

Staging Interventions: Limitations and Advantages of Performance as Research

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Abstract

Performance ethnography is a new approach to anthropological research that uses theatre to identify and critically examine power structures as they exist in everyday life. Researchers using this methodology aim to work with participants from the community they're researching to resist oppressive systems of the academy and the community. With this focus on effecting change, performance ethnographers vastly expand the reach of ethnographic projects. As a consequence, these projects may fall short of the anthropologist's high expectations for transformative work, and run the risk of reinforcing the researcher's power over their subjects by prioritizing their own agenda. This thesis examines methodological interventions performance offers to ethnography using a few case studies, and argues that performance ethnography is not successful when it is used mainly to transform or liberate the subjects of research. For these interventions to be effective, anthropologists should recognize their limitations and use performance ethnography as an investigative and educational tool.

Acknowledgements

My mother taught me the world is full of performance and my father taught me everything is political. As always, I owe everything to my parents.

In 2017, my sister's Christmas present to me was a spiral bound compilation of 19 articles about performance as research in anthropology. A couple weeks before, during finals, I had called her asking for resources on this topic to help me complete an assignment. I had an idea that theatre and anthropology could be connected, and for one of my final papers, I decided to propose a senior thesis on the possibility for theatre to be used in anthropological research. This was before I ever heard the term performance ethnography. I quickly realized that I was scratching the surface of a whole field which was new to me. In a minor panic, I told her, "I don't know if I can do this". That Christmas, my whole family witnessed the gratitude I felt when I received her gift: I burst into tears over a hefty stack of academic papers. It might have seemed strange, but for me, this was a culmination of so many gifts of the same kind. From the beginning, Zoë has given me the ability to do what I dream of.

Thanks to Jacob Culbertson, who told me what I am trying to say.

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I. Introduction

Performance ethnography offers a new way of doing anthropological research. This form of ethnography includes applied theatre, which uses theatrical techniques for pedagogical and activist ends, as a method for fieldwork. It is collaborative, creative, and accessible to participants. By using performance to investigate the social world, performance ethnography engages with embodied and subconscious knowledge. However, applied theatre and ethnographic research do not fit perfectly together. While anthropologists using performance ethnography see its potential to be radical, their position as researchers fundamentally changes the applied theatre methods they use. Instead of using theatre to inspire change, ethnographers use it primarily to learn about the populations they study. Adapting performance for research impacts the effect it has on these populations. As a result, performance ethnography is not necessarily as democratic and revolutionary as many researchers anticipate.

I argue that the ethical issues with performance ethnography arise from its transformation from a method of resistance into a method for social research. Performance ethnography cannot be both a form of research and a form of liberation without being compromised in its ability to perform these divergent tasks. In order to determine how performance ethnography can be used ethically, I will explain what performance ethnography is, examine what it is purported to improve about ethnography, and review performance ethnography research projects which have varying levels of success with this method.

The ambition to develop a revolutionary anthropological practice is partly a response to the discipline's history. Anthropology has become hyper-conscious of the racism and colonialism which are historically part of the discipline, though not necessarily rid of these problems. An effort to decolonize and redefine the roots of anthropological practice has led to

greater recognition of less traditional forms of anthropological research such as native anthropology, autoethnography, and participatory research. Consequently, anthropology is in the midst of a complicated and messy renaissance in what counts as ethnography. In the 1970s, when the discipline of performance studies began, anthropology was at a turning point. The first performance studies department, founded at NYU in 1979, focused on “the *how* of performance—asking not ‘what does it mean?’ but ‘what does it do?’” (About Performance Studies n.d.). At the same time, anthropologists were also questioning the *how* of their discipline. The famous book *Writing Culture*, which “argues that ethnography is in the midst of a political and epistemological crisis” (Clifford and Marcus 1986: book jacket), sought to address the methods anthropologists were using, and what they expected to produce with them. As indicated by the book’s title, *Writing Culture* examined ethnographic writing, which has long been the main output of anthropological studies. Following the creation of performance studies, which brought together the worlds of theatre and anthropology, performance ethnography emerged, expanding the *how* of research for both disciplines. As such, this method focuses on making ethnography collaborative and transformative to encourage more responsible, engaged research.

A foundational assumption of performance studies is that performance is pervasive in daily life, and takes a variety of forms. Judith Butler’s theory of gender as a performance is a well-known example of this (Butler 1999). Performance studies has a vast range encompassing the ubiquity of performance in every facet of social life, including the performance of social constructs, dance recitals, traditional rituals, and so on. This breadth is also present in the more specific realm of performance ethnography. The invention of performance ethnography roughly coincided with the foundation of performance studies, and involved the same small group of academics. Conceived in the 1980s as an experimental idea (Turner 1982; Schechner 1985), it

emerged in the early 2000s as a defined method (Denzin 2003). However, performance ethnography is still defining itself to this day.

Like performance studies as a whole, performance ethnography incorporates performance in many different ways. In *The SAGE Encyclopedia of Research Methods*, the entry on performance ethnography states: “Performance ethnographers find or create opportunities to observe and/or participate in performances in the broadest sense. As such, performance ethnography involves inquiry into performance in any or all of its cultural or social contexts—in theatrical performances and/or in everyday life performances.” (Conrad 2008). According to this definition, performance ethnography includes any form of ethnography (itself an amorphous designation) which uses performance in the process of research or as a presentation of the findings. Some researchers who use this term create performances out of ethnographies they have written, in order to share their work differently. Some may re-create rituals or practices in order to understand them better. Still others produce performances by devising them collaboratively with participants from the community they’re studying. In this thesis, “performance ethnography” refers to this last variety, which often involves no scripts. In this method, anthropologists use performance in place of interviews to gather information from the population being studied. Performance plays a role in this type of ethnography as a fieldwork practice, and not necessarily a product. I have chosen to focus on this form of performance ethnography in order to examine the effect performance has on participants specifically, and how anthropologists can more ethically engage their subjects as performers.

Because performance creates knowledge in a different way than interviewing, observing people, or writing does, it fundamentally changes the way research is conducted. The central aspect of performance which make it unique is re-creation. On one level, this concept is very

simple. In traditional theatre, actors work to create a scene from a script, which may or may not be about a real event that has happened. Each rehearsal of this scene presents its own version of the written words, but the ceremony surrounds the final version, which has been prepared for and created with meticulous detail and planning. Thus the final performance is both a perfected re-creation of the rehearsals, a re-creation of the “original” play which is on paper, and perhaps an idealized re-creation of a real-life event (Schechner 1985). Scholars of performance studies have emphasized the importance of re-creation as a unique element of theatre and claimed that it makes performance an exceptional mode of expression. Some of the most in-depth thought on this topic comes from Richard Schechner, who in the 1980s wrote *Between Theatre and Anthropology*, one of the foundational texts of performance studies. As a director and performance scholar, Schechner’s concept of “restoration” from which I am deriving the idea of re-creation focuses on theatrical performances, not social performances. Although his theory of “restored behavior” is fascinating, Schechner does not address theatre devised collaboratively. In contrast, researchers using participatory theatre as a method for social science are interested in re-creation as it applies to research, as opposed to its implications for the art of theatre.

Re-creation is the mechanism through which collaborative analysis works in performance. It is no coincidence that this word has a resonance with the concept of play. Re-creation opens up research to an experimental format that is ultimately a refined form of pretending. Part of the reason researchers adopt these methods is that they embraces the participants’ subjectivity, instead of trying to suppress it. Re-creation acknowledges invention and construction as inherent parts of social life, and invites those things to inform our understanding rather than be covered up by an “expert” who attempts to sort fiction from fact.

Augusto Boal understood the power of re-creation to shape the historical and political narrative, and developed a method of collaborative re-creation which is often used in performance ethnography today. Boal was a Brazilian actor born in 1931 who studied at Columbia and used experimental theatre methods to fight the climate of military dictatorship in Brazil. He was heavily influenced by Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, and created Theatre of the Oppressed (TO) as an application of Freire's theory of engaging the oppressed in the creation of knowledge. Boal saw performance as an ideal tool to empower the marginalized people of Brazil. He wanted to democratize the narrative of the play by asking audience members to take part in changing the story as they saw fit (Clark and Mangham 2004). Realizing that theatre as a form of entertainment is not accessible to oppressed people, and believing that traditional theatre is inherently counter-revolutionary, Boal devised the methodology which he called a "rehearsal of revolution". In the following quote, Boal explains the connection he sees between re-creation and revolution:

[The spectator] too must be a subject, an actor on an equal plane with those generally accepted as actors, who must also be spectators. All these experiments of a people's theater have the same objective — the liberation of the spectator, on whom the theater has imposed finished visions of the world. And since those responsible for theatrical performances are in general people who belong directly or indirectly to the ruling classes, obviously their finished images will be reflections of themselves. The spectators in the people's theater (i.e., the people themselves) cannot go on being the passive victims of those images... Perhaps the theater is not revolutionary in itself; but have no doubts, it is a rehearsal of revolution! (Boal 1993: 155)

For Boal, re-creation is a way for audience members to take their own part in the depiction of their lives. Boal aimed to create "rehearsals of revolution" by asking participants to think critically about what is going on in a scene, what kind of power dynamics are present, and strategies that could change the outcome. With guidance from the facilitator and input from the actors about their characters' motivations and affect, the group collaboratively investigates the

“data” about social dynamics in the community. The “scenes” in Theatre of the Oppressed mimic the structure of a traditional dramatic scene, which has a central conflict, a buildup of action, and a resolution of the conflict. The theatrical convention of building tension and then resolving it serves Boal’s pedagogical goal of finding out what the resolution of a real-life problem could be. He quotes German philosopher Hegel to describe this phenomenon within traditional theatre (Boal 1985: 88). Hegel says, “dramatic action . . . is not confined to the simple and undisturbed execution of a definite purpose, but depends throughout on conditions of collision, human passion and characters, and leads therefore to actions and reactions, which in their turn call for some further resolution of conflict and disruption.” (Hegel 1920: 249) Performance ethnographers mobilize this call for a resolution of the action to gear their research towards change.

This aspect of performance ethnography aligns most with the format of participatory action research, and is part of a larger trend in the evolution of research for social transformation. As Österlind explains, “The fundamental hypothesis for the varying forms and techniques of Theatre of the Oppressed is that if someone who is oppressed performs an action in theatrical fiction, this will enable him or her to perform it also in real life (Boal 1995, 46)” (Österlind 2008: 74). Boal created Theatre of the Oppressed as an opportunity to build solidarity, understand the oppressor, and create strategies for resistance. Today, many performance ethnography projects take on the same goals. However, Boal and community organizers like him do not have the added (and somewhat conflicting) purpose of producing academic research. While rehearsals for revolution are always a form of research, inasmuch as they produce knowledge and investigate the social world, they are not intended for an academic audience, or conducted by an expert who comes from outside of the community.

Clearly, Boal did not conceive of Theatre of the Oppressed as a research method. Influenced by Marx, Brecht, and his own experience with an oppressive state (he wrote the book in exile after being tortured by the Brazilian military), Boal intended TO to incite radical change. Nevertheless, his methods have been adopted globally for different purposes. The clear techniques laid out by Boal in his books aid those who have no background in theatre education with facilitating the exercises for groups. Furthermore, the format is adaptable and highly accessible to different populations. For these reasons, Theatre of the Oppressed has become a popular method for everything from professional development to diversity training to research tool.

However, when applied theatre is used as research, it takes on the intellectual distance and ethical entrapments of the researcher. In particular, the activist aims of participatory theatre directly contradict the role of researchers who do not come from the communities they work with, and typically do not have the power to change their participants' situations. While Boal could choose to work exclusively for and with the oppressed, the necessity for researchers to intellectualize their findings and report on their data make their alliances less clear-cut. At the same time, performance is a useful method to explore the tensions and power structures underlying everyday experiences, and because of its pedagogical intent and its accessibility to people who have no experience with theatre, TO is a popular form for performance ethnography and a basis for many applied theatre projects.

The dilemmas faced by anthropologists working with performance are unique versions of the same ethical issues present throughout social science research. I am attracted to performance ethnography for its generative creativity in response to these stymying problems. Collaborating on a theatrical project offers a different approach to representation in ethnography. In my own

experiences acting, I've learned about others through experimental, first-hand understanding, which necessarily came from connections to my own life. Acting forces one to put their self in another's place quite literally, and react to a scene emotionally without thinking. These elements of performance are all potentially transformative factors for ethnographic storytelling and research. Performance offers exciting possibilities for social scientists seeking more applied and collaborative methods. However, it is not without its unique challenges.

Because of the many ways performance can be used to change anthropological research, the genre of performance ethnography is unfortunately ill-defined. This lack of clarity about what performance ethnography is amongst those who use it leads to confusion about what performance ethnography does. Though I am skeptical of searching for concrete results in ethnography, in this case, a focus on what performance ethnography accomplishes (and especially, what performance ethnographers expect from this method) helps us understand how it is best used. Many researchers using performance ethnography disavow measurable results as important, aligning themselves with the belief that the "impact [of an applied theatre project] may manifest itself in many forms including the material, the physiological, the psychological, the social and the cultural" (Etherton and Prentki 2007: 140). Dennis identifies her performance ethnography as part of "the challenge for researchers to engage with participants in consciousness-raising, transformation, and emancipation" (Dennis 2009: 67). In Montreal, Hamel sought to "restore the voices" of her homeless participants (Hamel 2013: 414). These broad aims are incredibly ambitious for a single ethnographic project. Furthermore, they may cause more confusion about what performance ethnography *is* capable of, setting it up for failure.

There is some overlap between performance as a tool for revolution and as a form of ethnography. Performance ethnography supports progress, and makes it easier for participants to

speak their own minds. On the flip side, any effort for social change needs research of some kind to support it. Performance ethnography can exist in between the extremes of conservative research and radical social movements. In fact, in order to be successful, it must exist in between, and recognize its limitations in each area. In lieu of promising to liberate oppressed people by giving them new forms of understanding and expression, performance ethnography can work with these populations to make modest advances towards a more ethical anthropology, if we practice it responsibly.

II. Methodology

Some of the struggles I had in my research were with narrowing down what aspect of performance to focus on. The first decision I had to make was what the term “performance ethnography” means to me. Because it is so broad, I had to decide what the definition of this idea would be for this paper, in order to set the parameters of my research. Several of the works I refer to as “performance ethnography” are not identified that way by the author. Alternative terms include “Popular Theatre” (Conrad 2004) and “applied theatre” (from *Research in Drama Education: The Journal of Applied Theatre and Performance*). For my purposes, I have focused on studies which include the participation of research subjects directly in the creation of a performance, whether or not that performance is ever finalized. As mentioned in the Introduction, this choice allowed me to focus on what the consequences of performance-based methods are for the people anthropologists study, and the ethical snags for this particular type of research. Though my perspective is turned towards the effect of research on participants, I mostly address how anthropologists should adapt their research goals or the scope of their methods to improve performance ethnography. Focusing on anthropologists’ understanding of

their methods is an effective way of changing the experience of ethnography for everyone involved. I chose to analyze performance ethnographies done by other researchers because I think we need more research on anthropology, and academics in general. As social scientists, we have the ability to uncover structures of power hiding in conventional behaviors and seemingly innocuous beliefs. But we do not examine our own assumptions and systems often enough. Being self-critical while doing ethnography means nothing if your practices never change. I am challenging what Stewart refers to as the “style of immanent critique” prevalent in modern anthropology (1998:25). By focusing on the implementation of a methodology in this thesis, I hope to shed light on how anthropologists might contribute to systems of power even while being critical of them.

I am lucky to be working within a field that appreciates self-criticism and largely agrees with this methodology already. Most of the literature I’ve read has included self-conscious reflections on the author’s own work, and how it can be improved. I consider myself to be working with the authors whose work I’m examining, thinking through the difficulties they encountered and hoping to add a useful perspective, rather than being in opposition to them. Far from being regrettable, the difficulties these researchers encounter are the very areas which anthropologists train to study. They are inevitable, informative, and ideally encouraging in their indication that we have hit upon something tricky. However, in a field which values self-consciousness so highly, these tensions can become repetitive and dead-end into performative gestures rather than useful considerations.

Reflexivity is helpful when it offers new ways of looking at things which create possibilities. Several authors have informed my emulation of generative critical theory, which offers specific, accessible suggestions for change. bell hooks argues for an embrace of theory

that is accessible and rooted in the experience of the oppressed. She writes about theory being liberatory, healing, and useful to people with all levels of education, when it is truly written to be engaging. hooks says that meaningful theory “emerges from the concrete, from my efforts to make sense of everyday life experiences, from my efforts to critically intervene in my life and the lives of others” (hooks 1991: 8). Her argument that clear and concrete theory can be practical influences my decision to use performance theory to address seemingly mundane or incidental problems within performance ethnography. In a similar vein, Mónica Russel y Rodríguez’s “Messy Spaces” illustrates the incorporation of theory into the daily life and personal experiences of the author (Russel y Rodríguez 2007). While my work does not focus on autoethnography, this piece artfully demonstrates what many performance theorists attempt to capture when they write about the importance of the quotidian. By examining the role of theatre in anthropological research, I am attempting to play a small part in what she calls “undisciplining ethnography”. This phrase represents an embrace of antidisiplinary research and personal, emotional connections to the subject of study. In my research, I have continually asked myself what I am trying to do with this thesis and why the particular topics I have chosen matter. I am “undisciplining” by simultaneously uplifting speculation and exploration as ways of working through performance theory, while rooting my ideas strongly in the practical consideration of how performance really works.

In my criticism of an “inclusive” model for ethnography, I am inspired by the holistic notion of accessibility from disability studies. In this field, increasing access is not just a matter of making it possible for the disabled to navigate the world, but a process of restructuring society to dismantle the normative view of ability. Disability studies holds that the root cause of disability is social exclusion rather than physical impairment (Taylor 2017). As such,

accessibility is a function of who has access to power as much as it is about physical access. This concept of accessibility applies the idea equally to those outside the disability community who have been denied access to cultural and political power. In performance ethnography, researchers try to address this inequality by making their methods more accessible to participants.

Performance breaks down the barrier of academic language and allows participants to express themselves in a self-determined and less regulated manner. In addition, ethnographers' efforts to increase access to knowledge or expression should include an examination of the system which denies access, or diminishes the value of a particular kind of inquiry, in the first place. These forms of marginalization are present in the work of anthropologists as they are everywhere. I examine the way researchers inadvertently enforce the model of access which expects a marginalized community to be transformed, even with the intention of liberation, without anthropologists changing at all.

My contribution is largely to bring researchers using performance together and read them as different versions of the same type of work. The authors I've referenced come from backgrounds in education theory, performance studies, sociology and social work, anthropology, and theatre. These academic specializations have kept certain lines of thinking separate and stunted. The bulk of my research has been geared towards uniting these authors and recognizing the overlapping conversations taking place in different areas. This is a small portion of all of the wonderful work that's been done with performance ethnography. By spanning several disciplines and attempting to take different fields of research into account, I made it impossible to avoid missing some very relevant and interesting work. I hope this synthesis will offer some insights into the unique nature of performance as a research tool. Most importantly, I hope that readers

will be inspired to seek answers to some of the questions I raise in the existing literature and through their own contributions.

III. The Interventions of Performance Ethnography

To demonstrate how performance ethnography serves as research, I sort the claims made about this method into three main areas. I summarize the unique contributions of performance as “accessing knowledge,” “collaborative research,” and “acting differently.” The background of performance studies as an interdisciplinary field means there are many threads of influence synthesized to create performance ethnography. It’s difficult to untangle these threads into clear, defining principles. As a truly multifaceted tool, performance has a complex relationship with research, and can be employed in almost infinite ways. The three aspects of re-creation I have chosen to focus on are essential components of the difference between performance ethnography and traditional ethnography. As such, they represent the main reasons anthropologists expect performance to transform their research.

Accessing Knowledge

Each discipline has a particular relationship with knowledge, shaped by its history and epistemological approach. As a social science, anthropology has focused on descriptive and archival work, using research to expand what we know about people and to preserve cultural artefacts. This approach has been critiqued extensively as a reproduction of a colonial, Eurocentric perspective. For instance, Kathleen Stewart recognizes that

While [modernist critique] enjoined the anthropologist to specify, and guard against, his or her own ethnocentrism, it also charged him or her with the task of illuminating a total field of data under observation (Strathern 1987b)... The constant, ritual decontamination of the anthropologist’s own ethnocentrism through

self-conscious relativism and systematic data collection legitimated the anthropologist's critical role as a model builder (and a model world citizen). (1998: 25)

The methods of data collection and observation maintain a pretense of objectivity and center the beliefs of the anthropologist, who represents Western thought. By modeling itself after science, anthropology adopts the framework of uncovering the "truth" of the world. This situates the researcher above their informants and their audience, as the ultimate interpreter of reality. But the influence of the humanities, particularly literature and theatre, have changed this dynamic. In Norman Denzin's book *Performance Ethnography: Critical Pedagogy and the Politics of Culture*, he acknowledges the influence the "narrative turn" in anthropology had on performance ethnography (Denzin 2003: 27). This phenomenon of the 1980's shifted the focus of ethnography from cataloguing and analyzing different cultures, to reflexive attention to the writing itself. The narrative turn brought with it an understanding of performance "as a methodology" (28). More broadly, it made anthropology as a whole concerned with how aesthetic structures shape our interpretation and presentation of data. In addition to theatre giving participants access to emotional and physical understanding, it taps into a personal, experiential world which represents a kind of knowledge often unappreciated. The development of performance-based research comes out of this line of thinking, that performance constitutes knowing on another level, and that it makes research more accessible to participants.

Conrad uses performance ethnography because this method of investigation is better fitted to how we experience the social world. Performance allows participants to represent their knowledge about the way people act directly, rather than having to explain it. As she points out, "knowledge of culture or social life is performative rather than informative" (Conrad 2004: 16). In the social world, action comes before thoughts, and therefore we "know" things through

acting. Using performance, participants can convey their knowledge of their community regardless of their experience communicating that knowledge in technical terms. Creating knowledge through performance is political because it allows the subaltern to speak. In addition to expressing their stories in a more holistic way, using performance means participants can also decide how to depict them, just as an anthropologist would. This gives participants the ability to analyze and interpret the “data” of the scenes, and decide for themselves what is most important. In Madison’s review of Dwight Conquergood’s article “Rethinking Ethnography,” she says,

If embodied practices and borderlands are the hallmarks of ethnographic inquiry then performance becomes both a method and an ethical principle. Performance demands that the researcher’s body must be coterminally present and active in a dialogical meeting with the Other—this is co-performance. (Madison 2006: 349).

Conquergood’s idea of “co-performance” underlines the collaborative and affective form of research which arises through acting. Madison’s explanation of this idea demonstrates the inherent redefinition of the relationship between subject and researcher in the “dialogical” act of performing.

Conquergood dedicated much of his work to recognizing how the unique advantages of performance could improve research in anthropology. After living through a dramatic transformation of the discipline, he was passionate about engaged research which was directly applicable to the populations anthropologists studied. Conrad says, “For Dwight Conquergood, performance was an ethical act; it addressed the crisis of representation by offering an embodied, empathic way of knowing and of deeply sensing the other.” (Conrad 2008: 2) Performing involves taking on a character and learning what they are feeling. It forces the actor to use their own experiences to understand a situation they may never have been in before, developing an empathetic connection between themselves and the “other”. Like reading a good novel,

performing opens up a world where the distance between self and other can be crossed with shared experiences and empathy.

By using performance as research, anthropologists hope to integrate observation and description with emotional, embodied perspectives. Denzin (2003) dedicates his book to this creation of an ethnographic, performative, political methodology. As he says, “I advance a critical performative pedagogy that turns the ethnographic into the performative and the performative into the political” (xiii). By using performance as ethnography, he hopes to transform what anthropological research is capable of. This transformation starts with the method of collaborative, critical performance.

Collaborative Research

Asking participants to act affords them a much larger role in the research, even if they do not take part in the final presentation. Using re-creation to work through social dynamics means the findings depend on the way participants play with their understanding of relevant events. Unlike other forms of ethnography, participants can decide, to some extent, how they want the story to go. As Denzin says,

Performance ethnography simultaneously creates and enacts moral texts that move from the personal to the political, from the local to the historical and the cultural. As Conquergood (1985) observes, these dialogic works create spaces for give-and-take, doing more than turning the other into the object of a voyeuristic, fetishistic, custodial, or paternalistic gaze. (Denzin 2003: x)

The exploitative history of anthropology makes present-day ethnographers especially cautious about their relationship with their subjects. The voyeurism and paternalism in social science which Denzin references are the vestiges of the discipline’s role as the investigative arm of the colonial empire. Modern anthropology is practically a different discipline than its earliest

iteration, thanks to the work of visionary critics such as Abu-Lughod (1991) and Gupta and Ferguson (1992). However, it reproduces the same dynamics where the researcher is the person who ultimately decides what is true, while the populations they study are observed and described. As Conquergood, Denzin, and others demonstrate, this is not just a condition of ethnography, but a consequence of the hierarchy between different forms of knowledge, and who has access to them.

Performance affects the relationship between researcher and their “subjects” because engaging more with the process of research gives participants a better understanding of what they are consenting to. The process of performance ethnography usually involves much clearer boundaries between the researcher’s role as an expert and their role as a member of the community they are working with. As a result, participants have more agency about whether to be involved in the research and to actively consent to how their stories are interpreted when they work with theatrical methods.

In ethnography, the consent and participation of the population being researched is always a major concern. During the course of ethnographic fieldwork, it is difficult to maintain boundaries between research and personal relationships. There are no clear differences between “official” research and the ethnographer’s personal experiences, as evidenced by the method of “participant observation” which basically consists of experiencing something and then writing about it. Lines are blurred between “interviews” and casual conversations which take place in the course of living alongside each other. As anthropologists seek to become integrated into the community they are studying, they may even purposefully obscure the difference between personal interactions and researcher-subject encounters. In order to get a more “authentic” view of how the population behaves, anthropologists typically want to blend in as much as possible,

essentially gaining their participants' trust in order to get better results. This threatens the agency of participants to consent to what they are revealing to the ethnographer in their role as a researcher, and what stays between them outside of that context. When the anthropologist presents their research, it benefits them to include anything interesting they experienced in the field, regardless of how they came about it.

In contrast, methods involving performance require much more discrete participation. When participants engage in re-creation, they are actively taking part in the process of research, and often control which topics are addressed, and even which are prioritized. Even if they interact with the anthropologist casually outside of the project, there are very clear lines between which of their stories are being staged as part of the ethnography, and which are private. Although fieldwork may cover uncomfortable material, participants remain conscious of their consent to the research because of the constructed environment. This is one reason performance gives participants more agency in their role, and a potential solution to some of the ethical dilemmas of ethnography.

In performance ethnography, participants can also help decide whether the research is truly representative of their community and themselves. Sallis (2014) took advantage of this by asking his participants to give feedback about the script he created using their words. Because the high school students he was working with were involved in the process of staging the performance, he had to check in about whether they felt the play represented their "characters" well. He found that their input about the script provided even more insight into their social world. For instance, Sallis had conversations with individual participants about how they wanted to be perceived, the background for why they acted a certain way, and their feelings about consolidating multiple real people into one character for simplicity's sake. He refers to these

conversations, which occur outside of the performance space, as “dramaturgical discussions” (318). Sallis’s understanding of the social dynamics in the high school, and his creative process of writing and directing the ethnography, were informed by these discussions. Reflecting on this experience, Sallis says, “A major finding of the project was that when the participants worked with me to develop my ethnographic performance, new data emerged that were mutually beneficial and which may not have surfaced had I created it without the direct input of the informants.” (317). Ultimately, he decided to include some of these conversations he had with participants about the original material, and his interpretation of it, in the final version of his ethnodrama. Sallis’s choice to incorporate his informants’ input about the ethnography into the final product means their perspective on the social roles they are performing are heard. He views the his participants’ influence as beneficial to the ethnographic product.

Despite these positive interventions, performance ethnography does not directly disrupt the power of the anthropologist. The collaboration between participants and researcher is formed by the researcher inviting their subjects into their work. Depending on the ethnographic performance, participants’ contributions may be more or less significant. These limitations are not necessarily debilitating. In fact, there are risks in a population having unregulated influence in performance ethnography, which I will address in the section on the limitations of performance ethnography.

In the following section, I will explore how performance ethnography can create change within individuals who are involved in the project. I want to be clear, however, that the transformation which performance encourages on some occasions does not represent a disruption of power on a larger scale. Much as anthropologists may want to, they cannot escape their position as experts whose are part of an elite group of knowledge producers. Ignoring this does

not lead to good anthropology or good activism, but recognizing its power allows researchers to produce ethical work within the limitations of their positionality.

Acting Differently

Re-creation, as the central mechanism of performance, encourages participants to take an active part in the story they are telling about their experiences, and to change it. Conrad (2004) argues that the participatory process allows those involved to “solve their own problems” because of the way exercises are structured to work through the issues participants bring up. Participants can literally change the script of social interactions to depict what could be different.. Dennis (2009) claims that “The main purpose of critical research is not to reproduce, depict, or represent the life of a community for outsiders as if taking a photograph (Korth, 2005) but, rather, to engage with and understand the life perspectives of a community for its own sake and the benefits of others.” (70). Performance as research, she argues, gets at a more immediate purpose than just that of representation. In fact, “using theater as ethnography blurs the line between what is and what could be; in others words, between what is and what ought to be” (Dennis 2009: 70).

For many performance ethnographers, encouraging their participants to change their attitudes or behavior is a main aspect of their research design. When discussing their methods, researchers state plainly that they hope to bring about this kind of reflection and social change through their work. Dennis explains that this activist effort can be incorporated into the aims of an ethnographic project. She says that “[ethnographic] research goals can be broadened and in just such a way as to include consciousness raising, critical reflection, and explorations into the way things could be (Korth, 2002), including what research might be (Fine, 2006)” (69). These research goals fundamentally change the purpose of anthropology and the anthropologist’s

position towards participants and their work. This is part of a larger trend across disciplines towards research that primarily focuses on fixing social problems. In their book *Participatory Action Research*, Lawson et al. describe this branch of research as “a special kind of social work practice characterized by simultaneous knowledge generation and progressive problem-solving as groups of researchers engage in the social construction of reality” (Lawson et al. 2015: 3). This vein of social science sees immediate outcomes for communities in need of support as the most important product of research.

The goal for participants to have a transformative experience through theatre comes close to Boal’s original intent for his methods. Designing theatre for “the oppressed” to him meant giving them tools to effect their material situation and how they perceive the world. Theatre of the Oppressed challenges actors to analyze what is going on in a scene, and if they don’t like it, to try to affect it. Facilitators ask participants to step in and try out different roles, and to see if they can get other characters to act differently. Österlind (2008) points out that this technique is designed to educate the participant about everyday actions, and connects Boal’s vision of transformative theatre to Bourdieu’s concept of habitus. This term encompasses the culturally specific social roles people perform as well as the actions and beliefs that make up those roles. Bourdieu’s work on habitus connects an individual’s social performance with their internalized acceptance of the way things are (Österlind 2008: 73). Without these attitudes being conscious, it is very difficult to affect them. Because acting accesses a more embodied and instinctual kind of knowledge, it may reveal participants’ habitus, when a discussion or lecture might not. The pedagogy of performance operates on this level of action and reaction as opposed to clarified thought.

Participants may be more willing to engage in this critical process because the method of re-creation offers distance from the subjects of the scene. While performing connects the actor to a character with empathy, there is also a clear distinction between this character and themselves. This allows the performer to examine the scene from a distance, while having “insider” information about what motivates the characters’ actions. This removal from and simultaneous investment in the scene changes the participants’ relationship to the story they are telling. For instance, a scene which involves one character insulting another, which one of the participants described from their own experience, has very personal feelings and judgements attached to it. By describing the subjects depicted in the scene as “characters,” they lose their connection with one particular participant, and become a figure everyone can relate to. The “antagonist” who insults someone is also made sympathetic through this distance. Participants who might agree with the antagonist are strongly implicated because it should become clear through the course of the exercise that the antagonist’s actions are wrong. However, everyone involved is granted the space to reflect on how their beliefs or actions might be similar to the negative example in the scene. Participants have a chance to learn from watching the action with this critical distance. Their understanding that their depiction is a re-creation, both a version of and separate from reality, is key to this difference.

The ability to shape the narrative of an ethnography is a radical departure from traditional boundaries between informant and storyteller which has complex consequences. According to traditional ethics of research in the social sciences, anthropologists should change as little as possible in the communities they work with. This is based on the outdated assumption that the population being researched has a “natural” state in the first place, and contact with the researcher will contaminate their unaffected way of life. Anthropologists going into the field now

expect to have a mutual impact on their participants through their daily social interactions and the relationships formed between them. However, it is quite presumptuous of an anthropologist to embark on a research project with the agenda of liberating the community they're joining. Most researchers who use performance are more self-aware than to expect this. But the trend of research focused on having an immediate impact on the community necessitates reflection on what the unintended or harmful consequences of this development could be.

IV. The Limitations of Performance Ethnography

While some are in favor of expanding the category of ethnography to include a more interactive, critical approach, Ingold (2013) makes a case for sticking to the strict definition of ethnography, "describing people." His reasoning is interestingly similar to the performance studies approach.

While Ingold does not advocate expanding the category of ethnography, he argues that anthropology is more than traditional academic research. Ingold wants to get away from the conflation of anthropology with ethnography and work against the dominant epistemological claim "of the academy to deliver an authoritative account of how the world works..."(2). Like anthropologists in performance studies, he proposes that real anthropological research goes beyond recording the differences between cultures, and involves a process of experiential learning which is embodied and individual. In order to distinguish between anthropological inquiry and the specific process of ethnographic research, Ingold argues that ethnography is exclusively descriptive in its purpose. He uses this strict definition to counteract the erosion between the practice of ethnography and anthropology as a whole. Ingold worries that

...the speculative ambition of anthropology has been persistently compromised by its surrender to an academic model of knowledge production according to which lessons learned through observation and practical participation are recast as empirical material for subsequent interpretation. In this one, fateful move, not only

is anthropology collapsed into ethnography, but the entire relation between knowing and being is turned inside out. Lessons in life become ‘qualitative data’, to be analysed in terms of an exogenous body of theory. (4)

Ironically, Ingold uses the importance of alternative modes of knowledge as evidence supporting a stricter definition of ethnography. From his point of view, ethnography is ultimately a method of gathering data, and attempting to redefine “data” to include affective responses increases the importance of ethnography and confines anthropology to a single practice. In contrast to performance ethnographers, he does not want ethnography to envelop all forms of research. His solution to the dominance of an academic form of knowledge is to limit ethnography itself to the area of description, and acknowledge the vast possibilities for anthropological research and methods outside of ethnography, including performance. Ingold says, “Anthropology is studying with and learning from; it is carried forward in a process of life, and effects transformations within that process. Ethnography is a study of and learning about, its enduring products are recollective accounts which serve a documentary purpose.” (2).

Although Ingold is not directly in conversation with theorists in performance studies, his recommendation for ethnography presents a challenge to researchers who expand the category of ethnography with experimental new methods. His belief that ethnography should remain discrete raises the question of what performance ethnography is really capable of doing. Ingold answers this himself with the literal translation of the word: “description of the people”. He prefaces this definition with the defense that “... there is nothing ‘mere’ about descriptive documentation. Ethnographic work is complex and demanding. It may even be transformational in its effects upon the ethnographer. These are side effects, however, and are incidental to its documentary purpose.” (3) Like performance ethnographers, Ingold doesn’t believe description is what anthropology as a whole should focus on. He understands that representation and collaboration

are not truly separable. However, he criticizes ethnography with broad aims such as transforming the subject and changing the anthropologist's relationship to their work. Instead of combining fieldwork, observation, analysis, and social critique through performance, perhaps these things are best left separate.

The elegance of Ingold's simple definition of ethnography is compelling. Seeing transformation or the development of contradictory narratives as "side effects" of ethnographic description makes this expansive practice much more manageable. Narrowing the scope of what counts as "research" and "data" may even increase an appreciation for other kinds of anthropological inquiry. After all, calling re-creations "data" betrays a bias towards objective observation which reinforces the marginalization of embodied and emotional knowledge. By claiming that anthropology as a discipline is against the idea that knowledge is inherently textual, Ingold supports the development of research in other media, though he may wish it were not automatically termed "ethnography".

Performance ethnography attempts to integrate activism, creative expression, and anthropological insights seamlessly. Using this art form for anthropological study may encourage researchers to attempt too much at once. Some of the aims of activist research are incongruous with the positionality of an anthropologist and the methods of applied theatre. From an anthropologist's point of view, creating a social theatre offers an exciting opportunity to do research in a different way. But applied theatre is meant to be directed, analyzed, and used by "the oppressed". In contrast, the means of ethnographic production ultimately lie in the hands of the anthropologist, even in the case of performance ethnography. Ingold makes it clear that ethnography is a method of research, the purpose of which is ultimately observation and learning rather than resistance.

The following are examples of struggles, disappointments, or limitations which ethnographers have encountered in their experience using performance ethnography. These examples confirm my belief that performance ethnography attempts to be too many things at once. As Dennis notes, “the movement toward participatory action research seeks to engage participants in research (not conduct research on participants) toward their own goals, lives, and social transformations (Fals-Borda, 1987; McTaggart, 1997)” (Dennis 2009: 71). Engaging participants with their own experiences is exactly what performance ethnography is made to do. However, working towards “social transformations” through an ethnographic project is not necessarily possible. Anthropology is often geared towards social change in the abstract, but participatory action research reframes the priorities of research so that change is the central point, and research is secondary. In some ways, this is closer to the original intent of Theatre of the Oppressed. However, for ethnographers, focusing on perceptible, outward change in a community distracts from more feasible goals, and puts pressure on the participants to transform within a short timeframe.

With these considerations about observable versus long-term impacts, it’s unclear how to measure the “performance” of ethnography in the sense of whether it’s effective or not. Etherton and Prentki (2006) address this question extensively, focusing especially on research conducted in conjunction with international aid organizations. In these cases, as in many where funding relies on proven results, the impact of the project must be immediately observable. This presents a serious limitation for researchers who hope to provide deeper solutions than “a short term fix” (140). Among the many consequences this may have for applied theatre projects, Etherton and Prentki worry that searching for immediate impact encourages ethnographers to focus on the changes they expect or want to see, while ignoring unintended consequences of their work. This

could be especially dangerous when researchers are using methods explicitly designed to make their participants question their role in society and fight back against their oppression. Because researchers are coming from outside the population, they are not in a position to lead their informants in how to act. They may have a narrow or skewed view of what the population's biggest concerns really are. As Etherton and Prentki point out, "The very notion of impact is not free of judgments concerning political systems and values." (141). As with all forms of anthropology, researchers conducting performance ethnography bring these values into the field with them. Participatory theatre works best when participants' experiences are centered, and they have the ability to define what is significant and helpful for them. Researchers' ability to serve the population they're working with decreases the more they have an agenda of their own. This is why seeking to create change in a very specific way actually hinders the performance ethnography from being authentically helpful to the participants.

Another factor which effects the intended impact of a study is the population a researcher chooses to focus on. For performance ethnography, this is particularly significant, since many projects have the goal of empowering or enlightening the people they work with. According to Etherton and Prentki, most applied theatre projects focus on working with "victims" or people who have suffered trauma, marginalization, or oppression. They argue that this preference among social workers to work with the most vulnerable populations is due in part to the pressure to identify a specific impact. Etherton and Prentki point out the insidious truth that "Careful selection of a marginalised 'target' is likely to yield immediate results in terms of instant impact upon the psyches of participants." (2006: 145). While it may produce a satisfying result immediately, trying to transform the least powerful population might not be an effective way to change an oppressive system. In some circumstances, the gap in life experiences between

researcher and participants could negatively affect the outcome of the project. When researchers have the ambitious aim of fixing a social issue which participants have dealt with their whole lives, they can end up with misunderstandings or unintended consequences (Etherton and Prentki 2006: 148). As outside researchers, performance ethnographers may end up imposing their own idea of what is empowering, instead of letting their participants lead. This was the case when Dani Snyder-Young worked with predominantly non-white students in a high school in Baltimore, exploring the issues they faced at school and in social relationships (Snyder-Young 2011).

In this project, Snyder-Young's priorities did not always match those of her participants. Going into the project, she held expectations for what she wanted the students to take away from the experience. In her article, Snyder-Young argues that the main problem with this performance ethnography came from the pervasive conservative values in popular opinion which she was unable to contend with due to her limitations as an outsider (30). She reaches this conclusion based on the students' inability to critically examine the notion that "A man stands up for his woman" (30). From her point of view, the fact that the students she's working with actively support this statement, even when she challenges it, shows the limitations of performance ethnography in its reliance on public opinion. She uses this example as evidence that popular theatre sourced by the general public may not advance progressive values. Snyder-Young struggles with the control her participants have over the scene in question, which plays out differently than she would have liked.

On a surface level this is a classic example of what might "go wrong" when participants become co-narrators of an ethnography. Asking participants to decide how a scene should turn out opens up many different interpretations, and there will be disagreement about what is really

going on in the scene. It's possible that oppressive relationships *within* the group of participants will be maintained during the process. Ideally, this disagreement would be an opportunity for participants to share their feelings about what the actions of each character implies, and why going one way or another with the scene might make them uncomfortable. However, because she is seemingly the only person who disagrees with the rule that "a man stands up for his woman" in the group, and she does not wish to overly influence their interpretation of their own experiences, Snyder-Young doesn't feel able to have an honest discussion with the students about why she wanted the scene to go a different way. Without having that conversation, it's impossible to say if the disagreement she has with the students really stems from conservative values and popular opinions, or if she is misunderstanding.

Snyder-Young's imposition of her own interpretation of the scene presents two limitations of participatory theatre projects. The first, which she writes about, is the possibility for the analysis of participants to remain superficial and fail to address problematic attitudes which are upheld by the group as a whole. Once consensus is reached among participants about the direction they want a scene to go, their representation of reality rules. The second hazard is the potential of the researcher to overly influence the way the scene is acted out. When anthropologists actively seek to change the narratives presented by their participants through recreation and collaborative analysis, they have an increased responsibility to understand what the participants are really saying, and interrogate their own interpretations of "the problem" presented in the scene. If Snyder-Young had asked her participants why they felt young men have a responsibility to stand up for "their" women, she may have learned more about how gender dynamics and heterosexual expectations function for high school students of color with intersecting marginalized identities. These two limitations together demonstrate the tedious

balancing act between centering and challenging participant's experiences through participatory theatre.

In their chapter on ethical dilemmas in performance ethnography, Mienczakowski and Moore (2008) show that re-creation is not unequivocally beneficial for participants. In some cases, participants representing themselves can be harmful or even dangerous. For the purposes of educating a powerful audience, they recommend negotiating the balance between authenticity and the dignity of informants carefully. This is especially important for projects which use participants in the study as actors for the presentation of the work, since this affords little to no anonymity. Though the scenes depicted may not be exact recreations of events, they represent the feelings and thoughts of those on stage and can be very revealing. This can create a dynamic where participants perform painful and personal moments to educate an audience that doesn't respect their privacy or autonomy. To protect their participants from public scrutiny and re-traumatization, Mienczakowski and Moore never use actors who have personally struggled with the same issues they write about. In their method, patients' experiences with mental illness are used to create an ethnographic performance text which is then performed for an audience of healthcare professionals and interested public by trained actors. They reason that participants stand a risk of being further marginalized by performing the roles which they hold in real life (2008: 455). Their article offers an important critique of participatory theatre projects which ask participants to perform their personal story for crowds of people in order to educate others about their personal issues.

If the ethnography will eventually be performed, anthropologists should think seriously about who the audience will be, how the participants are depicted (whether they themselves are onstage or not), and what the appropriate level of involvement of the participants is. To ensure

the outcome of this performance is positive, Mienczakowski and Moore also recommend that researchers “Overtly choose data that reveal themes that are positive and full of hope for the future rather than dwelling too much on despair.” (456). This recommendations reveals some of the tensions in performance ethnography between representing the research with integrity and effectively inciting change.

When those in power control the representation of events, the re-creation of performance ethnography has the danger of becoming a revision of reality. Re-creation stems from an oppressed population’s re-imagining of the world, but it can be co-opted to enforce the narrative of the dominant class. In these cases, performance projects do not even have the pretense of equal power dynamics between actors. One example observed by Clark and Mangham (2004) involved a company performance put on by and for employees, intended to open up conversations about problems in the workplace. Unfortunately, this company-sponsored project was not constructed to gather genuine feedback and involvement from the labor force, but rather presented a type of hands-on training for increased efficiency. Clark and Mangham’s analysis is that

The plots [of these dramas]... are not focused on first-order structural change, but rather, second-order issues such as communication. The prescriptions for future success contained within these plays are not about the subversion or redesign of the hierarchy, but rather, its maintenance and lubrication through improved communication practices... (Clark and Mangham 2004, 848)

These performances took the format of Forum Theatre, a form of Theatre of the Oppressed in which audience members are invited to replace one of the original actors to experiment with their character’s role in the scene. This is one way for the audience to change the outcome of the character’s actions, as well as gain understanding about the motivations and strategies of the character they choose to embody. But when the actors asked for volunteers from

the audience, there was little interest from the employees (845). It was clear that their honest input, whatever it may be, was not the point of the exercise.

This use of Forum Theatre is in direct opposition to Boal's intentions for TO as an anti-oppression training tool. "Organization theatre," used by corporations, is a genre which coopts his methods to increase productivity and obedience in employees. The authors include an eviscerating quote from Boal's response to one of these organizations when asked for his presence:

'Please understand me. Theatre of the oppressed is theatre of the oppressed, for the oppressed and by the oppressed. I know that social and labour conditions in Brazil and in Europe are very very different, so it is difficult for me to imagine what words like managers, executives, business etc. really mean to you. I know what they mean to me.' (849)

There is no doubt that this use of participatory theatre is contrary to the very function which most ethnographers value in the discipline. However, I include this example to demonstrate the potential for re-creation to promote domination and exploitation just as efficiently as it can deconstruct them. A representation is a powerful product which must be constructed with care. If the narrative of a scene is controlled by those in power, the plot can be manipulated towards the oppressor's version of the truth. This outcome is more likely when participatory theatre is not used for and by the oppressed. The impulse to use performance to educate and transform the oppressors, as Mienczakowski and Moore do in their work with healthcare professionals (2008), is modeled on a typical social science contribution towards a more just world through increased understanding. However, the embodiment of the oppressed by the oppressors is tricky territory which could easily lead to cooptation and domination of their narrative.

This domination of the narrative by those already in power can happen less intentionally, if the audience for a performance isn't sympathetic to the message of the ethnography. Hamel (2013) was disappointed by her attempt to use participatory theatre to teach the attendees of a city council meeting about the challenges faced by the homeless population. Leading up to the performance, Hamel helped lead rehearsals with homeless participants, Theatre of the Oppressed practitioners, and professional actors. These rehearsals were intended to develop scenes from the homeless participants' perspective, but the researchers focused on understanding the point of view of their oppressors, such as cops, business owners, and tourists (406). Hamel interprets this focus away from the homeless participants' experiences as an intentional preparation for the city council meeting, which would be populated by real people with these more powerful roles, whom the researchers did not wish to alienate. Ultimately, when the attendees of this city council meeting had the chance to change the scenes to reflect their own experience, the homeless characters were marginalized or even represented as antagonists. Hamel writes,

The audience turned the tables around as they appropriated the narratives of the oppressed towards themselves: shop owners and residents depicted themselves as oppressed by aggressive solicitation and by overall anti-social behaviours of their homeless neighbours who were portrayed as responsible for their own life conditions, thereby justifying the right to indifference claimed by some of the domiciled. (Hamel 2013: 413)

In this case, re-creation offered an opportunity for the oppressors to contest the narrative of the oppressed in the space of a public forum where they were dominant. The attempt of the project leaders to inspire empathy for the homeless backfired when participatory theatre was used in a direct confrontation between the oppressors and the oppressed.

Though performing the experiences of the oppressed in front of the oppressors may sometimes work to inspire empathy and consideration, it is best to control a direct confrontation like this carefully in order to avoid the harm victims face through re-marginalization. Measures

to mitigate this harm could include diminishing the input of voices other than the participants (i.e. oppressors are not asked for their opinion or input about their experiences) or that the invited audience and actors otherwise live in close community with each other and have already established trust. For instance, a study about women's marginalization in the education system, performed for a sympathetic schoolboard seeking to increase inclusivity, might be successful because the performers and audience are already mostly on the same page. It also helps for the stakes of the play to be relatively low: when Mienczakowski and Moore use performance to educate those in power, they focus on specific issues such as healthcare practices, as opposed to the survival struggles of homeless people in the face of extreme persecution. Participatory theatre should not attempt to reconcile a marginalized population with the "well-meaning" oppressors when the structure of oppression is ongoing.

As a whole, these limitations boil down to aspects of performance as a research method, along with anthropologists' ambitions for it to be so much more than that. But these consequences of using performance for ethnography are not necessarily bad. In the creation of an ethnography, the researcher's perspective will naturally be more prominent, even with a more collaborative process. It's okay for the researcher to influence the population they're working with, or for the product of an ethnography to be educational instead of transformational. Performance ethnography works best when these limitations are recognized and accepted. In each of these examples, the authors contributed valuable work to their field, but may have gone too far by expecting to affect their participants deeply.

Dennis's experience with grade school teachers in the US Midwest provides a positive example of the work participatory theatre can realistically begin to do (2009). Working as part of a larger extended project about the education of English-language learners (ELs) in public

schools, she conducted a modest one-day workshop using Theatre of the Oppressed methods as part of a staff development day. Using a script comprised of her interviews with English-learning students, she first introduced the topic with a short play (read, not fully staged) and then asked the teachers to re-create one scene from the play in breakout sessions (73). She worked with two sets of twelve teachers who voluntarily came to these sessions as part of their day. The teachers took turns portraying the bullies, EL students, and teacher in the scene, discussing how they felt as the characters and changing how the characters reacted as the exercise progressed. Although this activity may not have deeply affected every participant, it provided the teachers with a way of understanding the experiences of their EL students more, reflecting on their role as teachers, and developing strategies to handle bullying outside of the classroom.

In this context, Dennis was careful to control the discussion of what EL students were experiencing. Most of the teachers did not start out sympathetic to the EL students, professing beliefs that these students didn't belong at their school and shouldn't be in America if they didn't speak English well enough (79). Knowing this was the pervasive attitude, Dennis did not give the general assembly of teachers the opportunity to respond to the initial, longer performance. Later, they re-created a very short scene with one central conflict and only a few lines of dialogue. This gave the teachers the opportunity to try many iterations of the scene, changing their interpretation of what was going on and how their character's response could be improved each time. Because this exercise was conducted with a group of peers, they were relatively free to experiment with their honest responses without being inhibited by negative consequences for their ideas. Dennis challenged the participants' negative attitudes about EL students while keeping an open mind about how their own experiences might inform the group about how the scene could evolve. Finally, while Dennis asked the teachers to interpret and analyze the scene

with her, she ultimately treated the workshops and each of the re-creations as data about the teachers' perspectives which she further interpreted in her final product. This created a barrier between participants' ideas and Dennis's analysis of the study, which would have been consolidated if the performance was presented with the teachers. This project had its own ethical dilemmas and conflicting aims, but the positive (though modest) outcome Dennis perceived proves that performance ethnography can be transformative for oppressors as well, when it is well-designed.

V. Beyond Ethnography

In their eagerness to focus on the impact of their work, ethnographers tend to over-emphasize the merits of representation. While taking control of the story may be powerful for participants, and can improve ethnography, there is a limit to what stories can do. One danger of flattening the experience of participants to focus on the transformative power of their stories, as opposed to what their experiences mean to them, is mistaking social inclusion of marginalized populations for deeper social change. Etherton and Prentki state that "Today, much of the applied theatre work with vulnerable or marginalised sectors of UK society carries with it the overt or covert aim of social inclusion... It is much rarer for any assessment to be made about whether the marginal group has made any impact upon attitudes or behaviour in so-called mainstream society." (2006: 148). Representation may get people thinking about the oppressed in a way they haven't before, but it won't necessarily spur social change which is inconvenient to the oppressors. Beyond the realm of research, representation must be complemented by resistance that challenges the authority of those in power in order for structural change to occur. If ethnographers over-emphasize the power of stories or the importance of audience's reactions to

their research, it may be harmful to the participants' focus on their own transformation and what they've learned about the world they live in, which may not coincide with what a removed audience takes away.

That being said, participants in performance ethnography may well contribute more than they learn. The spirit of performance ethnography, tracing back to Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, acknowledges the superior understanding that participants already have of their lives. The goal of performance is to bring this out, and the researcher is primarily the one learning from this experience. While this process can help participants articulate and recognize what they know in different ways, it would be truly ignorant to assume that a project in applied theatre will educate marginalized participants about issues of which they were unaware. Conquergood (2002) offers a valuable perspective on the relationship which oppressed people may already have with performance in their daily lives. He says,

Dominant epistemologies that link knowing with seeing are not attuned to meanings that are masked, camouflaged, indirect, embedded, or hidden in context. The visual/verbal bias of Western regimes of knowledge blinds researchers to meanings that are expressed forcefully through intonation, silence, body tension, arched eyebrows, blank stares, and other protective arts of disguise and secrecy—what de Certeau called “the elocutionary experience of a fugitive communication” (2000:133; see Conquergood 2000). Subordinate people do not have the privilege of explicitness, the luxury of transparency, the presumptive norm of clear and direct communication, free and open debate on a level playing field that the privileged classes take for granted. (2002: 146)

Performance ethnography is intended to draw out these meanings, give attention to these subtexts, and allow them to be developed in the language they were written in. Researchers will benefit from remembering that their discovery of the meaning behind these moments follows that of their participants and is a mimicry of the original, a rough translation which cannot carry all of the same weight.

Examining the significance of quotidian gestures further may be completely undesirable for some populations. These subtextual communications provide a protective cloak for marginalized communities to express themselves without their full understanding being detected. As Conquergood says, “Oppressed people everywhere must watch their backs, cover their tracks, suck up their feelings, and veil their meanings.” (2002: 148). In this context, asking participants to explore how power dynamics affect their actions is no small favor. Even for those who are not quite consciously aware of the varied meanings conveyed by their socialized expression, diving into these implications can be upsetting or even dangerous. Participants from oppressed populations may be forced to dwell on the extensive restriction of their expression, or confront the pervasive effects of oppression in their relationships and communication. This illuminates the amount of labor and trust ethnographers ask people to contribute to their research. The increased participation and investment which performance requires, which gives subjects more agency to tell their story, also increases what is being asked of them.

James C. Scott has written a whole book on this other side of theatre, the intentional obfuscation of power dynamics and subordinate knowledge (Scott 1992). One of his main arguments is that “What may look from above like the extraction of a required performance can easily look from below like the artful manipulation of deference and flattery to achieve its own ends.” (34) Scott’s interpretation reads resistance into performance in a whole new way. He depicts the *habitus* of oppressors and the oppressed as laden with intention and manipulation. This theory enlivens the social scene, making everything teem with double meanings. He argues that both the dominant and subordinate populations have “hidden transcripts” which reveal more of their true feelings. These come out when individuals from these groups are isolated, but opposite views are professed in the public sphere. The hidden transcripts of the oppressed reveal

extreme hatred for their oppressors, while the hidden transcript of the oppressors demonstrate barely successful attempts to convince themselves that they deserve their dominance and to assert their continued control.

The concept of hidden transcripts helps put performance ethnography in context, and demonstrates the limitations of representation. If private hatred and mocking of the oppressors serve as relief for marginalized communities, there is only so much that divulging the personal experience of their daily lives can do towards transforming social interactions. Anthropologists may be able to shed light on power dynamics or validate the experience of the oppressed. However, they should recognize that a performance of subjugation may serve as an intentional capitulation to power for the marginalized population. Ethnographers should be wary of challenging what they see as internalized oppression, and work towards the goals of the oppressed, rather than attempting to explain their situation to them or attack coping strategies which make use of “artful manipulation” of the dominant narrative. Underestimating the agency oppressed populations already have makes for bad anthropology. Performance ethnographies can explore paths to change through a collaborative examination by participants and researchers about their positions in society. For this change to happen, the systems of oppression must be challenged more directly. Just as Boal believed, systemic change comes not from shared goals and experiences, but from active resistance and revolution. Performance offers a direct connection between the particular knowledge of the oppressed, their strategies for refuting and re-creating the truths of their world, and what change could look like on a larger scale.

These social performances are deeply entrenched, and are not going to be solved solely with performance interventions in social science research. However, Conquergood points out that shedding light on these hidden transcripts is exactly what performance studies is poised to

do. Through an understanding of society and culture inspired by research methods from the humanities, performance ethnography can ensure that the social performance, as well as the social text, is taken seriously. Through participatory theatre, those in power or facilitating systems of power can learn to question their dominance and develop transformative empathy for the oppressed by experimenting with their own performed identity. If anthropologists are conscientious and reflexive in their work, marginalized populations may even be able to teach us more about their experiences using methods which speak volumes more than interviews.

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