The Space Between: Using Peer Theater To Transcend Race, Class, and Gender

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Abstract: *This study explores the experience of directing a Peer Theatre group of inner city black teenagers from the standpoint of a white, working-class woman. Peer Theatre's unique communicative ability to make sense of situations and issues through portraying characters both similar and different from one's self can enable participants to transcend issues of race, class, and gender. Through talk, we were able to honor our differences, construct ways to co-orient ourselves to each other, and build relationships based on our common humanity. We found three feminist transformational processes associated with Peer Theater: experiencing the dialogic moment, sustaining tensions and contradictions (by using feminist anger, forming guiding values, and participating in rituals), and empowering women and other marginalized members of society.*

It was an average Thursday evening during the winter. As I opened my mouth to explain the purpose of Peer Theater to a group of white, middle-class college students aged 18-23 who were seated before me waiting to audition for a Peer Theater group on their college campus, words escaped me. For a moment, I saw the faces of the Peer Theater participants from first group I directed . . . inner city black teenagers. I felt the overwhelming sense that I had been in this place before—a place of complete disorientation and silence, a place where everything I knew seemed to vanish. (Personal journal entry)

This relatively disturbing event, coupled with my current coursework on gender, society, and health communication prompted me to search for the journal I kept during my first Peer Theater experience five years earlier and revisit that experience. After leafing through its pages, I revisited the tensions and joys in that life-changing moment. Five years ago, Peer Theater changed my life's direction as a woman, as a professional, and as a scholar. My experiences with this group helped me make sense of my life and how I fit into a larger order.

As with any attempt to create meaning and understand the social-historical-economic underpinnings of ordinary experiences, I could not construct interpretations alone. Sensemaking is an intersubjective activity. Over time and space, many individuals have helped me weave together meaningful accounts of these experiences. Most recently, I have returned to these Peer Theater episodes with the assistance of the second author. While Patrice did not participate in the events that I recount in this article, she worked with me to frame, edit, analyze, and make sense of my experiences. Her thoughts about the analyses mingle with mine throughout this article in such a way that I present the findings as a singular voice.

For me (Venessa), the original Peer Theater exchanges and subsequent reflection about those experiences began a long-term passion for working toward equality in voice, opportunity, and choices. For Patrice, these discussions are part of an ongoing program to locate different ways of changing society through feminist theorizing and practice. It is this feminist transformation—this passion and challenge for advocacy—that this article explores.

Feminist transformation typically is defined as "the fusion of political perspective and practice" (Lewis, 1990, p. 469). Many different change processes associate with the varied causes and consequences of women's subordination (Buzzanell, 1994, 2000; Calás & Smircich, 1996; Tong, 1989; Wood, 2001). What many of these processes share is a faith that awareness of unjust situations can motivate women and men to unite against these inequitable and damaging conditions in our institutions, our socialization practices, our economies, our relationships with nature, and so on throughout the world (Hegde; 1998; Lorber, 1994). The process of translating awareness into advocacy often requires assistance of others not only to determine which of the many change strategies might be useful in a given situation but also to continue the process of interpreting and evaluating lived experiences in light of feminist commitments.

What happened in this Peer Theater group is similar to the consciousness raising of Second Wave feminist groups. Consciousness raising has had different manifestations in feminist advocacy and research but the term is used here to refer to actors' new knowledge gained from learning about and reflecting on one another's situated locations and subordinations (see Hogeland, 2001; Wood, 2001). Consciousness raising enables women to "re-examine and reinterpret their lives in the light of a new found awareness of patriarchy as the effect of social relations rather than nature" (Weedon, 1999 p. 179).[1]

The Peer Theater group that formed five years ago was explicitly charged with sex education and AIDS awareness. The beginnings of the group lay within a health care system in a major United States metropolis that allowed an African American, female AIDS doctor to form a peer education group of inner-city kids to take the message of choice out to their communities. The target group was inner-city African American teenagers. My job as the group's director was to teach these teenagers "theater."

However, the subtext was much more than sex education and AIDS awareness. Through participants' interactions preparing for plays and their construction of improvisational roles for different audiences, they (and I) located a space to confront stereotypical expectations of race/ethnicity, gender, class, and sexual-social

orientation. Peer Theater experiences electrified every cell in my body—and I have never been the same. Yet, Peer Theater is not described in feminist transformational models.

The goal of this study is to explore the ways that Peer Theater enables participants to make sense of their lived experiences and transform themselves and others around them. To accomplish this purpose, I review literature discussing Peer Theater in general as well as some of recollections and expectations regarding the specific Peer Theater project five years ago. I describe my primary sources of data (journal entries and current reflections) as well as the auto ethnographic approach taken to derive themes applicable to feminist theorizing and change. The heart of the paper illuminates some key experiences and recurring themes tied to dialogue, spirituality, and feminist standpoints. The essay concludes with some theoretical implications and practical applications of the findings.

Literature Review

In general, Peer Theater provides a means to learn from others through storytelling and dialogue. Personal experiences and engagement with others combine with theater's ability to suspend disbelief to provide a unique interactive context for personal growth. The overt goal of Peer Theater is education about a critical social issue, such as AIDS, date rape, drug abuse, and so on. Described in this section are the techniques, processes, and goals of Peer Theater, then the focus shifts to the Peer Theater group that formed the basis of my analysis.

The techniques of Peer Theater are storytelling and dialogue. With storytelling the primary form of information transmission and exchange (Hughes, 1998). Storytelling assumes its historical and traditional importance (i.e., a way to communicate important information and build and bind cultural, tradition-based understanding of the world) when actors communicate not only their personal life stories but also the lives of the characters they are creating. In their sharing of stories, peer actors can bridge their differences. There are different forms of storytelling, such as religious morality accounts, folktales, fantasies, fairy tales, histories, anecdotes, long narratives, and interactive or collaborative storytelling processes. Whatever the form of storytelling present in this theatrical context, one overriding fact remain constant: The story needs to be compelling, interesting, well crafted, unique, and engaging. In the words of one of the actors in my Peer Theater group, "Man, you got to tell it right."

Peer Theater also incorporates dialogue. Isaacs (1993) says that "dialogue can be defined as a sustained collective inquiry into the processes, assumptions, and certainties that structure everyday experience" (p. 2). Like traditional theater, dialogue involves a willingness to suspend ordinary assumptions and behaviors, but it also involves probing to determine reasons for defensive exchanges and searching for coherence (Isaacs, 1993).

Another defining characteristic of Peer Theater is that its explicit goal is peer education about a social problem. Peer education is best defined as "structured programs that stress experiential learning among participants," (www.advocatesforyouth.org) in this case, addressing some aspect of sexual health and led by trained peers. Merriam-Webster's dictionary defines peer as "one that is of equal standing with another; one belonging to the same societal group especially based on age, grade, or status" (Merriam-Webster, 1999 p. 857). Peer education is particularly important for teens at risk for disease. Peer Theater emerged as a teaching mode in part when the United States Government developed a set of national health objectives entitled, *Healthy People 2000* (www.health.gov/healthypeople), which was developed to project health indicators for ten-year periods of time. Researchers found that the most successful educational approach in dealing with emotionally charged and misunderstood health issues was to use peer education to deliver clear messages in innovative ways. They also found that traditional methods of teaching, which normally included an "adult authority figure" and no theatrical expression, had not helped America's youth make healthy life-style choices. Peers educating peers was the most successful method in changing youth behavior (www.health.gov/healthypeople). Peer education includes leadership, activism, and service. Because of their commitment to peer education programs, participants obtain better quality information about healthy lifestyles and can generate positive peer pressure (www.bacchusgamma.org). With others, they can create new cultural norms (www.bacchusgamma.org).

Peer education differs from Peer Theater in several ways. The director of a Peer Theater group often does not share the same characteristics as the group members. The educational process is co-learning for all members (including the director), and entertainment is a necessary component of the learning process. Singhal and Rogers (1994, 1999; see also Papa, Singhal, Law, Pant, Sood, Rogers, & Shefner-Rogers, 2000) describe how entertainment-education relates to mass media in the United States and developing countries around the world. According to Singhal and Rogers (1999), entertainment-education "is the process of purposely designing and implementing a media message both to entertain and to educate, in order to increase audience member's knowledge about an educational issue, create favorable attitudes, and change overt behavior" (p. 9). The authors further identify the purpose of entertainment-education as contributing to "directed social change, defined as the process by which an alternation occurs in the structure and function of a social system" (p. 9). Peer Theater shares these goals.

Because of the involvement, dialogue, and entertainment characteristics of Peer Theater create commitment to and active involvement in understanding and changing lives, Peer Theater also can heal divisions

in society. The power of theater to heal and transcend constraints is documented in recent literature (see Trounstine, 2001). Theater provides a site in which participants can express emotions suppressed in day-to-day life. Actors can feel the range and depth of a character's experience and give it voice. They also locate causes for laughter and amazement as they begin to understand that experiences of others have similarities to their own. Most importantly, participants begin to envision the world in ways that are not available without creative expression. The practice of theater gives voice to the unspeakable and to endless possibilities:

> The woman laughed at their frailties and cheered each other's successes. It was a place where they came to feel safe and to be challenged creatively, a time when the prison did not intrude. . . . In this space I felt the presence of an enormous generosity, a power that came from the women working together to create something larger than themselves. The women made room for each other, and they made room for ideas and feelings. (Troustine, 2001, p. 235)

In Routine's example, the prison happened to be a penitentiary. In my Peer Theatre group, the imprisoning conditions were the social, class, race, and gender constraints imposed on the participants–a prison as real as Troustine's institution and as possible to change through talk, interaction, and commitment to create something better (for psychic prison, see Morgan, 1997).

In Peer Theater, actors not only speak to one another as they attempt to understand the intricate workings of the characters they create during the rehearsal process, but they also use verbal and nonverbal language to convey meaning, messages, and interpretations of the characters' beliefs, values, and experiences. According to Hughes (1998), "theater presents us with ourselves in different contexts, holding the mirror up and showing us what we have done and what we might do" (p. 10). In short, theater can become a site in which identity, resistance, and social change are possible (see Trounstine, 2001).

Although Peer Theater holds within its processes the power to transform lives, anticipating how these processes will unfold, who will be changed forever, and what participants will co-learn is not possible. When I first met the 15 teenagers who participated in my Peer Theater group five years ago, I was working in one of the four major health education organizations in the metropolitan area where I had grown up. My worldview was relatively limited about issues of race, gender, and class--especially relative to health education and access to treatment. However, in my mind, this Peer Theater group was just another job. My journal entries capture these feelings:

> I remember thinking that this theater project is going to be like any other theater project. We'll write some scripts, do some exercises, and produce some plays—no big deal. Two days before our first rehearsal, I decided to go to the medical library at one of the local universities and look up HIV/AIDS information. My goal was just to get a sense of what research indicated about sources and treatments so that I could have some rudimentary understanding of the disease before I started working with the group. I found out general information about disease transmission routes and general demographics of infected people.
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> I walked into rehearsal feeling like I had it together only to find out from these students that there's a lot more to HIV/AIDS education than numbers and transmission routes. There were issues like economic status as it relates to access to health care, racial understanding of the disease based on how information is transferred to minorities and women, and safe sex practices and messages. To them, as it should have been to me from day one, this theater education project was about life and death. One of the peers said to me: "If we kick the message to the people, they live. If not, they die. It's as simple as that." (Personal journal entry)

In sum, Peer Theater holds the potential to transform lives through creation of awareness about social problems and specific ways to change these problems. Although Peer Theater is aligned with community issues, it has not been discussed specifically as a feminist transformation method. This study asks the question: How can Peer Theater enable participants to engage in feminist transformation?

Method

Participants

The Peer Theater group included 12 women and 3 men, all of African American heritage, aged 15-19 years, and living in the inner city of a major urban center in the United States. Each participant brought memories from his/her life—rape, petty crime, juvenile probation, addiction, abusive parents, and poverty. I include myself as one of the participants, making the total number of "actors" 16. I am a red-haired, divorced, white, middle-class, thirty-something female with green eyes and a loud laugh who currently lives in a suburban community. At the time I worked with this group, two significant differences were in place from my present description: I was of lower-class economic status, working as an administrative assistant at a health advocacy agency and holding three additional jobs as a freelance writer, babysitter, and theater director; and I was married to an unemployed, white, 40-year-old pipe fitter.

My recollections of participants and the information and emotions they shared provide the lens through which the reader can view the participants since no data were collected from them. The use of autoethnography, which is grounded in anthropological scholarship and fieldwork as well as in literary genres such as prose and autobiography, enables me include actual co-constructed events and changes over time and space (Banks & Banks, 2000; Crawford, 1996; Ellingson, 2001; Ellis & Bochner, 2000; Frey, Botan, & Kreps, 2000; Neumann, 1996;

Pelias, 2000; Ragan, 2000; Shields, 2000). Crawford (1996) states:

> To take up the cultural text and position it in my lived experience through auto-ethnography is to change how I experience others as others. Furthermore, auto-ethnography is a particular way of framing my awareness so that I must include some account of myself. To interpret the "social Subject positions" of others through auto-ethnography appears to be substantially different from performing the part of the participant observer who must always, it seems, be falsely cast in the scene. (p. 167)

Besides the actors and first author (the "I" in the personal narratives and analyses), the other person who co-constructs this autoethnography is the second author. She is a tall, dark-haired, married, middle class, forty-something associate professor with six children who lives in an academic community with her partner, who also is a professor. She is my graduate advisor, my co-author, my colleague, and my friend.

Procedures

Here I describe my data and discuss the process of constructing and evaluating autoethnographic research The primary data source is my personal journal; it consists of 25 pages of single-spaced text written five years ago. Also included are current notes and experiences that triggered this autoethnographic account as well as "findings" from both authors' ongoing conversations about change processes and difference. None of the original "field notes" in the journal were ever intended for research purposes. Rather, they were recorded to provide insight for the development of future Peer Theater groups and to help me process disturbing or unsettling encounters after they occurred. The journal also was kept so that I could submit a final report on the activities of the group to the program's administrator.

It may seem problematic to construct an autoethnographic account of these experiences after they occurred so many years ago. However, Ellis and Bochner (2000) point out that all stories are only partial interpretations that shift as authors tell them for different purposes, to different audiences, at different time. Sacco (2002) comments about her shifting and multiple positionalities over time and space during her recollections of owning a tattoo shop for a summer. She notes she still feels too close to the events to have made sense of and feel peace with them. She is "trying to replace bitterness and thoughts of 'why did this happen to me?' [losing her shop and battling her outsider status] with acceptance" (p. 76). When a story is told, to whom, and how it is told influence the presentation and content of autoethnographies. Although I present a coherent account derived from years of sensemaking, this will not be the final version as I continue to reflect on my experiences.

In constructing autoethnographies, Crawford (1996) points out, the research process intertwines inextricably–data collecting with analyzing. In using personal experiences and recollections as data, a researcher is (re)positioned "as an object of inquiry who depicts a site of interest in terms of personal awareness and experience" (p.167). In this positioning, authors engage in self-conscious reflexivity (i.e., the "dilemma of how to position themselves within their research projects to reveal aspects of their own tacit world, challenge their own assumptions, locate themselves through the eyes of the Other, and observe themselves observing"), (Bochner & Ellis, 1996, p. 28). The process of self-reflexivity leads authors to have different starting points and genres for expression, but they always start with themselves, as Carolyn Ellis (in Ellis & Bochner, 2000) writes,

> I start with my personal life. I pay attention to my physical feelings, thoughts, and emotions. I use what I call systematic sociological introspection and emotional recall to try to understand an experience I've lived through. Then I write my experience as a story. . . . The goal is also to enter and document the moment-to-moment, concrete details of a life. That's an important way of knowing as well. (p. 737)

Autoethnographies bridge the personal and the academic. They juxtapose memories with expectations for the future. The need for coherence and desire to pull apart experience and reveal vulnerabilities, tensions, uncertainties, mixed emotions, and partial interpretations are ingrained in the autoethnography (Ellis & Bochner, 2000). Readers can evaluate autoethnographic projects by whether the work achieves verisimilitude (i.e., "it evokes in readers a feeling that the experience described is lifelike, believable, and possible," Ellis & Bochner, 2000, p. 751) and "generalizability" (i.e., readers "determine if it speaks to them about their experience or about the lives of others they know," p. 751). Of importance here is what the authors learned that is of use in understanding intersections of race, class, and gender through talk.

Peer Theater as Feminist Transformation

In reading and rereading journal entries as well as reflecting on (and conversing about) past and present experiences, both authors formed three thematic processes that characterized the Peer Theater experiences. In themselves, these thematic processes are not remarkable. However, how they can enable individuals to transcend race, class, and gender in Peer Theater is different from other change models and provides a fairly concrete way to fulfill the possibilities that awareness of injustice can bring. The three feminist transformational processes associated with Peer Theater are: (a) experiencing the dialogic moment, (b) sustaining tensions and contradictions (by using feminist anger, forming guiding values, and participating in rituals), and (c)

empowering women and other marginalized members of society.

Experiencing the Dialogic Moment

I don't think I'll ever forget the looks on the faces of the peer actors the first day they met me. I have a first name that most people associate with black women, but I am a green-eyed, white woman of Irish-Slovak descent. I witnessed their disappointment as I entered the room. Their reactions were no surprise.

Often in my life prior to this particular experience, white people had assumed I was a black woman because of their ignorance associated with the spelling and origin of my name. Three times I have been interviewed for jobs because people thought they could meet their "two-fer" quota (Allen, 2000). I often reveled in their shocked expressions when I entered rooms. I felt good about witnessing the tongue-gaping stare of their ignorance. In my privileged status, naiveté, and youth, I mistakenly thought, "this must be what it's like to be black." The fact was, I didn't know anything about race. I hadn't even processed that whiteness was a race and that, at the end of everyday day, I still received all the privileges that whiteness brought with it. My "difference" was an illusion in the minds of people seeing my name written or hearing it spoken. It disappeared when they saw my face.

But the same situation that had once made me laugh–the stunned expression of seeing a white woman where a black woman was supposed to be standing–silenced me when I encountered it from this group of black teenagers. My sudden sense of unmarked whiteness (Weedon, 1999) embarrassed me. Weedon (1999) states "in mainstream discourses of race, whiteness functions as an unmarked neutral category, a norm which is equivalent to being human" (p. 154). She continues, "One consequence of this failure to recognize the racialized nature of whiteness is that race and racism come to be seen as the problem and responsibility of people of color" (p. 154).

In their eyes I saw the same question I had in my mind: Exactly what was I going to teach them about finding "reality" in their theatrical expression? I had no idea what would bridge the gap between us, given perceptions of each other grounded in the political, historical, and social identities of race, class, and gender. I decided that if I was going to "teach" them anything about theatrical creation in the hope of creating characters that were expressions of real people, I knew I had better open myself up and not allow myself the privilege of being in charge. Rather, my instinct told me to start working on the walls between us that were almost visible as soon as they saw me. I wanted them to see me--not my white face. The first thing I did was to tell them who I was — my fears, upbringing, and biases.

I bet you were expecting a black woman to walk through that door, huh? (Mumbles from around the room in agreement) Well, we can all see I'm pretty white. In fact, it's pretty hard to get "whiter" than me (several people laughed). And because of that I have to tell you I'm a little afraid about being here. I'm supposed to teach you about Theater so that you can reenact the lives of people like you, but how can I do that if I don't know anything about "being like" you? I am a white woman. I was raised in an environment that was violent, bigoted, broke, drug using, and raging. I am from a lower-level working-class family in which most people believe that the only thing women should or could do is get married and have babies. I went to schools that were in the lower rung of education and saw a great deal of physical and sexual violence being perpetrated against my peers. I was often afraid. I'm still often afraid.

I have heard every stereotype about middle-class people, inner-city people, gay people, and black people—at times, I believed them. I know what it feels like to have people not believe in you, to have them think you can't accomplish anything, because of some stereotype. I know what is to want to get out and get up. And that's why I'm here. Not to teach you about your experiences, but to help you find a way out of whatever you want to change in your life. Theater gave me a sense of self. It provided me a way to leave the pain I was living in and step out of it. Theater is about creating something larger than yourself. It's a way to move through. And, I can tell that it saved my life – because I was going nowhere fast until I found it. (Personal journal entry)

The fidgeting had stopped long before I finished my lecture and by the time it was over, something had changed in the room. The tension lightened; the atmosphere was more energized. The actors began to raise their hands and tell me about their lives. With more personal disclosure than I offered, they shared their experiences with having premarital sex, getting pregnant, being raped, held down, held back, held up, and their parents' drug use. We spent that first night sharing our lives and why we came to this group. To my surprise, many of them had already figured out that they wanted out. They wanted to change their environments, to empower people, to stand up, and to speak out. They just didn't know that Theater would do that for them. I knew what Theater could do because it had been the one thing that gave me freedom to express myself (Personal journal entry).

Somehow, in this brief introductory session, the group found a dialogic moment, also known as a "living" or "poetic" moment in therapeutic dialogues (Shotter & Katz, 1999). By dialogic moment, the authors mean a point at which people release their defenses and truly talk to each other: in these living moments new possibilities are created so that people can find new solutions to their problems. (Shotter & Katz, 1999).

In these moments, individuals respond to each other, draw joint attention to what they are saying and doing, and establish an opportunity to change habitual behavior. Like Foss and Griffin's (1995) invitational rhetoric, this moment is an exchange that creates awareness of others' ways of thinking and reacting but does not intend to

persuade others to a particular point of view. In this moment, anything is possible. People open up their hearts and souls. They make themselves transparent and vulnerable. They direct attention to aspects of their lives that otherwise might remain invisible (Shotter & Katz, 1999). Although dialogic moments share some similarities with turning points, they are qualitatively (and often methodologically) different from turning points. Turning points are specific points of time (associated with particular events or with the culmination of a long thoughtful process) in which relationships with others or with organizations change (Baxter & Bullis, 1986; Bullis & Bach, 1989a, 1989b; Rawlins, 1992). Turning points can be, but are not necessarily, the same as dialogic moments.

In contrast, dialogic moments are those rare instances in which individuals transcend the ordinary circumstances of their lives through talk. At these moments, people can achieve some understandings of the complex interrelationships they have with others in specific contexts. Embedding dialogic moments within the rich detail and considerable achievement of oppression recognition differs greatly from the usual turning point research. Bullis and Stout (2000) comment that work on turning points often neutralizes the voices of those marginalized and different from the norm (often designated as "outliers"). Bullis and Stout comment that "neither people, nor their experiences, nor the institutions involved were positioned within the broader society" in this research (p. 72). By operating from feminist standpoints, the commonalities as well as differences between groups of people can be clarified and used to alter theoretical grounding (Harding, 1987; O'Brien Hallstein, 2000). In this way, the words themselves and the ways that the talk is framed, co-constructed, and generative (of new possibilities) that are importance.

In many ways, the dialogic moment is spiritual because it constitutes an openness to "*an 'unseen order' in the world around us, . . . the drive to create wholeness*" (Mirvis, 1997, p. 203, italics in the original), to "a reality beyond the material" (Daniels, Franz, & Wong, 2000, p. 543). The dialogic moment is spiritual because it focuses on questioning and living with our ideals and values (Damianakis, 2001; Harlos, 2000; Mirvis, 1997). The dialogic moment marks the beginning of this questioning, the transcendence from mundane minutiae of life and active engagement of self with oneself and others (Csikszentmihalyi, 1997), and the examination of our souls on a daily basis. Shotter and Katz (1999) say that dialogic moments are arresting because they possess a full sense of seeing, hearing, touching, feeling, flavor, and smell.

Dialogic moments are rare but pivotal for feminist transformation. Moments of self-, other-, and relational-insight can provide springboards for sensemaking as women piece together what their lives mean within a larger social order and how they have been systematically disadvantaged. These moments are emotion-centered as well as cognitive. They exist as instances of feeling–intense, mixed (positive and negative), and jumbled feelings–without regard to whether these feeling displays are appropriate. Isaacs (1993) writes about feelings in dialogic encounters:

> People begin to feel the impact that fragmented ways of thinking has had on themselves, their organization, and their culture. They sense their isolation. Such awareness brings pain—both from the loss of comforting beliefs and by exercising new cognitive and emotional muscles. (p. 4)

Dialogic moments offer ideal opportunities to explore intersections of race/ethnicity, gender, sexual social orientation, and other forms of difference that categorize us as members of dominant groups or as "others." These explorations are done as individuals learn through talk how to make sense of their mundane experiences with others and to consider new possibilities. In the case of Peer Theater, the framework and purposes of this form of theater offer a mechanism and a purpose for talk. But it was the actors' struggles to develop awareness of and communicate what was happening in their lives that enabled them to experience dialogic moments. Dialogic moments alone, however, are not sufficient to create change. Their possibilities require sustained attention from self and others.

Sustaining Tensions and Contradictions

One day, after an open rehearsal, a colleague of mine at my full-time job, a black man who had heard about the rehearsal the night before, stormed into my office and demanded to know what I was doing working with these teenagers. Stunned I answered, "teaching them theater."

He launched a diatribe that started with my working with the competition when my loyalty should be with the institution I worked with full-time and ended with "tell me what an upper-class cracker has got to teach these kids? These kids don't need one more whitey trying to teach them to be black." The string of expletives attached to the issues of my race, my gender, and my social class illustrated his severe fear and uncertainty toward what I was doing. Until the night before this exchange, this particular man knew nothing of my work with the theater, had never been to a rehearsal, had never met the students, or seen one of their performances. He really had no idea what was going on in the context of the Peer Theater, but he knew one thing: I was a white woman who had "no right to work with these kids."

His comments angered me. I was shocked by the volatile nature of his approach, his self-righteousness, and his reverse racism. I kept thinking, "He doesn't give a damn about what these kids are learning or not learning. He cares only about his exclusion from the program." I had never experienced this kind of aggressive behavior on

the basis of my race. Two things happened for me. For perhaps the first time, I began to really think about the affects of racial bigotry on the lives of people. This awareness coupled with a strong determination to prove this man wrong. I set my sights on making sure this theater project would work, the kids would learn to know themselves, and together we would build something that transcended the bounds of race and class.

Even though the teenagers learned about this particular incident through the program coordinator and too were angered, they had a lifetime of anger and experiences on which to draw and push them toward change. I was just discovering my anger in full force (Personal journal entries).

Experiencing a dialogic moment is not enough to sustain interactive processes that can encourage transformation in everything we do. In my Peer Theater experience, three subprocesses were necessary to sustain tensions and enable participants to exploit the contradictions in others' and our own actions, feelings, and thoughts. These three processes are: using feminist anger, forming guiding values, and participating in rituals.

Using feminist anger. Feminist anger leads to change because it acts as a motivator or catalyst. Feminist anger is not destructive because it does not feed on itself—it feeds on injustice. Jaggar (1989) states that anger becomes feminist anger when individuals recognize the specific instance not as a single instance but as indicative of a widespread pattern of inequity. Anger indicates when something is very wrong and focuses action on possibilities for change. Hercus (1999) argues that anger is the "most agentic emotion, is an essential component of efficacy," or the belief in the possibility of change (p. 36). Feminist anger does not dissipate over time although it may be subject to emotion work and emotional labor (i.e., effort put into projecting socially appropriate feelings displays in private and workplace contexts; see Fineman, 1993; Hochschild, 1983). Hercus (1999) identifies the ways women manage feminist identities either by keeping their feelings in check (i.e., showing self-restraint and avoiding conflict) or by stating views assertively and with confidence. While hiding feelings can lead to emotional exhaustion, expressing feelings within a supportive environment can help women participate in collective activities that they value. Women express their feelings by affirming their feminist identities, by gaining strength from the movement, and by participating in situations that facilitate their expression of socially inappropriate emotions for women.

In the case of the Peer Theater group five years ago, participants described many different feelings as they identified with and distanced themselves from their own and others' experiences. Frequently, the women became so angry at being interrupted or having their ideas challenged that they would throw socks or shoes at others. The participants often were so frustrated with their daily lives and oppressions that, when feelings became too intense, they "acted out." The energy they released in an explosion of anger became the form and content of our theater. The group channeled and reframed these emotions and the substance of these exchanges into a creative space and the voice of the character. We raised questions such as, "Would your character throw socks in frustration or would she do something else?" The answer was usually something like, "Hell no, she wouldn't throw no socks. She'd get herself up and change her mind. She'd do something about the situation." The dialogue would continue around the character until the actor found within herself an answer to her own intense emotion. One actress told me, "It was really stupid for me to act like that. I want to be a strong woman, not some crazy. I won't be doing that again." She didn't.

In this Peer Theater group, I also learned how to use my anger to create change. However, the anger and how these feelings are channeled into other behavior do not always lessen my frustrations or change circumstances. As I recently reflected about my Peer Theater experiences and reactions of my black colleague from my full-time job five years ago, I wrote: "I'm still angry about that jerk. – it drives me though."

Forming guiding values. To move from the dialogic moment to a use of sustained tensions and explorations of lived contradictions, we incorporate certain principles, values that form the spirituality and dialogue. These values maintain community. Important values are humility, compassion, and simplicity (Harlos, 2000; Neal, 1997). Humility means that we do not position ourselves above or as more important than ourselves. Without humility, we cannot engage in the kind of listening that is important in dialogue. Levine (1994) describes listening as essential in dialogue:

> The core of team dialogue is *collectively listening with spirit*. That is: a group of people listens (individually) with selfless receptivity to each other's ideas, thereby emptying themselves to create a common vessel which—shaped by and sustained by the power of the group's collective listening—receives and contains a collective spirit" (p. 62, emphasis in original).

Compassion is "a deep concern for others expressed as helpful, kind actions requiring empathy, patience, and courage" (Harlos, 2000, p. 618). Frost, Dutton, Worline, and Wilson (2000) have found that "people often act compassionately in the face of pain without knowing what is appropriate or how compassion should be conveyed" (p. 25) and that "organizations create an emotional ecology where care and human connection are enabled or disabled" (p. 26). In compassion, we connect with others by surrendering to their pain and offering comfort. In my journals, I found that Peer Theater gave me strength through connection:

> I experienced my own anger at being overlooked, at being told I'd never be anything—that nobody expected much from me. As we listened to each other, the dialogue changed to offer more support and understanding, but also to encourage a change in behavior. The motto emerged "if you don't like where you're living, move out." (Personal journal entry)

Because Peer Theater often is improvisational when participants perform for an audience, actors and audience members often do not know what may happen next. For example during a performance of a new script, one of the actors completely forgot her lines. In this scene, her character was disclosing her HIV/AIDS status to her new boyfriend. The audience's rapt attention broke for what felt like twenty minutes, but was in actuality about three seconds. As they sat there staring at the actors, the actor who forgot her lines began to act very nervous. The actor playing her boyfriend leaned over to her, touched her hand and said, "Why don't you just tell me what's on your mind . . . it'll be OK." The actress stood up and walked around the table to hug him and as soon as she touched him, she remembered her lines. What could have been a potentially negative situation turned out to be a moment in which the actors and the audience touched because of the kindness the actor playing the boyfriend extended to his peer. As Frost et al. (2000) point out, "compassion is action in the face of not knowing" (p. 32).

Finally, simplicity encourages us to "focus on substantive, significant issues rather than on superficial, irrelevant appearances" (Harlos, 2000, p. 619). One day, the actors were tired from extra rehearsals, hungry because I had driven them to hard to practice, and sick of me barking at them during their routine. Of course, as teenagers often do, they decided they weren't going to do the show. Each in their own way, threw the biggest temper tantrum that they could muster–swearing, crying, screaming, walking out, and sitting down. The situation had simply become more than they could handle.

They ended up forming a circle in which they could throw bodies on the floor. One of the actors said, "This sucks, we're not gonna help nobody like this." With this statement, all the complexities and frustrations melted away. They were there for one purpose–to educate others about HIV/AIDS. The reason became more important than how tired and frustrated they felt.

These three values of humility, compassion, and simplicity form foundations for spirituality in our lives, particularly for the ways that we value community. Daniels et al. (2000) state that an "implication of valuing community [in spirituality] is the recognition that we do not exist in isolation but are part of a larger entity. Being in community entails certain responsibilities" (p. 557). These responsibilities involve treating ourselves and others with dignity and respect and serving a vision of lives that transcend their material aspects.

This vision of lives focuses on lives in community. Dialogic moments are essential in this community development. Such moments, according to Shotter and Katz (1999) enable us to realize that "all changes in the being of an individual, in their sensibilities, originate in joint, social, or dialogical exchanges, in processes that go on, not first as ideas in one or another person's head, but are woven into the fabric of activities between them, in their practices." These dialogic moments and the ensuing communication require vigilance in that we must maintain openness to ourselves and others to achieve sustained dialogic encounters.

In our effort to sustain the dialogic moment, our Peer Theater group agreed to work through issues that arose during our time together, no matter how tough they were or how angry we felt about them. We determined as a group that it was not okay to act on our stereotypes. We agreed to try to help each other overcome our predisposition to stereotypes by talking them through instead of ignoring them or giving them power. If someone (white or black) used a slang term that was not understandable to someone else, the person who did not understand the language brushed the back of his hand against his face. This practice alerted the person using slang that he or she needed to rephrase the statement to make it accessible to everyone.

Participating in rituals. The group derived several techniques for continuing our dialogic moment. Some of these interactions became regularized into rituals. For example, each time we met, we started rehearsal on the floor, stretching and generally chatting about the day's schedule (i.e., goals and objectives to accomplish). Being on the floor, on the same level with one another, was a position that lessened the power imbalance in place by the nature of our working relationship. As long as I was on the floor with them, we were visibly equal. If they remained on the floor and I stood up, the emotional climate changed.

Also, starting rehearsal on the floor took on symbolic meaning of "getting grounded" and enabled us to work on theatrical techniques such as breathing, body placements, and flexibility. The theatrical work dove-tailed with the psychologically comforting dynamic of being on an even and equal plane. Hercus (1999) suggests that ritual is important in the emotional framing process that goes along with feminist identity and collective action but she does not elaborate on this point. Some of our rituals, however, illustrate her point.

Each rehearsal began with a talking circle in which the participants sat on the floor of the rehearsal space. The Native American tradition of the "talking stick circle" provided the framework from which we built our own ritual (www.vision-nest.com; www.wisdomcircle.org). Our group's governing rules for the talking circle were that whoever held the stick was the only person who could speak; the words the speaker uttered would be the truth as he/she knew it; the others listened fully and completely to the statements made and feelings expressed and never challenged the validity of

the statement. The group had a "no-repeat" rule, which meant that anything said by any member at anytime that was of a personal nature was never to be repeated outside of the group context. This protection of vulnerability provided an essential ingredient to ensuring the emotional safety of the group. At our talking circles, everyone took turns telling their stories. Each member of the Theater group shared the events of his/her day or any other issue on his/her mind and solicited either a supported listening session or feedback from his/her peers. In addition, the ideas about plays and performances were shared and discussed in the circle to alleviate a stop-start scenario once active rehearsal had begun.

The talking circles promoted bonding within the group and demonstrated that any feeling or emotion was acceptable to share in this setting. Emotionally charged topics ranged from disturbing issues such as a parent's drug abuse, instances of discrimination directed against members of the theater group, fear of STDs from sexual activity, and date rape. These topics were interspersed among other teenage issues, such as disliking school, excitement over a date for the dance, and stress from tests. For this group of teenagers, it was highly important that their peers as well as the authority figures working with them understood them. Adults working with the group participated in the circle as long as they followed the established rules.

The talking circle was also important for the Peer Theater group to let the actors express the frustration of their lives before rehearsal. By "venting" immediately prior to performances and rehearsals, they could concentrate on the topic of HIV/AIDS more clearly. The expression of their negative feelings and emotions allowed their creative minds to take charge and therefore, making their rehearsal process more efficient and creatively productive. In subsequent rehearsals, members drew on these conversations to provide support for each other, thereby reconstructing their group's cohesion across time and space.

What we did not realize in these rituals and regularities is that we were developing formats for articulating our realities and analyzing our stories. Without our knowing it, the interaction rituals enabled all of us to engage in heuristic storytelling, that is, "storytelling [that] allows meanings to be explored, discovered, even changed in the dialogue rather than assumed, sedimented, and reified" (Langellier & Hall, 1989, p. 215). As our time together progressed, we developed a closeness that could only occur because of understanding each other as we sat in our individual social, racial, and gendered locations.

Empowering Women and Other Marginalized Members of Society

The women who sustained me through that period were black and white, old and young, lesbian, bisexual, and heterosexual and we all shared a war against the tyrannies of silence. They all gave me a strength and concern without which I could not have survived intact. Within those weeks of acute fear came the knowledge–within the war we are all waging with the forces of death, subtle or otherwise, conscious or not–I am not only a casualty, I am also a warrior.

I am the face of one of your fears. Because I am woman, because I am black, because I am lesbian, because I am myself, a black woman warrior poet doing my work, come here to ask you, are you doing yours? (Lorde, 1980, pp. 20-21)

Was I doing my work? Am I still doing my work? Those are good questions to ask. Theatrical expression was for me the single most important accomplishment of my childhood and early adult life. Learning the discipline of theater allowed me a means to explore my inner feelings in a way that was structured and safe. It taught me about freeing my mind from the constraints of the "world out there." It provided a network of friends and peers who would help me make sense of the life I was living, one that was entrenched in violence and lack. Theater made it OK for me to be different. The better I got at acting, the more I could lose myself in the character and the action of the play and forget about my real life. It was the site of personal, emotional, and spiritual freedom. It was a space where I had a voice–strong, clear, and important. On stage was the only place I ever truly felt safe.

Finding a voice is not about finding ultimate truth . . . it is about learning to accept oneself within the social-political-economic-historical forces that helped to shape one's existence. It is facing your fears and finding the strength to do something about these fears. It is the process of being sustained by others so that you can emerge as a warrior (Lorde, 1980). It is also about staring down the racist and other bigoted belief structures in which one is raised. hooks (2000) best explains this call to action when she writes

> Given today's culture (sic) on where the white and black working-class and poor have more to say to one another, there is a context for building solidarity that did not exist in the past. That solidarity cannot be expressed solely through shared critique of the privileged. It must be rooted in a politics of resistance that is fundamentally anti-racist, one that recognizes that the experiences of underprivileged white folks are as important as those of people of color. (p. 118)

For the actors in the Peer Theater group, the power of achieving standpoints, of politicizing action, and of experiencing creative intensity and influence within and with each other was exhilarating. For individuals, it makes your knees buckle under the sheer thrill of it. It pulls you toward emotional expression, physical action, and choice—it is both magic and fleeting. You can't

willfully create it--but you can create the context that might enable transformation to happen. That context in which anything is possible can be Peer Theater.

Langer (1957) describes art as a means to capture and communicate lived experience. From the aesthetic transformation of lived experience, freedom can emerge. That freedom is what I hoped to help my peer actors achieve at least once in their lives. Because of their creative, artist experience, they began to speak for themselves with more conviction and clarity. This communicative process is described by hooks (1994) as "like desire, language disrupts, refuses to be contained within boundaries. It speaks itself against our will, in words and thoughts that intrude, even violate the most private spaces of mind and body"(p. 167).

There was a marked change in actors and in me at the end of our work together. We were no longer alone–we had found a way to bridge our differences and meet each other person-to-person. Peer Theater facilitates individual transformation such as Lorde (1980) referred to:

> I have come to believe over and over again that what is most important to me must be spoken, made verbal and shared, even at the risk of having it bruised and misunderstood. That the speaking profits me, beyond any other affect. (p. 19)

Peer Theater can create solidarity in a group that can bind us together in ways that encourage identification and articulation of modes of oppression and marginalization and means of changing those conditions. Brenner (2000) explains that being allowed to "practice being different kinds of relationships, to experience our capacities for cooperation, solidarity, and democracy," (p. 187) is essential in envisioning a world where class and gender politics do not confine and constrain.

My work with and through that Peer Theater group did not end five years ago. The transformation process still is emerging. As my work progressed with the group, I gained new and important insights into myself and my life's experiences. Today, five years later, I still use those lessons and feelings as guides when I feel disempowered and marginalized as a woman straddling two classes–my class of origin and my middle-class lifestyle–and the constraints that position places on my daily living.

Conclusion

The most profound experiences in our lives occur when we least expect or welcome them. By finding the moment in which we live most fully in our frail inner selves, the space between all of us that is colored by our race, our genders, and our class are transmuted by our ability to reach our hands across that space to touch the humanness of another. In that instant—as we pass through our pain, our biases, our sense of self--we find our own humanity. And it isn't until later, after the moment has long passed, that we can begin to look back and understand how we have been forever changed and then we find within ourselves a way to communicate the experience. (Personal journal entry)

As it turned out, the students in the Peer Theater found they had meaningful things to say and could change their lives and the lives of people around them. They found a self-confidence that didn't have in the early weeks of the group's work. They were marked with change; they learned to believe in themselves.

The six months I spent working with this Peer Theater group were probably the most difficult of my life. Our work together fostered a tentative bond of individual and collective awareness. I often felt as if I had just stepped off a roller coaster—a little sick and dizzy and at the same time, exhilarated and transformed, a process described by using three themes: experiencing the dialogic moment, sustaining tensions and contradictions (by using feminist anger, forming guiding values, and participating in rituals), and empowering women and other marginalized members of society. However, these themes do not tell what I learned or what the other Peer Theater participants experienced.

I learned that race, gender, and class are not something "out there" that I do not have to consider unless necessary. I learned that these issues always impact people's location in society. Most importantly, I know that biases, pain, and ignorance can be bridged through creativity and communication. The thing we fought was ignorance—not each other. Our courage to look into our hearts and accept others when we communicate helped us make sense of the space between us. Through our theatrical expressions, we transcended our personal limitations.

But these words can sound meaningless as we struggle with what it means to communicate. In the case of Peer Theater, communicating meant the use of talk to break down barriers, to sustain differences, to offer comfort, to explain what we meant and who we are, and much more. Peer Theater provided the structure, the language, and the purpose for engaging in the kind of talk that could transform us. When the dialogic moment was achieved, the rituals, rules, and practices of Peer Theater did not allow the moment to die. Instead, the ability to really talk to each other and to envision new possibilities continued to other interactions, relationships, audiences, and personal experiences. Peer Theater made it okay to be different and possible to envision a new social order.

I know that no matter what my life was like prior to working with these students, it has never since been the same. Their humor, heart, laughter, pain, rage, and despair seeped into my sensibility and became part of me–not in the sense that what was theirs is now mine, but in the sense that having known them helped me know myself. In their eyes I saw the reflection of my own humanity and the path of my own journey. It is a journey I still travel.

Note

1 The organization of the Peer Theatre group five years ago centered its content or focus of consciousness raising was health education about AIDS. It is well known that HIV/AIDS is a disease that thrives on ignorance and silence (see Brendlinger, Deervin, & Forman-Wernet, 1999; Cline & McKenzie, 1994; Free & Fox, 1992; Huesca, 1999; Lather & Smithies, 1995; Lewis, 1994; O'Sullivan & Thomson, 1992; Waldron, Caughlin, & Jackson, 1995). Besides biological transmission routes, a more insidious transmission route of HIV/AIDS is apathy. In late 1990s, the most rapidly growing group of HIV/AIDS infections was straight women of color between the ages of 19-25 years (www.cdc.gov). One-quarter of all new HIV infections in the United States were estimated to occur in young people under the age of 21 (www.advocatesforyouth.org). Specifically, by December 1997, 3,130 AIDS cases among people ages 13 to 19 in the United States were reported to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and the percentage of adolescent AIDS cases among female teens in the United States had risen from 14% in 1987 to 49% in 1997 (www.cdc.gov).

During the 1990s, women and especially women of color, began to speak out in articles, papers, mainstream media, plays, photo essays, AIDS walks, and activist conferences across the country about their invisibility in the AIDS pandemic, even as their numbers of infected members continued to increase. From these activities stemmed a wealth of literature, both mainstream and scholarly, about health education and stories that captured the faces and voices of women living with HIV/AIDS (Lather & Smithies, 1995; O'Sullivan & Thomson, 1992).

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