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The Possibilities and Limits of Participatory Theatre: Exploring Belonging and Resistance with Second-Generation Black and Muslim Dutch Youth in the Netherlands

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Abstract

Grounded in a collaborative theatre project with Black and Muslim second-generation Dutch youth in the Netherlands, this paper critically examines the use of participatory theatre as a method of knowledge production. Drawing on vignettes from the theatre project, I investigate the possibilities and limits of theatre as an embodied research method for practicing resistance to, and fostering public dialogue about, Islamophobia and racism. I argue that theatre can be a citizenship practice by prefiguring alternate futures, rehearsing resistance to oppression, and facilitating cross-racial and public dialogue.

Keywords: *participatory theatre; racism; Islamophobia; the Netherlands; second-generation youth.*

Introduction

Second-generation Black and Muslim youth in Europe face persistent stereotypes and discrimination (De Zwart, 2012; European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, 2017, 2018). These constitute material and social barriers to belonging: while second-generation youth hold de jure (legal) citizenship, their de facto citizenship (social membership) is questioned (Arendt, 1951; Somers, 2008). Viewing citizenship as a social, political, cultural, economic, and legal construction (Marston & Mitchell, 2004), it is important to critically interrogate the construction of (shifting) boundaries of belonging as well as how belonging is formed through emotions, social membership, identity, and legal citizenship (Nagel, 2011) in a context of migration. This paper analyses theatre as an embodied research method by exploring the possibilities and limits of theatre for rupturing with everyday experiences in order to enact and foster dialogue about belonging, Islamophobia, and racism. Drawing on popular education techniques, the Theatre School of Resistance was a 14-week participatory theatre program in Rotterdam which formed part of my larger research project on belonging with second-generation Black and Muslim youth in the Netherlands. Building on stories from the Theatre School and the final public performance, I critically examine theatre's potential as a site of social change by investigating the ways in which participatory theatre alternately fosters and limits transformative social dialogue. In doing so, I argue that theatre can be a practice of citizenship in three ways: prefiguring possible futures, practicing resistance to various forms of oppression, and facilitating public and cross-racial dialogue.

Theatre as Method

There is a growing number of researchers using theatre as an arts-based method of inquiry (Cavanagh, 2013; Erel, Reynolds, & Kaptani, 2017; Gallagher, Starkman, & Rhoades, 2017;

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Johnston & Bajrange, 2013; Perry, 2012, 2017; Pratt & Johnston, 2017; Quinlan & Duggleby, 2009). Storytelling is one way of foregrounding the experiences of marginalised people and making visible underrepresented experiences. Hannah Arendt (1968) claims, "We humanise what is going on in the world and in ourselves only by speaking of it, and in the course of speaking of it we learn to be human" (p. 25). Through theatre, participants can tell the stories that matter to them, and share their knowledge with a wider audience. Stories help us make sense of the world. Sara Ahmed (2004a, 2004b), in her critical work on affect, posits that emotion does not reside within an individual, but rather circulates through encounters with 'others' or those cast outside of the social 'norm' of who belongs. Theatre and other creative arts methodologies provide a space to play with emotion and a platform for strangers to encounter each other. Reflecting on his experience creating a script with African-American inmates, Chris Hedges (2017) believes theatre speaks truth to power. Storytelling is an evocative way of connecting with each other. Telling stories based on experience is a powerful critical social location from which to speak (hooks, 1990). Theatre is an embodied art-form, as such it provides space to play with affect (Gallagher et al., 2017) and fosters encounters with others through storytelling (Sonn, Quayle, Belanji, & Baker, 2015). In his research with temporary seasonal agricultural workers in Canada from Mexico and the Caribbean, Perry (2017) demonstrates how theatre provides a unique space for exploring embodied practices and tacit or subconscious knowledge, particularly with marginalised people who are usually not deemed as 'knowers.' Researching with arts-based methodologies such as storytelling and theatre has multiple points of knowledge-creation. Not only does it tap into tacit, embodied knowledge and engage in a dynamic way with multiple audiences, as a workshop tool it allows researchers and participants to learn together and from each other, and to create knowledge in collaboration.

Research Design

Based on popular pedagogy tools and techniques developed by Augusto Boal (1979) and Paulo Freire (2002), I developed the Theatre School of Resistance in collaboration with The Seed, a Rotterdam-based creative arts organisation working with youth. The first eight weeks combined theatre games and training with interactive focus group discussions on issues around citizenship, belonging, intersectionality, and resistance. During this time, participants in the Theatre School developed and acted out their stories of oppression and resistance for each other. The Seed and I then reworked these stories into a script for public performance in the spirit of Boal's Forum Theatre. Forum Theatre breaks the 'fourth wall' – the traditional passive one-way communication with a theatre audience (Quinlan & Duggleby, 2009; Tofteng & Husted, 2011) – by inviting audience members, called 'spect-actors' in Forum Theater, to provide commentary, make suggestions regarding what they are seeing on stage, and even come up on stage themselves to try out suggestions to transform a scene of oppression. During the following five weeks, participants rehearsed the script and, in the last week, put on a public performance. The public theatre performance was filmed and turned into a short video. Additionally, I created a manual based on the Theatre School of Resistance. Both the video of the final performance and the *Manual for Educators* can be found at valeriestam.com/theatre/.

Ten young people participated in the Theatre School of Resistance. Participants ranged in age from 19 to 30 and five identified as men and five as women. Though it is difficult to ascertain class, most of my research participants could be understood as middle-class, though many of them have experienced a range of class mobility. Participants came from a wide variety of backgrounds: second-generation Angolan-, Moroccan-, Eritrean-, Cape-Verdean-, and Indian-Dutch. I define

second-generation as people who were born in the Netherlands (or arrived at an early age) and whose parents migrated from elsewhere. In addition, two male participants were bi-racial: one with a Somali mom and Dutch dad and another with a Rwandan mom and German dad. Aside from me (the researcher), there were three participants – Dutch, Ukrainian, and Bulgarian – who identified as white. In addition to audio-recording and transcribing each theatre workshop and the final performance, I interviewed all 10 theatre participants. To verify data, I collated quotes, skits, and conversations into themes and used one theatre workshop to share and collectively validate, reflect on, and expand or change these themes.

Theatre as Prefigurative Practice

As an affective artform, theatre is a powerful tool for revealing tacit knowledge and exploring concepts in community. For example, in one theatre workshop participants played with the idea of belonging in a more visceral way, thus revealing deeper insights about how belonging is created. Belonging is experienced through affect and in relation to others (Wood, 2013); Black and Muslim Dutch youth's sense of belonging is regularly contested and negotiated. In this workshop, four participants created a very powerful skit on the theme of belonging. In the skit, four people met for a meal and discussed their respective trips back 'home' to the country of their parents. During the warm and open conversation, they discover common experiences about how they were welcomed and made to feel like part of a family or community. At the end of the skit, they introduce themselves to each other, thus revealing that none of the four knew each other prior to the meal, despite the instant connection. They explained their rationale for the skit, saying:

> Thomas: Yeah, we spoke about a lot of different things. Some poets, actually. We tried to fit them in a great quote…to be…
>
> Anwar: To be an us for once instead of a them
>
> Thomas: So, we tried the us.
>
> Anwar: Us, like including everyone. Instead of a them. (Theatre workshop. May 9, 2017)[2]

Theatre as method allows for both a critique of the social world as well as the creation of new possibilities, what Ortega (2016) refers to as both a diagnostic project and a creative project. First, in creating and enacting a situation of belonging in this skit, participants demonstrated that belonging is something they can actively create. These participants intentionally created a sense of belonging through sharing experiences and telling stories instead of the typical introductions in 'Western' society about names, work, school, where you live, and where you are from. In *performing* this scenario, participants imagined and created alternative spaces and possibilities of belonging; they carried their audience with them, thus prefiguring possible futures. Second, the creation of other possibilities of belonging was facilitated by theatre as storytelling. Perry (2012) argues that theatre is a tool of decolonisation in that it employs a "…counter-discursive embodied language….for the purpose of developing counter-hegemonic stories, identities, and subjectivities" (p. 103). In this skit, participants 'try to be an us instead of a them,' thus creating space to step out of the everyday in order to critically reflect on it. Theatre ruptures with everyday life, enabling exploration of these embodied, marginal perspectives and knowledges which can provide a

[2] All names are pseudonyms.

counterpoint to commonplace or taken-for-granted knowledge, disrupt power dynamics, and prefigure alternate futures.

Theatre as Resistance

I broadly define resistance as both extra-ordinary and ordinary practices to survive and thrive in socially unjust situations.[3] Theatre is a part of the social world where real people encounter one another and provoke conversation and reflection. As "creative resilience" (Gallagher et al., 2017, p. 226) theatre can be a tool of survival and resistance. In the context of precarious or contested citizenship, declarations of citizenship are acts of resistance. Boal's concept of theatre as rehearsal for resistance became important to our group as we moved through the Theatre School and decided what kind of public conversation we wanted to host in the final performance. Faith, an Eritrean-Dutch theatre participant who identifies as an activist, suggested that Theatre of the Oppressed (TO) would be a good training ground for activists:

> [TO is able] to give people a safe place to express, but also to try new things. To try new behaviours in a safer space. Because sometimes I talk to people and they tell me, "Sometimes I see things happen and I don't know what to do." So, I think that's a good way to mobilise people. (Interview with Faith. August 7, 2017)

The final performance lasted about two hours: in the first half hour, actors performed once without interruptions; then, we transitioned to Forum Theatre where the audience was invited, facilitated by the Joker,[4] to make suggestions to the actors or to physically replace the protagonist in a scene of oppression and try out their own ideas to improve the outcome of the scene. The Joker's role is to encourage people to make suggestions or come up on stage themselves, and to facilitate subsequent conversation around what changed, why, how, and what could be done differently. Rehearsing resistance provided an opportunity to figure out what types of solidarity were effective. For example, sometimes the 'oppressors' found that they had a harder time oppressing after audience intervention. One scene – a late night talk show - depicted an Islamophobic host interviewing a Muslim rapper. After spect-actors tried different strategies on stage, including pushing back on popular stereotypes about Muslims, audience members wondered how the 'oppressor' experienced these interventions: Sayeed, the talk show host, replied:

> Sayeed: I felt kind of limited now.
>
> Spect-actor who replaced the rapper on stage: Of course, you were limited. [He nods very self-assuredly] [lots of laughter]
>
> Sayeed: I was like, shit, this is like harder for me! [laughter]
>
> The Joker: Please give these guys a hand. [Applause] (Performance. June 28, 2017)[5]

Participants felt it was powerful to know that oppressors could feel restricted or subdued or sidelined. Debriefing also fomented ideas about how privilege or one's social location could be used

[3] See Ahmed, 2017; Bayat, 2015; Johansson & Vinthagen, 2014; Lilja, Baaz, Schulz, & Vinthagen, 2017; Richter-Devroe, 2011; Sharp, Routledge, Philo, & Paddison, 2000; Staeheli, Ehrkamp, Leitner, & Nagel, 2012 for a rich discussion of ordinary and extra-ordinary practices of resistance and their entanglement with power.

[4] The Joker is a term used in Forum Theatre for the person who facilitates interaction between the audience and the actors and encourages audience involvement in the performance to change the situation in a positive way. The term 'Joker' comes from the wild card in a card game; similarly, the Joker in Forum Theatre can move between and outside the action to prompt critical reflection.

[5] This excerpt is available on the video of the final performance at valeriestam.com/theatre/. Time stamp 4:06

to influence instances of oppression. For Faith, TO represented a chance to see how privilege could be leveraged in oppressive situations. When she tried it herself, she felt limited by her own positionality as a Black woman and by how people perceived her:

> Faith: For me it was difficult because what you have in mind is different than how people perceive you and so I wanted to ask questions but I wasn't able to…I wish I could play someone that was privileged enough to get into that conversation and say something about it or ask for the manager and be in a position that people listen, but I'm not. So even if I want to pretend that I am –
>
> Thomas: That's also a feeling of powerlessness.
>
> Faith: …[T]hat's why I was asking all these questions, like "Why is he there, and why are you there?" [T]rying to understand which privileges [are] here and what do you do because to know what to do you need to know which power structure is at work. (Theatre workshop. April 25, 2017)

Theatre allowed us to step back from everyday life to discuss, analyse, and practice resisting the restrictions and constraints that operate in daily life. Theatre can act as a mirror for society. Hannah Arendt argues that storytelling "…bring[s] to light the incongruity between reality and the abstract concepts we hold" (paraphrased in Disch, 1993, p. 669). With theatre, everyday encounters can be critically analysed because theatre takes us out of daily life in order to explore what is known, make it more explicit, and (potentially) break from it. Practicing different strategies and tactics is helpful in exploring how marginalised people can tap into different sources of power and influence, as well as in giving privileged people the opportunity to explore how their privilege can be used to mitigate oppression. In this way, theatre as resistance is about practicing active citizenship and claiming *de facto* belonging in a community.

Theatre as Cross-Racial and Public Dialogue

Theatre and storytelling allow for an analysis of society *and* give insight into how we and others experience society. Maria Lugones (1987) believes in the idea of play when traveling to someone's world so "we can understand *what it is to be them and what it is to be ourselves in their eyes*" (p. 17, emphasis in original). Thinking with Arendt, storytelling invites listeners to train their imagination to go visiting (Disch, 1993) so that our own critical analysis of society or events is enriched by multiple perspectives. Cross-racial dialogue, then, can be fostered through theatre and storytelling. During each workshop, the group did a mixture of theatre games (some of which felt quite silly) and more introspective, interactive workshop activities. We designed the workshops to consecutively and intentionally build up a level of trust within the group. Not only was this important for performing; it was also important in building a strong group dynamic for safe(r) spaces where participants felt they could express themselves, disagree, and have deep and difficult conversations around race and power (Leonardo & Porter, 2010; Reynolds, 2014).

Talking about cross-racial dialogue was, of course, easier than practicing it. A vignette from one theatre workshop (May 9, 2017), reveals some of the limitations of theatre and storytelling for knowledge production and social transformation. Anneke, the only white Dutch participant in the theatre program, gave a skit on her experiences as a teacher where she confuses the names of the two Asian boys in her class. After her performance, which was well received, many people in the group said they identified with the experience of the two boys. Following this, Anneke felt the need to give what she called a teacher's perspective. She went on to say that she often mixed students up – not just students of colour, even blonde girls, she hastened to add – and that people should be more understanding because teachers have a lot to remember. I bring up this point not to single

Anneke out but to demonstrate how difficult it is to work through privilege and the social and cultural blinders that come with it. Anneke – though she first portrayed an instance of her own racism in the classroom – found herself 'ambushed by whiteness' (Yancy, 2008), feeling the need to defend and distance herself from allegations of racism. Other participants saw Anneke's response as indicative of a larger problem around racial dialogue in the Netherlands. In the following week of the Theatre School (May 16, 2017), we revisited Anneke's play:

> Faith: [I]n this country in general it's not really possible to talk about racism without bringing in all this other stuff. So, if you tried to talk about oppression of people of colour, there's always this other narrative that needs to be put next to it. [For example] a sketch of white people being racist against people of colour, but then, oh! We also have to put black people who are being racist to each other.
>
> Anwar: [laughs] Equated.
>
> Faith: Yeah, and then we also have to talk about women. And then we also have to [say] that we do the same with white children….
>
> Chahni: [When] discussing racism, a lot of times [if you take] a not nice subject then you make it discussable, make it comfortable to talk about it. And it leaves out the thing that it is about! (Theatre workshop. May 16, 2016)

From my perspective, the initial mood in the room was quite appreciative of Anneke's willingness to start a conversation on racism and openness to self-reflection. Had Anneke been able to acknowledge and honour the experiences of others and use this skit as an opportunity to unpack some dynamics of racism, I believe she would have found the ensuing conversation very affirming and encouraging. As it was, the atmosphere quickly became frustrated and tense. In this vignette, theatre fell short of creating bridges of cross-racial understanding and solidarity. While theatre and storytelling allow for traveling between worlds (Lugones, 1987), Mariana Ortega (2016) argues for a *critical* world-traveling and cautions against:

> …political excursions, a type of politically correct tourism—fleeting moments of experimenting with being political while not really being committed to effecting change….for members of dominant groups, world-traveling might become just that—play, a sort of game in which one learns some interesting things about the "other" but that ultimately has no real consequences for the practitioner. (p. 141)

Cross-racial dialogue necessitates putting some skin in the game. Theatre for social transformation cannot simply be about *play*; this vignette reminds us of the responsibility to act.

The final performance was held in Rotterdam *Noord* at The Seed's venue space. Over forty-five people attended. The event was posted on social media and participants invited friends and family. Audience members were primarily young people in their twenties and thirties. The audience reflected the racial diversity of the theatre participants. I was disappointed that more white Dutch people did not attend – in this sense I felt we were 'preaching to the choir' – but on another level the racial make-up of the audience allowed us to go deeper quickly. At various points, spect-actors said: "I've experienced this" or "We've all been there" or "This happened to my brother." These personal connections with the scenes being portrayed on stage demonstrated that the scenes of oppression really resonated with the audience. From personal observation, approximately seventy-five percent of the audience engaged at one point with the conversation, either through nodding or shaking their heads, speaking up, or replacing one of the actors on stage. There was a palpable energy in the room. Conversations continued in the aisles and seats for an hour and a half after the

Forum Theatre wrapped up. Both the cast and the audience were invested in their roles. Spect-actors felt comfortable sharing their opinions and disagreeing with each other. A number of people approached me and the Joker afterwards saying they would like to do something similar. The cast and the spect-actors left feeling energised and having made connections.

Though we did 'preach to the choir' at the final performance, using theatre allowed us to travel to other worlds, seeing and making sense of others' experiences through our own eyes. Forum Theatre opened up this 'visiting' by compelling an active, embodied, visceral engagement with others' stories. In this way, the tools of Theatre of the Oppressed remind us to cultivate an awareness of our own attitudes and prejudices as well as intentionality around what we invest personally and materially to the exercise of imagining and prefiguring a more socially just world.

Conclusion

Dialogue about racism and Islamophobia is important. With increasing migration and mobility and a rise in white nationalist populist movements, it is incumbent upon societies and politicians to challenge the entrenchment of racism and Islamophobia. The Theatre School of Resistance enacted, and reflected upon, conversations about what it means to work through differences of race, religion, and life experience and to resist oppression. Theatre creates breathing room for these difficult conversations.

Participatory theatre can address marginalisation and social isolation by creating a sense of community and shared experiences, and it can render visible experiences of oppression so as to explore and analyse how these power relations work in concrete situations (Erel et al., 2017). Theatre for social transformation is also one way of performing active citizenship and participating in political life (Chou, Gagnon & Pruitt, 2017; Johnston & Bajrange, 2013). There are many benefits to theatre in research: It develops aesthetic spaces which can enable practitioners to share strategies for dealing with challenging and complex situations; it furthers capacity for critical reflection; and it provides a forum for practicing skills and competencies needed to deal with inequalities in their everyday life (Kumrai, Chauhan & Hoy, 2011).

As a migration researcher, using theatre allowed for a more participatory and collaborative approach with second-generation Dutch youth, thus disrupting researcher-participant hierarchies. It provided an alternative language to discuss embodied realities and subjugated knowledges, bringing tacit knowledge to the fore. This embodied language was also helpful in practicing or rehearsing resistance to oppression and facilitating a dynamic public conversation on social justice issues. Tapping into the arts also allowed us to engage with a broader general audience in a fun and dynamic way. The Theater School was not just a fleeting moment; rather it undertook the difficult work of holding open the space to have conversations around difference and inequity. In the Theatre School of Resistance, participants were consciously and subconsciously experimenting with how to behave and interact differently in society. These kinds of conversations may influence public debates around belonging and migration.

Arts-based methodologies are not perfect. Researcher-participant hierarchies could have been further disrupted, for instance, by involving participants in the design of the weekly workshops for the theatre school. Though we aimed to challenge them, our cross-racial conversations still reflected unjust societal power dynamics at play. At times, white privilege dominated our conversations, at other times we fell short of engaging with the white Dutch public. On one level, our microcosm reflected Dutch society, including the unequal power dynamics at work; on another level, this

project held a space open to critically and collectively reflect on, and dialogue about, challenges in Dutch society.

In this article, I have sought to demonstrate that arts-based methods, specifically theatre, may have benefits for migration researchers. Theatre as a social justice research method helps to center the stories of marginalised knowers and critically think 'outside the box,' thus ultimately contributing to different forms of knowledge production and challenging power. Enactment of these conversations through theatre builds powerful connections. In the Theatre School on Resistance, Dutch youth not only practiced resistance to Islamophobia and racism, they also practiced holding conversations around these issues. Theatre as social justice dialogue undertakes difficult work of creating space for conversations around citizenship and belonging. With practice, participants start to imagine and enact alternative possibilities, thus creating different futures in conversation with others. Practicing also allows participants to rehearse resistance for real-world scenarios and increases ease with cross-racial and public dialogue on difficult topics.

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