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Demechanizing Whiteness: Lessons from Theatre of the Oppressed

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Demechanizing Theatre of the Oppressed, Whiteness, and the Exploitation of Racialized Violence

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The Theatre of the Oppressed (TO) provides small group techniques to strategize and "rehearse" for collaborative liberation using popular education forms of systems analysis, bolstered by practices that counter implicit biases and habituated behaviors. This essay draws on interviews with jokers at CTO-Rio to advocate the need for continual engagement of demechanizing practices both within TO and in the lives of practitioners in order to demechanize the tenets of white supremacy that we are born into, particular focus on counteracting the habit of exploiting Black suffering for creative capital.

Context

A clinic worker (of any racial identity) speaks to people in line waiting to enter the performance space:

While you wait for your results, I'm here to talk to you about what it's like to find out your test results are positive. Well, first, let me say that no one wants to find out they've got implicit bias, or what we call "whiteness."

(*Pause*) We all know we're at risk, but I know I thought that even though everyone in my family has it, maybe I would get lucky.

(*Pause*) Don't look at me like you're so sure you're clean. So many of us thought it was just "those types of people" who had it, we didn't even think to get checked. But remember, research shows that half of white folks and a third of Black folks have some degree of implicit bias towards white people.[1]

(*Pause*) Anyway, when I was told I had whiteness, I was surprised and defensive. I was all "but there's got to be an ointment to cure this!" There was a lot of denial, you know? But I've come to accept who I am. I treat the symptoms, and I'm part of a patient advocacy group working on a cure. It may not happen in our lifetime, but if so, we're "gonna die looking for it," hah… Anyway, the most important thing to know is that it's contagious if unchecked, and that's why we're all here today.

(*Pause*) So, thanks for coming. Your results will be out shortly.

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[1] https://www.pewsocialtrends.org/2015/08/19/exploring-racial-bias-among-biracial-and-single-race-adults-the-iat/

Upon entering the theater, audience members receive a printed handout that includes, among other graphs, the following text:

"Thank you for taking the implicit bias test today. Here is your result: Your data suggests a slight to moderate automatic preference for European Americans over African Americans. We recommend attending a community treatment program. Please proceed to the meeting room at this time."[2]

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This article takes as a premise that systemic forms of white supremacy/anti-Blackness exist (at minimum within the U.S. context) and that TO group members including leaders/organizers/jokers can, to greater and lesser degrees depending on their social location, implicitly replicate aspects of this (and other) oppressive dynamics even while doing work intended to counter it. Because of this, I here reiterate the fundamental necessity of demechanization as a cornerstone of Theatre of the Oppressed practice, and press further to advocate the need for continual engagement of demechanizing practices both within TO and in the lives of practitioners. In conclusion, I present one set of possibilities and liabilities in addressing racialized violence through cultural work.

Oppression and Theatre of the Oppressed

Theatre of the Oppressed (TO) provides small group techniques to strategize and "rehearse" for collaborative liberation from oppression, using popular education forms of systems analysis which are bolstered by practices that counter implicit biases and habituated behaviors.

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[2] Excerpt from "We're Working on a Treatment" (2016) by elizaBeth Simpson

One definition of oppression used in the anti-oppressive practice literature of social work is: "oppression takes place when a person acts or a policy is enacted unjustly against an individual (or group) because of their affiliation to a specific group…. It also includes imposing belief systems, values, laws and ways of life on other groups through peaceful or violent means." (Baines, 2007) With gratitude to Ruth Gilmore Wilson's reference to decreased life expectancy as a core impact of oppressive dynamics, (2007) for this article I define oppression as an alignment of system dynamics such that members of certain social classes are consistently hindered in full expression of self and livelihood including health, personal relationships, income, type of work, creativity, cultural expression, etc., while members of other social classes are either not hindered, or in fact benefit from those same dynamics.

Author's note as Interlude

In response to direct editorial prompts to include some of who I am "as a human being," I will present in a footnote a few compass points to locate me. These are surely not shared as a resume (some may in fact be liabilities), but as mile-markers on my path.[3]

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[3] As are you, I am a person shaped by complex experiences which are in turned shaped by unruly forces inflected by massive webs of social dynamics, personal choices, and collective successes and failures enacted over generations. Some commonly considered checkboxes are being a 44-year old creative, queer, white, neurodiverse, raised catholic-working-class in urban New England, recently university-educated woman who has now lived in Illinois most of her adult life. My political roots stem from puppet- and song-based nonviolent direct action in mass anti-globalization movements of the late 90s and early 2000s. My considerations of power were first influenced by deep involvement in the intentional communities movement and anarcha/anti-authoritarian collectives; 20 years of professional and informal work in small group facilitation, conflict resolution, transformative justice, and community co-responsibility; and honed by the wisdom of contemporary Black feminists such as Dr. Ruth Nicole Brown. My design and systems theory orientation to the co-mingling of art and social change has been bolstered since 2001 by involvement in the School for Designing A Society. Of direct import to this article is my 362 hours in TO trainings, first by Augusto Boal starting in 2000, then with Mark Weinblatt, Julian Boal, Geo Britto and other jokers/curingas at Centro de Teatro Oprimido-Rio in 2018 and 2019. I've attended and offered workshops at numerous PTO conferences as a non-academic, and have jokered many of my own workshops (mostly about opposing white supremacy) but didn't work with a consistent group until last year when I held a three-month series to address community engagement and climate change. Formative in all I do is my mentorship with students of Ella Baker beginning in 2004, and being consistently involved in anti-racist organizing since then, including pre- and post-Katrina activity to support Black leadership and white humility. In the last 7 years this has often taken place through my role as the local lead for the Champaign-Urbana, IL chapter of Showing Up for Racial Justice, which seeks to leverage white folks and their resources in service of amplifying and enacting the directives of local Black, Indigenous and People of Color (BIPOC) leadership. I know that I am one voice in a chorus that helps each other stay in tune by singing and listening together.

Demechanization, and the Need for It

Decades ago, Augusto Boal asserted that through repeated responses to the stimuli of their environment, people begin to "feel little of what they touch, listen to little of what they hear, and see very little of what (they) look at" (1992). To counter these cognitive inhibitions, TO developed "demechanization": a set of techniques through which participants will dehabituate their thinking. (Boal, 1992; Linds, 2002; Chung, 2011; Raynor, 2017)

Anti-normative practices such as demechanization are essential because we enact culture in historic and geo-located moments that shape the ways we think and act into patterns. (Wanasek and Weinberg, 2011) Group participants carry with them the social habits and norms of their culture, which are in turn informed by a dominant culture that shapes social norms and expectations. (Poole, Seibold, and McPhee, 1985) Thus, all groups will inherently carry and replicate the social patterns of action of the dominant culture, and in cultures where systemically invested imbalances of power are part of the social structure, any decision-making practice will allow for the replication of power imbalances unless they are specifically counteracted. That is to say: if a technique is merely "neutral" towards the social climate of the group the process will replicate bias and oppression simply by creating a space in which participants play out their inherited patterns unfettered. So, any group wishing to avoid replication of oppression will need to actively employ anti-oppressive practices. Demechanization is one such practice.

Theatre of the Oppressed seeks to disrupt physical and mental patterns that replicate undesirable power dynamics so that participants can express alternate visions of the world. (Boal 1992, Ikemire, 2010) As a means to this, demechanization seeks to re-invigorate participants' capacity to sense and feel (Boal, 1992) by forcing awareness of how the body moves in habits and replicates dominant ways of thinking (Ikemire,

2010) by stimulating uncommon motions and sounds in order to experience the world from unfamiliar perspectives. (Vierk, 1997) Boal describes movement as a form of thought expressed via the body, (1992) and can see emphasis on the body in the categories of games: feeling what we touch, listening to what we hear, dynamizing several senses, seeing what we look at, memory of the senses. (Boal, 1992) Emphasis on demechanizing the body makes particular sense if one regards it as a site of cognition, i.e., not merely a "host" for the brain, the body is part of a neural network that engages in information processing. (Olsson, 2010) It is through this embodied engagement that demechanization re-invigorates participants' capacity to sense and feel, reconnecting us to nonlinear insights through physical formations of liberatory vision.

However, while demechanization is often mentioned in long form TO training workshops, when I began to formally research it in 2015 I quickly realized there is little extant writing on it. Though discussed briefly in Theatre of the Oppressed (Boal, 1979) and in Games for Actors and Non-Actors (Boal, 1992), it appears that demechanization as a topic has received no considered attention in print. This was a matter of grave concern to me, given my understanding that demechanization consists of more than the games, and that the many people who undertake TO work without the support of ongoing apprenticeship could easily miss or mis-take the extent of the role demechanization has in every aspect of TO and relegate it to the mere domain of "warm up games." Seeking to remedy this gap for myself and others, I embarked on a project to explicate implicit knowledge about demechanization first through a series of exploratory workshops at PTO conferences, and then via a series of individual and group interviews with jokers/curingas at CTO-Rio between December of 2018 and July of 2019. While this research is still in process, already key themes are emerging that I will share here in the interest creating a common conceptual framework:

- Demechanization is not a "warm up" to be done once at the beginning of a session or project, but should infuse all TO activities and regularly inform what choices jokers and spect-actors make.

- Much of the essential wisdom of TO and its practices is not written, nor can be sufficiently conveyed through writing alone: active and ongoing engagement supported by mentorship/apprenticeship are the means by which holistic understanding of the work of TO can be understood.

- Engagement with the aesthetics of the oppressed is a fundament upon which all other activities of TO should be built

- It is imperative for jokers to note discrepancies between their role as outlined by TO and their lived actions, which may counteract both their training and their principles. e.g., despite strong emphasis that it is not the role of the joker to prescribe outcomes, it is very easy for a joker to become not only the difficultator of a process owned by participants, but also a leader/director making executive decisions on behalf of the group.

It is this last theme that I will pursue in the remainder of this article; first advocating for reflexive practice in TO work, then looking critically at what I see as a habit of exploiting trauma responses to racialized violence in misguided pursuit of alternatives to it.

Demechanizing Theatre of the Oppressed

A form of popular education, the methods of TO are to be accessible and non-proprietary, requiring no specialized skills or certification, and needing few resources other than the bodies of the participants. Additionally, TO specifically seeks to oppose binaries between knowledge producers and knowledge receivers, (Ikemire, 2010) and diffuses the potential power of the joker by asserting that those impacted by a harm are specifically and uniquely positioned as experts on their own experiences. However, it is still all too possible that in enactments of TO, whether one-time performances or ongoing groups, access to planning, implementation, and follow-up are limited to a few key individuals, with the majority of participants having no directorial or leadership roles. Exacerbating this imbalance is the circumstance in which the joker does not share the experience of the oppression in consideration and yet is considered by themselves or

others as the expert on what to do. Noting and disrupting how power operates in and through the body of all participants, including the joker, is at the heart of demechanization.

A practice of bodies, TO is a decidedly collaborative sense-making process. (Olsson, 2010) The prospect of engaging bodies in TO leads to a general question of which bodies will be included in its knowledge making processes and which will not: TO explorations will of course only employ the bodies that are present at the moment of inquiry. Knowing this, we are reminded that visual relationships are power relationships (Boal, 1992), and that visualization is not direct representation but a speculative mapping that shows as much about the choices made along the way as about the concepts depicted. (Myers, 2014). This means that, in addition to the possibility of creating brilliant articulations of spect-actor-ular vision, projects lacking sufficient relationships with the community in question will likely suffer from a dearth of requisite embodied wisdom, and can thus mis-represent what is being explored. To a keen eye, who is and isn't seen during the process and/or performance can implicate the visibilizing and un-visibilizing social forces that shaped it. A performance that does not center the aesthetics of those at the heart of the inquiry may show more about the influence of the coordinators than the power of the oppressed[4].

This obfuscating dynamic can be seen clearly when (which is not always) white people lead BIPOC-centered projects and inadvertently guide the outcomes away from their root expression to white cultural or ideological norms. Though I am advocating for demechanistic attention to TO practices in general, in this cultural moment where popular uptake of old knowns about white supremacy make dismantling it one notch closer, attention to the habits of whiteness are timely. So, let's turn our attention there with the help of systems thinking.

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[4] Full consideration of this is beyond the scope of this article, but I recommend becoming familiar with the work of Coletivo Madalena Anastácia and Barbara Santos's luminary *Roots and Wings*. (2019)

Decisions employed in the process of knowledge making result from particular observations made in a particular moment. (Bowker, 2014) That is, knowledge is specific to the people generating it, in a place, at a time, in a social context. And because any way of thinking is cultivated in a particular context, both the thinking and the product of thinking will inevitably show traces of the material and social contexts in which it was generated (Boal, 1985). This means that, in a culture undergirded by white supremacy, jokers and spectators alike will carry with them into the work the tenets of white supremacy, and it will take consistent demechanization at all levels of practice to undermine its prevalence. Yet, "tell me what to do so that I can do it right and be done with it" solutions are one of the tendencies that calls for de-habituation. It is not "finding the right answers," but continuing to listen and feel into the specific ways any of us as individuals or as collectives implicitly support white supremacy that will be our release. One such way I offer for consideration is replaying traumatic events when depicting racialized violence in cultural work.

Demechanizing the exploitation of racialized suffering in cultural work

As with all forms of violence, when creating any type of cultural work involving racialized violence it is a simple and common theatrical trope to simply re-present the explicit enactment. This dramaturgic strategy can, regardless of compositional craftsmanship, rely on exploiting the sympathy generated by somatic resonance for effect; that is, a performance may simply replay the horror by naming or showing blunt violence, and whether done crudely or artfully, audiences may still experience it as "powerful" due to the strength of their own somatic response.

When we as composers and artists create simplistic pieces that rely on this type of innate response to create an experience of meaning, we can callously and unnecessarily re-inscribe trauma on those already

impacted by the violence.[56] And because many of those who experience oppressive harms from a witnessing distance have been trained into addictive relationships with adrenaline and cortisol by various media and news cycles, capacity for sympathy or empathy can adaptively become mechanized into a terror-numbness in which only the "more" terrible receives consideration and care. In light of this overstimulation, it is possible to pursue a morbid aesthetic competition to generate the most wounding (and therefore noticeable) bids for attention in a cycle of compositional form that cultivates an elevated standard for what counts as "powerful," requiring increasingly heart-curdling imagery.

I suggest that this type of collateral escalation has contributed to a correlation between mass and social media news cycle attention to racialized violence and widespread civic engagement in ending the suffering created through white supremacy: when those out of the direct line of fire see terrible things replayed on the news, we/they engage and when, after a few months we/they stop seeing it, we/they disengage, and only those in direct contact with the harms remain staunchly involved.

But, development of habitual body and thought patterns can be adaptive, allowing us relief from constant apprehension. (Boal, 1992) For many, part of this engagement/disengagement cycle can be understood not as de-prioritization but as a coping mechanism for our body-minds, which can't endure the sustained terrorizing messages that are so often relied upon to coax people out of their numbness. When either the

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[5] Downs, K. (2016) *When black death goes viral, it can trigger PTSD-like trauma.* PBS. https://www.pbs.org/newshour/nation/black-pain-gone-viral-racism-graphic-videos-can-create-ptsd-like-trauma

[6] Trudy. (2014) *10 Ways That White Feminist and White Anti-Racism Allies Are Abusive to Me In Social Media.* https://www.gradientlair.com/post/72006991812/white-feminist-racism-allies-abuse-social- media. Please also see *Farewell* (2015) https://www.gradientlair.com/post/130584664178/thetrudz-gradient-lair-blog-ends-2015- farewell and support her here: http://www.thetrudz.com/support

news cycle or cultural work leverages fear, either for motivation or profit, we will find diminishing returns as our body-minds brilliantly find ways to dissociate in order to stay alive.

In light of this, I am not suggesting that we need to "back off," avoid painful topics, or refrain from presenting graphic depictions of the dynamics of oppression in exquisite granularity. Rather, I am saying that if we want people to actually engage, we will need to anticipate and navigate potential overwhelm that results in cognitive and emotional shutdown by composing works that allow us to accompany one another into the depths, and come out again with capacity and creativity intact[7].

When we decline the compulsive catharsis of brute aesthetic force and instead walk ourselves, in good company, more deeply into the crevices of the dynamics of oppression, we can remember that oppression is nimble and flexible: its nuances lie underneath or to the side of heavy-handed tropes. For better or worse, circumventing explicit replications of violence provides opportunity to bring forward the messiness of contradiction and uncertainty as fertile ground from which we can grow collective nourishment.

To this end, a challenge I make to myself is to create works that forgo invoking a terror response and instead stimulate connection, companionship, inspiration, hope, testimony/witness, agency, and the incumbent sense of possibility that comes with being freed from fight/flight/freeze. It is in such a space that the proposals we long for will shake themselves from our collective tree of knowledge, inciting collective resilience and capacity to topple white supremacy in all its forms. However, unlike immediately

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[7] It is important to notice times in which a person experiencing a fear or trauma response wants the entire group to stop the exploration, which can result in members of dominant groups inhibiting the much-needed work of the whole. It's helpful to recall that, while it is true that an individual may have reached an emotional or cognitive limit (which should not be a source of shame), it is not the only truth of the room. It is important to seek a harm-reductive approach in the moment, but it is also imperative to seek harm-reduction at large and make collective choices in light of the knowledge that the oppression being addressed will not cease to exist because we desist from facing it. In such moments we can look for ways to tend to both individual and collective needs without putting them at odds with one another.

recognizable statistics on violent crime, these complicated and messy forms of sharing knowledge, information and wisdom may be overlooked or dismissed as irrelevant according to our habitual standards, so they must be actively advocated for and engaged in as legitimate forms. Again, here, demechanization can support us.

Conclusion

TO constructs narrative spaces that may allow or discourage varieties of discourse that would not emerge in another sort of space. (Pantidos et al., 2010) At the same time, any rendering channels what is seen and what is looked for, reducing capacity for answers outside of the scope of the method. (Myers, 2014) Participants can tend towards representing problems as hero/villain dichotomies that at best disallow more complex understandings of causality, and at worst engender a victim-blaming perspective that puts the onus for systemic change on individual people (Wanasek and Weinberg, 2011). Jokers can ask leading questions or provide directions that preclude more expansive responses. Knowing that we will bring our implicit biases with us, we can ply ourselves with counteractive tools, and employ demechanizing practice throughout our work.

In looking at the explicit and implicit structures of our own engagement of TO, we can ask: Where is the joker? Are they the center? Supporting collective centering? Most frequently heard? Redirecting listening to marginalized voices? Expert? Declining adulation? We can ask of our processes: what are they advocating? (Fortun, 2009) What ethics are being performed, and how do they align with the TO tree or other proposals of integrity? In general, we can ask: how does the way we are going about our work (and our whole lives) reify existing power dynamics and/or create possibilities beyond them? What political relationships undergird the emergence of TO as a method in *this* situation, both historically and socially and in the current, personal moment (e.g. how did I come to be doing this, and why am I doing "this," now, the

way that I'm doing it?). By seeing that the processes we use lend themselves to some modes of thinking and acting and not others, we can recognize the present as the "anteriorized future" (Fortun, 2009) and literally set the stage for what comes next.

To that end/beginning: I reiterate my call for consistent, compassionate vigilance to demechanization. Without committed reflective praxis in which theater-makers and jokers hold their choices humbly to the fire of liberatory standards that will be out of reach until we are all free (yes, an impossible but imperative principle), patterns of misdirected enactment can counteract the radical roots of TO and result instead in an evangelical paradigm of advice giving and paternalism, where empowered agents act on behalf of passive victims, and we end up again as agents of oppression offering theatrical catharsis (Boal, 1992) that enables its continuance. So, I hold the invitation wide for all jokers to— knowing that we will be consistently pulled towards fulfilling oppressive norms— keep on our shoulder always the question of how and when we are agents of collective liberation, and how and when we are advocating an agenda informed by our own habituated thinking.

Outro: "We're Working on a Treatment" as a case study in performative explorations of racialized violence

In wrestling with what content would allow for a harm-reductive exploration of white supremacy and racialized violence for a mixed- demographic audience, I addressed a series of questions to myself, colleagues, and friends through informal conversations:

- What are problems or challenges of someone like me talking/performing/writing about race?

- What has made you cringe in performances about race?

- What do white people in THIS community need to know about Blackness, anti-Black racism, or white supremacy?

- Under what conditions would it be healthful, ethical, or contributive to create this work?

In light of the answers I received, I settled on exploring the concept of being diagnosed with implicit bias towards white people for a number of reasons including that because, to varying degrees, it applies to both white people and BIPOC folks. I created a semi-structured participatory performance bringing medical language, the experience of being tested for implicit bias, and the humility-informed systemic analysis of twelve step programs into play with one another, with care to circumvent potential micro-aggressions between participants. It is an excerpt from this piece that opened this article.

Author's Note as Finale

Seeking to contextualize the first performance of "We're Working on a Treatment," I found myself asking: when did I write this? Was it when someone was killed or when their murderer was exonerated? To a large extent, these contours have become a strange timeline of my life. May this writing contribute to the liberation of all people, and specifically the safety of all Black people.

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