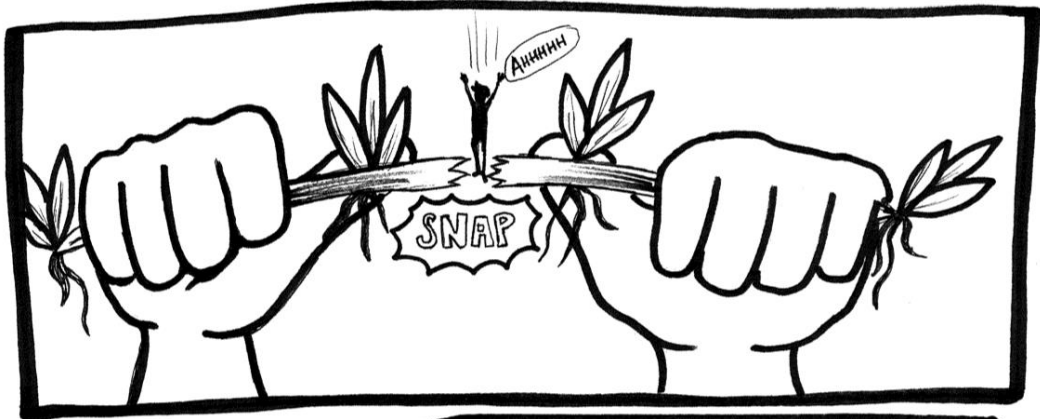


In the dissociated space, the curriculum *is critical thinking* as we collectively experience the ways in which students re-associate. As educators, practitioners and researchers, we wonder about the how, what and why in the ways student/researchers re-associate as they do.

In our work we find that each invitation to students to play within the creative space through drama strategies opens up this non-space. Reflect back, if you will on the video provided. In the video we see, let's call her Ciara. In the first traditional classroom moment she is reserved. In the drama, however she is very vocal. The drama is a process drama/mantle of the expert hybrid. (For more information see Weltsek, 2017) a pioneer journey where a caravan of White settlers confront the First Nations elders with a request to be allowed to settle. In the drama moment, with nothing more to go on than "you are an elder in the community and these people want to come into your people's land," Ciara leaps into the unknown and a dynamic, force filled and vocally present human emerges. Seconds later we see her in the institutionalized imposed role of submissive student, quiet and reserved. In the unknown of the creation of her role of elder Ciara is neither herself nor other. Rather she is in a state of emergence, experimentation and becoming. Based upon past, present and future understandings of how society works she steps back into a non-space to look at possibilities for action. She chooses what elements she wishes to employ, "puts them on" and engages. In this moment of stepping back into a non-space, a space where she divests herself of role as child, student, and gendered Ciara must take steps to create a reality a truth for the moment. It is in that moment of "piecing identities together," in reassociation and making sense of all that she has stepped back and dissociated from where learning takes place. It is in embracing that new role and taking action where we can see the learning. Learning/education/scholarship then is not the generation of facts or quantifiable testable skills or theories. Rather, through dissociation, individuals are in a state of constant becoming, data lives and knowledge breaths within a continuance of the exploration and not through a blind re-performance of archetypes or a detached telling of findings. We bring self, we bring research findings in the form of an evolving experience on an empty page and invite students/colleagues to share and wonder.



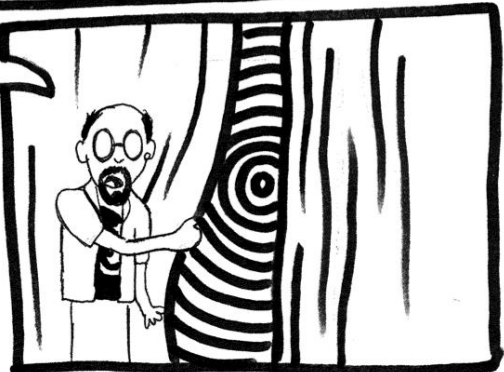
WE'RE OFTEN CHALLENGED TO SEE THE RESEARCH AS A RHIZOME. JUST THINK ABOUT DELEUZE AND GUATTARI. BUT WE'RE SUGGESTING A COMPLETE **BREAK** IN CONSCIOUSNESS AS THE SITE OF INVESTIGATION.

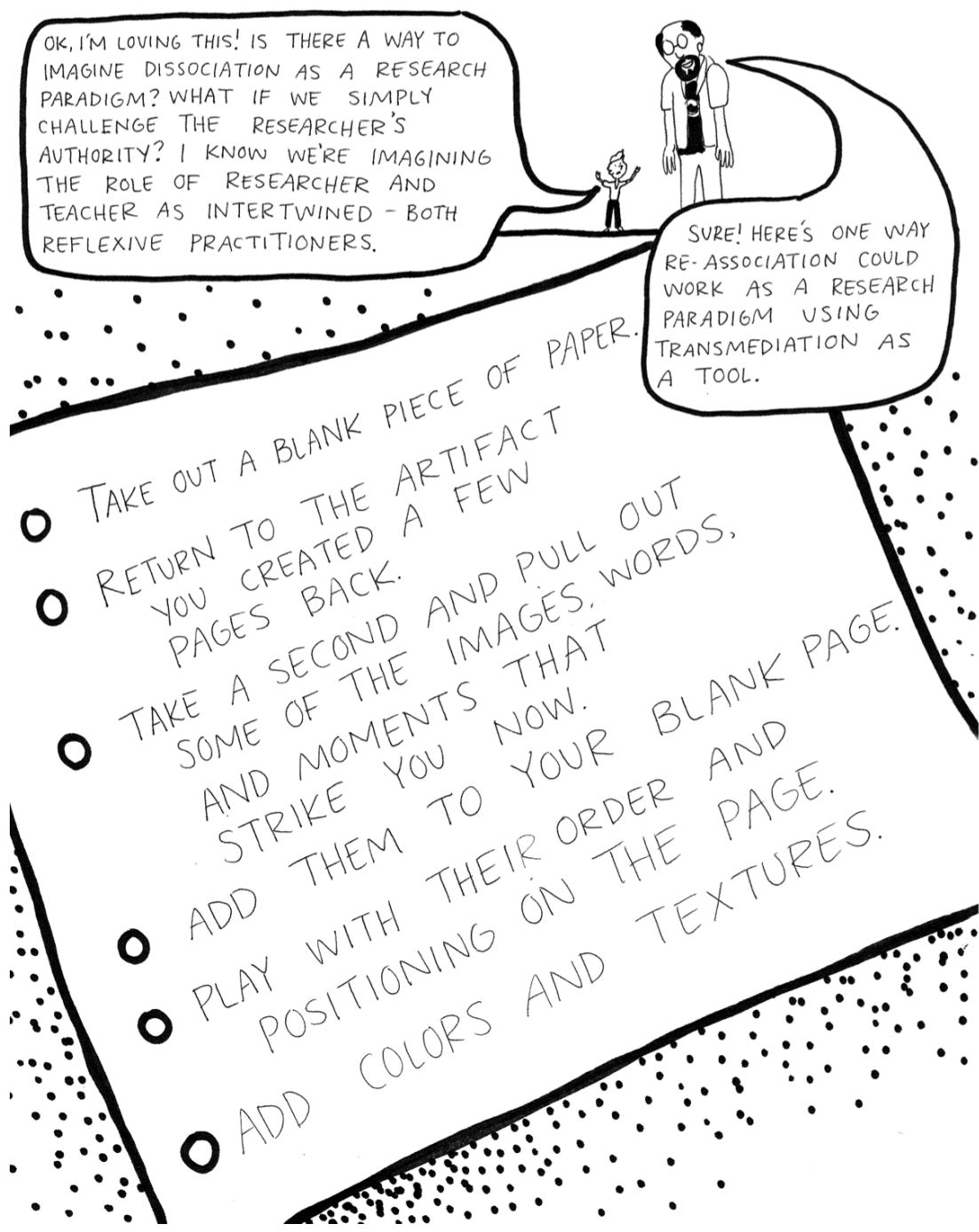


THERE IS A MANIC OBSESSION WITH CONNECTIONS ACROSS DISCIPLINES. THAT'S THE RHIZOME. BUT A CONNECTION TO WHAT? TO WHOSE NOTION OF REALITY? IT IS USUALLY A VERY BIASED, OPPRESSIVE, AND ELITIST NOTION OF WHAT IS REAL.

YES! EXACTLY AND OUR WORK IN DRAMA HELPS TO CREATE THESE MOMENTS OF RUPTURE AND DISSOCIATION WHERE STUDENTS DISCONNECT FROM EVEN THEIR EMBODIED SELVES.

DRAMA IS A GREAT WAY TO CREATE AN ENTRY INTO THE UNKNOWN. IT PROVIDES A LAUNCHING POINT AND RE-ENTRY SPACE (THAT HELPS INDIVIDUAL REALITY CREATION DISCONNECT WITH OTHER INDIVIDUAL CREATIONS).



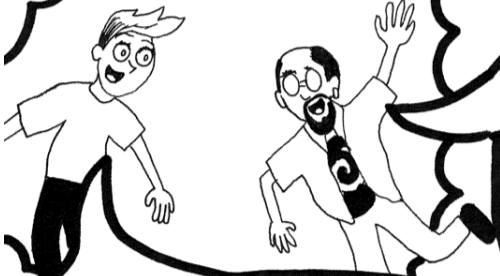


OK, I'M LOVING THIS! IS THERE A WAY TO IMAGINE DISSOCIATION AS A RESEARCH PARADIGM? WHAT IF WE SIMPLY CHALLENGE THE RESEARCHER'S AUTHORITY? I KNOW WE'RE IMAGINING THE ROLE OF RESEARCHER AND TEACHER AS INTERTWINED - BOTH REFLEXIVE PRACTITIONERS.

SURE! HERE'S ONE WAY RE-ASSOCIATION COULD WORK AS A RESEARCH PARADIGM USING TRANSMEDIATION AS A TOOL.

- TAKE OUT A BLANK PIECE OF PAPER.
- RETURN TO THE ARTIFACT YOU CREATED A FEW PAGES BACK.
- TAKE A SECOND AND PULL OUT SOME OF THE IMAGES, WORDS, AND MOMENTS THAT STRIKE YOU NOW.
- ADD THEM TO YOUR BLANK PAGE.
- PLAY WITH THEIR ORDER AND POSITIONING ON THE PAGE.
- ADD COLORS AND TEXTURES.

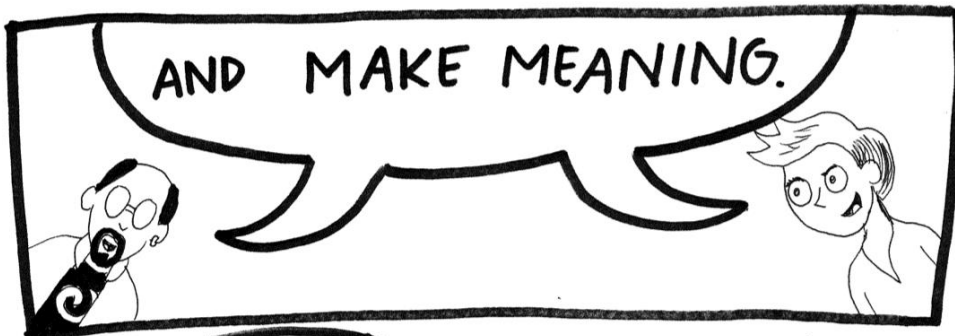
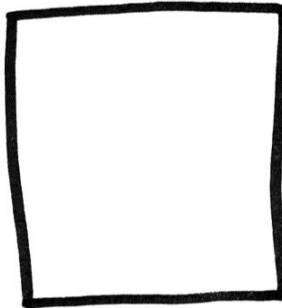
IT'S HERE THAT RESEARCHERS AND TEACHERS ALIKE CAN WATCH THE LEARNING PROCESS IN ACTION. WE, LIKE MANY POST STRUCTURAL EDUCATIONAL THEORISTS, KNOW THAT WE DRAW ON PAST LIVED EXPERIENCES, PRESENT NEEDS AND FUTURE EXPECTATIONS ALL IN RELATIONSHIPS TO SYSTEMS OF POWER, IN ORDER TO MAKE SENSE OF THAT MOMENT.



LOOKING AT YOUR NEW DRAWING, HOW DOES IT INTERACT WITH THE ARTIFACT YOU ORIGINALLY CREATED? HOW MIGHT DISCONNECTIONS TO THE NEW DRAWING INFLUENCE YOUR THOUGHTS ON **DISSOCIATED THEORY OF EDUCATION** AND THE WAY IN WHICH DRAMA MAY SUPPORT THE CREATION OF THESE SPACES?

NOW WHAT YOU'VE DONE IS REASSOCIATED IN THE REASSOCIATED SPACE. MEANING ON TOP OF AND INTERTWINED WITH MEANING! SEE, THE BIG THING FOR US IN EDUCATION IS THAT WE CAN NEVER KNOW WHERE A STUDENT, READER OR RESEARCHER WILL TAKE THE IDEA. SO THE ANALYSIS OF THE DATA OR THE LEARNING EXPERIENCE IS ALWAYS THE DIALOGUE.

**DIALECTICAL
PROCESSING**



This graphic and its underpinnings call for a reorganization of the theory and practice of drama in education that works toward social justice and equity. We advocate and argue for a radical leap into the acknowledgement of a multiplicity of ways on knowing. We incite resistance to any fixed or predetermined notions of truth, ethics, or political action and instead demand a critically emergent pedagogy, research and politics based within individual inquiry and collective dialogue. The possibilities of educators, researchers and practitioners relinquishing so much control of individual narratives and imaginings means being open to conflict and failure, with which our current political moment is already overwhelmed. Yet, it is in this space of unknowing that we know a richness of critical thought and self-discovery takes space. The dissociated space is a shift in temporality that can challenge teachers, researchers, and learners alike to dwell in a void from which they emerge renewed and ready to collectively fight and play and be in our socially constructed reality.

SUGGESTED CITATION

Weltsek, G. and Hammoor, C. (2019). Leaping into the disassociated space: Unknowing activism, agency and youth identity in “Notes From Nowhere.” *ArtsPraxis*, 5 (2), 80-113.

REFERENCES

- Agunbiade, Y. Interview by G. Weltsek. Tape recording, rehearsal interview. (January 20, 2016). Waldron Arts Center, Bloomington Indiana.
- Agunbiade, Y. Interview by G. Weltsek. Email, post-performance. (September 18, 2017). Indiana University, Bloomington Indiana.
- Adomat, D. S. (2012). Drama’s potential for deepening young children’s understandings of stories. *Early Childhood Education Journal*, 40 (6), 343-350.
- Albers, P., & Harste, J. C. (2007). The arts, new literacies, and multimodality. *English Education*, 40 (1), 6-20.
- Ayers, W., & Alexander-Tanner, R. (2010). *To teach: the journey, in comics*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Diagnostic and statistical manual of mental disorders: DSM-5. (2013). Washington, D.C.: American Psychiatric Association.

- Baudrillard, J. (1994). *Simulacra and simulation*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.
- Boal, A. (1985). *Theatre of the oppressed*. New York: Theatre Communications Group.
- Clark, K., & Holquist, M. (1984). *Mikhail Bakhtin*. Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press.
- Dwyer, P., & Wyn, J. (2001). *Youth, education and risk: Facing the future*. New York: Routledge.
- Davis, B., Sumara, D., & Luce-Kapler, R. (2000). *Engaging minds: Learning and teaching in a complex world*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Deleuze, G., & Guattari, F. (1987). *A thousand plateaus: Capitalism and schizophrenia*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Emmel, N., & Clark, A. (2011). Learning to use visual methodologies in our research: A dialogue between two researchers. *Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung / Forum: Qualitative Social Research*, 12 (1).
- Ferguson, A. (2001). *Bad boys: Public schools in the making of Black masculinity*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.
- Freire, P. (1997). *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. New York: Continuum.
- Gallagher, K. (2001). *Drama education in the lives of girls: Imagining possibilities*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.
- Giroux, H. (2001). Cultural studies as performative politics. *Cultural Studies-Critical Methodologies*, 1 (1), 5–23.
- Grady, J. (2008). Visual research at the crossroads. *Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung / Forum: Qualitative Social Research*, 9 (3).
- Hagood, M.C. (2008). Intersections of popular culture, identities, and new literacies research. In J. Coiro, M. Knobel, C. Lankspear & D. Leu (Eds.) *Handbook of research on new literacies*. New York: Erlbaum.
- Kress, G., & T. Van Leeuwen. (2001). *Multimodal discourse*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Lenters, K., & Winters, K. (2013). Fracturing writing spaces: Multimodal storytelling ignites process writing. *The Reading Teacher*, 67 (3), 227-237.
- Lesko, N. (2012). *Act you age! A cultural construction of adolescence*. (Second edition). New York: Routledge.
- McCloud, S. (1994) *Understanding comics: The invisible art*. 1st Harper

- Perennial ed. New York: Harper Perennial.
- Medina, C., & Perry M. (2015) *Methodologies of embodiment: Inscribing bodies in qualitative research*. New York: Routledge.
- Min, E. (2001). Bakhtinian perspectives for the study of intercultural communication. *Journal of Intercultural Studies*, 22 (1), 5-18.
- Rosenblatt, L. (1978). *The reader, the text, the poem: The transactional theory of the literary work*. Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press.
- Sartre, J.-P., Williams, F., & Kirkpatrick, R. (1960). *The transcendence of the ego: An existentialist theory of consciousness*. New York: Noonday Press.
- Saldaña, J. (2010). Writing ethnodrama: A sampler from educational research. In M. Savin-Baden & C. H. Major (Eds.), *New approaches to qualitative research: Wisdom and uncertainty* (p. 61–79). London: Routledge.
- Schroeter, S., & Wager, A. C. (2017). Blurring boundaries: Drama as a critical multimodal literacy for examining 17th-century witch hunts. *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy*, 60 (4), 405-413.
- Sumara, D. (2005). On the Importance of the Eccentric Curriculum *Journal of the Canadian Association for Curriculum Studies*, 3 (1).
- Weltsek, G. (2017) Journeying into the complexities and possibilities of performative pedagogical research and analysis. *SCENARIO*, 2017 (2), 31-49.
- Walsch, N. D. (1995) *Conversations with God: as uncommon dialogue*. New York: Penguin.
- Wells, T., & Sandretto, S. (2016). “I’m on a journey I never thought I’d be on”: Using process drama pedagogy for the literacy programme. *Pedagogies: An International Journal*, 12 (2), 1-16.

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHIES

Gustave Weltsek PhD, Assistant Professor Arts Education, Indiana University School of Education. He examines how critical performative pedagogy (Weltsek and Medina, Pineau) functions as a space of emergent identity for social change and explorations of equity. His publications appear in; *Youth Theatre Journal*, *Arts Education Policy Review*, *Language Arts*, and the *Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy*. Professional service includes past editor of the *Youth Theatre Journal*, and past AATE Chair of Research and Publications. He is the

2013 AATE research award recipient and served as a writer of the new United States Standards for Theatre and Drama Education.

Clare Hammoor EdD, is a theatre practitioner obsessed with object-oriented ontologies, clowning, and creating joyful, absurd theatre with children (and things). Equally committed to the possibilities of justice and philosophy, Clare collaborates with men and women who live the realities of the US's system of mass incarceration. Clare's work has appeared in international journals and conferences including *Body, Space, Technology* and *Performance Philosophy*. Formerly the Drama Specialist and Director at Blue School in Manhattan, Clare currently collaborates with high school students as the head of the drama program at Denver South High School.

Students as Arts Activists: Insights and Analysis from a Politically Engaged Assessment

MATTHEW REASON

YORK ST JOHN UNIVERSITY

ABSTRACT

Throughout the second year of their BA programme at York St John University (UK), drama and dance students engage with a compulsory module titled “politically engaged practice.” As part of this they are given a deliberately provocative assessment brief that requires them to “plan, design and implement a small-scale politically engaged piece of acts activism.”

This paper explores the experience of asking students to become, if only temporary, political activists. It does so by first setting out how arts activism is framed and defined for the module as an intersection between effect and affect. Under the headings “dialogical activism,” “culture jamming” and “quiet activism,” it then provides a typology of the kinds of arts activist projects undertaken by students. Suggesting that the assessment offers an opportunity for “authentic learning” the paper describes how students articulate the impact of the module on their sense of social consciousness and relationship to political issues.

Finally, the paper reflects on the role of activism within the academy, particularly in a context where universities are frequently accused of operating under a liberal bias that imposes particular political perspectives on students.

The assessment brief is intended to be a provocation, an impulse to action through which students can immerse themselves in active learning. It reads: "working in small groups you should plan, design and implement a small-scale politically engaged piece of arts activism."

All assessment briefs require a degree of tacit knowledge in order to understand what is being asked—what after all is an "essay" or required by the instruction to "reflect critically?" This unpacking is certainly needed here, as the task is intricately tied up with the content, which in turn is tied up with questions of aesthetics and effect and affect. However, if ever I have designed an integrated moment of assessment—defined by Marilyn Lombardi as one where assessment is "not merely summative" but "woven seamlessly into the major task in a manner that reflects real-world evaluation processes" (2007, p. 3)—it is this one. The result is, I believe, a particularly powerful learning experience for both students and the instructors.

In this short essay I have sought to think critically on the experience of asking students to become (even if only temporarily) arts activists. I do so by first setting out the *context* in which it is located, also providing a brief *definition* of how arts activism is framed for these circumstances. I then outline the *actions* undertaken, providing a broad typology of the kinds of activist projects students have pursued. Next I explore the kinds of *impacts* that have occurred, suggesting that amongst the most transformative were those that effected the students' own social consciousness. Finally I present some brief reflections on the role of *activism within the academy*.

Throughout this paper discussion will include anonymised reflection, feedback and discussion from students.

CONTEXT AND DEFINITION

The arts activist assessment comes towards the end of a year-long

process of engaging students—predominantly second year BA students studying drama and dance—in questions of political arts practice. This takes the form of two modules, the first—Politically Engaged Practice 1—looks outwards and introduces students to key concepts and arts practices, exploring how the arts impact upon and are impacted by social movements and political agendas. Based upon this critical and contextual grounding, the second module—imaginatively titled Politically Engaged Practice 2—makes a couple of significant shifts. Most importantly, as introduced above, it operates a movement towards practice as it requires students to plan and implement their own arts activism project. These will be explored in detail in a moment. In doing so it also focuses on arts practices that seek to make an *immediate* intervention—however small, ambitious, radical or fleeting—into the political sphere. That is it focuses specifically on arts *activism*.

This difference between what might be termed broadly “political performance” and “arts activism” is inevitably subtle and fuzzy, but one that Marcela A. Fuentes articulates clearly through the term “artivism,” writing:

This neologism defines productions by artists who use their craft to mobilize concrete action in response to social issues. The term “artivism” characterizes a drive towards action in the making of an artistic intervention. In activist projects, the main goal is to trigger responses and not merely represent a state of affairs. (2013, p. 32-33)

The key element here is the description of how arts activism typically entails action directed towards an immediate and identified change. We can see this focus on action, on doing, in other definitions, such as the glossary of *Art, Activism and Recuperation* that defines activism as “An activist looking to create change using the medium and resources of art” (Trevor, 2010, p. 8).

The utilisation of art in this manner is in one sense obvious. As Suzanne Nossel writes on artivism, “art has the ability to change our minds—inspiring us to take on different perspectives and reimagine our worlds. If we can agree that art’s ability to change the individual psyche is profound and undeniable, why have we activists, who are in the business of changing the collective mind, shied away from employing art directly?” (2016, p. 103)

The hesitation that Nossel observes feels connected to the (re-) deployment of art as explicitly instrumentalist. If activism is focused on “concrete action,” change and *effect* then art (particularly rich, rewarding, memorable art) is often more ambiguous, elusive and produces *affect*. In outlining this debate, Stephen Duncombe persuasively brings these ideas together, suggesting that the very efficacy of arts activism comes through the indirect, perhaps partly incomprehensible, experience of affect—a process he terms *æffect*. The significance of this, for Duncombe, is to recognise that the processes by which we change our minds and form opinions are complex and not solely the preserve of facts or dispassionate knowledge:

As recent developments in cognitive science suggest, we make sense of our world less through reasoned deliberation of facts and more through stories and symbols that frame the information we receive. And, as any seasoned activist can tell you, people do not soberly decide to change their mind and act accordingly. They are moved to do so by emotionally powerful stimuli. As such, when it comes to stimulating social change, affect and effect are not discrete ends but are all up in each other’s business. (2016, p. 117)

When working with the students it was this complex intersection of ideas that we explored. We were asking them to operate as practitioners and artists, to consider the affective impact of their work on audiences; and also as activists, mindful of political efficacy. Crucially, therefore, they needed to consider a kind of political aesthetics, where the aesthetics of their action—whether in form, in appearance, in tone, in tradition—align with and support the goals of their activism.

ACTION: ARTS ACTIVIST PROJECTS

In the two years that the module has been running to date, a range of activist projects have been undertaken. As is the nature of the module, these have been small-scale, experimental, ephemeral and DIY. As is the nature of assessment, and the diversity of a student cohort, they have ranged from the sustained, inspired and thoughtful to the more confused or hesitant. Reflecting on the projects it becomes possible to begin to draw out some typologies, describing the kinds of arts activist

approaches that the students have adopted—defined by ethos and aesthetic, rather than topic or politics. Of course these types overlap, but this section will explore broad categories under the headings: dialogic activism; cultural jamming; and quiet activism.

Dialogic Activism

Subtle distinctions reside between ideas of dialogical art (Grant Kester), conversational art (Homi Bhabha) and relational aesthetics (Nicolas Bourriaud). Fundamentally, however, each describes a conceptual and aesthetic shift from considering art as a one-way relationship between the art work and individual spectator to various ways in which this relationship can become an exchange or encounter. As Kester puts it, dialogical art describes:

the possibility of a dialogical relationship that breaks down the conventional distinction between artist, art work and audience—a relationship that allows the viewer to “speak back” to the artist in certain ways, and in which this reply becomes in effect a part of the “work” itself. (1999/2000)

Emerging predominantly from community arts practice, dialogical art resists the idea that art has to be a fixed entity, an object or artefact produced by a special kind of somebody called an “artist.” Instead dialogical art is produced through the encounter, a co-production or co-creation by whomever is participating in the exchange. Examples here might include Rosana Cade’s work “Walking Holding” (2013-14) which “involves one audience member at a time walking through a town or city holding hands with a range of different people” or Deborah Pearson’s “Drifting Right” (2014) which she describes as a one-on-one performance “in a canoe for an audience member who is also a right-wing voter [...] it is a piece about talking to conservatives, and sharing a boat with a conservative.” With both these examples the substance of the “work” shifts from being an entity to an exchange—the “work” is what happens between the artist, the participant and the action.

The desire to initiate such exchanges has been a recurring feature of students’ responses to this module, seeking to design a form of creative doing that stimulates or maintains a politically engaged conversation.

One group located their project around the taboo of menstruation

and specifically the “tampon tax” (under UK and EU law tampons are currently classed as a “luxury” and subject to value added tax). To explore and expose this theme they organised a Make Your Own Tampon workshop, hosted in the Student Union, in which anyone was welcome to join them in making homemade tampons (and also tampon bunting, tampon earrings, tampon accessories). In their reflection on the project one group member wrote:

Our aim was to create a piece of arts activism that was dialogical, we wanted to make an event that was both non-hostile to the audience, where the art was *created* by the audience. Without the presence of participants we wouldn't have had an event [...] the participants' responses became the art.

The students described the making of the tampons as a “metaphor” or a “gimmick”—the actual thing was the exchange between the participants about the issues and ideas raised by the initial provocation. Following on from the module, the students received an invitation to re-create the Make Your Own Tampon workshop as part of “Beyond the Vote,” a festival celebrating 100 years of women's suffrage in the UK.

Another group similarly sought to initiate conversations, this time about nuclear weapons. They did this through approaching passersby and asking if they would mind if they “drew around your shadow,” itself a reference to the “nuclear shadows” that were all that were left of people and objects obliterated by the atomic explosions in Nagasaki and Hiroshima. This unusual request acted as an interruption to everyday life and an avenue into conversation. The students sought to present the work in a politically neutral manner, as neither for or against nuclear armaments, but as a desire to bring to the surface something that has largely slipped from our everyday consciousness. As one participant commented “I think this piece has started a conversation that needs to be carried on.”

This interest and desire to produce dialogical projects perhaps reflects a sense amongst students that the conversations that matter to them – and there have also been dialogical projects on education, invisible disabilities, mental health and male suicide—are not taking place within public discourse and/or are doing so in a manner from which they feel excluded. They also indicate the importance of a civic politics,

of a true democracy needing to be one where people have the right to be heard and sense that they are being listened to. Indeed, one group of students framed their activism as a “listen-in,” stating:

I never considered something as simple as listening could be classed as political, due to it being an everyday task. But if you allow someone to have one hour of your day to sit and tell you whatever they like or whatever is on their mind—well, how would you feel?

Cultural Jamming

Culture jamming is a form of activism that seeks to imitate, satirize and thereby subvert the power of media and branding by using its very familiarity as a form of critique. Central to ideas of culture jamming is that our daily lives are saturated with media images and branding which seek to have an impact on us but over which we have little or no control. In this manner the majority of media culture is the opposite of dialogical; while it may often be described as “communication” it is rarely if ever interested in a genuine exchange. While dialogic art seeks to offer an alternative to advertising culture by creating intimate, one-off, hand-held and local encounters between participants, culture jamming takes an alternative approach of using the tools and images of media culture in order to construct a different message.

While culture jamming often appropriates the polished aesthetics of mainstream media, of most interest for this module were those instances that utilised the body and had a more handmade immediacy. Two examples addressing similar concerns are Yolanda Dominguez’s series “Poses” (2011) and Celeste Barber’s “#celestechallengeaccepted” (ongoing from 2015). Both operate through a similar concept, ordinary women with ordinary body shapes recreating the idealised bodies and appearances presented in fashion and advertising. Barber’s work is photographic, located on Facebook and Instagram; Dominguez recreates the poses of high fashion advertising in public settings: in streets, doorways and parks. With both the act of mimicry draws attention to the impossibility, and inherent ridiculousness, of the original.

For students, who are the targets of endless, all pervasive, inescapable media messages, the possibility of responding to and talking back to such representations through culture jamming spoke to them directly. Like the examples of Barber and Dominguez this was often in terms of where they felt it touched on them personally, in terms

of body image, beauty and identity.

Inspired by Dominguez's "Poses," one group undertook a project in which they replicated the outlandish postures of fashion mannequins, standing in shop windows or on shop floors amongst clothing displays wearing t-shirts with the slogan #beyourownmannequin. The objective was to highlight the difference between the body types and shapes of the mannequins and those that most people actually have. As one of the group members said, "We want to encourage people to be their own mannequins instead of trying to become a body size which is near impossible to achieve."

What is interesting about this project is that it utilised a form of culture jamming, but also maintained a physical presence, placing themselves and their bodies on the line. This act of showing up is integral to much activism. Their project was picked up and written about by Yahoo News (Eriksen, 2017) where they faced their own experience of trolling: ranging from "Liberals will protest ANYTHING!" to "Face reality you are fat and ugly. Protesting will not change that, a good diet and exercise will."

What all the culture jamming orientated projects have had in common is that the students often have a contradictory relationship to branding and advertising. At once aware of and concerned about its influence on their lives, they are also deeply invested in it and genuinely enjoy the pleasures that it gives them. Culture jamming allows them to play out both parts of this relationship, working *with* the references that they love and enjoy, while also reclaiming a little bit of the space for themselves.

Quiet Activism

In a much reproduced article titled "Give Up Activism," Andrew X presents a critique of what he terms the "activist mentality," in doing so describing factors that I found resonated with how the students engaged with and at times resisted becoming activist. By "an activist mentality," writes X:

What I mean is that people think of themselves primarily as activists and as belonging to some wider community of activists. The activist identifies with what they do and thinks of it as their role in life, like their job. [...] The activist is a specialist or an expert in social

change. To think of yourself as being an activist means to think of yourself as being somehow privileged or more advanced than others in your appreciation of the need for social change. (1999, p. 3)

Few, if any, of the students on the module identified with the “activist” as presented in this description. Indeed for many it clearly articulates much of what they found off-putting and alienating about activism and politics more broadly—esoteric, self-regarding, elitist, exclusory. All of course perceptions that grass roots activism would hope to cast itself in opposition to. One student reflected on her relationship to ideas of activism:

Through the process I struggled to find my inner activist. I felt that I did not have any strong political views or a subject I was extremely passionate about. The term activist itself was a complex thought. Always when thinking about activists I would relate the notion to aggression, signs and marches—to me there was no way of relating activism to art or to myself. Yet this suggests that the only actions that bring about social change are the actions of a person defined as an activist. I realised I found this demeaning to the everyday actions of others who may not view themselves as activists, but who bring about social change in their everyday actions.

In contrast many students were more able and willing to locate themselves in terms of ideas of “quiet activism,” describing forms of political activism that, in the words of Laura Pottinger, steer away from “antagonistic, vocal and demonstrative forms of protest” and instead “expands the category of activism to include small, quotidian acts of kindness, connection and creativity” (2016, p. 215). Examples of quiet activism might be typified by forms of “guerrilla activism,” such as yarnbombing, guerrilla gardening and other forms of “craftivism” (Hackney, 2013). An example of a quiet activist projects undertaken by the students was one that attached knitted gloves and a card containing information about rough sleeping to anti-homelessness architecture and street furniture around the city centre.

For students, quiet activism also encompassed their attitude to dialogical art, where they defined their acts of conversation, their acts of listening, as moments of everyday kindness and community that

resisted the impersonal, frantic and inhumane experience of much of contemporary life. In this vein, another group recreated Yoko Ono's famous work "Mend Piece" in the University Library, with the students spending a day attempting to repair broken china teacups as a metaphor for mental ill-health and distress. As one student put it, this was a form of dialogical quiet activism, where the aesthetics were appropriate to their issue:

Inviting passers-by to help us rebuild broken teacups created a zone where discussion about mental health could happen. Questions about the teacup and its connotations to fragility and mental instability were raised, leading to a range of discussions around why we are considered so fragile; what we can do to resist this ideology; and how we could improve our generation's, and future generations' mental well-being.

IMPACT: OUTWARD AND INWARD EFFICACY

As discussed earlier, one of the definitions of activism is the desire for social change—change in an active and often immediate way. It seems tempting, therefore, to measure or think about activist projects in terms of their success in producing change, to think about words such as effectiveness and efficacy. Indeed, Stephen Duncombe presents an interesting provocation that arts activism is often *too* hesitant in this regard and should seek to assert and measure its impact more confidently and more systematically.

In their reflections students were indeed very hesitant to claim significant impact, their discussions crouched with an immediate awareness of the smallness of their actions and the vastness of some of the issues they were addressing. They spoke, instead, about the value of changing even one person's mind, about starting a conversation about something that might stay in the mind, about momentary impacts and effects being "enough."

What is also striking, however, is that in their reflections students were more assertive and more confident about the impact that undertaking the projects had had on themselves. Confident, moreover, in asserting the value of this impact. They had been through a process whereby they grappled with and then started to identify, declare and own

their own active positions in relation to politics and social issues. They grappled with and started to identify their own relationship to ideas of activism. For example, one student who'd participated in the Make Your Own Tampon project, commented:

Speaking of myself, I've grown into the idea of becoming an arts activist. It is shockingly easy to slip into being apathetic about political issues, especially if they don't severely impact you as a person.

I knew that our event would not be relatively earth shaking, or that it would change the tampon tax law, but the fact that we got people talking about the tampon tax and educating people on the period poverty crisis is a step in the right direction to change, which is why I would refer to myself as an activist after going through the process and seeking to break taboos through conversation and crafting.

Another that:

I feel that I have made change, albeit it personal; in investigating these political issues, I feel that I can identify as an arts activist. The artistic explorations I conducted made me see mental health from a different perspective. Whilst this outcome may be a small change, I feel that awareness is one of the key factors to effect change.

The arts activist projects, therefore, acted as a kind of consciousness building; an educational processes through which where they came to know and recognise their own stake in and responsibility to a broader social democracy.

REFLECTION: ACTIVISM IN THE ACADEMY

The module is not optional. It is compulsory for all the students enrolled on our "performance" suite of degrees (which includes BA Drama, BA Drama Education and Community, BA Drama and Dance). As a final reflection I want to consider the pedagogic and political implications of placing a compulsory element of political activism within the university curriculum.

To an extent this might be a non-issue, we are simply asserting the

centrality of politics to all arts practice. Of the many repetitions of the maxim “all art is political,” Toni Morrison puts it particularly clearly:

All good art is political! There is none that isn't. And the ones that try hard not to be political are political by saying, “We love the status quo.” (Nance, 2008)

We want our students-as-artists to be aware of this, and understand that no arts practice can exist outside of politics. Yet, there is a difference between seeking to provide students with a critical framework through which to analyse the relationship between politics and arts practice, and requiring them to undertake their own piece of arts activism. To do so perhaps feeds into and confirms a long established trope that academia is awash with liberal bias that sets out to influence, or even indoctrinate, students' political opinions. The fear seems most prevalent in the US (topic of books such as Ben Shapiro's *Brainwashed: How Universities Indoctrinate America's Youth*, 2004, David Horowitz's *Indoctrination U: The Left's War Against Academic Freedom*, 2009, or Jordan Peterson's recent video “Dangerous People are Teaching your Kids,” 2018) but is certainly also a prominent discourse in the UK.

It is true that the assessment does not require students to develop arts activism with any particular political ideology, simply that they are politically engaged. This is perhaps a little disingenuous, however, as students will inevitably be able to detect their tutors' political values. Linvill and Grant discuss, for example, how within a grade orientated culture some students are likely to respond to perceptions of instructor political bias through “self-silencing and disingenuous expressions of their own beliefs” (2015). In other words, students may produce activist projects that fulfil what they believe are their assessor's political ideologies. Certainly, my own political ideology would most likely be classified as left wing; moreover I have asked myself how I would respond to a group of students who proposed (as a for instance) that they wanted to produce an activist project that was anti-immigration, nativist or even racist in focus.

Students own anonymous module feedback suggests that these issues are not seen as a problem, with remarks such as liking how they were allowed and trusted to make their own projects. Other comments have included “we were able to fully understand that everything is

political because we could do anything in our projects;" "I enjoyed creating our own arts activist group as I could be part of a project that suited my political concerns;" "I feel that this module has allowed me to explore myself and what I care about." For some students the module no longer felt like a module, with one remarking "The project didn't feel like an assessment" and for another "It didn't feel like we had to do it, but in fact rather enjoy it." In other words, for some students the projects were real world actions with real world consequences, producing "authentic learning" (Lombardi, 2007), including of the impact of the process upon themselves.

Of course this was not the experience of all, although resistance was more frequently couched in terms of rejection of *all* politics, rather than specifically that of the instructors. One student honestly recounted her journey:

I still dislike politics. I started this project with a hatred for anything political. In saying this, as the process went on I found I had a small interest in the political aspects that affect everyday life. I find politics complex and confusing therefore I try to avoid it. However, I have learnt that it is important to talk about politics because conversation is the first step to change.

While students haven't reported concerns with instructor bias it is worth considering that there could be various reasons for this. Possibly it indicates the extent of their self-silencing, perhaps not wanting to acknowledge even to themselves that they have adjusted their positions in relation to grading or tutor influence. Alternatively, as arts students they have perhaps already been self-selected by cultural and political perspective. Finally it is possible that the group nature of projects means that they tend to gravitate to topics where they can build consensus, such as important but less contentious issues of mental health or body image.

As a final remark, I have a sense that there would be nothing weirder, nothing more pedagogically inappropriate and deceitful, than setting out to teach a module on politically engaged practice and arts activism from a position of supposed neutrality. All teaching must model what it seeks to achieve, and so here I wonder if the module itself should not be conceived as an activist project. I think I am able to speak for my colleagues in describing the conscious positioning of our drama and

dance programmes as immersed with a social justice agenda: we want our students-as-artists-as-activists to make a difference and to take responsibility for the change they want to produce in the world around them. Certainly the module hopes to bring about change and is the first step in this larger ambition.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank my colleague, David Richmond, who works with me on the module and all the students from York St John University who have participated creatively, politically and joyfully.

SUGGESTED CITATION

Reason, M. (2019). Students as arts activists: Insights and analysis from a politically engaged assessment. *ArtsPraxis*, 5 (2), 114-128.

REFERENCES

- Duncombe, S. (2016). Does it work? The æffect of activist art. *Social Research*, 83 (1), 115-34.
- Eriksen, A. (2017). [Students protest store mannequins to highlight society's "impossible" body ideal](#). *Yahoo News*, 27 March 2017.
- Fuentes, M. A. (2013). Zooming in and out: Tactical media performance in transnational contexts. In P. Lichtenfels & J. Rouse (Eds.) *Performance, politics and activism*. Basingstoke: Palgrave. 32-55.
- Kester, G. (1999/2000). [Dialogical aesthetics: A critical framework for littoral art](#). In *Variant*, 9, Winter.
- Hackney, F. (2013). Quiet activism and the new amateur. *Design and Culture*, 5 (2), 169-93.
- Linville, D. L., & Grant, W. J. (2016) [The role of student academic beliefs in perceptions of instructor ideological bias](#). *Teaching in Higher Education*, 22 (3), 274-87.
- Lombardi, M. M. (2007). [Authentic learning for the 21st century](#). In Educause Learning Initiative, May 2007.
- Nance, K. (2008). [The spirit and the strength: A profile of Toni Morrison](#). *Poets and Writers*, November/December 2008.

- Nossel, S. (2016). Introduction: On “artivism,” or art’s utility in activism. *Social Research*, 83 (1), 103-5.
- Pottinger, L. (2017). Planting the seeds of a quiet activism. *Area*, 49 (2), 215-22.
- Trevor, T. (Ed.) (2010) *Art, activism and recuperation*. Bristol: Arnolgini Gallery.
- X, A. (1999). [*Give Up Activism: A Critique of the Activist Mentality in the Direct Action Movement*](#).

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Matthew Reason is Professor of Theatre and Performance at York St John University (UK). His current focus is on experiential and phenomenological responses to theatre and dance performance, including through qualitative and participatory audience research. Publications include *Documentation, Disappearance and the Representation of Live Performance* (Palgrave, 2006), *The Young Audience: Exploring and Enhancing Children’s Experiences of Theatre* (Trentham/IOE Press, 2010), *Kinesthetic Empathy in Creative and Cultural Contexts* (co-edited with Dee Reynolds, Intellect, 2012), *Experiencing Liveness in Contemporary Performance* (co-edited with Anja Mølle Lindelof, Routledge, 2016) and *Applied Practice: Evidence and Impact Across Theatre, Music and Dance* (co-edited with Nick Rowe, Bloomsbury, 2017). For further information visit [Matthew's website](#).

Inciting Solidarity through Plural Performativity and Pedagogical Aesthetics in Ethnodrama with Marginalized Youth in Toronto

RACHEL RHOADES

ONTARIO INSTITUTE FOR STUDIES IN EDUCATION

ABSTRACT

In the Youth Artists for Justice program, 12 socio-economically under-resourced, racialized youth conducted research and created an original play that invited others in the community and within the field of education into the imaginative sphere of critical and dialogic re-envisioning of the world. The study indicates youth ethnodrama performance as a potential site for a public relational pedagogy of resistance. This collaborative action research project aims to identify how this group of youth conceptualize their current and future roles within contemporary social movements and strives to garner within them a sense of hope and capacity to conceptualize and enact their political agency. Collectively, the youth cultivated a sense of solidarity, social responsibility, and political agency as they came to identify as an artistic ensemble analyzing critical issues and using theatre to depict forms of resistance. Following Judith Butler's (2013) definition of plural performativity, the

youth could use the theatrical space to perform and engender political participation. The pedagogical aesthetic of their original performance, Reflections of Tomorrow, illustrated realistic depictions of their own experiences and revealed the power and the passion with which they strive to make progress, inviting others to respect and enact their courageous resistance.

In this article, I will share findings from my doctoral research project entitled, *Confronting Racism and Neoliberalism with Collaborative Action Research and Ethnodrama*. In this collaborative action research, I recruited a group of 12 socio-economically under-resourced, racialized youth in Toronto through visits to public schools and community centers throughout the city. The purpose of the project was to conduct research and perform an original play for a public audience through the Youth Artists for Justice program. My main objective in the research was to instill and strengthen agency in historically marginalized youth as they conceptualize and enact participation in resistance and solidarity. This research indicates youth ethnodrama performance as a potential site for a public relational pedagogy of resistance that invites others in the community and within the field of education into the imaginative sphere of critical and dialogic re-envisioning of the world. I also aim to contribute to scholarship on drama methodologies and social movement theories of change that support marginalized youth in theorizing their own social roles within the political realm, while also helping to equip them with the skills required to communicate their political message, policy arguments, grievances, and demands for change.

I implemented the method of ethnodrama with the youth over the course of the 15-week program, which is the process of “dramatizing the data,” through the creation of a production (Saldaña, 2011, p. 13). My use of ethnodrama is a response to the call by critical youth scholar, Michelle Fine (2014) for youth resistance researchers to move beyond solely documenting inequalities towards creating space for the radical imaginary (in Tuck & Yang, p. 56). In combining research and dramatic play, ethnodrama may offer unique qualities that effect how youth envision, theorize and rehearse resistance, political participation, youth identity and cultural production. The youth created an original performance as their research product, which then served as public

pedagogy in communicating their emergent theories of change to an audience mainly composed of public school educators.

This collaborative ethnodrama action research project aims to identify how this group of youth conceptualize their current and future roles within contemporary social movements and strives to garner within them a sense of hope and capacity to conceptualize and enact their political agency. The study explores how youth respond to current conditions in part by embodying solidarity. Currently, the neoliberal value of individualism and the instrumentalization of social relations exacerbate what sociological theorist Durkheim claimed as ... "the historical process ... [of] desolidarization, at the end of which isolated individuals remain" (in Bayertz, 1999, p. 13). Scholarship on solidarity prior to this last decade conceptualized the term as a sense of moral obligation to protect and aid people within a similar social classification, as opposed to the more current application of the term as an act of crossing borders of identity in common struggle with others whose contexts are in fact different than one's own (Crow, 2002; Taylor, 2016). There is a gap in scholarship on solidarity in relation to youth perspectives and manifestations in youth lives. This project illustrates how a group of marginalized youth take up research on social issues both within their realm of experience and outside of it.

ETHNODRAMA, PLURAL PERFORMATIVITY & ENACTING POLITICAL SUBJECTIVITY

One of the study's research questions focused on how the use of collaborative action research and ethnodrama as methodology support youth in rehearsing the particular roles they envision for themselves as political agents. The youth conducted research through interviews, publications on social science studies, and autobiographical commentary on social issues through online sources. The youth then served as drama-based educators by interweaving their collected data with the stories they exchanged in the program to develop scenes that illustrated potential interventions on various issues. They emphasized intersectionality and the intersection of oppressions, such as discrimination against women of colour, the overlap of the struggle for Indigenous rights and environmental justice, the interconnection of spousal abuse and patriarchal capitalism, as well as the relationship

between inadequate primary and secondary school education on social issues in the perpetuation of racism and Islamophobia. The depiction of individual stories as a collective piece in the ethnodrama performance manifested the political action of what Butler and Athansiou (2013) call “plural performativity.” These scholars describe the ideology of the concept and action as such:

One has one’s own story and claims, but it is linked with the stories and claims of others, and the collective demand emerges from those singular histories, becomes something plural. [...] This means shifting from a view of rights that calls upon and reinforces forms of individualism [...] to a social form of agency, or performativity in plurality. (p. 157)

Collectively, the youth cultivated a sense of solidarity, social responsibility, and political agency as they came to identify as an artistic ensemble analyzing critical issues and using theatre to depict forms of resistance. Following Butler’s definition of plural performativity, the youth could use the theatrical space to perform and engender political participation, with the ideal result that, “the uncoun ted prove to be reflexive and start to count themselves [...] as a way of producing a political subject, such that the subject is a political effect of this very exercise” (Butler, 2013, p. 101). On entering the program, most of the youth considered themselves as outsiders to politics, without clear guidance on how to become involved or validated as an active participant. The ethnodrama research and devising process offered them concrete tasks to perform that allowed them to discover, critique, and represent political discourses they originally felt distanced from. They found themselves more attuned to the everyday instances of oppression and resistance in new ways. Wizard Barry, an 18 year-old female and recent immigrant from Russia, described this awakened awareness in a post-performance talkback with the audience:

First of all, people tend to put issues in the back of their heads and try to think of themselves, think about it later. But here, we had to do some research and so from our side, I found out so much new stuff and like everyone else did about all the problems we had, all the issues, and it became a sort of sound in my head that I would hear all the time and I started noticing these issues more. (May 24,

2017)

At this same talkback, Mike, a Black 20 year-old shelter-dwelling male, recounted how the data collection process inspired him to not only seek out knowledge on the issues related to the ethnodrama, but also to act as a peer educator engaging others in critical dialogue and artistic exploration:

There was a lot of really in-depth work that we had to do. Rachel was getting us up with people that were in these specific areas, these specific fields so we could do interviews with them. A lot of it was listening out, like personally, paying attention to the news and all these different things...a lot of listening out and paying attention to what is going on and bringing that back to and saying, "Hey, this is what I learned this week." (post-show talk-back, May 24, 2017)

Through the process of devising an ethnodrama, the youth embraced the roles of critical educator-artist-researchers. They committed to enacting these roles with thorough knowledge of the issues so as to have maximum possible impact with their theatrical pieces. When asked to describe any potential connection between being a political actor and theatre-making artist in her post-program interview, Super T, a 15 year-old queer Black female, responded:

Responsibility. Like in the plays and the theatre and in arts, you need to know what you're doing, and you need to take time at home to research and think about it and that's the same thing that goes with like political stuff. You need to know what you're saying. There won't be enough impact. Like you won't bring them or draw them. (June 11, 2017)

Super T spoke with confidence and ownership of her role as a socially-committed theatre artist participating in political discourse. This was a major change from her responses in my initial pre- program interview with her, in which she stated her lack of direct engagement with political issues despite her desire to take part in effective social action.

I don't participate. I don't pay attention to them that much. [...] What

makes me want to participate is me being able to get my voice out there and getting—being able to make a change in some type of way. (January 30, 2017)

In theorizing performativity as a potentially political act by and for those who are disproportionately impacted by systems of injustice, Butler (2013) refers to global public protest. I connect this form of action to the performativity of theatre in the context of ethnodrama created by marginalized communities to raise demands for justice. In Butler's words, "performativity names that unauthorized exercise of a right to existence that propels the precarious into political life" (2013, p. 101). Super T's experience reflected how the opportunity to devise and perform altered her self-perception from a voiceless youth to a public educator-artist-researcher engaged in politics. In preparation for her role in collective creative devising, she researched topics related to her scenes, which included gathering information on pipelines and contentious relationships with emotionally abusive fathers. She learned about the principle of equity through a discussion in the program through the metaphor of adding platforms of different sizes so that all people, no matter how oppressed, could see over a wall representing systemic obstacles. We related the concept of equity to issues such as racism within all levels of the educational system confronted in particular by Black students, including personal experiences by the youth participants in secondary school and their family members in college. As someone who identified as too uninformed and doubtful of her impact to engage in political action, it was a welcome surprise to hear her take on a radical perspective when she contributed, "instead of having to do extra work, just get rid of the wall so that everyone can see." Not only had she gained more knowledge of power structures; she participated in dialogue, and eventual theatrical devising, with a rich analysis of societal transformation.

The youth engaged plural performativity as a form of politics in depicting representational scenes of resistance informed by the exchange of stories from their own personal contexts, research into the particular experiences of others, and collective analysis of systemic oppressions. Athanasiou describes performativity, in the context of the dispossessed coming together to demand change publically, as "a shared affective economy of motivation, endurance, changeability, and vitalization" (2013, p. 178). As caring and passionate researcher-artists,

the Youth Artists for Justice ensemble developed this “affective economy,” as described by Riley, a 20 year-old, gender non-binary, Chinese-American Bostonian university student in her recollections of meeting with the Toronto group:

They really cared about what they were doing. Like, I could just see it in their eyes, and also the fact that they said, “I care a lot.” And for, there’s like this raw- I just saw this raw, unfiltered passion for what they were doing, which was really nice, and their belief in their own ability to change things and make change happen was very uplifting. (July 5, 2017)

Upon developing deeper and more nuanced understandings of social ills through critical discussions of the conceptual level and research on the level of experiences within communities, the ensemble bonded over a sense of responsibility to devise affective and informational scenes as an artistic-political contribution to struggles for justice.

INSTIGATING SOLIDARITY AND ACTION WITH A PEDAGOGICAL AESTHETIC

The youth participants claimed their role as public pedagogues through their performance, and their aesthetic decisions served this educational purpose. In the last section, I analyzed how they passed along their own learning as to the importance and legitimacy of utilizing anger as a theory and practice of change. In this section, I continue to describe their pedagogical aesthetic, which they used to promote more just social relations. The characters in the youth performance experienced and described oppression in cases such as teacher bias, corporate greed in resource extraction industries, interpersonal violence, and societal disinvestment in marginalized communities. They utilized various strategies of resistance from assertive confrontation in everyday situations and direct action in social movements on the stage in order to educate the audience, sometimes through emotional resonance, other times through disconcerting lack of resolution. The youth educated their audiences by depicting interventions, interruption, and resistance in ways that intended to leave the audience considering, as applied theatre practitioner-scholar Wan-Jung Wang writes, their “... inter-subjectivity in

the reception process” (p. 566). The youth desired to awaken an awareness of inter-subjectivity within the audience in relation to the multiple subjectivities audience members hold as individuals and as a means for the audience to consider their own relations and contrasting positionalities with the characters on the stage. Gareth White (2015), writing on aesthetics within applied theatre, reminds us that “... subjectivity is constituted as a felt experience of a place in a social order” (p. 39). Theatre can produce affective experiences that stimulate a recognition of one’s own social positionalities and roles in creating a more equitable social order.

The scenes in the youth performance emphasized the need for solidarity by depicting relational development between characters with potentially divergent goals, such as the three community leaders, who align themselves toward a larger desire for justice. In writing about “relational aesthetics” in art, Bourriaud (2002) states, “... the essence of humankind is purely trans-individual, made up of bonds that link individuals together in social forms which are invariably historical” (p. 18). The characters in the performance speak of the histories of the social groups which they represent and advocate for, and the ways in which they can create relational bonds that further a democratic project that supports marginalized peoples as a whole. *Reflections of Tomorrow* illustrates the necessity for valuing and utilizing interdependence in struggles for justice that rely on solidarity to reach progressive social aims.

Aesthetics is a term that is not always connected to applied theatre based on the assumption that the instrumentalization of the field in terms of social transformation is the primary goal of the work. However, applied theatre scholars of the recent past have started to reintegrate the idea of aesthetics, the artistic qualit(y)ies of the product and the artistry of facilitation, as important to the overall effect of the applied theatre experience for both participants and audiences (Bowell & Heap, 2010; Haseman, 2010; Thompson, 2011; Winston & Strand, 2013). In the cast of Youth Artists for Justice, the youth’s artistic choices reflect a pedagogical aesthetic that both draws forth an affective reaction and, simultaneously, perhaps even consequently, instigates personal deliberation within the audience as to their potential to engage in interventionist acts. In a follow-up focus group, Mike articulates the intention to “make [the performance] a mirror, allow people to see themselves in it and see that it all really starts with them. ... It’s great

that you enjoy it and you feel passionate about it, but we need something more” (March 15, 2018). The aesthetic choices by the youth artists were intended to produce an atmosphere of emotional impact through care for the characters, such as monologues from marginalized students dealing with unequal power relationships with school leaders, women experiencing domestic abuse, and Black youth reflecting on incidents of police harassment, combined with irresolution as a mechanism to instigate a desire for change from and by the audiences in their own lives. Mike further reflected on the pedagogical aesthetic, speaking of the creation of a purposeful discomfort as a means to instigate self-exploration by audience members and eventual action:

It’s a very, very tense thing and you can’t leave. You have to stay in your seat. You have to fight these, whatever demons are that you’re dealing with, especially if it’s something that you think is directed at you or it’s something that you need to change about yourself or something that you need to change in society or in your area around you. It forces you to sit through that. It forces you to have conversations with yourself, conversations with people around you. (Mike, Focus Group, March 15, 2018)

The elements of affect in Mike’s analysis contribute to an impulse towards critical thinking preempted by emotive power as produced through a pedagogical aesthetic. This relates to applied theatre scholar Penny Bundy’s discussion of “aesthetic response [that] involves cognition and emotion, acting, not separately, but in a ‘thinkingly feeling’ or ‘feelingly thinking’ way” (Bundy, 2003, p. 172). Similar to Mike’s emphasis on turning from the theatrical space to an ethic of progressive social activity, Augusto Boal (2006) argues for “‘The Aesthetics of the Oppressed, [which] aims at enabling fuller knowledge and placing in front of the person any ethical decisions to be made, [...] so that our choices may be conscious” (p. 36). In the same follow-up focus group, Alex, a 16 year-old first generation Bengali Muslim, describes his desire for the audience to see the intersections between the world of the characters and the world outside of the theatre, and to confront their own histories and potential futures in interrupting the patterns depicted in the play:

[We wanted to] really engage the audience in a way that entertains them, in a way that stays with them. Also, in a way where they can see themselves in the same situations, and so, that's kind of planting a seed. After the play, they begin to plant their own trees with that seed. And before you know it, everyone starts doing that, and then we have an entire force of people who want change. (March 15, 2018)

One aesthetic choice included the youth leaving an intentional thorn in the side of their audience by leaving all of the scenes unresolved. The classroom scene ends with Mrs. Mope lapsing back into patriarchal behaviours by calling on Mike to answer the next question, and then disregarding his attempt to stand in solidarity with the girls when he proposes that she ask them instead. The youth depict the frustrations of slow change without resorting to debilitation. In the scene about Richard, an oil extraction corporate executive, the youth depicted his abusive relationship with his wife, Isobel. The scene ends with Isobel and her daughter planning to move into Isobel's parents' house the next morning when Richard leaves for a conference. The daughter has teamed up with a local environmental justice activist to post a video of her father disregarding the destruction of Indigenous lands that resulted from his extractive project. Their goal is to build a grassroots movement to halt the project. In the scene on developing a new community centre, the community leaders devise a proposal and confront doubt as to the potential success of their plan due to anticipated restrictions from the government. The protagonists of each scene remain determined to stay in the fight despite the obvious obstacles. In this way, the youth aimed to stir up emotion and critical thought from the audience as to how they could re-enter the world in active solidarity with others who are standing up to challenge ideologies and improve material conditions for subjugated groups in resistance. Tyson spoke about the pedagogical intent of the performance:

But it's like, we shouldn't let it get to that point in the first place where we now need a resolution. [...] The best countermeasure is a preventative measure. Instead of being like, this happened. How do we fix it? You should make it so that it can't get to that point in the first place. [...] Like, why do these things happen? How does it happen? Why is it allowed to happen? (March 15, 2018)

The youth wanted to avoid a case in which the audience left the theatre enveloped by an Aristotelian cathartic release, ready to return to the insularity of their regular lives. By ending the scenes at a point of conflict, the youth artists turn the responsibility on the audience to strive for resolution by acting for change in their own lives. In the context of *Reflections of Tomorrow*, as evidenced by the title, the youth model the resistance they want to see reflected in the future, in the audience's everyday tomorrows.

Youth participant artist researchers received feedback from audience members that revealed an immediate impact. For instance, Alex reflected on the responses from his own family, with an emphasis on greater understanding and recognition of issues experienced by Indigenous communities in Canada.

As much as it was entertaining, but it was also really educational for them because they learned a lot. I know, especially in my family. [...] They learned about like Native people. [...] Really exploring it and knowing exactly what people experience and the whole effect about it, that was really like eye-opening for them, and they learned a lot about like the way people intersect to like, or how issues, how we all have the power and also how people, how all of our issues intersect. (July 5, 2017)

Bersi, a 16 year-old female who travelled on foot from Eritrea to Ethiopia with her uncle before arriving in Canada as a refugee two years ago, also expressed confidence in altering the perspective of an audience member. In her case, a music teacher at her school reported extensive learning on account of the performance.

People came in the audience and they were like, "I didn't know about this!" Even my teacher was like, "How did you guys even knew about this?" She was like, "I didn't even know like half those issues." [...] And she was so surprised that we knew more even though we are young and she's a teacher. [...] We touched a lot of issues, right? So, changing people's perspective in a political way with theatre is the best thing that I've ever seen until now. Like they get to have fun and they get to learn something. [...] So, like getting to learn about others things is so helpful, and you get to know more

and like letting others know is the best thing I've ever done so far.
(June 8, 2017)

The youth participants received validation of the power of their performance to shift audience attitudes. I did not conduct audience surveys because of the primary research foci on the enactment of knowledge acquisition, critiques of society, and tactics for social change by youth participants. Consequently, the data on the impact of *Reflections of Tomorrow* is limited to anecdotes from youth. My choice not to conduct surveys also stemmed from the decision instead to invite youth I had previously worked with and continued to mentor from Boston to attend the performance and conduct a post-show workshop with the youth participants and audience members. The impetus for this workshop was for the youth and audience alike to experience embodied collaboration in devising theatre based on the issues that arose in the play, such as anti-capitalism, Indigenous rights, anti-racism towards Black youth, and environmental justice. I also aimed to inspire the youth participants through the confident workshop facilitation by youth a mere few years older who had engaged in a similar project in the recent past. The workshop allowed the youth and audience to envision what solidarity could look like by creating their own scenes that depicted current injustices and transformative strategies to collectively build a more just future.

All of the scenes model for the audience the rehearsal for everyday resistance, a rehearsal for mobilizing "people power" in the moment and creating relational solidarity that may make these daily oppressions survivable in the short-term and that may manifest in the future to greater effect. For instance, in the classroom scene, through resisting the teacher together, Rose and Lily reinforce each other's indignation and open space for each other to voice and bolster their grievances and demands for change. Parts of the devising process mirrored that of Forum Theatre, but rather than bringing in "spect-actors" from the audience, the youth themselves stepped into the archetypical scenarios of specific instances of oppression during rehearsals and then translated their attempts at shifting the power imbalance into the script of their performance (Boal, 1985). They did not create a magical solution where the teacher transformed her beliefs and behaviours around patriarchy, but rather opened up a dialogue about what new understandings can be reaped from a less-than-ideal outcome. Youth applied theatre scholar

Snyder-Young (2012) critiques the common "magic" that often concludes devised performances by and for youth as serving to reinforce the status quo. She argues that such endings place the responsibility with the youth to adapt their own behaviours and attitudes without representing the needs to hold accountable systemic powers that create the conditions for the issues being portrayed. The scenes are not a how-to on reversing oppression, but rather a model for the ways in which marginalized youth and community members at times engender solidarity as a means of coping with and openly countering systemic prejudice within a long, often disheartening process of change. Their pedagogical aesthetic illustrated realistic depictions of their own experiences and revealed the power and the passion with which they strive to make progress, inviting others to respect and enact their courageous resistance.

SUGGESTED CITATION

Rhoades, R. (2019). Inciting solidarity through plural performativity and pedagogical aesthetics in ethnodrama with marginalized youth in Toronto. *ArtsPraxis*, 5 (2), 129-143.

REFERENCES

- Bayertz, K. (1999). Four uses of "solidarity." In K. Bayertz, (Ed.), *Solidarity*, (pp. 3-28). The Netherlands: Kluwer.
- Boal, A. (2006). *The aesthetics of the oppressed* (Trans. A. Jackson). London and New York: Routledge.
- Boal, A. (1985). *Theatre of the oppressed*. New York: Theatre Communications Group.
- Bourriaud, N. (2002). *Relational aesthetics* (Trans. S. Pleasance and F. Woods). Dijon: Les Presses du Réel.
- Bowell, P., & Heap, B. (2010). Drama is not a dirty word: Past achievements, present concerns, alternative futures. *Research in Drama Education: The Journal of Applied Theatre and Performance*, 4 (15), 579-592.
- Bundy, P. (2003). Aesthetic engagement in the drama process. *Research in Drama Education: The Journal of Applied Theatre and Performance*, 8 (2), 171-181).

- Butler, J., & Athanasiou, A. (2013). *Dispossession: The performative in the political*. Cambridge: Polity.
- Fine, M. (2014). An intimate memoir of resistance theory. In E. Tuck and K. W. Yang (Eds.), *Youth resistance research and theories of change* (pp. 46-58). New York: Routledge.
- Haseman, B. (2010). Why be interested? Aesthetics, applied theatre and drama education. *Research in Drama Education: The Journal of Applied Theatre and Performance*, 15 (4), 465-475.
- Saldaña, J. (2011). *Ethnotheatre : Research from page to stage*. Walnut Creek, CA: Left Coast Press.
- Snyder-Young, D. (2012). Youth theatre as cultural artifact: Social antagonism in urban high school environments. *Youth Theatre Journal*, 26, 173-183.
- Taylor, K.-Y. (2016). *From #BlackLivesMatter to Black liberation*. Chicago: Haymarket Books.
- Thompson, J. (2011). *Performance affects: Applied theatre and the end of effect*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Wang, W-J. (2010). An exploration of the aesthetics of an oral history performance developed in the classroom. *Research in Drama Education: The Journal of Applied Theatre and Performance*, 15 (4), 563-577.
- White, G. (2015). *Applied theatre: Aesthetics*. London and New York: Bloomsbury.
- Winston, J., & Strand, S. (2013). *Tapestry and the aesthetics of theatre in education as dialogic encounter and civil exchange*. *Research in Drama Education: The Journal of Applied Theatre and Performance*, 18 (1), 62-78.

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Rachel Rhoades is a teaching artist, youth worker, and Connaught scholar doctoral candidate at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, University of Toronto. She holds a BA in Arts Education & Social Change from Vassar College and MEd in Community Arts from Lesley University (Cambridge, MA). She has spent the last 12 years involved in creating and implementing performing arts programs with marginalized youth in Boston and Toronto. Through her research and drama education initiatives, she is committed to working in collaboration with youth and communities to counteract structural inequities and their

manifestations through projects grounded in social justice.

Beyond the Wall: Borderland Identity through Puppets

[ANA DIAZ BARRIGA](#)

NORTHWESTERN UNIVERSITY

ABSTRACT

On November 2017, in the city of Nogales, Arizona/Sonora, binational festival Beyond the Wall / Más Allá del Muro took place, bringing 15-foot tall puppets to the US/Mexico border. This essay is a first attempt to bring an academic gaze to Jess Kaufman's and my activist pursuit, reflecting on how puppetry allowed us to deepen our conversation with community members and discover the true purpose of our artistic action. This paper will trace our journey from the conception of the performance as an attempt to reframe the politically-charged border wall, through the expansion of the festival via the inclusion of community leaders, to the actual event and performance with puppets built and operated by volunteers from various segments of the community. Exploring community-based theatre where puppets function as amplifiers of the stories and identities of community members, and suggesting the opalescent identity of the puppet as parallel to the identity of the borderlands, this essay uncovers and establishes new research

questions, to be explored through praxis as they shape the future of the project with the aim of investigating how to create activism with a lasting impact focused on our common ground by rooting it on voices from the community.

The first iteration of binational festival Beyond the Wall / Más Allá del Muro took place in November 2017 in the city of Nogales, Arizona/Sonora, bisected by the border between Mexico and the US. Originally conceived as a giant puppetry performance that would turn the politically charged “wall” into an object of play, the event expanded, through the inclusion of community leaders, into a two-day festival in celebration of the borderlands featuring an art exhibit, two block parties, a concert, and a performance at the border with 15-foot tall puppets built and operated by community members. This essay is a first attempt to bring an academic gaze to our activist pursuit by examining the history of the project, the decisions taken, and the discoveries made. New questions arose as our involvement with the community reshaped our understanding of their and our identities, as well as the purpose and impact of our activism at the border, culminating in the identification of key research inquiries for the next phase of the project.

WHERE WE COME FROM

On February 17, 2017, my future collaborator, Jess Kaufman, and I had a Skype meeting. Donald Trump had just been inaugurated as President of the United States and his proposed “border wall” was the subject of repeated news reports. Jess had an idea for an intervention at the border: during the meeting, she talked me through a proposal to use giant puppets of children to turn the wall into an object of play. I suggested we involve the community members that were being affected by the new immigration policies, inviting them to be the performers in hope that they could use the puppets as a means to redefine their relationship to the border. And thus, Beyond the Wall was born.

Trump’s announcement of intent to build a wall between the US-Mexico border in 2015 (Washington Post Staff, 2015), brought more attention to immigration issues and the aggressive rhetoric that was

being used to refer to those issues on both sides of the border (BBC News, 2017a; Karaim, 2016; Parker, Corasaniti, & Berenstein, 2016). Protests against the wall became a common occurrence (Althaus & Cordoba, 2016; Karaim, 2016; Leou, 2017) and, although some were carried out through positive action, the common thread among them was a rejection of the new policies to be implemented (BBC News, 2017b). Our observation was that these activist attempts were only getting limited results. We hoped to find an alternative approach, creating a call to action that had, at its core, the positive aspects of the borderlands. Jess and I intended to use scale to diminish the importance of the border wall and believed puppets could be a useful means to achieve this: we hoped to be able to build figures that were big enough to interact over the existing border fence, while keeping their intrinsic good-natured character. We wanted to inspire people to think of the wall in a playful way, using the puppets as tools for reversing the growing negative rhetoric around border politics. Our inkling was that life and the events at the border went far beyond what was being fed to us by the media.

I say inkling because neither of us is from the border. Jess is based in New York and I am from Mexico City, so, although we felt we could represent the respective views of our countries to an extent, we were also aliens to the borderlands. The organization of this event became a turning point in re-discovering and re-defining our own national and professional identities through our exploration of the possibilities and limitations of working in the borderlands and our engagement with the borderland identity.

In researching the legal viability of our project, Nogales was suggested to us by a state-level political organizer in Arizona due to its existing artistic scene as well as its geographic location: the city is divided by the border, existing simultaneously, in Sonora, Mexico and Arizona, United States. Over the next couple of months, we managed to contact leaders of the community¹—one in Arizona, and one in Sonora—who were excited by our project and proposed we incorporate our performance into existing events that sought to enhance the economy and promote local businesses on the Arizona side, and to bring cultural activities and provide spaces for local artists on the Sonora side. Raúl

¹ Persistence and a series of lucky coincidences (probably made possible by the heated political climate at the time) permitted this. Unfortunately, the length and scope of this paper does not allow me to delve into further detail.

Leyva, our collaborator in Sonora, told us that he had spent years seeking a partnership in Arizona to organize events, and we were glad to position ourselves as facilitators in the communication between people of these adjacent communities, along with building infrastructure through production duties to make these events a reality. Through these collaborations, our project rapidly expanded from a one-off performance at the border into a two-day binational festival.

We built the first prototype for our giant puppets during a residency in New York in July 2017 with guidance from kinetic sculpture artist Anne Clobberly. During this construction process we discovered the identity of our initial puppet and, in an unconscious gesture, named her Flor. It wasn't until Flor stood up in her full, 15-foot tall glory at the work-in-progress showing on the final day of our residency that we realized there were deeper questions about what we were doing. We confirmed that our puppet had a playful character and the potential to unite spectators through the mere desire to interact with it. But who was this character that we had created? Where was she from, and what was the significance of her belonging to a certain place? During the build, we interrogated the viability of having community members participate in the building and operating of the puppets during the festival, but on the last day we made the crucial leap to considering the implications of their participation. What would it mean to ask this of the people of Nogales?

WHERE WE WENT

In the two months leading up to the festival, we put out calls for artists to participate in the exhibition and concert, as well as call outs for community participants to build, decorate and operate the giants. Two weeks before the festival, Jess and I drove from New York to Arizona, transporting Flor and our building materials, without any participants signed up to be involved in the puppet construction. After four days of driving and dreading that no one in the community would want to partake in this activity, we arrived with our small team² in Nogales for the first time on Monday, November 20th.

Nogales became a city in the 1920s, but it was a village since the 1880s when a train station was built in the area, which had been a

² Our team included impromptu assistant Talya Chalef, our intern Michael Duncan, as well as documentary film-makers Derly Pérez and Andrés Arias.

migratory path and trade route since the 1770s (“The History of Nogales, Arizona,” n.d.), to promote commerce between Mexico and the US (H. Ayuntamiento de Nogales, n.d.). As the population increased, the benefits of having a city straddling both countries became apparent. Inhabitants crossed freely to obtain commodities that could be found on the other side until a temporary fence was built in 1916 followed by a permanent fence in 1918 (Burton, 2017). This division has undergone several reconstructions affected by political circumstances: in the mid-1990s, an existing chain-link fence was replaced by one of corrugated steel, and the bollard-style fence that stands today was built in 2011 (Medrano, 2011). Upon our arrival, Stephanie Bermudez, our local collaborator, gave us a tour of Nogales, Arizona. She showed us areas of the fence where a new mesh was being installed to keep people from passing objects through the border, prompting complaints from current citizens who, constrained by visa limitations, would take advantage of the permeable structure of the fence to have lunch with their family members (Zionts, 2017), and who are now being restricted by a solution that is supposed (but unlikely) to resolve smuggling issues that exist all along the US/Mexico border (Contreras, 2016).³ This brief overview of the history of Nogales highlights how the community, though divided by a national border, functions as a single entity: *Ambos Nogales*, so called by those who live there.

The border crossing point, however, portrayed the same belief as the media: we all, including those at the borderlands, must conform to the identities assigned to us by the frontiers that divide us. We “belong” to a nation. This was made clear by the long lines non-US citizens had to endure to go through passport control to enter into the US, while those with a US passport whizzed through the crossing point, without even having their belongings checked. To cross into Mexico, however, no one appeared to keep track of anyone’s comings and goings, with only an unused metal detector and a few agents securing the country’s entrance.

³ At the time of this writing, the mesh attached to the fence is approximately 8 feet high, leaving more than half of the existing bollard wall permeable above it. When we conducted a binational picnic encounter with high school students coming together on both sides of the border, agents instructed us to ensure the students did not reach up and pass objects through the fence above the mesh (J. Kaufman, personal communication, November 2, 2018).

On Tuesday, November 21st, Raúl gave us a tour of Nogales, Sonora before taking us to the Museo de Arte de Nogales, where we were offered space to work for the week leading up to the events. Though we spent the day building by ourselves, our fears about a lack of participants were short-lived. We had a few curious visitors and by Wednesday, word of our presence had spread, and we welcomed our first volunteers: a group of high school students from the Preparatoria Municipal accompanied by their teacher, Oscar Lancaster. Though they were reticent at the beginning, by the time night fell, they did not want to leave. Oscar told us that not a lot of people believed in these teenagers, who became eager when they realized we trusted them and appreciated the effort they were putting into these puppets. Eventually, they even engineered a new cushioning system for the puppets' backpacks. Over the next couple of days, more volunteer groups showed up, including a large group of student teachers from the Universidad Pedagógica Nacional; artist/activist single moms who allowed us to promote the festival on their radio station, and who brought their daughters along to help with the construction; a group from Arizona Equality, an LGBT organization; and a group of teenagers who were taking circus classes at a local community center, and who offered to stilt walk for the performance.

The building sessions offered an opportunity to talk with each of our volunteers, all from different parts of the community, but who nonetheless shared their love and hope for the advancement of Nogales. They told us about their day-to-day lives (which for some, consisted of a constant crossing back and forth between nations); about their projects (sometimes hindered by the changing border politics); and those who had been there longer told us how the border had drastically changed during their lifetime. The Nogalenses were more than simply Americans OR Mexicans: they each represented a myriad of different identities depending on which parts of the community they belonged to. Many factors were at play, including their birth country, which nation they resided in, where their family lived, how they chose to relate to the border, etc. Hearing these stories clarified the purpose of our trip. Neither Jess nor I could tell these people how to relate to a border that is such an intrinsic part of their lives; the best thing we could do with the puppets was to listen, and try to get others to do the same.

Our project acquired the characteristics of community-based

theatre as defined by Cohen-Cruz (2005), where we collaborated with people from the community who became the center of the performance due to a “shared primary identity” which is “fundamental to their sense of themselves” (p. 2). We felt our aim as artists was to amplify the stories we were hearing, believing, as exemplified by Playback Theatre practitioners, that “[o]ur narrative about ourselves and our society is key to our identity” (J. Fox, as cited in H. Fox, 2007, p. 93). Though we differ from traditions like Playback Theatre and Theatre of the Oppressed in the centrality given to traditional narrative, we share the same values of deep listening and empathy, as well as a commitment to social justice (J. Fox, as cited in H. Fox, 2007).⁴ However, we consider ourselves ‘actors’ not in the sense of the ‘performer’, but rather, as those who are present, listening, and *acting* on what we hear.

Two days before the festival, we engaged our participants in a micro-workshop where we spoke about how their identities could be reflected in the decoration of the puppets. One notable moment in these conversations is the talk we had with the daughters of the single moms; they decided to decorate one puppet to look like Rosie the Riveter, demonstrating the reference they have for the women of their community and how they felt they should be represented. Getting our various groups of volunteers to talk about these themes while working on a joint task highlighted central aspects of their identities. This multiplicity, absorbed and condensed by the puppets, was portrayed as a single, diverse identity: the Nogalense. The process emphasized the fact that the Nogalense identity, due to the circumstances of the site where it exists, is transient, flexible, permeable, amorphous and ambiguous. The complexity within the borderland identity and the acknowledgment that its multiple components all belong to the community meant the puppets were invited to be “expressive of more than a monolithic belief system” (Cohen-Cruz, 2005, p. 6) in their portrayal, and their ability as good activists was brought to the forefront.

As demonstrated by Bread and Puppet Theater and their predecessors from the 1930s and before, giant puppets have an ability

⁴ While community-based theatre is the subject of an enormous, rich discourse, the scope of this paper only touches it lightly; Playback Theatre and Theatre of the Oppressed have been chosen as examples of community-based practices that also have participant voices at their core. Further examination of where this work fits in this critical paradigm will be the subject of future research as this project evolves and develops.

to incite change (Bell, 2008). Interestingly, in the US, many of these practices arrived as traditions brought by immigrant groups (Bell, 2008). In their activist performances, Bread and Puppet invite volunteers to participate, utilizing their unique way of incorporating elements of puppet theatre using “simple materials, direct means, and a strong connection to community ... as a reflection and articulation of community conscience” (Bell, 2008, p. 210).

However, Bread and Puppet involves volunteers in performances that have been previously planned by the artists, taking advantage of the lack of ‘seriousness’ of puppet theater to address difficult, highly politicized topics (Bell, 2008). In contrast, we actively prioritized volunteers as the central actors of our work, allowing us to keep our celebratory intention at its core. As with Playback Theatre’s “conductor,” the puppets created “a safe, open, and inviting environment” (Fox, 2007, p. 100), and similar to Boal’s “joker,” they helped us “ensure that those who know a little more get a chance to explain it, and that those who dare a little, dare a little more and show what they are capable of” (Boal, 2002, p. 245). The giant puppets, which we initially hypothesized as a suitable form to blur the wall, functioned as an invitation that allowed different kinds of people to engage with the themes being proposed.⁵ Their “traditional exemption from seriousness” (Schumann, as cited in Bell, 2008, p. 193) served as a form that granted members from different sectors of the community access to discussions about the uniqueness of the borderland identity.

On the night of November 24, a binational exhibition at the Museo de Arte de Nogales featuring work by artists from both sides of the border marked the inauguration of the festival. The following morning, the festival continued with a block party on the Arizona side. At 3pm, two puppets, led by my collaborator and operated by participants, made their appearance, leading the block party attendees to the border. On the other side of the fence in Mexico, I waited with our volunteer stilt walkers and the rest of the puppets and volunteers. The puppets had a brief encounter by one of the pedestrian crossing points, where they greeted each other, rejoicing at the encounter through see-through panels that are part of the structure of the wall. We encouraged people to cross, since, after the parade, the event would continue with a concert and arts

⁵ I am grateful to Jess Kaufman for identifying this way of speaking about the function of puppetry in our work.

fair on the Sonora side. Then the parade began. Parades and street theatre use the spatial nature of the public-space (in our case, of the border wall) to re-appropriate it, and the use of puppets better exploits its theatrical potential (Bell, 2008). By using scale to challenge the idea of the hard divide, our puppets established the contentious zone between Mexico and the US as a new, liminal *Border-Land*. The parade moved through the streets adjacent to the border fence. Some of our volunteers improvised a marching band with a chair and a trumpet. The mood was celebratory as we headed to a predetermined location where Border Patrol and the Sonoran authorities had granted us permission to perform.⁶ All through the route, we saw the other giants tracing a parallel course on the other side.

A surprise occurred, however, when we arrived at our designated meeting point and realized that the fence was taller than we had estimated. Our puppets could not reach each other over it. Our volunteers were not deterred, and cherished the fact that they could see, laugh, and dance with those beyond by getting the puppets to interact through the bollard-style fence. In this way, the puppets amplified their voices and their stories, becoming a 15-foot tall manifestation of their desire to connect and their will to celebrate their culture, not just through their appearance, but also through their improvised action.⁷ Those who spent the week with us building these giants appeared deeply impacted by the potential of their creations and tried out different actions that the puppets could take to interact with one another.

We walked back to the Plaza Pesqueira in Mexico, where the concert and final part of the event was to take place, and eagerly awaited the crossing of our giant friends. After some quick disassembly and reassembly of the US-side giants, all the puppets were reunited in

⁶ A mention should be made here regarding our involvement with CBP. Working legally was a crucial tenet from the beginning; this included getting me an artist visa to work in the US, and obtaining all pertinent permits. The CBP officials expressed a desire to change the rhetoric at the border and challenge the negative reputation they have been given by the media; after all, many of them are also members of the community. It is interesting to note that framing our project as “not a protest, but a celebration” was key to catching their interest and getting consent.

⁷ The only predetermined aspects of our performance were the route and the fact that there would be an encounter by the fence at the agreed meeting points. The content of that encounter was for our volunteers to decide. Before the parade, our volunteers were trained in the basic actions they could perform with the puppets as a foundation to experiment further with their movement.

Mexico and further merriment ensued. The puppets circled the fountain in the center of the square and danced together. They were handed off from volunteer to volunteer, and everyone present who had been involved in their construction had a chance to operate them. Radio and television reporters, some of which had been following the event all week, approached. Valerie Lee James of the Huffington Post wrote, quoting one of our young volunteers: “‘We made these puppets to celebrate Nogales,’ she said proudly. Funny, she never said a thing about a wall” (2017). The puppets had begun to change the media portrayal of the border, allowing the local community to challenge the narrative around their identity.

The lack of precision in the images created by puppetry leaves space for contemplation, allowing strong convictions to be expressed without forcing their adoption, inviting the audience to interpret them and relate to them on their own terms (Bell, 2008). It was through this ambiguity that our puppets were able to portray the nebulous identity of the borderlands. Unlike human actors, who cannot portray truly generalized human beings due to their own inherent individuality, puppets can represent the everyman figure (Obraztsov, as cited in Jurkowski, 2013). Their status as objects allows them to depict a more respectful representation of “the other” by embodying identities through the integrity of the objects and the ways in which they are operated (Bell, 2008). In this way, puppets can represent everyone, without making anyone feel excluded from their activist pursuit. But given the nature of this project’s need to highlight the specificity of the singular identity of the Nogalense, a question arose regarding how the puppets’ inclusive potential could be honed to illustrate the uniquely blended identity of the border.

Though we are each composed of the multiple identities imbued by the various roles, spaces, and cultures we embody, this multiplicity is more evident for the people at the border. The unique site they inhabit is politicized in a way that attempts to force them into the mold of a single identity: their political nationality. The challenge they face when shifting from one identity (political) to another (cultural) could be considered akin to the shifts in identity that puppets undergo. It is through their animation that puppets transform from inanimate objects into living beings; this shift of perception—Jurkowski’s (2013) “opalization” or Tillis’ (1992) “double-vision”—has been explored in studies considering whether

audience members are aware of both identities of the puppet—alive/not-alive—simultaneously, or whether they oscillate rapidly from one perception to the other.

Puppets exist in a borderland of identity: it is interesting to consider whether this parallel oscillation is what makes puppets suitable representatives and vehicles for the amplification of our volunteers' stories. Are they Nogalenses Mexican *and* American? And what else? Is their identity oscillating or does it exist in “double-vision”? Is its essence the opalescence that allows them to belong to both places at once? These are some of the questions that will be explored in future praxis as the project moves forward.

WHERE WE ARE GOING

The end of the concert marked the end of the festival and of our time there. We arranged for three puppets to stay with the community members for future use should they so desire.⁸ But we knew we were not saying goodbye for long. Before we left Nogales, many of our community partners and volunteers had invited us to return, and it was clear that this had been the pilot of a recurring event.

As we began planning the next iteration of the festival, we questioned how we could make it more relevant to the community. We do not want the festival to occupy one weekend and disappear, but rather to have a deep and expanding impact that seeps further into the community while radiating to adjacent sister cities at the border and beyond. The way this activity at the border explored the union of identity poses questions about how to ensure activism does not further segregate vulnerable and/or minority communities by placing them in a spotlight. How can we ensure that their voices are attended for reasons beyond the fact that they belong to an unheard minority?

In our attempt to achieve these aims, we have begun a pen-pal program with high school students from Ambos Nogales, inviting them to explore the borderland spaces where they coexist. The material the students are generating, as well as their proposed future participation in the festival, will inform the decisions made in curating the second iteration of the event, for which we are hoping to involve a larger segment

⁸ Since we left, they have made appearances at several school and community events, independently of our involvement.

of the community. In the long term, we hope that Beyond the Wall will establish a positive purpose in Nogales and that local partners will take over its organization, allowing us to expand its impact by involving other borderland sites and creating sister festivals. We are driven by the question of how we can ensure that activism brings us together and creates a lasting impact, without emphasizing the vulnerability of and further marginalizing those involved. Instead, we seek to highlight the bond between the human beings who take part in a joint activity which invites both participants and facilitators into a mindset where the identity construct is simultaneously celebrated and transcended.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Besides those previously mentioned, I wish to acknowledge the contributions of the activists, artists, and organizers that made this event possible including (but not limited to): Colectivo Taco de Perro, India Aubry, Voices from the Border, Lazlo Kantor, Cristina Pierce, Cindy Rodriguez, Public Works Department, Governor's Island Trust, Fractured Atlas, Materials for the Arts, Movimiento Teatro por la Dignidad, Southwest Folklife Alliance, Love Glasses Revolution, Jacksubeli González, Zulema Rodriguez, and Elena Vega.

For more information, visit [Beyond the Wall](#).

SUGGESTED CITATION

Diaz Barriga, A. (2019). Beyond the wall: Borderland identity through puppets. *ArtsPraxis*, 5 (2), 144-157.

REFERENCES

- Althaus, D., & Cordoba, J. (2016, February 10). World news: Pope to stand with migrants on border—Francis' trip to Mexico will include Mass on Texas border, a zone of campaign contention. *Wall Street Journal, Eastern Edition*; New York, p. A.8.
- BBC News. (2017a, February 7). [Former Mexico president Vicente Fox: "Go to hell Trump."](#) Retrieved October 24, 2018.

- BBC News. (2017b, February 18). [Protest against Mexico border wall](#). Retrieved October 24, 2018.
- Bell, J. (2008). *American puppet modernism: Essays on the material world in performance* (1st ed.). New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Boal, A. (2002). *Games for actors and non-actors* (2nd ed.). New York: Routledge.
- Burton, T. (2017, February 23). [No wall necessary: The USA-Mexico border at Nogales in 1915 | Geo-Mexico, the geography of Mexico](#). Retrieved November 3, 2018.
- Cohen-Cruz, J. (2005). *Local Acts Community-Based Performance in the United States*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press.
- Contreras, R. (2016, July 18). [Poll: US-Mexico border residents feel ignored, oppose wall](#). *San Diego Union Tribune*. Retrieved October 27, 2018.
- Fox, H. (2007). [Playback theatre: Inciting dialogue and building community through personal story](#). *TDR/The Drama Review*, 51 (4), 89–105.
- H. Ayuntamiento de Nogales. (n.d.). [Sonora-Nogales](#). Retrieved November 3, 2018.
- James, V. L. (2017, December 1). [Wise imagination: Mischief and mirth at the wall](#). *The Huffington Post*. Retrieved October 31, 2018.
- Jurkowski, H. (2013). *Aspects of puppet theatre* (P. Francis, Ed.) (2nd ed.). Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Karaim, R. (2016, September 2). [U.S.-Mexico relations](#). *CQ Researcher*, 26, 697-720. Retrieved October 24, 2018.
- Leou, R. (2017, February 2). UCLA students protest against immigration ban, US-Mexico border wall. *UWIRE Text*, p. 1.
- Medrano, L. (2011, June 30). [Evolution of a border crossing: US to tout fortified fence in Nogales](#). *Christian Science Monitor*.
- Parker, A., Corasaniti, N., & Berenstein, E. (2016, August 3). [Voices from Donald Trump's rallies, uncensored](#). *The New York Times*.
- Tillis, S. (1992). *Toward an aesthetics of the puppet: Puppetry as a theatrical art*. New York: Greenwood Press.
- The Washington Post*. (2015, June 16). [Donald Trump announces a presidential bid](#). Retrieved October 24, 2018.
- Zionts, A. (2017, November 1). [Border mesh to extend 700 feet along West International Street](#). *Nogales International*. Retrieved November 3, 2018.

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

[Ana Diaz Barriga](#) is a Mexican theatre artist focused on international collaborative performance and specialized in puppetry. Ana has performed in festivals including the Edinburgh Free Fringe (UK, 2011), Sprint Festival (London, UK, 2015), and the Prague Quadrennial (CZ, 2015). She has trained in puppetry with PIP (CZ), Yael Rasooly (IL), Improbable (UK), and Gyre & Gymbly (UK), among others. She has an MA from the Royal Central School of Speech and Drama (London), and is currently working towards an Interdisciplinary PhD in Theatre and Drama at Northwestern University researching puppetry and kinesthetic empathy.

The Aesthetics of Activism in Korea: The Utopian Performative and *Communitas*

JISUN KIM

YALE SCHOOL OF DRAMA

ABSTRACT

This article explores how the aesthetics of activism can function as a driving force of a social movement by empowering the individuals and creating a “utopian vision” among them. Two recent major movements in Korea are introduced as examples; the Ewha Womans University protest and the Candlelight Protest, both of which indicate new possibilities of aesthetic activism. There was a big protest occurred at Ewha Womans University in 2016 summer, which was one of the crucial events that elicited the nation-wide Candlelight Protest. It was a site-specific theatre located at the main building of the school, which students occupied for 86 days until their demands were met. The students enacted a range of theatrical performances, such as holding public meetings with their masquerade-like masks on, making music videos, publishing comics on SNS, writing parodic novels, and parading with flashlights at night. Then in the winter of 2016, Korea witnessed a great wave of candlelight in the central square of Seoul, leading to the

impeachment of the incumbent president. During months of Candlelight Protest, diverse groups of society—including families, teenagers, disabled people, queers, and various non-political clubs—gathered together with candles on the street every weekend.

*In both Ewha Protest and Candlelight Protest, the performative and aesthetic power of the protest naturally altered the modalities of the community, transpiring a sense of *communitas* that emerged from the “feelings and sensibilities of utopia” which J. Dolan referred to as the “utopian performative.” Individuals were not amalgamated into a distinct community, but rather rediscovered themselves as individual beings, transformed through their solidarity, empowering themselves to transform reality. These protests show new possibilities of aesthetic activism.*

INTRODUCTION

When discussing political protest, focus is usually placed on the contents of the protest, the consciousness of the participants, and social significance of the movement. However, attention is rarely placed on the aesthetics of the protest, and when they are discussed, the aesthetics are considered as a derivative of a certain “ideology” of the protest, not as a pivotal motivation to move people. This article, however, chooses to explore how the aesthetics of activism can actually function as a driving force of a social movement by empowering the individuals and creating a “utopian vision” among them. In order to do so, two recent major movements in Korea are introduced; the Ewha Womans University protest and the 2016 Candlelight Protest, both of which indicate new possibilities of aesthetic activism.

These examples are particularly relevant as they reveal the process of a fundamental transformation of activism in Korea and show significant differences from former political revolutions. The history of political protest in Korea is connected to the history of the democratization of the nation, made up of several bloodshed revolutions happened from the 40s to the 80s. These revolutionary uprisings were more physically violent, shared a clearer ideology, and were formed by stronger organizations compared to the contemporary protests. These historical revolutions were comparatively homogeneous combative

movements, premised on a sense of duty. This traditional type of protests still survives in present Korean society as a mainstream form of protest, particularly for the laborers' right to strike.

However, the examples dealt with in this article show recent new ways of protesting that generate a playful "performance" as an effective method of activism. In these movements, common citizens, not political organizations, constitute the backbone of the demonstrators. They reject a violent protest, pursue horizontal communications without an authority figure, and avoid making an ideological or political statement, rather focusing on a specific purpose of their gathering. And these new characteristics of the protests naturally necessitate a new form of aesthetics. There are much more peaceful enjoyments, festive atmosphere, and most importantly, spontaneous *communitas*. The most distinctive feature of the concept of *communitas*, which was introduced by V. Turner, compared to the established social community, is that individuals are deeply engaged in ritual time and space, wherein they escape from social identities and achieve existential status, unconfined by structural identities such as class, social status, or occupation. Individuals in *communitas*, therefore, form temporal and all-powerful bonds with other individuals, existing in the "here-and-now":

We feel that it is important to relate directly to another person as he presents himself in the here-and-now, to understand him in a sympathetic (not an empathetic—which implies some withholding, some non-giving of the self) way, free from the culturally defined encumbrances of his role, status, reputation, class, caste, sex or other structural niche. Individuals who interact with one another in the mode of spontaneous *communitas* become totally absorbed into a single synchronized, fluid event. (Turner, 1982, p.48)

Another important aspect of *communitas* is that the feeling of communal solidarity it creates does not eliminate the strong sense of individuality. Turner explained that *communitas* is essentially "a relationship between concrete, historical, idiosyncratic individuals" (1969, p. 131). *Communitas* is a ritual community in which existential individuals, stripped of their former and social identities, create direct, immediate, and affective bonds with others while maintaining their uniqueness. Therefore, *communitas* is unsurprisingly transient. It is a community embodied with potentiality that is not revealed in the daily lives of

participants in their roles within the existing social structure, and therefore has a subjunctive mood. However, even though the existence of *communitas* is temporary, the effect it produces within the individual is not. *Communitas* provides individuals with a utopian vision for an ideal society.

These new forms of protests also exercise an enormous amount of political power, even stronger than that of violent and combative protests. This may suggest how the aesthetic of the protest should be developed and analyzed, keeping pace with changes in the ontological viewpoint of the contemporary society, whereby solidarity arises not by virtue of identity but due to temporary consensus about a certain issue. This temporality creates a liminal time and space, where people can perform themselves and connect to each other without any specific qualification. They are free to create and discover their new selves through enjoyment, rather than having the sense of sacrificing themselves for any social change. Individuals are not amalgamated into a distinct community, but rather rediscover themselves as individual beings, transformed through their solidarity, empowering themselves to transform reality.

EWHA WOMANS UNIVERSITY STUDENT PROTEST

In the summer of 2016, there was a big student protest at the Ewha Womans University in Korea, which is considered to have elicited the nationwide Candlelight protest, resulting in the impeachment of the incumbent president of Korea, Geunhye Park (Lee, 2017). Initially, this student protest was created voluntarily among the students, in order to oppose the commercialistic school policy and arbitrary governance of the then-president of the university, Kyung-Hee Choi. It was a non-violent protest occupying the main building of the university. However, problems occurred when the president of the university called the police to disperse the students in the building. There were around two hundred students in the building and the number of the police responding to the scene was around sixteen hundred (Ahn, Seol, & Choi, 2016). The students were unarmed female students and some of them got injured during the suppression process. The majority of the students criticized this kind of brutal suppression on campus as an action that should not be occurring in a democratic state. This incident made the headlines in

the major media in Korea and the protest spread among a larger group of students.

As a result, the students once again occupied the main building for 86 days, until president Choi resigned (Lee & Choi, 2016). The students enacted a range of theatrical performances which opened a new chapter in the history of protest in Korea. In order to understand the unique aesthetics of this movement, several particular characteristics of the protest should be noted. First, they refused violence. It was a peaceful demonstration. Even before the students were dragged out from the building by the police, they sang the K-pop song "Into the New World," by Girls Generation, in front of the police force (Think We, 2016). The video clip subsequently became a hit online. This is a noticeably different phenomenon compared to the student protests in the 80s and 90s in Korea, which were highly violent, with flying firebombs and using iron pipes as a weapon.

Secondly, there was no leader or leading organization of the protest. Prior to the Ewha protest, student protests were usually organized by the university student council. However, the Ewha protest occurred spontaneously and the students planned everything via an online school community. They did not ask each other's names, and always wore masks outside of the building. This anonymity policy was strictly followed by the students for two reasons. Firstly, they wanted to protect themselves. They were worried about the risks that could occur from participating in the protest, such as being subject to disciplinary action by the school, or being arrested by the police. Secondly, the students wanted to project themselves through a unified voice, not as a mere assembly of individuals. Since the protest became a huge issue in Korea, there were many reporters around the school. Following this, the students did not want their individual voices to be reported as if they were representing the whole group. As there was no leader, there were no authorized individuals to express the official opinion of the students. Therefore, the students refused to do individual interviews, but rather tried to "perform" their unified voice.

To construct a unified voice through which the students could communicate with the media and others outside of the building, they had to form their official statements together. This was a very interesting phenomenon as it showed that they were (either consciously or unconsciously) aware of the performativity of the protest beyond the naïve belief of transmitting the "truth" by individuals. Meetings took place

four times a day, and all Ewha students and graduates were authorized to participate in the meeting held in the main occupied building. Every decision was made by a direct democracy, and consequently, it took a considerable time to make any decision since each item had to be discussed and confirmed by every student who participated in the meeting. As a result, university officers, journalists, professors and others had to wait to get the “official” response of the students in case of any negotiation and inquiry. This way of decision making was named as a “snail democracy” by the media, which means a slow democracy. In addition to the official statements, the internal rules and policies of the protest were created from scratch during these meetings.

Based on this anonymous and democratic atmosphere, spontaneity became a core value of the protest. Every student of the university had access to the building, so they could come and go at any time, as long as they had their student ID cards. Some slept in the building, while others commuted. Not every student of the university participated in the protest, but anybody who wanted to participate could just walk in to the building with their ID cards. The building was occupied 24/7 by the students and the occupation was maintained by volunteer students. Some volunteers were responsible for checking ID cards and patrolling the building, while others focused on building maintenance and managing the official email and Facebook account. The large portion of financial needs was fulfilled by alumni donators. Volunteers managed the donations and were responsible for distributing meals and daily necessities in the building. The work of the volunteers was based on a shift rotating system, so anybody who wanted to volunteer could fill in the voluntary work form for their preferred time and position. It was basically open to every student.

This spontaneity and openness also stimulated creativity within the protest. There was no leader, so everybody could be a leader, free to suggest any kind of project during the meetings. If the project was confirmed upon the meeting, the proposer then became the person in charge of that project and she could gather individuals who wanted to participate in the project. Such teams were called TFs (from English “task forces”). There were numerous kinds of TFs, such as a parade TF, investigation TF, events TF, faculty meeting TF, contents production TF, etc. Some projects were huge. For example, there were parade events with flashlights at night, inviting all the members of the university, from

enrolled students to alumni and professors. There was also a diploma-return performance, in which alumni returned their diplomas at the main entrance of the school. The slogan for this performance was “The school we graduated from is not this violent university.” Some other projects were smaller and more entertaining. There was a student protest photo exhibition, an event for making calligraphy pickets for the parades, and job hunting lectures where the alumni were invited to the building in order to attract non-participants to the protest. Students also held a study-performance in the building during the mid-term period, wherein they actually studied, responding to criticism such as “the duty as a student is to study, not to protest.” Sometimes they organized dancing parties in the building for their own entertainment. They also published comics and parodic novels on their official SNS. Ewha Alumni who became mothers were allowed to come with their babies. There was a nursery room in the building decorated by the students.

As such, the protest was peaceful, democratic, creative, and artistic. The most impressive characteristic of this protest was that it greatly empowered individual participants in the process, both in a political and creative way. It became a theatre. It was not just one organized theatre, but a combination of a diverse kind of theatres taking part inside and outside of the occupied building. There was no promise back then that the president of the university would resign, and the students suffered continuous threats by the school and the police. Many students were having psychotherapy sessions because of post-traumatic stress disorders derived from the confrontation of the massive police force and the fear of participating in the protest. Nevertheless, the protest was full of joy and utopian visions, even though the students were very well aware of their tragic situation. The term they used for referring to the building they occupied was “Etopia,” denoting Ewha-utopia. They built solid feelings of connection with each other in this horizontal, open, creative community, even though they did not really know each other. It was a living example of *communitas*. However, the students did not initially intend for or design this kind of effect. It was their temporal and successive choices of aesthetics which unexpectedly changed the modality of the community.

THE 2016 KOREA CANDLELIGHT PROTEST

The goal of the Ewha student protest was simple: resignation of Kyung-

Hee Choi, who was responsible for calling the police and the violent suppression on the campus. However, she had no intention to resign and the protest lasted longer than the students expected. Therefore, the students started investigating the background of the president Choi to add more pressure to her. They were suspicious of the political power that she possessed, which allowed her to draw such a huge number of police officers into the campus. After a series of collective investigations, they finally found a dubious connection between her and Sun-Sil Choi, the closest friend of President Park (Yoo, 2016). This revealed evidence of the illicit admission of Sun-Sil Choi's daughter to Ewha. It seemed that the president of the university helped the admission process of Choi's daughter. This issue raised great anger among the public, being a critical clue to discover new dimensions of the relationship between president Park and Sun-Sil Choi. Sun-Sil Choi turned out to be an impregnable figure, who exerted great power over Park's governance, even though she held no official position in the government. People were shocked to find out that Park's political decisions were highly influenced by this unauthorized figure. When the public opinion worsened, and the situation got out of control, president Choi finally resigned. Shortly after, the nationwide Candlelight demonstration began, aiming for the impeachment of president Park, who was accused of a large amount of corruption related to Sun-Sil Choi, such as abuse of official authority, bribery charges, art industry repression, and public opinion manipulation.

This Candlelight demonstration was much larger than that of the Ewha Womans University, yet both shared fundamental principles: non-violence, spontaneity, and creativity. For over 20 weeks, until Park was finally impeached by the Constitutional Court, more than 1 million people from diverse groups of society, including families, teenagers, disabled people, LGBT groups, and various non-political clubs, such as a fan club of a K-pop star, gathered together on the street with candles every Saturday. This protest was also called the Candlelight Cultural Festival, since it was a peaceful festive gathering. Many popular singers volunteered to have concerts during the protest for free, and the public had the opportunity to speak freely on stage. Like the Ewha protest, the Candlelight protest also created space of creativity, whereby individuals can experiment with a new form of community and self-representation. They celebrated Christmas and New Year's Day on the street all

together with fireworks. People created me-medias to transmit the protest site, and “inextinguishable” Candlelight applications became popular in the winter’s strong wind. Various members of the society marched on the street with their unique flags designed by themselves, enjoying the gathering. There were cat lovers, high school teenagers, rural villagers, university students, and many other social groups.

Although the protest was impressively peaceful, it became one of the most powerful protests in Korean history, succeeding in the impeachment of the incumbent president, followed by a new president election. Jae-In Moon, the newly elected president, now advocates his government as a “Candlelight government,” acknowledging the power of the people. This occurrence of a mature culture of protesting rises as an important political and historical topic in Korea, yet there is little research on how this mechanism works. Many are still focusing on recognizing the phenomena, and not on analyzing it, perhaps as there is no certain framework by which to analyze the events. I argue these recent tendencies of protests require a fundamental shift of paradigm, to invert the ideological way of thinking. In these particular protests, ideology does not precede aesthetics.

What is important is to understand on what basis people reorganize themselves. This understanding suggests a new ontology born out of aesthetics: body constructs ideas. J. Butler (2015), in her book *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly*, said that “the body is less an entity than a living set of relations” (p. 65). By this statement, she points out that if the relation changes, the body itself changes too. Therefore, if we consider the world as a body and the concept of aesthetics as a way to relate oneself with the world, when we discover a new kind of aesthetics, it means we could find a new form of relationship which can change the basic principle and identity of the world itself. J. Dolan in her article “Performance, Utopia, and the Utopian Performative” (2001), affirmed that these changes are not made by hypothetical reasoning, but by a “utopian performative,” through which “feelings and sensibilities” of utopia are experienced (p. 460). Utopia does not exist on Earth, but we can “feel” its existence through aesthetic activism, which enables us to keep trying to reach utopia, despite its impossibility.

CONCLUSION

In both the Ewha Womans University protest and the Candlelight Protest, people discovered their latent power and possibilities through these performative stages of the protest. They were not just the angry public, but artistic actors on the stage, developing the ideas of presenting themselves. They did not follow a grand narrative written ahead of them. They were free to organize their individual projects through the protest. This surely empowers individuals, but at the same time, this powerful stage cannot happen without the communal and aesthetic support of the people, as in *communitas*.

This paper is an attempt to acknowledge this new phenomenon of protest in Korea. In order to focus on excavating its aesthetic power and recognizing it, the observations and discussions regarding other features of the examples of the protests are not discussed in great detail. Of course, those protests were not perfect, as every performance is. My intention is not to idealize them, but to understand their power in aesthetic terms. I hope there will be more future research based on their aesthetic features.

SUGGESTED CITATION

Kim, J. (2019). The aesthetics of activism in Korea: The utopian performative and *communitas*. *ArtsPraxis*, 5 (2), 158-168.

REFERENCES

- Ahn, H., Seol, S., & Choi, P. [안홍석, 설승은, & 최평천]. (2016, July 30). Ewha students occupying the main building for three days. [이화여대생 3일째 본관 점거 농성...교수등 5명 46시간만에 나와] *Yonhap News*.
- Butler, J. (2015). *Notes toward a performative theory of assembly*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Dolan, J. (2001). Performance, utopia, "Utopian performative." *Theatre Journal*, 53, 455-479.
- Lee, E., & Choi, J. [이은재 & 최재영]. (2016, Oct. 21). Could not stay as

- it was. ['이대' 로 있을 수 없었다]. *SBS News*.
- Lee, Y. (2017, Mar. 14). [How sparks at S. Korean women's school led to anti-Park fire](#). *AP News*.
- Think We. (2016, July 30). [Ewha students singing "Into the New World," before armed repression](#) [video file]. [이화여대 폭력진압 직전 다만세 부르는 학생들].
- Turner, V. (1982). *From ritual to theatre: The human seriousness of play*. New York: PAJ Publications.
- Yoo, S. [유상욱]. (2016, Oct. 18). Ewha protest: Professors join the protest. [이대 "특혜 없었다"... 교수들도 '총장 퇴진' 시위]. *JTBC News*.

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Jisun Kim is an MFA candidate in Dramaturgy and Dramatic Criticism at Yale School of Drama. Her research interests include but are not limited to theories of affect and performativity with a focus on contemporary women playwrights and performance artists. She is interested in women's theatre not only in performances but also in social movements. Her current research project is to illuminate unique female aesthetics revealed in both contexts.

A Silent Shout: Metamodern Forms of Activism in Contemporary Performance

TOM DRAYTON

UNIVERSITY OF EAST LONDON

ABSTRACT

There has been a recent and notable trend within contemporary performance spheres for artists to respond to various sociological, economic and political crises by creating participatory, community engaged performances. This article addresses how specific contemporary performance as activism projects have now evolved to respond to, and have been affected by, the emerging concept of the metamodern. By focusing on two 2017 productions, Mem Morrison's Silencer and LaBeouf, Rönnkö & Turner's #HEWILLNOTDIVIDEUS, this article argues that the metamodern oscillation between sincerity and irony, as laid down by Timotheus Vermeulen and Robin van den Akker, has become an integral component in these artists' performance-based activism. This article examines these performances in context with other politically engaged, participatory performance trends as well as the emerging concept of the metamodern in political and cultural spheres. The study offers a new insight into current practice formed upon the

interstice of the metamodern and youth politics, and how performance as activism can be (re)defined within the current political landscape.

I am watching a livestream of a pedestrianised street in Łódź, Poland. A bakery can be seen on the left of the screen and a security car on the right. Traffic can be heard in the background as shoppers, families and security guards walk on and off screen, oblivious to the webcam I watch them through. A year ago, I could log into the same webcam and watch a white flag flapping against an unknown desert sky. Six months before that, I could observe a crowd of teenagers staring into the camera, wrapped up against the New York winter, repeatedly chanting the mantra they saw emblazoned above the webcam; “He will not divide us. He will not divide us. He will not divide us.” The *#HEWILLNOTDIVIDEUS* installation, by performance art collective LaBeouf, Rönkkö & Turner, at the Muzeum Sztuki in Łódź follows a tumultuous and politically charged history of the project. From its beginnings as an installation at the Museum of Moving Image, New York, through to the controversial arrest of LaBeouf, the battle between the artists and factions of the alt-right for a white flag, to the seemingly unaware Polish street that I can spy on today, it is a bizarre and ever-changing piece of contemporary activism.

Meanwhile in London, in strikingly similar aesthetics to the text pasted above the *#HEWILLNOTDIVIDEUS* webcam, a series of placards have been placed along a high street by performance artist Mem Morrison. In stark black type against a white background are announcements of personal “crusades” (Circulate, 2017) from members of the local community. Shoppers and families walk between each placard in the *Silencer* project, stop to read a few, and carry on with their day. “Don’t Blame Muslims!,” “Fund The Third Sector!,” “Give Up Your Seat!” are just some of the striking titles on display in this silent, stationary protest.

Silencer and *#HEWILLNOTDIVIDEUS* are examples of performance as activism that engage with the thematic of, and complexities surrounding, the emerging concept of the metamodern. I refer to metamodernism here as a cultural modality, or structure of feeling, as per Vermeulen and van den Akker’s popularisation of the term (2010) that speaks to a contemporary modality of post-postmodernism based upon a proliferation of (ironic) sincerity, affect and

depth (van den Akker, Vermeulen & Gibbons, 2017), with specific reference to particular aspects of Hanzi Freinacht's posited empathetic political metamodernism (2017). I will also examine each performance as examples of work built upon and expanding the methodological frameworks of Bourriard's relational aesthetics and specific interrelating performance modalities; Grant Kester's dialogical art (2011) and Andy Lavender's theatre of engagement (2016). I posit that these cases of politically engaged art are examples of a specific mode of performance as activism and may point the way for future performative, political engagement in contemporary culture built upon a metamodern oscillation between sincerity and irony, hopelessness and hope.

THE METAMODERN

Metamodernism's current usage was first popularised by Dutch cultural theorists Timotheus Vermeulen and Robin van den Akker in their 2010 article, *Notes on Metamodernism*, as a posited description of tensions within a post-postmodern landscape, an "emerging structure of feeling" (p. 2) within contemporary culture that could "no longer be explained in terms of the postmodern" (p. 2). They explain that the prefix *meta* stems from Plato's *metaxis*, of a "between" or "both-neither" (p. 6) dynamic that speaks to the "tension... of a modern desire for *sens* and a postmodern doubt about the sense of it all" (p. 6). Whilst modernism strove towards a singular truth and postmodernism at once negated, multiplied and deconstructed this truth, metamodernism operates within this *meta* dynamic, oscillating between "sincerity and irony, enthusiasm and detachment, naïveté and knowingness" (MacDowell, 2011). This oscillation, however, does not indicate a balance. Rather, state Vermeulen and van den Akker, "it is a pendulum swinging between 2, 3, 5, 10, innumerable poles. Each time the metamodern enthusiasm swings toward fanaticism, gravity pulls it back toward irony; the moment its irony sways toward apathy, gravity pulls it back toward enthusiasm" (p. 6). Examples of this sensibility within popular culture include the films of Wes Anderson, television shows such as *Bojack Horseman*, the music of Sufjan Stevens, the emergence of the *Simpsonwave* genre on Instagram, and the work of novelists such as David Foster Wallace and Zadie Smith. All exemplify an oscillatory movement between irony and sincerity, naivety and knowingness, hopelessness and hope. As

Vermeulen expands; “There is the sense [now] that you say; ‘I cannot just be cynical—I’m so tired of being ironic all the time—I want to be sincere.’ You’re not. We are all, from the start, ironic. That’s how we were raised... but we want to be sincere” (Frieze, 2014).

Metamodernism, in its oscillation between aspects of the modern (hope) and the postmodern (hopelessness), does not indicate a return to the trappings of modernist grand narratives. Instead, metamodernism presents a form of “informed naivety” or “pragmatic idealism” (Turner, 2015) that engages with a seemingly modernist revival of the strive for authenticity, romanticism and affect, whilst not “forfeiting all that we’ve learnt from postmodernism” (Turner, 2015). As Luke Turner, the British third of LeBeouf, Rönkkö & Turner, explains, metamodernism “describe[s] the climate in which a yearning for utopias, *despite their futile nature*, has come to the fore” (Turner, 2015, italics my own). In current political discourse, this metamodern strive for utopia is evident in a decisive split from the centralist political framework of the postmodern era. In the US, Trump offers to “make America great *again*,” whilst, in the UK, Brexit is a similarly symbolic offer of a “return” to a nostalgic, and possibly false, metanarrative of Britain’s own “former glory.” Vermeulen describes this (re)formation of political polarisations, be it “Obama, Brexit, Trump, Corbyn, Bernie Sanders... [as] all part of the same kind of game... a way back, or a way forward, or a way sideways to... a politics of ‘it can be different’” (Krumsvik & Co, 2017).

Although, as a cultural modality, metamodernism itself is “*neither* a manifesto, *nor* a social movement” (van den Akker, Gibbons & Vermeulen 2017, 5), despite Turner’s *Metamodernist Manifesto* (2011) gaining traction online, certain political ideologies have arisen through metamodernist discourse. Political philosopher Hanzi Freinacht, actually the pen name for Emil Ejner Friis and Daniel Görtz, posits that metamodernism can be read as a “developmental stage” (2017, p. 15) that “builds upon [the] understanding” (2017, p. 15) of Vermeulen and van den Akker’s usage of a structure of feeling. He details his vision of “political metamodernism” in *The Listening Society* (2017), of which recent attention was drawn to via the announcement of *The Initiative*, a new political party in Sweden that champion’s Freinacht as “philosophical inspiration” (Gessen, 2017) in laying down the foundations for “a metamodern politics [that] moves beyond liberal ideas toward shared responsibility for maximizing the happiness and health of everyone in the world” (Gessen, 2017). Freinacht’s political

metamodernism stems from the drive for affect, sincerity and depth inherent within metamodernism, alongside the act of continual oscillation between disparate polarities. He champions cross-party discourse and understanding as, “even if we don’t agree, we come closer to the truth if we create better dialogues” (Freinacht, 2017, p. 4), as a method of creating a political structure focused on a “deeper kind of welfare system that includes the social, emotional and psychological aspects of human beings” (Freinacht, 2017, p. 72). *The Listening Society*, therefore, is built upon a tangible and mobilised form of new sincerity (Foster Wallace, 1993), alongside an admission and application of the fact that, “everybody already is like you—a very limited, vulnerable, hurt, single human being... that is exactly why the world is a complete, utter mess. And because the world is a mess, you are a mess” (Freinacht, 2017, p. 146).

I posit that the two case studies within this article, *#HEWILLNOTDIVIDEUS* and *Silencer*, are examples of both cultural and political metamodernist sensibilities within contemporary performance. Both exhibit a central importance placed on empathy, connection and engagement with participants and audiences, a drive for sincerity and affect in their political involvement, whilst also demonstrating clear ironic detachment from this modality within their very construction. They strive for a utopia whilst also acknowledging the falsehoods and failings inherent within this act.

MEM MORRISON'S "SILENCER" (2017)



Silencer in Enfield, London. Photo © Mem Morrison.

Silencer, produced in conjunction with *Circulate: Outdoor Arts for London*, was “both a silent march and installation” (Circulate, 2017) created by performance artist Mem Morrison. The project was described by *Circulate* as an attempt to “raise awareness of the political, cultural and individual challenges faced by local people living and working in Outer London... giving a voice to the many unsung heroes who have helped shape communities” (Circulate, 2017). Morrison and his team worked with a range of participants around the city over the summer of 2017, including “children, young people, older adults and families” (Circulate, 2017), in a series of creative workshops within theatres and arts centres that led to the creation of the placards within the *Silencer* installations. Each installation took place in a separate London borough, beginning with a silent and anonymous march of individuals holding blank, white placards in support of their “own personal crusades, inspired by unity, censorship and togetherness” (Stratford Circus, 2017). This strikes me as a particularly metamodern statement, oscillating as it does between the concepts of the collective (hope) and the censored

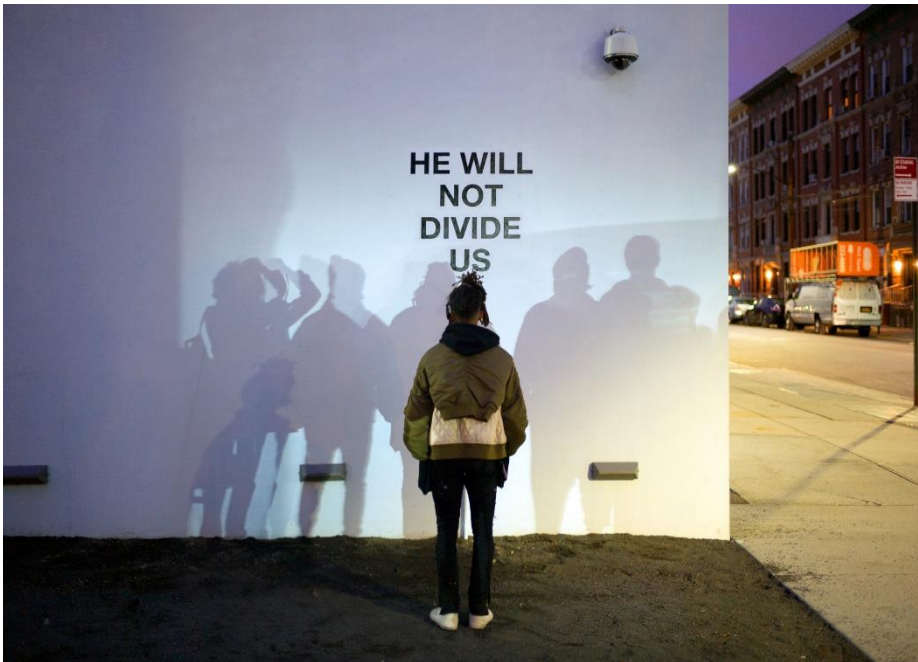
(hopeless), but the analogies will become clearer when we analyse the performance as a whole. Each silent protest ended at the place of the local installation, where placards printed with participants' individual "crusades" had been installed in place of the march's blank ones, revealing "the many contributed causes and stories people wished to be heard and acknowledged" (Circulate, 2017).

In many respects, *Silencer* builds upon previously established forms of community engaged performance. In 2016, Andy Lavender noted a trend within contemporary performance towards "'caring, engagement and commitment'... [that] moves us to a notably different lexicon from that employed during the height of postmodernism" (2016, p. 25). This performance, states Lavender, revolves around "'actuality,' 'authenticity,' 'encounter,' 'engagement'—a set [of terms] that would have seemed naïve or faintly ridiculous if wheeled out a generation or so ago" (2016, p. 25). He labels this mode of performance the "theatre of engagement," a modality that is "socially committed" (2016, p. 26) and that "provides an opening for certain sorts of political agency... in resistance to norms or uninspected assumptions, with the ability to make us see things differently and perhaps take action as consequence" (2016, p. 25). In many ways, *Silencer* fits firmly within Lavender's bracket, as well as resonating with earlier identified forms such as Grant Kester's dialogical art, which he discerned as "a body of contemporary art practice concerned with collaborative, and potentially emancipatory, forms of dialogue and communication" (2011, p. 2). As a socially engaged (Harvie, 2013) performance, *Silencer* provides a space for community and artist to engage within a political dialogue through its series of workshops, and a platform for communities' voices to be shared through both the marches and installations. It is performance as "*social interstice*," to quote Bourriard (2002, p. 45) in regard to his concept of relational aesthetics. I refer here to Bourriard's terming of relational art as "construct[ing] models of sociability suitable for producing human relations" (2002, p. 70), assembling a performative framework that, as Jen Harvie states, invokes "active participation with an environment and/or process that compels those audiences to interact socially with each other" (2013, p. 5).

However, *Silencer* offers an original and metamodern interpretation of such performative engagement. By aiming to give "a voice to the many" (Circulate, 2017) via performance modalities that share obvious

similarities with Lavender's theatre of engagement, Morrison's *Silencer* resonates strongly with that of Freinacht's *Listening Society*, where "every person is seen and heard" (Gessen, 2017). It offers a performative experience for both the participants and the audience that is "deliberately invested in social process, political perspective [and] matters of import to gathered groups of people" (Lavender, 2016, p. 26). The act of a silent march, however, deconstructs this process in a number of ways. During the march, protestors are silent both literally and figuratively, with the placards that they hold high remaining entirely blank; their personal crusades displayed in a "moment of quiet celebration" (Circulate, 2017). The name of the project itself can be read as a statement or a command; as a call to be heard, or a declaration of censorship. During the march, Morrison himself leads the row of protestors, with his singularly emblazoned placard displaying the *Silencer* logo—a symbol for a speaker marked with an 'x.' As an audience, we are encouraged to be silent and to *listen*, however, with both parties remaining silent, Morrison creates an aural space, in addition to the physical, for such relational and dialogical engagement to occur. That is the irony of the performance; it is dialogical in its silence. The act of *performing* a protest, too, is of note, with *Silencer* being framed by both Morrison and *Circulate* as an artistic installation, not a "genuine" political protest. Utilising the signifiers associated with political activism, a coordinated march with protestors bearing placards, whilst adapting them in an unexpected, silent and *blank* way, is also a re-appropriation of the conventions of political protest itself. By performing the protest in silence, both aurally and visually, Morrison is also highlighting the futility of their actions. The *Silencer* project constructs a space for dialogical engagement to occur, a platform for community participants to voice their own causes, but expects its silence to fall on deaf ears. It is a wholly metamodern performance; a "vessel for the [public's] needs and desires" (Gessen, 2017) that "attempts [change] in spite of its inevitable failure" (Vermeulen and van den Akker, 2010). It is hopeful and sincere in its (silent) shout whilst being ironically detached in its (shouted) silence.

LABEOUF, RÖNKKÖ & TURNER'S *#HEWILLNOTDIVIDEUS* (2017 – PRESENT)



Jaden Smith opens the installation. Photo courtesy LaBeouf, Rönkkö & Turner.

To discuss LaBeouf, Rönkkö & Turner's *#HEWILLNOTDIVIDEUS* is to engage in a dialogue steeped in Bourriard's relational aesthetics in regard to art that takes "as its theoretical horizon the realm of human interactions and its social context" (Bourriard, 2002, p. 14). As an example of performance as activism that engages with the complexities of a metamodern structure of feeling, *#HEWILLNOTDIVIDEUS* engages with an anarchistic strive for a "politics of 'it can be different'" (Krumsvik & Co, 2017), whilst also embracing, and adapting to, a continual, inherent and inevitable failure.

The original piece was installed on an outer wall of the Museum of Moving Image, New York, to coincide with the day of Trump's inauguration and was intended to remain "open to all, 24 hours a day... live-streamed continuously for four years, or the duration of the presidency" (LaBeouf, Rönkkö & Turner, 2017). The installation, described by Turner as "resisting division and the normalisation of division" (L. Turner, personal communication, June 13th 2018) consisted

of a webcam, above which bold black capitals proclaimed simply; “HE WILL NOT DIVIDE US.” Participants were invited to repeat the phrase as many times, and for as long as they wished in a “show of resistance or insistence, opposition or optimism, guided by the spirit of each individual participant and the community” (LaBeouf, Rönkkö & Turner, 2017). The piece famously opened that morning with rapper Jaden Smith staring solitarily into the camera. He continued to repeatedly chant the phrase for over five hours as word spread via social media, encouraging more and more people to join. The live-stream from this first day shows the crowd of predominantly young people increase in number, evolving the chant into a mass call and response, a dance and even a small concert. The chanting continues into the night, with LaBeouf and others continuing to repeat the phrase into the next morning.

As an example of performance as activism, *#HEWILLNOTDIVIDEUS*'s initial iteration demonstrates an obvious methodological relationship to Kester's dialogical art, in “soliciting participation” (2011, p. 2) within a durational, rather than immediate, artistic process whilst also constructing a relational model of sociability (Bourriard, 2002, p. 70) in which audiences can interact collectively and politically, as per Bourriard's relational aesthetics, both within the (immediate) physical and the (adjacent) online spaces. It is in its evolution as a project, however, that the full interplay between relational aesthetics, activism and the metamodern becomes evident.

In less than a week, the installation had become a target for certain alt-right groups, and self-proclaimed Neo-Nazis both on- and offline. Two days into the stream, a man wearing a cap strikingly similar to that worn by SS officers pushed past LaBeouf to “recit[e] white supremacist slogans into the camera” (Cliff, 2018). LaBeouf responded by repeating the installation's mantra particularly loudly into the man's ear, moving him away from the scene. Meanwhile, it was reported that moderators on 4chan and Reddit were attempting to stop users “organizing harassment campaigns” (Broderick, 2017) against people who could be seen on the live-stream, with “personal information being stored on a neo-Nazi wiki page” (Broderick, 2017). Other attempts at disruption included pizzas being delivered to the site of the exhibit and alt-right activists modifying the museum's sign to read “Museum of KEK” (Hewillnotdivide.us, 2017), in reference to the “Pepe the Frog” meme which has become synonymous with factions of the far right (Lawrence,

2017). Then, after an incident in which a figure at the installation “claim[ed] to be an ISIS suicide bomber” (L. Turner, personal communication, June 13th 2018) with LaBeouf “[taking] him to one side, and pull[ing] his scarf from his face so that he could look him in the eye” (Cliff, 2018), LaBeouf was arrested following the man’s “false accusation to the police, [with] the charges swiftly dropped” (L. Turner, personal communication, June 13th 2018). Shortly thereafter, the museum decided to end its engagement with the project, stating that the installation had “become a flashpoint for violence and was disrupted from its original intent” (Museum of Moving Image, 2017), despite no actual physical violence occurring on the site (L. Turner, personal communication, June 13th 2018). In fact, Turner explains that a number of issues outside of their control led to the installation’s closure; from a local politician asking the museum to close the project, to the museum refusing to supply any security for the site (Cliff, 2018). As LaBeouf explains; “it’s much easier to spin the narrative of ‘this crazy fucking celebrity millionaire asshole’ than it is to talk about what’s actually happening with the community that was showing up” (Cliff, 2018). In response to this closure, the livestream only displayed stark white text on a black background; “THE MUSEUM HAS ABANDONED US” (Hewillnotdivide.us, 2017). “They extricated themselves,” explains Turner, “Then we as artists became targeted; the work became targeted” (Cliff, 2018). This, however, was not the end of the project. A few days later, the installation was relocated to the El Rey Theatre in Albuquerque, New Mexico, where it suffered a spray paint attack before being switched off due to reports of gun shots in the local area (LaBeouf, 2017), with the artists deciding “it was unsafe to continue because of serious, credible threats of terrorist attacks by white supremacists” (L. Turner, personal communication, June 13th 2018). The webcam remained silent for a number of weeks, until the installation evolved into something else entirely.

On 8th March 2017, the image of a white flag against a blue sky appeared on the stream, with the “He Will Not Divide Us” text emblazoned on its side. Despite the location being unannounced, the flag was soon taken down by two members of the Traditionalist Worker Party and self-proclaimed Neo-Nazis (Turner, 2017), and replaced with a “Make America Great Again” cap and a “Pepe the Frog” T-shirt (Hewillnotdivide.us, 2017). The installation, still in its flag iteration, then

moved to the Foundation for Art and Creative Technology in Liverpool, England, before being taken down by the gallery due to “dangerous, illegal trespassing” (FACT, 2017). A few months later, the stream relaunched, showing the flag pinned against a white background in an unknown location. The flag was then installed at Le Lieu Unique in Nantes, France, before an “unauthorised drone carrying a burning piece of cloth approached the flag to try to set it alight” (Agence France-Presse, 2017), leading to the re-worked interactive-webcam iteration being launched at Muzeum Sztuki in Łódź in June 2018.

Regardless of the primary intentions of *#HEWILLNOTDIVIDEUS*, its impact, meaning and scope has been enlarged by the continual interplay between the artists, audiences, and factions of the alt-right determined to disrupt and terminate the project. In their drive to create a space, or, as Turner explains, “plant that seed and set those frameworks in place” (Cliff, 2018), for dialogical interaction with an audience that engages with a politics of “opposition or optimism” (LaBeouf, Rönkkö & Turner, 2017), despite continual attack from self-professed members of the alt-right, the artists constructed a durational installation that continues to attempt change “in spite of its inevitable failure” (Vermeulen and van den Akker, 2010). The artwork oscillates between its digital and physical iterations; becoming fluid in its presentational form as a response to specific cultural and political tensions. It is empathetic in its dialogical intention; attempting to engage audiences both in person and online with a sense of collective activism, whilst also becoming reactionarily exclusionary to certain political “factions” when provoked, in that it attempts to escape and avoid further disruption. However, the act of avoidance itself cultivates further interaction with members of the alt-right. *#HEWILLNOTDIVIDEUS* is a durational performance of activist exclamation and protest, one that actually provides a platform of sorts for two disparate political ideologies; the ones who will not be divided, and the ones who seek to divide. It is a metamodern performance that highlights the importance of activism driven art in the contemporary political climate. Oscillating, as it does, between a collectively shouted mantra, to a hushed phrase upon a flagpole, to a largely unnoticed sign upon a Polish street, *#HEWILLNOTDIVIDEUS*’s strength is in being able to be heard at all.

CONCLUSION

Both *Silencer* and *#HEWILLNOTDIVIDEUS* exhibit metamodern, oscillatory motions between disparate polarities; hope and hopelessness, connection and disconnect, shouting and silence. As examples of performance as activism they reappropriate and restructure specific modes of political protest as performance based upon theatres of engagement, dialogical art, relational aesthetics and forms of resistance. It is through this re-appropriation, however, that they create original and specific methods of performance as activism that reflect metamodern shifts in contemporary political discourse and culture that simultaneously strive for utopia whilst acknowledging their own futility. They act as silent or silenced shouts for change despite their inherent and inevitable failure.

On a recent visit to New York City, as part of the *Performance as Activism* conference at New York University, I found myself in the middle of protests in Washington Square Park, where hundreds of high school students joined thousands of others around the country in a mass walk-out on the anniversary of the Columbine school shooting (Hayhurst & Jackson, 2017). Surrounded by a mass of teenagers, I bore witness to a nationwide protest organised by one fifteen-year-old Connecticut student (Murdock, 2017). If the metamodern oscillation between enthusiasm and apathy is, as Vermeulen (Frieze, 2014) and Turner (2015) suggest, inherently connected to specific sociological, aesthetic and cultural structures affecting the millennial generation, the (now) young adults “for whom postmodern irony and cynicism is a default setting” (Turner, 2015), then it could be that Generation Z’s inherent focus on greater “human equality” (Fromm 2017, p. 18) will lead to different forms of performance as activism when the art of these now-teenagers comes to the fore. Whilst the millennial, metamodern structures oscillate between hope and hopelessness, between sincerity and irony, maybe the next generation will return a singular shout; one simply of *hope*. “We Are Change,” they chanted around me in Washington Square Park, “*No More Silence*.”

AUTHOR NOTE

Special thanks to Mem Morrison and LaBeouf, Rönkö & Turner for supplying images for this research, and to Luke Turner for particular and

detailed insight into the trio's projects.

SUGGESTED CITATION

Drayton, T. (2019). A silent shout: Metamodern forms of activism in contemporary performance. *ArtsPraxis*, 5 (2), 169-184.

REFERENCES

- Agence France-Presse. (2017). [*Flaming French drone targets anti-Trump art*](#). Retrieved 13th June 2018.
- Anti-Defamation League. (2017). [*14 words*](#). Retrieved 13th June 2018.
- Bourriard, N. 2002. *Relational aesthetics*. Trans. S. Pleasance & F. Woods. Dijon: Les Presses Du Réel.
- Broderick, R. (2017). [*Trump supporters and ne-nazis are using secret chatrooms to harass Shia LaBeouf*](#). Retrieved 13th June 2018.
- Circulate. (2017). [*Silencer*](#). 13th June. Retrieved 13th June 2018.
- Cliff, A. (2018). [*Shia LaBeouf, Nastja Säde Rönkkö, and Luke Turner get radically open*](#). *Dazed*. Retrieved 14th June 2018.
- FACT. [Fact_Liverpool]. (2017, March 23). [*On police advice, FACT and LaBeouf, Rönkkö & Turner have removed the installation HEWILLNOTDIVIDE.US due to dangerous, illegal trespassing*](#).
- Foster Wallace, D. 1993. E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S. fiction. *Review of Contemporary Fiction*, 13 (2), 151.
- Freinacht, H. 2017. *The listening society: A metamodern guide to politics book one*. UK: Metamoderna.
- Frieze. 2014. [*What is metamodernism?*](#) MillenialMarketing.com.
- Fromm, J. [ed.]. 2017. [*Getting to know gen z: How the pivotal generation IS different from millennials*](#).
- Gessen, M. (2017). [*The invention of a new kind of political party in Sweden*](#). *The New Yorker*.
- Hayhurst, K., & Jackson, S. (2017). [*Hundreds protest gun violence in Washington Square Park*](#). *Washington Square News*.
- Harvie, J. 2013. *Fair play: Art, performance and neoliberalism*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Hewillnotdivide.us. (2017). [*He will not divide us*](#). Retrieved 13th June 2018.
- Horton, H. (2017). [*Shia LaBeouf arrested live on camera after pushing man who said "Hitler did nothing wrong"*](#). *The Telegraph*.

- Kester, G. 2011. *The One and The Many: Contemporary Collaborative Art In A Global Context*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Krumsvik & Co. 2017. [Timotheus Vermeulen on metamodernism and fake news](#). Retrieved 13th June 2018.
- LaBeouf, S. [thecampaignbook]. (2017, Feb 23). [We have taken the stream down after shots were reported in the area. The safety of everybody participating in our project is paramount](#). [Tweet].
- Lavender, A. (2016). *Performance in the twenty-first century: Theatres of Engagement*. Oxon: Routledge.
- Lawrence, D. (2017). [HNN explains... the cult of Kek](#). Retrieved 13th June 2018.
- MacDowell, J. (2011). [Quirky, tone and metamodernism](#). *Notes on metamodernism*. Retrieved 13th June 2018.
- Murdock, L. [lanemurdock2002]. (2017, March 29). [I am 15. I am \(hopefully\) going to be around for awhile. I am going to make sure that every day that I live I will be fighting for those who can not. As always, time is on our side. There is much to come](#). [Tweet]
- Museum of the Moving Image. (2017). [Statement from Museum of the Moving Image on closure of HEWILLNOTDIVIDE.US](#). Retrieved 13th June 2018.
- Stratford Circus. (2017). [Silencer](#). Retrieved 13th June 2018.
- Turner, L. (2011) [Metamodernist // Manifesto](#). Retrieved 13th June 2018.
- Turner, L. (2015). [Metamodernism: A brief introduction](#). Retrieved 13th June 2018.
- Turner, L. (2017). [Joseph and Maigann Hutchins](#). Retrieved 14th June 2018.
- Van den Akker, R., Gibbons, A., & Vermeulen, T. (eds). (2017). *Metamodernism: Historicity, affect and depth after post-modernism*. London: Rowman & Littlefield International.
- Vermeulen, T. & van den Akker, R. 2010. Notes on metamodernism. *Journal of Aesthetics and Culture*. Vol 2.

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Tom Drayton is a theatre director and researcher based in East London. He has written for and directed *Pregnant Fish Theatre* since 2010 and lectures at The University of Worcester and The University of East London, where he is also studying his doctorate focused on political

theatre of the millennial generation. Tom is particularly interested in emerging companies, millennial theatre makers and work created on the interstices of youth politics and urban space. He is also an associate artist for *Project Phakama* and works with schools in East London to provide children with access to quality, interactive theatre.

“It Did Get Rid of the ‘These People Are Old People’ Thing in My Brain”: Challenging the Otherness of Old Age through One-to-One Performance

BRIDIE MOORE

UNIVERSITY OF HUDDERSFIELD

ABSTRACT

*This paper concerns the one-to-one performance work of Passages—a group of performers aged between 60 and 90—founded to support Bridie Moore’s PhD research into the performance of age and ageing. It analyzes how these performances challenge perceptions of the old person as “other,” and uses audience feedback, together with performance and social theory to explore how the work achieves this. The group uses mask work, proximity and intimate performance as a form of quiet activism, to challenge structures of thinking in subtle and penetrating ways. The analysis refers to the performance *The Mirror Stage*, given at the University of Sheffield (UK) in September 2015, and the paper discusses the one-to-one performance form and the eight one-to-one performances that were presented in the show. It engages with de Beauvoir’s (1953/1972) and Phelan’s (1993) notions of the “other” in order to explore the way the perception of otherness plays out and is*

disrupted by the presence of the old person in one-to-one performance.¹ The paper introduces the possibility that the contact facilitated by one-to-one could, as Allport (1954) argued, reduce prejudice concerning individuals who are members of outgroups such as the “old” and, by extension, to other marginalized individuals and groups.

This paper concerns the work of Passages—a group of performers aged between 60 and 90—founded to support my PhD research into the performance of age and ageing.² Here I analyze how Passages’ one-to-one performances challenge perceptions of the old person as “other,” and I use audience feedback, together with performance and social theory to explore how the work achieves this. The group uses mask work, proximity and intimate performance as a form of quiet activism, to challenge structures of thinking in subtle and penetrating ways. The following analysis refers to the performance *The Mirror Stage*, given at the University of Sheffield in September 2015.³ At the opening of this performance each audience member met one performer in a one-to-one. For the remainder of the show, first the bodies of the company were masked in a performance in which just the hands were visible; then only the faces were masked. Finally, the company collectively revealed their faces, each delivering a frank description of their appearance to the audience. How one-to-one within this performance disrupted the othering of the old person is the subject of the following discussion.

ONE-TO-ONE PERFORMANCES

On the question of both being and representing the figure of the old

¹ I have chosen, with Barbara Macdonald, to embrace the word “old” rather than “older. The word “older,” as Macdonald observes, is euphemistic, she sees the “avoidance of “old” as the clearest sign of our shame around ageing” (2001: x). I also argue that it constructs the old person only in relation to a projected age-normative citizen. Consequently, I have applied the word “old” where the referential word “older” would conventionally be used.

² This was undertaken between 2011 and 2017 at the University of Sheffield in the UK, and was funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council.

³ The phrase ‘The Mirror Stage’ was taken from Kathleen Woodward (1991) who proposes that at the end of life there is a “mirror stage of old age,” which is equivalent to Lacan’s “mirror stage of infancy.”

person, old performers are what social scientist Tehseen Noorani (2015) calls “experts-by-experience” (p. 32) that is, they have experienced what it means to age and be affected by representations of old age. To acknowledge this expertise, as part of *The Mirror Stage Passages* members made one-to-one performances that held implicitly within them a sense of time lived, of studied experience and of expertise gained over a long life. These have the potential to unsettle the normative representation of the old person in the mind of a potential participant.

In one-to-one performance the performer sets up the context in which they and a single participant co-construct the piece. As Rachel Zerihan (2009) explains, one-to-one gives an opportunity for “the spectator to immerse themselves in the performance framework set out by the practitioner” (p. 3). It “focuses attention and heightens the potential of the performative meeting, activating further performance’s agency to ignite response-ability in its audience” (p. 4). We aimed to harness this potential for agency and response in *The Mirror Stage* performance.

Passages performer Shirley Simpson’s one-to-one “Hands On,” centering on narratives of the body, invites participants to draw round their hands, inscribing the tracing with words and phrases while conversing on the subject of hands. Simpson then tells the story of her own recovery after her hand became semi-paralyzed:

In my story I told the participant about how I hated my right hand that was giving me pain and was not functioning properly, “letting me down.” Then how I changed my attitude and started instead to appreciate all my hand had ever done for me. I learned to love my hand, I stroked my hand kindly, nursed and supported my hand to improve and get better.⁴

The piece communicates Simpson’s understanding of her body, gained at a point of challenge in her life. Further, it aims to help the participant overcome negative attitudes to bodily failures. This work had an effect upon at least one of Simpson’s participants:

One participant did tell me that [...] she would work at changing her

⁴ Taken from “Reflections re my 121” document, sent via email on 6 October 2015.

own attitude towards her hands that were giving her some pain. Others [...] opened up with other stories about their life as they talked and traced around their own hands. People genuinely seemed to enjoy talking.⁵

The impact of this work on both Simpson as a performance maker and on her participant is evident and shows one-to-one can be mutually transformative. Other one-to-ones that opened *The Mirror Stage* are as follows:

“Resonance” (Ruth Carter)

A transactional piece which invites participants to tell a story, stimulated by one of a selection of Carter’s personal objects. These indicate, among other things, a life full of travel, connection with other cultures, intriguing places nearer to home and philosophical exploration. Carter invites the participant to choose an object that holds some resonance, and to reveal the story or thoughts that the object stimulates for them. In exchange she reveals what the object means to her. The encounter is infused with the authority of Carter’s voice as she guides the participant through the process, drawing on her long experience as a counsellor and mentor.

“Connections” (Elizabeth Seneveratne)

A meditation on the way hands facilitate the closest relationships, which uses the poem “Mother, Any Distance Greater than a Single Span” by Simon Armitage (1993) as its central text. The participant is led to a long narrow room and shown an exhibition of photographs. These images depict various ways in which Seneveratne’s hands, and those of her family, have nurtured, held, released and waved goodbye to loved ones. Seneveratne then asks the participant to hold one end of a ribbon that she unfurls as she recites Armitage’s poem. The two bodies in the long narrow space move further apart; Seneveratne reaches the far wall as she ends the poem. One participant commented that “her recital of the poem had a visceral and dramatic effect on me.”⁶ Seneveratne draws on her considerable vocal skill to evoke the emotional content of this

⁵ Taken from “Reflections re my 121” document, sent via email on 6 October 2015.

⁶ Ruth Carter’s post-production evaluation.

poem and themes of the piece.⁷

“Commonalities” (Tricia Sweeney)

Sweeney invites her guest to write down, on small pieces of paper, hobbies, pleasures, pastimes and/or particular details about tastes etc. She then presents these on a table, together with her own equivalent cards, making a map to see where commonalities or differences occur. This is an opportunity for the performer and participant to learn about each other. According to Sweeney, it draws on her previous work in occupational therapy and psychiatric settings; it functions to “bring people out about their concerns and enthusiasms” having a “gentle low-key, calm atmosphere.”⁸

“Lucy Chicken Soup” (Romola Guiton)

Participants are offered a bowl of soup while listening and responding to a cautionary tale of a momentary lapse of concentration. As the soup bubbles on the stove, Guiton asks the participant about similar family recipes and when her phone alerts her she serves the soup. She then reveals that it is actually the other pan that contained the *real* “Lucky Chicken Soup.” Lifting the lid of the empty pan she shows its blackened insides and tells how one evening, coming home tired, she turned on the soup, went to sit down for a rest, only to be woken two and half hours later by the smoke alarm. She was later admitted to hospital with smoke inhalation. Guiton discusses with the participant any similar experience they may have had; one that made them re-evaluate their behaviour or strategies. Guiton has a diagnosed memory-loss condition; throughout the piece she demonstrates strategies (such as mobile phone alerts) that help her cope with this impairment, these she calls “mental walking-sticks.”⁹ The fragility of memory is implicit in the performance.¹⁰

⁷ She was trained in at the Central School of Speech and Drama and then taught voice at Dartington College.

⁸ This was reported at a reading and discussion of the first draft of the exegesis on 5 May 2016.

⁹ This phrase was used in the first meeting we had about the one-to-one and I recorded this in my notes on the piece. I had to write up these notes and send a copy to Guiton, as she needed to have everything in writing as an aide memoire.

¹⁰ To be clear, Guiton did not perform this frailty it was present as part of her natural performance presence.

However, this performance also demonstrates Guiton's intelligent rationalization, fierce independence and resilience in the face of dementia, one of the most feared conditions associated with ageing. The story of the burnt soup and the fact that Guiton names it "Lucky" subverts the normative narrative of crisis associated with such events. Without such strategizing the incident might have triggered social welfare interventions, compromising Guiton's independence and self-determination.

"Wool" (Liz Cashdan)

This piece invites the participant to connect, in a tactile way, to a twentieth-century, intercontinental family history of the raw wool and blanket trade. Cashdan shows pictures and tells stories of her ancestors—Russian, Jewish émigrés—who came to the UK, escaping the Russian Revolution in 1917. Cashdan is discovered seated, knitting; she talks proudly about the sweater she is wearing, the sort fashionable when she knitted it in the 1980s, in her middle age. Via the jumper, Cashdan connects participants with thirty years ago and further back, through the family photographs of her father, mother, grandmother and grandfather. This positions her as having both extended lived-experience, and living-memory connections that reach back to the earliest years of the twentieth century. As stories are told and photographs, books and other artefacts shown, the participant glimpses the world of disappeared generations. The participant is invited to touch a green blanket—a family heirloom, one of the family's factory products—hanging in the performance space and Cashdan speculates that it was her governess who had edged the blanket so expertly, since it could never have been done by her mother. This performance speaks, through socio-historically specific details, about class, longevity, generational continuity and the fibres that bind individuals across time.¹¹ "Wool" finishes with Cashdan reading one of her poems, written recently as part of a Yorkshire Dales arts project. She invites the participant to

¹¹ 87 years old at the time of the performance, Cashdan is almost the oldest member of Passages, yet she is vigorously engaged in her life as an artist, poet and teacher. In addition to being a member of Passages, taking part in devised performance practice, she regularly publishes and performs her own poetry and has recently written and acted in one short film (*Swimming Pool*, 2015) and directed another (*Know Thyself*, 2015) as part of Leeds Beckett University's "CinAge" project. These films can be seen at cinageproject.eu.

feel and smell the scraps of raw wool found on barbed wire fences that inspired her work. This final act locates Cashdan as a present, creative force, responding to the world, here and now. The material substance of the wool, sensually present in the room, which she is wearing and manipulating into new forms, links her implicitly with both the vital here-and-now and a world communicated from her long living memory.

“Second Chances, Different Journey” (Shirley Fox)

An autobiographical story of personal struggle, resilience and success, inviting the participant to envisage their own future goals, this piece is also a testimony to Shirley Fox’s broken identity, which fractured on emigrating from Germany to England when she was two-years-old. At the opening, Fox draws attention to the walking boots at the doorway, which frame the piece as a journey, she shows her birth certificate, in which she is named as “Utte Charlotte Kagelmacher.” “Shirley Winkley,” she explains, was the UK name given to her in 1945; “Winkley” is her stepfather’s name and “Shirley” is after child star Shirley Temple. According to Fox, this loss of her original German identity figures as a difficult rupture in her life. She then shows her naturalization papers and a wedding photo—which speaks poignantly of isolation—of her standing alone in her white gown, outside the church. Fox points out the ways in which the women’s magazines she has arranged on a desk construct the “perfect wife” and stand for a period in her life of “buns and babies.” These magazines indicate how she failed to live up to the gender-specific standards of the time; this led to her divorce in 1975. To mark this second fracture, she takes the copy of her marriage certificate and of her Decree Absolute and severs them both with a small guillotine, throwing the pieces in a nearby bin. At this point, Fox asks the participant to speak about any point of fracture in their life that took them on a “different journey.” A word or phrase that expresses this fracture is written on the wall, adding to a list signifying other ruptures. The mood brightens as Fox moves into the more positive phase of her life-story; she dons a purple beret with a CND badge on it—indicating her shift into political activism—and shows her degree certificate, telling of her struggle as a single mother to become educated (post-divorce) beyond class expectations. This certificate, her daughter’s birth certificate (single parenthood), her naturalization papers (final split with her German heritage) and counselling qualification (professional

independence), speak of her attempts to overcome the various rifts in her sense of identity, precipitated by emigration and divorce. She then turns to a display of colourful leaflets, which represent her enthusiastic consumption of educational, arts and cultural activities. Here the narrative changes to one of hopeful rebuilding, this new sense of self, growing directly from a narrative of lost agency, rupture and second-hand identity.

“Speak Clearly” (Clare McManus)

This is a fun master-class in how to make a prototype message, or greeting for your answerphone. Contrary to expectations about the technophobia or incompetence of old people when it comes to digital technology, this piece relies on McManus’ skill in using recording and digital applications. The participant rings a cell phone that plays a message in which McManus tells them to knock and wait. On entering, McManus plays excerpts from a selection of YouTube tutorials about leaving voicemails, and then helps the participant, either to access their cell phone’s message recording facility, or to record a prototype message on her Dictaphone, which she later emails to the participant. McManus coaches the participant about delivery, vocal quality and taking a deep breath before starting.

The whole piece is couched in a semi-official style, including a tongue-in-cheek requirement to sign a disclaimer. The room is decorated with speech bubbles giving handy tips such as “energy is contagious,” and “have a smile on your face.” In her influential text *The Right to Speak*, Patsy Rodenberg (2015) sees the voice as a powerful aspect of individual agency:

As we open our mouths [...] we frequently reveal the deepest parts of ourselves. Not only do we divulge class, background and education, but our perceived status in the world [...]. No wonder it can be such a terrifying act to speak. No wonder it is a right attacked and repressed by those who think they [...] have the right to control how and what we have to say. (p. 2)

McManus coaches the participants through this “terrifying act,” in some instances encouraging them to record a message to someone to whom they might fear to speak or need to tell their truth. One participant reported privately to me the transformative effect of recording such a

message in this piece. Although “Speak Clearly” appears light and playful, by exploring the relationship between voice and its expression of self-worth McManus attempts to reacquaint subjectivity with its right to speak.¹²

Together these pieces convey a range of approaches and themes. Some evoke a sense of personal or family history, address relationships or communicate lived experience; one is a playful piece and another a storytelling exchange. Together they speak of resilience, a lifetime of learning and understanding, a rich sense of connection to the past and a hopeful communication of this for the future. The performers’ creative autonomy has inspired pieces that are inflected with questions and insights about experience, longevity, historical positioning, cognitive and physical impairment and resilience. Collectively they counter the notion that old people are a homogeneous group and are technophobic or resistant to new ways of doing and making art.¹³

ONE-TO-ONE PERFORMANCE AND OTHERNESS

One-to-one interrogates the position of the “other” in performance relationships and, by extension, in any human encounter. In *The Mirror Stage* it provides the opportunity to change the normative relationship of the audience-participant to the notion and image of the old person. In such a relationship the old person is generally situated in the position of “other” (even if the participant is also old). Zerihan (2009), when describing one-to-one, often names the participant “the other.” For example, having experienced Adrian Howells’ *Foot Washing for the Sole* (2008), she describes being “bound by moments of shared embodiment that Howells had created for me, his ‘other’” (p. 37). Moreover Zerihan

¹² “Speak Clearly” had a life beyond *The Mirror Stage* as McManus performed it at WROUGHT festival in Sheffield in April 2016.

¹³ Initially one of the group (Shirley Simpson) was skeptical about the one-to-one performance form, seeing one-to-ones as “therapy sessions.” However, when she saw the effect that her piece had on the participants she came to realize one-to-one’s potential for raising questions, stimulating debate and giving interrelational opportunities. On the whole the group embraced the work as a new challenge, even though they were unsure of this new type of performance. Some of the one-to-one performances turned out to be highly sophisticated works of art, (‘Wool’ for example) and some were beautifully simple offers, sharing aspects of the life of the performer and participant (‘Resonance’ for example).

(2006) uses the term “other” to describe both parties in the performance, where each is the mutual “other” in the encounter: “One body to another. Spanning time, sharing space, marking place, blending breath, sensing touch” (n.p.). In *The Second Sex* Simone de Beauvoir (1953) employs the term “other” when arguing that the male is constructed as positive and essential, and the female as negative, inessential or “other.” In *The Coming of Age* (1972/1996), de Beauvoir incorporates the phenomenon of ageing into her definition of “otherness,” arguing that

for the outsider it is a dialectic relationship between my being as he defines it objectively and the awareness of myself that I acquire by means of him. Within me it is the Other – that is to say the person I am for the outsider—who is old: and that Other is myself. (p. 284)

de Beauvoir defines here the complex and reflexive nature of ageing subjectivity, concluding that the old person is both subject to “othering,” and finds within herself her own “otherness.” Considering de Beauvoir’s analysis of femininity *per se*, an old woman is twice “othered,” both as a female and as old.

The *relational* nature of “otherness” is also pertinent when analyzing the one-to-one form; Peggy Phelan (1993) argues that:

[I]dentity is perceptible only through a relation to an other, which is to say, it is a form of both resisting and claiming the other, declaring the boundary where the self diverges from and merges with the other. (p. 13)

Summarizing Joan Copjec’s and Jacqueline Rose’s analysis of Lacan’s concept of “the other,” Phelan (1993) contends that

the fertility of Lacanian psychoanalysis resides in this psychic paradox: one always locates one’s own image in an image of the other and, one always locates the other in one’s own image. (p. 18)

I take this to mean that each, when looking at the “other,” perceives an image of herself as this might seem to the observer. Within that idea of *oneself as the other sees us*, we find an image of a nominal “other” (that is actually oneself). Phelan develops this notion further: “[s]eeing the other is a social form of self-reproduction. For in looking at/for the other,

we seek to re-present ourselves to ourselves” (ibid. p. 21). One-to-one utilizes this socially reproductive function, and if the performance is created and performed by an old person, this forces the participant-self to identify an idea of themselves within the mind of the *old* “other.” The performer-self correspondingly imagines herself re-presented in the mind of the participant-“other”; who she knows has a notion of her as “other,” thereby both come to a relationship, through an understanding that each exists as “other,” and is reflected and reflecting. So, a participant in Guiton’s one-to-one might well conceive of the way they are being imagined by the server of the “Lucky Chicken Soup” as a person with what could be termed “normal” memory lapses. Correspondingly, Guiton understands that she is both being understood as and representing herself as a resilient and independent person but one living with memory loss.

Phelan (1993) argues convincingly against “representational visibility” as a route to power, by quipping: “[i]f representational visibility equals power, then almost-naked young white women should be running Western culture” (p. 10). Writing from a psychoanalytical perspective, Phelan describes the split subject as suffering a lack and loss of the unified self, of seeking but never finding (ibid. p. 23–7). However, if, like Butler (1990/2006), one refutes the notion of any realm preceding that of the Symbolic, and consequently argues that subjects are always already constructed by language and exist within culture, then representational visibility, through the relational act of seeing the “other,” can be shown to impact on relations of power. A face-to-face relation creates conditions where, as one looks to find the self in the “other,” one seeks *sameness*, while simultaneously acknowledging the presence of difference in the “other.” Following this argument, the intimacy of a one-to-one piece, which performs relational identity, is transformational. For example, Simpson’s performance “Hands On” leads directly to the identification of one with another through the almost universal notion and material reality of the hand and thus promotes a simultaneous understanding of sameness and otherness in both performer and participant. Through this mutual understanding, where the performer creator is an old person, one-to-one has the potential to mount a challenge to normative perceptions of the figure of the old person solely as “other,” even in the mind of an old participant. This can be heightened

by a context promoting mutual discovery, as do many of *The Mirror Stage* one-to-one pieces.

At the opening of *The Mirror Stage*, one-to-one audience members encounter their performer “other” face-to-face. Thereafter, performers are fully or partially masked until the end of the show. This encourages audience members to search for their original one-to-one “other” (and consequently, following the above analysis, for themselves), first among the performers where only the hands are visible and subsequently among the figures of the masked chorus of performers. Masking the whole company until the end of the performance disrupts assumptions that spring from the image of the old person, especially her face. The face is the area of the body (along with the hands) that holds the most potent meanings associated with age; the “reveal” at the end of the piece, where the performers unmask themselves, brings into focus the meaning and value attached to the old face, which up to this point is unseen and, according to at least one audience member, who emailed me, is to some degree forgotten:

It did get rid of that automatic “these people are old people” thing in my brain – they could have been any age while they were anonymised with the costumes and masks.¹⁴

The audience member has previously encountered one unmasked member of the cast and seen all their hands revealed, so he simultaneously knows and forgets that “these are old people.” This implies that the normative figure of the old person has been fundamentally disrupted in the mind of this particular participant.

One-to-one, in live artist Kira O'Reilly's words is “[a] highly stylized, highly structured, heightened social interaction” (in Zerihan, 2006, n.p.). This type of social interaction, which constitutes—as Alan Kaprow (1993/2003) puts it—“lifelike art” (p. 201) is a form of quiet activism that transforms relationships. Kaprow claims, “lifelike art [...] is a training in letting go of the separate self” (p. 217). Kaprow's use of the word “self,” as it applies to one-to-one, includes both the artist and the co-constructing participant. An understanding of the relational nature of selfhood helps explain the transformative potential of one-to-one. In *The Mirror Stage*, the notion of the old “other within us” is challenged in the

¹⁴ Email response, received on 30th September 2015.

minds of both the performer and the audience-participant and this disruption can potentially extend to old people outside the performance space. One participant discussed how the piece “Connections” had caused her to consider her relationship with an older “other,” her mother:

The performer held one end of a ribbon and I held the other. We were connected, [...]. Yet we were also separated. This [made] me think about how as I grow older my relationship with my mother changes, we continue to be connected and separated.¹⁵

This sense of both connection and separation is echoed in accounts of one-to-one more generally: Heddon, Iball and Zeriha (2012) contend that “[o]ne to one performance is employed as a tool for claiming and proclaiming individuality” (p. 121), and yet Zeriha argues that “[t]he function and development of the encounter is reliant upon shared economies of exchange, identification and understanding” (2006, n.p.). Both the participant and the performer can belong to a demarked group category (for example old people) and simultaneously to a subset of one, which opens the potential for—in Phelan’s terms—a self-reproductive relation, each to the other. As the participant (quoted above) described, this duality is brought into focus. It is this tension between membership of a specific group—in this case the marginalized group named “old”—and the universal experience of individuality that was brought into play, both in the one-to-one encounters and in the masked production as a whole.

Martina Von Holn, discussing her one-to-one *Seal of Confession* (2006), argues that

a possibility arises for a different kind of encounter which is based on an exchange between two individuals and challenges both the performer’s as well as the audience’s perception of self and the other. (in Zeriha, 2009, p. 79)

Intergroup Contact Theory supports this contention. First formulated in the post-war period and investigated in detail by, amongst others, Gordon Allport (1954), Intergroup Contact Theory contends that the

¹⁵ Email questionnaire, received 5 October 2015.

greater the contact between social groups, then the less those groups will display prejudice or negative bias towards each other. Intergroup contact is therefore useful in combating the social exclusion of marginalized people or outgroups.¹⁶ Whilst this theory most commonly proposes efficacious contact between groups rather than individuals, political scientist H. Donald Forbes (1997) contends that intergroup contact also combats prejudice between individuals. One-to-one potentially fosters intergroup contact between a series of individuals within the performance. The theory suggests that participants can develop a degree of understanding with one member of the “outgroup” and that this contact will diminish prejudice.¹⁷ Furthermore, Allport postulates that there are optimal intergroup contact conditions that lower prejudice and can be particularly transformative of the way outgroups are seen; these are: “equal status between the groups in the situation; common goals; intergroup cooperation; and the support of authorities, law, or custom” (in Pettigrew & Tropp 2006, p. 752). It is clear that one-to-one fosters mutual goals and has the support of the overarching authority structure of the performance event. One might argue that equal status in a one-to-one is doubtful because the performer originates and controls the context and because the participant is in an unfamiliar setting, however Passages’ work is highly interactive and follows the co-constructional model exemplified by performers such as Howells, fostering a collaborative relationship of trust and exploration.¹⁸ So, following Allport’s findings, the conditions for lowering prejudice have been significantly met and can potentially challenge the way audience members might view these particular old people, and therefore others they encounter subsequently.

¹⁶ This can include both verbal and physical (non violent) contact. Contact can have emotional, intellectual and or political dimensions, and can be of an everyday or more formal nature.

¹⁷ Outgroups can consist of marginalized or minority subjects, but the term “outgroup” can also be defined in relation to the “ingroup” in question in any study or discussion. Therefore notions of “ingroups” and “outgroups” could describe a wide variety of groupings of people. In this article I use the term “outgroup” to denote the marginalized category of “old.”

¹⁸ Howells used the term “audience-participant.” See Heddon and Johnson (2016), p.10)

CONCLUSION

Pettigrew and Tropp (2006) state that the effects of contact have been underestimated:

Not only do attitudes toward the immediate participants usually become more favorable, but so do attitudes toward the entire outgroup, outgroup members in other situations, and even outgroups not involved in the contact. (p. 766)

Such understanding of the efficacious nature of contact applied to Passages' work could be extended to apply to all interactive and immersive performance forms, which provide structures within which meaningful contact can be made between individuals and between groups. Phelan's notable distrust of the *specular* as an efficacious instrument to alter power relations is mitigated by this notion of contact, which, in one-to-one, can include hearing, touching, even smelling, as well as seeing, and it certainly includes proximity and relational self-reproduction, as discussed above. In *The Mirror Stage* contact took place in a context designed carefully and sensitively by each old performer, one that showed expertise, experience, understanding and skill. This performance fostered involved and complex levels of contact and conceivably a reduction in prejudice between the outgroup "old" and those who (while part of any number of different groups) at that moment, made up the group called "the audience." This work performs a quiet activism that can change structures of thinking and ways in which groups can relate to each other. Further research with members of any outgroup might confirm the assertions made above about the potential for one-to-one and other intimate forms of performance to effect a social change in understanding of outgroup identities.

SUGGESTED CITATION

Moore, B. (2019). "It did get rid of the 'these people are old people' thing in my brain": Challenging the otherness of old age through one-to-one performance. *ArtsPraxis*, 5 (2), 185-201.

REFERENCES

- Allport, G. W. (1954). *The nature of prejudice*. Reading, MA: Addison Wesley.
- Armitage, S. (1993). *Book of matches*. London: Faber and Faber.
- Butler, J. (1990/2006). *Gender trouble: Feminism and the subversion of identity*. Abingdon: Routledge.
- de Beauvoir, S. (1953). *The second sex*. Harmandsworth: Penguin.
- de Beauvoir, S. (1972/1996). *The coming of age*, trans. by P. O'Brian, New York: WW Norton and Co.
- Forbes, H. D. (1997). *Ethnic conflict: Commerce, culture, and the contact hypothesis*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Heddon, D., Iball, H., & Zerihan, R.. (2012). Come closer: Confessions of intimate spectators in one to one performance. *Contemporary theatre review* (Special Issue: *Live Art in the UK*), 22 (1) pp. 120–133.
- Heddon, D., & Johnson, D. (eds.) (2016) *It's all allowed: The performances of Adrian Howells*. London & Bristol: LADA/Intellect.
- Kaprow, A. (1993/2003). The real experiment. In A. Kaprow and J. A. Kelley (Eds.), *Essays on the blurring of art and life*. Berkley & Los Angeles: University of California Press, pp. 201–219.
- Macdonald, B. (2001). *Look me in the eye*, 2nd ed. Denver: Spinsters Ink Books.
- Noorani, T. (2015). Service user involvement, authority and the 'expert-by-experience' in mental health. In C. Blencowe, J. Brigstocke, and L. Dawney (Eds.), *Authority, experience and the life of power* Abingdon: Routledge. pp. 49–69.
- Pettigrew, T., & Tropp, L. (2006). A meta-analytic test of intergroup contact theory, *Journal of personality & social psychology*, 90 (5) pp. 751–83.
- Phelan, P. (1993). *Unmarked: The politics of performance*. Abingdon & New York: Routledge.
- Rodenburg, P. (2015). *The right to speak: Working with the voice*, (2nd ed.) London: Bloomsbury Methuen Drama.
- Woodward, K. (1991). *Aging and its discontents: Freud and other fictions*. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press.
- Zerihan, R. (2006). [Intimate inter-actions: Returning to the body in one to one performance](#). *Body, Space, Technology Journal*, vol.6 (1).
- Zerihan, R. (2009). [One to one performance: A study room guide](#). *The Live Art Development Agency*.

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Bridie Moore is a Lecturer in Performance at the University of Huddersfield. She recently completed her AHRC funded PhD at the University of Sheffield, researching the performance of age and ageing in contemporary British theatre. Before lecturing Bridie was a theatre director and facilitator in mainstream and community theatre, working for, amongst others, Liverpool Everyman and Battersea Arts Centre. Her PhD incorporated performance practice-as-research and to facilitate this she formed Passages, a group for performers over the age of fifty. *Life Acts*, was staged at Sheffield University Theatre Workshop in April 2013 and went on a public engagement tour. Subsequently Passages have staged three interactive performances: *A Blueprint For Ageing* (2014), *The Mirror Stage* (2015) and *You Need Hands* (2016).

Inday Dolls: Body Monologues and Lullabies for Freedom in Prison; Scripting Possible Futures in Justice Art in Iloilo's Correctional System

MA ROSALIE ABETO ZERRUDO

UNIVERSITY OF SAN AGUSTIN

DENNIS D. GUPA

UNIVERSITY OF VICTORIA

ABSTRACT

The prison is not a dead end. Freedom is born in prison. Women in prison bounce back, resurrecting through their stories, reclaiming their bodies. This research investigates the politics of freedom, space, and body in prison. Women exercise their own sense of freedom navigating in a tight small crowded place through stories of objects, body lullabies, and archetypal ethnodrama. Women recreated new selves with new colors to light up their life in the darkest times.

Storytelling as a powerful tool for political and cultural assertion is essential in this research as a healing art process. The creative personal geography work makes women tell stories as a means of gathering parts of themselves back to one piece. Our work in freedom art we resonate

to the words of Estés, “Stories are medicine... They have such power...we need only to listen... Stories are embedded with instructions which guide us about the complexities of life” (Estés p 15-16). This performance research presents the body monologues of women in a space (read: prison) where time restricts liberty and memories of freedom collapse with dreams of emancipation. Through a series of creative and performative exercises this prison became a performance space animated with the living narratives of human stories of objects and as a site of compassion where an overflowing bodies intersected and shared the politics of tolerance, compassion and love.

This study examines Iloilo women’s resilience in an overcrowded prison. The study further investigates the context of “freedom in prison” inside the jail with 700% congestion in the Philippines. The Freedom-in-Prison project encompasses arts-informed research (Knowles and Cole, 2007) and performance research, and served as psychosocial intervention through the arts for women in detention, considered as Persons Deprived of Liberty (PDL). In the Philippines with a population of over 100 million, more than 160,000 PDL are in detention, including 12,000 women. According to criminal justice scholar Raymund Narag in *State of PH in 2018: Our jails are now world’s most congested* published online by Philippine Center for Investigative Journalism, “We are now officially the most overcrowded correctional facilities in the whole world: our 605% congestion rate is far ahead of Haiti’s 320%, the second most crowded” (2018). Narag, who was a former inmate and now a faculty at the Department of Criminology and Criminal Justice at the Southern Illinois University Carbondale, decries the state of injustice within the confines of prison bars. Many of these inmates live in an overcrowded condition, some with 700-3,000% over-congestion rate, which still continues to rise.

As a direct response to the harsh situation in detention of PDLs in Iloilo City, Freedom-in-Prison research started in 2016. The study evolved into a “restorative social enterprise,” providing livelihood skills training to women PDLs and their children and families. This paper argues that artistic processes inside the prison halls and its critical-creative engagement is an imaginative restoration and has potential for

economic enterprise. In the Freedom-in-Prison project, the stories of the women were foregrounded and gathered through “stories of objects.” Stories of objects embody a creative process wherein the women PDL were asked questions on how they can potentially express their freedom inside the prison hall. Their answers were manifested through their fabric soft sculptures, such as dolls, as a way to tell their stories. The women’s stories are a complex juxtaposition of archetypal characters embroidered into dolls, called Inday dolls. *Inday* is a Visayan word for woman. If one is called *inday*, an indication of endearment is suggested, but over the years with rising poverty in the provinces, cases of extreme migratory movement and the influx of Visayan women to Manila, the capital of the Philippines, as domestic workers, the word shifted as *kasambahay* or helper/maid. Originally though, the word means “Miss” or “Mademoiselle” as a personal endearment or used as a title for a woman respected, adored, and loved. While for the Ilonggos in Panay region in Central Philippines, *inday* is a name that rings a euphonious sound of affection, but nowadays this word is nuanced with meanings of disempowerment and oppressions. However in theorizing empowerment and examining the possible futures of the oppressed women inside the prison, we decolonize the word *inday* and re-claim it as significant inspiration in mobilizing the narratives of these women, by bringing its original meaning and re-formulating its identity as a term that scripts stories of the futures. The women were tasked creatively in naming and claiming their identity through the “stories of objects” workshop. These Inday dolls were produced by women as art products that featured the artisanship and artistry of PDL.

Additionally, the women were organized to create a devised performance piece based on their interviews, that I (Zerrudo) conducted with my students. My co-writer, Dennis D. Gupa on the other hand, helped in the post-dramaturgical reflection of the performance and the analysis of Inday doll project within the framework of freedom art. While Gupa was not present in the creative workshops and actual performance inside the prison hall, he was aware of my freedom art projects. His works in the applied and community based theatre inform my theoretical tendencies in executing freedom art. Our long creative and academic work began when I invited him as a scholar in residence at the university where I work. We (Zerrudo and Gupa), write this article on freedom art from our mindful, conscious, overlapping, and intersecting theoretical dispositions. In this article the use of pronoun “we” includes Gupa and

the use of “I” refers to me (Zerrudo).

Four specific narratives of resilience were used in this performance research of women archetypes as basis for the dramaturgy. Prison art and the stories performed behind bars contend that the prison is not a dead end. In this paper, we, as co-writers narrate the process and performance analysis of the project that hopefully can contribute in the discourse of freedom art emerging from sites where continuing oppressions within the social, cultural, and political structures that entangle women inmates. By navigating the ethical complications of freedom art projects, we explored how the women in prison were able to bounce back, be resilient by giving them agency and able to engage with the themes of optimism and empathy within the sites of precarity. Through visual art and performance making processes with elements of storytelling, poetry performance, and body movement exercises, my students and I witnessed the commitment of the women inmates in creative art forms that engender collective energy of scripting new futures. Inspired by these activities, these women signified possible futures within the zone gutted by miseries and fires of anticipated freedom, like phoenix rising from the ashes and dancing in their lullabies.

Finally, we write this paper as a textualization of the often unwritten narratives of self-empathy and confidence that rupture an artistic thematization and performative exploration of freedom by women behind bars. By accessing semiotics as exegetic lens in reading the visual texts produced in their Inday dolls and the cogency of a self-meaning making processes, we contend that freedom art gives rise to a script of a possible future. This paper is a contribution to the growing interest in justice arts and social transformative art-making projects, gathering collective and individual stories in an exploration of personal geographies (Harmon, 2004) through body monologues and poetic inquiry (Prendergast, et al., 2009). By creating spaces of creativity that allows artistic agency to rise from the bodies of the women inmates and through an ethical practice of our freedom-art, we employed our indigenous cultural worldviews of *pagrespeto* (respect), *pakikisama* (fellowship) and *pakikipagkapwa tao* (sensing oneself to others). We also decided that all women PDL's names be changed herein to protect their identities.

I initiated the first phase of the project in Iloilo City, Philippines after getting the permission from the Iloilo City District Jail Female Dormitory.

During this phase, interviews with the women with signed consent form were conducted. The coded data during interviews became essential in the performance research, which then translated into visual theater juxtaposed with elements of ethnodrama and ethnotheatre put forward by Johnny Saldaña, a theatre practitioner and scholar. Saldaña defines ethnodrama as “the written script which consists of dramatized, significant selections of narrative collected through interviews, participant observation, field notes, journal entries, and/or print and media artifacts such as diaries, television broadcasts, newspaper articles, and court proceedings” (Saldaña to Hare 2007). Ethnotheatre is then the staged script, which uses “the traditional craft and artistic techniques of theatre production to mount for an audience a live performance event of research participants’ experiences and/or the researcher’s interpretations of data” (Saldaña to Hare, 2007). We advanced our practice of freedom art that uses *pagrespeto* (respect), *pakikisama* (fellowship) and *pakikipagkapwa tao* as ethics of creative and critical engagement and by borrowing Saldaña’s ideas of ethnodrama and ethnotheatre: “The narration, monologue, and dialogue must ring true to life and evoke the world of its participants. The live, intimate, real-time nature of ethnotheatre gives the audience member not a sense of “being there” but, during performance, “being here” (2005).

Guided by these principles, my students and I foregrounded the narratives of the women. Data drawn from the interviews, observations, and poetic biographies were formed as scripts. These personal narratives from the prison brought out rich poetic content, resulting in a performance text used in devised theater work. When interviewing the women, we realized that listening is not just a process of hearing the stories shared by women, but an act of performing empathy and care. And as artists-scholars, we were inspired by Neilsen’s (2004) words in shaping a creative-ethical encounter that happens between the women participants and the facilitators. She puts it plainly:

Poetry and inquiry ask us to listen deeply. We must put ourselves in the context; we must feel, taste and hear what someone is saying. Sometimes we must learn to listen under the words, to hear what is not being said. We must be empathetic, aware, non-judgmental, and cautious. (to Prendergast, et al., 2009)

Referencing this quote on listening, we remember the Visayan word “*pamati*” which means shared listening. Its root word “*mati*” literally means, to listen. My students and I brought the practice of *pamati*, as method of engaging to the stories of these women. Linking this act of listening to theorizing is in itself a creative process of decolonizing that is needed in freedom art project, as this ethical practice mobilizes and engages an awareness of the feelings while listening to the participants who live in sites or spaces of precarity. The practice of *namamati* allows the facilitators ethical accountability to these women.

Gathering the women who have been subjected to intense criminal processes, confinement, and emotional miseries, this project repurposed the prison hall as a new zone of freedom by allowing the women to script their narratives by constructing Inday dolls. Shared listening in creating these dolls is not just a method but includes an ethic and generative act of individual/collective agentive sculptural/performative art process. We continue to draw our inspiration from the words of Neilsen who asserts that “we owe our participants and ourselves nothing less” (Neilsen to Prendergast et al., 2009). The poetic texts are a powerful collective testament of the unthinkable trauma in prison. Women boldly transform angst and pain into poems and stories candidly, with delicateness, truthfulness, humour, care, and courage.

In our experience and through our self-reflexivity, doing arts that examines justice, Freedom-in-Prison investigates the undercurrents of the authoritarian institutional penology where the body is walled and the morality of the women prisoners are subjected into confined rehabilitation and management. Within the processes of this state-imposed penology and rehabilitative initiative, the facilitators of freedom art create a politics of space where the politics of disaster embedded in the women’s stories are celebrated and revealed. As artists facilitating this project and examining the signification of the post-performance, we began the process by asking ourselves this question: What is the culture of women in prison and/or prison for women? Answering this question means allowing the women to exercise their own sense of freedom, as they constantly navigate in a tight small crowded place. By bringing the arts in their space my students and I facilitated a creation of a mental space for healing and re-imagining a renewed self with new colors (as evidenced by the various textiles of Inday dolls) to light up their life in the darkest times.

In foregrounding the relevance of stories in freedom arts we were inspired by the American poet, Jungian psychoanalyst, post-trauma recovery specialist, author and spoken word artist Clarissa Pinkola Estés, who states: “Stories are medicine...They have such power; they do not require that we do, act anything—we need only to listen... Stories are embedded with instructions which guide us about the complexities of life. Stories enable us to understand the need for the ways to raise a submerged archetype” (2005). We read “stories as medicine” (Estés, 2005) as a powerful tool for the political and cultural assertion that is essential in this research as a healing art process. The creative personal geography work makes women tell stories as a means of gathering parts of themselves back to one piece. In recent work in Prison Theatre, my students and I have witnessed how the potency of telling stories open spaces where participants remake themselves and breathe in new life to a new self, a new body, a new way of thinking about life. For some women, telling stories is like singing to one’s deep old wounds, tending to the pain and caressing the calloused skins. Listening to one’s own story opens new arms embracing the old self. For example, Nanay Maria found a new family much more loving than her own inside the prison. She feels she is no longer alone. According to her, being heard and accepted by the collective is her redemption and affirmation.

The following paragraphs of this paper outline our reflections as artists and scholars theorizing freedom art and working with women who turned into performers and visual artists. Although there is a sense of temporality of them being artists, we perceive that their participation had a profound impact to the way they imagine their lives outside the halls of prison.

ART TRANSCENDS PAIN

This project provides us a connective reflections of how these women behind bars carry a natural predilection for artistic production that appertain to self-empowerment with deep emotionality and wisdom. Witnessing them create Inday dolls and emote stories for performance, we contend that every woman in the prison hall is a culture bearer, and given more opportunities for art and cultural training, they can be a repository of wisdom. In Philippine mythology, Filipina women are depicted as spirit warriors. They can be a counterpart of the women in the indigenous communities who are the exemplary artisans like mat

weavers. In Basey, Samar it is an age old tradition that women gather under the Sohoton cave in Guirang Village, drying wild *tikog*¹ grass and weaving together as a daily artistic chore. Even in the aftermath of the superstorm, this is the source of strength as the grandmother's thread held them together as one community to rebuild their lives together. The extraordinary handwoven mats interlaced effortlessly with colorful *tikog* by these ordinary housewives and unschooled artisans symbolize the capacity of women in engaging in a symbolic re-imagination of their world. This village is the source of exemplary artisanship handed down in a school without walls but breathes a living tradition. Mirroring these women weavers to the women behind bars allows us self-reflexivity in observing, participating, co-creating, facilitating and even theorizing freedom art with the women who end up in prison, which we feel is a great loss in exercising their imagination.

Responding to the women's rehabilitation program through the arts, we believe that art making is a creative process where women express their painful stories through stories of objects. Art gives birth to ideas, makes invisible visible, and transcends the personal narratives to meaningful objects as artworks. The performance does not happen on stage, the storytelling happens during the process of art-making through embroidery, beadwork, and the doodling of threads and pens.

The Freedom-in-Prison project proactively engaged with incarcerated women within the context of psycho-social support. These female PDLs exercised their own sense of freedom navigating in an intensely crowded place, through art workshops which finally gave birth to Hilway² art products—where they were free to re-imagine a new self with new colors to light up their life in the darkest times—resisting the mechanisms of injustice that portray them as others and captives of the law.

POLITICS OF SPACE

The politics of space is often a major issue in the process of restorative art making. The Freedom-in-Prison workshops in Iloilo City District Jail

¹ Scientific name is *Fimbristylis Globulosa*; belonging to a grass family this type of reed plant is ubiquitous in Samar Island, Philippines.

² In Hiligaynun, the language spoken by women inmates, the word "*Hilway*" means, "freedom".

Female Dormitory is voluntary with an average number of 10-20 participants per workshop confined in a very small area out of the total 330 square meters where everything happens at the same time. The jail population totals more or less 23 PDL with 22 personnel with a ratio of 22:1 personnel. The total cell area is 120 sq.m. which is meant ideally for 25 PDL based on international standard. The present area has a ratio of 1 prisoner to 4:7 sq.m. area. The facility originally good for 30 women, accommodated more than 232 women ages 18-65 years old. The only space for workshops is the multi-purpose area which serves as visiting, sleeping, eating, worship, resting, and working areas.

Women learned to navigate in such a congested detention space, and painted a picture in their own words of a place: “longing, clammy, dark, overcrowded, crammed full, painful, remorse, sticky hot, bitter, dreamlike, sacrifice, failure, exhausting, excruciating, scary, terrifying, hardship, shortage of food...” One called it a room where all dreams cease to exist. On the contrary some women considered the crowded room as “sweet, a place full of love, a place for change, a place to repent sins, enlightenment, a new heaven, a life.”

For some, being in detention is redemption from being killed in the streets or abused in their own homes. Some suffered many years without family support and visitation. The normal trial could last six months, but the majority of the women are still on trial for five to ten years. More than 91% are accused of violating Republic Act No. 9165 Comprehensive Dangerous Drugs Act of 2002 Section 5 (selling) and 11 (possession). In many circumstances during the workshops that I conducted with my students, this multi-purpose area was treated not just as a physical space but as a platform for an agentive and collective project of imagination. Just like the *tikog* of the mat weavers of Basey, Samar, these women weaved their stories in confinement and were permitted without shame to re-imagine their world by symbolically performing these stories and sculpting Inday dolls, rupturing new futures outside the halls of incarceration.

STORIES OF OBJECTS



The women's stories were spontaneous outbursts, reflections, supplications, and lullabies expressed as poetic tag lines for the Inday dolls. The prose, poetry, and tag lines created by the women as their personal narratives were coded for analysis. The coding resulted in several categories which spoke of family, relationships, parent-child issues, body, sexuality, dreams, memories, spiritual quotes, prayers, humor, jokes, dreams, visions, and objects with embedded memories of hope. The narratives were further categorized based on archetypes such as mother/caregiver, lover, heroine, explorer, warrior, worker,

believer, traveler, and jester.

By acknowledging the significance of the concept of archetypes, we draw our inspiration from Carl Gustav Jung, who used the concept of archetype in his theory of the human psyche. He believed that universal, mythic characters—archetypes—reside within the collective unconscious of people the world over. Archetypes represent fundamental human motifs of our experience as we evolved; consequentially, they evoke deep emotions (Golden, 2019). These archetypes served as our framework in understanding motivations based on the candid, instinctive, and spontaneous expressions of the women in their personal narratives. The majority of the women evoked the mother or caregiver archetypes, which can be easily connected to matriarchal society with close family ties in the Philippines. The lover archetype was also very strong as a natural tendency to desire human connection and touch for women who are deprived of basic human needs.

Women in prison embrace freedom in different archetypal characters who are powerful, traditional, indigenous, eternal, mystical, modern, engendered, no gender, misfits, single, mother, grandmother, and wild women. An inter generation of women stories played multiple roles as the artist, dreamer, believer, carefree, caretaker, innocent, leader, listener, warrior, lover (seductress), creator, jester (joker), sage, boss (ruler), magician (free spirit), and gatherer of stories (*chismosa*). These archetypes also represent our powerful characters such as the Inday Bato as the women born on drug trade; Inday Gugma as the lover; Inday OFW (Overseas Filipino Worker), and the Inday Nanay as mother, caregiver, and believer who leave everything to God's mercy. All as one woman fighting her own villains and demons, for only when she faces her own truth and accepts her own weakness, she becomes a heroine, and she becomes free. Her truth is her freedom.

SIGNIFICANCE OF OBJECTS ON STAGE

Bodies are stories. Stories as art objects. Each object carries a story. Bodies tell stories as repository of pain, experience, dreams, memories, death, and life. The stories of each woman come alive on stage as a result of ethnographic performative inquiry represented by objects on stage. The following are the names of objects on stage that represent the stories of the women in our devised performance inside the prison

hall. The beaded hammock (*duyan*) of dreams was woven by several women as they tried to weave their dreams together through their lines, colors, and symbols. The “*duyan*” as the powerful symbol of the mother singing to her child captures the essence of the bittersweet ordeal of “mothering behind bars.” Many of the women in prison are mothers, and the story of one woman encapsulate the essence and struggle of a mother.

The chessboard is the metaphor of the game of life that makes one either win or lose. The objects were related to women’s everyday life such as pawns as sandal, bishop as bag, rook as umbrella, and queen as woman. Women fight to reclaim their own territory and power in society. When in the worst scenario with all odds against her, she fights back with love, compassion, gratitude, remorse, wit, and humour to conquer the adversaries in life. On the other hand, the delay of justice and inhuman ordeal of incarceration toughens her resolve as she dreams of a way out or freezes at a dead end.

The Healing Tapestry; Light inside the darkness reflects the symbols of faith activating the light inside each one as a prayer mat for women who wish to be alone with God. The *Piko* (hopscotch) represents the land and history of our ancestors where local motifs of Panay Bukidnon are embedded to highlight the cultural identity of our people. This game also is a metaphor of how women evolved from their innocence until they stepped into the dangers of society, dysfunctional families, or abusive relationships as harsh challenges in order to earn a personal space in this world. *Bato, bala, bata* (drugs, bullets and children) is the representation of the painful cycle of a person being hooked on drugs or either involved in the drug trade which is over 91% of the cases of women in this prison. A bullet has already wounded a child before he or she is born.

The Wings of Freedom (beaded brassiere), the embroidery brings out the bright colors of the heart. All of the beadwork on the “bras” unleashes the intimate reflection of the hidden emotions of women. The coming out of the women in their beadwork is also the “freedom” of their expressions and the coming out of their dreams, hopes and self-worth. *Barangay sa panglakataon* (Beaded boat) is a symbol of the journey of women who left their families hoping for a brighter future but ended up in prison. Finally the Inday Doll (beaded doll) is the story of each of the women for each story is a powerful, iconic portrait of self.

The theater making as a devised piece evolved from the written and spoken stories, which gave birth to characters. The women told their stories through their beadwork and embroidered tapestry, naming and claiming their identity in a process that expressed a symbolic representation of their life stories. The Inday dolls are not just mere objects but material portraits of the women that reflect the prison psychology, collective memory, personality archetypes, and personal stories. The creative process of sewing, doodling, beading, and stitching is the organic performance of the everyday, where inner personal monologues intertwine with the conversations happening between women. Manaf believes:

While the natural coping mechanism may be there in women's physiology, courage can be learnt and can be taught. We strongly recommend that prison curriculum include programmes which will harness on women prisoners expressing themselves (to conquer their fear and practice courage) especially through creative writing or creative art work. (2016)

Stories are a pathway to memory making. In the Philippine Northern ethnic group such as Kalinga, people make sure their stories are not forgotten by embedding or tapping ink on skin like the tattoos. *Batok (tattoos): Body as Archive* is a book written by a Filipina social anthropologist that showcases a traditional art form where "permanent visual record of the biography and memories of the person underneath the skin" (Amores, 2017). Traditional tattooing like *batok* of the Cordilleran people of the Northern Philippines employ several body inking techniques of inscribing stories, symbols, and status in the body. Like the traditional tattooing process, these women inmates involved in the freedom art project engaged in visual memory making by telling stories through thread and needle marked on a different skin, the textile. In this textile they encode their status as women in the community they wish to live, love, and share light. Their stories are inscribed through threads and embroidery, resulting in a rich textual material that served as personal slogans and artist statements.

BODY GEOGRAPHY AND SOFT SCULPTED POETRY

Words and bodies of memories are the major inspirations of the

narrative in which bodies become stories and stories become art objects. Each object carries a story, a personal “*hugot*.” “*Hugot*” can be a derivative of several Hiligaynon nuances such as *ugot* (disgust), *kagat* (grit), *ugot* (rage), *siagit* (shout), *akig* (angst), *buya* (release), etc.... These words rapture sources of creativity and inspiration for the rendition of creative works—a verbal iteration and textual manifestation of the inner anxiety and frustrations of these women artists moved through the threads and embroidery. Through bodily poetic renditions, Inday dolls are born as the manifestation of women’s way of reclaiming their bodies and freedom in prison. In this process, we reflected on the artist Frida Kahlo, the Mexican painter who painted her struggles and pain not only to show the world how she suffered, but to give the world a deeper insight of her vulnerable life, and most of all to show her strength. Her paintings seem to be a meaningful roadmap of her existence. Kahlo mused, “I paint self-portraits because I am the person I know best. I paint my own reality. The only thing I know is that I paint because I need to and I paint whatever passes through my head without any consideration” (Mehta 2019, adapted from Kahlo).

In one person, Kahlo embodies the many hearts and the multiple wounds that live inside a woman’s body. Her stories in her paintings are far beyond her time that echoed the pain as surreal protests on her canvas. The life of Kahlo existed in many pages just like revisiting the museums of the dead, for she had died many times being a “wife” and lover to a woman-hungry man. Similarly, the personal narratives from the women in the Freedom-in-Prison project are the encyclopedia of “*hugot*” of the PDLs who volunteered their personal stories through their artworks. In the personal narratives of the women, there are so many underlying tones, temperaments, meanings, and emotions as the Inday Dolls poetic tag lines have a rich texture of poetic substance. The poetic texts are powerful collective testaments of the unthinkable trauma in prison. The women inmates boldly transcend their excruciating pain of leaving a family and being implicated in a crime, into poems and stories with truthful visual and performative representations of their deepest wounds with wisdom and sometimes humour. The textual narratives become part of a traveling Inday dolls exhibit, the other version is sewn together into a fabric book of Inday Monologues.

STORIES HEAL

In her book *Truth Heals: What You Hide Can Hurt You*, Deborah King exposes her own truth to help others face their own truth, asserting, “What we try to hide hurts us. The truth heals us” (2009). Women fight the battle by facing their fears, taking charge of their own emotions and thought processes. Telling the truth is also taking back a healthy mental and physical state of being. Embracing truth can heal. As King put it:

Telling the truth is about freedom. It is about joy and peace and health and living a life that is meaningful, powerful, connected and loving. Ultimately, telling the truth is about feeling good in your own skin, unencumbered, free, and having the life that you want to live... we cannot live a lie and have joy. True peace and joy are manifestations of living our personal truth. (King, 2009)

We read “stories as medicine” (Estés, 1992) and use them as powerful tool for political and cultural assertion. Stories in this project function in the healing process of a wounded body by means of personal and creative re-imagination of painful memories into lullabies, object stories and body monologues. In attempting this re-imagination, women tell stories as a means of gathering parts of themselves back to one piece, and singing to deep old wounds, tending to the pain and caressing the calloused skins. Listening to one’s own story opens new arms embracing the old self.

A SPACE OF COMPASSION WITH OVERFLOWING BODIES

The physical space shared by hundreds of growing numbers of inmates is a living reality of harsh human condition. But on the other hand, a tight small space is shared with tolerance, compassion, and love. There are contrasting overflows, the lows and highs of human existence. A room of strangers share an intense mental and emotional space which serves as a venue for psychosocial intervention. With such human resources, the prison with overflowing bodies becomes a complex scenario of live performance and role play.

The detention cell is a challenging space where life-changing lessons are learned and celebrated in the context of freedom in prison. When the physical space is limiting and debilitating, women show resilience, and ways to comfort and support each other. The art making

process is a meaningful exercise to create a mental space to help in the rehabilitation with humanity and compassion. One of the greatest gifts of a human to the world is the freedom of creation and expression. According to the women, to create means freedom, the one who continues to love is free.

MOTHERING BEHIND BARS

Mothering deeply carries the qualities of unconditional love. Mothering behind bars is the most empowering scene, seeing women find a way to exercise their freedom to support their children and family as breadwinners. Nanay³ Kakay, in her deepest sadness, remorseful of her actions, but nonetheless brave in facing her own realities is quoted: “Prison has taught me many lessons in life. Prison gave me a new life, a new way of seeing, a new way of loving. A kind of freedom I never experienced when I was in the outside world.” What women say about prison is strikingly interesting, for it is lonely and painful, but the same place that gave them hope, strength, and courage to face their own truth. Nanay Daday, another young inmate said, “If I’m not inside, I would have been found dead on the streets. It is better that I am alive inside. I have no life anyway outside. Here, I found a new family among my friends and I found a new me.” Before, prison had a stigma for being such a notorious place, though it has slowly transformed its programs, still it is not a place to dream of.

The personal narratives of these inmates reveal a picture of women becoming and turning as mothers of different generations. One mother, Nanay Lalay vowed to stop another generation of her family from ending up in jail, especially her children: “My mother died in prison. My father and brother are in different prisons serving life. My two sisters are with me in the same jail. I don’t want this to happen to my children. This curse has to stop.” Some of the women who left behind children and families are breadwinners and continue to earn inside the prison from washing clothes or giving massage to earn extra money to continue to send their children to school—they continue to mother behind bars.

The then jail warden Imee S. Lopera (ICDJ FD in Iloilo), shared the positive impact of the project in a testimonial program saying in context,

³ *Nanay* is a Tagalog word for Mother. Another iteration of the word is *Inay* or *Nay*.

Freedom-in-Prison project did not only help financially as a creative enterprise for women but most especially as a psychosocial support. When women are busy making art, the jail was quiet and peaceful. There were less or no fights and bickering, which can result to chaos and physical assault. The women were contained and focused in their art works that serves as therapy and positive diversion from many women issues such as sexual repression, menopausal syndrome, hormonal imbalances, psychological trauma, and physical irritability.

The process of art making brings the women to a meditative healing space as a temporary sense of freedom from the everyday harsh realities of the prison environment.

Author of *Long Walk to Freedom* and former president of South Africa, Nelson Mandela said, “When a man is denied the right to live the life he believes in, he has no choice but to become an outlaw....It is said that no one truly knows a nation until one has been inside its jails. A nation should not be judged by how it treats its highest citizens, but its lowest ones” (Mandela, 1995). The famous quote speaks about how jail is a mirror of a nation. In a country with a crumbling social justice system and where extrajudicial killings⁴ are perpetuated everyday by the highest ruler of the nation and the jails are never a transformative space but an infernal site of death, we listen to the stories of women inmates, celebrate their work of arts and watch them perform their monologues. They become *kapwa* (fellow)—contributors of life in a community hinge from what the Vietnamese monk, Thich Nhat Hanh calls, “interbeing” (Hanh, 2009). *Kapwa* and “interbeing” re-enforce our belief that art impacts the lives of other people. Ordinary people who have dared to love and make a difference in their community through art are very contagious: “Artists have roles as agent in transformation that are more socially viable than mainstream art world roles” (Goldbard, 2009). We

⁴ Philippine Senator Antonio Trillanes divulged that the war on drug spearheaded by Philippine president Rodrigo Duterte resulted to deaths of “more than 20,000” Filipinos. As quoted in [Aljazeera](#), Trillanes said, “While the country continues to laugh at the lewd jokes of Duterte, more than 20,000 of our countrymen have been killed” (Regencia, 2018). Online news website, [Rappler](#), reports that according to the Philippine National Police records, “...4,540 drug suspects have been shot dead in anti-drug operations...” (Talabong, 2018).

believe that every human being has infinite possibilities, tapping into the potentials of incarcerated women could also mean digging into a gold mine of powerful creative force.

ACADEME OPENS ITS DOORS

As part of the academic service learning, the classroom opens its doors to immerse students in social justice based curriculum and serve the community. This becomes an opportunity for our students to have an engaged, hands-on, critically conscious immersive learning environment and research-informed art practice. The University of San Agustin (USA), in collaboration with the Iloilo City District Jail Female Dorm (ICDJFD) as initiated by the USA Fine Arts Major Organization (FAMO) opened the doors to community-engaged work and a multi-sectoral and intergenerational practice of art making that aims critical empathic discourse on justice art. This creative-led research which originally started as “Freedom-in-Prison” has involved my students in the workshops, product development, bazaars, and art fair for display, sales, and exhibitions of the art product. A funding grant from the National Commission for Culture and the Arts supported the initial product development.

According to Boyer, “The Scholarship of engagement means connecting the rich resources of the university to our most pressing social, civic, and ethical problems, to our children, to your schools, to our teachers and to our cities....” (Boyer, 1990; as cited in King-Jupiter, et al, 2008). The education inside the four corners of the classroom is nothing if this is not applied to impact the community.⁵

⁵ Zerrudo’s students in cooperation with the Fine Arts Major Organization (FAMO) of the University of San Agustin, Iloilo design team were directly involved in various activities in the formulation of Freedom-in-Art Project, including a fundraising project where they pitched the project at the Youth South East Asian Initiative (YSEALI) Seeds for the Future by the US Mission for the ASEAN. The project, Hilway (freedom) Art Project was chosen as one of the top 20 social enterprises by Bank of Philippine Island Accelerate Program and the Bayan Academy in 2018. FAMO, an organization under the supervision of Zerrudo, has produced a Walk to Freedom fashion story to showcase the personalized creations made by PDL to represent their stories outside the prison hall. What started as a class project and professorial research of Zerrudo has evolved into a restorative social enterprise.

REFLECTIVE ANALYSIS

The authors believe in storytelling as a tool for cultural assertion and a weapon for transformative education. Storytelling is likewise essential in this research as a healing art process. The results of this short engagement used the unconventional principles of art-making in the context of “stories of objects.” The most important part of the experience was the learning process with organic unfolding of each woman’s narrative. Estés’ philosophy frames the intention of this soul work: “The ‘craft of making’ is an important part of the work.... Art is important for it commemorates the season of the soul, or a special or tragic event in the soul’s journey. Art is not just for oneself, not just a marker of one’s own understanding. It is also a map for those who follow after us” (Estés, 1992). Art is not just about making objects or paintings or products, it is seeing the unseen and creating a portrait of the soul.

This real human situation in the prison is the ultimate test to a human being. The real encounters with the women made the author believe more in the capacity of an “*Inday*” Ilongga woman to cope with intense human hardships in the culture of resilience, tolerance, spirituality, and acceptance. Aside from family support, other PDLs even without visitors for many years, gained from the culture of intimacy of extended family support and the compassion of other inmates. Alma Quinto, a Filipina visual artist who metaphorized art as a womb, says “I see art as a womb—compact, snug, and warm—a shelter that nurtures, provides comfort, and offers protection. When the womb gives birth to an idea and fosters exchange and dialogue, it brings people and cultures together...” (Quinto, unpublished research). The art making served also as a refuge or escape from the discomfort and everyday torture of the congestion. Somehow the creative workshops revealed the “beauty” of each one, and brought a common ground to reach out to one another.

Human creativity is boundless and a synergy of women doing art together transforms the space into a supportive healing environment. The subtle experience of shared space is life weaving energies and emotions and minds into a nest of comfort and understanding. The politics of space and body brings a crucial discourse in the prison as women navigate their own sense of freedom and expression. Above all, where women thrive, one can see resilience, love, and compassion even in the worst places such as an overcrowded prison. The Inday Dolls serve as an agentive object that gives voice to the women, not just those who were imprisoned, but those who are in the peripheries. For the

women, Inday is no longer a poor province girl or domestic helper or woman inmate, but a strong resilient woman who continues to stand up for her family by mothering behind bars. According to one PDL recently released who survived after committing suicide inside the jail, the Inday doll project gave her purpose in life.

The arts-based process has been life-changing to both the researchers and the participants. The purpose-driven initiative brought the art works of the women around the globe. The Inday Dolls Project has been presented as a research project in local and international audiences. initially as “Stories of Objects from Indigenous to Contemporary; A presentation with performance installation” at Artful Inquiry Symposium at McGill University, Montreal in 2016. Zerrudo’s research paper, “Freedom-in-Prison, Prison-in-Freedom” was awarded Best Paper in the 4th National Conference on Social Justice in the University of Cebu, Philippines in 2017. In the same year, the paper was presented at the International Conference on Education and Global Studies in Kyoto, Japan. Another opportunity came when Zerrudo shared this project at the New York University’s Forum on “Performance as Activism” in 2018. The Inday dolls exhibition, coupled with performance and workshops, has reached and engaged with both local and international audiences.

Museo Pambata, a famous children's museum in Manila, hosted an art for healing workshop in which Zerrudo was the facilitator of children of victims of extra judicial killings during the exhibition of the Hilway Stories of Objects in 2018. On the other hand, Got Heart Gallery hosted the *Hilway Art Exhibit; Mothering Behind Bars* in 2018. In time for the Mother’s Day Celebration, Zerrudo delivered an Art Talk with an art exhibition hosted by Kularts at Bindlestiff Studio, in San Francisco, California. Thankful for the Filipino-American communities, Zerrudo was supported to exhibit her Inday dolls in two cities in the USA in the same year. *Ilongga Matters; Mothering Behind Bars* was exhibited at Purple Yam, Brooklyn, New York.

By tracing the impetus of our freedom art project, we are also historicizing the globality of Inday dolls as an act of articulating the value of justice in spaces of precarity in the Philippines, including the many prison halls through local, national, and transnational freedom art engagements. We write this article using the light that the women inmates have shared to our lives and we will continue to tell their stories

until their scripts of new futures have become a reality.

SUGGESTED CITATION

Zerrudo, M. R. A. and Gupa, D. D. (2019). Inday dolls: Body monologues and lullabies for freedom in prison; Scripting possible futures in justice art in Iloilo's correctional system. *ArtsPraxis*, 5 (2), 202-224.

REFERENCES

- Amores, A. S. (2017). *Batók (Tattoos): Body as archive*. Baguio: Museo Kordillera, University of the Philippines.
- Elizabeth, L. and Young, S. (2006). *Works of Heart: Building village through arts*. Oakland: New Village Press.
- Estés, C. P. (1992). *Women who run with the wolves*. New York: Ballantine Books.
- Goldbard, A. (2009). *New creative community*. Oakland: New Village Press.
- Golden, C. (n.d.). [The 12 common archetypes](#). Lake Stevens, WA: Soulcraft.
- Hare, J. R. (2008). [Review: Ethnodrama: An anthology of reality theatre](#). In *Forum: Qualitative Social Research*, 9 (2).
- Hanh, T. (2009). [Understanding interbeing](#). *The Bodhi leaf: Reflections on the Dharma*. Retrieved February 28, 2019.
- King, D. (2009). *Truth heals: What you hide can hurt you*. Carlsbad, CA: Hay House.
- King-Jupiter, K. L., Stevens, K., and Bondy, B. (2008). Prison arts and faculty engagement: A recipe for improving college teaching. *Journal of Higher Education Outreach and Engagement*, 12 (3).
- Knight, K., Schwarzman, M., and Many Others. (2005). *Beginner's guide to community-based arts*. Oakland: New Village Press.
- Knowles, J. & Cole, A. (eds. 2012). *Handbook of the arts in qualitative research: Perspectives, methodologies, examples, and issues*. Los Angeles: SAGE Publication, Inc.
- Manaf, N. F. A. (2016). "Female courage" in prison literature in Malaysia and the Philippines. *International Society of Communication and Development among Universities (ISCBDU)*.
- Mandela, N. (1995). *A long walk to freedom*. New York: Little Brown and Company.

- Mehta, A. [Frida Kahlo](#). Retrieved February 27, 2019.
- Naidus, B. (2009). *Arts for change: Teaching outside the frame*. Oakland: New Village Press.
- Narag, R. (2018). [A humanitarian crisis, a monster in our midst--State of PH in 2018: Our jails are now world's most congested](#). Philippine Center for Investigative Journalism. Retrieved February 28, 2019.
- Prendergast, M. Leggo C. & Sameshima, P. (eds.). (2009). *Poetic inquiry: Vibrant voices in the social sciences*. Rotterdam: Sense Publishers.
- Quinto, A. (2016). NewBuildZone: Arts-based projects for communities in man-made and natural disasters. Unpublished report.
- Regencia, T. (2018). [Senator: Rodrigo Duterte's drug war has killed 20,000](#). *Aljazeera*. Retrieved March 1, 2019.
- Saldaña, J. (2005). [Street rat: An ethnodrama](#). *Journal of Curriculum and Pedagogy*, 2 (1), 5-11.
- Talabong, R. (2018). [PNP's drug war death toll tops 4,500 before SONA 2018](#). *Rappler*. Retrieved March 1, 2019.

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHIES

Ma Rosalie Abeto Zerrudo bridges multi-characters as cultural worker, performance and visual multi-media artist. Her lifework in the Philippines gifted her a complete workshop. She combines her background in BA Psychology, and MA Educational Theater (New York University) as community-engaged culture-based art practice she calls soul work. The process-based people-centered approach employs restorative creative process, intuitive spontaneity, memory making, ritual performance, music poetry, ephemeral installography and restorative social enterprise.

Dennis D. Gupa is theatre director and a PhD in Applied Theatre (Candidate) at the University of Victoria. His research explores how indigenous rituals and human-ocean relationship can inform contemporary applied theatre practice and process that engages community and local elders in sea coast communities where ecological destruction, climate change, modernities and colonial encounters are present. He received a scholarship from the Indonesian government to study theatre and traditional mask dance at Bandung's Sekolah Tinggi

Seni Indonesia. The Asian Cultural Council's awarded him a fellowship to undertake a director-in-residence program in New York City in 2011. He has an MFA Directing (Theatre) degree from University of British Columbia and MA Theatre at University of the Philippines. He was awarded the 2016 Dwight Conquergood Award from the Performance Studies international (PSi) and the Ada Slaight Drama in Education Award 2017-2018. Dennis is a Vanier scholar.

Media Practice and Theatre in Conversation: Co-Creating Narratives for Positive Social Change

[JACKIE KAULI](#)

[VERENA THOMAS](#)

QUEENSLAND UNIVERSITY OF TECHNOLOGY

ABSTRACT

In Papua New Guinea, a country in the South Pacific, performance and ritual are part of day-to-day life through which social and cultural relationships are mediated. Understanding the way in which performances are woven into day-to-day experiences and political spaces lets us explore communal and indigenous processes around social change. Yet to date, there has been a very limited understanding of the value of performance for social change among development practitioners and those seeking to work with communities to impact on positive social change around certain issues.

Based on over a decade of engagement in arts-based research and development practice in the Pacific, we explore the way in which indigenous knowledge systems and performances can be harnessed to co-create narratives and performances for community audiences. Among others, we explore the model of Theatre in Conversation (TiC)

(Kauli 2015), an arts-based approach developed as research and a theatre for development model, to overcome some of the complexities linked to achieving social change. TiC is used in Papua New Guinea to assist community organisations and individual facilitators develop narratives of strength and resilience that highlight the challenges, create the conversations, and deepen understanding around sensitive issues. These narratives are further captured through other media such as photography or film. Workshops are designed to improve artist-facilitators' community engagement skills and artistry harnessing indigenous ways of learning and engagement in social change. In this paper, we highlight projects on gender-based violence and sorcery accusation related violence, as examples to explore the key aspects of this approach.

INTRODUCTION

International development projects are characterized by uneven power dynamics between those who fund programs and those who are regarded as beneficiaries of such initiatives (Escobar, 2011). A gap often exists between western frameworks and developing locally appropriate approaches to development. This might in part have to do with the need to justify impact of such initiatives within frameworks that make sense to those providing the funding, and in part due to the inherent complexity of local contexts. On a day-to-day basis people perform, negotiate and enact engagements within their local spaces, to establish and reconfirm relationships and to negotiate their positions within society. Entering these spaces requires careful introductions and negotiations around shared objectives and possible processes of engagement.

Papua New Guinea (PNG) is a country in the South Pacific that receives large amounts of foreign aid.¹ At the same time, with over 800 different ethnic groups in a country of 8 million people, the cultural, linguistic and ethnic diversity in Papua New Guinea is unique in many ways. In this setting, which foregrounds a communal culture, artistic performances and rituals are part of day-to-day life through which social and cultural relationships are mediated. Through intangible artistic

¹ Australia is PNG's largest donor with amounts of over 500 million per year.

creations people establish and maintain their connection to others (Leach, 2012).

In PNG, performances are enacted as activism when they serve a collective political agenda, for example when the rights of a community are impinged upon or when communities collectively engage in promoting a certain agenda. Understanding the way in which performances are woven into these political spaces lets us explore communal and indigenous processes around social change. Yet to date, there has been a very limited understanding of the value of performance for social change among development practitioners and those seeking to work with communities to impact on positive social change around certain issues.

The approach highlighted in our paper presents arts-based strategies for research and community engagement that harness indigenous world views and pedagogies. It builds on local understandings of performance and activism and creates further tools to expand the engagement to address specific social issues. Performances are interspersed with narratives of hope and resilience embedded in local contexts. We provide examples from projects seeking to address issues around gender and sorcery accusation related violence which integrate the model of Theatre in Conversations (Kauli, 2015a) with participatory media practices. Our aim is to provide examples of projects that harness oral and performative processes for community and collective agendas to address issues of violence.

BACKGROUND: ART AND ACTIVISM IN PAPUA NEW GUINEA

Art and art processes have been an integral part of PNG culture and society, and have been shaping social and cultural processes within communities for thousands of years. Since the 1960s, art and activism have drawn on contemporary art forms and integrated indigenous knowledge, creativity and relational systems in artistic formats such as plays, poetry books, sculptures and paintings. Contemporary art emerged in the pre-independence times² and this is where activism and the products associated with it were most visible (Beier, 2017). Artists were working to create a national consciousness and a national identity

² PNG gained independence in 1975.

and creating counter-narratives to the Australian colonial administration (May, 2013).

Literary works such as the Papua Pockets Poets or contemporary painters such as Matthias Kauage addressed issues around education and the challenges in understanding and learning about two different worlds. The play *The Unexpected Hawk*, written by John Waiko, captures a conversation between a mother and son, also noted in May's account of literary works in PNG (2013):

Son: Why do they treat us like this?

Mother: No one knows why. We do not understand them, and they do not try to understand us. But every tree has its roots deep down in the ground. Even their actions must have roots. I want you to go to school, so that you can dig out the roots. Do not hesitate to uproot their tree and drink their wisdom.

In the play the mother asks the son to learn from the colonial administration. While Papua New Guineans adapted to new systems, it can be argued the colonial power did less so, in terms of understanding and learning from the existing indigenous systems. Papua New Guinea adapted to a western system of education and subsequently worked on re-integrating indigenous practices within the education system (Skutnabb-Kangas, 2003). Similarly, international development practice historically has been characterised by promoting external knowledge and understandings. Increasingly, recognising that understanding and engaging with local solutions and listening might present key factors for sustainable development partnerships. In this space, representation and performance are key aspects in understanding community engagement.

As a sovereign nation, Papua New Guinea continues to seek to counter the narrative of the Other and produce representations that acknowledge its history and strengths (Stella, 2007). Throughout PNG's recent history there has been collective actions to address political structures and bring inequalities to the attention of decision makers. The performativity of these collective actions provides an important understanding of social movements and change.

For example, in 2013, people united for the Haus Krai movement. A Haus Krai is a traditional mourning ritual played out by relatives of the deceased, it is infused with singing, crying and lamentations, contained within them stories about the deceased (Gillespie & Hoenigman, 2013).

These are sung in mournful acts of sorrow, displayed publicly for all to witness. These mourning rituals are practiced throughout the country. To protest against weak laws in relation to domestic and sorcery related violence people marched the streets of PNG towns to demand policy change. In this case the ritual served as a performance addressing a national issue, highlighting that too many lives had been lost to violence (Kauli, 2015b; Nayahamui Rooney, 2017).

This provides one example in understanding the link between activism and performance and using rituals to create social change. We argue, that to date, development practice has not sufficiently engaged in the potential of indigenous performance to understand social change and social relations more broadly. Paying attention to performance and ritual means observing every day practices and engagements and providing strategies to uncovering tacit knowledges embedded in the individuals' and communities' activities.

In the following sections we discuss the Theatre in Conversation (TiC) model and its integration with media practice based on our shared work around gender-based violence and sorcery accusation related violence to illustrate how development practice can harness and engage in indigenous performativity at community level.

UNDERSTANDING PERFORMANCE AS ACTIVISM IN DEVELOPMENT: CO-CREATING NARRATIVES FOR POSITIVE SOCIAL CHANGE

Our approach draws on a variety of forms and formats which foreground co-creativity and relationships, integrating research and advocacy within action research and practice-led approaches. Here, we merge the model of Theatre in Conversations (Kauli 2015) with participatory and community media strategies to create hybrid forms of media practice. These hybrid forms of practice were developed to attend to the challenges of development practices in trying to affect change in communities. The objective of TiC was to create spaces where collective learning and sharing can take place while co-devising artistic performance that stimulate conversation within a community. The TiC model combines three established genres of practice: process drama, community theatre and community conversations. There are key

principles that the three genres share but also key components that each of these components brings.

Community theatre promotes the inclusion of indigenous performances and local participants. It utilises community cultural advisors from the community and integrates an appreciation of aesthetic and pedagogical possibilities embedded in indigenous performance (see Murphy, 2010; Van Erven, 2002).

Community conversations privileges knowledge and understanding of communities and aim to harness this knowledge for dialogue and problem solving. According to Reid (2009):

The power to change lies within: within communities, within groups, within people [...] The answers to what needs to be done lie within: communities can work out for themselves what needs to change, what needs to be done. (p. 7)

Process drama focuses on process (using dramatic forms to understand a subject) rather than product (theatre production) as a way to increase participants understanding around issues. The curatorial processes of using drama forms frames dramatic experiences. When utilised well it integrates experiences from all participants, focusing on elements such as power and agency to ensure a rich experiences of the issue or subject being explored. It is therefore an important approach when dealing with sensitive social issues and different power dynamics. A key component of process drama is the role of the facilitator as leaderly-led facilitator (Haseman, 2002). A leaderly-led facilitator both leads and guides the experience of participants through an issue, but is also comfortable at being led by the experiences of the participants. Their artistry is demonstrated in how they bring together and highlight intersections of knowledge that emerge from the experience and how they address beliefs, perceptions, power and agency within the workshop spaces.

The genres of community theatre, community conversations and process drama are merged in the TiC model. In the following section we share an example of using the TiC model in practice. We then expand our understanding and use of TiC to participatory media practices including photovoice, filmmaking and digital storytelling to point towards opportunities in creating and activating collective learning spaces locally, nationally and internationally. Photovoice and digital storytelling

use a similar approach as people themselves take photographs to creatively express their personal stories. Photovoice is often outputted as a single photograph or a series of photographs accompanied by a written narrative, whereas digital storytelling makes use of the digital format and combines an audio narrative with a variety of visual media materials and is edited into a short personal film. Our processes of engagement serve both to reflect on and respond to power dynamics and experiences within groups and how groups can represent their own experiences as forms of resistance and collective action.

RESPONSES FROM THE FIELD—MODELS IN PRACTICE

Theatre in Conversations in Rai Coast, Madang

An example of TiC in practice is demonstrated in a community engagement program addressing gender relations in the Rai Coast district of Madang. TiC was used as a way to understand the various manifestations of violence towards women and how families and men responded to the issues. A performance was created focusing on the impact of violence on women with the goal of creating empathy among the community audience.

Context specific challenges around gender and power were addressed as part of the script development workshop. Prior to the actual performance the audience was briefed to intervene and participate at key points in the story. The main character who played the abusive husband would continue to play the antagonist as a strategy for provocation creating and maintaining dramatic tension.

On one of the days the play was performed, an older male community member responded to the performance with deep, moving reflections about men's violence towards women. The performance became a catalyst for a nagging question that perplexed him for the duration of the performance:

What kind of life, what kind of life are you looking for, you leave your wife and take another woman, what kind of life are you looking for?
(Older Male district officer, Saidor 2012)



Fig 1: Theatre in Conversation, Sidor District Station, 2012

The TiC approach in this scenario highlighted two key components. Firstly, the performance implicated the behaviours of men in the district who had come to normalise the issue of wayward deviant men, and secondly, it made visible the trauma, shame and pain women go through in silence. It was not until seeing the character of the woman visibly struggling to make ends meet, while the husband chastised and abused her, that many of the men in the audience realised the demeaning and demoralising ways they treated their wives. Schiefflin (1998) has discussed 'the creation of presence' as core component of performance:

Performances, whether ritual or dramatic, create and make present realities vivid enough to beguile, amuse or terrify. And through these presences, they alter moods, social relations, bodily dispositions and states of mind. (p. 194)

TiC engaged audience feedback while utilising a repertoire of indigenous performances drawing on context bound narratives to create a public dialogue debating the implications of men's violence towards women within a safe space. The community agreed beforehand that conversations generated during the performance and community discussion would be respected and safe. In this space, women also

weighed in on the discussions asking why they were being mistreated. As a process, TiC engaged community members as performers and audiences to reflect on a present issue.

TiC as an approach serves to provide an in-depth understanding of local context harnessing indigenous performances, local knowledge and practices to generate dialogue and create safe spaces for communities to discuss relevant social issues. We combine this approach with audiovisual media processes to work with community groups to represent the issues they have explored to a wider audience.

Photovoice and Filmic Narratives to Support National Strategies on GBV

The *Yumi Kirapim Senis* initiative was developed involving six community based organisations addressing gender-based violence in their communities (Thomas & Kauli, 2015). In workshops with participants from the organisations we used photovoice as a research process and represent people's individual experiences and stories. In addition, six documentary films were produced as part of the initiative, highlighting relational aspects and showcasing locally developed solutions to gender-based violence (Thomas, Kauli, Munau, & Fernandes, 2015). While the films involved a production team, processes from TiC were used in the workshops as foundational processes to draw out narratives and tacit knowledge. The program ran parallel to the development of the National Strategy to Respond to Gender Based Violence (GBV) and supported the advocacy efforts to get the strategy passed by the PNG government (GoPNG, 2016).

Working with advocates was strategic as we were asking people to share and document their personal experiences (compared to predominantly fictional character narratives in TiC) and therefore it was not only important that their stories and experiences were validated by their work within these organisations but also that the organisations provided the necessary support networks for those exposing their stories.

In workshops we facilitated the sharing and narrating of stories collectively. What emerged from the personal narratives was that the large majority of participants had experienced GBV themselves and were working in these organisations with a vision to create safer communities.

The inspiring thing that I learned from this workshop is that all of us have been living with all forms of violence but nobody knows. Through this workshop I can openly share my problems through the photovoice which might help others who view it to obtain information from it. (Participant, Simbu, Workshop 2014)

After the production of the films as part of the initiative, we brought the organisational partners together to share their stories with national stakeholders in the capital Port Moresby. These stories were curated through both a photo exhibition—with photographs being exhibited together with short written stories—and the screening of the films. The collective understanding that there were key local solutions within communities that could be harnessed as key knowledge in addressing GBV was supported by the advocacy tools such as the films and stories. These advocacy tools importantly offered a contextualised understanding of each of the situations, whether it was situated in an urban or rural area, whether it affected women or children, and whether advocates were addressing predominantly the legal system, providing police or medical support. The media products were curated stories based on everyday indigenous practices and performances.

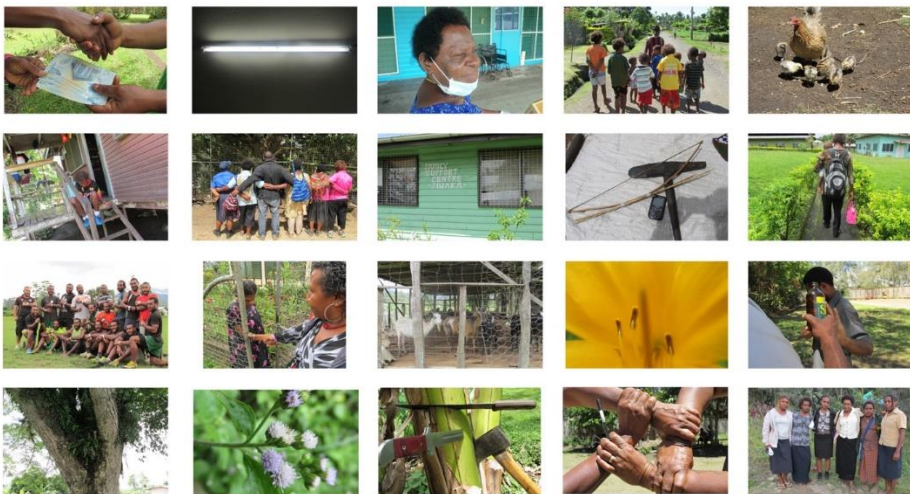


Fig 2: Examples from the 60 photo stories produced in six workshops (Thomas & Kauli, 2015, pp. 52-53)

Collectively people's stories presented holistic solutions, supported by a strong coalition of people who joined the movement of holding national stakeholders accountable for the way GBV was being addressed in PNG. The presentation of these collective narratives at a national launch demonstrated the innovative work of the community-led organisations while advocating to the government to do more to address GBV in PNG communities. The films revealed to government the possibilities for creating change through coalitions and how locally led endeavors are producing action:

The *Yumi Kirapim Senis* films are actually implementing what the GBV strategy [policies] is talking about, communities out there are already there doing it. People of Papua New Guinea actually owning those processes and policies that roll within and we don't expect someone from outside to come and help us address GBV. The solution often lies within here, we just need to identify the way and recognize where those solutions are and mainstream those best practices. So the films are definitely a plus in terms of rolling out the GBV strategy for us in the country.³

The concept of representation requires careful examination given the experiences of colonialism. By engaging in a TiC approach local narratives and forms are harnessed. When these are integrated in media products, such as performances or audiovisual representations, they represent an in-depth perspective of an issue which mass media often does not account for or acknowledge. Such representations require careful considerations and they are discussed between facilitators and participants as they emerge as co-creative media products.

Addressing Representation of Sorcery Accusations and Violence

The Yumi Sanap Strong initiative, which sits alongside Yumi Kirapim Senis, was developed taking into account previous experiences. It specifically targets sorcery accusation related violence in PNG. Undertaking a media analysis of newspapers we found that there was limited representation of those seeking to address the issue within their

³ Gayle Tatsi is the Executive Director of the Office for the Development of Women at the Department of Religion, Youth and Community Development, Yumi Sanap Strong National Launch, Port Moresby, 2015.

communities, in particular human rights defenders who have established a strong network in PNG. Despite their many advocacy efforts their voices were often not accounted for in dominant media representations which focus on the often gruesome incidents with little analysis of the causes of the crimes. Behind this backdrop we worked with four organisations in different provinces in PNG to create digital stories.

Similarly to the photovoice approach we discussed under the Yumi Kirapim Senis initiative, digital stories encourage the sharing of individual personal stories. This was at times challenging to participants who had not shared their stories with others, but the potential of capturing their own story audio-visually often encouraged people to narrate their stories. As one participant commented:

It was a challenge for me to share my story and I was hesitant as I have not told my story to people like this. But then we took photos, I felt that I want to share my story and that I can really capture it with photographs. (Workshop participant, Simbu 2017)

To support a 'do no harm' approach we briefed participants about the possibility of sharing stories while keeping the anonymity of the storyteller. Some participants wanted to be identifiable in the story while others decided to remain anonymous. Those remaining anonymous could use different creative techniques to achieve this in their stories. For example, they could chose to have the story read by an actor and select photographs that would not in any way identify them or their location. In discussing the visual representation of the stories, the concept of metaphor was important to ensure anonymity but also in most cases to create a stronger feeling of empathy among audiences. Here, indigenous aesthetics and knowledge were embedded in the narrative, performative and the visual representation.

Local concepts were expressed in local language and represented visually where appropriate. These were linked through personal stories of impact, such as Mary Kini's story (see Fig. 3). Indigenous aesthetics in this case capture relevant narratives embedded in social and cultural experience while becoming an expression of social relations in past, present and future (see Leuthold, 1998).



During my father's wake the community said my mother gave him kaukau (sweet potato) and he went off to fight and then got killed. The community planned on killing my mother because she gave my father 'kol kaukau.'



When my mother heard about this, she feared to join the wake of her husband. She just left.

I waited for one day, then another day passed and then a week passed, she was gone for good.

Mary Kini

Fig 3: Excerpts from the digital story by Mary Kini 'Stori bilong Mary Kini' (2017) as part of the Yumi Sanap Strong initiative.

With the production of the digital stories and through the collective work of the human rights defenders the opportunity emerged to present these representations at national and international levels. This included a forum at national level in Port Moresby and attending the Women of the World Festival in Brisbane, Australia.

In these spaces Mary Kini shared her own story of human rights abuse to advocate for the need for change. Mary spoke about the issue of the security of human rights defenders and the need to establish a human rights commission in Papua New Guinea:

I have to say something which I felt was very important for me to say. In PNG at national level as a voice for the other human rights defenders, and here I felt that that's another country and more over it was a commonwealth gathering and Australia is part of it, PNG is

part of it, so I really wanted to push for PNG to establish a national human rights commission (Mary Kini, at the Women of World. Festival, Brisbane, 2018)



Fig 4: Mary Kini and other human rights defenders speaking at the photo exhibition of Yumi Sanap Strong in Brisbane, Australia.

Emerging from these processes—the sharing of stories and collective responses—was that these representations harnessed the strength of individuals and communities to promote change. In these spaces, activists are countering a long tradition of representation of Papua New Guinea, based on a deficit model that often portrays Papua New Guineans as passive observers to their development changes. These representations emerging from collective workshops were developed on the basis that knowledge was harnessed from within and that those experiences and understandings are key to providing solutions. As such they countered dominant narratives many of which remain a legacy of colonialism and top-down development approaches.

CONCLUSION

In this paper we have highlighted examples from projects in Papua New Guinea working in the space of international development practice. We have argued that development projects seeking to address social issues

within communities have an opportunity to harness local knowledge and indigenous performativity. We have outlined the TiC model for community engagement and have demonstrated how this model can be integrated with a variety of media forms to support the activist agendas of individuals and communities. This might include opening up spaces at local, national and international levels to discuss topics previously not highlighted and to ensure appropriate representation of local knowledge systems and understandings. As such, these arts-based processes have the potential to bridge power dynamics in international development practice, as they co-create and co-facilitate shared learning spaces and a collective consciousness.

These processes rely on the willingness to listen to and to value people's voice and story. With this approach arts-based processes can create safe spaces for people to discuss issues that might be normalised with the community and difficult to talk about. Further, media practices can provide processes that support co-creating narratives and collaborative problem solving. Indigenous performances can be harnessed because embedded within these are knowledge systems that are part of lived experiences. Capturing these stories and processes can inspire others to create change. The bringing together of advocates and strengthening coalitions among people, as we have demonstrated, can make a strong contribution to impacting policy makers and creating change at multiple levels.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We acknowledge our collaborating partners who shared their stories and who continue to be at the forefront of creating change for gender equality and human rights. We would like to acknowledge the support from our funding partners including the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade—Pacific Women Shaping Pacific Development Program, the United Nations Development Programme and Oxfam in Papua New Guinea.

SUGGESTED CITATION

Kauli, J., & Thomas, V. (2019). Media practice and theatre in conversation: Co-creating narratives for positive social change.

ArtsPraxis, 5 (2), 225-242.

REFERENCES

- Beier, U. (2017). *Decolonising the mind: The impact of the university on culture and identity in Papua New Guinea, 1971-74*. Canberra, ACT: Pandanus Books.
- Escobar, A. (2011). *Encountering development: The making and unmaking of the Third World*. Princeton University Press.
- Forsyth, M., & Eves, R. (2015). *Talking it through: Responses to sorcery and witchcraft beliefs and practices in Melanesia*. ANU Press.
- Gillespie, K., & Hoenigman, D. (2013). Laments and relational personhood: Case studies from Duna and Awiakay societies of Papua New Guinea. *Humanities Research*, 19 (3), 97.
- GoPNG. (2016). *Papua New Guinea National Strategy to Prevent and Respond to Gender Based Violence 2016-2025*. Retrieved from Port Moresby.
- Haseman, B. C. (2002). The 'leaderly' process drama and the artistry of 'rip, mix and burn.' *Playing betwixt and between: The IDEA dialogues 2001* (p. 226-233): IDEA Publications.
- Kauli, J. (2015a). *Establishing the conceptual and practical foundations of a new form of theatre for development: Theatre in conversations*. Queensland University of Technology.
- Kauli, J. (2015b). *Will you speak for me? Contemporary experiences of violence against women in Papua New Guinea*. Queensland University of Technology.
- Leach, J. (2012). Creativity as a Social Relation? In S. Biggs (Ed.), *Remediating the social*. ELMCIP: Electronic literature as a model of creativity and innovation in practice.
- Leuthold, S. (1998). *Indigenous aesthetics: Native art, media, and identity*. Austin, University of Texas Press.
- May, R. (2013). *State and society in Papua New Guinea: the first twenty-five years*. ANU Press.
- Murphy, G. (2010). *Fears of loss, tears of joy: Raun Raun Theatre and its role in the construction of a national culture in Papua New Guinea*. Port Moresby, University of Papua New Guinea.
- Nayahamui Rooney, M. (2017). Lewa Was Mama (Beloved Guardian Mother). In M. Macintyre & C. Spark (Eds.), *Transformations of gender in Melanesia*. ANU Press.

- Reid, E. (2009). Manual for community facilitators. Community Conversations Initiative: Engaging communities in the response to the HIV epidemic and its driving forces.
- Schieffelin, E. L. (1998). Problematizing performance. *Ritual, Performance, Media*, 35.
- Skutnabb-Kangas, T. (2003). Revitalisation of Indigenous languages in education: Contextualising the Papua New Guinea experience. *Language and Education*, 17 (2), 81-86.
- Stella, R. (2007). *Imagining the other: The representation of the Papua New Guinean subject* (Vol. 20). Honolulu, University of Hawaii Press.
- Thomas, V., & Kauli, J. (2015). *Yumi Kirapim Senis—Our images, Our actions*. Papua New Guinea, Centre for Social and Creative Media & UNDP Papua New Guinea.
- Thomas, V., Kauli, J., Munau, L., & Fernandes, A. (2015). *Yumi Kirapim Senis—Community Actions Against Violence* [DVD]. Papua New Guinea: UNDP & Centre for Social and Creative Media, University of Goroka.
- Van Erven, E. (2002). *Community theatre: Global perspectives*. London, Routledge.

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHIES

Jackie Kauli is Postdoctoral Research Fellow in the Creative Industries Faculty at Queensland University of Technology. She leads a number of research projects funded by development agencies which support the use of indigenous and arts-based research approaches. Jackie's work focuses on harnessing drama techniques, creative practice and communication strategies to contribute to development practice and theory. She holds a PhD in Creative Industries from Queensland University of Technology and has over 15 years experience working in international development on issues around health, education and gender. She works across PNG and Australia.

Verena Thomas is Senior Research Fellow in the School of Design, Creative Industries Faculty at Queensland University of Technology. Her research interests include communication and social change, communication for development, health communication, arts-based

research approaches, visual methodologies and participatory design. Verena has developed innovative and creative approaches to localising research in cross-cultural contexts. She is the founding Director of the Centre for Social and Creative Media at the University of Goroka, Papua New Guinea, which she led from 2012-2016. Verena has led numerous projects funded by donor agencies, government and non-government partners. She has extensive experience in research and media capacity building in the Pacific region.