

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

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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 uncouned 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 quality(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.

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manifestations through projects grounded in social justice.