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Newspaper Theatre, Critical Race Theory, and Commemorating
the Wade-Braden Trial in Louisville, Kentucky**

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Moving Forward, Living Backward, or Just Standing Still?: Newspaper Theatre, Critical Race Theory, and Commemorating the Wade-Braden Trial in Louisville, Kentucky¹

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This essay, with a link to the full group-devised script of "Moving Forward, Living Backward, or Just Standing Still?" describes how graduate students entering an MFA acting program devised a performance inspired by the WPA's Living Newspapers and Boal's Newspaper Theatre to commemorate the 60th anniversary of the Wade-Braden housing case in Louisville, KY. Drawing on critical race theory, I argue that the process, together with the script itself, offers an example of several ways performance can be used to remember and re-imagine a community's racial history and future. It commemorated the trial itself, creating a public reminder of Louisville's segregated, anti-Black past; it revealed intersections between segregation in Louisville and the practices of racist policing that led to Michael Brown's death in Ferguson, MO, thus connecting an historical event of local significance with a contemporary, national problem; it worked to decenter white narratives and authority; and it offered one model of how student artists can be trained to work together with community

¹ A copy of the full script of the play can be found at https://docs.google.com/document/d/1vDwB5t9XnesEug3jmNSga2T3jDiZO6YaIV_QfYU5aM/edit?usp=sharing

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audiences to acknowledge how white supremacy is built into our laws, and imagine how we might build institutions differently moving forward.

Background

In 1954, when Andrew and Charlotte Wade tried to buy a home in the then predominantly white Shively neighborhood of Louisville, KY, they were met with the violence emblematic of racist housing practices associated with the Jim Crow era. 60 years later, in 2014, Dr. Cate Fosl, Anne Braden's biographer and a founder of the Anne Braden Institute for Social Justice Research, and Mariam Williams, former Program Coordinator at the Institute, organized a project to commemorate the anniversary of the legal case that emerged after Anne and Carl Braden helped the Wades purchase their home. As part of this commemoration, I worked with a group of graduate students entering the University of Louisville's MFA program in theatre performance to devise "Moving Forward, Living Backward, or Just Standing Still?"

Together with the script itself, this essay describes several ways our creative process, inspired by the WPA's Living Newspapers and Boal's Newspaper Theatre, attempted to center the experiences of people who live with and resist racist oppression and violence as we remembered and re-imagined a community's racial history and future. The performance commemorated the trial itself, creating a public reminder of Louisville's segregated, anti-Black past; it revealed intersections between segregation in Louisville and the practices of racist policing that led to Michael Brown's death in Ferguson, MO, thus connecting an historical event of local significance with a contemporary, national problem; it worked to decenter white narratives and authority; and it offered one model of how student artists can be trained to work together with community audiences to acknowledge how white supremacy is built into our laws, and imagine how we might build institutions differently moving forward.

Looking back to avoid living backward: centering the Wade family in commemoration

Andrew Wade explained that he had wanted to own a solid house outside of the bustle of downtown Louisville, but with an easy commute (Fosl 137); his wife Charlotte, Mariam Williams writes, “had a vision for her life that included living in the home of her choice, and her husband wanted to give her dreams to her” (Williams 2014). Dr. Cate Fosl points out that in May 1954, *Brown v. Board of Education*’s desegregation of schools both marked a turning point in the struggle for Black civil rights and “triggered a wave of massive white resistance” to integration of many kinds (Fosl 135). This racist white resistance to desegregated housing was deeply entrenched in Louisville, KY, and it was the inability to find the kind of home they wanted in a neighborhood where Black people were not prevented from buying that led Andrew Wade to seek assistance from Anne and Carl Braden shortly before the *Brown* decision. The Wades faced continual racist violence after they eventually moved into the neighborhood, culminating in the explosion of their home with dynamite.

In the 1999 epilogue to her memoir first written soon after the case happened, *The Wall Between*, Anne Braden expresses concern that the public story told about the Wades’ experience shifted to center white people because she, her husband and other white activists were indicted for sedition for having purchased the house for the Wades that was later blown up: “It is distressing to me, even now, to realize that, among the many white people who poured out their support for us, it was apparently of more consequence that a white man had been unjustly sentenced to fifteen years in prison than that an African American family had been denied a house to live in” (338). The shift that Anne Braden noted in how this story was told began when the case went to court – rather than prosecuting those who firebombed the Wade home, the state latched on to anti-Communist hysteria and indicted those who purchased the house. The Wades’ own story was minimized except as it related to whiteness, a practice not unusual in courts of law. Critical Race Theory holds that legal narratives – stories generated in courts of law like the one surrounding the bombing of the Wades’ home – have the power to shape public opinion: “The stories or

narratives told by the ingroup remind it of its identity in relation to outgroups, and provide it with a form of shared reality in which its own superior position is seen as natural” (Delgado, Michigan Law Review, 2412).

There were several events planned as part of the 60th anniversary commemoration of the trial, including a public library exhibit that later became a digital history resource (still available at <http://www.blackfreedomwhitealliesredscare.org>). The Anne Braden Institute for Social Justice Research and The Brandeis School of Law at The University of Louisville intended to collaborate on a trial re-enactment in the law school’s Allen Courtroom. They contacted UofL’s Theatre Arts Department for help coordinating the reenactment, and knowing my background in community-based theatre and interest in creating work focused on racial justice and social change, colleagues in the department directed them to me. I was very interested, especially as I am a Louisville native and have a strong interest in the city’s history, but I was also concerned about being in a position of leadership on this project. Both of my parents’ families had roots in the California neighborhood of Louisville’s West End, which is now predominantly Black. They were eventually part of “white flight” from that area in the 1960s, joining other white families who were migrating south to Shively and beyond, and participating in the racial segregation of the city.

As a white assistant professor of theatre who lives under that legacy, I am perceived as a member of the “ingroup” that shaped anti-Black narratives designed to naturalize white privilege, and I have inevitably benefited from my position in a structure designed to perpetuate racial inequity. I felt an urgent need to help examine racist housing practices and their connection to the continued segregation of Louisville, and to explore how theatre practice might help re-imagine the future landscape of the city, but I was aware that my own family’s place in this history made it troubling that I would be in charge of telling this story. I took to heart Braden’s own desire to re-direct focus back to the story of the Wades, and their courage and struggle: “We tried to resist this [narrative shift] by always talking first and last about the house and the issue of segregation. I have wondered in recent years if there was something more we could have done to stop this gradual but decisive change in emphasis” (Braden 338). In retrospect, I recognize that

there were more steps I could have taken to seek a director of color for this project, as I am not certain that my attempts to decenter my own authority were successful. At the time, however, I recognized that the top-down power structure of a standard rehearsal process might reinforce my own authority and center a white woman's perspective, and a straight-ahead reenactment might risk re-inscribing a case that used the dominant "us/them" anti-Communist legal narrative popularized during the McCarthy hearings to steer focus away from the racist violence the Wades experienced.

Scholars of critical race theory suggest that building counter-narratives is one effective method for dismantling white supremacy in both theory and practice. While I remained uneasy, I attempted to find ways to use my position to further anti-racist practice. I hoped that using devising techniques rooted in Theatre of the Oppressed and the WPA's Living Newspapers would offer a framework for de-centering my own authority and allow for multiple intersecting counter-narratives to take center stage. I wanted to open a path for students of color to collaborate with activists and audience members in the area to generate an anti-racist practice by first *inverting* the "ingroup/outgroup" structure that had been created to center whiteness, and ultimately *replacing* it with a multivocal, multigenerational model that could highlight and reflect the complex experiences of people who lived with and resisted racist violence.

In addition to preparing actors for work in theatre pursuing an MFA in performance, the University of Louisville offers students the option to get a graduate certificate through the African American Theatre Program. As described by the department's website, the AATP, "...is committed to staging works by new and established African-American dramatists, developing a broad audience for African American theatre, and offering an in-depth curriculum that focuses on the theory and craft of acting, directing, and designing for Black Theatre" (African American Theatre Program). In the fall of 2014, I was also asked for the first time to teach a course for incoming theatre arts graduate students called "Introduction to Graduate Studies," which is intended to orient MFA students to the University and help them navigate the expectations and opportunities of graduate study. I thought using this course to devise a script for the

Braden trial re-enactment project would serve several purposes: it would require the incoming students to engage closely with the community in which they were going to be working and making theatre, it would give them a chance to consider the history of race in Louisville and grapple with the value of and need for a program like the AATP, which focuses on the work of Black artists, and it would introduce them to the idea that actors can do work that is rooted in a commitment to social justice – that the stories they tell as artists can have profound consequences for the community in which they live and work.

My job, as I understood it then, was to facilitate research and collect materials that would help students build this play with the community. I spent the summer compiling selections of trial transcripts I had access to, which were limited to the appeals brief, which included large excerpts from the trial, and sections of *The Wall Between*, in which Anne Braden quotes several moments directly. In the month of August, shortly before we began the academic year in which we would develop this project, Michael Brown was shot and killed by a white police officer in Ferguson, MO, and the city erupted in protest when Officer Darren Wilson was not held accountable for Brown's death. The history of policing, anti-Black violence, and racist housing practices in St. Louis had clear connections with Louisville's history, and I started a bibliography of news stories so that these connections could find their way into our exploration of the Wade-Braden story.

Standing Still: Un-making Place in the Brandeis School of Law

While it maintains programs like the African American Theatre Program and a major in African and African Diaspora Studies, The University of Louisville is historically considered a predominantly white institution. The Allen Courtroom at the Brandeis School of Law is “an appellate courtroom with a seven-seat bench, witness stand, 12-person jury box, counsel tables and a podium” (Louis J. Brandeis School of Law). As a space within a PWI devoted to the practice of law and study thereof, where “mock trials” often take place, it also serves as a rich location to interrogate through performance how the law applies to bodies in

public and private space. The courtroom is surrounded by images, which had also been placed there in 2014, of Dr. Martin Luther King addressing a packed room of students and other community members in 1967, some of whom sit on the sills of open windows (O’Leary). While the space is one devoted to narratives about the law – both larger public narratives about who holds power and judgment, who sits in which seats, who asks for justice and who grants it, and the more specific narratives built around legal cases – these photos of King’s visit offer a counter narrative of students questioning the law’s solidity and encroaching on its boundaries.

In order to suggest how they might trouble the walls built to protect seemingly solid institutional structures that privilege whiteness, it seemed important to offer these incoming graduate students – who would be engaging their bodies in the practice of telling stories professionally – an introduction to the stories of resistance in Louisville, and to the practice of questioning the official narratives constructed by the law. There was a particular challenge with the Introduction to Graduate Studies course in that it was only scheduled for an hour per week and was not generally dedicated to creating performance. To ensure that the incoming graduate students would be committed to the process, and in an effort to decenter my own power and include them as co-creators of the course, I emailed them prior to the start of the semester to introduce the project and inquire about their interest. Their replies showed a general enthusiasm about the possibility. Since they were open to the idea, I began the semester by asking students to complete The Anne Braden Institute self-guided civil rights history tour of Louisville, orienting themselves to this new place in a way that emphasized not only the hidden story of segregation, but also the history of resistance and work for change.

Popularizing the means: training actors to develop counter-narratives

I wanted to make sure this project emerged from a devising process in which the voices of the students working on the piece – most of whom were people of color – played an active and creative part. I

also hoped to involve Louisville's activist community, of which Anne Braden had long been such a committed and crucial member until her death in 2006. To increase the students' awareness of the larger population and history in which they were to be artists, my intention was to engage them in a series of conversations with Louisville residents about the history and present of race, place, and housing in their communities so that we might examine together connections between the Wades' experiences and the contemporary dynamics of race, housing, and otherness in the city. In order to further direct focus back to the community, we reached outside of the theatre department to invite broader participation: anyone who felt strongly about the case and the issues surrounding it was invited to be involved, either in community conversations or as one of the actor/playwrights who attended the sessions in which we built the script through improvisations.

The ensemble ended up being a mixture of first-year MFA actors, undergraduate theatre students, and community members, and the play combined historical documents, current news reports, Anne Braden's writing, and verbatim transcripts of community conversations. Everything in the play was powered by human labor and energy – from handwritten titles on signs to actors moving rehearsal blocks around the space to indicate scene changes. This grassroots, inclusive and democratic way of working also seemed appropriate to the subject at hand, and a way to offer a multivocal alternative to the dominant narrative supplied by court records. The emphasis on the presence and work of physical bodies in the construction of environment was intended to underline the real and urgent human consequences of the subject at hand.

I also scheduled three story circles with the community, one at the Carl Braden Center in West Louisville, one at the downtown location of the Louisville Free Public Library, and another at the University of Louisville. With the assistance of Dr. Fosl and Mariam Williams, I reached out to members of the community who might have an interest in the subject. This part of the process was not entirely effective, because I realized too late that the students' work and rehearsal schedules would not allow for them to easily attend the two story circles at which members of the community outside UofL would be present. The

practice of listening that is part of collecting community stories seems a vital part of decentering authority and building counter-narratives in the theatre-making process. In these small groups, the local activist community shared wonderfully rich stories of Louisville's past and present on the subject of race and housing, Anne Braden and her work, policing in West Louisville, and Louisville's civil rights history in general. A member of my own family also attended a story circle, and at one point I shared a brief story illustrating my own position of privilege. Ideally, our small-group collective structure would invite those who have been the target of systemic and individual racism to be at center and give voice to their own experiences, while white participants could be transparent about their own complicity in racist structures but spend most of the time *listening* closely and actively. As it stood, I – the white director of the piece – was the only representative of the creative team in these rooms. To successfully hand over my own authority, I should have figured out a way to make it possible for the group of student artists to be present. Regardless, participants generously gifted their stories to the project. I included recordings of these circles in the materials students used to devise the piece, and the community conversation sections were included verbatim. The people who participated in these sessions were invited to read script drafts and attend rehearsals if they desired, and some attended the performance itself.

As mentioned above, I had proposed to the project's originators that in order to interrupt the narrative promoted in the trial and create space for counter narratives, rather than doing a direct re-enactment of the trial, we should use a documentary form inspired by the WPA's Living Newspapers and Augusto Boal's Newspaper Theatre. The living newspapers of the Federal Theatre Project were designed to create theatrical performances out of history and current events. Paul Nadler wrote in "Liberty Censored: Black Living Newspapers of the Federal Theatre Project," (*African American Review*, 1995), "The living newspaper form drops the shield of fiction, confronting issues not as imaginative or Platonic concepts, but as questions of immediate concern to a living, breathing audience" (621). He suggests that the power of this form may have led even the Federal Theatre Project to censor living newspapers that dealt with race

because they might be inflammatory. Using Living Newspaper techniques for the trial commemoration seemed to be a way both to introduce young performers to historical processes outside of those typical in professional theatre training programs, and to generate a piece that addressed current issues of racial injustice, segregation and police violence that were directly connected to the problems that led to the Wade family's experiences.

To center and amplify the stories of people affected by those issues and create a piece that interrogated the legacy of the Wade-Braden case in Louisville, we worked with many techniques described in Boal's *Legislative Theatre*. Boal explains that the project of that work is to, "bring theatre back into the centre of political action – the centre of decisions – by making theatre as politics rather than merely making political theatre. In the latter case, the theatre makes comments on politics; in the former, the theatre is, in itself, one of the ways in which political activity can be conducted" (20). As one of the four categories of legislative popular theatre, newspaper theatre "seeks to popularize 'the means of making theatre' so that the people themselves can use them and make their own theatre" (235), and to show that "in the same way that all people are potentially theatre artists, so all spaces are potentially 'dramatic spaces' and all subjects are potentially 'dramatic subjects'" (236). The techniques arose out of a need for "the demystification and deconstruction of the habitual techniques of journalism" (237).

After gathering and studying research materials, including trial transcripts, newspaper accounts of current events, the report on housing in Louisville, and recordings of community conversations, the actors and I met to devise the piece. In the devising and rehearsal room, the actors themselves became authorities, shaping the materials into a performance. I served as an outside eye to reflect back to them what they had generated and offer questions for clarification. We began with a common practice for devising or writing plays from community-based research – determining what subjects the research suggested and writing possible chapters of a performance on note cards. The actors then improvised short performance compositions on those subjects, and we wrote brief scenes based on those improvisations. To

create the full performance, we decided to put hand-lettered chapter titles on an easel, to make a visual reference to what might be a presentation of evidence in a courtroom. Each chapter included narration, an original scene on the chapter subject devised by the students, a segment of the Braden trial, documentary research, and a selection from our community conversations. In this way, we were able to represent multiple narratives on the same subject in a limited amount of time, raising questions for the audience/jury to consider. We began each chapter with a key question posed by the ensemble of actors.

Boal describes several techniques used by the Arena Theatre of Sao Paulo to present and interrogate news articles on stage, and these techniques seemed useful as we attempted to present both the narrative generated by the courts and a counter-narrative that might exist alongside that story. The list of eleven methods he describes begins with a “simple reading,” which is a clear and direct reading of a news story outside of its original context (237). Many sections of the script we generated involved just this: direct re-enactments of the trial itself culled from available transcripts, or a straight-ahead reading from *The Wall Between* to accompany the beginning of the play and set the stage. The rest of Boal’s list provides ten methods that complicate straight-ahead reporting and quite frequently present narrative and one or more counter-narratives at the same time, and we embedded the trial reenactments in sections of performance that made use of almost all of these techniques. Boal describes:

- a “complementary reading,” which is a reading accompanied by annotation or comment that corrects a bias or presents a more complete story (think of a “there... I fixed it” meme, for example, which both exposes the bias in the original and provides a counternarrative by changing a few words) (239). In the script for *Moving Forward*, the transcripts from our community conversations frequently work in this way, allowing personal experience of Louisville’s past and present to supplement archival texts from the trial;

- a crossed reading, in which two news items that contradict each other or present a full story together are linked (Boal gives an example of a story about a French actress who would dine with famous artists and political figures on a talk show, which was crossed in performance with a story about children in San Juan dying from malnutrition) (240). There is a section of our script that includes performers reading excerpts from Louisville newspapers reporting on the Wade case and Braden trial, all of which center white perspectives, while also representing the events as a Communist conspiracy, or at the very least bad judgment on behalf of the white people involved. We preceded this with an improvised “game show” called “Guess That Race” that highlights the discrepancy between media representations of white people and people of color to offer a fuller picture of racialized media bias then and now;
- the rhythmical reading, which adopts a particular cadence, poetic, musical or otherwise to enhance the text (261). The sections of text that borrowed styles of speaking from television programs – game shows and awards shows – were contrasted with a selection from Gil-Scot Heron’s “The Revolution Will Not Be Televised,” and the protest song the actors chose to add to the end, “Ain’t Gonna Let Nobody Turn Me Around.” All of these served to emphasize a contrast in ways of speaking in popular media, the music of resistance, the “legalese” of the courtroom, and the abbreviated sound-byte style of news and media reports;
- the reinforced reading, which combines factual texts with slogans or songs that typically serve to obscure the violence of those texts (such as propaganda used by violent governments or advertisements that make products sexy while obscuring their detrimental qualities) (261). We included in our script statistics regarding police violence against and disproportionate arrests of Black citizens, and followed these with crossed readings of both the preamble to the U.S. Constitution and the Louisville Metro Police Department’s Statement of Values, to emphasize how

these aspirational statements taken as fact serve to obscure biases that lead to anti-Black violence;

- the parallel action, which consists simply of “miming actions which contradict or complement the news item which is being read by an actor” (242). One scene in the performance involved all of the actors of color standing behind blocks that had been previously stacked on top of each other to represent a “house,” while two white actors put on police caps and stood on either side of the stage area facing toward the audience at a distance from the other actors. As one actor read a description of the acts of violence the Wades experienced after they moved into their Shively home, the actors of color ducked and gestured as if to protect themselves from violent blows. The scene ended with an actual quote from the police who had been hired to guard the Wade home and ignored the violence that was happening: “You people are too intelligent to get excited over those little things. Just let them go.”
- the historical reading, which includes historical facts (or scenes about historical events) alongside a related news item (243). The entire play was designed to operate in this way, weaving historical documents together with descriptions of personal experience and contemporary and historical news reports and scenes created through actor improvisation, to demonstrate the connections between all of them;
- improvisation, either performed open to modification in front of an audience or as a developmental technique to create a script (243). The performance included moments of in-the-moment improvisation in which the actors would generate their own words based on the theme of that section, as well as short scripted scenes on the subjects of news reports and trial transcripts that had been generated through actors’ improvisation. This was key to the democratic spirit of

newspaper theater, emphasizing the possibilities of imagination and collaborative creation alongside historical documents;

- “the concretion of abstraction,” which uses images, symbols or other means to make more real something that has lost its impact and become abstract (244). Again, our interviews with Louisville activists served to clarify how people’s lived experience here and now was still affected by redlining and racist housing and policing practices that some audience members might understand only through news reports or historical accounts;
- text out of context, in which an actor reads the news in a context completely different from the way news is generally presented (Boal uses the example of an assassination reported in the style of a gossip columnist) in order to enable the audience to see both the news and the style in unexpected ways (245). Again, the game show and awards show styles worked in this way, to reveal how racial and structural bias is often elided by simplified popular representations;
- and finally, “insertion into the actual context,” which takes a news report generally considered to be “objective” and allows people to see the complexities of the context in which the event occurred (245-46). Again, the entire script was intended to work in this way, but perhaps the most salient example here is the information about the Wades having armed accomplices other than the police defending their home. Reported in the trial itself, the presence of weapons is used to discredit the Wades and make them and their defenders seem violent. Viewing this fact in the larger historical context allows the audience to recognize the complexity of why the Wades might have made that choice.

Moving forward: audience as jury

A key part of the performance itself was engaging the audience in active interrogation of the information presented. As they arrived at the Allen Courtroom, the audience was asked to wait outside, and as the performance began, one of the acting company acted as “bailiff” opening the doors and stating, “All rise for the jury.” The audience, then, initiated the performance by entering the courtroom cast as the jury, and they were handed “jury sheets” as they took their seats, to be filled out after the performance. Some were invited to sit in the courtroom’s jury box. Modeled after a form I had received while serving on a jury in a civil case the previous summer, the forms read, “SPECIAL VERDICT FORM, Wade-Braden Case, 1954, Louisville, KY, Ferguson, MO, Then and Now. Future Solutions. Your Verdict:” followed by space for the audience to write.

During our final rehearsals in the space, two of the actors, both Black women, casually improvised singing the protest song derived from a spiritual, “Ain’t Gonna Let Nobody Turn Me Around,” and we decided to keep that moment, having them lead the song as a curtain call. The singing not only provided another powerful reference to moments of Black resistance to unjust laws, it drew on a call-and-response tradition of building community, and encouraged the audience to join in the process and become participants. After the performance finished, the audience was given a few moments to fill out the jury sheets and offer answers to the questions raised in each section, which were repeated at the end of the play: “Who can live where, and why does it matter?; What is the role of the police? Whom should they protect and serve?; How do the media represent African Americans? Do they perpetuate misperceptions and fear?; How do we determine what makes a person ‘good?’ Why do we hold people to different standards of morality?; and finally, How can we move forward, rather than live backward or stand still? What are *your* solutions?”

Our post-performance discussion, then, in the spirit of Boal’s legislative theatre, encouraged the audience/jury to assume a more active, creative role within a space dedicated to learning about the practice of law, and helped us collectively generate possible suggestions for ways to help remedy the situation of

segregation, housing discrimination, and anti-Black violence. One jury member brought up community-based training for police in dealing with LGBTQ citizens and suggested having evidence of participation in that training worn clearly on police uniforms. Another recommended requiring law enforcement to actually live for extended periods of time, at least during training, in the communities they would be policing.

If there had been more performances or extended community meetings outside of these events, we might have generated action steps from the discussions that we could take as a community to work toward necessary changes. As it stood, in honor of the Wades and their struggle, and the anti-racist practice they and the Bradens championed in the Louisville community, the process served as a way of encouraging artists, activists and educators to explore creative paths to re-imagine the space of the courtroom and the city, the legacy of this case, and the history and future of racial justice in the United States. The full script can be found at

[https://docs.google.com/document/d/1vDwB5t9XnesEug3jmNSga2T3jDiZO6YaIV_-](https://docs.google.com/document/d/1vDwB5t9XnesEug3jmNSga2T3jDiZO6YaIV_-QfYU5aM/edit?usp=sharing)

[QfYU5aM/edit?usp=sharing](https://docs.google.com/document/d/1vDwB5t9XnesEug3jmNSga2T3jDiZO6YaIV_-QfYU5aM/edit?usp=sharing) to serve as a published commemoration of the Wade-Braden case, as illustration of the various counter-narratives generated by the process, and as a piece of artist-generated, community-based public scholarship.

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