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Don't Poke the Bear – Project Report

Nicole Kontolefa¹ and Grace Cannon²

In 2018, four applied theatre practitioners created a forum theatre play and workshop for a small Wyoming community. They wanted to engage participants in a dialogue about inclusion, racism, and homophobia, in particular how it manifests in a state known as the "Equality State." Forum theatre focuses on a protagonist experiencing oppression and how they may break their own bonds. In this report, two of the facilitators and creators reflect on how using forum theatre to follow the actions (or inaction) of a potential ally in a play about the exclusion of a gay woman of color was useful in deflecting white fragility and calling in an audience of mostly white folks to reflect on their own role in dismantling racist and hetero-normative social structures.

INTRODUCTION

In the summer of 2018, four applied theatre³ facilitators from New York created and implemented a custom workshop and forum theatre piece for a community in Wyoming. The goal of the applied theatre project, entitled *Don't Poke the Bear*, was to promote critical thinking, examine roles and relationships within a small homogenous community, and interrupt a culture of silence around experiences of people in marginalized communities. The process of creating, implementing, and reflecting upon this workshop and forum theatre piece provided multiple lessons in the ways that Theatre of the Oppressed can function to disarm heteropatriarchal white fragility while identifying actions and intentions for dismantling oppression.

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³ As a discipline, Applied Theatre brings together art, academia, and activism. Applied Theatre, as defined by the Mandala Center for Change is "a general term describing the use of drama in participatory ways and often in non-traditional settings to address social issues" ("Applied Theatre").

PROJECT DESCRIPTION

The four co-creators and facilitators of *Don't Poke the Bear* met as graduate students in an applied theatre Master's program. The team included Ashleigh Bragg, an actor, writer and teaching artist; Elise Goldin, a community organizer with low-wage workers, immigrant communities, and tenants; Grace Cannon, a community-based theatre artist and facilitator from Wyoming; and Nicole Kontolefa, an actor and teaching artist. The latter two, and writers of this report, are two white cisgendered women hailing from Wyoming and New York City respectively. The other two co-facilitators identify as a queer Black woman and a cisgendered white woman.

The workshop was implemented four times over the course of three days in August of 2018 in Wyoming and twice in New York during Spring and Summer of 2019. In Wyoming, different sections of the local community were targeted: the first implementation was at a facility that provides court-ordered therapeutic and educational services to girls aged 12-21 from around the state; the second was held at a public library downtown; the third at a community center that provides services to older adults; lastly, the fourth workshop was held at a theater facility on Main Street. In New York, the workshop was implemented first with a group of applied theatre practitioners and then with members of a multi-faith community center dedicated to nurturing inclusive community, peace and justice. The three-hour workshop asked participants of different ages and backgrounds to explore the question: what does it mean to be a good neighbor? We originally developed this workshop for a specific community in Wyoming, one facilitator's hometown. Admittedly, we were afraid of alienating our participants by using terminology deemed politically biased or "leftist." Even if folks in our workshops were ideologically diverse, we did not know how they understood words like patriarchy, white supremacy, white fragility, or dehumanization. At the same time we did not want to coddle them, or propose a watered-down version of the reality that Indigenous and LGBTQ+ Wyomingites

experience.

We were mindful of the chilling effect that white fragility can have on conversations about racism. Having experienced the discomfort of white fragility in our own bodies and witnessed it in others, we assumed the predominantly white community we were working in would be afflicted with this quality as well.

In her description of white fragility, DiAngelo describes “a series of defensive moves” that white folks resort to when feeling any racial “stress” (DiAngelo 103). A defensive mindset is not a learning mindset, and we wanted to use as much of our workshop as we could to engage in dialogue and learning around the central issues of inclusion and identity we had highlighted in our research.

We decided that forum theatre was an ideal method for showing versus telling the effects of identity-based discrimination within a homogenous community. Additionally, forum theatre aligned pedagogically with our intention to meet participants where they were. For these reasons, we devised an original forum play and planned activities that would prime the audience to be ready to reflect and actively participate.

The workshop began with a series of activities, including a group discussion, an energizer game, and a round of Story Circles⁴. The group discussion about the qualities participants valued in their neighbors acted as an assessment activity aimed at gauging values and norms among the people in the room. The energizer game was a call-and-response activity that invited participants to communicate the ways in which they identify personally, giving group members the opportunity to recognize collective commonalities and

⁴ ‘Story circles’ was developed by John O’Neal and members of the Free Southern Theatre as a way to engage the community in the art-making process (*Our Founding*). We facilitated Story Circles in groups of 3-4 people.

differences. The Story Circles were based on the prompt: 'Talk about a time when you felt like an outsider.' These activities laid the groundwork for the presentation of a forum theatre play and the facilitation of audience participation in the process. The play, which shares a name with the workshop—*Don't Poke the Bear*, is based on research, news stories and personal encounters that illuminate aspects of the political and social climate of Wyoming.

Devising the forum play used a recipe based on our social identities, and our expected participants (mostly straight, cis, white people), combined with research about hate crimes, discrimination, exclusion and migration of young people out of the state. Forum theatre is often sourced from community members to ensure that the plot and scenarios are relevant to participants. Because we had limited time to be in Wyoming and wanted to arrive prepared with a ready-made workshop, we gathered news stories and personal anecdotes from contacts ahead of time to devise a plot that would represent the most pressing social and cultural issues facing the community.

At the beginning of the play, the audience meets Irma—a gay woman of color, member of the Crow tribe, and single mom—who has just moved into her late Uncle Bill's house in the fictional town of Hobart. Irma informs the audience that soon after she moved into town, her car was vandalized with hate speech. In the first scene, Irma encounters Kathy—a straight white woman, next-door neighbor to Irma—who has rallied support in the neighborhood and church community to pay for repairs on Irma's car.

The rest of the play depicts the ways in which Kathy is challenged by her family and church friends who ultimately do not consider Irma to be one of them. When Irma decides to leave Wyoming after her neighbors take a stand against her home business at a City Council meeting at the end of the play, the facilitators ask the audience to consider what Kathy could have done to counteract the subtle homophobia

and racism as well as the outright hostility that she witnessed.⁵

Each scene that shows Kathy coming up against distrust or outright dehumanization of Irma is based on real lived experiences. For example: one news story reported that in 2018 a teenager's car was tagged with the word "Lesbo" in Riverton on the Wind River Reservation. Additionally, a gay man who grew up in Wyoming shared with us that his mother had faced cruel treatment from her church friends on social media after he married his husband. Lastly, the community for which we were preparing the workshop had seen a battle in front of the City Council over whether or not to pass a Non-discrimination Resolution that would include a statement of support for LGBTQ community members.

The incorporation of these true stories into an original narrative alongside our decision to place an ally-figure in the protagonist role—rather than the primary oppressed character—was an intentional choice to problematize the role of white folks in dismantling oppressive social structures.

The risk of creating a narrative with Kathy in the protagonist role was that by decentering Irma, we might be disempowering her and suggesting that folks like Irma in the community need saving. Yet, we knew as facilitators we could be setting our participants up to make judgements and assumptions about Irma that might fall into the category of victim blaming. With these two things in mind, we opted to make the identity of our protagonist most like the people we expected to be the majority of our participants.

In forum theatre, the first scene is typically constructed to depict a moment of stasis, after which the protagonist is just as likely to succeed as fail in subverting the oppression that takes place later in the play.

⁵ See Appendix A for a full synopsis of *Don't Poke the Bear*.

In our play, we depict Kathy behaving in a way that many privileged people might consider to be a good neighbor. However, the stasis that exists at the beginning of this play is not an equitable equilibrium. Kathy may be asserting herself as a well-intentioned, supportive neighbor by gifting Irma with money she raised among her church friends to help pay for repairs on Irma's car, but Kathy is still making a lot of assumptions and not quite connecting with Irma. In this way, the play begins with Kathy playing the role of "white savior." Other stories with the straight cis white woman as the protagonist might end right there. But our forum takes this as a jumping off point, which reveals that when good intentions are not backed up by action, allyship quickly falls apart. While Kathy is the protagonist of "Don't Poke the Bear," she is not necessarily the hero. In this way, our forum problematized the "white savior" trope by inviting participants to see the choices Kathy makes not only to allow other people to discriminate against Irma, but also the many subtle ways in which Kathy participates in the oppression herself.

We wanted our participants to engage with the social issues that marginalized groups in the state were experiencing without asking them to pass judgement about what individuals in these groups should be doing differently. We planned to hold up a mirror and ask, what part are *you* playing in this process?

PROJECT FINDINGS

The use of applied theatre and, in particular, forum theatre in the implementation of this workshop was successful in providing opportunities for participants and facilitators to disarm heteropatriarchal white fragility through praxis: the cyclical process of action and reflection (Freire 25).

Using DiAngelo's construction of 'white fragility,' there is also the possibility to expand the definition to include stressors that trigger defense mechanisms beyond conversations about race. This is why we are using the term 'heteropatriarchal white fragility'—in order to point to the potential for defensive reactions to

stress brought about in discussions of racism, homophobia, and misogyny.

The ways in which heteropatriarchal white fragility played a role in our groups can be hard to quantify or describe. In the remainder of this report, we offer an analysis of participant comments and interventions⁶ that suggest people who might have seen the play as an example of “the way things are” were empowered by forum theatre to imagine and practice enacting the change they wanted to see in their community.

FIELD NOTES & ANALYSIS

It is a common misconception that racism or any other type of oppression is a personal choice, an action committed by the individual (“Core Concepts”). This mindset was put into question when we asked the participants to identify what Kathy could do to change the outcome of our forum play. She didn’t *do* anything to push Irma out of the community. As one participant said about Kathy’s actions in the forum play, “She did everything she could” to welcome her. Yet, she also didn’t want to “poke the bear”—a phrase that means disturbing the status quo—by using her own status in the in- group to work against social and systemic forces that push people to the edges and out of communities.

Forum theatre—which invites participants to watch dramatic action, comment on it, and then participate in the action—is praxis manifested. At first, participants would believe Kathy had made every possible effort to be a good neighbor—she even raised money for Irma! Then, through dialogue and interventions, groups would move toward a new outlook: one that said Kathy could have and should have done more. As participants in *Don't Poke the Bear* engaged in praxis, they could reflect on examples of oppression in their

⁶ Interventions refers to moments of spect-acting during forum theatre. The word “spect-actor” is a combination between a spectator and an actor. Boal used this term to describe his audience members who actively stepped into role in a forum play (Games 15).

world while stepping outside of themselves, giving them a way to learn without succumbing to heteropatriarchal white fragility. In the end, the participant who had expressed that Kathy had done all that she could for Irma wrote in her feedback form: “This workshop definitely helped me self-reflect on what I could do in a similar situation and what I should do. It made me feel more motivated to stand up for what is right. I think I was beginning to become complacent with the way [my hometown] can be; the mentality that you either need to fit in or hide how you’re different.”

While in New York participants were quick to see the ways Kathy failed Irma and her community, their interventions were similar to those of Wyomingites. The participant groups were more diverse racially in our New York presentations than in Wyoming. We wondered if centering a straight white woman in a story about racism and homophobia would ring hollow in a room full of people involved in social justice work already. Ultimately, while the small town setting may have felt more distant from New Yorkers, the relationships and microaggressions presented were familiar.

During both presentations there was lively discourse and several instances when women of color spoke to what Kathy might have done to speak up for and support Irma. In one instance, at the interfaith center in New York, we saw how two participants had different understandings of Kathy’s power and were able to confront this difference together. In the final reflection on the play, an older white woman spoke about how Kathy lacks power as a woman standing up to her husband and the neighbor who wants to petition against Irma’s jewelry business. Another participant, a young Black woman, responded by saying that she saw Kathy in a totally different light. Speaking directly to the older women, she described Kathy as a “gatekeeper” who had agency in all of the social spheres, from which Irma was being excluded. Kathy could move through these circles and influence the people in them and she was surprised other people did not see this. The older woman received this and thanked the young woman. In this exchange, the forum play

became a space for them to talk across difference without the older woman becoming defensive.

Part of the reason it was possible for these two participants to speak candidly about visible discrimination without anyone taking the critique personally is the use of aesthetic distance. When devising the play, we committed to maintaining aesthetic distance between our play and the town we were working in while also remaining true to the lived experiences, on which our story was based. We created the fictional town of Hobart and, with some exceptions, played across gender and age. As the play often hovered between real life and the imagined, many female participants quickly and openly identified with Kathy, saw their husbands or brothers in Russ—Kathy's husband—and recognized the judgemental nature of Gwen the Church Chick and Fred the neighbor. Using familiar relationships and power dynamics allowed our spectators to hop right into a world that was similar to but not exactly their own, effectively subverting the tendency of heteropatriarchal white fragility to spark defensive reactions and shut down learning.

A tweet in June of this year stated: “‘We’re listening and learning’ is 100% the new ‘thoughts and prayers’” (@Snozztastic). This tweet sums up the tendency of people or organizations to engage with social justice issues passively and from afar. *Don't Poke the Bear*, like all forum theatre, offered moments of listening and learning from each other but also demanded action. Kathy was a well-intentioned neighbor who consistently fell short of proactively opposing dominant values and social power structures. Forum theatre gave the opportunity to dissect situations that folks often find themselves in and try out different ways of interrupting homophobia and racism.

FUTURE PLANS

Don't Poke the Bear has proven to be a successful workshop for allowing people with power and privilege, relative to those most vulnerable populations, to examine their participation in oppressive systems while

circumventing many self-justifying tendencies related to white fragility. For this reason, we are excited that we have received funding to return to the state and implement the workshop in four different towns as soon as we can do so safely. As we analyze our play and facilitation of the workshop we have certainly found areas to improve upon in the next iteration of this project.

As a group of majority white facilitators, it is imperative we reflect on our own white fragility when facilitating forum theatre. Reflecting on our facilitation we found instances when we could have been more curious about how participants perceived the intersections of Irma's identity. After watching a practice run-through in Wyoming, one friend participant asked, "Why is she Crow?" We understood her question to mean that it did not seem to affect Irma's story. Was this question an example of being "colorblind"? Or had we not been clear in our storytelling? After this comment we included several problematic references to Irma's Crow identity. There is a long and continuing history of exclusion and violence against Indigenous communities in Wyoming, yet participant groups there were still reluctant to point to her status as a member of the Crow Nation as the reason for discrimination.

In several interventions participants pointed to Irma's relationship to Uncle Bill as a way to prove to townspeople that she belongs. We could have done a better job at interrogating this intervention, and the values behind it. What assumptions were they making about Uncle Bill's identity? Would a white family need to have relatives in the town to be welcome with open arms? Perhaps the biggest distinction when doing forum theatre with potential allies, or oppressors, is that the oppression that seems clear to us as facilitators may be invisible or taboo to the participants. It is our job as facilitators to meet participants where they are, and then be ready to take them further, to see what they might not have seen in their own lives before.

As we prepare to implement this workshop in the future we ask ourselves: How can we make more space for honest reflection with participants about Irma's Indigenous identity? We endeavor to responsibly represent the ways in which Kathy's individual choices matter in dismantling systems of oppression without objectifying Irma's story or identity. We will be spending time connecting with community partners, including Indigenous-led groups in the state, PFLAG chapters, and local Pride organizations.

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Appendix A

Don't Poke the Bear
Forum Play Synopsis

Characters

Irma: Queer woman of color (half Crow), new-to-town, mother to Billy
Kathy: Irma's neighbor, white woman, has lived in Hobart for 15 years
Russell: Kathy's husband
Gwen: Kathy's close friend from church
Fred: Kathy's and Russell's neighbor

Scene 1 - Opening Scene

Welcome to the town of Hobart, Wyoming. Each actor introduces her character one-by-one and turns upstage. After A introduces Irma, she goes into character, "Two weeks after we moved to town, it happened. I was driving back from Riddleys..." She turns to walk across the stage slowly. As she crosses, each character turns around and looks at her, reacting as if they are seeing the word "Lesbo" spray-painted on her car. The song "Give Me One Reason" by Tracy Chapman plays in the background.

Scene 2 - Kathy and Irma Meet

This scene is set on Irma's porch. Kathy comes over to introduce herself to Irma who is coming out to put

up a rainbow pride flag on her porch. Kathy explains she is Irma's neighbor, (she knew her Uncle Bill and she's happy to have someone taking care of the property) has seen what happened to her car, and raised money among neighbors & church chicks to help her fix her car (get it repainted). Kathy notices Irma's earrings and tells her she loves "Indian jewelry." Irma says she makes them herself and sells jewelry. Kathy says she has friends she knows would love her jewelry. Irma says she has to get her son off to school.

Scene 3 - At Home with Kathy and Russell

Later that night in Kathy's and Russell's kitchen. Russell is just home from work and Kathy is cooking dinner. Russell comments on the rainbow flag that Irma has put up on her porch. Kathy mentions she took the money over and met Irma that morning, learned she has a son and is super nice. Russell makes fun of Irma, "How'd she manage to have a kid?" then mentions the dinner party coming up in a few nights with the Jacobsens and Brownwells. Kathy suggests inviting Irma. Russell objects, it doesn't seem appropriate since it's a couples evening with old friends. Also, he thinks Irma will make everyone else a little uncomfortable. Russ describes their friends: "family values types, we don't want to poke the bear, right? Besides she doesn't want to be friends with me." Kathy gives in saying she doesn't want to make it an issue.

Scene 4 - Kathy Runs into Gwen at Ridleys

Shopping at the grocery store about a week later, Kathy runs into her good friend, Gwen Brownwell. Gwen confronts Kathy about the fact that she has let Irma into the private Facebook group of all their close friends from church--the "Church Chicks." Kathy is surprised this bothers anyone since the Church Chicks all contributed to the fundraiser for Irma's car repairs. Gwen says, "I don't want to poke the bear but it has been making a few of us uncomfortable." Kathy is so embarrassed that people have been talking about this privately and she didn't know. Gwen explains that the ladies just want to feel like they can express themselves freely in the group and that Irma is not really "one of them." Kathy doesn't know how to fix this issue since Irma is already in the Facebook group. Gwen tells her it's a good idea to remove Irma, or the Church Chicks will start a new group.

Scene 5 - Fred visits Russell and Kathy

A month later, Russell and Fred are shooting darts in Russell's garage when Kathy gets home. Fred is on a mission--he wants Russell and Kathy to sign a petition of people who will stand against Irma's application for a Conditional Use Permit in order to run a business out of her home. Kathy says she knows about this, that Irma makes beautiful jewelry and she has already bought some. Fred is vehement in his dislike for Irma, and saying he doesn't want "the character of the neighborhood to change" with "who knows who" coming and going. The permit will be discussed at the next City Council meeting, and Fred wants to know who is going to stand with him. In the end, Russell signs on with Fred. When Kathy objects, Russell signs both of their names. The scene ends with a stand off between Kathy and Russ when he uses a slur to ridicule Kathy's friendship with Irma.

Scene 6 - Kathy Arrives Too Late - Or didn't arrive at all.

Several months later. This scene opens as Irma knocks on Kathy's door. Kathy is surprised when she opens the door to find Irma--she decides to go out on the porch rather than invite her in. Irma is returning a cake pan, and Kathy learns that no one brought their families to her son Billy's birthday party. We learn Kathy herself did not come. Irma shares that she has decided to move away.

Kathy makes some attempts to say she's sorry, but ultimately does not say much. Irma leaves.