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Students Staging Resistance: Pedagogy/Performance/Praxis¹

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¹ Lois, Rebecca, and Deirdre presented this work as part of the 2014 Illinois Communication and Theatre Association convention, winning the top panel award. The authors would like to extend their gratitude to the anonymous reviewers for their constructive feedback as well as *PTO Journal* editor, Jenn Freitag.

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⁴ Lois M. Nemeth (B.A., Governors State University, 2016) recently graduated with a double major in theatre and performance studies and communication. In addition to her interests in music, photography, public speaking, nature, and serving her ministry, Lois has worked in the theatre as an actress, director, and stagehand, as well as a workshop facilitator in communities needing to engage one another in dialogue. Her most recent work, *I Can Leave: Surviving Domestic Violence*, is an original solo performance that she plans to tour. This is her first educational publication. Lois can be reached at loisnemeth@gmail.com.

⁵ Rebecca Townsend (A.A., South Suburban College, 2013) is a senior studying communication at Governors State University. She is actively involved with raising awareness about issues related to the LGBTQ community, domestic abuse victims, and the Black Lives Matter movement. Having performed for various community theatre projects, she is currently working toward developing a program of social change and healing through methodologies of improvisation. Rebecca can be reached at rebetownsend@gmail.com.

⁶ Deirdre L. Webb (B.A., Governors State University, 2007) is a graduation counselor in the Office of the Registrar at Governors State University, where, after receiving a degree in interdisciplinary studies, she is pursuing a second bachelor's degree in theatre and performance studies. Deirdre has been writing poetry and short stories since grade school. "There's an Elephant in the Room" is the first poem to see professional publication. Deirdre can be reached at dwebb@govst.edu.

This essay archives and reimagines a collaborative student performance—inJUSTICE—developed as part of a performance and social change course. Working within the framework of critical pedagogy, the intents of this piece are several: to offer strategies for teaching a course on performing resistance and mentoring students in the development of original work; to provide insight into how students, primarily at the undergraduate level, process performance in the context of social change, as well as apply course concepts and practices in their own performance work; and to affirm a body-centered, performative pedagogy in the classroom. Also included is a [video of the live performance](#).

A revolutionary leadership must accordingly practice *co-intentional* education.

Teachers and students (leadership and people), co-intent on reality, are both

Subjects, not only in the task of unveiling that reality, and thereby coming to know it critically, but in the task of re-creating that knowledge.

Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (69)

Change is imperative.

Augusto Boal, *Theater of the Oppressed* (ix)

Writing at the intersection of cultural studies and critical education with performance as the fulcrum, Henry A. Giroux and Patrick Shannon incorporate the teachings of Freire and Boal in their articulation of critical pedagogy: beyond “raising questions about how culture is related to power—why and how it operates in both institutional and textual terms—within and through a politics of representation” toward “resistant readings and the development of oppositional practices” (5). Both in the classroom and on stage, I (Patrick) never forget my responsibility as a critical pedagogue to make meaning of the subject matter for students through discussion of real-world application. In so doing, I seek to create learning environments where students speak from their own positionalities to challenge the status quo (and celebrate when victories of equality are won)—“creating counter-public spheres . . . through which collective struggles can

be waged to revive and maintain the fabric of democratic institutions” (5). These principles led me to develop and teach a course for our new Theatre and Performance Studies program at Governors State University—Performance and Social Change.

Following the framework outlined by Elizabeth Bell and Stacy Holman Jones, I conceptualized the course around “three different sites, as real and metaphorical stages for political change: the theatrical stage, the streets as a global stage, and everyday life as a stage” (199). My intention for the course was to explore a variety of performance traditions, theories, and practices that, like many working in the context of social change performance, cultivate “ways to transform our political processes to give voice to those who are now silent, to make them heard as equals, and to ensure that their voices enhance the quality and justice of public policies and actions” (Archon Fung, qtd. in “How” 67). Purposefully broad in scope, the course consisted of work by Bertolt Brecht, Antonin Artaud, Jerzy Grotowski, Augusto Boal, Anna Deavere Smith, and bell hooks,⁷ as well as Jan Cohen-Cruz’s edited collection, *Radical Street Performance*; Michael Rohd’s *Theatre for Community, Conflict, and Dialogue*; Eve Ensler’s *The Vagina Monologues*; and Tectonic Theatre’s *The Laramie Project*.

My approach to performance in this context stems from Boal’s principles of Theatre of the Oppressed (TO)—namely, his notion of theatre as a weapon for liberation, a rehearsal for revolution. Students were asked to think of performance not merely as an object of inquiry, but as a methodology—“a deliberate act, a self-conscious act, an act that requires performers to think about how and why their bodies are behaving in the ways that they are” (Pineau 50-51). Throughout the semester, students applied their knowledge across these contexts by engaging in a variety of activities, such as conducting a class workshop based on Rohd’s Boal-inspired book; attending and writing responses to several live theatrical

⁷ Specific readings included excerpts from Brecht and Willett’s collection *Brecht on Theatre: The Development of an Aesthetic*, Artaud’s *The Theater and its Double*, Grotowski’s *Towards a Poor Theatre*, Boal’s *Theatre of the Oppressed*, Freire’s *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Smith’s introduction to *Fires in the Mirror*, and hooks’s “Performance Practice as a Site of Opposition.”

productions, including two solo performances (Medina Perine's *Hair Crownicles* and Penelope Walker's *Sugar Funk*) as well as a production I directed of Emily Mann's documentary war drama, *Still Life*; and creating both a solo and a collaborative performance of an intervention on a theatrical stage and in a public space, respectively.

Like many performance studies educators, my teaching environment is one "of embodied thinking that encourages self-reflection and critical distance as well as empathy, concern with cultural contexts, values, and issues, and confidence in [students'] opinions" (Stucky and Wimmer 10). I believe in a pedagogy that places the body at the center of learning, embracing performance and performative ways of knowing and being toward "concrete and embodied possibilities for resistance, reform, and renewal" (Pineau 51). I believe in aligning students' lives with course content, rousing their curiosities as to how they do the work of theory every day; how they bear the weight of history, language, institutions, and materiality (Hamera and Conquergood); how the personal is political:

to create/perform/construct those spaces in which desire, memory, knowledge, and the body reconfigure discourses of critique and possibility that enable multiple ways of speaking and acting as part of an ongoing engagement with the crucial issues of identity, agency, and democracy. (Giroux and Shannon 5)

I believe in a collaborative, humanizing pedagogy (as Freire articulates in the epigraph), in which students teach me as much as I teach them. I remind them that we are in both the classroom and the world together, as improvisational pioneer Viola Spolin (a performative pedagogue whose development of theatre games has been influential to many working in performance for social change) articulates: "True personal freedom and self-expression can flower only in an atmosphere where attitudes permit equality between student and teacher and the dependencies of teacher for student and student for teacher are done away with. The problems within the subject matter will teach both of them" (9). Finally, I believe in making clear all that is at stake: performance can be both entertaining and instructive, "a transformative process built on the power of

imagination while also recognizing the power of historical and social contexts and relationships” (Caron Atlas, qtd. in “How” 76), an opportunity to “see that the world is knowable, malleable, and demands critical thinking” (Peter C. Brosius, qtd. in “How” 75).

Governors State University’s student demographic is mostly educationally underserved, a mix of traditional and non-traditional commuter students, mostly of color.⁸ The university’s location in Chicago’s south suburbs is, in part, what led to our program’s investment in focusing on performance as a transformative agent of social, cultural, political, and personal change, as well as to my interest in the position in the first place. With GSU’s institutional initiative to facilitate accountability, responsibility, and civic engagement toward the greater good, my colleagues and I continue to position our program as a conduit for public discourse.

I envisioned the course as an interdisciplinary draw, not just departmental majors but students from diverse programs of study across campus. I hoped these students would bring their own perspectives of the personal challenges that face those who are oppressed, for whom survival has become of acute concern (and, really, isn’t that many of us?). I wondered (and worried) how we would discuss pressing, heated issues in nuanced, thoughtful ways and whether or not students would feel comfortable enough to share their own experiences with oppression. By semester’s end, my goal was—and is⁹—to have students,

⁸ Since its founding in 1969, GSU was an upper-division university until it transitioned to a 4-year comprehensive university in Fall 2014, offering freshman courses for the first time. With this launch, a host of degree programs were created, including Theatre and Performance Studies.

⁹ Currently (Spring 2016), I am teaching the course for a second time, with a total of 9 traditional and non-traditional students—all undergraduate women. While the course is similarly structured, it is now offered as a once a week 3-hour session instead of two 75-minute meetings. Based on my previous experiences, I have revised the course to include new writing assignments, updated readings, as well as independent research about a performance, performance series, space, artist, or organization creating socially resistant performance to culminate in a final presentation, and an additional performance (an embodied synthesis of a week’s particular readings intended to provoke class discussion). The current students have chosen to work as one group for the collaborative performance assignment, with child exploitation as their theme. I look forward to observing how they heed the

regardless of their academic discipline and sensibilities, discover the inherent “holistic” relationship (Caron Atlas, qtd. in “How” 76) between art and society, to recognize their social responsibilities as citizens as well as society’s responsibilities to themselves and others (Becker). Further, it was important to impress upon them what a former professor instilled in me: the mark of an educated person is asking questions—not necessarily having answers.

The class was small: a total of five students, four of whom were women, majority African American, undergraduate and graduate, both traditional and non-traditional. For many, performance was a new venture; all of them, though, were new to performance in the context of social change. However, unlike Bruce McConachie’s experience facilitating TO with students of privilege, these students met the course with “a clear experiential basis for understanding oppression” (253), recognizing (though by no means reveling in) the fact “that oppression comes in many forms and varies significantly in degree. . . . from sharp stab to mundane grind” (258).

Across the courses I teach that delve into culture, politics, privilege, and power, I find it necessary, especially in my position as instructor, to state my positionality—early and often—about my skin color as a marker of privilege. Granted, I am a queer body subjected to my own inequalities (Santoro, “Queer Renderings”; “Queerscape”), yet I recognize my ability to pass with comparative ease. Additionally, I am often either one of or the only white body present in a classroom, so my need to acknowledge that I am not an expert in the room when it comes to race, for instance, is even greater. (During the first rehearsal for Lorraine Hansberry’s *A Raisin in the Sun*, I made it clear to the cast that, as their director, I could not speak for them, nor did I want to, and that I would rely on them to help me understand their history as we worked together to stage the production.)

collaborative call, their staging and insights of the work, the public’s reception, and how their process will differ from their predecessors.

With so few students, it made sense for all to work together in developing this collaborative endeavor—performing an original text, an existing text, or some combination of the two using TO and radical street performance as touchstones. I assigned the project several weeks into the semester, immediately sensing students' minds reeling—the obligatory dread for group work. In my experience, students often find the very notion of collaboration a daunting task. Once they agreed upon schedules and other organizational minutiae, their understanding of the task became clearer, their excitement grew, and they settled on their theme—injustice. Although broad, injustice gave them a generative opportunity to riff in myriad directions, allowing multiple access points for personal connections.

As for my involvement, I remained relatively hands-off, encouraging students to navigate their devised work primarily on their own. Though far from an invisible presence, I would not call myself a director in this context per se, as it was important that I not influence the story they wanted to tell (or somehow get in the way of that story/telling) but, rather, help shape the narrative conceptually and aesthetically. Moreover, I wanted to emphasize the importance of collaboration as a necessary exercise in learning how to negotiate personal and artistic desires—a foundation of theatrical practice. While most of their meetings (not necessarily rehearsals, they were quick to point out) took place outside of class, I allowed them time during class time to connect with one another, as I answered specific questions; clarified under-developed and unclear ideas; encouraged the paring down of ideas; connected their work to course concepts, discussions, and the works of others; insisted they not waste any more time; and reminded them—often—of Tony Kushner's sage advice: "It isn't enough to have good politics; good politics don't redeem bad art. Good ideas expressed badly are at serious risk of becoming bad ideas" (qtd. in "How" 63). (One of their initial ideas involved literal ice—a riff on their theme of *injustice*—and without a clear enough idea of the logistics of incorporating the ice (and its melting presence), and whether it would have its intended effect, I continued to question them until eventually, they realized that, while playful, this was not the direction they wanted to take, nor the most practical.) I also took on the role of mediator, ensuring

everyone's ideas were heard and considered amidst an ongoing (and mounting) battle of wills, a reality Holly Hughes laments:

I was part of a group called GET SMART, which stood for Group Effort to Save My Art, and while there were a few fabulous actions, we couldn't agree on what time of day it was. Some of my fellow downtowners were as puritanical as the Right, and there was the nagging suspicion that it was really all a publicity stunt. But most of what I remember is the sense of how afraid we all were. (qtd. in "How" 73)

Perhaps it was fear—of embracing and surrendering to the process, of disclosing personal information, of acknowledging oppression for themselves, of a grade, of public acceptance—that fueled their anxiety.

After a month of preparation—a revolving door of artistic choices and creative and interpersonal frustrations—the students staged a two-hour performance in a high traffic area of the university during the early evening surge before night classes began, consisting of tableau, spoken and sung poetry, a soundscape, and an interactive art wall. What follows is a dialogue among the performers about their before-and-after impressions of the course, the project, and their process.

* * * * *

Deirdre: I took the course because the first word in the title was "performance." As for social change, it's my history: I've been around awhile and I've been called "colored," "black," "African American," and "Negro." I've gone the gamut. I've seen social things change all the time, and then not change at all.

Lois: The course was a requirement for the Theatre and Performance Studies major, but I was also interested in how theatre can inspire thought provoking global social implications.

Rebecca: I was intrigued by the idea—how can performance be of service to someone else? How can performance educate the masses? I've been a theatre geek all my life, so this was another facet to explore.

Uriah: In all honesty, my advisor suggested the course because I needed an elective to graduate. I was one of the few in the course who did not have any acting experience except for plays I was in for extra credit back in the day. But as the course progressed, I became aware of the social dilemma the world is in—how we are so quick to judge without realizing that we never gave the other person a chance. Being black in the world today, even though we are in a new millennium with a black president, we are still victims of the social dilemma. I knew early on in the semester that this course would allow me to help change that.

Lois: We were all on the same ship, so to speak, on this course's maiden voyage. Here we were, the five of us, in this space, with the chance to do something significant and to learn so much.

Deirdre: To make an impact.

Lois: To put our thoughts into action.

Uriah: To help change our circumstances.

Deirdre: We all had a chance to share—where we were in our heads, what we were feeling, a good laugh, and of course, seriousness.

Rebecca: We were five strong-willed individuals who had something to prove. Everyone wanted to share something that was important to them. And we wanted it to be real. There was no tiptoeing around this—we wanted to really go there.

Lois: We were filled with so many preconceptions of how our performance would be a driving force toward social change. We were focused on not only our grades but how we would be received by the rest of the university. This was much bigger than a grade. We definitely struggled figuring out what to do and how to do it.

Rebecca: I wanted to create something with shock value, something out of the ordinary. I didn't want to play it simple. I wanted to get people out of their comfort zones. We needed to create something that drew attention to the campus population, those who are actually here.

Deirdre: We decided on the theme of justice, which eventually evolved into injustice.

Rebecca: We identified more with injustice. There were so many things that we were going through individually, and it became a personal call to action. Yet we had such conflict, starting within ourselves (at least for me): Is my injustice important enough? Is it stupid? Will it make a cohesive contribution to the others' ideas?

Deirdre: We went back and forth about this and that, throwing ideas out here and there. A little thought would become something totally different. We'd ask how that would work and how to portray that. Without an easy answer, we'd give up.

Rebecca: "No, it's not strong enough. No, it's not big enough. No, it could be better." We all had different intentions leading up to the performance.

Lois: It became a personality clash, a fight for artistic vision.

Rebecca: I'm black but didn't agree with the idea of focusing solely on the N-word. I was more interested in LGBTQ issues.

Deirdre: I didn't care if we focused on the N-word, I just didn't want to use the word. I didn't see a problem with many of the suggestions, but develop it, tell us more about it. We were at such odds with each other and the process. We went from being a vulnerable family that could breathe together and trust one another to the Hatfields and the McCoys. It was truly shocking.

Lois: So we started to breathe.

Deirdre: Literally breathe.

Rebecca: Breathe deeply.

Deirdre: And it finally hit us: it's all injustice. Just as there are as many personalities, there are as many injustices. We realized that we didn't have to focus on one injustice. No injustice is higher than another. There is no little sin or big sin—it's all sin.

Rebecca: In the end, though, I was thankful for the conflict and the complexity. I think it allowed us to

become better artists and activists.

Lois: In the end, our performance was about more than something that just happened to me or any one of us in particular. We are not alone in this fight.

Deirdre: So, at the start of our performance, we decided to bind ourselves together—a single cord that passed from one body to another, connecting us so that one could not move forward without the others.

Rebecca: We walked, in single file, with a rope tied around our wrists, into the Hall of Governors where others were eating, studying, heading to or leaving class. The audience was invited into our space by default.

Lois: Being tied together provided substantial visual impact, showing a united front against the injustices of the world.

Rebecca: While creepy for me, the walk served a purpose: spectators immediately questioned, “What’s going on?”

Deirdre: It worked because it gave us cohesiveness—a sense of unity. This last minute decision somehow made us a family again.

Rebecca: There were four representations of injustice displayed, and a fifth character—Justice—as a voice of reason. The rope was to show no difference between the injustices against a black person, a homosexual person, a financially distressed person, or an abuse victim. The rope that bound us together—the chains, the shackles—was to show the connection that oppressed communities face together.

Lois: I performed a victim of domestic violence because I am a survivor, a woman who was drawn into herself with physical and emotional scars from abuse. Some never survive—murdered by their abusers.



Fig. 1. Lois M. Nemeth. Photograph by Kyle Horn.

Uriah: I felt that I removed myself for a moment and became this vessel that stood for much more. I know that many people, specifically young black men, fall victim to being categorized with the image I portrayed of a raunchy, urban black male who wears baggy clothes and flashy shoes, and that image is usually associated with violence. My goal was to erase that way of thinking because it is simply stereotyping, and we should stop putting people into that bubble and judging their behavior by their appearance. We're not even giving them a chance.

Rebecca: I wanted to represent the LGBTQ community, acknowledging the struggle for acceptance and how love for another human being, considered taboo by others, is not recognized. But I was hesitant to represent a group that might reveal my vulnerabilities. It was hard and scary, but it was something that I needed to do for others and myself.

Deirdre: I portrayed Justice, but I suppose if you don't believe in justice, a just person would seem just as unjust.

Lois: The overall group costume choices were based on personal interpretations of each of our characters.

We encouraged each other to be creative and add whatever we felt comfortable wearing. I chose

torn and dirty clothes—as if I were beaten—with bandages showing my physical abuse.

Deirdre: I wore white, which of course was to symbolize cleanliness, purity, and goodness. It was actually a play on the traditional thought—black or green can be just as clean. I also used a walker (papered with the text of the poetry I performed) because Justice is lame.

Rebecca: And some people think that saying or doing the right thing or standing up for someone else is lame.

Deirdre: Instead of Justice being blind—justice is never blind—she’s lame, she’s off balance, she can barely hold herself up.

Uriah: I chose to wear the clothing of your typical urban N-word, or at least as stereotypically defined by the media: dark sagging pants and a hat turned to a specific side representing gang affiliation.

Rebecca: The use of a black sheer scarf over my face did not become an idea until the night prior. I liked what not clearly seeing my face represented; I could display injustice without regard to color or anything else. I wanted to be as inclusive as possible. I also wore a series of colorful bandanas signifying the rainbow, which I used in multiple ways, mostly as a mirror in which all I saw—and see—is a reflection of pride.

Deirdre: Some were afraid that not being dressed the same would make us seem like we were each doing our own thing, but the different clothing worked.

Lois: Each of us also had white duct tape over our mouths with the injustice we represented written on it. Mine was “abused.”

Deirdre: Everyone chose the word they felt best described their character or how their character is seen.

Rebecca: It was to symbolize not only those who have suffered injustice, but also the injustices of which people don’t openly speak or see. I chose the word “homosexuality,” which I placed over my eyes instead of my mouth.

Uriah: I chose “N-word” because it’s a term that is loosely thrown around in the Black community, but when

a person who is not black says it, we are offended. Yet we overlook the fact that the word itself is very offensive, so I wanted to show that whoever says it does not make the word right. There should not be a pass because someone's black. It should not be used—period—because it's very degrading. But this was not just about the audience, it was about me as well. Like so many black people, I've used the word before (even before I've realized saying it), and I wanted to explore the meaning of the word for myself. Why is it that you have to be black in order to say it? I find it ridiculous because we are so adamant about having equality, but we don't allow it among ourselves. Sure, the word has a very different meaning now than it used to, and while it is most often associated with friendship, so many people lost their lives because they wanted that word to stop being used. My goal was to have people think about the message they send when they use that word.



Fig. 2. Uriah Berryhill. Photograph by Kyle Horn.

Deirdre: Instead of tape over my mouth, and because I was the only speaker in the performance, I wanted to convey positive thinker, so I had the word “thinker” on my forehead with a positive symbol on both sides. I chose this because I believe justice is the positive choice, and people who choose justice are thinking positively.

Rebecca: We placed our bodies as four points of a square, connected together by the rope, with Deirdre (Justice) in the middle. The four of us representing oppression began in positions on the floor, like

sleeping formations. Throughout the performance, we would change poses—another way of representing the oppressive levels in which we literally place ourselves. Without sounds or words, we created distinct images that shifted throughout the performance. At one point I held an imaginary baby in my hands, recalling a memory I had of a family member, her tedious struggle with the adoption process, finding a donor, etc. She was incredibly hurt that she and her wife could not simply raise a child and call it their own.

Lois: I thought it would be effective to place my hands on my throat—the hands that choked me, restricted me from escape, and tried to kill me.

Uriah: I wanted my hands to be tied as if I was in bondage, representing the body of a slave. I wanted to show how enslaved the N-word has made us—me—as we continue to ignore the anger and hurt it brings, especially to our elders. I staged my body as a sign of frustration and damage.

Lois: We held these moments of fear and anguish with tremendous focus until Deirdre told us to shift.

Deirdre: The shifts were really more for the sake of the performers than the audience. The floor was hard. However, saying “shift” reminded the onlookers that change was possible, and it also gave them an opportunity to see the oppressed from a different angle.

Lois: Shifting gave us a source of inner power, another means to convey to the audience how the oppressed struggle for freedom. We needed the audience to realize that this type of abuse exists. Stop shutting your eyes.

Rebecca: The idea of “see no evil, hear no evil, speak no evil” was present as a way of representing how we oppress each other: seeing and not speaking, hearing and not listening, speaking and really not considering the source of hate that one encompasses. Our bodies became a kind of physical interference to someone’s consciousness, getting them to question, “What do I feel when looking at this?” We forced the audience to look at us. We forced them to confront us.



Fig. 3. Rebecca Townsend. Photograph by Kyle Horn.

Lois: There are so many different people from different walks of life who are not given the opportunity to be heard or to heal. For me, it was painful and exposing, yet freeing at the same time.

Rebecca: Being in that place, we couldn't run from it. We couldn't fake it. If we were going to have people meaningfully consider us, we had to stay committed to these silent images.

Uriah: We knew the audience would wonder when and if we would speak.

Lois: We decided it was best that the four of us playing the oppressed remain silent.

Deirdre: The oppressed rarely get to speak for themselves.

Rebecca: Our silence made the most "sound" for a socially conscious experience. Yet there were times when I wanted to scream—to let it out. As our "just" narrator, Deirdre was that scream—our collective voices—using original poetry to provoke the audiences' consciousness.

Deirdre: I had some idea beforehand about what spoken material I might use, but I truly had no idea what I would say when. I always knew I wanted to use certain language, such as "we hold these truths to be self-evident," but I improvised a lot of what I said, and although I ended up repeating myself quite a bit, there was power in that. I chose a poem I had written a couple of years before, "There's an Elephant in the Room," which is an observation of people not saying what they really want to, or should, say. It was used to point out how we hold things in for sake of not causing a stir. When, in

fact, stirring things up is what will sometimes provoke change.

There's an elephant in the room
Am I the only one who sees it
Am I the only one who cares
There he sits unruffled
With his scraggly, bristled hair
Looming ever closer
His tail swishing like a broom
Why won't somebody mention
That there's an elephant in the room

He doesn't like the silence
He hates to be ignored
He's trumpeting quite loudly
The walls are being gored
The pounding of his stomping feet
Will destroy our foundation soon
Please somebody tell them
There's an elephant in the room
How many more must suffer
How many more must cry
Who will stand up bravely
And look him in the eye
Where is that child, who in his time

Declared the Emperor nude
Come on somebody point your finger
At the elephant in the room

Have we made some strange agreement
That we'll all behave the same
We'll endeavor not see him
We'll forget to know his name
The wedding will continue
With an ignorant bride and groom
But in this marriage there'll be no bliss
With an elephant in the room

I bow my head and shiver
As to pressure I give in
How dare he wink his eye at me
And toss a saucy grin
If it were only up to me
I'd send him to his doom
Cause you only have to speak aloud
To kill the elephant in the room

You see they lose their power
When you stand and call their bluff

When its hateful name you do reveal

Most will vanish in a puff

So let the cat out of the bag

Avoid the doom and gloom

Be kind enough to rise and say

There's an elephant in the room

Lois: I was inspired by Dee's words—it kept my emotional responses close to home, and I was able to free myself in the moment from the abused woman I once was.

Deirdre: The spoken word was designed to function as a hopeful narrative, juxtaposed with the images represented: what one is hearing and what one is seeing are the opposite. This approach makes you think: you have to either be right in the middle of the road or you have to focus on one or the other. If your focus is on the middle of the road, then you can see both things, and if you see both things, you have to think about both things. Had it all been very oppressive, people would feel that oppression, and we would have risked them walking away not necessarily thinking about why. If it were too positive, it becomes a Pollyanna show, and people walk away because it isn't real.



Fig. 4. Deirdre L. Webb. Photograph by Kyle Horn.

Uriah: Dee's poetry gave me more insight and helped me become one with her words. One poem in particular, "There's an Elephant in the Room," spoke of how we notice injustice but say nothing about it; we walk past and turn our heads as if we do not—cannot—hear or see. But we must confront these issues, try to make them right. She had such intensity and passion in her voice. It gave me chills, and I even lost myself for a moment. It was breathtaking.

Rebecca: We also used instrumental music—smooth, light, meditative—which proved an effective attention-getter. Can you imagine what those walking through the main entrance and following the soothing sounds must have thought when they finally saw us? I'm sure they had no idea what to expect.

Deirdre: Elm's [a student from a nearby college not enrolled in the course] music—a kind of free-form jazz—kept me in a relaxed state when I started to get tired and had to fight the frustration of forgotten notes. He was aware that I was going to be listening to the music so that I could flow with—and not against—it. At one point, when I had to stop talking to relax my voice, I heard him playing a certain pattern that sounded like a moan to me. So I began to moan. Elm heard me and we began to echo each other. Then when he ramped up the intensity, I was moved to improvise off of the moaning. I had not planned that at all, and the words just came out. It was a happy happenstance.

Lois: Reactions from the audience seemed apprehensive at first. But as curiosity and interest grew, so did audience participation.

Rebecca: We wanted the audience to perform with us, so we had tables with paper, markers and crayons, and thumbtacks for people to add messages to our Wall of Justice.

Lois: There were notes of encouragement, disgust, and positivity. The wall became a way for others to address—and suggest how to stop—the oppressions we portrayed.

Deirdre: There was no way for our audience to be passive—those who stayed got involved. Those who

posted on the wall got involved. Even those who only stopped to read what others wrote got involved.

Rebecca: And as hard as you'd think it is to walk past something like this without fully acknowledging it, there were those who did.



Fig. 5. Imani Rhodes. Photograph by Kyle Horn.

Deirdre: Often people get so used to stepping over the person lying on the street—or they go to the opposite side to avoid having to look at them.

Uriah: I had the opportunity to talk with some of the audience members following the performance. They told me they wrote on the wall because it was something they could not just sit and watch. They felt that they needed to be a part of something special.

Deirdre: Like any performance, you cannot prejudge an audience's reaction. I honestly thought, at some points during our planning, that no one would care or even stop to see what was going on. Many people walked by without stopping, but most at least slowed down to see what was going on. I tried to engage the ones who chose to sit and the ones who chose to stop and stare. There were a lot of stares, but now and then I would catch a reaction. A slight nod of the head or a furrowing of the brow went a long way to know that someone at least was listening. Some of the people sitting

looked interested for a moment, and then it was as if they wandered off. Even though I was the voice of justice, I felt uncomfortable at times because people stared at me wanting to know who the hell I was. That energy was coming directly at me, and I felt physically drained.

Rebecca: The audience was blindsided. Their faces showed both confusion and interest. Some just walked by, some stayed to the end, others actually went to class and came back to see how it ended. I heard far away conversations that got quieter as they walked closer to the performance space. Overall, the audience feedback was unexpected yet pleasant. In fact, as we ended our performance, there was applause.

Lois: I perceived the audience to have responded exactly the way we had hoped. The entire Hall of Governors and the adjacent cafeteria, staircase, and balcony became filled with audience members—proof we made an impact by sharing our knowledge and understanding of street performance. I heard and saw positive and negative responses. Many looked on in disbelief, while others watched to see what was next. Some people seemed disinterested, while others commented that the performance was disturbing their study groups as they proceeded to walk away. Many showed empathy, and after the performance, other students noted that the performance was scary, interesting, thought provoking.

Deirdre: Late in the performance when the audience grew and was standing on three different levels around the hall I began to feel the energy. That energy made me feel like I should give more because someone did care and they were feeding off of me as well.

Uriah: The audience response was a big surprise for me. I thought no one would pay us any attention besides those we told about the performance. To see the Hall of Governors filled with people watching our class was unbelievable. I was excited to see people stop in their tracks and take a seat to watch what we were doing. I believe that some people could not leave because of the intensity we portrayed. We actually got people to care.

Deirdre: The few people I spoke to in the days that followed were effusive in their praise of the performance. I heard things like: “You rocked,” “You all were great,” and “That was cool.” I would have liked to have heard someone say, “That really made me think.” Even still, I think we did plant a seed or two.

Lois: Our five bodies, our cries for justice, created awareness.

Deirdre: How much easier is it to get someone to hear you when you don’t tell them that they are wrong (for fear of shutting them down), but instead appeal to their better nature? Don’t tell them they’re wrong—show them there is another way. I don’t know if anyone else thought of it that way, but that is how I approached the performance.

Lois: We wanted to show collaboration, create empathy, and engage compassion. No matter who we are or where we come from, the oppression of our world, created by us, can be changed by us. We aimed to provoke questions by having the audience put themselves in our shoes: What if you were this victim? How would you feel? What can you do to help? Enough is enough.

Deirdre: We wanted the audience to think and also to possibly say as Brecht does: “I’d never have thought it—That’s not the way—That’s extraordinary, hardly believable—It’s got to stop—The sufferings of this man appall me, because they are unnecessary—That’s great art: nothing obvious in it—I laugh when they weep, I weep when they laugh” (qtd. in Brecht and Willett 71).

Rebecca: I, too, had a shift in my conscious behaviors following the performance. With the poetry recited on the usage of the N-word, I tailored my language of the word—I stopped using it. I asked friends to not reference each other as such, educating them about my experience with the project. In a world that can be so beautiful with its differences, we shouldn’t cloud it with terms that stem from hatred and oppression.

Lois: I was questioned afterwards: What were you trying to portray? How did you get the courage to display your body? Were you ever abused? The research I conducted on my character was personal—the

inner pain and loss of freedoms of my past. I have learned more about my strengths through this performance. I was able to become more comfortable with advocacy and intervention against injustice. I received confirmation as to how we can use theater to bring awareness to the public.

Uriah: It always brings me a sense of accomplishment to change someone's thinking for the better.

Lois: Activism. That's what this performance (and course) was all about for me—to take my education and do something with it, not just stand around talking about how my life is torn apart and how I'm screwed, but to actually do something about it. Learning about Theatre of the Oppressed and about all the people who have struggled for so, so long, has transformed me. I learned how to apply my studies through real life experiences in real time.

Rebecca: Before taking this course, I always wondered how people create change—and with resonance.

Now, I understand the art of activism, and I see examples everywhere. Both the performance and the course have been a reminder to be comfortable in my own skin, that my sexuality is beautiful—and that if I have to hide it to be accepted, I'm not living.

Deirdre: Anything that has the potential to right a wrong is an intervention. I hope that something said or seen will be remembered the next time the audience members come upon an injustice, especially if they are the person being unjust.

* * * * *

Initially, I witnessed my students' performance from behind the lens of the camera, traversing in, out, and across their inspired landscape, experiencing street performance's fluid nature between performers and audience. Before the thought of publication entered my mind, I wanted to document the work for the students, to provide them with an alternative perspective of their efforts, capturing not only their performance but the reaction of the audience as well. I conceptualize the camera lens not in opposition to the subject but, rather, as an extension of that subject, allowing me (and others) further entry into, and contemplation of, the work. Certainly, the camera represents distance, but it also represents heightened

connection. Additionally, the video extends the message of the performance to a broader audience.

My students and I continue to explore the implications of this work in part through the creation of this document, a two-year process spanning several phases. In my initial correspondence, a little over a year after our course ended, I sent them a list of questions—asking, among other things, how they considered the performance an intervention, to describe the oppression they portrayed and why they were drawn to it, and how they saw the audience engage (or not) with their work—collaging together their responses into a unified dialogue. (Unfortunately, only four of the five students were able to participate.) Upon receiving word from the reviewers wishing to learn more about the students' experiences, as well as mine, I scheduled a meeting in the hopes that, despite the passing of time, we could collectively reinvigorate our memories—which we accomplished in an hour-and-twenty-minute conversation which I transcribed, edited, and added to the original dialogue.

Across these multiple encounters with the work—in video, in writing, and in person—I am reminded of Melanie Joseph's "[interest] in theater not as an incendiary device for the revolution but rather for its potential to excavate the vital, often deeply quiet moments that precede it. Against a background of so much rushing noise, it is this quiet, this pause, that I believe has the potential for great resonance" (qtd. in "How" 91). Joseph's words ring true for me—and perhaps my students—insofar as their work accomplished an important moment of respite, not only for our campus community, but also for the student-performers themselves. Their provocative use of body, voice, and soundscape shifted a familiar space on campus to that of an extraordinary rupture—"a changing script. . . . a reality apart from the everyday . . . to something more ideal. . . . a bridge between imagined and real actions" (Cohen-Cruz 1). The students staged critically arresting moments, capturing the audience's attention as evidenced by those who remained throughout, those who returned, and those who kept walking through the space but felt compelled to slow down ever so slightly. To this day, faculty and staff still mention the performance and how it changed the environment as well as the influence it had on their thinking.

Performing is not always easy, especially when investigating charged issues in public spaces. I commend my students for challenging themselves—and others—through their commitment to the immediacy, vulnerability, bravery, and risk of performance, of creating personal art as social, cultural, and political practice. Both then and now I feel the significance of their project, yet with time and distance behind them (and me), I wonder how, if at all, they might revise their work and what I might suggest to strengthen it. I wonder what the performance would have looked like if they made their physical choices more defined, more interactive with themselves and their surroundings. I wonder how they could have addressed the audience more directly—and to what effect. I wonder what would have happened if each of them became speakers at some point. I wonder what would have happened if the recorded music was replaced with human sounds. I wonder how they could have used the rope with greater dynamism, revealing perhaps how people oppress themselves. I wonder how the oppressed might interact with one another; would the oppressed become the oppressor, or could they unite together, toward coalition? I wonder how the art wall could have extended beyond its dedicated location to include additional areas throughout the space. Finally, I wonder if each performer could have performed multiple oppressions, and how that would change the experience for them as well as the audience. I wonder—and isn't that the aim of performance?

Performing involves putting one's body on the line; it was an impossibility to ignore that what the audience saw in front of them were real bodies—powerful signifiers of flesh and blood demanding to be recognized, considered, felt. Their work reminds me of Dwight Conquergood's assertion:

Narrative is a way of knowing, a search for meaning, that privileges experience, process, action, and peril. Knowledge is not stored in storytelling so much as it is enacted, reconfigured, tested and engaged by imaginative summonings and interpretive replays of past events in the light of present situations and struggles. Active and emergent, instead of abstract and inert, narrative knowing recalls and recasts experience into meaningful

signposts and supports for ongoing action. (337)

As an educator whose work crosses classrooms, stages, screens, and pages, I believe in the power of story as a pedagogical tool—impressionable, resonant, generative, consequential. We are storytelling animals, as Jonathan Gottschall argues in his book by the same title, where “story is for a human as water is for a fish—all-encompassing and not quite palpable” (xiv), “giv[ing] us pleasure and instruction. . . . simulat[ing] worlds so we can live better in this one. . . . help[ing] bind us into communities and define us as cultures” (197). And while story in itself is not social change—“We never truly advocate social change” (Doug Paterson, qtd. in “How” 65)—my students’ work (as well as the work of teaching) illustrates how performance as story functions as a catalyst for enactment, becoming a critical means to “advocate a type of or direction to the social change continually evolving around and within us,” where “all theater has an impact on the flow of social movement and interaction, collectively and personally” (Doug Paterson, qtd. in “How” 65).

I believe in educating students not toward singular careers in the arts, but as cultural workers-at-large: those interested in giving something back to the everyday worlds in which they must live and prosper. In the context of his work empowering communities through interactive theatre techniques, Rohd advocates that

the beauty of this work as a medium for dialogue is that it is specific to the individuals with whom it occurs and to the moment in which it occurs. The tools are transferable and their use ends up where it belongs—in the hands of community members who pose the questions and create the forums needed in their own communities. (xvii)

Thus, in our work toward embodying critical pedagogy’s aspirations of cultivating a true—equal—democracy, we must never forget its emphasis on hope—“the desire to dream, the desire to change, the desire to improve human existence” (Denzin 229).

I believe that my best location as an educator is not above students but beside them—as that of

collaborative listener, facilitator, and storyteller—so collectively we can become, as Lois is fond of saying, change-makers conspiring together as we work toward justice for all.

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