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a continued Theatre of the Oppressed

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A Continued Theatre of the Oppressed

Tania Cañas¹

There have been calls within the Theatre of the Oppressed community for a development of a poetics of the oppressor, a form of Theatre of the Oppressor as an extension and reimagining of Theatre of the Oppressed. Such calls center on three main points: a less binary framing of oppressor-oppressed, developing allyship from the oppressor who is in a resourced position to make material structural changes, and a call towards an increased dialogue through inclusion. The article shares initial considerations when thinking about a theatre of the oppressor, looking at the potential pitfalls and risks. This piece argues for a continued centering of the oppressed as an imperative continuation of a poetics of liberation.

“Don’t ever forget, that the least fascist among the fascists are also fascists.”- Roque Dalton

“As long as there are poor, liberation will come from the poor.”- Ignacio Ellacuría

There have been calls within the Theatre of the Oppressed community for a development of a poetics of the oppressor, a form of Theatre of the Oppressor, as an extension and reimagining of Theatre of the Oppressed. (Chinyowa 2014, Harrison & Weinblatt 2011) Such calls centre on three main points: a less

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binary framing of oppressor-oppressed, developing allyship from the oppressor who is in a resourced position to make material structural changes, and finally as a call towards an increased dialogue through inclusion. Theatre of the Oppressed has a close relationship with social change, struggle,² and liberation; a theatre of the oppressor thus brings with it questions about the oppressor's role within social and political dialogue and change.

Despite the contextual sifts from the global north to the global south that saw the development of *rainbow of desire* (1995), Augusto Boal continued to reiterate a theatre of the oppressed. A theatre of (rather than 'by') the oppressed talks of the embodied lived collectiveness of the oppressed; it is an active stance 'of' rather than a passive, abstract and distant, disembodied and individualized 'by.' The centering of the oppressed, as lived experience, within Theatre of the Oppressed is one that imbues the poetics with its radical liberatory purpose. "The poetics of the oppressed is essentially the poetics of liberation" writes Boal (2000, p.155). Liberation Philosopher Ignacio Ellacuría argues that for philosophy to continue to be liberationist it must not only prioritize but be driven by the marginalized (2013). What might such an understanding of liberation mean in relation to a theatre of the oppressor? In a theatre of the oppressor, are the oppressed still the priority and driving force? It is not this article's intention to definitively conclude whom as individuals are/are not oppressor or oppressed. This piece is not a purist defense of Theater of the Oppressed nor does it deny that TO sometimes has difficulty in dealing with complex modalities and intersectionalities. Instead it seeks to interrogate the potential dangers of a theatre of the oppressor with regard to voice, space and change. This piece argues for a continued centering of the oppressed as the imperative continuation of a poetics of liberation. The text shares initial considerations when thinking about a theatre of the oppressor and questions what is being called for and who is ultimately being served by a theatre of the oppressor?

² "When you discover the potential to struggle, that's an important discovery" Boal asserts (Morelos, 1995).

Inclusion and dialogue

Theatre of the oppressor as a call for a more complete, inclusive dialogue with regards to the oppressor's contribution to social change requires problematization because we exist within unequal structures that directly implicate voice. As philosopher and dramatist Sylvia Wynter (2015) describes, colonialism brought us into a singular, dominant field of representation; crucially however, it didn't position us all equally. This is something that Aníbal Quijano (2000) and Walter Mignolo (2007) describe as a *colonial matrix of power*. As Patrick Wolfe (2006) describes, "settler colonizers come to stay: invasion is a structure not an event." (p.388) Daily exchanges therefore exist *within* this matrix and structure of power. Franz Fanon writes in a *Dying Colonialism* (1994)

There is not occupation of territory on the one hand and independence of persons on the other. It is the country as a whole, its history, its daily pulsation that are contested, disfigured, in the hope of a final destruction. Under these conditions, the individual's breathing is an observed, an occupied breathing. (1994, p.65)

This dynamic is further located by Aileen Moreton-Robinson in her examination of the invention of Australia as nation-state along with its mechanisms of control invested in dispossession. (2015, p.xii) She asserts, "There can be no equal partnerships while there is still illegal dispossession." (2015, p.7) What then, is being called for when a poetics of the oppressor speaks of a "more balanced pedagogy" in a theatre of the oppressor? (Chinyowa 2014, p.15) What constitutes a "more balanced pedagogy" within sites where equal partnerships and dialogue do not exist? As sociologist Lucy Nicholas (2020) suggested in a recent public lecture, "You need to treat people different, to treat them the same" especially on such unequal sites of power where oppressor-oppressed dynamics exist. (personal communication, May 21, 2020) Within unequal sites, dialogue is never simply dialogue. Therefore, inclusion of the oppressor may in fact have adverse implications on the very dialogue theatre of the oppressor aspires to achieve.

Performance ethnographer Dwight Conquergood complicates understandings of dialogue in relation to the privilege of clear communication. “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 take for granted.” (Conquergood 2013, p.34) He also suggests that dialogue, in unequal sites, becomes a form of co-performance witnessing (p.20)³. In this way dialogue may in fact become a form of control.

A few years ago I was approached by a large multicultural arts organization in Australia to acquire feedback from artists that were part of a program run by the organization. Having been a former contract employee and artist in their programs I was aware that most of the ongoing staff at this multicultural organization were white, including the CEO at the time, whilst on the other hand, the artists being asked for their honest feedback were non-white and dependent on the organization for contract to contract roles. I advised that the best way forward would be to have an all People of Color, Black, and First Peoples space. I wanted to provide a site where feedback could occur within a safe, collective environment that could later be de-identified (and not attributed to the individual) especially given the problematic program on which the artists were being asked for their honest feedback. My professional advice was swiftly and adamantly denied by the CEO in the “interest of transparency and dialogue.” It was as if dialogue could not exist without whiteness as presence, as witness, as gaze and ultimately as surveillance. I wondered why within-community dialogue was not considered dialogue.

There are severe implications when inclusion occurs without the context of power relations and thus the material consequences of voice in space. As artist and psychologist Grada Kilomba reminds, “we

³ The encounter between ethnographer and participant in performance studies, as “not a natural one” but one constructed on a “suspension of disbelief by both parties”; not as a “fiction-fiction” but rather a form of co-performance witnessing (Conquergood 2013, p.20).

are not dealing here with a peaceful co-existence of words but rather a 'violent hierarchy, which defines *who can speak, and what we can speak about.*' (Kilombra 2012)

As Jonathan Neelands (2007) argues in the UK context, there is a different political plan and therefore strategy at play in the 'social' and 'inclusive' turn within culture. Cultural policy and funding, he argues, with a focus on social inclusion and participation, has focused on "outreach" approaches with "disadvantaged groups." (p.312) This approach is "based in the pro-social and affirmative rather than political and transformative vision of New." (Neelands 2007, p. 313) The cultural policy of inclusion is not one that brings about the development of the new, radical, or liberatory processes, but rather has historically been used to depoliticize a process or work. Tim Prentki describes inclusion as a colonial model "where the centre's prescribe what is good for the periphery ... in the name of "social inclusion." (2012, p. 202). Sonia Hamel's article *When theater of the oppressed becomes theatre of the oppressor* (2013) demonstrates that Theatre of the Oppressed can (and sometimes has already) become a means to further subjugate the oppressed by centering the oppressor. In Hamel's case study Forum Theatre was used to discuss the tensions between homeless people and other locals in public spaces in Montreal. The piece was developed by people experiencing homelessness and performed in public. Hamel notes the dynamic in which:

the perspectives of the oppressed towards their oppressors were appropriated by the perspectives of the latter towards themselves, thereby reproducing a typical deliberative space in which the hierarchy in the audience dominated the agenda, while our homeless participants endured in silence." (2013 p.403)

The bringing together of groups under the premise of dialogue resulted in the reproduction of the existing hierarchy and in fact contributed to the culture of silence around those experiencing homelessness "after having so courageously and generously exposed themselves on stage" (Hamel 2013, p.415) She further notes that resistance as it occurs in the global south often clashes with the politics of identity and

individualism in the global north. The case study concludes just as the title of her article suggests:

becoming a theatre of the oppressor. This example denotes how dialogue in the case of a theatre of the oppressor might in fact reiterate the speech power the oppressor already possesses.

The statement that oppression narratives are incomplete (Chinyowa 2014, Harrison & Weinblatt 2011) overlooks the daily power-dynamics that govern speech acts. It assumes that inclusion of the voice and interest of the oppressor promotes, rather than risks, dialogue. Inclusion of the oppressor not only affects dialogue but, in some cases, limits dialogue. "A more inclusive theatre of the oppressed" (Harrison & Weinblatt 2011, p.15) in relation to dialogue, comes imbued with pre-existing power-dynamics and is not automatically neutral. It potentially reproduces the power-dynamics towards silencing and surveillance and even censorship. As I argued in *Diversity is a White Word* (Cañas 2017) "just because we exist in a space, doesn't mean we've had autonomy in the process by which the existence has occurred." Similarly, to have the oppressed and oppressor in a space does not mean automatic dialogue occurs. The conflation of inclusion of the oppressor for a 'full story' or 'better pedagogy' negates that Theatre of the Oppressed does already talk of the dynamic between oppressor and oppressed, except that it does so from the *perspective* of the oppressed within a world in which the oppressed have limited spaces to speak in resistance. (hooks 1990. Oppressed peoples need to have access to community organizing and mobilizing spaces, including through Theatre of the Oppressed. It is important to have exclusive spaces in which inclusion is not treated as a blanket term. The inclusion and dialogue space arguments for a poetics of the oppressor brings a dangerous precedent; as cultural safety theorist Dr. Ruth D'Souza suggests, such spaces merely "replicate equality discourse" (personal communication, June 3, 2020) rather than discourse on equity and justice, let alone liberation.

Social change and Liberation

A poetics of the oppressor can only offer a limited understanding of social change. There is a classic example of Boal that talks about a man⁴ on the floor with a foot to his chest representing the image of an oppressor and oppressed. Boal describes liberation as the man on the floor pushing the foot off his chest. Proponents of theatre of the oppressor argue, “how much easier could it be if the oppressor removed his foot from the chest of the man lying on the ground?” (Weinblatt 2011, p.24) This however not only centers change on the lifting of the foot (whether by consciousness, reason, convincing by the person below, or sense of self ‘goodness’). This suggestion, rather than breaking ties, which Ellacuría asserts is essential to liberation, actually maintains the same dependency which “makes self-determination impossible.” (2013, p.52). It forgets that lifting the foot is still the exercising of power to lift the foot, which is equal to the power of putting the foot down in the first place. It is to think, as Ellacuría warns, that domination becomes a condition of freedom. (p.51) It places a great deal of trust that power will be relinquished in the long term. As Assata Shakur reminds us “nobody in the world, nobody in history has ever gotten their freedom by appealing to the moral sense of the people who were oppressing them.” (2000, p.140) As First Peoples writer and activist professor Gary Foley also notes, self-determination is taken, not given. (personal communication, April 11, 2017) Therefore, the assumption that the oppressor as “part of the problem” is “better placed to be part of the solution” (p.7) is troubling. It assumes a link between resources that might be applied to social change – the very resources that the person with more power will most likely be less than willing to give up, asserting that the resources are being used ‘well’ – and actual social change, It places ideas of change within the pre-existing problematic frames, the very frames that define ideas of possible (and therefore impossible). As Arturo Escobar asserts in *Pluriversal politics: the real and the*

⁴ Note the gendered language

possible, a different possible is possible. (personal communication, September 25, 2020) Theatre of the Oppressed is designed to make us re-think these relations, not repeat them.

One argument supporting a poetics of the oppressor is the concern that the oppressed will merely invert structures and become the new oppressor. (Chinyowa 2014, Harrison & Weinblatt 2011) One must interrogate a fear of inversion. The fear that the oppressed will act as the oppressor and seek to 'mimic' the oppressor continues to work within colonial terms of enunciation (Mignolo 2011) and imaginaries.

Aesthetics of the Oppressed (2006) and *Theatre of the Oppressed* (2000) discuss social and political relations in relation to *conscientization* which seeks to counter a 'mimic' tendency. The argument about mimicry dismisses the potential of the oppressed to intelligently, creatively consider and make a new world – one that is outside of the existing terms of enunciation. The preoccupation with inversion indicates a distrust of liberatory processes that denies and negates the political potentiality of the marginal as a site of change. In *Marginality as a Site of Resistance* (1990) bell hooks centers lived experience of marginality, as "a site of radical possibility." (p.341). Linda Tuhiwai Smith in *Decolonising methodologies: Indigenous people and Research* asserts

To resist is to retrench in the margins, retrieve what we were and remake ourselves. The past, our stories local and global, the present, our communities, cultures, languages and social practices all may be spaces of marginalization, but they have also become a space of resistance and hope.

(2012 p.4).

A poetics of the oppressor might further cause a self-referential approach around existing power.

All about the oppressor

A poetics of the oppressor is offered as an alternative to 'finger pointing' and 'labels' as 'over-simplification;' "people are inevitably complex in ways that are impossible to define with labels." (Harrison & Weinblatt 2011, p.6). Theatre of the Oppressed, however, interrogates power dynamics rather than labels. Oppressor

dynamics are often afforded an invisibility that normalizes and enhances their power.⁵ Theatre of the oppressor may normalize that power dynamic (the oppressor who lifts their own foot) which in turn may contribute to an individualized defensive inclination to demonstrate and manage one's own perception of 'goodness' *through* power and control rather than challenging power and control. Such an approach potentially encourages performative allyship without exploring systemic change. Sociologist Iris Marion-Young defines oppression as "the disadvantage and injustice some people suffer not because of a tyrannical power [that] coerces them but because of the everyday practices of well-intentioned liberal society." (2014, p.5) The inability or unwillingness of the oppressor (and oppressed) to locate themselves within oppressive systems can contribute to the maintenance and reproduction of oppressive power dynamics.⁶

In the case study of homelessness in Montreal, Hamel describes a character wrestling with internal conflicts as a police officer.

This character told the story of an internally conflicted 'good cop,' proud of graduating from the police academy without being brainwashed by police culture, who became a cop to 'defend the widow and the orphan.' This enactment illustrated the police officer's internal oppression when faced with difficult interventions towards marginalised populations: I'm not always at peace with what is expected of me as a police officer. I mean, it's not right to kick someone when he's down. (Marie in her depiction of a cop) (2013, p.406).

As Hamel writes when examining this example of what she terms a theatre of the oppressor, "each interlocutor was attempting to preserve his or her own sense of self as a 'good person' rather than an indifferent or rude oppressor." (p.414) This barred the person from locating themselves critically as part of

⁵ See for example, discussions of the epistemic zero point (Mignolo 2009), hubris of the zero point (Santiago Castro-Gómez, 2007), and whiteness (Frankenburg 1997).

⁶ It is important to mention here that, while this paper narrowly focuses on analyzing arguments made for a theatre of the oppressor, consideration of intersectionality adds a great deal of complexity to the definitions of oppressor, oppressed, and oppression itself.

the context and complicit in homelessness through a lack of relational understanding within a power dynamic and a lack of solidarity. Furthermore, she noted that the performance became a platform to interrogate the status of the oppressed. Homelessness in Montreal was compared to other parts of the world as justified, as being “relatively mitigated,” because there was the belief that there was “easy access to food and shelter not to mention the self proclaimed tolerance and generosity of open-minded domiciled neighbors.” (Hamel 2013 p414)

In essence, might a poetics of the oppressor become all about the oppressor, even when it seeks to understand/define the oppressed? Conquergood describes as the ‘enthusiast’s infatuation’ a problematic ethical pitfall which sees an over identification of the other leading to a superficial understanding. He outlines the consequences of an unproblematized identification with the ‘other’ in cultural confrontations. We see an example of this with the interrogation of the oppressed status itself within Hamel’s case study:

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 behaviors of their homeless neighbors who were portrayed as responsible for their own life conditions, thereby justifying the right to indifference claimed by some of the domiciled.” (Hamel 2013, p. 413)

They also note that unquestioned rhetoric came to dominate the agenda of the Forum Theatre, which went “well beyond a simple rejection of the content of the play.” Yet at the same time, no one “dared replace a homeless character ... because audience members were experientially unfamiliar with the practical and psychological implications of the homeless experience.” This meant that the only characters replaced became the ‘indignant passerby.’ (Hamel 2013, p. 413) Finally she notes that the dialogue became focused on “facile solutions” such as attitudes of individuals, and at worst “a blatant justification of this right to indifference” (p.414)

A call to the poetics of the oppressor also speaks of the potentiality of addressing allyship to “help bridge the gap between the categories of agents and targets by making them allies in the process of liberation.” (Weinblatt 2011, p.7) The key aspect to allyship is that allies do not lead or drive the conversation. In *All about Power: Understating Social Power and Power Structures* (2019) Srilatha Batliwala articulates that one major form of power is agenda-setting power. (p.34) This type of power exists as an invisible resource power; importantly however it is the power to decide “what is important and what is not, what can and cannot be discussed, what matters and what does not.” (Batliwala 2019, p. 17) Theatre of the oppressor must be interrogated to determine if its process is not an exercise in agenda setting power.

Conclusion: re-centering of the oppressed

“The reference to the poor as definitive of liberation situates the concept in its proper perspective” (Ellacuría 2013, p. 51).

Early in this article I noted that I would not defend Theater of the Oppressed from the claim that it sometimes oversimplifies or ignores complex modalities and intersectionalities. Rather, this piece seeks to discuss what Theatre of the Oppressed is in service of, and what a theatre of the oppressor might be or not be in service of. It asks if a theatre of the oppressor, in its attempt to de-center the oppressor, might in fact be re-centering them? The article is a call for a re-centering, a re-prioritizing of the oppressed in social change, liberation, and world-making dynamics. This does not mean that we must view oppression in a homogenized sense ignoring a complex world. Nor does it imply that the focus on the oppressed erases the

particulars of oppressions which do *not* occur on a “single-axis.” (Crenshaw 1989, p. 140) or ignores the “coloniality of power.” (Quijano 2000)⁷

There is still much work to be done within the Theatre of the Oppressed. However, that does not lead to a call for a theatre of the oppressor. TO’s re-interrogation within the changing world cannot be an excuse to exercise power over others in the very act of trying to critique it. This article asserts that Theatre of the Oppressed continue as Theatre of the *Oppressed*.

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⁷ Maria Lugones extends the work of Aníbal Quijano’s coloniality of power (2008) to discuss race and gender as interlocking oppressions within the overarching system of colonial oppression. “It is only when we perceive gender and race as intermeshed or fused that we actually see women of colour.” Their work provides an invaluable example of how the lens of intersectionality must inform examinations of oppression.

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