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## Your Story / My Story / Our Story: Performing Interpretation in Participatory Theatre

In this article, I outline an approach to interviewing and “data” interpretation that I encountered in a feminist, community-based participatory theatre project. In 1998 I began work with Jan Selman,<sup>1</sup> a feminist theatre director with many years of experience in community theatre on a project we called Transforming Dangerous Spaces (TDS). This name was selected to illustrate the risk-taking and dangerous spaces that exist in many feminist organizing and coalition projects and a desire to create more equitable social relations among women. The purpose of the community-based collaborative project was to use the power of popular or participatory theatre processes to explore the conflict and challenges (mainly in relation to difference) that seemed to be recurring within North American feminist coalition and feminist organizing efforts. Twelve other women joined the project,<sup>2</sup> including two other experienced facilitators (Sheila James and Caroline White), and we began a journey of discovery, meeting every Saturday morning at a local neighborhood house for two intensive four-month periods.

This project, which began as a one-year project, grew into a much more involved and ongoing investigation. In the process we<sup>3</sup> learned much about popular or participatory theatre, we adapted exercises to suit the focus of our investigations, we became a kind of mini-coalition in which we explored our past as well as emerging experiences as feminists working in community-based and institutional contexts, and we came to appreciate the embodied, playful, and dangerous process we were engaged in. Participants in TDS project came with diverse cultural backgrounds and organizational and organizing experiences. We shared an interest in using popular theatre to explore feminist coalition politics, but we also had various interpretations of the process. I came to the project with many years of experiences as a feminist advocate and activist—my experiences in these contexts, as well as Jan’s, were central to the development of TDS. My location as white, middle-class academic shaped my experience of this project in significant ways. In particular, this project has further strengthened my interest in the contributions that theatre and dramatic forms can make to arts-based as well as feminist activist research.

Many elements of the participatory theatre project could be included in this discussion. I have focused on a particular exercise as an example of how bringing popular theatre and dramatic sensibilities into the research process—in particular interviewing, interpretation, and presentation and repre-

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sentation—can offer much to the larger discussion of the contributions of arts-based research to education (and to qualitative research discussions regarding the interpretive process). The contributions of theatre and performance are slowly gaining more presence in the discourse of arts-based research, which has for the most part been concerned with narrative approaches. In this article particular attention is given to the process of creative collaboration and participatory audience that can occur when using theatre and dramatic forms. This process and the activity described in this article can contribute to ongoing deliberations about interpretation (every utterance or illustration creates new meaning), the politics of representation (whose story is being told, by whom, and for whom), and the solipsism of arts-based research (but it's just your story).

Before situating this article within the larger discussion of the contributions of feminist, community-based, action-oriented, and arts-based inquiry, the contours of the activity are presented below. It is a challenge to draw now on a discursive activity—writing this article—to discuss what was a nondiscursive expression of meaning; I take to heart the limitation of texts that attempt to reconstruct experience. “[Texts] can only simulate; they cannot capture and keep the experiences they claim to reference” (Donmoyer & Yennie-Donmoyer, 1995, n.p.). The following is a description, a kind of telling; below I provide a script of the activity in an effort to re-present, re-construct, or to show what happened.

During this particular activity, we broke into pairs and interviewed each other for about one hour (in total) about a “dangerous” moment in the TDS group or outside the project, a moment that had left its imprint. As one partner talked, the other listened, took notes, probed for understanding. After the interviews were finished, each partner took a few minutes to map out a plan for re-presenting in dramatic form what they had heard. We then reconvened as a large group, and each interviewer took turns creating an image using body sculptures (metaphoric and imagistic impressions of an event, theme, or emotion) or snapshots (frozen pictures created by the participants of a moment in time) using several members of the audience as props, that in some way captured an element of what they had heard and understood their partners to have said. After each image was presented, a discussion followed where other participants of the audience offered their perceptions of what they had seen. Those who had been part of the image also described their experience and interpretation of the image. The director/interviewer talked about what she had intended to illustrate. And the original story teller/interviewee commented on the presentation.

In this activity, the more “traditional” role and responsibility of interviewer/researcher expanded and shifted to include that of image-maker and director, and the “traditional” role and responsibility of the interviewee/subject shifted and expanded to include spectator/audience member, as well as co-director. In this activity the interviewer's interpretation was performed immediately following “data collection” rather than some time much later than the original conversation. What struck me about this activity was how it illustrated the dynamic and intersubjective character of interpretation. Those involved with research in the social sciences such as education are well aware

that interpretation is part of the entire research process from problem formulation to presentation of results. That being said, in the discussion about the “politics” of interpretation (whose story is this?), there is a tendency to position interpretation as “the final product” of research. Furthermore, despite much effort to take on the question of subjectivity, there is a tendency to suggest that some pure form of interpretation can be achieved, a form of story, narrative, account uncontaminated by researcher perspective, biography, and bias. The image of interpretation that remains with me after this exercise was of a spiral.

### *Shifting Paradigms*

Bentz and Shapiro (1998) argue that research in the social sciences has entered a postmodern period where the “triumphs of science and rationality” (p. 1) are being called into question.

These new aspects of knowledge creation are exciting. They provide you with an amazing array of possibilities for creative research work: new fields of study, new things about which to inquire, new methods of inquiry, new ways of combining knowledge of different fields, new ways to incorporate your self and your social background into your research, new technologies to play with, and new social relationships with peers. (p. 3)

Part of the postmodern sensibility now influencing research has drawn attention to how traditional “scientific” research has reinforced relations of domination. This aspect of research has been a central concern for feminist scholars and activists. “The most central dilemma for contemporary feminists in fieldwork, from which other contradictions are derived, is power and the unequal hierarchies or levels of control that are often maintained, perpetuated, created, and re-created during and after field research” (Wolfe, 1996, p. 2). Fine (1994) writes about activist feminist research and the importance of engaging in “power-sensitive conversations” (borrowing from Haraway, 1988). “The strength of feminist activist research lies in its ability to open contradictions and conflicts within collaborative practices” (Fine, p. 23).

The long history of research as a colonizing project is also part of a significant and growing indigenous scholarship. “The ways in which scientific research is implicated in the worst excesses of colonialism remains a powerful remembered history for many of the world’s colonized peoples. It is a history that still offends the deepest sense of our humanity” (Smith, 1999, p. 1). In addition to Indigenous and feminist scholars, efforts to disrupt this practice have been the concern of community-based, action-oriented research (Gitlin, 1994; Ristock & Pennell, 1996; Stringer, 1999; Whyte, 1991). As Stringer outlines, it is an approach developed as a counter to the exploitive and damaging elements of traditional science.

Community-based research seeks to develop and maintain social and personal interactions that are nonexploitative and enhance the social and emotional lives of all people who participate. It is organized and conducted in ways that are conducive to the formation of community—the “common unity” of all participants—and that strengthen the democratic, equitable, liberating and life-enhancing qualities of social life. (p. 28)

The productive and reproductive dimensions of power have been identified throughout the research process, from the initial formulation of a problem to be

explored, to the preparation and publishing of reports. In more traditional orientations toward research, it is the researcher who has the final say, although it must be acknowledged that researchers do not undertake their work in a vacuum and are strongly influenced by the culture of their discipline and the context of their investigations. A variety of strategies have been generated to make the researcher's path transparent so that the accounts created by the researcher reveal, and thus leave open for examination and critique, the theoretical, political, autobiographical, and methodological approach assumed by the researcher. Other methods that seek to provide participants with more influence include submitting preliminary analyses to participants for their consideration. In action-oriented, community-based research the intent is to support a collaborative process from the beginning of problem identification to the creation and dissemination of results.

The issue of interpretation is a recurrent concern in discussions of qualitative research as articulated by Denzin (1994): "In the social sciences there is only interpretation. Nothing speaks for itself" (p. 500).

Political and action-oriented as well as arts-based educational research offer more dimensions to the "politics of representation," and new questions begin to emerge when criteria that relate to aesthetic and expressive "texts" are included. Arts-based inquiry in education is an exciting development that contributes to and expands these discussions regarding the limitations and oppressive features of traditional scientific research, opening spaces for experimentation of alternative approaches, approaches that weave in aesthetic sensibilities and postpositivistic forms of expression. Barone and Eisner (1997) have mapped out several features of arts-based research practice that relate to a shift in emphasis away from scientific approaches toward artistic expression; in arts-based research the *expression* of meaning becomes central compared with science where meaning is *stated*. "The poetic as distinct from the prosaic, aesthetic art as distinct from 'scientific,' expression as distinct from statement, does something different from leading to an experience. It constitutes one" (p. 84).

In their collection of stories about expressive approaches to qualitative research in adult education, Willis, Smith, and Collins (2000) challenge the "cool-headed rational stance" (p. 10) of the objective empirical approach; what is needed is attention to the heart of expressive research.

This exploration suggests that in practice, research as a human purposive activity is pursued within the multiplex skeins of real "lived" life; influenced not only by intellectual curiosity and the epistemological and ontological assumptions underpinning it, but less visibly, by human emotions and desires ... For this project, it was to do not so much with the ontology of ideas of "being" and its representation, but with "heart." (p. 10)

In the same volume, the issue of solipsism, "the view or theory that self is the only object of real knowledge or the only thing really existent" is explored by Piantanida, Garman, and McMahon (2000, p. 101). These authors express concerns with the argument that interpreting art or other expressive forms is neither appropriate nor necessary. McMahon (2000) is concerned with the acritical approach to examining and describing one's own experience: an approach common to autobiographical research and arts-based inquiry. She sug-

gests there are criteria for judging such efforts—the author's motivation for writing or creating any artistic expression needs to be considered.

Stories born of artifice or solipsism, those that are not conceived in the spirit of discovery but of didacticism are not generative.... Any persuasive quality assigned to the arts-based educational researcher's art will not reside in her fiction itself but in the journey toward insight she invites us to make with her through her fiction. (pp. 144-145)

The narrative turn in educational research has been welcomed by many researchers; less frequently discussed are the contributions of theatre and drama to research that honors the expressive over the didactic. Considering the contributions of ethnodrama, Mienczakowski (1995) suggests that "traditional research, once written, becomes temporally bound and prone to fundamental readings, ethnodrama, as an extension of forum theatre, renegotiates its meaning with every performance" (n.p.). Donmoyer and Yennie-Donmoyer (1995), noting that narrative has been the mainstream of those who employ artistic research, outline how performance, particularly Readers' Theatre can transform data. Readers' Theatre is a "staged presentation of a piece of text or selected pieces of different texts that are thematically linked" (n.p.). This approach, in the view of these authors, allows the voices of those whose stories and accounts were the source of data to become "much more vibrant and capable of being heard" (n.p.).

The tension between aesthetic judgments, key to the expressive arts, and ethical human relations in social science research has become a focus of discussion. The decisions made in producing an ethnographic performative text are explicated by Saldana (1996), who reflected on the tensions between the ethical obligations he had as a researcher to protect participants, and his desire as a playwright and director to create an engaging story, to go for "the juicy bits." Mienczakowski (1999), responding to Saldana's confessional tale, suggests that "ethnographies, and in particular ethnodramas, are most useful when informant voices are articulated and heard in open and continuous collaboration with the informants themselves" (n.p.). In a later article Mienczakowski and Morgan (2001) discuss the tension between aesthetic or dramatic need and validity in relation to the use of ethnodrama in health-related research.

That is to say, we do not create fictional accounts to serve a form of poesis or to satisfy aesthetic or dramatic need. The consumption of health is fraught with drama as it is! In all events, this is not theatre for artistic pretention, aesthetic appeasement or entertainment. (p. 221)

Attending to "the performance turn" in the human sciences has been more recently taken up by authors such as Denzin (2000), who also wonders how "to construct, perform, and critically analyze performance texts" (p. 904). In musing about the future, Denzin suggests that "interpretation is moving more and more deeply into the regions of the postmodern, multicultural sensibility. A new postinterpretive, postfoundational paradigm is emerging. This framework is attaching itself to new and less foundational interpretive criteria" (p. 914).

Most of these discussions in arts-based research literature explore the process of creating a performance based on data gathered through qualitative and

ethnographic field work. The performance turn in research has illustrated the power of drama and theatre to engage audiences, to give voice to those participants in research projects who are located on the margins of mainstream institutions, to create a dynamic interplay between "text" and "reader." In this article I examine how dramatic processes can be used as the methodology, not only a choice of how to tell the final story or stories.

*Examining Coalition Politics Through Popular Theatre*

The focus of our investigation in the TDS popular theatre project was the tensions and conflict that frequently emerge in feminist organizing practices. Feminist scholarship has examined some of these struggles, particularly with respect to practicing inclusivity and acknowledging and respecting women's differences. Scholars like Young (1990) suggest that the desire for unity "generates borders, dichotomies and exclusions" (p. 301). Groups that seek mutual identification have left many women feeling excluded because of different racial, class, age, and sexuality locations (to name only a few). Groups and coalitions have become dangerous territories, and feminist activists and scholars have called for ways of creating equitable participation and pedagogies that recognize the inequalities of risk-taking (Razack, 1993). Familiar ways of working or conceptualizing are no longer effective when facing conflict and in our struggles to create inclusive communities and organizations.

Jan and I were curious about the potential of theatre, and in particular popular theatre processes, to offer new ways of being, seeing, and telling to those who are poorly skilled in the art of conflict. We wondered if through a participatory theatre process we might find ways to work more constructively, affiliatively, and pleurably with conflict and tension. "We need more written work and oral testimony documenting ways barriers are broken down, coalitions formed and solidarity shared" (hooks, 1994, p. 110).

Diverse conceptualizations of popular theatre reflect the significance of the location, time, people, and political context in which it occurs.

Popular theatre is a process of theatre which deeply involves specific communities in identifying issues of concern, analysing current conditions and causes of a situation, identifying points of change, and analysing how change could happen and/or contributing to the actions implied. (Prentki & Selman, 2000, p. 8)

The purpose is not to create art, but rather to use an artistic or expressive medium, theatre, to investigate problems. The term *popular* reflects the grounding of the theatrical process in a community's interests; it does not mean that it is intended for a *general* public, rather it is for a specific public with specific goals. The philosophy and principles of popular theatre are closely aligned with Freire's principles of education where "exchange, participant ownership, reflection and action" (Prentki & Selman, p. 8) are central. Augusto Boal (1979) is often identified as one of the main creators of what is currently understood to be popular theatre in North America.

Popular theatre embraces and uses as fuel the conflicts that are often at the heart of community struggles. Popular theatre honors the stories and storytelling processes of communities. Because of its creative and experimental orient-

ation, new ideas can be tested and new ways of being can be rehearsed. The process of creating theatre from the everyday issues facing individuals in community establishes a process where individuals and groups can examine their experiences and the meanings of these experiences somewhat objectively. The theatre process creates a space, an opportunity to establish some distance from one's experiences that supports critical reflection and deeper understanding. Theatre is a process that involves, even requires, not just spectators, but community members who are interested and actively engaged as both storytellers and audience members.

Considering the contributions of popular theatre in a discussion of research can contribute to creating some space between what have been traditionally been dichotomized concepts, including subjective/objective, truth/fiction, researcher/researched. In participatory or popular theatre, participants are researchers, storytellers and story-makers, speakers and listeners. Interpretation of stories is made evident through theatre processes so that the individual or group telling the story is also part of the audience that actively engages in scenemaking. Theatre processes open more space for challenging and naming the character of the power relations among community members. Popular theatre is about creating a liminal space between "real stories" and the making of a scene or fiction. New ways of being and knowing and relating can happen in this space.

#### *Building a Space for Embodied Investigation*

After we had secured our funding, the first phase of the TDS project focused on recruiting participants. Flyers inviting women to participate in the project were distributed to a wide range of equality-seeking organizations in the Vancouver lower mainland that were concerned with social justice issues for women. We (Jan, Caroline, Sheila, and myself) also contacted potential participants through our own feminist networks. Six introductory workshops in a variety of community settings were held; attendees were introduced to popular theatre techniques and provided with more detailed information about the project. Ten women indicated an interest in continuing with the project. The next intensive workshop phase began in January 1999; we met every Saturday morning for 12 weeks, using and adapting various popular theatre exercises to build rapport and to explore experiences of feminist politics. We presented the results of this intensive workshop phase at a community-based workshop that involved both showing scenes and participatory exercises. After meeting in the fall of 1999, women in the project expressed a desire to continue, and so we began another series of Saturday morning workshops, meeting between January and May 2000. This second year was concluded with another community-based participatory workshop.

Throughout the project we used various methods to document the process and our experiences, including audio- and videotaping, written feedback, photographs, and drawings.<sup>4</sup> More traditional interviews were also conducted during the first year of the project and after the project was completed. As we regrouped to begin the second year, we decided to use our developing knowledge and skills in theatre to conduct interviews with each other; this time the focus was exploring some dangerous moments in and outside the project, times when we felt vulnerable and a sense of risk. The following is a descrip-

tion of that exercise written as a script. The tale told is not exactly what happened, but is a recreation of what happened pulled together from memory and conversation.

### *Performing Interpretation*

*Scene #1: Busy urban street—a mix of commercial and 3 story apartments. It is raining and the streets are shiny. Some pedestrians walk by, traffic is constant. A small red car pulls up in front of a corner building with a sign that reads “Eastside Neighborhood House.” A white woman (Shauna) emerges from the car, closes the driver door, moves to the rear of the car and opens the hatch, bends in and takes out a large yellow plastic rectangular storage bin. Balancing the bin on her hip she closes the hatch and walks to the front door of the Neighborhood House. Another car pulls up behind the red one, two women emerge, one Indo-Canadian (Sheila) the other Chinese (Cynthia). They wave at Shauna, take backpacks out of the car and join her at the door. The three women go inside.*

*Scene #2: Large bright room about 25 by 30 feet: walls are white, floor is covered with square grey and black linoleum tiles. The far side of the room has floor to ceiling windows which look out onto a garden. To the right of the entrance, there is a table with coffeepot, fruit, muffins and bagels. Eight women (a mix of Indo Canadian, Chinese, and white women, ages 35-50) are standing near the table holding coffee cups, talking and laughing.*

**Shauna:** We should get started.

*The others return their cups to the table and arrange themselves in a circle in the centre of the room. Cynthia leads the group through some gentle stretching exercises: circling arms, rotating head, twists and bends. Then group begins to walk around the room, changing the rhythm of their step as Cynthia changes her movements. The group walks quickly, then slows down, then backward, then sideward. The exercise keeps going for several minutes until Cynthia calls it to a close. Sheila moves to the front of the room.*

**Sheila:** We’re going to play “Traffic” as our warm up for the main activity today—the idea is to get into working closely with a partner, to focus on communicating effectively as a team—this will be useful to the next task which involves interviewing each other. So in your pair, choose who will be the “car” and who will be the “driver.” The person who is the “car” must keep her eyes closed while the “driver” gives directions. The driver and the car need to work together as a unit. To move the “car” forward, driver tap your partner on the back, like this. To move the “car” backward, tap her on the head, to turn left, tap her left shoulder, to turn right, tap her right shoulder. To stop, remove your hand and stop tapping. To speed up, tap quickly, to slow down, tap more slowly. Drivers, remember, do not go too fast, work with your partner—tune into how quickly your car can respond to your directions. Your task is to drive carefully and try to avoid collisions. OK, the partner who is the “car” stand in front, facing forward with your eyes closed and the “driver” stands right behind her.

*The game begins and the drivers begin to maneuver “through traffic,” trying to avoid other “cars” by changing directions, speeding up, slowing down, stopping. There’s lots of bumping in to each other and laughter.*



Sheila: OK, now switch partners, those who were “drivers” are now “cars” and vice versa. Move into traffic again, keeping in touch with your partner, keeping them safe, watching traffic, and avoiding collisions. *After a few minutes of driving, Sheila calls out:* Now you need to park your car close to the walls of the room, out of traffic. *After “parking the cars,” and much more laughter, the women form a circle and sit on the floor and Cynthia then outlines the next exercise.*

Cynthia: Now that we’ve had some practice working with our partners, we’re going to shift gears a little and do some interviewing. Take some pencil and paper and in pairs find a quiet place in the building. You’re going to interview with each other for a total of one hour, switching roles of interviewer and interviewee after 30 minutes. In your interview talk about moments in or outside the project that felt “dangerous.” When you’ve finished, which should be 11 a.m., we’ll return to the large room—try to leave a few minutes at the end of your conversation to take a break, get some coffee, use the washroom. Then we’ll show some scenes. Here’s the idea, each woman who was the interviewer will take a few minutes to look at her notes, sketch out a plan, and then using other members of the group, but not their interviewee, create a body sculpture that in some way reflects an element of what you’ve heard in their partner’s story. Then we’ll do the usual debrief, asking what we saw in the sculptures, etc.—you know the routine. OK, you’ve got an hour—let’s regroup at 11 a.m.

*Scene #3: Two women are facing each other each sitting in large arm chairs in a corner of the second floor of the community centre, one is Indo-Canadian (Surjit) and other other is white (Shauna).*

*Surjit:* Tell me about a moment inside or outside the project that was dangerous for you.

*Shauna:* Well there have been many moments that have felt like I was on the edge of something, feeling like I was stepping off a cliff. It’s both exciting and scary. Feeling like I *should* take that step or a leap, kind of excited, because I knew I would learn a lot, but also feeling hesitant and fearful. So I could talk about a lot of times that felt both exciting and dangerous all at once—that’s what this project is about right, “being safe enough to be dangerous” as Jan says. There’s one scene I remember that pushed me into that space of risk and uncertainty. I’ve thought about it a lot because it represents for me a place where I was feeling really stretched in relation to both my skills in theatre, how to play a character and improvise without a script, and the coalition politics we were exploring. It was also about my location as a white woman and how to work in solidarity with women of color, to work in ways that acknowledged difference, the history of racism in women’s organizing efforts, to work respectfully and not to defer to women of color because that is a form of racism itself. Anyway, all of those concerns came together when we were presenting a scene at the community workshop where we showed some of our exercises and some scenes we’d developed from our stories.

It was the scene of the “Sweet and Sour Collective.” I was playing “Jane,” one of the founding mothers of the organization, a white, middle-class, middle-aged woman, someone like me [*laughter*]. When I played that character I brought in a lot of my own experiences of coalition work and what I had witnessed. Jane’s character is feeling rather overwhelmed by the changes taking place in the organization, particularly the

conflict between and among the women who are members, conflict between white women and women of color, between and among white women. She's frustrated with the time spent addressing these struggles and believes that the real work of the group is not getting done, instead there are many meetings spent talking about the poor representation of women of color, of lesbian women, or disabled women, or First Nations women in the group and how the group needs to change to include these other voices, other women, and other perspectives. She is shocked at the anger being expressed by women of color. She feels it is not helpful, that the anger is getting in the way of working in solidarity. She fears that the conflict will tear the group apart and it must be smoothed over. She longs for the days when there was a strong sense of sisterhood and feels that the focus on difference is damaging. And she is hurt because her years of hard work are not being acknowledged, in fact she is regarded with suspicion because of her "founding mother" status. Rather than expressions of appreciation for her work and commitment to the struggle, she is charged with being elitist, privileged, and unaware of her racism.

Anyway, that's the character I played in the scene. After we had showed that scene we asked the participants, the audience members, to go and stand by one of the characters they felt strongly connected to—either negatively or positively. Then each character went to a different corner of the room and talked with their small group. In my small group, I was asked questions about my background, what I was thinking and suggestions were given for ways to work differently to shift the power struggle in the scene. This was called, as you remember, "animation in role." I had to improvise in the moment, staying in character, as I listened to and responded to this discussion and then try something different in the scene. It was incredibly hard work, to stay in character. I worried that those who joined the group thought *Jane was me*. I wanted to break out of being Jane and tell them, "This isn't me, it's a character", but at the same time as I felt that urge to distance myself from Jane's character, I had to admit that there were elements of Jane that were close to home. It was really challenging, it pushed me to be honest about what I thought, how I was both different and similar to Jane. And it was happening all in the moment of theatre.

*Scene #4: Women are now back in the large room.*

*Sheila: [pointing to one side of the room] OK, this is now the "stage" so grab some chairs or sit on the floor in front of the stage. Who would like to go first?*

*Surjit says she'll go first and takes her chair off to the side of the stage section and sits down for a few minutes looking at her notes. She asks for 3 volunteers from the audience who join her and move off to a corner of the room.*

*Sheila: Those in the audience either close your eyes or sit with your back to the stage while the actors put their scene together.*

*Surjit moves her group to the front of the audience and begins to create her sculpture. She takes one woman and positions her, adding the other two women to the first image until a human sculpture is formed. On stage, the three women are standing close together with their backs to each other, each one facing outward, forming a kind of triangle. One woman has arms crossed over her chest, looking outward, her expression is stern, another woman has her arms at her sides palms facing forward, looking directly outward, expression neutral. The third woman faces outward, arms*

*are bent, hands in front of her face about one inch away, palms together, facing inward, eyes open.*

*Sheila: Are you ready? [Surjit nods] OK, those in the audience open your eyes and look at the sculpture carefully, walk around it you want to, really examine it. Those who are in the sculpture, remember to shake loose when you're feeling tight and keep breathing. The women in the audience get up from their chairs and walk slowly around the sculpture and then return to their seats.*

Sheila: Those in the sculpture can relax now. So what did you see in this image?

Audience member: I see three women, one is afraid to look, another is open and the other is kind of closed down, angry.

Audience member: I see the woman with her hands in front as wearing a mask, the one with her arms crossed is resistant, the third with her hands at her side is passive.

Audience member: split personality

Audience member: it's a journey, a transformation

Sheila: Surjit, what were you trying to portray?

Surjit: Shauna was describing to me a struggle she faced in playing the character Jane in our scene about the Sweet and Sour Collective—she was struggling to stay in character and she was also fearful of what others thought of her character. She talked about many things happening simultaneously, therefore I put the three people together like that. Being in character is a kind of mask, but in this scene the face behind the mask can still be seen. The woman with her palms outward is very vulnerable and the woman with her arms crossed is another mask, not a mask of theatre but a mask of protection.

Audience member: I don't see vulnerability, I see that as an image of openness.

Sheila: Shauna, what do you see, how does it relate to your story?

Shauna: I like the image of the mask and how it's away from the face so you can still see the face. It makes me think about "animation in role," how you need to stay in character and use the mask of the character to interpret the world, what you hear but you also need to recognize that you are *in character*, to feel somewhat protected by the theatre performance, as a kind of fiction based on reality. It's the space that theatre can create for reflection on yourself and the struggles that are painful. It's about needing some kind of protection but at the same time it's not about hiding either. I'd like to feel as open as the woman with her palms outward, but it feels far too vulnerable. The woman with her arms crossed, makes me think about times when I do that and what might happen if I uncrossed my arms. It makes me think of the body-mind connection, how our physical positioning connects to our way of being and thinking. This is great, I have another sense of my struggle now. Thanks Surjit!

### *Postscript*

My goal in this article is to illustrate the intersubjective aspects of storytelling and storymaking. Stories have their power in their telling, in the intersubjective space between narrator and audience. In this exercise narrators became part of the audience of their interpreted story, a re-presentation constructed by the listener/director, and they were also listening as other members of the project offered their interpretations (of the interpretation). In this activity the power and responsibility of the listener/director was part of a public process that

offered ways of addressing the politics of interpretation and representation. Through theatre it offered another way to consider the issue of accountability or validity not usually found in traditional research, nor in arts-based inquiry. The process created an opportunity to go deeper, for participants to better understand the speaker and the meaning of their story. The narrator had an opportunity to tell her story and see it reproduced, or at least elements of it, and in that moment she bore witness to the multiplicity of interpretations and found new meaning for her experience.

This process of interviewing and then offering a kind of dramatic transcription back to the speaker as well as others, was exciting and it was risky. There was danger in revealing our limitations as listeners; in revealing what was important to us as narrators; in finding words, gestures, images that attempted to capture and reflect what we thought we had understood as listeners. The process meant that we were vulnerable and accountable to others. The theatre processes created some safety for this dangerous work to happen, but it was fragile, and we approached it with great care. It is important to emphasize that this particular activity took place after a great deal of trust had developed among group members; and it occurred after participants had acquired skills and knowledge of the principles of popular theatre techniques. The importance of these two factors—skill-building and trust—cannot be overstated.

### *In Closing*

In their discussion of the “Fifth Moment” in qualitative research, Lincoln and Denzin (1994) attempt to define a set of challenges that face qualitative researchers at a particular juncture that they describe as a place of tension where traditional, postmodern, and poststructural sensibilities are all at play. They caution the reader that “writing the present is always dangerous, a biased project conditioned by distorted readings of the past and utopian hopes for the future” (p. 575). They outline several problems of this fifth moment including the crisis of representation and legitimation, the author’s place in the text, and verisimilitude. They offer some speculative thoughts about the future and suggest that we are “between stories.” “The Old Story will no longer do and we know that it is inadequate. But the New Story is not yet in place” (p. 584). One of the ways they suggest that researchers are addressing this in-between-space is to become bricoleurs. “Bricoleurs know that they have few tools, and little by way of appropriate parts, and so become inventors ... In the bricoleur’s world, invention is not only the child of necessity, it is the demand of a restless art” (p. 584).

In many respects the notion of bricolage captures the experience I had of how the members of the TDS project used and adapted popular theatre exercises to suit our process of discovery. The interviewing/interpretation/representation process outlined in the above section could also be considered a process that can further our explorations of our being between stories. Given the characterization of the fifth moment articulated by Denzin and Lincoln, arts-based inquiry and the way popular theatre can contribute to that emerging field could perhaps be the sixth moment, where “we seek to learn how to tell new stories, stories no longer contained within or confined to the tales of the past” (p. 584)

Notes

1. Jan Selman is currently Chair, Department of Drama, University of Alberta. She and I were co-investigators on this project, which was funded by a University of British Columbia Hampton Grant.
2. After holding several introductory workshops, 12 women joined this project. All were employed in some kind of community-based agency, many offering direct services to women such as women's centers. Others worked in care centers, ESL programs, and AIDS prevention programs. In the total group of 14 women (including the 4 facilitators) half were straight women, half were lesbian or bisexual, half had Indian, Latino, or Asian ancestry, half were white-skinned women with European cultural backgrounds.
3. I use the term *we* both cautiously and deliberately. The term *we* can and has been used as "an imperial net thrown over the bodies and minds of Others from my ivory tower" (Fine, 1994, p. 30). I use the term *we* as a signal to the reader that the project was a collaborative effort of many women and my experiences in the project are a result of this wonderful mix of energies.
4. This documentation was for the purposes of reflecting on the work and building on previous activities. These materials were not considered as data in the traditional sense of social science research, and participants did not give their consent to have these images shared beyond the group process.

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