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After Images: Using Augusto Boal's Image Theatre to Balance Artistry, Analysis, and Activism in the Performance Composition Process

Bonny Leah McDonald
Louisiana State University and Agricultural and Mechanical College

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AFTER IMAGES: USING AUGUSTO BOAL'S IMAGE THEATRE TO
BALANCE ARTISTRY, ANALYSIS, AND ACTIVISM IN THE PERFORMANCE
COMPOSITION PROCESS

A Dissertation

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
Louisiana State University and
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in

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by

Bonny L. McDonald

B.A., University of Texas at Austin, 2002

M.A., Western Kentucky University, 2005

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS.....	ii
ABSTRACT.....	iv
CHAPTER	
1 THE IMAGE THEATRE OF THEATRE OF THE OPPRESSED.....	1
2 ARTISTRY, ANALYSIS, AND ACTIVISM IN IMAGE THEATRE.....	22
3 BLACK HISTORY MONTH “FOR REAL”	38
4 MAKING SACRED WASTE.....	63
5 RACY.....	95
6 CONCLUSION.....	134
WORKS CITED.....	153
VITA.....	159

ABSTRACT

In this study, I describe several performance experiments in which I applied Brazilian theatre artist Augusto Boal's Image Theatre method to mobilize a composition process that is artistically exciting, politically relevant, and pedagogically engaging. Over the span of about seven years, I used Image Theatre as the bedrock of my artistic practice as a director of social justice themed works for the stage. I show how using Image Theatre as a tool for performance composition can balance artistry (theatrical practice), analysis (cultural studies), and activism (collaborative struggles toward justice). To do so, I review relevant literature on Boal's corpus and Image Theatre and show how my research contributes to the ongoing conversation about the ethics and applications of Boal's method. I then describe three major performance projects in which I used Image Theatre as a method for staging collaborative performances addressing social justice topics. In each case study, I offer descriptions of the performance composition process and final performance product in order to reflect on several practical strategies for directors and teachers interested in creating collaborative performances that call for social change.

CHAPTER 1

THE IMAGE THEATRE OF THEATRE OF THE OPPRESSED

INTRODUCTION

In a workshop that served as part of the composition process of a show I directed in the HopKins Black Box at Louisiana State University, I asked eight participants to create a still pose of the word *racism*. I prompted the group to follow an impulse and then commit to a whole body gesture. I then asked them to view each other and to describe what they saw in terms of the corporeal body. “Everyone looks really tense, tense muscles,” one participant said. “A lot of people have their hands over their eyes or their faces,” said another. “Does anyone see any notable differences or similarities among groups of bodies, white or Black, or male or female?” I asked. “I do,” one participant ventured. Using language offered in the workshop to describe body forms, he then explained, “The white bodies seem more abstract, and the Black bodies seem more illustrative.” Pressed for examples, he contrasted a white student who took an “artsy” sort of pose, all elbows and angles, and a Black student who held his arms across his body protectively, head hung low. I asked, “Based on the physical evidence we’ve made here, how are we, as a group, thinking about this word *racism* today?” The descriptions came rolling in: “It’s awkward, it’s tense; it affects different bodies differently; it’s more abstract for those who are white; it’s more concrete for those who are Black; we don’t really know what it looks like; lots of us don’t really want to see it.”

The activity I describe above derives from Image of a Word, an exercise that is part of the Image Theatre (IT) method developed by Brazilian theatre theorist and practitioner Augusto Boal. I called this game as part of the staging process for a performance about Black-white interracial communication practices. Boal understands and promotes IT as a form of participatory theatre

that engages a group emotionally, physically, and intellectually (*Oppressed* 135-9). Over the span of about seven years, I drew on IT to ground my artistic practice as a director of social justice themed works for the stage. I found that IT operates in valuable ways to encourage critical consciousness and to create a powerful sense of ensemble in a cast, particularly when it is engaged as a method for performance composition.

In this study, I analyze three major performance projects in which I used IT as a grounding method for staging collaborative performances with social justice topics. I argue that IT is a highly accessible tool that can serve performance studies researchers who seek to maintain a productive tension between three intersecting goals of performance studies as outlined by Dwight Conquergood: artistry, analysis, and activism (“Interventions” 376). Drawing on scholarly literature from Boal’s corpus, Critical Pedagogy theory, and my three case studies, I describe how IT can be used to balance the tensions among artistry (aesthetic practice), analysis (cultural critique), and activism (collaborative struggles toward justice), particularly when applied as a performance composition tool.

In this chapter, I call on research on Boal’s Theatre of the Oppressed (TO) system to contextualize the argument I expound on in subsequent chapters: that using IT as a way to initiate performance composition balances artistry, analysis, and activism. I first review Boal’s conception of the TO method, of which IT is a key part. Second, I synthesize the scholarly treatment of IT as a tool for social change, noting a pattern of documentation that minimizes analytical and artistic possibilities or celebrates them without offering salient examples from real world application. Third, I overview my argument that using IT as a staging device for performance composition can balance what Conquergood calls the “three As of performance studies” (“Interventions” 376).

BOAL'S THEATRE OF THE OPPRESSED

Enduring teaching tools and theatrical forms, Boal's TO methods are regularly the subject of pedagogical workshops, conferences, and scholarly attention. Each year, thousands of folks of all ages attend Boal-based workshops across the world, and a body of scholarly research documenting these practices grows in tandem. Born in Brazil in 1931, Boal graduated from Columbia University in New York in 1955. He developed his TO system in the 1950s and 60s while directing the Arena Theatre in Sao Paulo. Desiring to develop an "activist theatre" that spoke directly to the concerns of the Brazilian people, Boal and his actors experimented with the Stanislavski-based realism that dominated Brazil's theatres at the time, eventually moving toward an eclectic style of performance later systemized in the "Joker System" (*Oppressed* 159-172). The combination of realism, stylized movement, exaggerated character portrayals, and an interest in local politics and daily life, systematized in the Joker system, inform the building blocks of TO as a whole.

The Arena Theatre company used the Joker System to make classic European dramas more relevant for their Brazilian audiences. Ruth Laurion Bowman notes that the Joker System "is a flexible formula for adapting and staging extant texts, as well as for developing new ones" that aim to "destabilize the singular reality of the world as it is represented in the dramatic text (and as it is conventionally reproduced in performance) in order to explore alternate ways of representing and interpreting that world" (139). Understanding realism as overly focused on the singularities of experience and stylization (such as musical theatre or dance) as overly focused on the universal, Boal's Joker system aimed to "examine a reality in the process of modification" (*Oppressed* 168) using four basic techniques summarized by Bowman below:

1. an "alienated" acting style, designed to "reduce" dramatic characters to a relatively simple "social mask" and to distance the actors from characters;
2. continuous role reversal or switching, such that characters are played by several actors, and actors play several characters;
3. stylistic and genre eclecticism from scene to scene (or even within a single scene), with little or no regard for a unified production style or tone;
4. the use of music as an independent "discourse" to complement, supplement, subvert, or contradict the meanings expressed in the text and performance. (140)

The first three techniques are employed in various ways throughout what scholars understand to be TO.

Another key part of the Joker System is the figure of "The Joker" him- or herself, who also shows up in many of the other TO methods. Objecting to the opacity of meaning often resulting in traditional theatre, where analysis of a play or perspective is left up to the director to decide and the audience to interpret, Boal proposes a Joker figure who serves as a sort of master of ceremonies who moves between the audience and the action of a play, offering explanations as needed (*Oppressed* 175). In various TO techniques, games, and more elaborate improvisations, the Joker's role is "to mediate between actors and spectators and in all ways possible assist the latter's participation within the dramatic action" (Babbage 143). Boal's son Adrian Jackson notes that the Joker's role "is not that of facilitator, the joker is (in Boal-speak) a 'difficultator', undermining easy judgments, reinforcing our grasp of the complexity of a situation, but not letting that complexity get in the way of action" (*Rainbow* xix). One might deploy the Joker role in a huge variety of ways, so long as the Joker helps an audience to understand themselves as social actors.

In Boal's philosophical treatise on the theatre, *Theatre of the Oppressed*, Boal outlines his "experiments with the People's Theatre of Peru" in the 1970s (120-1). Conscripted to teach workshops as part of a national literacy campaign, Boal began to imagine theatre – particularly

visual image theatre – as a language, useful to people who spoke diverse local languages and dialects and to artists and non-artists alike (*Oppressed* 120-121). In his capacity as director of the People's Theatre, Boal developed a “plan for transforming a spectator into an actor” (*Oppressed* 126), which he proceeded to identify as “spect-actors.” The dual role blurs the lines between actor and audience and challenges participants to use theatre as a rehearsal for reality, what Boal sees as theatre's rightful position in a society (*Games* xxiv).

In *Theatre of the Oppressed*, Boal explains how his notion of spect-actors acts as an extension of Bertolt Brecht's epic theatre. Boal claims that theatre was once a communal practice, but that a major shift occurred in Greece that separated the actors from the audience, leaving the audience passive and removed from the action (*Oppressed* 120). According to Boal, this “repressive use of theatre” became increasingly individualistic, separating performers from audience; and fatalistic, separating social actors from the ability to influence social structures, until Bertolt Brecht's intervention of Epic Theatre (*Oppressed* 37). Brecht relied on what he termed *Verfremdungseffekt*, or Alienation Effect, to provoke a critical awareness in his audiences, “as opposed to a subjective attitude of becoming completely ‘entangled’ in what is going on” (Brecht 78). In Brecht's Epic Theatre, “[h]uman behavior is shown as alterable; man himself as dependent on certain political and economic factors and at the same time as capable of altering them” (Brecht 86). Brecht aimed to make a theatre that would, by means of the Alienation Effect, create a critically-minded spectator, an amateur expert, capable of disentangling herself from the particulars of the scene and take a broader, historical view of the social conditions that make any given moment possible. Rather than aiming for audiences to be “swept away” by the beauty or drama of a theatrical

moment, Brecht hoped his theatre would encourage audience members to ask questions of and formulate critical opinions about the social realities depicted on stage.

Rather than have actors create a performance that would invite critical spectatorship like Brecht, Boal sought to dismantle the separation between actors and spectators entirely. This radical reformation of the relationship between performer and audience is one of the key ways in which Boal insists that theatre, which has been used as a tool of social control, can be turned into a revolutionary “weapon” (*Oppressed* 122). To this end, Boal writes, “First, the barrier between actors and spectator is destroyed: all must act, all must be protagonists in the necessary transformations of society” (*Oppressed* x). By creating, manipulating, discussing, and performing scenes from their everyday experience, spect-actors engage in a “rehearsal for the revolution,” or a “rehearsal for real life.” As Boal writes, “The *poetics of the oppressed* (sic) is essentially the poetics of liberation: the spectator no longer delegates power to the characters either to think or act in his place. The spectator frees himself; he thinks and acts for himself!” (*Oppressed* 155).

Boal proposes a four-part system for creating and engaging a spect-actor:

First stage: *Knowing the body*: (sic) a series of exercises by which one gets to know one’s body, its limitations and possibilities, its social distortions and possibilities of rehabilitation;

Second stage: *Making the body expressive*: (sic) a series of games by which one begins to express one’s self through the body, abandoning other, more common and habitual forms of expression.

Third stage: *The theatre as language*: (sic) one begins to practice theatre as a language that is living and present, not as a finished product displaying images from the past...

Fourth stage: *The theatre as discourse*: (sic) simple forms in which the spectator-actor creates “spectacles” according to his need to discuss certain themes or rehearse certain actions. (*Oppressed* 126)

In Stage One, participants are invited to connect to their corporeal bodies through a series of “disjunctive” exercises designed to defamiliarize and reacquaint the body with its owner.

According to Boal, participants can begin to recognize how their everyday experiences of work, class, and other social roles result in a particular “mask” of behavior’ (*Oppressed* 127). Boal’s book *Games for Actors and Non-Actors* offers a multitude of exercises and games aimed at reacquainting the actor with their body in Stage One. The games are divided into five categories, designed to “reharmonize” the body from its “battle with the world” by asking actors to carefully tune into their sensory experience (*Games* 49). Boal notes that in our everyday lives, “we start to feel very little of what we touch, to listen to very little of what we heard and to see very little of what we look at” (*Games* 49). Hence, the games are divided into segments which address our physical atrophies and hypertrophies: Feeling What We Touch, Listening to What We Hear, Dynamising Several Senses, Seeing What We Look At, and Memory of the Senses (*Games* 149-174). The warm-up phase of Stage One prepares the group to move on to Stage Two, where participants are challenged to move, often in groups, in creative and unfamiliar ways, to, as Boal writes, “express themselves with their bodies,” something most folks are quite unused to doing (*Oppressed* 130).

Drawing on the expressive possibilities explored in Stage Two, in State Three, the spect-actors are tasked to use their bodies to signify specific internal states or external events via the more elaborate improvisations of IT and Forum Theatre. IT requires a facilitator or “Joker” who guides participants through a series of body-based non-verbal improvisations in which they create static and moving images of thoughts or experiences around a theme. Afterwards, the participants discuss what the images evoked for them and, often, proceed to explore more imagery based on those evocations. Techniques begin with participants either positioning their own bodies or “sculpting” each other’s bodies in response to a prompt generated by either the group itself or the Joker (*Games* 176-181). To sculpt images, some participants act as malleable “clay” while other

participants act as “sculptors,” physically manipulating their fellow participants’ bodies into different positions.

Key techniques include: Image of a Word, in which all participants display or sculpt one particular word, such as, in my opening example, “racism;” Images of Transition, in which participants sculpt a “real” image of oppression, an “ideal” solution, and then images that explore how we might transit from one to the other; Multiple Images of Oppression, in which participants make not one but several images of the oppression under consideration; Multiple Image of Happiness, in which participants move in and out of fluctuating images of happiness (i.e., the apparent absence of oppression), learning that “happiness” alters as different members enter and exit the image; and Image of the Group, in which everyone in the group must place themselves in a depiction of their own group dynamics. Another category of IT techniques are the Games of Mask and Ritual (*Games* 148-159; 193-201), in which participants are asked to show, emphasize, and alter norms of social behavior as evidenced by everyday social codes and masks, or habitual ways of presenting oneself.

Each of the aforementioned IT games has three essential parts: (1) the non-verbal creation of an image out of participant bodies (their own or each others’) in response to a prompt offered by the Joker or by the participants; (2) *dynamisations* of those images, which are variations on the image that require participants to isolate, exaggerate, or alter their own or each other’s static poses by layering movements, sounds, or words; and (3) a group discussion of the images that invites various interpretations of the images and dynamisations. While Boal emphasizes the importance of letting images speak for themselves in the initial stages, in this final stage, participants are encouraged to discuss the images without feeling the need to “interpret” them, that is, to assign

them a definitive meaning. Boal identifies this process as “the multiple mirror of the gaze of others” because it shows imagery and language to be polyvalent in meanings and effect (*Games* 175). Boal insists that none of the techniques are obligatory and that any of the dynamisations can be applied to any exercise, and also that the whole system is flexible according to the group’s desires (*Games* 176). Thus IT is a straightforward and highly accessible set of techniques, and yet the practice contains within it the “totality of the [Theatre of the Oppressed] process,” Boal claims (*Games* 176).

Boal calls the more popular and well-researched Forum Theatre is “an artistic and intellectual game played between actor and spect-actors” (*Games* 243). First, a show with a clear protagonist is performed like a conventional play, then spect-actors are asked if they “agree with the solutions advanced by the protagonist” (*Games* 243). Next, the players run the play again, instructing anyone in the audience to “take the protagonist’s place whenever he or she is making a mistake, in order to try to bring about a better solution” (*Games* 243). When a spect-actor member calls “STOP!” the actors must freeze where they are and the new protagonist must try to change the outcome of the play using new solutions. The actors intensify their roles as oppressors to show the protagonist how hard it is to change reality (*Games* 244). Another spectator can try to change the fate of the protagonist at any point. A Joker figure acts as the leader of the game, explaining how everything works and facilitating play among the spect-actors.

Stage Four includes some of Boal’s specific formulations of political theatre. In *The Aesthetics of the Oppressed*, Boal’s son Adrian Jackson renders the TO system as a whole in a diagram called “The Tree of Theatre of the Oppressed.” Jackson explains that on the trunk of the tree near the earth are the exercises designed to “de-mechanise the body and the mind,” a process

essential to advancing any further in the system or up the trunk (3). IT and Forum Theatre are located higher on the trunk, followed by five distinct branches or discursive forms, namely, Newspaper Theatre, Direct Action, Legislative Theatre, Invisible Theatre, and Rainbow of Desire (*Aesthetics* 4). Although Bowman has made a case for the Joker System as an important technique in its own right, Jackson does not include it as a distinct branch of TO, yet elements of the Joker System run throughout the five branches of the tree.

In my work, I call on IT as delineated in *Theatre of the Oppressed* and expanded on in *Games for Actors and Non-actors*. Although Boal addresses and adds to IT in *The Rainbow of Desire*, written several years after his exile to Europe and North America, I do not address these IT modifications in my study, preferring to focus on exercises designed to explore shared social conditions. Boal explains that TO has three branches: the educational, the social, and the therapeutic, and that the Rainbow of Desire techniques are “focused on the therapeutic branch” (*Rainbow* 15). Leigh Anne Howard further explains that Rainbow of Desire “deals with less concrete oppressors and provides a more personalized (vs. social) change by addressing emotional or psychological oppressors” (218). I sometimes include a handful of image-making exercises from Stage One listed in *Games* that Boal designates as part of the practice of “Seeing What We Look At” and “Image Games” (129-161). I find these exercises particularly useful for warming up actors’ bodies and practicing how to make expressive images in preparation for IT work. My project, then, focuses on the trunk of the “Tree of the Theatre of the Oppressed” rather than on its branches.

IMAGE THEATRE SCHOLARSHIP

Often given short shrift by TO scholars, IT is typically framed as a precursor to Forum Theatre activities. Below, Lib Spry provides a commonplace perspective on and placement of IT:

I would begin my introductory workshops with theatre games, move on to teaching body sculpting as a technique, and then, using the images the participants sculpted, ask people to identify moments of oppression in their lives. From there the group would identify the collective problems they wished to tackle so we could move into forum theatre work. (172)

Those few who do treat IT in greater detail tend to emphasize its ability to create bonds by instigating conversation among a given group of participants and to uphold its function as a liberatory tool. Berenice Fisher's work with TO and feminism is emblematic of the powerful sense of group identification the method can engender by enabling the sharing of stories and feelings. She describes her work with IT as effective because "[t]he lack of pressure to verbalize afforded participants a certain measure of safety to express deep feelings they could not or did not wish to explain. Sharing these feelings through group sculptures helped build trust among participants" (Fisher 192-3). Similarly, Diane Conrad's article "In Search of the Radical in Performance" documents the author's use of a modified version of IT using photographs with incarcerated teenagers. Like Fischer, Conrad appreciates the success of IT as a way to generate confessional communication. She describes the teens' responses to IT as "seriously considered and sincere, involv[ing] the need for giving and receiving respect, good decision making and care for self in terms of eating well, working out, and not smoking weed" (Conrad 134). She also documents the teens' success in using the technique to imagine a better future for themselves and, for several participants, to acknowledge and discuss their bisexuality.

Brent Blair and August Fletcher focus exclusively on IT, locating its value in restoring citizenship by enabling therapeutic conversation. They characterize the strength of IT as mitigating a "reluctance to communicate." They apply the technique in a community of Rwandans whose social norms discourage expressions of feeling sorry for oneself leave them stifled into an uncomfortable silence about the recent Tutsi genocide (Blair 23). While Blair and Fletcher modify

IT in order to avoid the binaries of “oppressed” and “oppressor,” their application opens the floodgate for much needed communication. For the authors, IT offers “a means for personal, nonverbal expression to develop into a communal discussion” (Blair 25).

In contrast, in “A Silent Revolution: ‘Image Theatre’ as a System of Decolonization,” J. Adam Perry describes the system as a profound transformational technique. Understanding decolonization as both “the political transformation of nation-states” and “the articulation and transformation of dominant ideologies at the level of communities and individual bodies,” Perry claims IT is a “holistic process which employs a counter-discursive, embodied language” with the power to develop “counter-hegemonic stories, identities, and subjectivities” among its participants (103). Perry’s primary example is of four young people who use IT to focus on a schoolyard fight. The antagonist describes her aggressive pose as “evil happy,” after which the author-Joker encourages her to re-term the pose, in “adult speak,” as “powerful” (Perry 110). Perry affirms Boal’s understanding that IT works to expose a society’s rituals and social codes by mining everyday actions and gestures as a microcosmic of the social.

Ross Louis’s article about using Boal’s methods as critical language pedagogy in the English as a Second Language (ESL) classroom focuses on how the move from image-making to social problem-solving occurs. Louis describes his work using Boal-based tactics with adult ESL learners as an effort to frame “their educational project as an attempt to negotiate their own performatively constituted identities within the larger frame of a performatively constituted language” (339). Rather than simply learn English in rote and apolitical ways, Louis uses TO techniques “for mobilizing the English language in an attempt to critique and resolve students’ communication-based obstacles” (340). In ESL workshops, his students use IT and Forum theatre to reflect on

their reasons for learning English in the first place and to practice overcoming difficult and often culturally loaded everyday moments of English language usage. Through this work, students reclaim their purposes as second language learners (for facilitating immigration, for example, or for reconnecting with family) rather than give up their agency to the academic ritual of passing a standardized test. I see this project as most similar to mine because IT is used to channel personal experiences through an unfamiliar language with a concrete result in mind.

In sum, IT is rarely the main subject of concern in TO scholarship. Most often, scholars include a brief description of an IT exercise as a preparatory technique for Boal's other, more popular forms. While some scholars have documented how IT encourages the sharing of personal stories and feelings among participants, fewer document how it can be used to activate critical consciousness and thinking. My study affirms the position of those who laud its use as an analytical technique and considers the unique possibilities for its use in the setting of social justice themed performance composition.

CRITICISMS OF BOAL'S IMAGE THEATRE

In this section, I focus on scholarly critiques of Boal's image-based techniques. It is important to note that most of the critiques of Boal's methods come from devoted practitioners who appreciate and engage a given method, and who often propose ways to modify it to suit the needs of their communities.

Fisher dismisses IT altogether as a way to engage spect-actors in critical conversation, writing of her preference for other Boal-based forms when political analysis is the goal: "Although image theatre could be used to sculpt ideal situations, the non-verbal nature of this technique did not leave room for political discussion" (193). I would answer that while IT is *not* an exclusively

non-verbal technique, there certainly is no guarantee participants will engage in analytical discussion regarding the images a group creates. Still, I think IT provides a useful scaffold (a grounded “trunk”) for such conversations, and my interest is in how to operationalize this possibility.

Leigh Anne Howard is one practitioner who appreciates the flexibility in Boal’s techniques, but worries that Boal “provides educators with little guidance about how to extend his games toward more comprehensive techniques that can produce change” (229). She proceeds to assert that one difficulty in TO “involves pushing spect-actors to transcend the personal to concentrate on the social” (229).

One of the most cutting critiques of Boal’s method comes from theatre scholars David Davis and Carmel O’Sullivan, who question what they posit as not only Boal’s move away from a revolutionary politics grounded in Marxism, but a failure to ground his method in Marxist theory in the first place (288). Although the authors do not indicate if they have tested IT themselves, they show particular disdain for the IT exercise in which participants sculpt “real” and “ideal” images of their inner or social worlds. Framing Boal’s directive to experiment with the reality of the images as a practice of idealism and a far cry from dialectical materialism, they write:

This is the method of phenomenology and the social construction of reality, where what the participants agree the world is, becomes the world—not as a materialist method which would take as its reference point the objective reality...Boal’s *Theatre of the Oppressed* is built in practice on such an idealist model, ignoring the materialist philosophy that ‘People’s ideas are intimately linked to the sort of lives they are able to live.’ (290-291)

This critique oversimplifies Boal’s methods by zeroing in on the particular dynamisation of sculpting real and ideal images and overlooking: (a) that sculpting the images is “intimately linked” to the participants’ experience of their material reality; (b) that the more difficult sculpting of

“transitional” imagery is the main point of the game; and (c) that images are meant as platforms for discussion, not ends in themselves.

In many ways the gulf between theory and practice emerges from how IT is applied rather than how it was originally conceived by Boal. Participants in IT are aware that they are not creating the real world in the workshop; rather, they are creating symbolic representations that grow directly from their experiences of living in their corporeal bodies, which are, arguably, the single most important material site of oppression. The process of discussing the images (the multiple mirror gaze of others) is meant to expose those concrete realities in explicit, and not idealistic, ways. Participants are left with a more complete picture of their realities thanks to their fellow spect-actors’ images and the way their fellow spect-actors see their own images. What was once symbolic—i.e. “This is what I think racism looks like”—turns into several concrete stories from different people’s lives. Even when working in the “ideal” mode of IT, participants are not necessarily being idealistic. This technique can reveal to participants that not everyone sees a solution to a social problem in the same way—which, again, points to and helps participants understand that our highly individual, material experiences shape how we each operate in and understand the social world.

Within IT, the multiple mirror gaze of others—not the images themselves—is the locus of the “rehearsal for real life.” Davis and O’Sullivan’s critique seems to remove the possibility of conversation and art being tools for social change and ignore the ways in which the situated aesthetic of IT enables particular kinds of explicitly material body-to-body conversations. However, their critique points to the necessity for those of us invested in IT and TO work to articulate the

aesthetic and theoretical components of our practice more concretely and to discover repeatable ways to initiate and document the productive conversations that result from IT work.

AIMS AND METHODS

My goal in the following chapters is not to offer a method of art-making that is foolproof, but instead to offer a set of tools that help a director, critical studies teacher, or performance pedagogue to meet the needs of their constituency while maintaining a balance between artistry, analysis, and activism. The qualitative approach I take here enables thick description of the messy, dynamic process of art-making and how IT helped me to recognize and address the contingent nature of three distinct groups within that pursuit. As a teacher and performer who has and continues to negotiate the personal, historical, and institutional valences of social oppression and movements toward justice, I write to bear witness to the ways performance practice can serve as an instrument of such negotiations in educational and theatrical settings. I address the difficulties of moving a group from modes of personal narrative to the poetics and rhetoric of social critique and social change in the performance composition process. In the three performance projects considered in this dissertation, I describe ways we might honor and deploy *both* local-embodied *and* critical-analytical articulations. My hope is that this description will demystify the process for anyone who might want to apply a version of the method in their own community in a way that would best suit that community.

This project responds to scholarly conversations about the difficulty of moving from the personal to the political in TO work, especially in North American settings. While some practitioners have begun to address this problem, Leigh Anne Howard writes, “Few practitioners have made things any easier by publishing their experiences as a guide for emulating. But without

guidance or ongoing, shared scholarship, interactive theatre can result in discouragement and confusion” (229). She notes further that many practitioners simply follow Boal’s method “like a template” instead of modifying the technique to address their particular constituencies. She warns that by “refraining from rewriting the techniques, practitioners neglect to take the work forward in the tradition Boal established” (Howard 218).

In this study, I offer several detailed accounts of how I “rewrote” IT for use as an initial staging device while navigating the concerns of three distinct communities. In many cases, I include step-by-step descriptions of techniques, conversations, and outcomes as a way to reconcile the need for more comprehensive examples of how Boal’s method can function as tool for social change. The extended documentation of my work that follows runs along the lines of those practitioner-scholars who aim to modify TO in order to incite their particular spect-actors to critical dialogue and collaborative problem-solving in light of their experiences within historical and ideological contexts (Shutzman 139).

Although I recommend IT as a particularly efficacious tool for those who wish to engage performance composition as an artistic, analytical, and activist practice, I do not mean to suggest that it is a magic bullet. I document my experiments staging performances using IT as a way to analyze when and how it worked best and also when and how it did not work as well. This project examines three experiments in which I utilize IT, not only as a form of participatory theatre as Boal imagined it, but also as a staging device. The overarching findings of the three case studies detailed in subsequent chapters are twofold and interconnected: 1) that image theatre is a powerful tool for directors and/or performance studies artist-pedagogues who are concerned with balancing

artistry, analysis, and activism in the performance composition process, and (2) that image theatre can best meet its goal of social change with the addition of an explicit aesthetic goal.

The qualitative, descriptive style I use in this document emerges from scholarly calls for thorough accounts of Boal-based work as well as an inclination to honor the full contributions of the casts with whom I worked. Participant observation, where researchers “directly immerse themselves in [the] settings [of their research]” (Lindlof 44), is the most evident way of describing this aspect of my project. In every case, I participated in the techniques I directed alongside students or cast, and in two cases, I acted in as well as directed the shows I describe. Often, I use the “we” form to describe decision-making and embodied processes. Speaking of her investment in writing in ways that honor the everyday struggle for social justice rather than privilege theoretical insights alone, critical race scholar D. T. Baszile writes,

I have to chart...a course that values the discursivity of theory and practice...a course that embraces subjectivity, rather than feigns objectivity; a course that values the voices of those marginalized; a course that values a commitment to the community, to the collective we. (203)

It is in this spirit of valuing praxis, subjectivity, and community that I aspire to record my own and my students' experiences in a straightforward, descriptive manner. I believe, along with bell hooks that “any theory that cannot be shared in everyday conversation cannot be used to educate the public” and is therefore not liberating (“Theory” 5). Therefore, I generally write in a style meant to be accessible to educators who might want to take up similar practical experiments.

I acknowledge here and with those with whom I work my own positionality as a white, middle-class, educated woman from the South with particular interests in performance and how it might create critical communities that practice deliberation on social justice issues. D. Soyini Madison identifies such an acknowledgement of positionality in critical work as an important

move toward “resisting the trap of presenting an interpretation as though it has no ‘self,’ as though it is not accountable for its consequences and effects” (8). Rather than formal interviews, IT is used to generate stories and associations. As participants comment on their images, on the process itself, and on the show, we enter into a process of what Conquergood calls “coperformative witnessing” (“Interventions” 373).

In each project I consider, students or cast members knew I would write about the project later, and I periodically requested reflective writings from them to that end. Often, I noted on a laptop what participants said during rehearsals. I also wrote or recorded extensive field notes immediately following key rehearsals. I sometimes draw on the scripts of the shows we created. Even though most participants took pride in the work we did, some did not want their names mentioned, so I have changed their names and in some cases offered composite identities. Some moments were particularly painful for some participants, and I did not include them. Many participants deserve more credit than I am able to provide in my effort to protect those who wish to remain anonymous.

CHAPTER SUMMARIES

In the second chapter, I examine each of Conquergood’s three goals for the field of performance studies, artistry, analysis, and activism, and clarify how I refer to them in this project. I discuss how IT activates the body and mind of participants within these frameworks and begin to build the case for using IT to initiate a performance composition process.

The third chapter details one of my first forays into IT as a high school drama teacher conscripted to create a school-wide Black History program celebration in a racially tense public school environment. I knew students were reluctant to express their thoughts in mixed-race groups

either because they did not have the right words to navigate conversations about race, or because they lacked the confidence to enter into potentially divisive conversations. I describe ways IT helped me to honor the participants' desire for activist performance work while also engaging analysis and artistry in our efforts to create a school-wide Black History Month performance event.

In the fourth chapter, I describe a multi-week IT-based workshop that addressed environmental justice with about seventy high school and middle school students at a public school in Plaquemine, Louisiana. This workshop eventually led to a full-length theatrical show with a sixteen-person cast in the HopKins Black Box theatre and the New Orleans Fringe Fest. In both the workshop and show, I used Boal's IT techniques to help defamiliarize the everyday, habitual actions that contribute to the proliferation of single-use plastics (purchasing, consuming, discarding). In this case, the component of artistry was foremost, yet I show how IT served this goal while at the same time balancing it with analytical and activism components.

In the fifth chapter, I detail the process of collaboratively composing the theatrical show *Racy*, which ran in the HopKins Black Box theatre in April 2015. IT helped both my cast and our community to have critical conversations about race relations as we connected to each other and to key ideas from Critical Race Theory. Since the kinesthetic material we generated in IT workshops ignited a furious curiosity about race politics and theory among the participants, we turned to Critical Race Theory for intellectual clarification and artistic guidance. In this case, the cast's primary interest was analytical, and I describe how IT served this interest. I also discuss the challenges we faced balancing artistry with analysis and activism in our highly analytical performance.

In a concluding chapter, I focus on how using IT as a technique for initiating a composition process provides an especially ethical approach to performance composition. I argue that moving bodily toward critically understanding reality with a collective is efficacious pedagogically. I venture that the fundamental component of kinesthetic engagement in IT is particularly valuable for addressing social justice topics since it demands we enter into visceral encounters between subject and self, subject and discourse, and subject and other bodies. Lastly, I discuss how my deployment of IT as a director informed my pedagogy in performance studies, communication studies, and other more traditional classrooms, noting several implications and advantages.

CHAPTER 2

ARTISTRY, ANALYSIS, AND ACTIVISM IN IMAGE THEATRE

OVERVIEW

In his touchstone essay, “Performance Studies: Interventions and Radical Research,” Dwight Conquergood argues for the need to collapse the traditional divide between scholar/theorists and artist/practitioners, insisting on a “revitaliz[ing] the connections between artistic accomplishment, analysis, and articulations with communities; between practical knowledge (knowing how), prepositional knowledge (knowing that), and political savvy (knowing who, when, and where)” (“Interventions” 377). Conquergood distinguishes traditional academic ways of knowing that operate outside of the object of inquiry and largely in textual form from the promise of performance studies, a field “grounded in active, intimate, hands-on participation and personal connection” (“Interventions” 146). He recommends an “experiential and engaged model of inquiry” that conceptualizes performance “along three crisscrossing lines of activity and analysis” (376-8). Conquergood offers several different alliterative configurations of these three areas: imagination/inquiry/intervention; artistry/analysis/activism; and creativity/critique/citizenship (376). He calls for performance studies researchers to “forge a unique and unifying mission around the triangulation of these three pivot points” (“Interventions” 376).

Conquergood offers yet another variation on the three key aims of performance studies in the following list:

1. *Accomplishment* – the making of art and remaking of culture; creativity; embodiment; artistic process and form; knowledge that comes from doing, participatory understanding, practical consciousness, performing as a way of knowing.
2. *Analysis* – the interpretation of art and culture; critical reflection; thinking about, through, and with performance; performance as a lens that illuminates the constructed creative, contingent, collaborative dimensions of human communication; knowledge that

comes from contemplation and comparison; concentrated attention and contextualization as a way of knowing.

3. *Articulation* – activism, outreach, connection to community; applications and interventions; action research; projects that reach outside the academy and are rooted in an ethic of reciprocity and exchange; knowledge that is tested by practice within a community; social commitment, collaboration, and contribution/intervention as a way of knowing: praxis. (“Interventions” 377; italics in the original).

For this study, I prefer the terms “artistry, analysis, and activism,” but I think it is important to note that Conquergood intentionally names and renames these categories to echo their fluid, contested, and contingent nature. As we focus on one or another of these elements, they pull away from each other, while at the same time constituting each other. In my years of practice as a director and teacher of communication and performance studies, I have used Image Theatre (IT) as an initial method for satisfying the complex mission Conquergood describes as the essence of performance studies. In this chapter, I offer an overview of my understanding and application of how Boal’s IT techniques operationalize the three As of performance studies (“Interventions” 376).

ARTISTRY

For Conquergood, artistry, falls into the broad pivot point of “Accomplishment – the making of art and remaking of culture; creativity; embodiment; artistic process and form; ... performing as a way of knowing” (“Interventions” 377). In my practice, I understand the term artistry to refer to the isolated use of the corporeal body as a mechanism of expression in IT, and to refer to the product participants work toward and create in the composition process. In both phases, I appreciate IT’s polyvalent and minimalist aesthetic as well as its cultivation of and reliance on the human body.

Since, in general, TO is a participatory form emphasizing kinesthetic engagement, collaboration, and accessibility, it is not generally treated by scholars as an artistic form per se. In a notable exception, Kanta Kochhar-Lindgren compares Boal's image-based activities, in particular, to the fragmented, polyvalent aesthetic of Surrealism by analyzing it in relation to the famous seventeenth century parlor game "exquisite corpse." Kochhar-Lindgren sees both types of games as a combination of ethnography and surrealism that call on "processes of leaving the familiar body and approaching the heterogeneous body" (218). The aim of the games is to help participants "better understand how social change can take place at the micro-level through the gestures of multiple moving bodies" (Kochhar-Lindgren 218). She evokes Gregory Ulmer's notion of a dramatic orientation toward knowledge that highlights visual, spatial, and kinesthetic dynamics of bodies to frame TO and Surrealist work as a "situational aesthetic" (Kochhar-Lindgren 218). The aesthetic she refers to employs a collaborative process of making a pastiche of "living tissue of disparate bits and bodies in which politics and aesthetics are built into the process" (Kochhar-Lindgren 219). Like the Surrealists, Kochhar-Lindgren argues, Boal intends to subvert any academic or special training as a precursor to art-making.

To achieve that democratic end, Boal eliminates scripted dialogue, props, and other accouterment of the theatre, and replaces them with the simplicity of bodies making images in a format designed to work with and around language barriers, discomfort, or, lack of theatrical or analytical training. For me, IT's defining aesthetic is a sort of kinesthetic minimalism, relying on the shapes and movement of the human body or a group of bodies in space. Leigh Anne Howard argues that the minimalism or simplicity of TO techniques operates "to level dominating hierarchies in theatre and establish theatre as a tool of liberation" (231). The simplified aesthetic,

like the performer-audience relationship, is also a political act. The aesthetic "rules" of doing Boal-based work are, accordingly, part and parcel to the politics of engagement they are meant to engender.

Following Boal's techniques, my mission is to engage participants' corporeal body in several phases aimed at enriching their expressivity: warm-ups are designed to ignite playfulness, kinesthetic experimentation, presence, and interpersonal connection. Exercises, games, and more extensive improvisations are designed to activate the body as a tool for investigating ideas, feelings, and external (social) roles. Rehearsals are aimed at precision, polish, and repetition. I affirm Boal's insistence on the importance of defamiliarization in the pursuit of "better awareness of the body and its mechanism, its atrophies and hypertrophies, its capacities for recuperation, restructuring, reharmonisation" (*Games* 48). I also take up Boal's games in many cases to "deal with the expressivity of the body as emitter and receiver of messages" (*Games* 48). I seek out methods that encourage cast members to enjoy, test, and push, their bodies while also attempting to "meet their own desires while helping others' meet theirs" (Bowman).

In terms of creating a final artistic product for the stage, my personal sense of artistry has been influenced by the stylized theatre of Vsevolod Meyerhold, Bertolt Brecht, and Boal. Like them, I am interested in using stylization to draw out the social atmosphere of a given moment rather than zero in on personal experience in the way that realistic acting styles may. I have found IT to be uniquely suited for working with what Brecht calls social gestures or social masks to expose not only an individual struggle with power, but the apparatus of power (Brecht 86). The "Rituals and Masks" IT techniques help us, as Boal writes, "to study the character of the

oppressed/oppressor relationship, that most common of patterns, from a distance, in a social context” (*Games* 201).

Along these same lines, I have a particular interest in using IT to reach toward Meyerhold’s notion of “plastic movement” or “plasticity,” whereby “means of movement and poses [the performer] must present a picture which enables the spectator not only to hear the spoken dialogue but to penetrate through to the inner dialogue” (270). Meyerhold’s famous biomechanical system of actor training aimed to make a mask of the whole body, employing it as a means of presentation, interpretation, inspiration. A mask demands that the body speak, that all elements of character—voice, face, text, subtext—are made visible. Stylization pushes the externalization required of mask yet further, extending and exaggerating character and gesture with the aim of making what is psychologically hidden apparent and what is socially covert, overt (Moody 866). For Meyerhold, movement was “the means of pointing theatrically to what is truly significant in the action, the sub-text, the unspoken dialogue of emotions, what Chekhov had called ‘the quintessence of life’” (Braun 33).

Like Meyerhold’s stylized theatre, part of the power of IT is its ability to externalize internal phenomenon and realities. It thus reveals character and action as something put-on rather than something inevitable. Edward Braun references Lunacharsky’s understanding of the external technique: “the study of character in its full social milieu in order to create stage portraits of hyperbolic dimensions which would reveal socio-political causes and effects in all their complexity” (190). These “hyperbolic dimensions” are key: when we take a character or social norm to its logical-fantastical extension, when we view it in its most exaggerated proportions, we can better

hold it to the light. I find such a stylized aesthetic, and therefore IT, especially apt for creating performances that address social justice themes.

As a cast moves toward the polishing phase of the composition process, I become increasingly invested in precision of blocking and movement, an inclination no doubt informed by my training as a youth in dance and gymnastics, as well as in oral interpretation. While I do invest energy in crafting a solid and repeatable framework within which performers may work, I work toward trusting performers to follow their instincts and to take risks even in the moment of public performance. My sense is that using IT as a starting point for creating a show is an especially useful way to build the mutual trust and ownership of a product necessary for the kind of artistic confidence I want to cultivate in a cast. The kinesthetic expressivity and responsiveness IT cultivates in a group of performers translate well to a strong artistic team.

IT work produces a series of static or dynamic poses for group consideration: only the absolute bare bones of an artistic project. An ensemble might use IT exercises merely as a place to generate important themes, as a way to write or analyze scenes in a play, or as the essential building blocks of a dance show. The artistic possibilities are limitless. While an interest in stylization informs my own aesthetic, and while IT may arguably lend itself to such an aesthetic, I do not intend to proscribe any particular aesthetic for practitioners. Instead, I argue that since IT is infinitely flexible when it comes to generating raw material, attention to the artistic aspect of a performance is as important as attention to analysis and activism, as each of these are best fulfilled in relation to the others. Indeed, aside from a general leaning toward stylization, the shows I describe in this document vary significantly in their aesthetic presentation.

ANALYSIS

Boal clarifies the way IT functions as an analytical tool: “the aim is not to see how *one oppressed person* sees *one oppressor*, but to find out how *the oppressed* see *the oppressors* ... we would be forced to call it, contrarily, social expressionism, or ‘objective expressionism’” (Games 181; emphasis in original). The “objectivity” in this “expressionism” is a result of realizing how one’s personal experience reflects the social-historical experiences we all share. The “oppressed” as a class is brought into awareness of itself as such through performance. Because it requires participants to create images that represent or counter their own cultural learning and to display the usually invisible discourses embedded in everyday interactions, IT generates precisely the kind of artifacts (at once abstract and concrete) needed for analyzing shared experiences.

Indeed, practitioners of TO report incredible results among their participants, from classrooms that become “cohesive, positive, communal units” (Vettraino 71), to actors who emerge with “insight into the possibilities for change, for personal or societal intervention” (Linds and Goulet 165). TO scholars point to Boal’s conception of the body as a site where ideological discourses play out on the material plane to explain the efficacy of TO and its various techniques. If “the material life of the body is expressive of oppression because the body itself, its actions and gestures, are determined by ideological relations” (Auslander 129), then IT is a method where those relations are made visible and unpacked. Overwhelmingly, TO scholar-practitioners hold that by accessing the gut-level, corporeal language of the body, Boal’s methods operate to make the unconscious conscious.

In “Metaxis: Dancing (in) the In-between,” critical pedagogue Warren Linds portrays IT as an aesthetic form where a story or issue is “crystallized” via its emergence into the realm of doing

and seeing. Linds writes, “As an aesthetic landscape emerges, doubling for the social, the theatre practice becomes a form of text—a weave of potential meanings—that extends beyond the workshop space” (119). One might observe that the multiple body poses that are made in IT are like a landscape, stretched as they often are along a horizontal plane so that the group can see the whole picture or, as is Linds’s point, the social world that they made. That is, the “aesthetic landscape” doubles as a social landscape in the way that it expresses shared yet also polyvalent responses. Shari Popen also emphasizes IT’s ability to both reflect and reframe real life. She articulates TO as an aesthetic space characterized by a seeming plasticity of time and space, a “telemicroscopic” lens able to zoom in and out of the personal and social levels of experience (126). Popen writes, “In TO, the space of theatre is brought out of abstraction and reclaimed as an embodiment of human imagination” (125).

Indeed, Boal claims that the essence of theatre “is the capacity possessed by human beings—and not by animals—to observe themselves in action. Humans are capable of seeing themselves in the act of seeing, of thinking their emotions, of being moved by their thoughts” (*Games* 12). The ultimate aim of IT is to engage a group of spect-actors to call on their own bodies to make images that describe their experiences, and then to discuss those images as artifacts of their experiences. The point is to “see” what other people see, with the aim of better seeing ourselves as part of a collective. As Adrian Jackson writes,

The polysemy of images is a vital factor in this work; a group of individuals will perceive a whole range of different, but often intriguingly related, meanings within a single image, often seeing things which the sculptors have no idea were there. (*Games* xxiii)

Since, as Boal claims, human beings “can see themselves here and imagine themselves there; ...can see themselves today and imagine themselves tomorrow” (*Games 5*), by manipulating these images, participants engage in a rehearsal for real life.

In general, I agree with the understanding of “seeing oneself” as the essential mechanism of IT, but I have found in both my study of others’ experiences and my own practice that it is easy to make assumptions about what participants take away from the rich kinesthetic techniques Boal offers. I have found that IT generates a desire on the part of participants for further analysis of and articulation about the personal experiences that come to the fore in workshops. And also that the desire for intellectual clarity can become especially acute in participants when they are in the process of working toward a final aesthetic performance rather than engaging in IT as an end in and of itself.

In the various productions I consider in this dissertation, participants have often called for more specific vocabularies to describe their social realities after having mined their personal experiences using the kinesthetic strategies of IT. Often, a desire for verbal clarification arises when a group struggles toward putting a final product on stage. As we move from IT workshops to the staging process, groups start to ask questions like: “What exactly are we trying to say here? What do we want our audience to take away from this scene? What is the point?” As in the opening example in the introduction, cast members craved politically correct, expressive language to describe their embodied discoveries about their own whiteness, Blackness, or racism, but were at a loss in many cases to translate those discoveries into words. As a direct outgrowth of the intuitive, image-based material generated in the image-making process, IT has helped me and my casts turn toward Conquergood’s *analysis* component of performance studies, “the interpretation

of art and culture; critical reflection; ... knowledge that comes from contemplation and comparison; concentrated attention and contextualization as a way of knowing (“Interventions” 377).

Although I feel it is important to allow critical conversations to arise organically from the IT process, equally important is developing a facilitation style that helps participants to acknowledge how their feelings speak to broader conversations regarding power and powerlessness, particularly if the point of the performance process is social change. I look to D. Soyini Madison’s clarification of critical work to delineate what I mean when I recommend turning toward analysis.

Madison writes that critical work,

seeks to articulate and identify forces and ambiguities that operate beneath appearances; to guide judgments and evaluations emanating from our discontent; to direct our attentions to the critical expressions within different interpretive communities relative to their unique symbol systems, customs, and codes; to demystify the ubiquity and magnitude of power; to provide insight and inspire acts of justice; and to name and analyze what is intuitively felt. (13)

IT is uniquely suited to this sort of work because of the way it invites participants to externalize what they intuitively feel. IT lays the groundwork for the demystification process Madison calls for. I have found that following through the steps of naming and analyzing what participants intuitively feel about communities, codes, acts of justice, and other power relationships balances the personal artistic impulse in IT with broader social analysis.

Of course, I would not be surprised to find that many Boal practitioners take the step of naming and analyzing the images which emerge from IT in more or less intentional ways in their classroom and community work, but detailed explanations of how this “analysis” step happens is not apparent in the body of literature about this work. My interest is to articulate how I have

worked to operationalize the kinesthetic, intuitive aspects of IT in ways that explicitly serve social justice goals within the context of staging a show.

My understanding of analysis is informed by my interest in the cultural studies dictum that when studying a particular group or social situation, one should not presume in advance about what is most interesting to investigate nor even what the best questions are. Stuart Hall describes a central goal of cultural studies “to enable people to understand what [was] going on, and especially to provide ways of thinking, strategies for survival, and resources for resistance” (qtd. in Grossberg 2). Whether a group is working with minimal guidelines (such as particular theme) or within many constraints (such as a script), making sure to carefully wade through a process of critical analysis, can shape aesthetic presentation in terms of content and style. IT requires no script, no narrative arch, no verbal acting ability whatsoever, and yet in the matter of one or two exercises, it can serve as a launching pad into complex conversation and personal insight, whether in a staging or classroom setting.

Ample reflection is part of the intentional process of analysis during the performance composition phase for myself and my collaborators. As Deborah Mutnick writes, “To achieve praxis, action must emanate from reflection, which in turn produces a new set of reflections, leading to the next action, and so on, in an ongoing dialectic” (42). In this process, reflection took the form of quick reflective writing immediately after workshops, conversation within workshops immediately following IT techniques, and post-project meetings where the specific goal is to offer what we learned and what we might change in our process next time. Often, I lead participants on what Stuart Hall calls a “detour through theory” (283) in which we reflect on our experiences with the voice of critical cultural experts, yet always return to our own cultural truths.

Recognizing that culture is a slippery subject and that theory “can never be a self-sufficient moment,” Hall calls attention to the “displacement ... *always* implied in the concept of culture” (283-4). He reminds us that there will always be an ineffable quality of experience that structures, such as theory, cannot articulate (Hall 284). Recognizing this displacement, I approach reflective analysis with the cast delicately: first, by engaging kinesthetic forms that do not require formal discussion, then, by encouraging conversation based out of that kinesthetic work, and lastly, by introducing additional readings only when the participants have directly called for them.

ACTIVISM

Conquergood places activism within the broad aim of “[a]rticulation ... outreach; connection to community; ... knowledge that is tested by practice within a community; social commitment; collaboration, and contribution/intervention as a way of knowing” (“Interventions” 377). I use “activism” to refer to the term’s broadest associations in Conquergood’s various triads: as social commitment, outreach, connection to community, and collaborative contributions, rather than an action designed to alter the laws or configuration of a city, town, or state. I do not preclude this sort of collaborative work from a stricter definition of activism, but my work with IT has convinced me that participation in a body politic must start somewhere tangible, and investment in a community at large often starts small. A classroom, a group of concerned students meeting after school, a gymnasium packed with an entire school’s population certainly count as communities; cities or townships are simply networks of such smaller communities.

Boal’s TO system was conceived as activist theatre. Boal’s method was in large part a reaction to what he understood as the repressive role of catharsis in Aristotelean drama. Boal (along with Brecht) challenged Aristotelean poetics (as a form of literary discourse based in

conflict, struggle, and catharsis) on the grounds that we need art that challenges or changes the world rather than entrenches the status quo by cultivating empathy with a protagonist's struggle only to resolve it by the end of the play (Bell 207). Boal characterizes Aristotle's tragic form as coercive, "its basic task: the purgation of all antisocial elements" (*Oppressed* 46). He argues that when we identify with a protagonist we "delegate power to the dramatic character so that the latter may act and think for [us]" (*Oppressed* 122). As the character moves through the classic dramatic arc of the story from crisis to catharsis in Aristotle's "purgative system," spectators internalize a false sense that their problems too are solved (*Oppressed* 47). Instead, Boal's spect-actors do the thinking and acting for themselves, and Boal's games and exercises are designed to leave the spect-actor with a desire for social change due in large part to the acute *lack* of resolution his method is designed to engender.

Boal's conception of activist theatre was also heavily influenced by the insights of fellow Brazilian Paulo Freire's educational philosophy outlined in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. Boal's theatre operationalizes Freire's notion of *conscientao*, a process of developing an understanding of the relationship between particular social circumstances and the historical constructs which create those circumstances (Freire 85-90). This kind of "reflection upon situationality" lies at the very heart of TO, and is a form of activism in its own right. Boal also follows Freire's insistence that rather than operating under the assumption that members of a given group have a deficit that must be fixed by an expert, educators must instead mobilize the wealth of experiential knowledge already extant in any given group to solve their own problems (Freire 52-67). IT work echoes the commitment to honoring the embodied and colloquial knowledges of those present.

In this project, there are two key sites of civic or activist investment: the ensemble of performers themselves and the larger community they attempt to affect with their artistic product. In terms of the ensemble, group identification, trust, and mutual respect are all part of activism, and IT offers a unique method for igniting these attributes of a strong ensemble in groups of like and unlike participants. Beyond an investment in forging powerful bonds among cast members, however, IT's ability to instigate critical analytical reflection shapes the activist possibilities of the final artistic product. I am invested in creating an "activist theatre," which Boal defines as "a theatre that attempts to influence reality and not merely reflect it" (168). He writes,

I believe that all truly revolutionary theatrical groups should transfer to the people the means of production in the theatre so that the people themselves may utilize them. The theatre is a weapon, and it is the people who should wield it" (*Oppressed* 122).

Beginning the rehearsal process with IT has helped me to create a sense of collective ownership and investment in our project that is both a form of activism in its own right as well as a necessary orientation for a group that is interested in creating a performance which calls for social change.

As a group works toward crafting a specific performance for a specific audience beyond themselves, the impetus to analyze their intuitive expressions in the context of their own social reality builds. Work with the kind of abstract images Boal's IT calls forth paired with specific aesthetic aims leads participants expeditiously to the kind of activist theatre Boal imagines. Taking the initial step of creating self-generated concrete images makes participants more willing to engage in critical analysis of their own social realities, which in turn generates the will to change those realities.

OVERVIEW OF THE THREE As IN THE CASE STUDIES

While I argue for IT as a composition process that balances artistry, analysis, and activism in productive ways, I do not intend to claim that the process operates the same in all projects or with the same degree of success. Each of the projects I describe reveals the nature of IT to respond to the contingencies of various groups of participants; and each highlights a different relationship between Conquergood's three As of performance studies. For the students I worked with on the Black History Month performance, changing school culture was of foremost concern in their process. My description of this project in Chapter Three shows how we used IT to create a performance that extended the activist orientation of our classroom composition process to the school at large, though sometimes at the expense of a polished aesthetic. In *Sacred Waste*, which I discuss in Chapter Four, I used IT to build an activist orientation with my cast despite having a pre-established artistic vision of the show. In this project, the initial IT composition process occurred with a different group of people than those who performed the show. I discuss the task of engaging the cast's analytical concept of the topic despite these challenges. In Chapter Five, I detail the making of *Racy*, whose cast became increasingly intrigued by critical cultural explanations for the discoveries they made during the IT process. This investment in analysis along with an intensely personal bond among the cast resulted in a stylized aesthetic that, we later found, left some audience members "out of the loop." While we hoped to address this anticipated problem by including a discussion segment as part of the show, I found that the audience's ability to access the performance was strained in a way it was not in other projects.

In the following chapters, I unpack the noted case studies, highlighting how IT can be used to compose performances for public audiences that link Boal's sense of activism with cultural

analysis in pursuit of an artistic goal while honoring participant knowledge. In sum, I have found that adding an aesthetic goal to Boal's participant practice charges the facilitator and the players with the responsibility of elucidating the content of their subjective image work in ways that activate and balance artistry, analysis, and activism in the performance process.

CHAPTER 3

BLACK HISTORY MONTH “FOR REAL”

OVERVIEW

When Black History Month rolled around in 2011 at the Math, Science and Arts Academy (hereafter MSA), a public high school in Plaquemine, Louisiana where I taught theater classes, no one wanted to be in charge of the requisite assembly. The principal asked many teachers, both Black and white, but all felt too busy, and perhaps too jaded, to take on the traditional school program. The job eventually landed with a seasoned junior English teacher who later recruited me (a second-year teacher at the time)—both white women. Of course, Black History is U.S. History, so while we felt self-conscious of our whiteness as leaders of this particular event, it seemed best that the show went on despite this glaring irony. Most of my theatre students who volunteered to be a part of the project were Black, and I was especially committed to approaching the project in a facilitative rather than proscriptive way, generating the kind of collective activism Image Theatre (IT) enables. In this case, Conquergood’s activism element of performance studies work was the foremost goal in our use of IT, and this element was activated through a kinesthetic engagement with the concept of race that resulted in a rethinking of the typical Black History Month Program aesthetic.

In acknowledgement of historical racial tensions in the area, the school’s leaders worked to maintain a 50:50 Black-to-white student ratio that reflected the school’s local community. However, they had limited access to resources designed to target racial consciousness-raising. As in many secondary schools in the South, students tended to self-segregate along racial lines. While the school generally maintained a peaceful atmosphere, racial tension became apparent in classrooms when the topic of race surfaced and this was especially the case during Black History

Month when white students indicated a lack of interest in Black History and Black students defended its importance. It became clear in the first meeting I had with students interested in participating in the project that Black students wanted this year's assembly to be "good" – specifically, something different than, as one junior called it, "the- Rosa-Parks-play-then-Maya-Angelo-poem-then-I-Have-a-Dream routine." After hearing this, I suspected that IT could help us to create something both artistically innovative as well as grounded in local politics.

I organize my discussion of this project chronologically in four key parts: I describe each cast's initial IT workshops, pivotal moments from our composition process, highlights from our artistic production, and lastly our reflections in light of audience reception. I show how IT provided a platform from which to negotiate the relationships among artistry, analysis, and activism as they pertained to the needs of this particular community. In the case of the Black History Month production, the group's need for understanding, analyzing, displaying, and developing an activist orientation came to the fore due to the nature of the social environment of the school. I describe how IT helped to meet the need for a highly participatory creative process and product. The artistic product we finally landed on featured many performers across different social groups at the school, real world scenes, and extensive audience involvement echoed students' concern to change their social realities in light of their broad social critique. Student performers took issue with Black History Month programs that in past years had been artistically precise but also, as they saw it, fairly innocuous. IT helped us to craft a performance that both enacted the spirit of Black History Month and critiqued previous Black History Month performances.

Throughout I explain how IT helped my students move away from what critical race scholar D. T. Baszile calls "dysconscious" rhetoric around race that masks divisions behind false harmony. Baszile's words aptly described the place from which we started our process: "faced with teachers/students who still cling to 'color-blind' ideologies, who are mostly unwilling to explore their own hang-ups...The classroom conversation...is the kind that disguises itself in benign 'can't-we-all-just-get-along' rhetoric" (203). Despite clear divisions among Black and white students (and often teachers too), race was generally not addressed as an important category as a matter of social protocol. On the rare occasions when the topic of race did come up, or when I brought up topics that pertained to race, students became uncomfortable, and a few—who were usually white—invariably proclaimed that they “didn’t see race,” or that they “didn’t judge people based on race,” or that “it’s who you are inside that counts.” For the most part, Black students remained silent during this sort of talk. IT was a crucial tool in helping us move past this sort of “dysconsciousness” to discuss difficult topics with more candor and clarity. The “multiple mirror of the gaze of others” afforded a chance for Black students to tell stories that made the fiction that race was irrelevant impossible to maintain. Critical race scholar-educator Cheryl E. Matias writes in "Who you callin' white," that by not learning counter-narratives complete with raced history, Whites [sic] cultivate a modus operandi of not seeing race; and, since race is out of mind, it becomes also out of sight." (295). IT provided a way to put race back into play in both spheres.

The reader may well have already noticed one of my own stylistic takeaways from my engagement in these critical conversations: one of the questions that came up for students near the end of the process of creating a Black History Museum was when and whether to capitalize “Black” and/or “white” as racial markers in their formal reflections to their experience of the project. I

asked students to do some research on this question and several came back with a variety of responses as a result of their internet searches. My students were surprised to find that this was a rather politically charged question; they each had to make up their own minds about it. Some chose to capitalize both Black and White. Others, like me, chose to capitalize Black but not white, ultimately convinced by Toure's argument from *Whose Afraid of Post-Blackness: What it Means to Be Black Now*:

I believe that "Black" constitutes a group, an ethnicity equivalent to African-American, Negro, or, in terms of a sense of ethnic cohesion, Irish, Polish, or Chinese. I don't believe that whiteness merits the same treatment. Most American whites think of themselves as Italian-American or Jewish or otherwise relating to other past connections that Blacks cannot make because of the familial and national disruptions of slavery. So to me, because Black speaks to an unknown familial/national past it deserves capitalization. (ix)

I treat the terms accordingly in my work both out of respect to this particular argument and as a marker of how even the most basic creative choices are embedded with cultural critique and mark changing citizenships.

In this case study, I note how IT served as an appropriate intervention in a racially tense environment with the aim of addressing problems as well as garnering participation from both white and Black students. IT allowed students to express their critiques of the school environment when it came to the upcoming Black History Month program and that the initial nonverbal orientation of IT made both Black and white students more comfortable sharing their concerns within a community of more or less implicated peers. Critical language helped students clarify their experiences as citizens of the school in the process of moving toward staging their original kinesthetic explorations. Since our IT techniques were not only part of an insular workshop but also led to a public performance, students felt a need to explain their political positions and were thus especially receptive to considering ideas from cultural critics. Though we faced several

aesthetic challenges stylizing sensitive material in a bustling high school gym, the production we created took the form of a “living museum” in light of our critical conversations and served as a significant form of activism for the school community. In this chapter, I reflect on the way the particular tensions among artistry, analysis, and activism affected the cast’s takeaway and the audience’s reception of the presentation—one of the key measures of the civic viability of our work.

WORKSHOPS

As the theatre teacher at the high school, I was tasked with “getting some skits together” for the Black History Month program in about one month—the end of February. I made an announcement seeking performers and held a meeting in my classroom during lunch. Ten Black students showed up for the first meeting. I started by making a joke about my questionable qualifications as an organizer of this event due to my whiteness and suggested we spend the first meeting brainstorming ideas to come up with a vision for the program. Several attendees at the first meeting spoke of their own and their peers’ general boredom with “same old” Black History events, and of many of their white peers’ disdainful ignorance of Black History’s value in the first place. As one junior said at that first meeting, “I hear a lot of the white kids at school saying stuff like, why is it always Black History? What about Jewish History? Or Indian History? I think there are a lot of reasons and I think the *why* should be a big part of this.”

From the start I felt I needed to engage a directorial practice that could help me and the group to address the highly localized concerns of my students. I wanted to facilitate student creation of “skits” that would describe their own experiences of and in relation to Black History rather than staging a play or other already extant text. I wanted them to think of their own experiences as text, in the way that anthropologist Clifford Geertz conceives of texts when he

argues that “cultural forms can be treated as texts, as imaginative works built out of social materials” (449). I turned to IT as a way to encourage students to be anthropologists of their own situation in order to create a show based directly in their experiences—otherwise, I had no particular aesthetic vision in mind. In addition, I hoped IT would help me to mitigate the asymmetrical power relations of a director who sets out to craft an aesthetic object from a workshop participant’s experience—especially when that participant’s experience is quite unlike that of her own.

I introduced IT to the group as a way to think through some of their concerns. From the very first Image of a Word exercise, students’ anxieties about reception of the Black History Month program from the school community at large were palpable. I noticed as well how important the nonverbal, highly creative part of IT—making the images—was for students who did not typically share perceptions of racial politics in the school in classroom settings. I asked one student to make an image out of the bodies present of “a typical Black History Month program” following the model of Boal’s “Image of a word: illustrating a subject using other people’s bodies” technique (*Games* 181). Immediately, Janae grabbed me and put me in a chair, in an exaggeratedly bored posture. She placed Ty’s body leaning forward toward a speaker’s body who stood before us with mouth wide open and arms upraised dramatically. Several of the other students present seemed nervous about this image—they wanted to know if this was this too “real” for me? I assured them it was not, and asked if anyone wanted to make any changes. One spect-actor turned my head away from the speaker altogether. Another spect-actor indicated that Ty should keep his body in the same leaning-toward-speaker position, but furrow his brow and move his eyes over to the left to

look at me. Several more adjustments were made, eliciting laughs and grunts and nods from the group.

Since students found it awkward to touch each other and especially to touch me (as a teacher-body), I offered the option to sculpt without touching the body—a technique Boal suggests that involves keeping at least six inches away while motioning how the sculpted body should move. Whatever it takes to make students comfortable, and sometimes because it makes students uncomfortable, I insist on using my own body in these workshops: I demonstrate what it means to “exaggerate a pose,” I commit with full energy to warm-up exercises, I jump in and out of the Joker role so I can put myself into an IT image. I think a willingness to engage bodily in exercises alongside participants is critical for the work. As bell hooks notes, for engaged pedagogy to be meaningful, teachers must to literally “offer something of ourselves to students” in the classroom (*Teaching* 130). She casts the typical teacher-body standing in front of the classroom to lecture as part of the impetus to erase the body in the academy. Such an erasure, she argues, “encourages us to think that we are listening to neutral, objective facts, facts that are not particular to who is sharing the information. We are invited to teach information as though it does not emerge from bodies” (*Teaching* 139). IT, like other forms of explicitly embodied pedagogy, works subtly as well as overtly to insist on the subjectivity of knowledge.

The initial image-building moment of IT practice invites participants to follow a purely creative impulse, as spect-actors experiment in order to become more versed in the form. My job in this moment of the practice is to encourage such a fluid approach. Invariably, students hesitate to make initial images and adjustments. I repeatedly reminded the group that “anything goes,” that “you don’t have to know why you are choosing this image right now, just trust your instinct,”

that “just do it now and we’ll think about it later.” The impulse to critique, to analyze, must be stayed a while if the images are to open up exciting possibilities for consideration. In this first step, Boal advises participants to think of image as a language and not try to “apprehend its precise meaning” (*Games* 175). Still, I find that even as participants are directed to “trust their gut” to allow for creative choices in this step, the use of bodies as text serves to remind all present right from the start of the relevance of the body in this particular work—an unsettling reminder due in part to its unfamiliarity.

When no one wanted to make further adjustments to an image, I asked the group to describe what they saw in the statue. As always, I tried at first to request descriptions on the level of the physical bodies and their positions, and slowly invite interpretation from as many participants as possible, so as to activate Boal’s “multiple mirror gaze of the other” – the phenomenon he understands as the very centerpiece of TO. The critical faculty comes online in this step, no matter how literal or how interpretive responders become. In this case, descriptions ran:

“The white audience is not even looking at the presentation and the Black audience is trying to listen but is mostly just mad that she’s not bothering about it.”

“But [Ty] is just faking listening—he is leaning all forward and everything, but he isn’t even really listening because his eyes are over there.”

“Yeah, he doesn’t care what the guy is saying either but he has to act like he does.”

“No, he does care, that’s why he’s trying to lean in and listen, but he’s just tired of this white teacher’s attitude—no offense, Ms. McD—I don’t mean you I mean the statue-teacher.”

“I think he cares, but he’s distracted because she is over-doing it on the boredom, all slumped over and rolling her eyes.”

“The guy on stage talking is over-doing it, he’s exaggerating it all too much and we’ve heard it all before already like I have a dream, we know, we know.”

“That’s because he’s trying to get these people to listen to him and they are too busy with their own drama!”

“It’s like, they have to be there, the program is boring, you’re supposed to care because you’re Black and you’re mad the white kids don’t think it matters, but if it’s going to be the same old thing—and you know he’s doing ‘I have a dream’ – it’s embarrassing is what it is.”

This crucial descriptive step plants the seeds of critique as the group gets to know where everyone stands by sharing and hearing what each sees in the open field of the image. As Boal writes, “On stage, we continue to see the world as we have always seen it, but now we also see it as others see it: we see ourselves as we see ourselves, and we see ourselves as we are seen (*Rainbow* 26). Sometimes, the group spirals into conversation for the rest of the session; sometimes, the image does not particularly strike the participants and it is time to move on. In this case, the group came to two key conclusions discussed in a wrap-up after our short meeting: (1) Putting an image of a the typical MSA student at a Black History Month program and audience on stage as a part of the Black History Month program would be really interesting (or “meta” as one student described it), and (2) white students needed to be in on this sort of workshop, both with the aim of recruiting white bodies for performances like this one and of getting white students at the school thinking about the “why” of Black History Month. As one junior said, “We need to get white students on board, we need to recognize how awkward [the program] usually is, and we need to

make sure it has something to say to the anti-Black-History types." Perhaps because the group found the image of Black History Month difficult to create at first, perhaps because it was fun to move around and to manipulate and look at each other's bodies, perhaps because it is rare to get a chance to slow down and listen to each other's thoughts, in just one session over a lunch period, a sense of activism began to form around this project. The group was beginning to get a feel for where each member stood on the issue at hand, to identify their key concerns, and perhaps most importantly, to understand where they all stood in relationship to each other. Their sense of identification began moving beyond their immediate sphere and toward an activist orientation.

This is not to say that these conversations were always easy. In several classes, for instance, white students expressed their shared sense of boredom with the "same old thing," and even asked the question the core group anticipated from their white peers: why *Black History Month*? Black students reported feeling obligated to feign interest due to white students' obvious and sometimes hostilely performed boredom. White students countered by arguing that the program was often thrown together at the last minute and therefore simply was not very good. Black students (sometimes reluctantly) agreed with this, and complained that this was part of the problem: putting a bare minimum amount of effort into such proceedings created a very uncomfortable situation for them and signaled further that Black History is not important; in essence, they argued that sloppy artistry lead to limited activism. Several Black students maintained that if white students paid attention, they would enjoy it, and that it was painful for them to see white students acting dismissive of the program year after year; they argued, in contrast, that a certain commitment to activism was a pre-condition for artistic accomplishment.

I tried out the Image of a Word technique the core group of performers came up with in my six regular classes of different grade and ability levels, about eighty students total. I added Boal's third dynamisations of this exercise in hopes of bringing us further into conversation. After striking the static image, Boal suggests that each participant begins "some movement or action of which the static image contained a hint; in other words, if the subject is eating, what will he do afterwards? If he is walking, where will he go afterwards?" (*Games* 185). When we tried this out, students in every one of my classes got up, left the "assembly" and moved off into same-race groups. Some students argued that they were simply talking with their friends, but often this became a pivotal place for analysis as we began to see that the Black History Month program was functioning as a racially divisive event at the school rather than garnering any sort of mutual appreciation. I offered the classes excerpts from Philomena Essed's critical insights in "Reflections on 'Everyday Racism'" and these were instrumental in helping us to see that "The concept of everyday racism qualifies how ordinary situations become racist situations. The study and analysis of these situations can be disturbing to the comfortable worlds of racial privilege" (461). Notably, we came to this discovery when we turned our gaze away from what was happening explicitly "on stage" in the Black History Month program and towards the everyday situations surrounding the artistic act. Our critique, in turn, moved from describing previous artistic presentations as "boring" and towards the ordinary fact of segregation ingrained in our everyday lives.

COMPOSITION

While the work was not always comfortable, it was often exciting. So much so that, with encouragement from the initial group of student performers, I decided to scrap my plans for a unit on duets and implement instead a unit on Black History Month primarily driven by IT.

Throughout the process, the core group continued to meet at lunch and discuss interesting work from my classes we would utilize for the upcoming program. We spent about twelve class days in IT workshops, working through variations of many of Boal's image techniques in *Games for Actors and NonActors*. The next twelve days were spent polishing the raw material various groups came up with for either their final grade on the unit or for a chance to perform in the Black History Month program. Frequently, I asked students to suggest prompts for situations or dynamisations they wanted to try out. The IT work produced dozens of images we later used as the basis for a variety of scenes in the final production. These images were often simple, straightforward, and keenly compelling for the students who created them. They led us to many important conversations that helped to rebuild the community of my classroom with greater awareness of racial tensions and historical truths. As we worked, students called for critical clarification about concepts that repeatedly came up. In particular, we were compelled to address concepts of ethnocentrism and systemic racism, especially as they applied to education practices. Students were open to these theoretical perspectives because they could see (often literally, thanks to IT) how they related to their immediate community.

For example, a striking scene emerged from one of the initial sculptures of "A Typical Black History Month at MSA." One student proposed a variation of this technique that I went on to repeat in all the other classes as well, suggesting that we make an image of "A typical History class at MSA." In the first version of the image, the figures' positions were reversed along racial lines, with white students appearing interested and Black students appearing bored. Several students objected to this depiction and made adjustments to show an overall boredom instead. Yet another student sculpted bodies into more varying degree of interest in the speaker, regardless

of racial identities. Gabe, the student who proposed this variation, was frustrated, saying that what he wanted to get to was what the teacher was teaching.

To address this, I asked Gabe to take the place of the teacher and called on Boal's first and second dynamisations for this Image of a Word exercise, in which a repetitive movement and a phrase are added to the image (*Games* 184). I told each student to think of a repetitive movement and one line their character (not necessarily themselves) would repeat. When I pointed at them, they were to do the motion and say the line. Standing at the front of the room with an imaginary piece of chalk, Gabe said, "And then this white guy...and then this white guy...and then this white guy," pointing over and over at an imaginary Blackboard. White students sighed in boredom while Black students yawned or rolled their eyes while saying versions of "Anyone notice it's all white guys?" or even "Hmm...I wonder who wrote this textbook?"

Eventually, I opened the floor to the observers for discussion: what did they see? What did this image suggest is going on in a typical History class at MSA and how does that relate to the first prompt about Black History Month? Many students made the mental leap, in some cases insisting and in others admitting that History is often "white" history, though we do not refer to it as such. The next class day, I offered the term "eurocentrism" as a way to frame the ongoing student discussion, and passed out copies of a short passage from Critical Race theorist Dolores Delgado Bernal. Bernal paraphrases a definition of eurocentrism from *The Council of Interracial Books for Children* as "(a) the belief that the perspective of the Euro-Americans is the norm and (b) the practice of ignoring and/or delegitimizing the experiences, motivations, aspirations, and view of people of color" (111). She goes on to argue that eurocentricity "shapes the practices of researchers, educators, and the school curriculum while continuing to adversely influence the

educational experiences of Chicanas/Chicanos and other students of color” (Bernal 111). These insights landed with my students because they had explored them using IT before reading about them in the text.

I strongly suspect that this classroom full of young students who live in rural, highly segregated areas of the Louisiana bayou country and do not typically use theoretical terms such as “eurocentrism” in daily conversation could not have achieved level of theoretical fluency in our ensuing dialogues about their own encounters with eurocentricity had IT not functioned as a scaffold toward that end. They took ownership over the new-to-them term as we discussed the eurocentricity typical of US history textbooks and even standardized exams, as well as the eurocentricity imbedded in the (white) perspective that Black History Month is “not about me.” Some students of both racial groups seemed uncomfortable during this discussion; some white students remained rigidly quiet. Our analysis moved the group from the playful identification founded in the kinesthetic creativity of moving bodies around in space into a tenser, activist atmosphere of racial consciousness. Rather than operating exclusively in the artistic mode of the exercises where they could at least pretend not to see or care about race, students now had to share and/or listen to critical conversations about how their racial identities shaped one another’s educational experiences.

Armed with both the term and a personal image of eurocentricity, several groups decided to pursue this thread for their final skits. Staging the scene using Boal’s second dynamisation of the Image of a Word variation, six students stood in a static pose indicative of a classroom, then one after the other, turned toward the audience to reveal what they were saying or thinking within the tableau before going back to the static pose. The process of composing the scene for the stage

pushed students into more detailed conversations about the eurocentricity of their education. Since each student got to say only one line, these lines were especially weighted and much debated. The entire class of spect-actors were called on to help finalize these lines—a process that took several class sessions. To arrive at the lines for this scene, I encouraged students to prod each other for how they felt in various classrooms while learning particular material and why or whether it mattered if people in textbooks looked like you or not. The scene started with a white male student playing a teacher and repeating the phrase “And then this white guy” several times before fading out to the next line, and so on. One white student’s line read, “This guy looks just like my dad! Maybe I’ll be a general when I grow up!” One Black student’s line read, “History class—where *every* month is White History Month!” The final speaker was a Black student reading the definition of eurocentrism from Bernal’s essay.

I made some adjustments to their scene in the way of making each body visible and exaggerating each body position so that an audience could see all the performers well and “read” the image quickly and easily, but this rather sophisticated treatment of the subject came directly from student workshops with IT. The evolution of this performance-making experience highlighted IT’s ability to ignite Conquergood’s three As. Participants accessed and manipulated their own experiences as artistic material, opened up a wider lens of cultural critique by listening to and performing what each other noticed about the world, and in so doing forged a clearer sense of citizenship—not necessarily a more comfortable one—in the act of making a performance that spoke to those discoveries. That sense of citizenship, in turn, allowed for the creation of an activist theatre, a collaborative work strategically designed to challenge and change the norms of the school community.

To move from critique of the current state of social relationships to imagining a more ideal world, I subsequently guided students through Boal's "Image of Transition" (*Games* 185) technique with the "Typical Black History Month at MSA." This activity produced a guiding compositional choice for the program. After spect-actors create the first image, the "real model of oppression," as Boal calls it, they then create an ideal model, "in which the oppression will have been eliminated and everyone in the model will have come to a plausible equilibrium" (*Games* 185). In the ideal model, audiences were visibly engaged: leaning forward, hands on chins, smiling. The performers went from standing up on a stage appearing to hold forth to more interesting poses, sometimes strange and sometimes simply more animated or specific than a "speaker" position. I asked students to move back and forth and to describe what they saw.

In one class, a student stated that the performer changed from Rosa Parks to Angela Davis. When pressed about how she saw this, she explained that the speaker moved from a seated position to a standing position, and that she "just made up Angela Davis because I'm doing a report on her for another class and that would be cool to hear about instead of the story we already know." We discussed the fact that though these stories were certainly important, repeating them in similar ways in the Black History Month program implied that these were the only figures in Black History worth mentioning—which was certainly not the case. We agreed to do a bit of research and focus on figures who were not usually centered at the school assembly.

The next dynamisation of this technique, in which performers attempt to show how they arrive at the ideal image one step at a time, proved interesting as well. While my twenty or so middle school students found this especially challenging and needed significant prompting from me, some high school students made moves the group found fruitful. Pairs of Black and white

students turned increasingly toward each other rather than away from each other, in some cases shaking hands or simply making eye contact. Groups observed that breaking down these steps revealed that it “takes effort to connect to people you don’t normally hang out with.” Other students performed “doing research” to morph themselves from a “stock” Black History figure to a less-well-known figure. One young white woman did a sort of mechanical magic trick around her head, explaining that she was “making myself remember that I should listen because even if I think history is boring sometimes, it’s also important because it still affects us.”

One notion that had come up a lot throughout the image-making process was the assertion of white students who insisted that they were not racist. Thinking of this along with Ty’s early concern about addressing the “why” of Black History, I felt this juncture was an important one for me as the Joker—the “difficultator”—and the exercise shaped my lesson plans over the next several days. In this particular class, I pointed out that “Destiny said it takes effort to hang out with people you don’t usually hang out with and Lacey said history still affects us. Are these connected?” Students floundered a bit, though some offered that you mostly hang out with people your family knows. “Let’s make an image of the city,” I proposed. A volunteer sculpted their home city out of seven student bodies. After a round of adjustments and descriptions they offered up an image of the town they described as, for the most part, divided along racial lines. Our discussion around this image got “stuck” at the level of “you live where your friends live.” Wanting to move students further into critical understanding of how history was affecting us here, on the next class day, I pointed my classes to an article on the systematic housing discrimination faced by Black families in the U.S. since the end of slavery (“How We Got Here”). I explained that this was part of what is meant by “systemic racism.”

I asked them to get back into their image of the city after we read the article and for volunteers to add anything they learned from this article to this image. In several classes, images showed Black bodies “corralled” into certain spaces by white bodies while white students were shown getting “help” or “support” by other white bodies. This technique exemplifies the way IT can assist in a critical democratic learning process rooted first in student experience, and only later enriched with expert knowledge. I proposed that we include a scene like this in the Black History Month Program, and we worked on clarifying the image with the help of the article for the rest of the week, but finally scrapped the idea because we had other scenes that worked better for the production we landed on. Still, this technique informed many conversations and artistic decisions later, especially when they pertained to systemic racism, ways we might participate in a racist system without necessarily being racist, and how it manifests in our local communities.

PRODUCTION

At some point along the way, the core group of student leaders decided to make the program a “living museum,” where audience would wander through to see various exhibits from the English, Art, and Theatre classes who contributed artifacts. Students led this move on the grounds that we needed to shake things up significantly from previous years. A passive, seated audience was the first thing to go. We roped off the gym into a winding pattern of booths and exhibit spaces. Students were called out of classes all day, two classes at a time, to walk through the museum we set up. Art students made interactive quilts recalling slave quilts, digital media students made videos, theater students froze in tableaux ready to perform original poems, skits, and interactive theater pieces. Many of my theatre students participated as group or solo performers, both Black and white. My colleague’s English students served as tour guides leading

groups of ten to fifteen through the living museum, stopping to watch skits or to initiate discussion about certain live or inanimate artifacts. Our aim was largely to ignite reflection about race politics in the school in relation to Black History, rather than that history itself.

Indeed, the very first exhibit student audiences encountered was staged to expose the "everyday racism" of previous assemblies. The tour guide started by offering a brief introduction about what the audience would experience in the museum and the protocol for "activating" living exhibits, which was to press the orange "button" (a sticker) on one of the participants' shoulders. The first stop was a polished version of the very first frozen tableau we made, featuring five student actors beside a poster on a stand with the caption: *THE HISTORY OF BLACK HISTORY MONTH AT MSA*. In the tableau, one Black student stood at a podium with his hands raised and mouth open as if speaking before four students, two Black, two white. The white students slumped down in their chairs in positions of abject boredom: one yawned and looked at her watch and the other held an eye-roll aimed away from the speaker. The Black students sat up straight: one held his hands mid-clap, his body at attention, all the while sneaking a surreptitious glance at his watch; the other looked angrily and disparagingly at the white students. The tour guide asked the audience what they saw in this image, whether they thought it really reflected previous Black History programs, and why they thought the museum started with this tableau. Students were immediately thrust into a highly localized portrayal of their own community. They got the impression right off the bat, as Ty had insisted they should, that this was "for real."

Several theatre students chose to perform poems by Black authors, or even original works as a part of this project. These, too, were staged using IT techniques. When they were not "activated," students posed as statues in the museum; each one came up with a still image that

signified the “essence” of their poem. We used the technique “The Kinetic Image,” in which “the actor has to show all the movements the body of this character does in a play” very quickly, leaving an often symbolic impression of the whole on the audience (*Games* 202). The kinetic image was then condensed further to a still image that contained an impression of the whole. Some simply began and ended with this pose, but most students “riffed” on this image throughout, varying the size, orientation, or parts of the basic still pose before returning to it as an endpoint. I asked the poetry performers to think of their basic pose as containing a “vocabulary of movement” they might use to highlight certain elements of the content or form of their poems. One particularly effective piece was a performance of “If We Forget” by Ja Jahannes performed by five Black students. They used the repeating motif of a Black power fist coming apart and coming together, with the open hand making an impression of emptiness—sometimes grasping, other times empty as they shared the lines of the poem: “If we forget / Who will keep the dream? / Who will celebrate? / Ancient portraits in Black / Reaching back / Reaching forward to today ... / Tubman’s train / Bethune and Brooke / Gwendolyn’s book ... How far / Can we go / If we forget?” (Jahannes 63).

Many of the exhibits in our living museum called on the audience to participate in embodied, kinesthetic ways that echoed our process. This was another of the artistic decisions our group made with the intent to shift the paradigm of the standard Black History program. We wanted the student body to feel the ways in which we constantly engage history as a living force. In one of the four larger-scale scenes, actors’ bodies were staged beside a computer screen that played a video of footage put together by a digital art student featuring a mash-up of school desegregation videos from the 1950s, many of which showed white students jeering at Black students as they approached a school. This was set against a live scene of racial division in the

cafeteria in which we used the step-by-step dynamisation of the Ideal Image exercise to show the difficulty of reaching across the gulf of social division in light of the past.

RECEPTION

Audiences of the Black History Month Museum had very different experiences of the event. Early in the day, the actors were fresh and audiences lingered. The performers and organizers exalted in the thrill of a successful run. After lunch, we realized we were running out of time and would have to move groups through the museum much faster if the entire school were to see the program. Also, my theatre students were exhausted. They were so excited to get out of class all day, they had happily agreed to perform for the duration of the event. I had not thought to implement a much-needed rotating schedule of live exhibits and breaks. We were all soon to remember that despite wearing buttons, our student actors were not automatons. The living exhibits thinned out for latter audiences as I asked half of the performers to take alternating breaks. This included our first especially successful interactive tableau of “A History of Black History Month at MSA.”

Despite some difficulties, members of the school community spoke of the success of the museum for a long time. Teachers reported that their classes returned eager to discuss the exhibits in terms of Black-white relationships at the school. Performers led the way in classrooms as they continued to reflect and speak about their experiences after the day of the event. As eleventh grader Jackie Breaux wrote of the program in a formal reflection paper guided by her English teacher,

The museum got me into conversations I'd never had before about segregation in our school. I felt like it was okay to be more candid about race issues. I kept thinking about how we basically keep acting out history instead of changing it. After the museum day, I went over and sat with the same group of Black students I'd been in the cafeteria museum

scene with...but this time in the *real* cafeteria. We joked about this. I said, ‘Look, Mom! Now we CAN all just get along!’ It was funny, but even being able to joke about racial tension feels like a big step.

While the project was not inspired by George C. Wolfe’s play *The Colored Museum*, several teachers compared it to our show.

Teachers commented that the museum format was productively unsettling in its mixing of otherwise stratified bodies and its repurposing of the passive space of a school assembly into an interactive space where bodies collided, meshed, and interacted through games, art, and performance. Since groups moved through the “museum” with their homeroom classes, Black and white students often experienced the program side by side, rather than in the more typical self-segregated seating patterns we expected in other assemblies. Instead of the divisiveness usually elicited between Black and white students in MSA’s Black History Month programs, the museum became a site of collaboration for both performers and audiences. Black and white students, audience members and actors, teachers and students, became accomplices of each other in a way that we believe had a lasting impact on school culture, at least for the four months that remained of that school year.

Due to the racial stratification in the school, the stakes of this project were especially high. At MSA, the opportunity for students to “speak” to each other using the oblique route of considering images as artifacts in their own right helped to initiate a conversation that simply was not happening amongst the student body. Also, and quite importantly in this regard, the techniques are fun. Students found it fun to be spect-actors, to interact physically, to make poses, and to comment on each other’s poses. As Freire, and in turn, Boal advocates, the work is all about the participants themselves—they are not an audience, but co-performers, and since most

performers feel that their presence matters, the work takes on an excitement that would be difficult to replicate in more distancing artistic forms.

Although we began with the participant-centered approach that Boal advocates, our work did not end there. What was different in our work here from Boal's conception of IT is that rather than the process being the product, the locus of drama, we employed the process as a method for performance composition intended for a broader audience of spectators. In doing so, we had to consider the community at large, and in turn, to broaden our civic investment. As MSA students voiced, "underdoing" a performance is a performance choice that speaks volumes in its own right (that the performance or subject matter is not worth doing well), so the first obligation to the community is often an artistic one. Groups must consider how they might effectively share the discoveries that were so profound for them in the IT workshop process with their community. Knowing an audience only sees a performance once or twice, the precision and energy of a performance must be such that the audience keeps thinking about the work long after the curtain closes. I think IT has two unique advantages as a compositional method in this regard: first, it lends itself to stylization, which in turn invites audiences to project upon and to ponder the work. Second, the actors leave the performance as authorities of their creative work (as compared to an actor in a traditional play process, showcasing the decisions of the director). This latter advantage is especially powerful in a small community like a school.

However, I cannot claim that the performance universally achieved artistic excellence. In terms of the creative act, the "accomplishment," as Conquergood calls it—the Black History Month Program—had as many disheveled moments as glorious ones. It was not Broadway. Even compared to the other projects described in this dissertation, the performances as artistic objects were not as

strong. In addition to the pacing and planning problems we encountered on performance day, we were working with horrible flickering fluorescent lighting, museum pathways jerry-rigged out of upturned cafeteria tables and pieces of rope unearthed from a closet, and the poor acoustics of an enormous high school gym. Some visual exhibits from the art classrooms were much better than others. The performance pieces were well-conceived and well-rehearsed, but for many students, this was their first time reciting a poem in public or “doing a skit” on a stage outside of theatre class, and their volume, poise, and performance energy often did not rise to a high standard. Understanding artistry in relationship to critical analysis and civic activism, however, allowed us to understand moments of “failure” as an important part of an ongoing process.

These creative challenges, were, indeed, reflections of the broader civic challenges in which we were enmeshed. Certainly, we could have thrown together a more artistically polished production by using the proscenium stage and stage lighting instead of the gym floor and the fluorescents. I could have spent my energy coaching a student to give an inviting introduction, a group of middle school students to offer their Rosa Parks play, a talented performer or two to give a wonderfully nuanced rendition of “Phenomenal Woman” and “I have a Dream,” but instead we sacrificed some degree of artistic precision to critique this sort of routine played its part in entrenching. IT helped me to discover and be responsive to student voices regarding what they wanted to get out of this production for themselves and others: an activist theatre production which would work toward changing school culture. The idea to create an interactive museum instead of a more traditional performance speaks to the participatory process, and even to the particular interest in activism amongst this group given the high degree of audience involvement they employed. Even when our museum lacked polished, it spoke loudly and clearly to this

particularly community's willingness to deal with its own relationship to race and racism. The critique students wanted to level about Black History Month—that seeing it as a highly political matter with real consequences for the students involved and thus worthy of serious artistic consideration—came through to their community.

CHAPTER 4

MAKING SACRED WASTE

OVERVIEW

Dear reader, this chapter is overflowing. It is stuffed with little bits and scraps and unwieldy glops and chunks of thoughts. And pictures. I keep trying to wrangle it in, to streamline it, but like a trash bin or a landfill, it keeps exceeding its boundaries, bursting. I want to write about Sacred Waste, the substance, the process, the images, the show, the script, the workshop, the community project, the installation, the pedagogical experiment, the scrambling around the streets after a football game picking up plastic bottle tops and making them into rattling ankle bracelets, but there is not room for all of it. How can I leave out the way the HopKins Black Box green room looked piled floor to ceiling with milk jugs, Styrofoam coffee cup lids, and plastic grocery bags? The way theatre manager John LeBret, holding a straw he found under the risers, told me, “You better get every last piece of this crap cleaned up after the run” in the most serious timbre I’ve ever heard him muster. How can I leave out the moment when a busload of high school students came to the dress rehearsal and told us the show was great, but that we stank? That we needed to wear more deodorant or something because it was “totally RANK up in there.” I want to write about my gratitude for that, how no one else had had the gall to say it. I want it all to stick around, like the plastic does, for thousands of years, little pieces fluttering on the wind, on the waters, forever. So the chapter is, well, a bit much. You have been warned.

Sacred Waste was a two-tiered eco-performance project: an environmental arts workshop series for middle and high school students and a full-length theatrical production I directed at two locations in 2013. Both the workshop series and show address growing environmental hazards of single-use plastics. I have long thought that if we respect plastic's history as a fossil fuel formed

across the vastness of geologic time and its future as a substance bound to outlive us and most if not all conceivable future generations, then we might treat it with the greatest respect instead of as mere junk. Hence, the impetus to worship it as the immortal substance "sacred waste." Such worship is ironic, of course, since the use and manufacture of plastics poses grave health and environmental risks from reproductive cancers to air pollution to wildlife poisoning (Knoblauch). This project was about digging around in the dumps to explore why, despite compounding risks associated with disposable single-use items, the desire for convenience trumps public consciousness in my community, my country. As the oft-quoted archaeologist Emil Haury liked to say in his public lectures, "If you want to know what is really going on in a community, look at its garbage" (qtd. in Rathje 318). *Sacred Waste* was an artistically complex show made from ten thousand pieces of plastic trash. In this chapter, I consider the heightened artistic atmosphere that resulted from working primarily with movement and images generated by IT combined with plastic trash and how that artistry effected the analytical and activist components of this staging process.

In both the workshop and show, I used Boal's Image Theatre (IT) techniques to defamiliarize the everyday, habitual actions that contribute to the proliferation of single-use plastics (purchasing, consuming, discarding). My goal was to mobilize IT as a way to make mundane consumption and discard practices hypervisible using slowed-down, over-the-top, and sometimes symbolic images made by the bodies of participants to describe their own behaviors. As a result of our work, I began to think of the physical motions of buying single-use products, using them briefly, and casually tossing them away as what Boal calls "ritual gestures": habituated movements unique to every society, which take on a perfunctory quality through repetition, such as a military salute or taking a seat in a classroom. By uncovering and examining these ritual gestures in the

kinesthetic and artistic ways IT offers, I hoped we might uncover what Boal calls the “*visual expressions* of the oppressions to be found at the heart of a society” (Games 194).

Unlike the other projects I discuss in this study, I approached IT workshops at two different sites, with two different goals, and with a pre-determined (but not exhaustive) artistic vision as a director, including several set pieces and parts of the script that were created before the cast initially gathered. In the *Sacred Waste* project, IT served to generate a productive balance between artistry, analysis, and activism amongst various participants within the parameters of predetermined artistic vision for the show we staged and put on in the Hopkins Black Box at Louisiana State University and at the New Orleans Fringe Festival. I describe how idea of the show came to me by way of encounters with powerful artistic images, a process I hoped to echo for audiences by employing IT. I then describe the IT workshop process, conducted with secondary students in which I tried to carve out an artistic space in their school community through which to enter analytical conversations about plastic politics. Next, I review critical discoveries that arose as a result of artistic staging work with the adult cast who performed *Sacred Waste*. Most of these discoveries centered around critiques of our own cultural practices regarding the consumption of single-use items, as a result of employing the figure of the shaman as a cultural critic. Still, while we shared a significant amount of scientific research on the proliferation of single-use plastics, our reliance on the analytical mode was generally less pronounced in this show than in other projects considered in this dissertation.

The copious plastic materials we used as costume and set pieces served to extend bodily movements and exaggerate the kinesthetic images we made to describe the environmental toll of plastics and the cultural norms that elide or ignore that toll. The result was a complex visual

spectacle with the power to immerse audiences in the world of the show. The chapter ends with a description of several key scenes from the show along with audience responses and a brief reflection about the particular challenges of balancing artistry, analysis, and activism when the show is not “made from the ground up” by the cast, but instead largely pre-conceived by a director.

INSPIRATION

Sacred Waste was originally inspired by two visual encounters, one in the Seattle Art Museum and one in the Rothenburg Kriminal Museum in southern Germany: the shimmering aluminum installations by Ghanaian sculpture artist El Anatsui and a collection of 15th century shame masks, heavy iron contraptions worn as punishment for minor crimes in medieval Germany. In both cases, I was struck by the incongruence of the material and its expression: street litter turned to fine art in the case of Anatsui, and torture device with cartoonish visage in the case of the shame masks. Both shaped the basic building blocks of the show: a banal substance infused with artistry and a foolhardy mood cut with a particularly sinister edge. The sense of being “struck,” stopped, paused, by these powerful images is what led me to think of IT again as a compositional method. How might I use the stage to make images from bodies and materials that would cause the audience to stop and reflect?

Anatsui’s massive, shimmering kente cloth-inspired designs made from discarded aluminum cans made me consider what it might mean to collect and arrange vast amounts of plastic trash into a similarly striking *mise-en-scene* for the show. The artist organizes teams of people to manipulate and arrange aluminum trash collected from the street into fine art displayed in galleries around the world (Anatsui). The viewer is overwhelmed by the sheer labor that must go into twisting and folding each tiny bit of aluminum that makes up the whole. Likewise, I wanted

to gather a cast and crew who would engage materially with plastic, making the stuff hypervisible in the form of beautiful, outrageous costumes as well as exaggerated movement work describing the everyday consumer's relationship to plastic waste. I had a clear view of the artistic aspects of the performance process, and trusted IT would pave the way toward an analytical approach. Activism took the form of all that a prolonged embodied engagement with the material we critique could teach us about our responsibility to each other and the earth.

When I returned from Germany, I wanted to make a shame mask out of plastic trash generated by my own buying habits. Like those in the Rothenburg Kriminal Museum, it would have a ridiculous, comical expression: part whimsy and part despairing. What would I be able to see while looking out of a mask of my "eternal" refuse? I had to find out. I dug under the kitchen sink for the stash of plastic grocery bags. I pieced together a fringed dancing cape. I made a foolish mask out of my own plastic refuse: a sushi plate, some bottle tops. I looked in the mirror and beheld a wild-eyed figure cloaked and masked in bits of toxic detritus, eager to lead us on a journey into the underworld of waste: a plastic shaman. Wearing a milk-carton mask and a grocery bag cape, the plastic shaman would sing the songs and dance the dances of the consumer age.

The first iteration of what would later become the full-length theatrical show *Sacred Waste* materialized as a final class project in Patricia A. Suchy's course on performance and technology in the Spring of 2012. Suchy prompted us to create performances in which our own bodies were "entangled" with various technologies. I immediately thought of my own fraught entanglement with the technology of plastic. I wanted to expose the ecological toll that results from a sense of entitlement to consume and discard without regard for environmental impacts that characterizes what Paul Gilroy refers to as "overdeveloped nations" like our own (42). I wanted to highlight

Gilroy's conception of "first world" nations as being characterized by "hubristic confidence in [their] own infallibility" (43), but I wanted to avoid being pedantic. I wondered how an explicitly artistic approach could mitigate didacticism but still effectively challenge the cultural norms of my classroom community. I devised a short movement sequence by calling on IT techniques to display the tensions between convenience and waste. These movements became the building blocks of a simple dance I put together in plastic shaman regalia. Equipped with my plastic mask and a dancing cape made of grocery bags, I entreated my classmates to dress up in various plastic accouterment and to learn the "Ritual of Abundance."

I instructed the group to stand in a circle and chant "May the earth make way for sacred waste!" while taking a sip from an empty coffee cup, throwing it on the ground, and stamping on it. Still in character as the plastic shaman, I had them follow me to a local coffee shop where we performed the ritual in a flash-mob style, surprising the quiet patrons. I entreated everyone in the class to participate, saying:

Come, it is time for the ritual; you must be dressed properly in the ceremonial garb, our sacred costumes built for the ages. Know that these items have been constructed with proper ceremony: each piece placed without worry, in moments of pure un-deliberated action, decisive, fleeting, in canisters of sacred waste that dapple the lands. As you choose your costumes, work to imbue them with your life force, for these sacred items will live on into the next generation and the next and the next and the next and the next and the next and the next and the next and the next and the next and the next and the next and the next and so on, carrying your spirit and the spirit of this age proudly into the future.

After this performance, I began to envision a group of outrageously trashy gurus who, instead of being perilously thoughtless about their routine consumer practices, approached disposable plastic consumption with ecstatic relish. I wondered what might be gained by leading such a group in creating a series of dances based on their own everyday discard gestures. I wanted

to experiment with using IT to discover and ritualize these gestures. I called up the principal at a public high school where I taught theatre and creative writing for two years and pitched a three-week artist residency using dance, drama, and visual art to teach students about the ecological toll of single-use plastics. He put me in touch with a talented art teacher, Elyse Garcia, with whom I worked closely to complete the project.

WORKSHOPS

The school where Garcia works is right next door to a giant plastic plant. Indeed, many of its middle and high school students' parents work in the plastic factory. On the first day of the three-week residency, I stood outside the art building at the school wearing an elaborate headdress made of plastic grocery bags, coffee cup lids, and green and white straws. If I were following IT strictly as proscribed within Boal's TO system, I would not bring in such an artifact from outside the group's experience, but instead draw exclusively from participant knowledge. Yet despite entering the school with a predetermined artistic and pedagogical aim, IT served as an invitation to students to create art and to explore the topic in their own right, and to join the community of the show I was in the midst of making. The art teacher prepped each class about what I was up to: that I was making a theatrical show about plastic pollution and that I wanted their creative help if they were interested in giving it. Conquergood's loci of artistry and activism were engaged from the very first meeting as students were verbally and kinesthetically invited to collaborate on an artistic process.

I wore a Very Serious face as students passed me on their way into the art room. I held out my ten-foot ceremonial cape, strips of plastic bags caught the wind and fluttered out behind me. Some students giggled with discomfort. Some averted their eyes. Some seemed intense with

excitement. Some looked at me like I was insane. I began by circling the class with my cape and intoning: “This is a one-time song. This is a one-time dance. This is a one-time ritual.”

The students in her classes ranged from twelve years old to eighteen years old. Wearing bemused expressions, they studied the construction of my headdress. Their teacher instructed them to take notes, to jot down impressions of what they saw or heard. I hoped to offer a slice of what I had experienced looking at El-Anatsui’s work, to encourage students to pause and look again, more carefully this time, not just at my costume, but at the drink and snack machines at school, the milk jugs and Styrofoam cups at home. In a loud and serious voice, I announced:

I am the Shaman Dasani! Today we celebrate abundance! We worship the singularity of creation! Indeed, I have grown tired of this ceremonial cape and will now throw it in the trashcan. There! Initiates! I have come to you today to teach you the rituals of *Sacred Waste*. First, I must attune the energy and see who will hold the eternal rattles. Stomp your feet to awaken the earth energy, the earth from which we draw these precious materials. For the earth must give way so we can call forth a great abundance of sacred waste! It is time to welcome the New Nature!

On the first day, I performed for six different art classes, one after the other. In each, I led the students through a series of warm-ups under the guise that we were readying our bodies for the ritual, before calling on IT to prompt students to make images describing their relationship to plastic. I acted as the Joker: leading warm-ups and several exercises while encouraging and provoking the group, except that I remained in character as the Plastic Shaman until the very end of the workshop. As the Plastic Shaman-Joker, I handed out rattles made from plastic drink bottles filled with Mardi Gras beads. I dressed the students in garbage bag capes and snack bag headdresses, then asked them to imbue their spirits with their ceremonial costumes.

“It is your turn to worship sacred waste,” I said. I began with Image of a Word, asking each group in turn to make an image of sacred waste with their bodies. I explained that the word

“plastic” was too mundane to describe such a resilient and beautiful substance as this, and that we would honor it by calling it “sacred waste” as well as by making statues of our bodies in its image. Class after class struggled to do this first exercise—a strange order, certainly, for a Monday in art class. I goaded them into it, saying “Do whatever comes to you—let the spirit of *Sacred Waste* move your limbs!” I offered a few examples myself. They tested the water with poses that recalled plastic bottles, or appeared stiff and awkward, or that echoed my own excitement for the stuff with arms lifted in joy. I asked a few what they saw, and praised interpretations that cast plastic as wonderful. “This one here, what does he look like? What is sacred waste to him?” “I guess he looks weird?” “Yes sacred waste is weird in the best of ways. How does he express this ‘weird’?” “Well, his arms are really stiff and by his sides and his head is sideways, I guess?” “Yes! Beautiful! It’s all here, look: the miracle substance—both hard and sure as stone, yet also flexible, tricky, sideways! Brilliant!” At this point, the middle school students in particular thought I was a bit off my rocker, but their giggles told me they were up for more.

On the second day of the workshop series, I called on Boal’s Ritual Gesture IT exercise (Games 196) by asking everyone to create a few still images of themselves buying, consuming, and throwing away a plastic container in “real life,” then to create supremely exaggerated versions of those actions, and finally to string them together into a “ritual.” I told the students that the idea here was to slow things down so we could “glorify in the existence of sacred waste.” My true purpose was to experiment with Boal’s sense that when norms of social conduct become so rigid or ingrained as to be constraining or unavoidable, they become “rituals,” and those rituals are “authoritarian, *useless* or, at worst, *necessary as the vehicle for some form of oppression* (Games 194-5; emphasis in the original). By defamiliarizing these rituals in artistic kinesthetic play, might we

begin to unpack the norms that undergird them and begin to analyze their potentially oppressive functions as Boal suggests? By imbuing routine gestures of acquiring and discarding with the added significance of their role in upholding authoritarian structures (say, of corporate greed and personal wastefulness), might they be more consciously enacted thereafter?

In one middle school group, a single performer drank a Coke in one fell swallow and then threw away the bottle in a long, slow motion arc. The other four members of her group crouched near the trashcan exhibiting much eager anticipation until the bottle entered the trashcan, whereupon they all erupted in shouts and sighs while simultaneously banging on the trash can. Then, they each took a turn throwing away Coke to a similarly boisterous reception. Another group performed an intricate movement piece depicting various items' life cycles before nonchalantly throwing them away. This piece featured a "Lunchables" box: a parent throws it into the grocery cart / a kid plucks it from a pantry / she eats the food items out of it at lunch / she throws it away, all in big exaggerated moves. I delighted in the idea of an elaborate recognition of an item's history preceding each act of discarding, and I saw an opportunity to get these students to think about where plastic itself comes from, not just plastic trash.

I entreated other groups to join in and moved back to the basic sculpting exercise. I asked, "Where did it come from before it was a Lunchable?" They eventually came up with "factory," so I asked a group to create a plastic factory image-ritual by dynamising their sculpted image with rhythm, then words, then movement as Boal outlines (*Games* 184-5). Then I asked where it came from before that. Someone said, "Fossil fuels, like oil." So I asked one group to make an oil field image-ritual. And then somebody said, "But before that it came from DINOSAURS!" I said, "Great, dance that too!" And then we put them all together. What they came up with shaped the

structure of the entire show: the framework for our ritual in the final artistic performance would be a history of sacred waste, a mythical-shamanistic journey into the story of plastic. Dwight Conquergood and others identify the reenactment of sacred myths as a consistent practice of all world rituals: “to re-enact [origin myths] as often as possible, to witness again the spectacle of the divine works, to meet with the Supernatural and relearn their creative lesson is the desire that runs like a pattern through all the ritual reiterations of myths” (Eliade qtd. in Conquergood, *Shaman* 50). While our enactment of a history of plastic would instead be ironic, we would draw on the form of an origin myth to underline the cultural significance of our subject.

By the third day of the series, I wore my headdress to school, but had generally dropped my persona as the Plastic Shaman. I faced the students now as creative collaborators, and explained further what my plans were and how I wanted to use some of the rituals they created in my upcoming show. No doubt, the excitement in each class was due in part to the divergence from the everyday school routine, but I attribute it to an equally palpable sense of investment in the project. The IT techniques had both offered a way to get everyone on the same page while also inviting students to take the role of active creators rather than passive recipients: a form a pedagogical activism, as I see it.

Our interactive work primed the group to listen with real attention when I gave a brief lesson on plastic pollution featuring many photos of clogged waterways, decaying birds with belly-fulls of plastic detritus, and landfills brimming with plastic bottles. I also shared with the class my vision to make intricate costumes out of plastic and its inspirational sources, El-Anatsui’s aluminum sculptures and medieval shame masks. I told the classes that I wanted every audience member to wear a plastic mask and hoped they would make them, and that in exchange I would

arrange a field trip for them to come see the show. I hoped, too, that we could continue to develop rituals for use in the show by the adult cast and that they would serve as creative consultants when they came to see the dress rehearsal.

Garcia took over to introduce the visual art component of the project and to show pictures of large-scale upcycling projects. She introduced a unit on up-cycling as an art form and mask-making as their class's up-cycled experiment. Each of Garcia's hundred students brought in plastic waste cleaned and collected at home, often with the help of their parents. Within just a few days, students were shocked at the enormous pile of plastic refuse in a corner of their already-cramped classroom. They set to work examining other artists' up-cycled plastic works on the internet and creating their own trash masks. I put together a panel of local artists to judge an up-cycled plastic mask art contest, and on the day I returned with prize money and certificates, I was greeted by hundreds of amazing plastic masks students were eager to donate to the show...as well as an incredible surprise.

When I opened the door to the art room, I stood before a fifteen-foot long by six-foot wide "dinosaur," as Garcia's students called it, made from at least 2,000 plastic bags. It was swaying before me like a Chinese New Year dragon, held aloft by six exceedingly excited middle school students sporting proud smiles. I was struck. Here was the sort of compelling image I was after: though made of trash, it was glorious. For me, like El-Anatsui's aluminum kente cloth pieces, the "dinosaur" was an expression of Conquergood's three As. It was the sum of the student's artistic vision, a representation of their critical analysis of their medium as a fossil fuel, and it represented the labor of many hands, working together, for "soooooo long," as they bragged, to express their newly politicized position outwardly. Their sense of pride revealed the extent of the micro-

community they had fashioned out of long hours twisting plastic together. I knew then that I would have to incorporate this dinosaur. While the dinosaur was a scientifically apt symbol for the compressed carboniferous life that constitutes fossil fuels, it seemed too literal an image for the conceit of a shamanistic journey. Instead, it would be a dragon.

On the last day, I asked each group to reflect on the workshop. Student after student expressed a newfound awareness of single-use plastics as pervasive and damaging, saying, “I can’t believe how quickly the plastic piled up in our classroom,” “I see plastic everywhere now,” “I realized how I’m part of this problem,” and “I never used to think about the plastic itself, or where it came from; I was just getting a Coke and now I’m like OMG I’m polluting.” Students emerged from the workshop series with a heightened critical awareness of their own consumption as well as the broader ecological toll disposable plastic takes. As one high school student Hailey Billadeau summarized, “It’s cheap, so we make a lot of it, so we don’t think about it, but it’s a huge environmental problem, and a health problem too, and those are connected.”

Along with another teacher at the school, I helped to arrange a field trip to bring in the entire group of students to our second dress rehearsal. I asked them to enjoy the show, but also to act as creative consultants, deepening their investment in the artistic act as well as linking the communities of the adult and student artists. They were thrilled with the masks and the dragon and with their classes’ being listed on the program as costume and prop artists. Many found the show to be exceedingly strange, and yet, as one ninth grader said, “This was so, so weird. It was actually scary, like the younger kids are going to have nightmares and I’m not sure this was PG-13. But it really makes you think about how insane it is what we do to the environment. So gross.” I heard from Garcia weeks after the project that there had been a push on the part of several of

these students to rejuvenate the recycling club at the high school, a testament to the sense of activism that grew out of the IT process.

COMPOSITION

I invited sixteen cast members to my home for the first meeting of *Sacred Waste* in order to pitch the idea of the show to them to see if they were interested. A few undergraduates from the basic Performance of Literature class auditioned for the show, but otherwise, I had approached individual colleagues, students, friends, and local musicians and simply invited them to be part of the project. At the first meeting, I provided plastic milk jugs and various plastic bits I had collected and asked everyone to make a plastic shame mask while I described my vision for the project. I painted the picture of a ritual coded in pseudo-mythological language using movement sequences devised in student workshops, with each scene featuring a different plastic shaman telling part of the history of plastic, from fossil fuel formation to its manufacture and consumption and finally to its profoundly ecologically disruptive destination: the ocean. All the while, the stage would become hugely messy with plastic.

I had written some scenes using the framework the MSA students keyed me into, and planned to use some of their movements as well, but most scenes (especially those with the entire group of shaman) would be staged largely from scratch using the same IT techniques I'd deployed in the first workshop. Before we began working together as a cast, I imagined this show as a sort of workshop akin to my first foray at the school, with each plastic shaman holding forth at separate stations. I envisioned each cast member teaching different *Sacred Waste* rituals to audience members who would be divided into groups and cued to move around the space from one station to the next. However, after we worked together for several weeks, we became attached to the

dynamic images we made and decided instead to designate a standard proscenium stage space, but include many moments of audience interaction. The principle of audience immersion remained, but the mechanics shifted to allow for the discoveries we made as a group to be showcased.

The adult cast often worked in separate groups based on participation in certain scenes in order to honor everyone's busy schedules. As we neared the opening of the show, we began working more and more as a whole group. IT helped us to bring the different scenes together in a process of discovering and showcasing the overarching themes of the show as a group. It also helped us to work out our use of shamanism as a central metaphor. Two key motifs continually resurfaced in our IT work: the role of first world hubris and corporate greed in consumption and waste practices and death and disease in marginalized communities as consequences of those practices, which helped some cast members and myself work through our concerns regarding cultural co-optation in the show. I describe the development of several scenes to illustrate the emergence of these concepts below.

When I first introduced the show to the cast, I offered a definition of both a shaman and a "plastic shaman." In Conquergood's study of Hmong shaman, he observes that the shaman "is the active agent of cultural process, dynamically exercising and mobilizing the core beliefs of the culture" (*Shaman* 47). A "plastic shaman," on the other hand, or a false shaman is one who co-opts or steals indigenous knowledge and traditions to use it for her own ends, usually monetary ones (Aldred 343). Posers acting as plastic shaman derive their practices from specific traditions or an amalgam of "native" traditions.

By mobilizing the term "plastic shaman" in *Sacred Waste*, I hoped to make fun of the false tribalism with which we approached the show. Wearing grass skirts made from braided strips of

plastic and headdresses of straws, we plastic shaman referenced a pre-industrial cultural tradition of dance and masking to create a ritual that was, on some levels, cheap, flashy, and disposable. Our medicine bags were filled with Mardi Gras beads, our rattles made of Coke bottles, our gods the four local plastic factories. We toyed with the idea that this ritual was set in a future time, where industrial culture has failed and we glorify the time of abundance that resulted in the “eternal” plastic scraps the rag-picking plastic shaman now wear as headdresses and bangles.

I knew I wanted the show to open with a whole-cast dance that would take shape slowly as each plastic shaman entered it. We used a rotating follow-the-leader technique to realize this goal, but after everyone mastered the moves, it seemed clear that the sequence needed a bit more form. I wanted this form to contribute to the overall message, so I turned to IT to help shape the opening ritual. What we came up with produced a few basic movements we returned to and riffed on throughout the show. Calling on Boal’s Multiple Images of Oppression exercise, in which a group concentrates on “a single concrete case” where “Society is represented *en bloc*, in one image” to produce a “Macrocosm in microcosmic form” (*Games* 186), I asked everyone to make a pose characterizing the acquisition of disposable plastics for them. Folks grabbed at the air, swallowed imaginary gobs of food, and opened their arms wide as possible. When the group described these poses to each other, words like “oversized,” “hungry,” “gaping,” “monstrous” emerged. Jane (who hails from Britain) said, “It’s sort of an American thing isn’t it, all this grabbing, acquiring, bigger, bigger, more, more more? Get as much as you can! It’s so easy! It’s so convenient!” These outbursts quickly turned into stock phrases in the show.

I asked if we were to sum up all these bodies in one word that characterizes how we as a group are thinking of acquiring disposable plastics today, what would the word be? “Greed,”

someone ventured. Jane then prompted the group to “imagine what it looks like coming out the other end!” I loved what we came up with: folks were squatting, vomiting, making even more monstrous expressions. One actor summed up the image of the whole group as “gross,” another, “desecration.” I asked everyone to put these moves together and dynamise them using rhythmic movement and a singular sound. We all settled into our own unique repeated movement sequence that came out of the notion of greed followed by making a huge mess: arms gathering in imaginary food into open mouths followed by bending over and grotesquely ejecting what was consumed. Sometimes, the sequence even ended with loud farting noises and a hand flapping around the rear.

This movement sequence was woven through the show and began to take on layers of significance. In addition to communicating the “grossness” of throwing away such a toxic and resilient substance, it seemed to imply that the consequence of greed is desecration. I commented on the effect of seeing so many bodies perform these gestures together: “It’s like how you see the trash can, but not the landfill—when you are all doing it, it is multiplied in a way that makes me see the broader picture—lots of shit everywhere.” Actors enjoyed making grotesque noises and gestures, and this visible enjoyment seemed to me to work perfectly to critique the blithe ignorance of U.S. consumers as to the fate of their waste. I offered that this exercise made me feel like a pawn in the corporate game: buying and discarding without seeing the exponential effect of collective greed and desecration. Someone suggested that we not just make a truly huge mess throughout the show, but that we periodically clean the stage by pushing the mess right into the audience, as they were seated in a landfill.

Many such techniques taught us the possibilities of the figure of the Plastic Shaman. The group of shaman began to function less like the prodding figure of Boal's joker, interrupting the group to find their own truths, and more like the teacher-critical theorist, remaining outside the group while trying to expose the myths that are operating underneath the surface of things. So, too is the goal of the shaman, whose role it is to convene with the ancestors, the old powers, in hopes of offering the community spiritual resources for survival. The shaman serves as the conduit between the "big picture" and everyday life. Lawrence Grossberg's understanding of the work of cultural studies functions in a similar way. He writes, "Cultural studies is never merely a theoretical practice, even when that practice incorporates notions of politics, power, and context into its analysis. Indeed...cultural studies offers a bridge between theory and material culture..." (Grossberg 6).

The composition of one scene, "The Shadow People," perhaps best exemplifies how such an analytical bridge is formed through the use of IT. Boal's basic image techniques served us as we attempted to stage the material risks of profit-driven plastic production on human and animal life, the toll of capitalism on various bodies. In the workshop phase, several secondary students described what it was like to live next door to a plastic plant after they formed images based on prompts about the role of plastic in their own lives. Student descriptions of mysterious alarms and sicknesses served as the basis for a scene I asked one cast member to write in light of further research on the connection between race and environmental hazards, especially in Louisiana. Mounting evidence shows emissions from plastic production and recycling are highly toxic and low-income and/or communities of color are disproportionately affected (Minter; PVC).

In a rehearsal of this scene, I used a modified version of Boal's Complete the Image (*Games* 139). In this game, pairs take turns responding to one another's physical poses, "showing what [each] sees as a possible meaning" for the original pose; the new relationship formed changes the image again, and the original partner replies again, in what Boal calls "a dialogue of images" (*Games* 140). While I read from Paul's script aloud, Tisha and Paul took turns creating images with their bodies that both attempted to reflect each sequence and respond to one another's movements. We repeated this exercise many times until the actors "landed" on sequences we all felt were striking. Their physical work drew out several interesting motifs that were not the most obvious from the script. The movements they chose depicted people as automatons, pushed into uncomfortable places and positions of work, as well as highlighted the fragility of the body, a mechanical breaking down at the social, human, and cellular levels. They drew out of Paul's monologue a heavy feeling of an endless struggle that ends not in triumph but decay, perhaps even cancer. We decided to use only Black performers for this scene, to underline the particular toll of plastic production on bodies of color.

Analytical discussion of this scene in the composition process revolved around how insidious this problem is, and how all of us are implicated as both consumers and bystanders to environmental racism. We wanted the scene to implicate the audience without taking a didactic approach. Later in the scene, other dancers took on Tisha's movements and spun out into the audience whispering "names of the dead" and at the same time handing out "sacred rattles" to each audience member. The rattles were made from hundreds of disposable water bottles, each filled with Mardi Gras beads and other plastic bits and decorated with colorful sprays of junk food bags. In all nine runs of the show, audiences begin shaking the rattles in time to the drums

keeping a beat during the scene. A dancer emerged from behind the screen, depicting a body worked into a sort of mechanical submission, continually decaying, mixing ingredients, serving, drinking, stumbling. The shaman tells us the dragon spirits calls for the bodies of “another and another and another” of his shadow people, then asks the audience-participants to “Take up your rattles and SHAKE THE EARTH!”

Our understanding of the plastic shaman’s role grew more analytically sophisticated as we returned to the embodied images of greed, theft, and exploitation and considered how these forces operated in the environment in the form of gross abuses of natural resources—often from indigenous lands for capitalist ends. Indeed, the plastic shaman in *Sacred Waste* conspicuously toy with what Dwight Conquergood calls the “custodian’s rip-off” in his four-part designation of ethnographic pitfalls regarding the scholar’s stance toward the other (*Performing* 5). In the custodian’s rip-off, the admiring ethnographer plunders sacred traditions for good performance material. While *Sacred Waste* is far from a formal ethnography, it is a fictive study of Western overdeveloped societies using costumes and drumming which recall tribal rituals. We stage the rip-off itself, rather than ripping off of a specific tradition. Our “desecration” (in Conquergood’s terms) of true shamanism is self-reflective: we use it to point out the same desecration of the environment and of indigenous cultures which are a byproduct of overdeveloped societies’ addiction to plastics.

And so the dance of the plastic shaman became a dance of ignorance and excess: a foolish dance, a dance of death. While we referred to *Sacred Waste* as a ritual of abundance, like Thanksgiving Day in the United States, the abundance we celebrated elides a litany of cruel secrets: secrets of the plastic plant next door to the poorest neighborhood, making its inhabitants

sick, churning out its colorful bits, destroying. What the plastic shaman hope to do is move us from a commodity fetishism critique, where labor is the suppressed and hidden force of currency, to a fetishism of self-destruction, where the hidden cost of the marketplace is “ritual” suicide: our daily ablutions to the poisoning of a planet. For embedded in our everyday consumption of plastics in particular is a movement toward self-destruction, of our bodies and of earth, of our ocean. We named this double-edged force the Dragon Spirit for the way it hails the plastic factory, its spines of chemical stacks spewing burning plumes of fire. The plastic shaman would worship plastic, yet at the same time, in their tricky way, condemn it. We would imbue every bottle, every plastic screw top and container of yogurt with the whiff of death.

COSTUMING

As the show and all its plastic accouterment began to take shape, a strange sense of incongruity crept in: as the show became more artistically compelling (thanks to increasingly intricate costumes, dances, and overall precision), our disgust with its object grew. This incompatibility came to the fore largely by way of our homemade trashy costumes. In the midst of a growing joy and sense of interconnectivity in the project, the discomfort of the material itself served as a visceral reminder of our message. We struggled together for months making wearable art out of this junk. We sat in the empty theater braiding up plastic grocery bags, speaking one after the other, like our plastic braids, weaving and knotting ends to ends, and so we made this strange world of *Sacred Waste* together, knot by knot by knot. As in Figure 1, we sat in circles, weaving, tying, knotting, dancing—this work became a “real” shamanistic journey, a real tango with death, the dance we did not anticipate, and one which infused the show with a sense of terror.



Figure 1: Cast members making headdresses

As is increasingly publicized, single-use plastic contains dangerous estrogen-like hormone disruptors like BPA, particularly when heated (Bisphenol A). Preparation for the show called for hours of knotting costumes, hot gluing bottle caps to plastic milk jugs, and practicing long, vigorous dances wrapped head to toe in plastic costumes for hours at a time, often under hot stage lights. The adult cast spoke regularly of the actual danger of heated plastic releasing toxic chemicals into our bloodstreams. While I worried about this danger, I could not help but think of it as part and parcel for our shamanistic journey. Conquergood writes,

The shaman is the one who can wage lifelong battle against the God of Death on behalf of others precisely because she or he has confronted it personally and survived the encounter. The initiatory sickness imbues the shaman with the authority of direct, immediate experience” (*Shaman* 49).

Our artistic goals led us to a literally dangerous space, forcing us to analyze our daily consumptive habits, and resulting in real concern with the problem of plastics outside the aesthetic space of the show (activism).

Several cast members said to me: “I wonder how much BPA you have exposed us to at this point?” While this was an ethical problem I did not anticipate, I also admit I appreciated the way this sense of danger we were experiencing began to carry over into the performance. It struck me as a *mimesis unto death*, Michael Tuassig’s term from his ethnographic study of an imaginary tribal culture, *The Magic of the State*, where even in rituals of colloquial magic, state power presents itself and is enacted on the bodies of worshippers (129). Even as we created this performance to analyze plastic, we literally absorbed its toxins. Cast members and high school students repeatedly identified a visceral sense of anxiety over the substance in relationship to their own bodies. The plastic waste we all collected for our masks and costumes quickly piled up in our homes, cars, and classrooms. Many felt suffocated and constrained by their own accumulation of plastic junk.” I asked all cast members, many friends and family members, and high school students to save their plastic trash for use in the show, and to pick up any plastic bottle tops they found on the ground. Many designated bins in their homes that overflowed the first few days they began to collect.

A tension grew between the beautiful show we had created and the real horror of the substance we critiqued. As the show’s opening approached, cast members’ performances increasingly began to express a palpable grossness of spirit: we growled, yelled, made horrific faces and grotesque gestures. We began to understand and to express the cultural madness inherent in the desolation of land and air for the over-developed world’s incredible appetite for disposable plastic. Knotting and dancing knee deep in polystyrene made its proliferation beyond the

boundaries of our bodies becomes more visceral as well. It began to get under our skin. To this end, one cast member wrote,

I began to think about my efforts, which seemed so small compared to the giant masses of plastic I imagined were just floating around the world, an idea that haunted me. I started feeling defeated if I had to buy something made from plastic materials.

Both the public school students and the adult cast immersed themselves in movement and material in a way that elicited a broader, more contextual understanding of the concepts, materials, and their own communities. Repeatedly performing the carefully crafted dynamisations we created while draped in the object of our analysis deepened our understandings of what was at stake here as we struggled bodily toward a final artistic product for the community. Dancing covered in our own trash, repeatedly enacting movements we devised to describe our relationship with discard practices, dreaming of teaching audience members parts of our “ritual,” we continually voiced new revelations about our relationship to plastics, each other, and the earth. On both tangible and metaphorical planes, such work asked us to experience firsthand the way ecologies work—as interdependent webs. Throughout the rehearsal process, we increasingly engaged Conquergood’s activism element of performance as a conceptual connection developed between our own bodies at risk and the risk we incur upon the “body of earth” via our own habitual consumption. When it came time to tell the tale to our community in the form of the show, a strong sense of collective revulsion impacted audiences as well.

PERFORMANCE

A desire to share our composition experience by making the show as immersive as possible guided the overall artistic choices of the final production. In this section, I describe several scenes from the creative act that highlight the show’s immersive quality along with a few audience

responses. I show here how the use of IT as a compositional strategy helped us to produce an artistic object that served to activate tensions among Conquergood's three As of performance studies. Echoing its role in the process of making the show, IT offered audience a polished creative artifact featuring a series of precise, symbolically-laden images at the center of each scene. In this show, a strong tension played between audience's enjoyment of the artistry of the show and the critical analytical orientation that artistry highlighted. The immersiveness, fun, and beauty of the show ignited an exciting yet increasingly uncomfortable sense of community amongst audience members, based as it was in the ironic worship of plastic and the plastic shaman's eagerness to ring in a "new nature," composed of almost entirely of plastic.

The theater doors open and sound pours out. Two drummers play hand drums, accompanied by a high flute made of PVC pipe and sporadic singing or chanting of the word "More!" Audiences' separation from daily life is marked doubly by a crossing of the threshold into a designated theatrical space, and by shaman-actors who verbally and physically draw audiences into their swirling dances. The plastic shaman repeatedly address audience members as "initiates," make invitational gestures, pull them by the hands and arms into their seats, and compel them to dance along to the musicians' drumbeats. Some audience members are dressed in "sacred waste" costumes by shaman who encourage them to "don your eternal robes." Wearing knotted skirts made from plastic bags, large necklaces made of plastic bottle caps, and other plastic detritus, the plastic shaman leap and crawl about the room in an exuberant dance which gains more and more form as the audience is fully seated. The plastic shaman take position on stage and synchronize their movements into those derived from the student workshops.

The shaman gather onstage, moving as one, while one of their number remains in the audience to welcome the initiates, saying “The ritual of *Sacred Waste* begins with a story of creation, for it is best to know from whence the sacred substance came.” One shaman wielding the dragon’s head and six dancing the body tell the story of a great dragon who lays his body down deep into the earth. Meanwhile, drums beat fiercely in semi-darkness, the dragon’s eyes are lit with orange orbs. In Figure 2 below, Amy Bridges wields the dragon head made by Elyse Garcia as she intones the story of a great dragon who lays his body into the earth, sacrificing himself for “what would come next, and be new: sacred waste.” Six dancers manipulate the body made from 2,000 plastic grocery bags, by Garcia’s middle and high school students.



Figure 2: The Dragon

Equipped with rattles, the audience joins in with the drums, which play across a dramatic transition wherein another plastic shaman stomps loudly out to center-stage. Without prompting, audiences shake their rattles along with each of his footsteps. In the fourth scene, “Faces of the New Nature,” the shaman instructs all to take up the plastic masks

placed under their chairs before the show, entreating us to place them over our “old” faces and breathe deeply. Solemnly, he instructs us to turn toward each of the four directions:

Turn this way, and inhale the mighty Exxon Plastic Plant to the North, turn this way and inhale indomitable DOW to the West, turn southward and savor the monolithic Melamine Americas, now turn to the direction of all things new, Eastward, and breath in Four B Plastics, Inc!

One LSU undergraduate communication studies student writes of this moment,

We were disgusted, grossed out about putting plastic from who-knows-where on our faces and then breathing it in repeatedly. I felt that this was effective because if plastic keeps piling up, future generations will, in fact, be suffocated by it. I kept thinking just how much waste there was in the theatre, and how that is not even a fraction of how much waste there is on earth. It was very sobering.”

The shaman then asks the audience to “imbue your ceremonial costumes with our earthly spirits, for unlike our fragile human bodies, this, your new face, will live on into the next and the next and the next and the next and the next and the next,” repeating the word “next” until the masked audience joins in with their voices and rattles. He keeps repeating “and the next,” pushing the audience’s and his own endurance, until finally ending with “generations!”

The next sequence, “The Bird Dance,” “honor[s] the sacrifices of all animals who spread sacred waste across the earth, carrying tidings of the future in their very bellies to the four directions.” Birds are a traditional shamanistic symbol, suggesting flights of the spirit, and ocean birds like the Albatross increasingly suffer death and disease due to ingesting plastic waste. The Bird Dance depicts the decay of bird bodies as they consume “bright bits of sacred waste.” Dancers grow visibly exhausted as they move through the two twelve-foot wings (made from recycled plastic found in the dumpster outside Coates Hall at LSU) manipulated by the center shaman, shown in Figure 3. She introduces the dance, saying, “When [the birds] can fly no longer, they lay their

bodies down. Feathers and entrails flutter away and melt into the ground, but the sacred waste they carry in their bellies remains scattered behind, forever, beautiful.”

The solemn scene describing decaying bodies ends in a surprise celebration. The lights come up bright and cheery as She Who Dances the Birds yells, “Lower the effigy!” and a plastic shaman lowers a large white bird piñata made with water jugs and bags and filled to the brim with unrecyclable plastic bits down to audience height. Offering a PVC baton, actors ask for a brave



Figure 3: The Bird Dance

volunteer who will complete the ritual by “spilling its entrails.” Many hands go up; one initiate is chosen and blindfolded. The audience cheers while s/he whacks violently at the bird-shape. Its head flies off somewhere. Hundreds of plastic bottle caps scatter all over the theatre space, covering every inch of the stage and often spraying the audience as well.

This moment stood out for some audience members as particularly uncomfortable, evoking for them the keenest sense of guilt combined with complicity. Audience members seemed swept away in the theatrics and images of the moment, and yet many reported feeling at odds with their own glee. As one LSU student audience member wrote in a response to the show, “When the

volunteer destroyed the bird, I was cheering. It was like a piñata. But then I thought: this is sick. We are cheering for actual destruction.” Another undergraduate wrote, “I thought the show was going to be all fun at first, and it was fun, but finally, the sense of planetary doom was terrifying, and yet there I was, chanting along and rooting for all this trash, especially when things got violent.”

The last scene, “The Gyre: Swirling in the Great Pacific Garbage Patch,” features one plastic shaman, center stage, spinning for several minutes in a costume made from 320 plastic bottle caps strung on fishing wire. Another shaman, pictured in Figure 4, introduces his dance as a depiction of the (real) enormous vortex of plastic trash that rotates perpetually in the Pacific Ocean. The lights go blue and weird. He sings a plaintive, nonsense song. His circular movements go on too long, hypnotic yet tense: he must carefully avoid the scattered caps at his feet while he grows obviously dizzy. Anthropologists cite the ecstatic trance that invites communion with spirits as the defining characteristic of shaman (Conquergood, *Shaman* 47).



Figure 4: The Gyre

The dancer appears increasingly possessed, spinning wildly, yet inviting people on stage to join him. One by one, actors come on stage, spinning along with him, inviting the audience-participants to join. The mood is solemn at first, but the drums pick up and all begin dancing. Once nearly everyone in the space is up on stage, the actors fling open the doors, leading the audience out saying “This way! The ritual is ever ongoing!” The audience does not get their usual chance to bookend the play by applauding. Many attempt to, but actors insist on leading them out to trashcans, or to bang wild rhythms on snack machines in the hallways. The plastic shamans keep it up, only saying “Go forth! Make more! Go and make the new nature! The ritual continues!”

REFLECTION

Each night of the show, I sensed a palpable and pleasurable energy of citizenship amongst the crowd as they yelled, shook the rattles, and danced, but it was this very kind of citizenship which we critiqued, one characterized by communities enjoying the privilege of convenience and yet choosing to be irresponsible anyway. IT paved the way for this ironic tension between artistry, analysis, and activism: the method propelled us to make a terrifically elaborate show featuring “fun” audience involvement, yet with movement work based in IT dynamisations which belied our true purpose. The show asked the audience themselves to enact their own madness, the madness that materializes in the everyday rituals of buying a soft drink and then tossing a non-biodegradable item into the trash. Still, while many audience members reflected on how the show effected their appreciation for the problem of plastic, I suspect a good deal fewer actually abstained from using disposable plastic or got involved with the anti-plastic movement in a long term way.

Such a contradiction was true of many in the cast as well. I venture that being generally less beholden to staging particular cultural theories (as we were in the other two projects in this dissertation) made room for a richer artistic landscape and yet risked continued activism in the environmental problem in which we attempted to intervene. I noticed that cast members came to “own” and enjoy the show as an artistic object more so than to invest in the particulars of the environmental subject matter—quite different from the cast in the other two shows addressed here.

In Conquergood’s “I am Shaman,” he identifies the lone adventuring hero as the symbol of American Individualism, writing, as Boal might, that “our separatist, individualist ethic gets enunciated daily” (45). This stands in sharp contrast to rituals of togetherness performed by the Hmong which feature, as did *Sacred Waste*, repetition, standing in circles, collaboration, group moment, and making-together. For the *Sacred Waste* participants, group-enacted, full-body image-rituals of performance functioned as a welcome respite from daily individualistic rituals of consumerism. Performing the gestures we created from IT work as movement and dance sequences left participants with a strong sense of citizenship based in the pleasure of group kinesthetic work and making a successful performance. While the development of strong group identification can be a form of social activism, it is not quite the same as working with a group toward a specific goal of social change.

The cast enjoyed each other, was proud of the show, and reveled in performing it each night. And yet over the course of time we spent working on both shows (about eight months), many cast members continued to buy single-use plastics despite their involvement in the show and their understanding of the ecological problems therein. On the other hand, several cast members reported the opposite: becoming further invested in “plastic politics” and remaining committed to

personal change and advocacy regarding plastic consumption. I must acknowledge that avoiding single-use plastic is exceedingly difficult, even for those with the best intentions. And yet I speculate that the strength of the artistic aspect of this show overshadowed its activist thrust, at least for the cast.

Another factor that may be partly responsible for this outcome is that the community who partook of the initial IT workshops and the community in which the performance was formally composed were different. While I utilized IT in both contexts, it was used differently in each: to generate raw material for consideration amongst the secondary students, and to enhance the material I had largely already decided upon with the adult cast. The secondary students grappled with showing the basic problems of plastic pollution and how it shows up in their lives, and through this process helped me to arrive at the basic form of the show: a brief history of plastic. The discovery of this history via creative, kinesthetic work perhaps proved more impacting than its presentation. The adult cast certainly made analytical discoveries, but unlike the secondary students, they did not come to the visualization of plastic's journey from dinosaur to supermarket aisle on their own. For me, this speaks to the clarity IT work can bring to critical understanding of a topic when it is used as a generative technique from the start. I speculate that sense of collective ownership over the primary pieces of the creative act can affect the degree of the investment in the topic.

CHAPTER 5

RACY

OVERVIEW

In 2015, I directed a show in close collaboration with Illyse Garnier, a former performance student and cast member in *Sacred Waste*. Garnier had been particularly interested in questions about cultural appropriation in *Sacred Waste*: Did we give audiences enough tools to understand that we meant to expose the exploitation of indigenous cultures by overdeveloped nations rather than ripping off our vague notions of their sacred traditions? Haunted by the need for more explicit analytical clarity than we both felt in *Sacred Waste*, we set out to use performance to explore our many conversations about race, whiteness, and interracial communication in the Deep South, where we were both born and raised. We eventually named the show *Racy: A Show About Looking and Seeing in Black and White*, inspired by Linda Martin Alcoff's work in *Visible Identities* on the visible aspects of race politics. I had hoped Illyse would agree to co-direct the project—feeling that such an enterprise ought to have both a Black and white leader—but she declined due to a lack of time to commit to planning rehearsals and a lack of familiarity facilitating Image Theatre (IT) workshops, which we both wanted to use as a composition tool. However, she did agree to be the Assistant Director.

Our inclination to employ IT grew out of our mutual understanding of race as social construction that initiates from and acts on the physical body. Rather than rely on a theory that would give us an abstract "view from nowhere," we wanted to insist on a method that explores the "view from a body," as Donna Haraway calls it, and IT helped us to do that (qtd. in Conquergood, "Interventions" 370). In *Sacred Waste*, IT served as a brainstorming and ensemble-building tool leading to a performance that relied on different artistic devices, rather than a

guiding artistic principle. For the *Racy* project, I wanted to explore how IT work itself might be stylized into a series of scenes drawing on the ensemble's theoretically-informed perspectives. How could we use images to ignite powerful conversations with audiences? Rather than imposing an artistic vision (as in *Sacred Waste*) or specific texts or contexts (as in *The History of the Black History Month Program*), in *Racy*, IT guided both the exploratory and artistic choices from the first rehearsal to the final presentation. I wanted to know what this work could produce in its own right and to what degree our product would be interesting for audiences. Ultimately, the method helped me to facilitate a collaborative process that resulted in about ten vignettes performed using “body-masks” derived from our workshops, sometimes accompanied by poetic or theoretical texts. The show played in the HopKins Black Box in April of 2015.

I lead the collaborative process in several steps: first, using Boal’s IT techniques to generate raw material from the cast’s own personal experiences with race and racism; next, guiding the discussion of concepts and articles from critical race theories to connect our personal experiences with systemic racism and to inform our final staging choices; and finally, leading rehearsals in which we practiced to perform our scenes with precision. I managed most of our group communication in person and online and often weighed in heavily on artistic choices for certain scenes, but I also made ample room for all cast members to create and direct scenes as they pleased. One scene consisted of a video made by a cast member that I saw for the first time (and heartily approved) at the show’s dress rehearsal. With a very young baby to take care of at home, I was eager for cast members to take on more leadership roles both managerially and creatively, and some cast members took me up on this more than others. Ultimately, the cast took enough

ownership that we decided to not to list me as the director of the show on our show poster and other promotional materials.

We worked together for four months, meeting at first once or twice a week and then, as the performance approached, meeting nearly every day. Our workshop process was so rich, many of us wrote emails, texted, and called each other after each session to continue processing together. In this chapter, I reflect on this project in great detail, drawing on my extensive field notes and the post-workshop reflective writing I periodically collected from cast members, focusing on conversations and techniques that generated material that appeared in or significantly informed the show. As with previous chapters, my aim is to offer practitioners and/or teachers a concrete understanding of how Boal's techniques helped us to triangulate aims of artistry, analysis, and activism as we worked to create an aesthetic production. In this case, an increasingly nuanced concern with cultural analysis resulted from a long IT-based composition process with a strong, small, invested ensemble. I venture that such a configuration—the foregrounding of theory with a tightly knit cast—led us to pursue a highly abstract creative form which was less accessible to our general audience compared to other public performances treated in this dissertation. I show how IT helped the *Racy* cast to meet our complex analytical and artistic goals and also consider the implications of this goal in terms how activism functioned different for the cast and our audience.

Below, I first offer highlights from a lengthy workshop process in which IT initiated compelling kinesthetic and analytical work about our personal understandings of race and racism. I demonstrate how our sense of group identification grew from an interest in increasing our own everyday communication about race politics both in and out of rehearsal into an impulse toward broader activist participation using IT as a way to explore race in a mixed-race group in the form of

a community workshop. I next describe how the profoundly-felt yet difficult-to-express nature of our kinesthetic work left us feeling hungry for words to more precisely speak about our personal and interpersonal experiences. I explain how IT served as a bridge between our embodied work and critical race theory, which we used to guide the move from raw material to scene solidification. I consider how a strong sense of citizenship combined with a highly sophisticated understanding of our material led us toward an especially stylized artistic product, a phenomemon I demonstrate by describing how we staged several key moments of the final production in the HopKins Black Box theatre. The chapter concludes with an analysis of the show's reception—in the form of student papers and nightly talkbacks from audience members. A sometimes-productive, sometimes-stymying tension arose between cast and audience and between those more and less well-read in race politics, which caused the cast of *Racy* to reflect on the capabilities of IT as an artistic form as we began to envision the next iteration of the show. Namely, I consider how an artistic process driven by a strong focus on theoretical analysis may compromise audience access to the activism generated amongst the cast.

WORKSHOPS

After planning it over the phone with Garnier, the first *Racy* meeting took place at my home. We asked everyone to bring snacks to share and their calendars for planning future meeting times. The initial group remained the same throughout, except for the one white male who dropped out due to work and school conflicts (though his absence became a sticking point for us since that left us with only one male body and an unfortunate—and probably unfair—joke about white men's commitment to the project of anti-racist work in general). The cast for *Racy* consisted of an even number of white and Black cast members, an intentional choice Illyse and I agreed

upon early on, since we were setting out to explore interracial communication along Black and white lines. Other than Illyse and myself, the cast consisted of Ahmad Black, Sidney Marino, Kyra Washington, and Tisha Howell (students who had been in various of my Performance of Literature classes at LSU); Lizzie Barnette (a graduate student and performer with whom I had worked in *Sacred Waste*); and Amy Bridges (a dear friend and communications instructor at LSU). No formal auditions were held: each person knew I was planning on making the show, and either asked to be involved or I asked them to be. Each had expressed interest in the topic of race, enjoyed creative movement work, and had been in at least one HopKins Black Box show before.

Illyse and I started by sharing our vision of a movement or dance-oriented show with a minimalist *mise en scene* and live musicians. This vision came about in part from a short, experimental iteration of *Racy* at the Prospect 3 Performance Festival in Baton Rouge in November 2014 that served as a petri dish for the show. Having worked with IT techniques for several years at this point, I knew we would be generating stylistic images that described our inner experiences, but was not sure about how those might be deployed in a full-length show. I told the cast briefly of my interest in Vsevolod Meyerhold's work in which biomechanical movement and body-masks were put to the task of social commentary on the "machine" of the Russian political climate in the 1920s. I explained that I was interested in what such body-masks might have to "say" about race and that I knew IT was an interesting way of generating full-body images.

I offered the group a handout with several bottom-line assumptions that Illyse and I were interested in testing out with this project. We explained that these assumptions were informed by scholarship on race and Boal, and that if anyone wanted sources or reading suggestions I would provide them. We began the meeting by reading these aloud:

1. Race (despite not being a scientifically valid concept) and racism affects our lives.
2. Race and racism affect each of us differently, and this is especially true depending on our Blackness or whiteness.
3. An individual's embodied experience of race/racism can be useful for understanding the phenomena of race and racism on an individual and systemic level.
4. Since race is a visible marker, the process of looking at others and being looked at by others is a productive site for exploring themes of race and racism.
5. Encountering "other" bodies in the process of performance provides such a site.
6. Boal's Image Theater, in asking us to embody our experiences and consider one another's embodied experiences (in this case around a theme of race/racism), is an interesting tool for considering race and racism.
7. We are interested in using performance to facilitate conversations about race/racism.

I asked everyone if they agreed with these presumptions or not or had anything to add here. Illyse did: "I think it's important for us not to assume that we 'get it' already, that we are not working from a place of 'I have nothing to learn' or 'I understand what you are going through.' I think that's important for all of us, but maybe, and I'm just going to put this out there, maybe that's especially important for those of us with white bodies. I keep having conversations with white folks—even friends—who see themselves as non-racist, but who proceed to be 'funny' in racist ways or to make assumptions about my experience of Blackness or of racism and I'm just tired of it." We added an eighth bottom-line, which I scrawled onto my handout: We will actively work against presuming we are exemplars of anti-racism and remain open to being checked by each other in this regard.

I asked each person to share with the group what interested her/him/zir in this particular project. At this first meeting, we spent the time sharing stories about our general interests in race and performance. The formal workshop sessions I describe below began a week later. In the next section, I detail four significant episodes from the first stage of our process underscoring how IT facilitated cast communication about race while propelling our investment in activism, both in terms of commitment to the group and our civic duty to the community. IT offered a productive

creative space where we engaged our “bodies-as-a-medium-for-learning,” in Pineau’s words (50), but we struggled in this project to contextualize our kinesthetic findings in their own right. I show in this section, however, how the richness of the IT work moved us to seek out critical elucidations of our creative discoveries.

Image of a Word

At the first formal workshop, I forecasted our agenda: performing a warm-up, dipping our toes into IT, starting to create a shared language of the body. I began by reading aloud one of Boal’s descriptions of IT,

Words are like trucks: they carry the loads you put on them. Words do not exist in nature, they did not come into being like trees: they have been invented by people, so it is important to understand that the inventors of the words lived in concrete social situations, some of which may no longer exist...Image is a language. All images also are surfaces and, as such, they reflect what is projected on it. As objects reflect the light that strikes them, so images in an organized ensemble reflect the emotions of the observer, her ideas, memories, imagination, desires...(Games 174).

I announced that we would be making images and describing them, and reminded everyone that this whole venture was an experiment with this method: maybe it will work, maybe it will not. I asked the cast to approach the process with curiosity and energy, and to not to get too bogged down with the editing mind in our sessions, but rather to let the body do the thinking—that we’d reflect on what we’d created afterward. I asked for thoughts before we began. Lizzie was eager to explore concepts with her body, since she identifies as a kinesthetic thinker. Illyse said she thought it wise to have a way into this process that comes from outside (referring to Boal/IT), rather than just from my personal imagination or desire to create something as an artist. I agreed.

We warmed up by forming a circle and shaking out from head to toe, stretching on our own, and a quick Round of Rhythm and Movement (Games 92), in which each cast member must

make a ridiculous movement and noise and then the rest of the group copies them exactly. The first IT exercise we played was Complete the Image (*Games* 193). An actor begins by striking a pose and another actor quickly offers a pose in relationship to the first. Here, I reminded the group that we were working to make our bodies readable, theatrical, to go ahead and extend and exaggerate our poses, to enter them with full energy, so someone from far away might be able to ‘read’ them.

We moved on to Image of the Word (*Games* 176), the exercise that formed the backbone of our rehearsals. To learn the basic format of Image of the Word, I planned to start with an innocuous word, yet one I specifically selected for its *apropos* status: *awkward*. I asked the group to move into a full body mask of the word *awkward*, employing all parts of the body with the intent to capture the essence of the word according to their own interpretation. Following a protocol from Boal workshops with Ruth Laurion Bowman, I invited everyone to turn out, facing the wall instead of the circle of bodies, so they could generate their poses separately so as not to feel the pressure of being watched in the creation process. Once the poses were set, I asked the group to turn back to the group, exhibit their poses, and then describe them on the level of the body. A couple of participants volunteered to describe a room full of hunched shoulders and dangling arms and knock-knees.

I checked in with the group about using the terms *Black* and *white* as racial indicators. I said, “We may well discover there are no differences, but I’m just going to test out this question now, and we’ll see how it feels to ask it and to respond to it, and whether it works for us: are there differences in the ways white or Black bodies are displaying the word *awkward*?” Folks looked around the room in their awkward poses, possibly feeling truly awkward at having to acknowledge

each other as raced bodies, and each quickly, even eagerly, said “No” – nays all around. The group agreed that it needed expedient terms for describing bodies and for asking the group to divide into cross- or same-race groups and also that naming our bodies *white bodies* and *Black bodies* felt fine, though somehow strange. I did not press the group to name why these terms were strange at this point, but in later reflections, some cast members acknowledged (1) that naming our bodies as *white body* or *Black body* had the effect of estranging oneself from the body, as if body and mind were separate, and (2) that we are practiced in *not* acknowledging the visible differences in our bodies in everyday conversation, and so doing so was initially uncomfortable for us all, and (3) that these terms worked to underline an understanding of race as a visual category.

The next word we agreed to try out was “racism.” We went through the steps again: face the wall to discover the body, turn in to the group to describe various bodies, and last I posed the question about whether we see differences across race. This time, to my own and others’ initial surprise, we immediately noticed differences between the Black and white bodies. White bodies were described by participants as more abstract (not representational in terms of a real-life encounter), with more weird parts (fingers curled or cramped or variously splayed), more complicated (feet in the air, off-balance, limbs and heads moving in different directions). Black bodies were described as more representational (arms crossed in front of the body or held up as if creating a barrier to the outside) more personal (faces and eyes looking forward as if at a specific person in off-stage focus), and more concrete (a body saying “no,” creating a barrier between it and an invisible other, or keeping something at bay). We also noted that it took the white participants considerably longer to arrange their poses for this concept.

I then asked the group to draw on the corporeal evidence presented by our bodies to answer the question, “Based on the physical evidence we’ve made here, how are we, as a group, thinking about the word *racism* today?” We shared many answers to this question: it’s both abstract and concrete, it’s something done-to that is staved off, it’s something we struggle to understand, it’s a barrier, it is unwanted, it is something some of us push away and something some of us feel mixed-up in, it’s something that white and Black bodies experience differently. These descriptions all seem true of racism as social phenomenon, and their specificity and diversity speak to the power of Boal’s process to move from the concrete-bodily to the abstract-conceptual with startling efficiency. At least among the white bodies involved in the project, I think there was a tacit assumption that we were basically “on the same page” about race and racism, as well-read, engaged, self-described non-racists, and yet here we were struggling to describe racism in the very first exercise we entered into. This was a profound awareness for us right off the bat: a visceral reminder that we cannot presume to understand another person’s experience of racism, especially across racial lines.

In a debrief after this workshop, folks expressed a bit of shock about how quickly Image of a Word allowed us to “perform into” the heart of the matter and how profound the differences in the poses of this very first exercise seemed to us. Amy said, “When we moved through the first word, *awkward*, there were so clearly no differences in our interpretations; the bodies were very similar, so much that it felt forced and even silly to ask the question about differences across race. So I was really surprised when there was such a dramatic difference with ‘racism,’ and the way those differences showed up.” So what was this about? I put this question back to the group: what do these differences mean to us, what is the broader story here, why were they different? What

does it *mean*? The group stumbled through this moment, articulating that it “made sense” that racism was more abstract for white folks. Black cast members cited stories from their childhoods in which their parents explicitly taught them about racism and about having to work extra hard in this world to get ahead and white cast members recognized that we did not have these same conversations with parents.

Unification

Another key exercise from our workshops was an attempt at creating a unified image as an ensemble, fueled by my growing interest in creating a series of body-masks describing looking practices across racial lines. In that desire, I overlooked Boal’s directive in *Seeing What We Look* (*Games* 135) to the Joker that she specifically ask participants to ‘attempt’ unification, and to recognize that a total unification might not be possible or desirable for the group, so and they need not feel obliged to unify. When I did ask groups to create unified images, I first asked them to unify their images of *racism* in same-race groups. I used Boal’s suggestion that this was a slow process and was more about “seduction” than “imposing one’s own rhythm and movement on others” (*Games* 135), but by highlighting the ways in which our bodies were already socially divided by race, I resisted the impulse to create a too-easy unification that might ignore that social division in the delimited space of the rehearsal room (*Games* 135). This exercise proved especially uncomfortable, however, and the group spoke out against it. One member expressed a desire to display her own image up against that of the group mask.

Each group watched as the other bodies carefully and slowly tried to form themselves into an image that included at least one part of all the bodies in their group—a summary of images in one body. I reminded everyone that the exercise should be totally nonverbal and that the

indication that the pose is “done” should be that everyone stops moving. We could not help noticing that the Black bodies came again into a unified pose much faster than the white bodies: feet shoulder width apart, the body twisting to the right, the arms crossed in front of the face with closed, tight fists, as in Figure 5, what we later called the “Separatist Mask.”



Figure 5: The Separatist Mask

In contrast, the white bodies took a long time, struggling to find a unified image composed of their particularly complex and diverse individual images. The final mask, shown in Figure 6, stood on feet spread apart with knees together. It was hunched over at the waist, with the right hand pulling the head down and to the right; the left hand jutting out from the waist and curling back in on itself.

We described these masks in turn, with the various participants noting first that the bodies had been centered, but now the Black bodies were stretching high, standing up, while white bodies were bent over, low. Kyra said that the Black bodies seemed strong and stable now in this group



Figure 6: The Guilty Mask

expression, despite the term at hand still being “racism.” Illyse noted that the white bodies seemed even more off-balance, more awkward as a group image, and that the holding of the head seemed to connote “guilt” in a more illustrative way than any of the separate bodies had. Noting a sense of unspoken discomfort in the group, I asked everyone to shake these bodies off by literally shaking out their bodies, and prompted the group to discuss their experience of this exercise. Illyse said that she felt good about the group image, noting again the speed and sense of surety with which the group completed it. Lizzie said that she did not like the idea of unifying, that she felt like her pose was erased in the group image, and that even though she tried to actively reject some

elements of the shared mask, she could not seem to sway the group. She asked that if we did the exercise again, we agree that we would not stop the attempt at unification so early, that we keep seeking nonverbal agreement until everyone appears comfortable.

I thanked Lizzie for her comments and suggested we try a quick exercise to acknowledge her objection more fully in which we display our own individual understanding of the term, relating to it or distancing ourselves from the mask in a brief movement piece. I suggested we move back and forth between our own personal image (which could be different from the very first image we first each offered of *racism*, or not, as we pleased) and the group image. Most folks showcased which aspect of the group pose came from their own initial pose, while Lizzie's personal image was markedly different from the others. Rather than hunching over and turning-toward the self, she held her arms out in an unnatural, yet grasping way, and opened her eyes very wide. She commented later that this was about desire or jealousy rather than guilt.

Kyra added a pose in which she literally "rose above" the group mask, reaching a hand high above aspects of the original pose (one arm stretching high over one crossed arm instead of two arms crossed in front of the body) and up on tippy toes. Tisha noted that this pose was hard to maintain. When Illyse said, "Oooh that's interesting," and I asked her why, she said that there is a lot of talk about "rising above" racism, and yet that does not really do anything about racism *per se*, and might leave someone trying to achieve the goal of rising above it as "off balance," as in the image of Kyra's pose. Kyra understood her point, but explained that she mostly tried not to worry about racism, that it was kind of "old school," that she mostly was not trying to focus on it in her daily life and this worked for her.

Each person offered dual poses, and each time, the cast reflected back what they saw. Each saw their own images in the “multiple mirror of the gaze of others” as Boal proscribes (*Games* 175). This exercise, which had been made up on the spot to satisfy Lizzie’s complaint, became a touchstone as we moved through many image-making techniques in response to various terms and questions we posed each other throughout the process of making *Racy*. Since we did want to create cohesive, artistically interesting, repeatable images to use in the show (rather than making them up on the spot as one does in the IT process), we went ahead and sought physical unification of cast members’ initially individualized expressions. At one point, Ahmad noted that the unification process worked for us in a show about how we see other people because the process created visual stereotypes: “You find what people have in common, then exaggerate it—that’s pretty much the definition of a stereotype.” We hoped that by crafting stereotypes, we would force audiences to acknowledge the stereotypes they saw (or refused to see), but Lizzie’s modification served as a reminder that we do not all experience oppressions (or other phenomenon) in the same ways. I asked everyone to remember this when it came time to make choices about how to put these masks on stage: how might they shift, how might we show our own relationship to them, how might we avoid simply reaffirming stereotypes?

Mask Dancing: Half-a-Salsa

A key exercise from our workshop series (and one we have since shared with groups in community workshops) was a combination of exercises inspired by Boal’s “Walks” which we often used as a warm-up (*Games* 70), and two Image Games: “Games of mask and ritual” (*Games* 148-159), and “Furnish the empty space” (*Games* 142). Essentially, we created a full-body image of our relationship to our own race and then dynamised it by systematically applying the components of

the mask to various body parts. We first ran through a number of silly walks to warm up and to defamiliarize our everyday ways of moving, and then I asked everyone to keep walking while thinking about their relationship to their own race, and then to “put that in your feet as you walk around.” My directive was met with perplexed expressions. I said, “I know, that’s an odd request. Try not to let your editing brain come in and do too much analyzing; try to let your body respond as you think about your relationship to your race, whatever that is. Just explore some options if you can’t settle on one.” As I called out variations, I moved around the room amongst the cast participating in the techniques as well. I asked folks to move this physicalization of their “relationship to their own race” into their knees, their hips, their spines, their shoulders, their head, their arms. Finally, I asked everyone to draw on the physical vocabulary they had just created through experimentation and put together a little dance that expresses this relationship. I asked us all to think about this dance as half-a-salsa, and to try go about trying to dance with others, putting their half-a-salsa about their race together with everyone else’s. I said, “let the other movements affect yours a bit as you try to fit this together like a proper salsa, like a jigsaw puzzle.” The room filled with laughter as we tried these moves out on each other.

I remember my own dance particularly vividly: feet taking little mincing steps, trying to be ever so careful, going sideways and never forward or back, knees and hips fairly stiff, shoulders scrunched up, one elbow cutting forward, one arm in a gesture of searching or shrugging or giving up, my head cocked to the side, looking ahead with just the left eye. I danced with Illyse first. She was taking big loud steps, lifting her knees up high, moving forward and back. Her arms were moving fluidly, as if doing “the wave,” and her chin was down, eyes up, looking very determined and serious. Our attempts at fitting these together were hilarious and provocative for us. Her

pounding forward-and-back steps kept running into my sideways mincing steps and we never quite got those synched up. My elbow sticking out in front of me forced her to lean back away from it no matter what we did. We laughed uproariously when she said, “Your elbow is oppressing me.”

After everyone danced, we sat down to discuss the exercise. There was a hearty round of “Wow” and “That was amazing” “That was so interesting.” I pressed everyone to explain further. Amy admitted that it was really hard for her to conceptualize her own relationship to her race enough to put it into her body. This rang true for all the white participants, including myself. Sidney agreed, saying “I don’t think of myself as white, even though I know I am white, obviously.” She referred back to a moment at the beginning of our meeting when we’d discussed buying dance shoes as a group and when she had said, “[The dance website] has a lot of different styles in nude.” I said, “Wait, brown nude or peach nude?” We all laughed and Sidney shook her head at herself as she admitted she had not thought about it. “It’s like the nude shoes,” she said, “I think we are taught that or just assume whiteness is normal, whatever that means.”

As a group we described both the experience of creating and the visual effect of the white-body half-a-salsa on “My relationship to my own race:” uncertain, lost, floppy, sideways, puzzled weird, awkward, confused. White cast members struggled to identify our own relationships to our race and to define racism. In light of this exercise, I later offered a passage from bell hooks who asks,

Why is it so difficult for many white folks to understand that racism is oppressive not because white folks have prejudicial feelings about Blacks (they could have such feelings and leave us alone) but because it is a system that promotes domination and subjugation? (*Black Looks* 12)

The task of conceptualizing the arrangement of our bodies as a part of that system later became part of the way we made sense of a mask describing “whiteness” or “white guilt.”

While each of their dances were quite different, Black members reported having no trouble coming up with something to explore or express what their relationship to their race was (even though it was an admittedly abstract thing to put into movement). We described each of these dances separately. Illyse said, “I can’t imagine what it’s like to go around not aware of your race. I think so much about race, I can’t believe I didn’t realize that a lot of people, I mean white people, really don’t think about it, or get to not think about it. And I can’t believe I didn’t know you didn’t think about it. It’s really shocking.” I said that I did think about my own whiteness quite a bit, at least in recent years and thanks to my engagement in race scholarship, and yet I still struggled to conceive of whiteness, particularly my own whiteness. In my own dance, I tried to describe a desire to keep hold of the ugly history of the white race (the hand pointing back) while attempting to charge forward and cut through the mess despite it (the elbow pointing forward), but feeling a bit uncertain and wary of my own privilege (the mincing steps).

Sculpting

Another particularly productive exercise for us was derived from Boal’s Image of Word: illustrating a subject using other people’s bodies. The exercise calls on Boal’s description of “The modeling sequence,” particularly “the sculptor touches the model,” or “sculpting,” as we called it for short (*Games* 136-7). By our third workshop, we had decided to hold as many rehearsals as possible in public places and held several, including this one, at City Park in Baton Rouge. We thought this would be a good idea for generating interest in the project from folks outside the university and for simply appearing as a mixed-race group obviously having fun and making art together in a space that typically self-segregates. After a dummy word to learn the ropes of the exercise, I told the group I thought sculpting the terms “Blackness” and “whiteness” would be

interesting, but I was not sure who should sculpt whom. We decided to start with Black bodies sculpting “Blackness” onto white bodies and white bodies sculpting “whiteness” onto Black bodies, then move to a reversal of the prompts.

Two poses from this session interested us especially and later appeared in the show in more or less modified forms. The first was a depiction of “whiteness,” sculpted onto a white body by a Black cast member. In the pose, the body leans forward slightly from the hips, the left arm is positioned with the hand on the left hip, the chin tilts up while the eyes look down, and the right arm holds out a pair of glasses which the eyes look through at an invisible focal point. This pose elicited much visceral and vague verbal response from the cast of the “Wow, yes” “Huh, so interesting” and “That’s really powerful” variety. When pressed for more, folks declared that it was interesting to think of whiteness as a way of seeing, or as looking itself. I offered that the pose might suggest a subject looking at an object and that in this way it described whiteness as othering.

The other pose came out of an extension of the first exercise: I asked everyone to divide into same-race groups and come up with a prompt each group wanted to see the other group mold onto their bodies. After extensive deliberation on the prompt, the white cast members asked for the Black cast members to sculpt onto their bodies a response to the question “What does the white gaze or racist white gaze attempt to make of you?” We worked this question out by calling on the notion of the “male gaze” unto female bodies, and explained that as well. Tisha sculpted my body into the pose that struck us most: she leaned me over to the left, formed my left hand into a fan beside my face, pulled my right hip dramatically forward as if presenting my rear end, placed my right hand on my right hip, and finally, she squeezed my mouth so as to get me to form an exaggerated pout with my lips.

This image was extremely charged for all of us. I remember Illyse shaking her head in somber agreement and several white case members including myself looking at this pose with much discomfort. In our initial unpacking of this pose in the park, I reported to the group my own experience of feeling embarrassed about being stuck in the pose while a group of young children walked by as the cast described the body. They looked at me and laughed letting me know I was looking ridiculous. I felt ashamed and wanted say, "This isn't ME it's just an exercise we are doing!" But because my job at the moment was to stand there and allow the group to describe the image, I felt I could not move. Amy suggested then that we put the "white gaze" pose next to this one. Tisha jumped in and made the glasses-forward image while I took up the "presenting" pose again. Everyone laughed out loud. I said, "Why is this funny?" We were not sure, but someone ventured that it had something to do with the surprise of how well these poses fit together: one looking and one inviting looking.

Amy then suggested we reverse the images. Now, I stood in a "white" pose making an image we called "analysis," looking through my glasses with a hand on my hip at Tisha in a "Black" pose, making what we saw as a sexualized image. The group fell into an awkward silence, broken by an uncomfortable "whoa." Someone suggested we stop making this image. Certainly, no one dared to laugh. Shortly after this exercise, we sat to write down some reflections of the workshop. Ahmad wrote, "Why is it funny for a white woman to pretend to be a Black woman, but when a Black woman portrays a Black woman, it is no longer comedic?" No one managed to answer his question at the time, and that inability felt tense. About halfway through our process, the struggle to understand the juncture IT had brought us to left the group feeling momentarily strained.

Community Workshop

After several cast workshops, we felt we were onto something worth sharing. We appreciated the way IT had allowed us a platform from which to dive into a traditionally socially difficult conversation without necessarily having the responsibility of verbally articulating personal and political histories. Sometimes these interpersonal and transpersonal stories emerged, but often we got to *feel* our way through personal or social phenomena, free of the risk of saying the wrong thing. Though on some level, we acknowledged that the images we created came out of our respective experiences and thus expressed some degree of personal truth, we also treated them as impersonal artifacts for group deliberation. When our images were offered to the “multiple mirror gaze of others,” even the creator of the image got a chance to step back and consider his/her/zir own experience in light of everyone else’s—a rare glimpse when it comes to matters of race. In this way, IT helped us to “see” each other. Kyra in particular expressed her own evolving understanding of racism as a social rather than merely personal force throughout the process of devising the show.

Because the process felt so profound for us (albeit in ways we could not always put a finger on), we applied to offer the workshop as “Racy: An Image Theatre Workshop on Race and Racism in Black and White” at Baton Rouge Community College’s Arts Fest in March of 2015, just a month before the show was scheduled to open at LSU. Several cast members wanted to learn to lead various IT techniques for the community workshop, and we scheduled yet another special rehearsal to that end. We divided the leadership in that event equally amongst the four cast members. The strong group identification brimmed over into an explicitly activist project. The Baton Rouge Community College workshop was attended by about fifty people, with a nearly 50/50 Black/white ratio among attendees.

The prompts we offered elicited charged responses, particularly a sculpture exercise in which we asked several different participants to create statues representing “race relations in Baton Rouge.” One image depicted an interracial couple in which each set of “parents” appeared to reject the relationship. One Black woman adjusted this image to depict the Black “parents” as open to the relationship while the white “parents” remained unhappy. She claimed this was truer in her experience, arguing that because whiteness is culturally valued and Blackness is not, dating someone whiter or lighter-skinned is often seen as moving up in the world—even though it’s racist to think that way. Another “race relations in Baton Rouge” image was harder for the group to interpret.

Three Black bodies and three white bodies stood in pairs. In each pair, the white body was standing upright, while each of the Black bodies were arranged in lower to higher poses from left to right. A white body was facing away from the crouching Black body; then a white body was standing beside and facing the same direction as a hunched over Black body; then a white body was facing and looking directly at a standing Black body. A pair of white participants argued that the image depicted the history of the civil rights struggle, with Black folks working to be seen as equal and achieving that goal. As the group mulled this over, the sculptor, a Black woman, could not let this interpretation stand and shared her intention plainly:

This man, he’s Black and he’s beaten down, his people had no opportunities and he has no opportunities and he’s given up. The white man ignores him. This man in the middle, he’s doing okay, he’s working hard and staying afloat, his life is hard but he’s making it. The white body next to him is doing the same thing, same kind of job, but he’s one step ahead, that’s why he’s smiling. This Black man, he is bright and creative and doing powerful things but they don’t want him to succeed. They notice he is rising above his situation, his station, and they are trying to put him back in his place.

The participants looked at us organizers perhaps expecting us to affirm or deny this interpretation of reality, but we all simply nodded in acknowledgement of her perspective. When Illyse asked if anyone had another take on this particular image, no one did. The need to make sense of the differences that kept surfacing in the images and interpretations offered by Black and white cast members had reached a climax.

COMPOSITION

At the end of the workshops, we felt we had created at the very least a series of static poses that could help us to ignite curiosity and conversation the way they had for us. The eight poses we eventually decided upon brought Kochhar-Lindgren's comparison of TO work with Surrealism which I discuss in Chapter Two into focus. In each pose, "[T]he body is simultaneously located individually and collectively in its situational immediacy, and yet it proliferates into multiple hybrid bodies and hybrid spaces" (218). Each of us offered up different associations and interpretations of these masks for the multiple mirror gaze of the other, and yet we agreed on a name and a broad signification of each mask, many of which expanded to take on dual names and meanings as we used the masks on different bodies and in different situations. Ultimately, the masks were named: (a) The Separatist/"I don't see you, you don't see me; " (b) Reaching Out/The Unhelpful Helper; (c) Colorblind Mask/The Violence of Ignorance; (d) Resisting a Mask Mask/Resistance; (e) Black Sees Black; (f); White Guilt/Discomfort, (g) White Gaze and (f) Stereotype. In this section, I describe our work to name, understand, and deploy these masks.

The many acknowledgements of difference in terms of images and interpretations of the key images Black and white bodies made in the workshops felt significant to us, yet we noticed that our conversation about race remained mainly on the level of the body or the level of personal

experience. While these are useful starting points for any group to enter into a conversation about race, what seemed to be lacking right off the bat is a critical, or historical understanding of what was showing up in these bodies' different interpretations of this term. For example, we could all see the struggle of white bodies to convey "racism" with those same bodies; we could see similarities between and differences across raced bodies, and name those differences "concrete" and "abstract," we could offer memories about being oblivious to or embarrassed by our race. No doubt these descriptions were provocative and engaging, and left us all eager to do more work like this as well as to learn more: we called and texted each other and spoke together and separately to make sense of these moments. Frequently when I asked the cast "But *why* is this image so striking? Why are we all oohing and aahing over this?" We rarely came up with anything satisfying. Our creative kinesthetic work seemed wholly profound amongst our group, yet as we moved toward staging decisions, we discovered a sense of critical uncertainty.

A tension arose between our desire to make activism work and our ability to clearly express our findings in language. We came to understand this tension not as a weakness of IT, but rather as a great advantage: it ushered in a curiosity for cultural analysis arising directly out of participant experience. About mid-way through our process, I had had enough conversations outside of workshops with cast members struggling to unpack the embodied work we'd done that I felt we had bumped up against a wall where we needed a critical cultural vocabulary to help us to see a historical context of white supremacy and the structural reality of systemic racism that body work alone could help us to connect to, but not quite define. I spoke with two creative consultants for the show who I knew were well-versed in critical race theory and race politics, to ask a few

questions about where to start these conversations and what use we might make of the body-masks we were coming up with in the IT workshop process.

Because we came to this theory from a place of recognized struggle, we were particularly receptive to the perspective offered by critical theorists. We turned toward cultural studies vocabularies not expecting pre-fab answers to our questions, but to sift further through our material findings. As Jennifer Slack writes of Stuart Hall's understanding of the purpose of theory, "Successful theorizing is not measured by exact theoretical fit but by the ability to work with our always inadequate theories to help us move understanding 'a little further on down the road' (114). In this vein, we turned to several concepts from critical race and post-colonial theory to make sense of our kinesthetic discoveries and to guide our staging process. This "detour through theory" (283), in Stuart Hall's terms, began with a group discussion session in place of the usual theatre workshop and continued throughout our process in the form of conversations and shared electronic documents. In this section, I show how these critical conversations informed our staging choices.

Colorblind Racism and White Supremacy

I began our initial conversation by summarizing the conversations I'd had with various cast members. It seemed to me that we were excited about what we were creating: a series of "body-masks" which spoke to ways of being in or seeing from raced bodies, but worried about what this might be leaving out: an understanding of racism as systemic rather than only interpersonal. I then put the question to the group: to what degree did everyone think we needed to address racism as systemic rather than interpersonal, were we doing that, and how might we do it more so if we wanted to? To help us answer this question, I returned to an understanding of systemic

racism from Critical Race Theorist Eduardo Bonilla-Silva which Tisha had sent out to the group as a text for us all to consider during the workshops. In *Racism without Racists*, Bonilla-Silva notes that despite the fact that few whites claim to be racist, and are most likely to assert they “‘don’t see any color, just people’” (1), race is a determining factor in the United States when it comes to a variety of social standings. He calls on a variety of extensive research to back up his claim that Black folks are more likely to be impoverished, are likely to earn significantly less money for the same jobs as white folks, receive less overall and a lower quality education, live in homes worth less than those of whites, receive poor treatment in commercial transactions, suffer from racial profiling by police and a host of other injustices (Bonilla-Silva 2). After listing these inequities he asks, “How is it possible to have this tremendous degree of racial inequality in a country where most whites claim that race is no longer relevant?” (Bonilla-Silva 2). He describes this phenomenon as part of a new racial ideology he calls *colorblind racism* in which whites craft powerful explanations and justifications for racial inequity, which work to “exculpate them from any responsibility for the status of people of color” (Bonilla-Silva 2). Despite colorblind racism seeming a “softer” sort of social force compared to the overt Jim Crow era racism, it shields whites from seeming racist while racism continues to operate powerfully within social institutions from law to higher education.

Though our conversation spiraled in many directions in relationship to this offering, several key ideas emerged. The first was that we felt our body-masks could certainly work to reject colorblindness and insofar as this phenomenon is part and parcel of the success of continued institutional racism, that work to develop the masks in this capacity was worth doing. Perhaps they could be made to show how seeing or not seeing another’s social situation rippled out into

tangible social realities. We liked the idea that the masks were open to interpretation, which we hoped would lead folks to an uncomfortable place where they were forced to confront their own ways of looking. It was important for all of us to ground broader notions of racism in the corporeal bodies of the cast and the audience. Even so, the next idea we came to was that it was worth it to go ahead and recognize some of the statistical disparities between the races and even to stage some of the theory we had considered, just to make sure we were not being so “artsy-fartsy” about the topic as to be opaque. While we hoped the masks would communicate on many layers, there were a few things we felt needed verbal articulation in case anyone was not convinced of the reality of racial inequity. Ahmad volunteered at this juncture to create a video piece for the show he later titled “A Last Supper” in which he offers, in part, statistical information about the relationship between race and poverty and the double oppression of Black women in the workforce. The video echoed the spare aesthetic of *Racy*: a Black-and-white colorscape, and still poses found in the live elements of the show.

Additionally, we had been struck over and over by the white cast members’ difficulties with conceptualizing whiteness and now started to speak of this inability as an aspect of colorblind racism. As one cast member explained, “Colorblind racism seems innocuous. But not engaging in race politics, even not seeing whiteness, is a form of violence.” This realization shaped the way we performed the “colorblind” mask we created for the show. In one of the opening scenes, each cast member strikes a pose and describes it strictly on the level of the body (mimicking the first piece of Boal’s IT process). The colorblind mask monologue follows:

The left foot is forward, its heel peeling off the ground
The right foot is flat, stepping back, the leg tense, straight, an uneven base
The torso twists to the right
The weight moves to the back leg

The face turns to the right while the gaze focuses forward
The left arm extends in front of the body, fingers splayed wide
The right arm bends at the elbow resting on the bridge of the nose
The left eye is obscured; the right eye peeks through slightly.

When we introduced this mask, just as when we initially created it, it leaned away from what it attempts not to see, while continuing to “peek through” – a nod, for us, at the fact that we do indeed continue to see in color whether we purport to or not.

After our reading on colorblind racism, we began to conceptualize this mask as much more aggressive, understanding colorblindness as a both a function and support system of white supremacy—another term we slowly began to take on. I offered Francis Lee Ansley’s definition of white supremacy not as a referent to white hate groups, but as

an economic and cultural system in which whites overwhelmingly control power and material resources, conscious and unconscious ideas of white superiority and entitlement are widespread, and relations of white dominance and non-white subordination are daily reenacted across a broad array of institutions and social settings. (592)

In light of this growing understanding of white supremacy, we continually reworked the mask throughout the show to demonstrate the aggressiveness of “colorblindness” in several scenes.

In a scene called the “Hoodie Dance,” for example, after eight red hoodies were carefully lain out on the floor by Black cast members, an audio compilation of major news programs denying the role of racism in recent police brutality cases played while each white cast member walked through the “graveyard” wearing a different “white” mask. Black cast members worked to block the white masks from stepping on the hoodies. When the colorblind mask walked through, its feet stomped loudly despite being rather off-balance, and the sharp angle of the elbow across the eyes lead the pose rather than trailed it, making the mask appear to “cut” through the solemn scene. Working with this mask exemplified

Hall's notion of a detour through theory, as we began by making a physical pose which described white cast members' understanding of their own "whiteness," wound up seeing and naming this mask "colorblind racism" after considering Bonilla-Silva's article, and ultimately changed the material presentation of the mask we'd made as we continually evolved toward thinking of this orientation as a function of white supremacy rather than merely ignorant or uncomfortable.

We also conceived of a piece along these lines called "Blondie and the Blondettes," in which three Black and two white performers created a dance meant to describe cultural appropriation and/or gentrification (we hoped it would read doubly). Repeatedly, the Black performers built intricate dancelike group movements in one part of the stage, only to be copied and displaced by the white performers, who exaggerated their movements and played them up to the crowd. The white performers used the "white gaze" mask to both scrutinize, distance themselves from, and to "steal" the original movements all at once. We hoped the contestation over stage space and the continued displacement of the Black bodies until they were finally "run off the stage," would speak to the nature of white dominance of public spaces, whether creative, corporate, or domestic. After this dance number, the "Blondettes" were called back onstage by Lizzie, now playing "TV Host," who informs the audience that "it's that time of the show" when the Blondettes perform an impromptu dance based on audience prompts supposedly gleaned before the show. Tonight's prompt...opens envelope..."What is it like being white?" The Blondettes try out a few tentative moves to answer the question, but ultimately run off the stage unable to do so.

One white cast member continued to process this mask long after the show closed, writing about it as part of a presentation on our experience of the show at the National Communication

Association Conference in 2015. I quote her thoughts here at length since they so clearly document her process of shedding dysconsciousness:

One of the body images that came out of the Image of a Word exercise was what we later called the Color Blind Mask. We came to [the first version of the mask] entirely intuitively based on the prompt: what is WHITENESS to you? I should first start by saying that coming into the show, I saw myself as a nonracist. And if there is one thing I learned from the show, it is that there is so much that I do not know about Race, and racism at work within my own belief system. This was particularly true about the concept of being colorblind. The falsehood of a modern-day state of colorblindness gained support with my investigation of racism throughout the show, especially institutionalized racism that makes it impossible to deny differences in how bodies of color are seen. Once I began to notice my errors, and my awareness of the web of Race issues began to grow, I became very self-conscious throughout the devising process of my ignorance of issues that might offend my fellow cast members. I found that throughout the show, my performance of the Colorblind Mask became progressively violent. I think this violence came from the discovery of this phenomenon within my own thoughts, and my subsequent desire to forcefully reject it. My original thoughts of, “I don’t see color” became more and more exposed as an overly optimistic tall tale. I owe this revelation to the process and to a scene I composed in which I interwove lines from Linda Martin Alcoff’s book *Visible Identities*.

I gave Lizzie the task of sifting through the first two chapters of *Visible Identities* to pull a few lines about race and visibility that struck her to incorporate into an early scene in the show. She selected and performed the following as part of this scene:

The physical features conventionally used to differentiate the races are almost laughably insignificant: skin tone, hair texture, shape of facial features...Thus, the elimination of race would seem to require only a retooling of our perceptual apparatuses. But here, I want to insert a worry: some white folks have declared, no doubt prematurely, that they have already reached utopia. While the rest of us continue to see in color, they declare themselves to be color-blind, to not notice whether people are ‘Black, white, green or purple.’ (Alcoff 199)

Lizzie’s experience is emblematic of the powerful combination of creative/kinesthetic IT work with theory/cultural studies.

The problem of essentializing

Another significant part of our detour through theory was an answer to a growing question as a group about what we wanted our audiences to read from our various masks. Up to this point, we had generated five masks we found compelling: a mask that was the result of the unification of Black cast members' response to the prompt "Blackness," both white and Black cast-generated "racism" masks mentioned earlier, the analyzing-white-body with glasses held out, and the sexualized Black body mask. I offered the group a few thoughts from George Yancy's book *Black Bodies, White Gazes: The Continuing Significance of Race* and offered by a colleague and creative consultant to the show who drew on Yancy as well.

I let the cast know I was offering these thoughts because they seemed especially pertinent to the masks we had created so far, the nature of using masks within this topic, and also because I hoped they would help us figure out how to deploy our masks ethically. Yancy argues that the Black body is a continually essentialized one: inscribed by whiteness with monstrous, less-than, unruly, and/or hypersexual qualities. He writes, "The corporeal integrity of my Black body undergoes an onslaught as the white imaginary, which centuries of white hegemony have structured and shaped, ruminates over my dark flesh and vomits me out in a form not in accordance with how I see myself" (Yancy 2). He understands Blackness as constituted and configured by and in relation to the normalizing hegemony of whiteness and the white gaze (Yancy 3). He works this reasoning through the phenomenon of the "elevator effect," in which a white woman signals fear of his Black body upon his entrance into an elevator she stands in. She does not really see him, rather she sees the mask of his Blackness, with its historically inscribed

blameworthiness (Yancy 5). Further, he argues that even if this same woman might understand racism to be “wrong” intellectually, it may “still have a hold on her lived body (Yancy 5).”

Ultimately, this conversation helped us to have a more sophisticated understanding of the “white gaze” and also to understand the hunch we’d been having all along that the interpersonal experience of racism, often covert and visceral, was connected to systemic racism. I learned as well that some group members did not have a sense of what “systemic racism” was as others spoke about it. We had to back up and draw on Yancy again for clarification here. Once we were on the same page, we began articulating variations on the idea that when white folks see a person of color as a stereotype and thereby fail to see that person’s full humanity, an investment in Black issues as social issues is impossible. We recognized the danger of using body-mask—an essentializing gesture—to critique the process of essentializing others, but felt it was possible.

In response to this discussion, Illyse asked, “so what would a body-mask look like that refused to be essentialized?” A new mask grew out of this question, one we finally called the “Resisting-a-Mask Mask,” or more simply, “Resistance,” which Kyra primarily played in the show. After playing with this notion as a group, we settled on a mask that refused essentializing, and even refused to be a body. In an opening “line up” dance, the resistance mask continually stepped out of line, cut up with the audience, or made fun of the other masks. When the masks introduced themselves one by one, Kyra was positioned at the end of the line. When it was Kyra/Resistance’s turn to speak, to show the audience how to build the mask, she instead stared down the audience with a proud look walked off the stage.

Colonialism and Stereotyping

The last major piece of critical theory session was a more in-depth discussion of the “White Gaze” mask set against the sexualized “Stereotype” mask. Several cast members expressed continued curiosity about why these masks so disturbed us. I called on Homi Bhabha’s understanding of racial stereotypes to navigate group and one-on-one conversations in this regard. We had not up to this point spoken in terms of colonizing and colonized bodies, yet I waded verbally through Bhabha’s ideas in “The Other Question” about the functioning of stereotypes in a process of fetishization, in which the colonial gaze attempts to fix the other as an object, one that wavers between presence and absence (Bhabha 76). He understands racial stereotypes as ambivalent in that they represent both a fixation and a disavowal of difference (Bhabha 77). These ideas found traction with some cast members more than others, but ultimately led to the creation of the scene “So...SAE...Whoa” in which we set out to explore the ways stereotypes loom in our daily conversations.

In “So...SAE...Whoa,” one Black and one white actor sat on stools engaging in a bit of dialogue after watching a video clip from a recent scandal in which University of Oklahoma chapter of the Sigma Alpha Epsilon fraternity engages in racist chants on a school trip. The dialogue is extremely spare (see below) making much of the acting nonverbal:

AMY: It's so
KYRA: Right
AMY: Bad
KYRA: Very
AMY: Oof
KYRA: Just a few weeks ago
AMY: No way
KYRA: Just a few weeks
AMY: That's so
KYRA: Yeah

AMY: Shocking
KYRA: Mmm
AMY: No?
KYRA: I mean
AMY: No?
KYRA: Not really.

During this conversation, another two Black and white actors stood on boxes behind their respective counterparts, as in Figure 7. We cycled through the various masks as if to reveal what the speaking actors were “really” thinking/seeing/saying.



Figure 7: SAE

My hope was that this scene would express the ambivalent nature of stereotypes and to explore that ambivalence by inviting audiences to notice what they inferred from the masks we offered up. The staging of the scene suggests a direct relationship between the two Black bodies and the two white bodies, and indeed the task of the actors using masks was to display what we thought the speaking actor was feeling or sensing or seeing—and yet the relationship was ultimately

one of ambivalence. We felt the scene acknowledged that both white and Black persons bring various layers of racial consciousness to any given conversation about race, whether those are acknowledged or not, and that we continually attempt to “fix” the other by comparing them against racial stereotypes even in the midst of everyday conversation. Still, the staging left a lot of room for interpretation. We finally decided that it did not matter if audiences understood precisely what the actors understood, as we hoped the scene asked viewers to interrogate their own tendencies to essentialize the other as they struggled make sense of what each pose meant to them in relationship to each speaking body.

One of the scenes we created in hopes of speaking to the matter of essentialization was a latter scene we called “System Break Down.” Derived from Boal’s exercise called “the machine of rhythms” (*Games* 94), two players at a time entered the stage in a mask they had not yet performed in (which in many cases meant a switching of the white-derived and Black-derived masks) and dynamized the masks—in this case, giving them walks and new ways of moving alone and together. For example, Amy entered the stage working the “I don’t see you, you don’t see me,” or “Separatist” mask, arms crossed at the wrists, hands balled into fists, legs very straight. She moved the legs in a stiff march making much noise with her feet. Illyse worked the “White Guilt/Discomfort” mask, a very complicated, curled over, cramped position the white bodies had made in response to the prompt “racism.” Throughout most of the show, the “Separatist” mask had been used to convey a sense of non-engagement or invisibility, while the “Guilt” mask had been used concretely to show white awkwardness when talking about racism or white self-reflection. In “System Break Down,” however, Amy worked the separatist mask as an aggressive one, charging into Illyse’s depiction of the guilt mask as terribly scared and cowed (rather than self-

reflective). For some cast members, this was a fascinating take on each of these masks—exposing the rigidity of the racial separatist position and the fear of the other that informs white guilt.

Yet while this scene was rich in visual appeal thanks to its complexity, such a detailed interpretation of this moment could only have come from our incredibly involved staging and reflection process. In fact, as we were soon to find out, such was the case with many of the scenes in *Racy*. The profound desire for activism we had achieved through our kinesthetic devising process, our experiences teaching the IT method at Baton Rouge Community College, and our newfound critical precision combined to make an extremely visually dense show that delighted some audience members, but left many others feeling left out of the conversation into which we meant to invite them.

REFLECTIONS AND RESPONSES

In the opening scene, “Welcome,” Illyse and I explained our intentions for the show and invited audience members to stay afterward to use the show as an artifact around which to have a conversation about race, racism, and social justice. Every night, at least half of the audience (usually about twenty-five or thirty people) stayed to speak with each other. Often, this conversation continued well beyond the allotted thirty minutes, extending into the parking lot outside the Black Box and the hallways at Coates Hall. Consistently, this group was a 50/50 Black and white mixed race group. We were happy to find a shared sense of urgency between ourselves and our audience members about the need to talk about race and racism. Folks expressed hurt, fear, frustration, memories, family histories, and hopes. Many audience members expressed rarely or never sharing thoughts about racism in mixed race groups and reported a sense of relief or even elation upon doing so.

My sense of these well-attended and energetic talkbacks is that our show did not allow the feeling of catharsis Boal so warns against in *Theatre of the Oppressed*. The overall aesthetic of the show emerged from a seeming contradiction—a visual density grounded in the cast’s increasingly sophisticated understanding of critical race concepts and a consistently abstract, movement-oriented method. However, the talkbacks let us know that this sense of density combined with abstraction frustrated some audience members, especially those who were less familiar with critical race conversations either on the personal or theoretical level. Several white and Black audience members who expressed a desire to hear more verbal and/or narrative aspects in the show from white voices in particular. Our sense as a cast was that whiteness was indeed featured, particularly the notion of white privilege and white refusal to acknowledge racism, and also that some of the verbal moments these audience members considered “Black” pieces were really “everyone” pieces. We acknowledged that a lot of the work of addressing whiteness in the show happened in movement work rather than in text—something we thought spoke to the unspoken and insidious nature of white supremacy, albeit in a highly metaphorical way.

Students in the Communication Department’s Performance of Literature classes that Spring wrote responses papers to the show. They were complimentary of the show as a whole, but students mostly offered a very general treatment of “racism” as the show’s theme. Deep as I was in the process, I craved feedback on the highly particularized choices we’d made about the connections between interpersonal and systemic racism, and therefore found some of these disappointing at the time. I think now that I was hoping for too much, as the responses were actually quite thoughtful. This excerpt from a colleague’s student’s paper is indicative of many:

I think they did a beautiful job presenting the issue of racism, and succeeded in enlightening the audience and opening our eyes and our minds to the issue. It’s something

that we are all aware exists and is happening in our everyday lives and something that saturates our culture and society, but this performance was able to centralize it and open it up to a core issue at an individual level that some of us may not even have realized occurs in our everyday experiences.

The student does not use the sophisticated language we were using, but I think she does key into our analysis about the relationship between racism at the “individual level” and the kind of racism that “saturates our culture.”

The cast met several times after the show to digest feedback we’d received since the show closed and to think toward a second draft. Aside from a handful of particularly thoughtful responses from individuals who were rather invested in race politics in their lives or careers, we gathered that the show was generally thought of as engaging, but hard to access. Descriptors that came up a lot were in the order of: “difficult,” “weird,” “mysterious.” When pressed, many of these same audience members did indeed have interpretations of various scenes that aligned with our own, but they did not feel confident voicing those interpretations for the most part. It is interesting to me now that despite all the care we had taken to articulate our experiences as a cast, we made a show which mainly spoke with images.

Whiteness, and white supremacy in particular, had been hard for us to talk about as a cast. While we attempted to show the difficulty of acknowledging whiteness as well as the pervasiveness of white ignorance and white supremacy, some of our choices remained especially opaque for audiences who were not versed in conversations about race or fluent in reading performance art. At worst, we inadvertently reinscribed the insidious invisibility of whiteness by creating what once audience member called a “Black play” directed (sort of) by a white woman. We also decided that my attempt in “Classy Statues” and other areas of the script to acknowledge my own position as a white, middle class director of a piece on race by directing the show aloud as we performed was

similarly opaque for most audience members. In our post-show meetings, we resolved to correct the perceived racial imbalance in textual passages as well as making using more of the language from our process in the final product to help audience members feel a part of the “in group” we had so strongly established in the cast.

Ultimately, as profound as the experience of using IT to put on *Racy* was for us as a cast, with the exception of our most invested audience members, we were not sure the general audience “got it” in the specific ways we’d hoped. Still, there is something to be said about this sort of conceptual frustration; indeed, we felt we had come full circle in our experiment with IT. Because the show was artistically strong and at the very least *appeared* to be thematically dense (with all its complexity of staging), audience members—just as we had in the development of the show—craved the words to describe both what they had seen and what they felt in their daily lives. Of course many audience members needed no assistance in describing or analyzing their experiences in response to the show. But I did notice that when audience members floundered or struggled to name certain of their experiences, cast members seemed to feel comfortable offering conceptual frameworks like “systemic racism” or “white supremacy” in ways that moved the conversation forward. While the post-show audience talkbacks featured many silences, hesitations, and struggles to articulate uncomfortable truths or questions, and while the show as an artifact of race relations soon dropped out of the spotlight, a rare public conversation on race in a group mixed-race strangers was, at least, getting started. Each night, we went well over the allotted thirty minutes. The conversations continued into the hallway, the parking lot, Facebook, my living room. Who knows where they might be moving now.

CHAPTER 6 CONCLUSION

REVIEW

The previous chapters examine my use of Image Theatre (IT)—a set of participatory theatre techniques from Augusto Boal’s Theatre of the Oppressed (TO) method—as a collaborative performance composition tool. I reflect on three case studies in which I experimented with the method as a director of performances for public audiences in very different contexts: a high school Black History Month program, a secondary workshop series, a theatrical performance in a university setting on plastic pollution, and a community workshop and theatrical performance on interracial communication and racism in both university and arts festival settings. Throughout, I insist that adding a specific artistic goal and an explicit engagement with cultural analysis to the participatory IT process constitutes an arts practice which strives toward balancing what Dwight Conquergood calls the three As of Performance Studies: artistry, analysis, and activism.

Ultimately, I find that IT makes room for responding to the contingencies of particular groups and that creating an artistic production in tandem with others and with cultural analysis is a particularly sensitive and salient form of theatrical activism. I show throughout how linking personal experiences to cultural analysis builds bridges between embodied knowledge and broad social structures in a way that enables more effective participation in actions toward TO’s stated goal of social change. I hold that practitioners cannot assume we know in advance how artistry, analysis, and activism fit together and what kind of balance is appropriate at a given time with a given community, but that IT can function to reveal how to best balance those tensions in the context of performance composition. Below, I summarize my findings from each chapter and offer a list of suggestions for practitioners interested in using IT to create social justice works for the

stage. I then situate IT's as a vital part of critical performative pedagogy, paying particular attention to how it might be used specifically to address the topics of racism and environmental justice. Lastly, I consider additional applications and implications of this work.

In the first chapter, I offer an overview of Boal's IT as part of TO. I review literature pertaining to Boal's image-making techniques and find that while IT is rarely considered in its own right, TO scholars tend either (a) to affirm its potential for connecting participant experience to broad ideological concerns without explaining precisely how this happens or (b) to call this same potential into question on the grounds that participants tend to remain in a personal narrative mode. While Boal intends his exercises to be Marxist in nature via their insistence on material realities, I address some of Boal's critics who argue that *Theatre of the Oppressed* often fails to meet this aim in practice. I end the chapter by further clarifying the contributions of this study in light of this review of scholarly literature.

In the second chapter, I review Dwight Conquergood's call for performance studies researches to engage methods of inquiry that keep artistry, analysis, and activism in balance. I consider how each of the "three As of performance studies" are part and parcel to IT. I discuss my own interpretation of in these categories as well and identify my particular investments in theatrical aesthetics, critical cultural studies, and participatory pedagogy. I argue that because IT is an extremely accessible exercise, it can function to propel a cast's commitment to activism by way of its activation of a precise critical understanding in the pursuit of a particular artistic product.

In the third chapter, I reflect on my use of IT as a white director of a Black History Month program in a racially tense middle and high school setting southern Louisiana. I demonstrate how working toward a public performance nudged participants to call for clarity in conversations about

race and racism within the school. I affirm IT's facilitative nature and its ability to draw out participant knowledge. I note ways IT unveiled a strained citizenship in the school community, as well as how it operated as a form of activism to complicate and enrich that same community by way of an analytical and artistic performance-making process.

The third chapter reviews my use of IT in a multi-tired performance project called *Sacred Waste* in which I used the method to engage participants in artistic work and conversations about single-use plastic pollution. I show how IT helped me to manifest my strong artistic vision for the show while continuing to honor participant experience and to bolster shared ownership of the project. I speculate here about the tension between analysis and artistry in particular.

In Chapter Five I discussed *Racy*, a theatrical show I collaboratively created along with seven other adult cast members. I described my own and my cast's struggles to have specific, critical conversations alongside compelling kinesthetic images made in IT workshops in response to prompts pertaining to race and racism. I showed how looking to critical cultural scholars in order to be clear about our messages enriched our performance composition experience. The fifth chapter considers the implications of this particular group's concern with analysis and how this element challenged our goal of creating an artistic performance that would alter our audiences' beliefs.

IT AS A PERFORMANCE COMPOSITIONAL TOOL

Recommendations for Practitioners

Rather than position IT as a guaranteed method for performance success, I offer it as a set of tools for finding out and operationalizing what is most important for a particular community in the process of staging a public performance while striving toward a balance of artistry, analysis, and

activism. While I review my particular practices of and sometimes minor modifications to IT in detail in previous chapters, I list them here as a way to both summarize and begin to codify these strategies for use by others:

*Approaching workshops as practice for a final public performance: Moving from an exploratory mode toward a specific artistic product tends to drive critical curiosity and further cultivate an interest in activism amongst participants.

*Including a thorough warm-up: In my own artistic practice, I most often move through the stages of knowing the body, making the body expressive, and theatre as language as Boal has prescribed. I am often particularly methodical about doing so in the initial workshops with a new cast when we are in the early stages of group formation and such democratic methods are most appropriate.

*Not referring to the work in terms of oppressor/oppressed: If my aim is not to assume the role of "savior," to entrench students' or others' perception of themselves as lacking, or to imply that the most interesting outcome of our work is to identify oneself as a victim (or victimizer), it may be best practice *not* to adopt Boal's nomenclature of "Theatre of the Oppressed."

*Prompting participants to make images of abstract concepts: In addition to making images of concrete settings like "your school" or "the contents of your trashcan," I often ask participants to make images of highly abstract words (such as "history," "greed," or "whiteness") in order to encourage grappling with these concepts to discover how clear (or not) we are about them.

*Offering topic-specific, pre-planned prompts: Boal often asks participants to think of an oppression they experience and then to suggest prompts for sculpting. Although I do often encourage participants to suggest prompts once we have experimented with a few I have offered, I

think it is important to craft prompts that are carefully designed to encourage participants to interrogate themselves and to engage with complex ideas they may not be eager to look at at first.

*Encouraging participants to exaggerate and extend their poses: Nudging participants toward full commitment of their physical poses within images works on several levels to enhance the IT process. Such commitment increases energy, forces the search for clarity, and calls for abstract images rather than “everyday” images, which in turn offer more room for interpretation when those images are held up to the multiple mirror gaze of others.

*Continually asking for clarification from participants about their understanding of images: I often pressed participants for more information about their reactions to images: Why does this strike you? What does this mean to you? How exactly do you relate? Why do you think our poses are all this way (or not that way)?

*Allowing struggle and confusion to build before offering expert voices by way of explanation, including my own: The deeper a group can plunge into uncertainty and poke around in that space a while by making yet more images and probing those images even when explanations for them do not come readily, the better critical voices are received.

*Asking cast to find and share research about their questions and concerns: Some of the concepts that “stuck” the most with various cast members were those brought in by their peers rather than by me as the director.

*Taking a “detour through theory.” Including sessions in the rehearsal process in which participants read and discuss material that addresses their questions and concerns from the workshop process. In cases where I did not know where to look for these voices, I asked colleagues whom I knew would.

*Using levels of vocabulary appropriate to participant age and relative interest in critical theory: Like everything else, the critique piece is contingent and should respond to the needs of the participants.

*Participating in warm-ups and other techniques along with the cast: by allowing the exercises and games to apply to and affect me, I take the same risk as cast members as well as model an full engagement physically, intellectually, and emotionally.

The IT Aesthetic

I also want to speculate further on the aesthetic characteristics of IT when it is used as a staging device. While IT is, as I have insisted, highly flexible as a composition tool, I have noticed a few aesthetic motifs that surfaced in each of these public performances and that I think are germane to the IT process. I list here a few aesthetic similarities amongst each of the shows considered in this project that I think emerged from IT rather than my own directorial modus operandi. First, I maintain that IT lends itself to a stylized aesthetic that in turns lends itself to social critique. I have located IT within the history of the stylized theatre traditions of Myerhold and Brecht to show how the sort of stylization IT operates within serves to elucidate broad social patterns as well as intrapersonal experience. Static poses infused with meaning thanks to the multiple mirror of the gaze of others leads to staging choices that highlight social norms through symbolism and gest. Second, IT work tends to produce highly kinesthetic, movement, dance, and/or body-based motifs. The significant role the body plays in the composition process shows up in the final product.

Third, IT lends itself to a final product that includes audience involvement. Each of the three shows has different degrees of audience involvement that came out of what we valued in

each. The Black History Month program, where activism was most vital for participants, featured the most audience-involvement, as a fully interactive “living museum.” In *Sacred Waste*, where creativity reigned above other concerns, the audience involvement served the total aesthetic: audience members dressed in costumes and played rattles along with the live musicians. In *Racy*, where critique was key for participants, the cast chose to involve the audience by inviting them to sit down and talk about the show as an artifact of culture.

Fourth, IT work tends to refuse catharsis in the spirit of TO. In each public performance considered here, the stylized aesthetic left audiences with a sense that something remains unresolved, a sense that grows out of the impulse toward action rather than passivity embedded in IT. I think this lack of resolution operated on the cast as well. In *Racy*, the openness of the show and the frustration many of the cast felt about communicating with the audience perhaps played a part in leading four of the show’s actors to propose further performance projects: two applied to direct in the HopKins Black Box’s next season (who had not directed before being in *Racy*) and two others reported pursuing further performance arts projects addressing the topic race in their local communities. Further experiments with IT will no doubt produce a richer understanding of the possibilities for IT as an aesthetic in its own right.

IT AS CRITICAL PERFORMATIVE PEDAGOGY

Engaging Performativity with IT Practice

While cultural studies often exposes historical accounts of social patterns, IT relies on embodied subjective experience as key to understanding the way social actors negotiate discursive forces. The act of creating an image encourages the performer to recognize her own historical positionality as both actor and observer of images. I concur with Mieke Bal's position that the

visceral and visual are intertwined, believing that we "...should be especially attentive to the multi-sensory aspect of learning, its active nature and its inextricable mixture of affective, bodily and cognitive components" (25). IT insists on a phenomenological approach emphasizing the subjectivity of the observer and the observed, while cultural studies helps us to examine better the intersections of power and politics in those images. IT is a practice of defamiliarizing looking; we are asked to create strange images of everyday experiences and then to reflect on them, understanding everyday looking as what visual culture scholar W.J.T. Mitchell calls a "cultural activity" in need of critical defamiliarization. Theorizing this sort of embodied minutia as illumination of social reality "departs from identifying oppression in terms of specific media or even broad practices...and pursues oppression and liberation within actual practices and situations in which these media or practices are deployed" (Alpers 37). I find a particular efficacy in this combination of kinesthetic and reflective epistemic modes.

I have found that moving bodily toward critically understanding reality as a collective is especially efficacious pedagogically and that image-making in particular offers a concrete way to examine, negotiate, and even reconfigure the performance of self in light of social norms. Making an image of a concept or one's relationship to a concept is essentially a process of creating a full body mask which participants may step into and out of as they measure themselves against it as a concrete entity. In this vein, images serve as an interesting metaphor for Judith Butler's notion of performativity (1). Butler has named the stylized repetition of acts that constitute the illusion of an abiding gender identity "performativity." Since the publication of her work on gender performativity, Butler and others have utilized this concept for thinking about everyday performances of race, ethnicity and class, as well as gender. Butler's work extends to the realm of

human behavior Derrida's argument that writing is fundamentally citational. For Butler, whether we repeat or react against cultural norms, our actions necessarily refer to the historical sedimentation of those norms and values, which are embedded in social conventions governing how one "ought" to perform one's gender, race, ethnicity, or class.

I argue that IT is a way to make visible the performativity of identity and behavior. Unlike everyday behavior, which is typically habitual, the "doing" of Image Theatre is entirely self-conscious: rehearsed, and often re-rehearsed. Therefore, in the doing of such performance, we encounter explicit possibilities of doing culture *differently*. As Meyerhold writes, "The mask is capable of hiding beneath it more than two conflicting images. The two faces of Harlequin are two opposite poles. Between them is an endlessly large number of shades and variations" (qtd. in Moody 864). IT asks participants to acknowledge how they wear, maintain, and see the endless variations of social masks. To practice IT is to acknowledge performativity, where (as in Butler's conception of gender), character is what one *does*, not what one *is*. Kochlar-Lindgren writes of this possibility within IT:

In creating a body-to-body exchange, perceptual and spatial differences are inhabited and highlighted in the format of simultaneity. As participants shift from pose to pose, they gain facility in taking on different bodies, different masks thus producing new vectors of subjectivation." (222)

Philip Auslander echoes this sentiment when he writes, "the Boalian body never comes to rest in a neutral state; rather, the point is for the spect-actor to be able to move from one [image] mask to another while retaining a critical distance from all masks" (*Playing* 131). My project articulates how a particular performance practice can challenge performativity, how a moment in the rehearsal process can be ripe with opportunities for students and teachers to consider and even reconfigure embodied expressions of ideological realities.

Because of the way it can move participants from a focus on self to other, from identification to empathy, from lived experience to cultural analysis, I position IT as a vital tool for critical performance pedagogy. I maintain that grounding critical pedagogy in kinesthetic work helps us to turn toward difficult personal truths and social fears, and that IT provides an accessible way to do so. While Pineau asserts performance methodologies as a fruitful means by which to achieve critical pedagogy's well-established aims of democratic engagement, social justice, and the critical examination of power (42), and much insightful work has been done to recognize the way the body-in-performance can work toward critical pedagogy's general goals of working toward social justice, less has been written about the use of performance methodologies specifically in the context of anti-racism work or environmental justice. In the next sections, I speculate on the application of IT to these particular areas.

Engaging IT as Anti-Racist Performative Pedagogy

By foregrounding race, racism, and white supremacy, critical race theory's "overall goal is the eradication of racism as part of the wider objective to eliminate all forms of oppression," often via "analyses [of] social interaction and policy in its social, historical and political context in order to render especially covert racism visible" (Chadderton 43). IT is an excellent tool for accessing critical race consciousness as outlined by this theory. One of CRT's key strategies for dismantling racist structures is counter-storytelling, which "foregrounds the experiential knowledge of communities of color in order to counter majoritarian narratives that have been normalized and circulated by dominant groups as the only legitimate view of reality" (Buras 1). It should be obvious that IT can help us to access such "counter-stories." I find that IT can prompt participants to tell such stories and to describe the gritty materiality of coming into racial consciousness, as

Cheryl E. Matias writes of the purpose of counter-stories: to "unveil intricate racial nuances embedded in everyday life" (292). But I think IT can work further, especially when engaged in the particular ways I have described, to expose the performative nature of race and racism.

Critical race and affect theorist Linda Martin Alcoff writes that "Noticing the way in which meanings are located on the body has at least the potential to disrupt the current racializing practices" (194) part and parcel of racism. IT can allow for the sort of disruption Alcoff calls for in a process of slowing down to reflexively observe and adjust one's awareness of oneself as a raced body in relation to self, other raced bodies, and critical findings about race. I think IT work specifically tailored to prompt participant exploration of themes of race, racism, and privilege can develop such awareness as a skill. The heightened self-awareness required of an IT pose addressing race or racism unveils both the presence of social norms and our visceral interaction with those norms. Since I understand racism to be alterable insofar as it is a repetition of learned norms; I insist on the possibility of reworking habitual embodied performances of racism in the "doing" of performance.

When we combine a conceptual understanding of racism with performance practices of reflexively noticing and adjusting one's habitual ways of encountering others, transformations of racism are possible. IT, then, can be a concrete way to explore the performative nature of racism. Charlotte Chadderton applies Butler's idea of performativity to racial and other identities by explaining how such identities and their meanings are largely performed "onto" nonwhites. If "the fixidity of race requires the everyday and perpetual exercise of white supremacy" (Chadderton 49), what might race begin to mean when subjects in cross-racial encounters widen their understanding of race as performative? I do not want to speak for Black participants, but I will assert that my

experiments with IT and race seemed especially fruitful as a way to teach white participants (including myself) about white privilege and to begin to conceptualize the usually invisible force of whiteness. White supremacy and privilege are infamously insidious and invisible forces for white folks. As Leda Cooks writes, “Whiteness, as a set of rhetorical strategies employed to construct and maintain a dominant White culture and identities, has always shifted to incorporate dissenting or divergent voices, to render invisible that which it cannot swallow” (246).

Our kinesthetic work with these concepts, especially in *Racy*, showed how difficult it was for us to conceive of these forces bodily enough to render them *visible*, and also how much ground we made in the struggle to do so. In his essay “Unperforming Race,” Daniel Banks warns of the dangers of repeating a historically entrenched performance of Blackness rooted in the racist tradition of black-face minstrelsy, even in Boal-based work like Forum Theatre (186). He advocates instead a practice of *unperforming*: “stag[ing] contradictions in the discursive system of ‘race’ and raciology, revealing complexity, limitations of language, omission of history, un(der)represented populations, and contradictory subject locations” (Banks 192). Citing Plato and Heidegger, he characterizes such performances as *poesis*, “‘bringing forth’...a new understanding, a new reality, an alternative epistemology” (Banks 192). For me and members of the cast of *Racy*, at least, Boal’s IT served precisely this goal of “bringing forth” a new awareness of our own whiteness, how that whiteness shaped our conception of Blackness, and ultimately, how our personal experiences fit into the broader workings of white supremacy. My sense is that IT can be used in the project of unperforming racism thanks to the transformations of stereotyping made possible by a process of reflexively inviting, adjusting, and complicating one’s conscious and unconscious images of “the other.”

More experimentation with IT as a specifically anti-racist pedagogy is in order, especially in light of the need for “[pe]dagogies that speak to whiteness, that foreground the ways that structures of racial categorization always point away from White as a referent are much needed in communication education” (Cook 246). In my experience with the Black History Month and *Racy* projects, I found that creating visual artifacts of our own “whiteness” made the category much more concrete. It was easier to begin talking about and analyzing whiteness once we could actually see it.

I would insert the caveat here that while it is my personal experience that IT has an important role to play in the project of eradicating racism, I do not set out to speak from a self-congratulatory position as a “good” white person at the apex of critical race consciousness, nor do I mean to exclude myself with talk of “participants” or “pedagogy,” as if racism is only a student problem. Instead, I put forward IT as a way for myself and others to reckon with racism as well as whiteness as a personal and systemic force, and since it can help us to understand how racism is (in part) constituted by embodied habits that can be adjusted over time.

Engaging IT as Environmental Justice Performative Pedagogy

IT also lent itself particularly well to environmental justice themes including the interdependency of ecologies and species and the role of individual bodies in vast ecosystems. In *Sacred Waste*, IT fostered an awareness of the performative nature of everyday practices of buying and throwing away as it did for race in the other projects. Noticing oneself in these taken-for-granted activities made room for the transformations of thought and behavior we sought to bring about in ourselves and our audience-participants. When participants created dance rituals describing, for example, the infusion of the ocean with microscopic plastic pollutants, a visceral

awareness grew out of the interaction between bodies, materials, and concepts that brought home our interdependencies within the greater ideological “body” of the earth. In both workshop and aesthetic production, we worked toward knowing ourselves in relationship to each other, the ecological systems of which we are a part, and our own waste. As a result of our heightened attention to our everyday discard practices, we began to ask more sophisticated questions about those practices: How do power and pollution intersect? Who has the economic privilege to overproduce waste? Whose bodies benefit and whose are harmed by these taken-for-granted practices? And how might we alter these practices to reflect our newfound awareness?

USING IT IN THE TRADITIONAL CLASSROOM

I would like to offer a few implications of this work for more traditional classroom settings. Throughout the process of staging various theatrical shows, I have learned the value of working toward a final public product, and this finding has influenced my pedagogy beyond the stage. While Boal insists on breaking down barriers between audience and actor, I think there is much to be gained—both for participants and audiences—in finalizing a process for public consumption. In my experience, requesting a specific, carefully crafted end-product forces a kind of critical reflexivity that work that remains in “process mode” cannot always achieve.

I have found the insistence on a final product to be especially effective pedagogically for collaborative work on social justice themes. Working as an ensemble pushes us to ask not who is the best performer, but what we can create together, how do we affect each other, and how much can we depend on each other—questions that we must also ask ourselves on a global scale. Building ensemble performance or other public presentation is a practice of interdependency, one that lends itself well to conceptualizing how our actions affect one another outside of the performance

moment. This ethic echoes Susan Guerra's critical assertion that "Our collective consciousness can work to transform concepts of power from hierarchical to relational approaches to power. We are accomplices of each other. Accomplices in the circle of different ways of Be-ing. I am because we are" (186).

In all the projects mentioned here, I found that the fundamental component of kinesthetic engagement demanded we enter into visceral encounters between subject and self, subject and discourse, and subject and other bodies, whether human or material. As a classroom and workshop teacher of all levels for over a decade, I have found that the immediacy of bodies in space in the process of "making together" has the power to shift interpersonal and conceptual relationships in the present in constructive, ethical, and critical ways. Largely this happens as a result of bringing participants fully into the present moment, and slowing everyone down to make room for self-observation and fellowship. When we foreground the body itself as a medium for learning as we do in IT, and follow through by contextualizing our bodily experiences in light of critical thought, we begin to conceptualize our own corporeal roles in broader social dramas.

Another implication pertains to the role of the director or teacher-body in a pedagogical setting. Using a kinesthetic, facilitative form like IT acknowledges the corporeal presence of the teacher in a way that insists on the relevance of subjectivity by acknowledging the embodiedness of knowledge, power, responsibility, and vulnerability in visible ways. When we move amongst each other as we "meet our desires while helping others meet theirs," as Ruth Laurion Bowman once described in a Boal-based work she led, and we begin to account for the shifting and subjective nature of knowledge. In an interview with bell hooks in *Teaching to Transgress*, critical educator

Ron Scapp suggests that the teacher who stands behind the podium and directs, “recalls the firm, immobilized body of knowledge as part of the immutability of truth itself” (137).

The distance teachers maintain as disciplinarians looming over the class only entrenches the divide between teacher and students, especially when the teacher is a privileged outsider. hooks points out that even when we disseminate "radical" material, such as some African American literature, for example, we may "attempt to deconstruct traditional biases while sharing that information through body posture, tone, word choice, and so on that perpetuate those very hierarchies and biases they are critiquing" (*Transgress* 141). IT's insistence on defamiliarizing bodies does not allow for such immobilization.

When teacher and students move around gracefully or awkwardly in a round of Boal's silly walks or Multiple Images of Happiness, the cultural and experiential gulfs between us close for a moment as our corporeal bodies come to the forefront. When students and teacher crowd around an image, and the teacher must ask what certain terms mean, or offer adjustments in a particular pose to reflect her own experience, "[s]olidarity begins to mean something visceral, and requires an acknowledgement of the places where I and another cannot meet" (Salverson 168). Similarly, hooks writes that “[w]e must return ourselves to a state of embodiment in order to deconstruct the way power has been traditionally orchestrated in the classroom, denying subjectivity to some groups and according it to others” (139). Just as a directing style must respond to the bodies present, so too must a teaching style.

Additionally, as a facilitative form that generates student stories and lays bare student concerns, IT can help keep the critical conversation student-led even as it becomes politically charged. The teacher can offer expert voices in response to student-generated content, rather than

introducing this content out of her own interests. This is of course an important component of a democratic learning environment, but is also useful for mitigating accusations of bias. When IT work offers a way for a leader to introduce professional voices that specifically address student discussions, that leader may be less likely to be seen as advancing her own political interests—and increasingly dangerous possibility for public school teachers.

The presence and acknowledgement of the teacher-body in relation to her students may be particularly important in the case of a cultural divide between those bodies. In “Schooling Race Talk,” Audrey Thompson argues throughout her reviews of three books on listening across racial differences that teacher-listening is often theorized as a “generic virtue,” rather than the “profoundly relational, cultural, and political” process it proves to be (22). Thompson worries that many pedagogical case studies in which white teachers reflect on their own practices regarding working with Black students, whiteness remains “at the center of pedagogical listening” (25). Citing examples from the texts she reviews where students of color feel put on the spot as exemplars of their race, or where teachers prompt students toward colorblind class discussion to keep the peace, she reminds us that we must continually “interrogate the whiteness of our ‘best practices,’ including pedagogical listening” (Thompson 25). She further warns that even white teachers with copious knowledge of racial politics and the very best intentions can unwittingly do violence to the aims of students of color “insofar as she approaches those projects without the students’ own investments” (Thompson 28). Thompson recommends that we may need to take a step beyond becoming educated about difference and “develop new embodied responses,” as “it is not clear how readily many of us can cultivate visceral responses to replace our well-schooled habits of authority, centrality, scholarly abstraction, and embodied privilege and power” (28). While

Thompson does not clarify here what such “embodied responses” might be, I believe this is precisely where IT might intervene as a tool for retraining habitual communicative patterns for both teachers and students.

Thompson focuses on race, but her analysis applies to other differences, from gender and ethnicity to ability and age. Movement, eye contact, touch, and other spatial negotiations that constitute IT practice can teach us to notice and to listen with our whole bodies rather than to perceive others as stereotypes or not to “see” them at all. The walls of the classroom fall away while students and teacher engage in exercises that privilege physical presence, allowing room for close interaction across various differences outside of the difficult and often new vocabularies of critical consciousness. The visceral play with which IT challenges us to engage each other can then bolster traditional modes of rigorous, intellectual reading and conversation as we develop visible and verbal examples of our differences. Of course, I do not argue that a semester or a few weeks of Boal’s games can solve widespread social injustice, but I do think it is a start, a place to make headway. I think teachers can use the form to listen more effectively to others across difference.

One further implication of this project applies to the ways performance studies practitioners reflect on their praxis. Often, reflections on certain methods remain either in purely or even overwhelmingly theoretical terms or are suggested as cookie-cutter compositional tools that cannot always honor local contexts. I think there is much to be gained from isolating a particular method and experimenting with its possibilities and limitations and other such systematic reflection on our praxis as praxis. How do we make artistically rich performances in broadly and locally ethical ways? How can performance tools be used to move between critical, creative, and civic arenas? Reflecting on the interplay between theory and practice as it applies to projects with

particular bodies helps us get a sense of how to respond to the contingencies of our varied social contexts. We must pay attention and call attention to what happens between bodies in light of particular methods. After all, we can sometimes get a sense of where we stand by noticing where/how/with whom we are actually standing.

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VITA

Bonny McDonald was born in Lake Charles, Louisiana in 1980. After graduating from high school in Lafayette, Louisiana in 1998, she majored in English Literature at the University of Texas at Austin where she graduated in 2002. She earned an M.A. in English Literature from Western Kentucky University in December 2005 and she is a candidate to receive a Ph.D. in Communication Studies with a focus in Performance Studies from Louisiana State University in May 2016.