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Rustbelt Theater: Children's Environmental Justice Narratives from South Elyria, OH

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Honors Thesis

Environmental Studies

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May 2012

Acknowledgements

This work would not have been possible if not for the generous support from everyone who is a part of the following organizations: Save Our Children, the Bonner Center for Service and Learning, the Mellon Mays Undergraduate Research Fellowship, Oberlin College's Office of Undergraduate Research, and Oberlin College's Environmental Studies Department. I would also like to thank my honors committee members for their patience and insight. Finally, I am incredibly grateful to Janet Fiskio for guiding me through this three-year process with nothing but positivity and enthusiasm. Thank you for inspiring me.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Defining the environment, defining justice

It is Monday, 6:15 a.m. A single mother wakes her two young daughters and sits them at the small kitchen table in front of bowls of cereal. The babysitter is late again. The mother goes through babysitters quickly; taking care of two very energetic and mischievous kids starting so early in the morning makes them quit after about a month or so. The only sitter left is chronically late, which often makes the mother late for work, since she cannot leave her two year-old and four year-old unattended. When the babysitter fails to show up this morning, the mother calls her job explaining why she will be late again. She gets fired. The children had started throwing tantrums while she was on the phone and the mother, unable to take it anymore, breaks down in tears.

The idea for this scene was created and performed by a group of third and fourth-graders during a community-based theater workshop that I led at Save Our Children's 2011 summer school program in Elyria, Ohio. The purpose of the workshops was to get elementary school students to identify and explore environmental justice issues affecting their community. The above scene is not about what is usually meant by "environment"—wilderness, endangered species, or natural resources; it does not even directly address the issues central to the environmental justice movement, such as the siting of toxic wastes. So how does the above scene count as an environmental justice narrative? Moreover, why should we care about elementary school children's theatrical portrayals of daily life in a small Rust Belt town?

The aim of this community-based research is to answer these questions. By doing so, the children's voices will bring to bear crucial knowledge about an under-served community. Their voices help to broaden conceptions of environmental justice, to the benefit of both the environmental justice movement and the emerging discipline of environmental studies.

In its broadest sense, environmental justice is concerned with the fair distribution of environmental risks and benefits, as well as ensuring that those affected by environmental risks are equally represented in the decision-making processes that affect their lives. While this definition seems straightforward, one look at the environmental justice movement demonstrates how widely it is interpreted. David Schlosberg states that at the core of the broad environmental justice movement “lies an acknowledgment of plurality, varied experiences, and diverse understanding of environmental problems” (1999: 109). Conceptions of the environment vary depending on who is experiencing it and in what forms. The environmental justice movement grew distinct from the mainstream environmental movement due to the latter’s narrow definition of the environment as external nature, or “wilderness,” and its preoccupation with preserving those “pristine” places that were believed to be unspoiled by man. The environmental justice movement emerged in response to the absence of the social justice component in mainstream environmentalism, and expanded the notion of the environment to include the places where people live, work, study, and play.

The tenets of the environmental justice movement demonstrate that environmental justice issues are entrenched in the social, political, and economic systems from which they stem. According to Charles Lee, the environmental justice movement divides the ecosystem into the biophysical, manufactured or built, and social environment (quoted in Schlosberg 1999). In 1991, delegates at the First National People of Color Leadership Summit drafted and adopted the “Principles of Environmental Justice,” a document that demonstrates how inextricably linked the issues are. The preamble states the movement’s mission to “secure our political, economic and cultural liberation that has been denied for over 500 years of colonization and oppression, resulting in the poisoning of our communities and land and the genocide of our peoples.” As

Laura Pulido points out, “It is difficult to discern where the environmental part of the struggles begins and where it ends” (quoted in Schlosberg, 1999). More important than discerning what struggles fall under which category is realizing that environmental, social, and economic struggles must work in tandem in order to bring about justice.

Despite the acknowledgment of diversity within the environmental justice movement, not enough attention has been paid to assessing the distribution and access to environmental benefits within and among communities. The tendency of U.S. environmental justice literature is to place most of the concern on the distribution of environmental risks. The most common narratives are related to the placement of polluting factories and waste facilities in communities of color and urban communities; exposure to harmful chemicals in the home and workplace, such as lead; and the host of diseases caused by the production, use, and disposal of compounds like polyvinyl chloride (PVC). While it is crucial to identify and tackle the disproportionate distribution of environmental harms found in our society, it is also important to look at the distribution and accessibility of environmental benefits among different communities, because a lack of benefits can be just as detrimental as exposure to risks. Bunyan Brynt (quoted in Schlosberg 2007) hits on this idea when he defines environmental justice as

those cultural norms and values, rules, regulations, behaviours, policies, and decisions to support sustainable communities, where people can interact with confidence that their environment is safe, nurturing, and productive. Environmental justice is served when people can realize their highest potential, without experiencing the ‘isms.’

By focusing on issues of access, the dialogue of environmental justice can be extended to communities that may not be fighting obvious instances of environmental justice such as a garbage incinerator or polluted drinking water, but are still struggling with structural barriers that

limit access to adequate employment, education, housing, transportation, nutrition, recreation, and health care. Schlosberg (1999: 110) argues that justice includes not just equitable distribution of risks (and benefits) but also a procedural component that recognizes the diversity of the participants and experiences in the environmental justice movement: “The movement is constructed from difference, revels in that fact, and negates the importance of a singular history, experience, or ideology” (1999, 111). Since part of justice is procedural and is served by recognition, then it is my goal in this research to help bring justice to the city of Elyria by presenting the voices of its residents as an alternative environmental justice narrative that has yet to be heard in the larger environmental justice discussion. Children’s knowledge of their eco-social environment are rarely privileged in environmental literature. By articulating the concerns of previously unheard participants—the children living in South Elyria—through Theater of the Oppressed techniques, new voices will enter the environmental justice dialogue, thus strengthening the movement.

Exploring environmental justice narratives in Elyria, Ohio

What kinds of environmental injustices exist in Elyria? The city is just twenty minutes away from the city of Oberlin, and yet the differences in the quality of life and resources available to these two neighbors are striking. The city of Oberlin has the advantage of having Oberlin College, a private educational institution whose regular flow of students (like myself) participating in the city’s economy has served to buffer the effects of economic decline that has gripped the rest of Lorain County. According to the *Encyclopedia of Ohio* circa 1994, Elyria was an important retail and industrial city for Northeast Ohio. Currently, U.S. Census data estimates for 2008-2010 indicate that the top three industries that employ Elyria’s population are

educational services and healthcare and social assistance (21.9%), manufacturing (18.0%), and retail trade (12.0%)¹. The fact that educational services and medical and social assistance comprise the largest percentage of employment may indicate an increased need for these services in the area due to economic decline. Unfortunately, Elyria is no longer an economically robust city; it is part of the post-industrial Rust Belt of the Great Lakes region. As poet Jonathan Penton writes in the introduction to Anne McMillen's "Monolith",

The county seat [of Lorain] is Elyria, a twenty-square-mile city ten miles from the lake and thirty miles from Cleveland. Like most of the communities just outside Cleveland's economic center, it has been in an essentially static state of financial and emotional depression since the 1970s. Also: it smells *terrible*.²

I have worked closely with Elyria residents for the past two years, and while I do not think the city smells *that* bad (though foul smells can serve as indicators of pollution in the surrounding environment), there are other obvious indicators that Elyria indeed faces economic hardship. For instance, U.S. Census data shows an increase in poverty in the last decade. In 2000, 11.7 percent of the total Elyria population was below the poverty level. In 2010 it increased to 16.8 percent. Poverty rates are higher for African-American residents, with an increase from 25.7 percent in 2000 to 30.2 percent in 2010. The elevated poverty rate for this minority group is important to remember for understanding the economic and social context of the community I partnered with for this study, which is predominately African-American, working class, and resides on the south side of Elyria.

¹ Agriculture constitutes less than 1 percent of employment in Elyria.

² McMillen's book of poetry, "Monolith" was published by a small, independent publisher, Unlikely Books, which distributes its products online. I accessed Johnathan Penton's introduction through the publisher's website. The web address is listed in the works cited section.

I was introduced to the south side of Elyria (or South Elyria, as residents call the area) by volunteering at a non-profit organization located there called Save Our Children (SOC). According to its website, SOC “provides intellectual, social and spiritual enrichment opportunities to ‘at-risk’ youth” through after-school and summer programs. I began volunteering at SOC after meeting the program director, staff, and the children in 2009. The program director, a South Elyria resident herself, gave me a brief background about the predominantly African-American, working class community I would be partnering with. She spoke of the decline in economic prosperity as more jobs and families migrate away from the area, the increase in street violence and crime, issues with food security, and the concentration of heavy industry that has waxed and waned in the region. Then, she informed me that SOC was looking for volunteers to teach any type of art class, since the students were interested in the arts. I volunteered to teach theater.

The idea for this community-based research project stemmed from the initial conversation I shared with SOC’s director. Coming from an environmental studies background, the obstacles facing South Elyria struck me as issues of environmental justice. As I began planning a theater curriculum for the third and fourth grade class, and keeping in mind the director’s description of the conditions of South Elyria in which my students live, several questions formed and ultimately developed into my main research questions. Put in its simplest terms, how can theater be utilized by the SOC community as a tool for exploring issues they encountered in their daily lives? I am especially interested in how the issues my students identified through this theater process corroborate, complicate, and/or dispute the SOC director’s depiction of South Elyria, as well as my own identification of South Elyria as an environmental justice community. To what extent do the children’s narratives bring out the environmental

injustices they face in their daily lives, and in what forms do these injustices exist? This research also addresses a second set of questions related to methodology. Why make theater the tool of choice for the exploration of community issues? What type of theater is utilized, and how conducive is it to community-based research? I will address these methodological considerations, along with a detailed description of the structure and composition of this community-based research study in Chapter 2.

My motivations for volunteering at SOC speak to my position in this research project and Oberlin College, as well as my relationship with South Elyria residents. I volunteered at SOC as part of the Bonner Scholars program, which grants money to low-income students of color like myself who are seriously committed to engaging in community service while in college. My motivation to volunteer at SOC stemmed partly from economic need and a duty to fulfill the requirements of my scholarship; from a genuine desire to engage in community service; and from the unexpected comfort I felt by being around other people of color. (The city and college of Oberlin is predominately white). As I began building relationships with the students and staff at SOC, I remained aware of and sensitive to the complexities that came with my position and how it affected our relationship. I was privileged for having the support of an elite educational institution like Oberlin College to conduct this research. When the director of SOC found out I was an Oberlin College student and a Bonner scholar, she granted me a significant amount of freedom to structure the theater classes because of Oberlin's and Bonner's good reputation in volunteer work. Yet I knew that in order to build good relationships with the students and staff, I had to be mindful of my position as an outsider, to listen, and to be respectful of community dynamics as they manifested in SOC's space. Being Latina, coming from a financially unstable immigrant household, and growing up in a minority community helped me sympathize with and

connect to the socioeconomic and cultural context of the SOC community.

Environmental justice and performance: a dynamic pair

The aims of community-based theater and the environmental justice movement are highly compatible, making the application of community-based theater to the struggle for environmental justice a powerful tool for transformation. Shannon Jackson writes that in a broad sense, community-based theater is a “social practice,” a kind of art that helps us “to imagine sustainable social institutions... [an] art that explores interdependent support, of labor, sanitation, welfare, and urban planning...Socially engaged art provokes reflection on the contingent systems that support the management of life” (2011: 14). In other words, community-based theater is an umbrella term for performing art forms occurring at the grassroots level whose mission is to mobilize communities in order to create social changes that will improve the collective quality of life. This mission is synonymous with the goals of the environmental justice movement.

Community-based theater provides a visual, kinesthetic, emotive, and creative process for discovering, critiquing, and changing the human condition. Participants engage in a meaningful dialogue that everyone can actively participate in and have access to. Collectively, participants have the artistic license to shape their theater pieces however the group sees fit. Richard Boon and Jane Plastow (2004: 7) posit that people who claim creative license raise their self-esteem, claim the right to voice their understandings about their world, and give themselves choices about how to live their lives. When community members are given artistic license, they become active participants in the quest for healthier communities.

I based my theater curriculum for Save Our Children on the Theater of the Oppressed (TO) model of community-based theater developed by Nobel Peace Prize nominee Augusto Boal.

First started in Brazil, Boal's native country, it has been practiced around the world for over 40 years. The goal of Theater of the Oppressed is for participants to dramatically analyze real-life oppressions/obstacles/challenges they face and act out potential solutions to overcome them. The theater process thus empowers participants to go out into the world and take action against the oppression, using the very solutions they tried out during scene work. TO is, according to Boal, "rehearsal for the revolution" (1985 122).

There are several different forms of Theater of the Oppressed. My curriculum drew primarily upon image theater, in which participants use their silent bodies to express a given social theme. The images they create through their poses can then be interpreted, reshaped, added onto, or subtracted from other images created by the rest of the group. These images represent a diverse, visual dialogue surrounding the theme at hand and provide insight for developing verbal dialogue. Ideas for scene work evolve out of image theater. TO works exceptionally well as a tool for environmental justice communities because TO provides a creative space to express and explore the issues most pressing to them.

John Sullivan et al. (2008) and the Community Environmental Forum Theater (CEFT) have done extensive work in various environmental justice communities in Texas using the Theater of the Oppressed model. In 2004 in Houston, Texas, CEFT coordinated with Project COAL (Communities Organized against Asthma and Lead) to form *El Teatro Lucha por la Salud del Barrio* (The Theater Fights for Neighborhood Health). Troupe members came directly from the affected neighborhood. Image theater exercises such as "Real to Ideal" allowed troupe members to use their bodies to make images of their worst environmental fears and then transformed the image into a safer, healthier community. At the end of the project, the actors were asked to evaluate their experiences. Sullivan reports that the actors claimed to have gained

increased self-confidence, self-esteem, and self-regard, in addition to an increase in knowledge about community issues and toxic exposure pathways (2008: 175-6).

Sullivan et al. (2006) additionally claim that networking is another potential outcome of the TO process. Networking is a key component to environmental justice work because it is the primary organizational pattern of the environmental justice movement, which is driven by decentralization, diversification, and democratization (Schlosberg 1999). When theater works at the grassroots level, the process can also lead to the formation of a network of community members, activists, academic researchers, scientists, and health and political organizations. For example, Sullivan et al. (2006) notes the many different organizations representing various parts of the Houston area collaborated with the Community Environmental Forum Theater (CEFT). Some of these organizations included the National Institute of Environmental Health Sciences Center in Environmental Toxicology at the University of Texas Medical Branch; community groups like *Unidos Contra Environmental Racismo* (United Against Environmental Racism), *Nuestra Palabra* (Our Word), *Talento Bilingue de Houston* (Bilingual Talent of Houston); members of the Houston Independent School District; and the Immaculate Heart Parish. Several other organizations worked with CEFT as well. The Forum and Toxics Assistance Division at the University of Texas Medical Branch continued to maintain network ties with many of the organizations that contributed to CEFT. Since community-based theater is ideally all-inclusive, participatory, and democratic, various representatives from different institutions are able to share their knowledge, resources, and ideas. Residents who are directly affected by environmental injustice on a daily basis provide local knowledge, defined as “knowledge about a local context or setting including empirical knowledge of specific characteristics, circumstances, events, relationships, as well as normative understanding of their meaning” (Fischer; quoted in Sullivan

and Parras 2008). This levels the playing field among “experts” and “laymen” because all participants, regardless of position, utilize the language of theater to communicate. “Experts” relinquish some of their own power and debunk their status by learning from the community as they participate in the theater process. (Boon and Plastow 2000). Power dynamics shift when the theater process validates their status as holders of crucial knowledge. When combined with the knowledge and resources of participants from other groups and institutions, the environmental justice network serving a particular community or city is all the more equipped to create change.

A popular refrain within the environmental justice movement is “We speak for ourselves.” Community-based theater such as the Theater of the Oppressed model provides a space for these voices to emerge. By sharing the tools of TO with the students at Save Our Children, I hoped to magnify their voices in ways that elementary children are seldom granted in the world of adults. With such a goal in mind, I will heretofore refer to this community-based research project as *our research*, to remind the reader that I am but one of the many voices present here. “Our” is a possessive adjective that indicates ownership, and the students and teachers at SOC have the right to claim as much ownership of this project as I do. (I just happen to be the person who was given the privilege to write it all up.) By having joint ownership of the research, members of the SOC community engage in the pursuit of both distributional and procedural justice in regards to their environment.

Chapter 2: Methods

The search for appropriate methods: Participant Action Research, Performance

Ethnography, and Theater of the Oppressed

Because our research spans the interdisciplinary fields of Environmental Studies and Performance Studies, we used a blend of qualitative methods practiced in these fields, namely participatory action research and performance ethnography, in our investigation of environmental justice issues in South Elyria. This blending of methods served to tailor to the particular needs of the SOC community. Since most of the participants were elementary school children of color from working class families, and because we were exploring environmental justice issues (which affect vulnerable populations), the methods chosen for this project had to be not only culturally sensitive but also appropriate, accessible, and engaging for the participants' age group, which was eight to ten years-old. The form and function of participatory action research and performance ethnography are well suited to meet the needs of the research participants.

Participatory action research (PAR) is an umbrella term used to describe a process of investigation that seeks to challenge the traditional notions and power relations of researcher-as-expert and participant-as-subject of study by emphasizing active participation and collaboration, democratic decision-making, critical analysis of pertinent social issues affecting the community of participants, and collective ownership of research projects (Denzin and Lincoln ed. 2000; Gaventa quoted in Brydon-Miller, 1997). In participant action researcher and performance ethnographer Diane Conrad's words, "as research 'for,' 'with' and 'by' the people rather than 'on' the people, [PAR] seeks to break down the distinction between researchers and researched"

(2004: 15). By hailing participants' lived experiences as a kind of expert knowledge of their specific social contexts, and by encouraging participants to create new collective knowledge, PAR strives to empower all those involved in the research process to bring about positive social change from the community-level (Maguire quoted in Brydon-Miller 1997). In the words of Reason and Bradbury "[Participatory] action research is not about knowledge for its own sake, but knowing in the pursuit of worthwhile purposes—which we may describe as the flourishing of human persons, communities, and the ecologies of which they are part" (quoted in Reason 2004). Participatory action researchers are invested in dismantling existing systems of oppression by joining science and academia with experiential, community knowledge and catalyzing collective action.

PAR grew out of a variety of research approaches committed to working with subjugated groups of people in the hopes of social transformation. These approaches include feminist praxis, critical ethnography, critical and eco-pedagogy, transformative education, and popular education, among others (Given ed. 2008). The popular education movement of the 1970s in particular had a strong influence on the development of PAR (Conrad 2004). Diane Conrad (2004: 14) writes

Popular education is aimed at empowering traditionally excluded, marginalized, or subordinated sectors of society. With the political intentions of collective social change toward a more equitable and democratic society through raised awareness and collaborative action, popular education practices explore the learners' lived experiences in both their humanizing and oppressive dimensions.

Popular education was spearheaded by Brazilian educator, writer, and philosopher Paulo Freire. In his book, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Freire posited that in order to create social change, people first needed to develop what he called *conscientização*, or critical consciousness, which is

an ability to critically question and analyze one's own social condition and act based on that analysis in order to change one's condition (Ira Shor quoted in McLaren and Leonard ed. 1993). The act of doing research, especially in the social sciences, requires critical consciousness. By breaking the barrier between the researcher and the researched and including participants as active members of the research process, PAR seeks to empower all those involved by providing a space for participants to develop critical consciousness.

Performance ethnography, like PAR, is a qualitative research approach that stresses active participation of those involved in the research project, in this case through performance. Part anthropology and part performance studies, performance ethnographers study the nature of social relationships through the lens of performance, a broad category that includes the performing arts, rituals, sports and other popular entertainment, and any performative aspect of daily life. (Schechner 2004). While it follows that the field of performance studies is as broad as the term that it studies, performance studies scholars have come to consider social activism as a defining characteristic of the field, due to the tendency of performance studies to be a space for transgression and resistance against traditional or mainstream disciplinary structures— hegemonic structures that perpetuate inequitable power relations and exploitation between researchers and their subjects (Bial ed. 2004; Given ed. 2008). Performance ethnographers, then, share similar goals with participatory action researchers in terms of challenging social norms and pushing for social transformation. Denzin asserts, for example, that performance ethnography is a way of acting on the world in order to change it (quoted in Given ed. 2008). Likewise, the driving force of community-based theater is a yearning for positive social transformation. In fact, collaboration between PAR, performance ethnography, and community-based theater is common (see Sullivan 2006, 2008; Conrad 2004; Dennis 2009; Saldaña 2003). These researchers

specifically utilize community-based theater techniques such as Theater of the Oppressed to bring out the performative aspect of performance ethnography.

Blending complimentary research methodologies

There is no set way to do PAR or performance ethnography; both methods are meant to be molded to fit the particular needs and desires of the research participants, and the two can be easily combined into one unique methodology. For example, performance ethnographic methods can be incorporated at any stage of the research process, whether for gathering, analyzing, and/or presenting the research material (Given ed. 2008). In our case, the children gathered and analyzed their research by engaging in Theater of the Oppressed workshops during their “theater class” time, and presented their findings as short play for SOC’s talent show, which served as the culmination of SOC’s summer programming. Likewise, PAR methods can be incorporated into any and every aspect of the research process, from planning to presentation. PAR informed our project from its conception to the writing of this paper. (I will go into further detail about the ways in which our project incorporated PAR later in this chapter.)

When PAR is combined with performance ethnographic methods that draw on TO techniques, the product can be transformative. This combination was especially fruitful when working with children and their everyday struggles due to its accessibility, sensitivity, and appeal. Active participation is one key aspect of PAR. Engaging in a TO exercise or performing in a play required active participation from the children. Indeed, to act in a theater piece is to be active. According to Jürgen Habermas (quoted in Denzin and Lincoln ed. 2000), PAR serves to open a “communicative space,” where group members can engage in meaningful dialogue about the issues they care about. TO and performance are centered around such a communicative space, as

it is through dramatic dialogue (either visual, verbal, or both) that the children are able to interpret, analyze, and create new knowledge, and then share it with an audience.

While the TO workshops were seen as play and not work, by engaging in the theater process the children were in fact doing critical research. Charles Garoian suggests that performance opens a liminal pedagogical space where the participants engage in a complex learning process that “recognizes the experiences, memories, and multiple perspectives of participants and encourages discussion of complex and contradictory issues” (quoted in Given ed. 2008). To the SOC students, theater was just another fun activity to engage in, like playing pretend during recess. With their active imaginations and eagerness for attention, children are wonderful storytellers, and many of them are still at an age when it is not embarrassing to be the center of attention. The TO exercises are crucial for participatory action research involving children because the children are able to fully engage in the research process in a format that they understand best—through play.

What kind of critical research did the children do through play? Children are not usually imagined as capable of conducting research, developing critical consciousness, or contributing to the fields of environmental studies, performance studies, anthropology, or any other social science. This skepticism likely stems from the dominant ideological claim that empirical, quantitative, and positivist forms of knowledge are the most valid forms of knowledge. This biased claim subjugates other forms of knowledge—such as the experiential, local, emotional, interpretive, hermeneutic, and critical—as well as the knowledge holders. PAR seeks to draw out these alternative forms of knowledge. As Reason and Bradbury (quoted in Reason 2004) state,

[Participatory] action research starts with everyday experience and is concerned with the development of living knowledge. It draws on diverse forms of knowing as

we encounter and act in our world, not just empirical and rational ways of knowing, including the experiential and tacit, the presentational and aesthetic, the relational and dialogical, the propositional, and the practical.

Children are more than capable of and are constantly creating these forms of knowledge.

Additionally, anthropologist Johannes Fabian (quoted in Given ed. 2008) argues that knowledge about culture or social life is “performative rather than informative” and can only be drawn out through performance rather than traditional social science methods like surveys and interviews.

For this reason, along with being accessible to children at SOC, the TO process allowed the children to present, analyze, and produce knowledge about the social conditions of South Elyria that is as valid as knowledge produced by adults. PAR, TO, and performance ethnography are methods that acknowledge the validity of the children’s subjugated knowledge and are thus appropriate to utilize for our research project.

Bringing PAR, TO, and performance ethnography to Save our Children

In accordance with PAR methods (see Brydon-Miller 1997), I began the research process by establishing a relationship with the SOC community based on their needs. As I mentioned in Chapter 1, I volunteered to teach theater during SOC’s 2010 summer program after the director informed me that students were interested in the arts but that there were no art teachers available at the time. I was asked to teach the third and fourth grade class once a week for the duration of the summer. I spent that first summer gauging student interest in different forms of theater techniques. Environmental justice was not a theme; emphasis was placed on exposing students to an array of theater models to see which ones worked best for their age group. The students were particularly fond of many TO exercises. During that time I got to know the homeroom teachers

for that class, other SOC teachers and staff, and learned more about the daily workings of SOC. Thus, the foundation for our working relationship was built that summer.

I continued to build the relationship during the 2011 summer program. In preparation for the summer, I chose TO games and exercises that received positive feedback from students the previous summer, along with other promising TO techniques, and used them to structure a set of TO workshop sessions, or “lesson plans.” Each workshop/class lasted 90 minutes. Through collaboration with SOC students, teachers, and staff, we held these workshops once a week for 8 weeks. I was placed with the same homeroom teachers who co-taught the mixed third and fourth grade group, and several children from the previous summer were back in the class. There were 15 students total, though attendance fluctuated throughout the summer. About three-quarters of the children were African-American, and the remaining quarter of the children were either of Latino or mixed-descent. All of the children lived in South Elyria.

Each of the first four TO workshops was structured in two parts: physicality, trust, and skill building; and story building and working on thematic problems. These parts were based on the general structure of a TO workshop as outlined in Boal’s *Games for Actors and Non-actors* (2002 edition).³ In contrast to the previous summer, I explicitly chose thematic questions for some of the exercises that dealt with environmental justice. Realizing that children would not be thinking about environmental justice in the same way that scholars and activists do, I avoided using the term environmental justice altogether, and spent much time simplifying the language of my inquiries. For example, I asked them to share what they liked and did not like about their neighborhood. Since the culmination SOC’s summer program was a talent show, and the class wanted to put on a play, the second half of the summer workshops consisted of creating and

³ See Appendix 1 for an example lesson plan.

rehearsing an original play created by the students. Combined with the time that the homeroom teachers allotted to rehearsing the students' play outside of my theater class, and the final performance at the talent show, the children spent about 15 hours engaged in the theater process.

Crucial aspects of PAR were implemented through the TO workshops. According to Brydon-Miller (1997: 661), effective PAR requires a significant level of mutual trust and commitment on the behalf of all the participants; entails that community participants and researchers together take responsibility research design, data collection and analysis, and implementation of "change plans;" and insists on participants owning the results of their research and how that research is being used. The first part of the TO workshops specifically worked to build trust within the group. Most of the children consistently participated in the workshops with enthusiasm. In terms of research design, while I was responsible for designing the workshop structure, I was attentive to student feedback and allowed the process to shift according to student interest. The students quickly chose favorite theater games, and we would play those more often than others. Exercises that were not as successful were dropped. I also abandoned some of the original questions about environmental justice that I had planned on having the children explore after I realized that the children were not interested in pursuing the topic as I was construing it. As per TO and PAR methodology, I shifted my questions and exercises to match the topics they wanted to address. In addition to student feedback, I incorporated aspects of the homeroom teachers' lesson plans into the TO workshops. The class's educational theme for the summer apart from the theater class was the "Great Outdoors" which included learning about local geography and history. We explored the Great Outdoors theme on several occasions during the workshops. In fact, several of the activities related to this theme influenced the plot and setting of the students' final play.

The process that the children went through in creating, rehearsing, and presenting their original play for their family and friends at the talent show corresponds to the collective action of data collection, analysis, and implementation of “change plans” that Brydon-Miller identifies as part of PAR (ibid). The children’s research was focused on creating a coherent play through the TO research process. This means they drew from their life experiences and imagination to create comprehensible characters, conflict, and context for their story. Environmental Justice research and activism is frequently engaged in creating social change through local politics, such as attending council meetings, and protests as part of their action plans. For the students at SOC, implementing an action plan meant presenting their perspectives to the adults in their community that care for their well-being. This transmission of knowledge from child to adult in the form of storytelling is a kind of ethical appeal to the adults for care and community action. And finally, in order to address the aspect of research ownership, I filmed the final performance and made DVD copies for each student, the homeroom teachers, and the SOC director.⁴ I will also give a copy of this paper to SOC to keep for their records.

Creating a dialogical text

My own role in this community-based research project besides coordinator and facilitator (or joker, in TO terminology) is to build upon the children’s research findings from the summer and present it to an academic audience. In this way, we are research partners building a coalition between Oberlin College and the South Elyria community, which is key in environmental justice work. The goal of sharing these findings in an academic form (that is to say through a formal,

⁴ The DVD also included parts of the TO workshops that were filmed by two of students in the class who felt more comfortable being part of the film crew being than actors.

written thesis), is to further validate the children's knowledge as an important contribution to environmental studies literature. In order to meet this goal, I employed several ethnographic techniques for the documentation of the TO process. I wrote field notes and journal entries after each workshop session. Notes from the previous session helped structure the next. The journal entries helped jog my memory and distinguish the events of one workshop from another. I brought a video camera to class, and two students, per their request (and in the spirit of PAR), used it to film parts of the theater workshops. I also filmed the final performance during the talent show. At the end of the summer program, I interviewed one of the homeroom teachers, Ms. Monica, who had collaborated with me for the past two summers. I also interviewed her sister, Ms. Kimi, who taught the teens at SOC that same summer. The sisters identify as black Hispanics. I asked Ms. Monica about her thoughts on how the summer went in terms of the theater class and the great outdoors theme. Both Ms. Monica and Ms. Kimi shared their personal experiences living in South Elyria.⁵

I then took the documented material of the children's research findings and conducted further analysis and interpretation to add another layer of understanding and complexity to our project. My intention is not to drown out other participants' voices or to have the final say on the research outcomes. My intention is to create a multi-vocal, multi-perspective text that maintains some of the performative nature of the research process. With this in mind I have written scripted descriptions of interactions between participants during the theater workshops and during the interview. The combination of field notes, journal entries, and audiovisual material formed the base for the recreation of the children's script in Chapter 3. Like in Conrad's scripted vignettes, (2004: 18), the scripts I have written, while based on my memory and documentation, are partly

⁵ To protect the identity of participants, all names have been changed.

fictionalized (Banks and Banks quoted in Conrad 2004) for ethical, thematic, and practical reasons. However, I have done my utmost to preserve the essence of the conversations and interactions. These scripts provide an opportunity for both close reading and interpretation on my part as well as for participant's voices to emerge and be heard.

I am consciously aware of the layer of subjectivity that I add to our collective research by preparing it for the academic arena. But in this consciousness I strive to be transparent about the choices I have made in the creation of this text, and why I have made them. Reason claims that transparency is more important in participatory action research than getting all the steps right, and that through this transparency we as researchers “encourage more full and rich accounts of how relationships are initiated, developed, brought to fullness, and ended” (2004: 272-3). Through this paper I hope to share with you, the reader, the richest account I can produce of how working with Save Our Children community in South Elyria shaped my perspective on the meaning of environmental justice and of research.

Chapter 3: Findings

Theater class at Save Our Children

“Ms. Lissette’s here! Ms. Lissette’s here!”

As soon as I enter the small room in which Save Our Children’s third and fourth grade class resides, children run towards me. Bouncing with energy, they tug on my hands, give me hugs, and shower me with questions about the day’s class.

“Can we play ‘Zip, Zap, Zop?’”

“I want to play ‘Murderer’ ‘cause we didn’t get to play it last time!”

“Are we going to act again?”

“I have an idea for a scene, can we try it?”

The homeroom teachers, Ms. Monica and Ms. Candace, greet me and ask the children to mind their manners and speak one at a time. They remind their students to be respectful and good listeners. I am grateful that the homeroom teachers stay in the room with me during the theater class, since they are much better than I am at enforcing class discipline. Not that the children need much disciplining. Their enthusiasm and attentiveness during our ninety minutes together keep them on task.

* * *

During our interview after the completion of SOC’s summer program, Ms. Monica reflects on how the children received the theater workshops. “I think it worked really well. And they looked forward to it, they were like, ‘Today is Tuesday? Are we having theater? *Yaaay!* Ms. Lissette!’ and they’d get really excited. And while they were having fun, they had to follow the rules, and if the rules weren’t followed they would notice how the game didn’t go to same way it was supposed to. They understood how important it was to follow the rules.”

* * *

The students work together to clear the foldable chairs and tables in order to make room for theater. We spend the first half of class doing a collection of warm-up activities, adaptations of children’s games found in Boal’s book, *Games for Actors and Non-Actors*, and theater exercises I remember playing when I was in grade school. Sometimes we begin by stretching our muscles and shaking our limbs as though we were covered in ants. Sometimes we warm up our voices by singing scales. Other times we jump right into the children’s favorite games, like “Zip,

Zap, Zop,” in which we all stand in a circle and one person passes a clap to someone else while simultaneously calling out “zip,” “zap,” or “zop” in the correct order. The receiver of the clap must then pass it immediately on with the appropriate z-word. Sensory and rhythmic games like this move quickly and immediately grasp the children's attention, and we have great fun together. Other games have them close their eyes and lead each other around the room. These games build cooperation and trust within the group, which are necessary group qualities for the second half of class time.

The next forty-five minutes of class are spent doing Theater of the Oppressed exercises that explore a given theme. Ms. Candace and Ms. Monica informed me before the theater workshops began that the summer’s main scholastic theme for their class was the “Great Outdoors.” The homeroom teachers’ summer curriculum revolved around activities that would get the children to explore their town while learning about local geography and history. I make an effort to incorporate the Great Outdoors theme into the theater workshops, while allowing the children to take this theme in whatever direction they like.

A different spin on the Great Outdoors

Sitting at her family’s kitchen table, Ms. Monica explains to me during the interview how she and Ms. Candace executed the Great Outdoors theme that summer. “We took a lot of field trips outside. We went to Lake Erie, the Black River Reservation in Lorain, Cascade Park, and the East Falls behind the police station. The children worked out in the [community] garden [across from Save Our Children]. We went on city walks; we used to go downtown and go people watching, trying to see where they were going, what their lives were about. It was about helping them to enjoy nature. It was about walking, being outside, and using the five senses.”

Part of the Great Outdoors theme also included geographic and historical components. Ms. Monica says, “The mapping project started out from the after school program, when the children didn't know how many states we have, what city they live in. Ms. Candace said, you know what, I really want them to know about their area, so she first started off with maps. Some of children couldn't figure out where they lived on the map of Elyria, so Ms. Candace showed them. Then she talked about the history of Elyria. I had no idea about the history, so it was interesting for me.”

* * *

The students' mapping project is proudly displayed on the classroom wall. Brightly colored pushpins mark where on the map of Elyria the students live. Other pins mark the locations of police and fire departments, Elyria high school, and of course, Save Our Children. Most of the pins cluster around SOC's location. Connected to each pin is a length of red yarn that leads to a self-addressed envelope made by each student. Their smiling portraits serve as stamps. Black and white photographs of the pedestrians, parks, and streets of Elyria's past surround the map, alongside the students' decorated envelopes.

The mapping project is a visual representation of the children's connection to their neighborhoods and their city, which constitute their environment. Ms. Candace and Ms. Monica sought to deepen that connection through field trips to the Great Outdoors. The field trips they organized provided an array of interpretations of what constitutes as the Great Outdoors. Visits to Lake Erie, Cascade Park, and the Black River are typical conceptions of this theme, as these are sites where children are taught to appreciate the aesthetic of wilderness. Gardening, another common interpretation of outdoor education, teaches children that their toil with the soil can

influence natural processes in their favor. City walks and people watching downtown, however, extend the view of nature to include human interaction with the built environment.

By including urbanized spaces in the Great Outdoors theme, the teachers encourage a more holistic understanding of the environment that does not separate human structures from nature. During the second half of the theater class, which focuses on story building, I also strive to get the children to explore the Great Outdoors theme from a broader perspective. This way, my students are less likely to become bored with or feel stifled by the Great Outdoors, and see the theme as a starting point for their stories to come forth. Moreover, a broad perspective of the children's environment is necessary in order to gain a holistic understanding of how their stories serve as environmental justice narratives.

Children's environmental justice narratives

When it is time to delve deeper into thematic issues with my students during one workshop, I begin by asking the class, "Think about what you have learned so far about the Great Outdoors, which is part of your environment. What does the environment mean to you?" As the children call out words, I write them on the blackboard behind me with a stubby piece of chalk. When the children have finished calling out words, I step away from the board to get a better look. I ask the students to quietly think about the words on the board, put some of them together, and use their imagination. What images do the words bring to mind?

* * *

The summer is long gone, and on a balmy spring day, I look back at the children's list of words, which I had hastily scribbled into my field notes on that summer day. Following my own

instructions from that particular workshop, I rearrange their words, adding none of my own, and use my imagination.

Save Our Children

Stores, farms, your room

Around, clean

Nature, trees, a roof above head

Cats, dogs, wild animals, family

Grass, bugs, people around you

Safety

The environment means many things to these children, and the list shows that they are able to identify its different components. Green spaces and wildlife may fall under the natural environment, but nature also resides in the domestic—household pets, and the insects lurking in the small patches of grass that have pushed their way through the concrete parking lot in front of Save Our Children. These domestic, built spaces provide shelter and structure for the children’s social environment—family, friends, teachers, peers, store employees and customers, neighbors, and the people they watch downtown. The students included expectations from their environment in their list as well. They expect the spaces they inhabit to be clean and safe. At a young age, the children understand what kinds of environmental conditions help them flourish.

* * *

The students look at the board strewn with their words about the environment for about a minute or so. Then, I use Boal’s image theater techniques with them to transform their list of words into a visual description. “Okay class, now that you have thought about the words on the board, and now that you’ve used your imagination to create images in your head about what the

environment means to you, I want you to share what you see with everyone. The trick is you have to use your body instead of your words. Strike a pose that shows us what you are imagining.”

One by one, the students strike a pose for the rest of the class. Dina and Tiffany each stood with their arms spread wide. Travis looks like he is punching the air. A couple students just stand there when their turn comes up, and a couple more choose not strike a pose. They want to interpret the other students’ images instead, they say, so I let them. Several students agree that Dina and Tiffany were birds trying to fly away. Charlie thinks Tiffany was Jesus on the cross.

“Ms. Lissette, I got a story for Travis’s pose. Can I say it?” says Mauricio.

“Sure thing,” I reply.

“Travis is in his room, and he’s throwing things around and punching things because he’s mad. He got grounded for getting really bad grades in school,” explains Mauricio.

“That’s an interesting way to look at Travis’s pose. Thanks, Mauricio. Does anyone else want to come up with a story for the other poses?” I ask.

Tamara raises her hand. “I think Tiffany is mad too. She’s frustrated and has her hands in the air ‘cause her mom couldn’t pay to get Tiffany’s hair done. So her mom did it herself but she doesn’t know how to do Tiffany’s hair right and it looks bad.”

“Really? That’s too bad for Tiffany. I hope she isn’t made fun of at school for the way her hair looks.” Tiffany nervously touches her hair. “Don’t worry Tiffany, your hair looks nice. We are just making up stories right now. It’s make-believe.” I turn to Tamara. “Thanks for sharing your interpretation of Tiffany’s pose, Tamara.”

Kenneth returns to the bird theme with his interpretation of Dina’s pose. “A goose is looking at her new house and is wondering if it’s good enough.”

“I think it’s a bird that’s hungry and wants some bread,” says Travis.

Charlie disagrees. “No, it’s Jesus on the cross and he’s saying ‘I didn’t do it!’”

“There is no right or wrong story here,” I explain to the class. “It’s okay if your story is different. People see things differently sometimes, and that’s fine.” I look at the clock. It is time to wrap things up and tidy up the classroom. “That’s all we have time for today, but everyone did a great job. I really liked the poses and stories you came up with. Next class we’ll start brainstorming ideas for the play you all will put on for the talent show that’s coming up in a few weeks. Can you guys help me set up the tables and chairs again?” Together the students help tidy up and get ready to go home.

* * *

The images and stories the children presented that day were visual manifestations of how they interact with and make sense of their various environments. The natural environment is invoked by the birds; the social environment by interactions with the family as they relate to school performance and personal grooming; the economic by a mother’s inability to afford to get her daughter’s hair done; even the spiritual is represented by seeing Jesus Christ in the outstretched arms of a child. Issues found in these image theater exercises include economic hardship, inadequate housing, and poor school performance. These issues may serve as indicators of structural inequalities found in their environment, which in turn should be examined from an environmental justice perspective. Firstly, economic hardship and poverty have major effects on a person’s ability to choose what environments to live in, such as housing, and their ability to handle environmental pressures, such as school life. South Elyria is the poor side of town, and many of SOC’s children live in economic hardship.

During our interview, for instance, Ms. Monica revealed to me, “A lot of times, children come inside and they don't have proper shoes, like their shoes are always falling apart. We tell them, you can't wear these shoes, you need a different pair. They don't have it at home. So what do we do? We go and take our small little salary to buy shoes for them to wear. We are their providers.” SOC provides free breakfast and lunch to all of its students. Staff members understand that this service is crucial, because for some children, sometimes these are their only guaranteed meals for the day. It comes as no surprise then, that economic hardship is a recurring theme in the children’s stories, including their final play.

The final play, which we brainstormed together as a class, drawing on previous discussions and exercises throughout the summer, is about three families, each from the past, present, and future of Elyria. Ms. Candace and Ms. Monica had the students come up with character histories and motivations for the play prior to the next theater class. The next time we met, Kenneth explained his character to me. “I'm a rich man [from the future]. And there are next-door neighbors who sometimes don't have enough stuff. Sometimes they don't have a car and they come to get stuff and ask for money, and I bought them a car so we can still be friends.” Naomi told me her character is a single mother with six children and lives in the present. (Due to a deficit of class actors, she ended up having only two children in the final version of the play.) Gerald chose to play a character from the past, an escaped slave who runs away with what is left of his family to start a new life Elyria, but they continue to struggle because the house they live in is falling apart. The issue of economic hardship is a primary source of conflict in all of the aforementioned character descriptions that the students came up with. Is this particular issue especially real to them because they are all children of color?

The fact that the predominantly black neighborhoods that SOC serves reside on the poorer south side of Elyria is an example of a major structural inequality known as institutional racism. Lynne D. Richardson and Marlaina Norris (2010: 171) define the phenomenon as follows:

Institutional racism, which refers to differential access to the goods, services, and opportunities of society by race, is normative, is sometimes legalized, and manifests itself both in material conditions and in access to power...Examples include differential access to quality education, sound housing, gainful employment, appropriate medical facilities, a clean environment, material resources, wealth, representation in government, and control of the media.

Since differential access to goods, services, and opportunities on the basis of race applies not only to the social environment but the physical one as well, institutional racism is synonymous with environmental racism. Howard Frumkin (2005: 290) writes that the disparities in the built environment span at least five arenas: housing, transportation, food, parks and green spaces, and squalor. These disparities, caused by institutional and environmental racism, are not just suggested in the children's narratives. Ms. Monica and her sister Ms. Kimi recall countless cases of the loss of goods, services, and opportunities for the residents of South Elyria. The sisters have lived in South Elyria for the past eight years.

Ms. Monica starts the long list of closures. "They've closed down a whole lot of things down here. They completely got rid of [South Pool], like two or three years ago. And they closed South Rec[reational Center] too."

"And you remember they closed down that school?" Ms. Kimi chimes in. "Elyria West. And they closed down East Gate elementary school. They closed it due to budget cuts."

“Yeah,” says Ms. Monica. “We have a lot of empty buildings. We have the empty Walmart. They made a bigger one and moved it to Lorain. Now there's just an empty building and it's been there for about a year or two.”

Ms. Kimi continues down the list. “They closed the Tops, and then Giant Eagle took over, and they closed Giant Eagle down too.” Then she switches the subject to transportation. “The bus system,” she says, “used to come every hour and now it's every two or three hours. They had ten different routes, and now they have only five routes and sometimes in order to go to Lorain you have to stop at this transition point and you have to wait for like half an hour to an hour and there's no cover outside so if it's raining, snowing, or too much sun, it's miserable. It's really time consuming, especially if you don't have a car, license, or transportation. It's really hard to find a ride to go all the way out Lorain to go to the welfare office, to get a job.”

The sisters went to Elyria High School, which is also located on the south side. There used to be several academic programs that served to prepare students for college, but those too were shut down. “Like they used to have this program called urban league,” says Ms. Monica. “They met once a week and they talked about getting your grades up, what you'd do when you got to college, and all that extra stuff. And then in the summer you would spend the whole summer on campus at Oberlin College. When I was in it, I was so excited for the summer, but then they stopped the program and I wasn't able to spend the summer [at Oberlin].”

“They also closed down Gear Up,” remembers Ms. Kimi. “When I went to school it was a program that helped with ACT, SAT and getting ready for college. They would actually pay for you and your lunch to go to different colleges. They got rid of that completely.”

Ms. Monica recalls yet another program. “They got rid of JOBS too. It was shaky when I was in it. It was about finding jobs for Ohio graduates.”

“And they haven't replaced any of this stuff?” I ask.

The sisters shake their heads. “Not that I know of,” says Ms. Monica.

From supermarkets, recreational facilities, and functional public transportation to schools and higher education attainment programs, South Elyria residents have experienced shrinkage in access to important resources. This shrinkage began as early as the 1970s, when global and national economic restructuring resulted in the deindustrialization of the Rust Belt, including Northeast Ohio. The closure of heavy industry operations in this region of the state led to the loss of thousands of jobs. As Barney Warf and Brian Holly (1997) note, reductions in federal aid to cities and welfare programs in the 1908s only compounded the problem. While some cities, such as Cleveland, have been able to shift their manufacturing sector to the production of chemicals, electronic equipment, and polymers (Warf and Holly 1997), only about 18 percent of Elyria's labor force was employed in the industrial sector in 2010 according to U.S. Census data. Even during times of economic growth, African-American communities seldom feel the benefits due to structural racism, such as restricted access to good education, transportation, and labor markets. Today's South Elyria residents have been put at a significant disadvantage in terms of physical, economic, and social mobility, which in turn negatively affects their ability to choose what environments to live in and their ability to handle environmental pressures. The children participating in the summer theater workshops at SOC were able to identify multiple symptoms of these disadvantages (though they were most likely unaware that the symptoms came from larger structural issues in society), and came up with imaginative remedies through their final play.

The final performance

There is no curtain to raise. There is no stage to reveal. But there are many pews, and they are filled with family and friends of the student performers in Save Our Children's summer talent showcase. The church next door to SOC's building has opened its doors and shines a metaphorical spotlight on the third and fourth grade class' untitled play. The students came up with the plot and the script. They rehearsed it for three weeks. Now, with few props and even fewer costumes (the students playing characters from the future don brightly colored cloths like ponchos over their regular garb, indicating future fashions), it is time to perform.

Scene 1

[An actor silently stands in front of the pulpit holding up a handmade sign reading "The Present," then exits. Mother enters with her two daughters, Alexa and Ariel. The girls lie on the floor, asleep. Mother wakes the girls and starts fixing two bowls of cereal on top of the church's piano. The girls sit on two chairs center stage.]

Alexa: What are we gonna eat for breakfast?

Mother: Cereal.

Ariel: We always have cereal. *[To Alexa.]* I'm smarter than you.

Alexa: No you're not. What's one plus one?

Ariel: Two.

Alexa: No it's not.

[The girls start to chase each other around the room.]

Mother: Hey, hey! Sit down! *[Mother gives each daughter a bowl of cereal and a bottle. Then she makes a call on her cell phone.]* Hello, Sis? Hi. I'm just calling you to see if you can

watch my kids while I go to work... Oh you have to work too? Well, do you know anybody else who can watch my kids? Oh, Ms. Michelle? Okay. *[Dials Ms. Michelle's number.]* Hello? Ms. Michelle? Hi. I'm calling you to see if you can watch my kids while I go to work. Oh, you have to watch somebody else's kids? Well, okay, bye.

[While Mother is on the phone, Alexis has been beating up on Ariel and making her cry.]

Mother: Hey! Get up! Sit down! I have to make a phone call, okay? You guys got to be quiet, okay? Okay? *[Calls her job.]* Mr. Banks, I'm calling to let you know that I'm taking the day off today because I have to watch my kids... What, I'm fired, what do you mean I'm fired? Alright then, I'll be there tomorrow morning to pick up my stuff. Bye.

[The girls continue to hit and push each other.]

Mother: Hey! Hey! HEEY! What'd I say? What'd I say? I said something. *[She spans both girls on the rear and sends them to separate corners.]* Didn't. *[Slap.]* I. *[Slap.]* Say. *[Slap.]* Be. *[Slap.]* Quiet? *[Looks at the audience.]* What am I going to do with these kids?

* * *

Young, single motherhood can be incredibly challenging, especially if the mother is raising her family on limited resources. An elevated proportion of young, single mothers in a community may be an indicator of impeded access to women's health and family planning services, and/or insufficient educational structures that disseminate information about women's health and family planning options. The quality of life for women who are unequipped for child rearing due to economic or social factors (i.e., live off of minimum wage or are unable to rely on the support of the father) critically depends on access to these health resources. As the audience can see in the opening scene of the children's play, single motherhood in the face of economic

and social instability is a serious struggle that could jeopardize the quality of life for both the mother and her children.

Like Mother in the play, Ms. Monica believes that young motherhood is a common phenomenon in South Elyria. “[Women] are having their children young, but I really think it’s that [young women] aren’t exposed to enough. Like they don’t know they have options.” She observes some of the effects that young motherhood has on the quality of life for children in a nearby public housing project. “Their parents aren’t even watching them. Like this one little girl, she is six years old, up early in the morning. She’s watching her three year-old and one year-old brothers, in the stroller, by herself, pushing them all outside of [the public housing complex]. How can a mother just let her six year old be out there with those little ones? And the sad thing is that her mother is around my age, like around twenty-five years old, and she has six children, and on her seventh.” Ms. Monica places the causation for the children’s situation on the mother’s neglect, but a closer examination of the structural forces at play reveal that the blame cannot be placed solely on the individual for the choices they have made. The fact that this mother lives in public housing, and that the overwhelming majority of residents of public housing project are people of color, raises flags that institutional/environmental racism is also to blame.

Scene 2

[An actor crosses the front of the church, holding up a sign reading “Future” then exits. Seven actors enter and start dancing to imaginary music. They are at a party. The host’s mother makes her way through the crowd asking people if they have their parents’ permission to be there. She gets to DrakeV6’s son, Roco.]

Host's mother: Roco, are you supposed to be at this party?

Roco: Yup!

Host's mother: *[Calls up DrakeV6.]* Is your son supposed to be at this party?

DrakeV6: No. Don't tell him I'm coming.

*[There's a knock on the piano. The party host's mother opens the imaginary door and
DrakeV6 walks in.]*

Party host: Who is this old man knocking at my door?

Host's mother: This is Roco's dad.

DrakeV6: Roco. Get in the car. *[Silence.]* Get in the car!

Roco: No.

DrakeV6: What did I say? Then do it!

Roco: No!

[DrakeV6 pantomimes slapping his son across the face.]

DrakeV6: Get in the car.

Roco: No! *[Gets another slap across the face.]*

DrakeV6: I just said get in the car.

Roco: And I just said no. *[Gets slapped again.]*

DrakeV6: Okay, you're grounded.

Roco: Fine, I'm going to my room anyway.

DrakeV6: You're not going to your room; you are going to the past.

Roco: *[Begs on his knees.]* No, please, no!

DrakeV6: *[Takes out an imaginary portable time machine and presses some buttons.]* Activate.

Roco and DrakeV6: WHOAH. *[They spin out of the room.]*

* * *

Scene 2 introduces DrakeV6 and his spoiled, rebellious son, Roco. Kenneth plays DrakeV6. Earlier in the chapter I mentioned that Kenneth wanted his character to be a rich man. DrakeV6 owns not only a car but also a time machine, which are signs of his wealth in the play. (I imagine that owning such an incredible transportation vehicle as a time machine would cost a fortune.) The characters in Future Elyria seem to be living in opulence when compared to Mother's situation in Present Elyria. Roco may have been spoiled by his father's wealth and privilege, which could explain his raucous behavior, his insolence towards his father, and his disregard for being grounded in his room (which is probably filled with entertaining, futuristic gadgets). DrakeV6 thus decides to discipline his son by exposing him to the harsher realities of Elyria's past.

Scene 3

[An actor crosses the front of the church, holding up a sign reading "Past" then exits. Harpo and his brother Jeremiah enter and sit on chairs stage right, by the piano. DrakeV6 and Roco spin into the scene from stage left.]

Roco: Where are we?

DrakeV6: Cascade Park?

[They observe the conversation between Harpo and Jeremiah.]

Harpo: I'm not going to work and I never will!

Jeremiah: Why don't you want to go to work?

Harpo: 'Cause I'm scared.

Jeremiah: Why you scared?

Harpo: I'm scared I might chop my fingers off. I don't want to be a lumberjack.

Jeremiah: Why don't you just go to the doctor's?

Harpo: 'Cause all the doc does is wrap a tissue around your finger and say you're all good.

Jeremiah: But I don't want to stay in this raggedy house anymore. Don't you want a better house?

Harpo: I'd rather not work. I'd rather just lay here and watch the waterfall. *[He lies down on the ground, as though admiring the nature around him.]*

Jeremiah: But mom would have wanted you to work.

Harpo: Well I guess so. Now help me up!

[DrakeV6 and Roco approach Harpo and Jeremiah.]

Harpo: Who are you?

DrakeV6: Who are *you*?

Harpo: My name's Harpo.

Jeremiah: I'm his brother Jeremiah.

DrakeV6: I'm DrakeV6. This is my son Roco.

Harpo: Where did you come from? You're dressed funny.

DrakeV6: We came from the future using this machine.

Jeremiah: Wow! Lemme see! *[Takes the imaginary hand-held machine and presses buttons]*

DrakeV6: Just don't press any—

All: WHOAH! *[Everyone spins away as the time machine transports them to another era.]*

* * *

Scene 3 takes place in Cascade Park, a historical park located on the north side of Elyria. The park has a special connection with the students and the theater workshops, which is

why I suspect the students chose to set the scene here. They went on a field trip to Cascade Park the day after a theater workshop in which the theme was “lost in the woods.” Through image theater techniques, they showed each other how they would feel in the woods, one thing they would take with them, and how they would use it. They created lots of images and poses during the workshop. The children had apparently enjoyed that workshop so much that they replicated their poses on top of logs and stumps at Cascade Park the next day. When Ms. Candace showed me the pictures she took of them striking their poses in the woods, my face lit up. I was later pleased to know that the students wanted to revisit their connection with the park through the play.

Three key issues raised in Scene 3 are occupational risk, poor housing conditions, and healthcare inequality. The three issues are intimately connected. Gerald made his character Harpo an escaped slave who ran away with his family to the north and settled in Elyria. Work opportunities for an escaped slave lay mainly as manual laborers or as house servants. Since logging is a form of manual labor, it is plausible that a freedman like Harpo could gain employment as lumberjack. The occupational risk of logging in an era before modern lumber and safety equipment must have been high, and working with heavy trees all day must have been grueling; it is no wonder that Harpo fears for his safety and health. But switching careers is not an option for him, because blacks had severely limited economic mobility at the time due to overt racism. Neither can Harpo choose to follow his desires and not work, because the current house he and his brother live in is in shambles. This job is currently his only hope for attaining a better house.

Harpo’s occupation and living conditions are in turn taxing on his health. Yet he cannot attain good medical care, as is suggested by his comment about the doctor merely re-attaching

his chopped off finger with tissue paper and calling it fixed. Harpo's mistrust of the doctor in the play reflects a real-life disparity in America's health care system. In their research on racial and ethnic disparities in health, Richardson and Norris (2010: 166-169) identified many resources that affect access to health care. The most relevant resources to residents of South Elyria include access to health information, income, level of education, insurance coverage, safe housing, nutritious foods, and convenient exercise spaces. Moreover, these researchers point out that racial and ethnic minorities are more likely than whites to live in environments that lack these resources that are needed in order to sustain health (pg. 166-9). The children identified issues related to income and safe housing in their play as well as in other theater exercises, and Ms. Monica and Ms. Kimi spoke about the closures of affordable grocery stores, recreational facilities, and programs for educational advancement that occurred in South Elyria since they moved to town. The students' and teachers' narratives suggest that health disparities exist in South Elyria. The disparities are in part caused by local environmental conditions.

Scene 4

[An actor crosses the front of the church, holding up a sign reading "Present" then exits. Mother enters with her two daughters. They are on a stroll through the park. Mother is on the phone.]

Mother: Hello Sis. I'm just calling to let you know that I lost my job and I can't find no babysitter so it's just horrible.

[Harpo, Jeremiah, DrakeV6 and Roco spin into the scene and land in Mother's path. She is surprised.]

Harpo: Where are we?

Mother: Uh...In Elyria, in Cascade park.

DrakeV6: What year are we in?

Mother: 2011.

Harpo: How's life in 2011?

Mother: Hard. I lost my job and I can't find a babysitter.

Roco: You work?

Mother: Yeah, everybody works.

Harpo: We came from the past and I don't want to work at my job. I hate my job. I need some money. I live in a shabby house and I need to raise up money so that my family can live in a better one. So, I'll be your babysitter! Just one dollar an hour!

DrakeV6: *[Looks at his son.]* Could you have two babysitters?

Mother: I don't really need two...

DrakeV6: Don't worry it's free.

Mother: Ok...sure!

DrakeV6: I'll be back in two months.

Roco: No, don't leave me here! I don't wanna work!

DrakeV6: Too bad. You need to learn your lesson!

Jeremiah: Will you take me back to the past now?

DrakeV6: Sure. Let's go.

[DrakeV6 presses some imaginary buttons and he and Jeremiah spin away.]

* * *

In Scene 4, the children present their creative solution to the multiple problems that were introduced in Scenes 1-3; namely by using the time machine to find support and pool resources from fellow Elyrians from different eras. Mother needs a babysitter, Harpo needs a safer job, and Roco needs to learn responsibility. It may be by chance that the three families meet, but their willingness to work together is noteworthy. While it is clear that the South Elyria community cannot use a time machine to solve its problems, the children were on the right track in terms of utilizing their social capital. Ichiro Kawachi and Lisa F. Berkman (quoted in Richardson and Norris 2010) define social capital as “the resources available to individuals and groups within communities as a result of their social network of connections.” The notion of social capital is central to the organizational structure and strategy of the environmental justice movement. Especially in disadvantaged, subjugated communities where access to resources is fragmented, working to build social capital—to pool local resources and willpower—may be a powerful strategy for dismantling environmental oppressions.

Scene 5

[An actor crosses the front of the church, holding up a sign reading “Two months later” then exits. Harpo and Roco sit on two chairs centerstage. They are watching a football game on television at Mother’s house.]

Harpo: Touchdown, woohoo! We got to check on the kids, c'mon.

[They go over to the girls, who are pretending to draw on the piano.]

Roco: Hey stop drawing on the wall!

Harpo: Now go brush your teeth. No not with that, that's a crayon. *[Girls pretend to brush their teeth.]*

Roco: Now go to bed.

[The girls lay down to sleep. The boys go back to the chairs center stage.]

Harpo: Those kids are like little terrors.

[Enter Mother. She lets out a big sigh.]

Mother: *Maaaaan*. I finally got a job and I finally got them in daycare. They go on Monday, and I start on Monday too.

Harpo: I've been meaning to tell you too. It's been two months. I've made enough money for a new house. Me and Roco got to go now. Well, I better start packing. I really don't want to go. 2011 really rocks but...

Roco: No, 2011 really sucks, but the football games are good.

[There's a knock on the piano. Mother answers the door.]

Mother: Hello DrakeV6.

DrakeV6: Hello. I'm back. Now, did my son learn his lesson?

Mother: Oh yeah, he learned his lesson real good.

Harpo: Well, bye now.

DrakeV6: Where are you going?

Harpo: I'm going with you! You are supposed to take me back home to the past.

DrakeV6: Oh, I forgot all about you. Well, come on!

[DrakeV6, Harpo, and Roco exit. Mother goes over to her sleeping children and tucks them in.]

Mother: Oh, I'm so glad everything worked out!

[End.]

* * *

Children can read and interpret their environment, and it is reflected in the stories they tell. Their teachers—grown-ups who have lived in the same town for about as long as the children have been living on this planet—corroborate the children’s lived and imagined experiences. Both children and adults possess local knowledge about the physical, social, and economic aspects of South Elyria’s environment. Such knowledge is crucial to environmental justice research, since the environment serves not just as an indicator but also the cause of inequality. People influence their environment as the environment influences them; the environment affects all aspects of people’s lives. Thus, examining an array of community issues from an environmental justice lens can help connect seemingly disparate issues, build social capital, coalitions, and solidarity. Eradicating structural inequalities, found in one’s environment and permeated through all aspects of one’s life—will require a collaborative effort. May children show us the way.

Chapter 4: Conclusion

Reflections on the research journey

This final chapter serves as a reflection on my personal journey through the community-based research process, and how that journey has resulted in an intervention in the field of environmental studies. As per the convictions of participatory action research, performance ethnography, and performance studies, which emphasize ethics, transparency, and subjectivity, it is not only appropriate but also necessary that I reflect critically on my role as researcher and how it has shaped research outcomes. Thus, I hold myself accountable to answering the

following questions: What were my research motivations and expectations, and how did I manage/struggle with them in light of PAR, which calls for the equal sharing of power and decision-making among all research partners, in my case children? How did collaborating with the Save Our Children community challenge me, and how did I grow from those challenges? What can social scientists such as myself learn from children?

Questioning power structures

The idea for our research came from a mix of organizational need, student desires, and an interest in environmental justice issues. Save Our Children was looking for volunteers to teach art classes and students expressed interest in theater. Through a conversation with SOC's program director, I was introduced to the desires of SOC's community and the issues facing the South Elyria community simultaneously. I then saw the theater classes as an opportunity to collaborate with residents of South Elyria in a theatrical exploration of community issues, which struck me as environmental injustices. I ran by the idea with the program director and asked for her opinion on me formally writing up the exploration findings, and she gave me her approval. The fact that I proposed that the theater class serve as a collaborative research project and obtained approval from an adult and not the children involved speaks to the matter of power dynamics in research. How was I going to share power with children, especially if I was interacting with them through a teacher/student relationship? The conventional classroom setting gives power to the teacher over the student. Outside of the classroom, too, adults have authority over children. The reasons for these power dynamics are obvious; children are still developing and require nurturing and protection. Adult caretakers have an obligation to do what is best for the development of the child, and have the power to enact decisions that may be contrary to the

desires of that child. But if I wanted the students to be co-researchers, did I need to relinquish all the power bestowed upon me as adult and teacher?

I reasoned that as a volunteer for SOC, I was supposed to meet the organization's expectations of what a teacher's duties were, and would hence fulfill that role. Moreover, a classroom with a dozen or so nine and ten year-olds requires a degree of structure and supervision for safety and efficiency's sake. Aware of the power I had over the students' activities during theater class, I made a serious effort to make my lesson plans flexible and accommodating to the students' needs, interests, and feedback as the classes went on. Theater of the Oppressed techniques are ideal for this situation, as they give artistic license not an adult director (or teacher, in my case), but to the theater participants. I paid attention to the desires of the homeroom teachers as well, whom I also considered to be co-researchers. Prior to the start of the summer program, Ms. Monica and Ms. Candace informed me that the overarching theme for the third and fourth grade class was to be the Great Outdoors. In response, I structured the class curriculum in a way that combined environmental justice with the Great Outdoors theme. I strove to make the themes as appealing and accessible to the students as possible. Part of the research outcome, the student-created and performed final play, stands testament to the power that the children wielded through creative license in the research process.

Challenges and lessons learned

I struggled with several methodological questions as the summer workshops progressed. Time and time again I expressed doubt in my field notes about the appropriateness of the research question and research group. After the first day, I wrote, "I like that the class can be so positive and that they can have so much fun, but I am worried about how deep we can really get

[into environmental justice issues] with this age group.” After the second workshop, I wrote, “While I am having a great time with the kids, I am fairly certain that they are not quite the right age group to be discussing environmental justice problems with.” I felt like I was forcing the matter upon them, and I was not doing a good enough job of explaining to them what environmental justice problems were. It was not until the synthesis of this paper that I realized what my problem was. I had been unrealistically expecting the students to be able to identify and articulate their experiences of environmental injustice on a level on par with the academic environmental literature. Such articulation would require higher-level cognitive skills that children at that age have not yet developed; it would require an understanding of the interactions among complex social structures that shape people’s lives, of the racial and ethnic inequalities inherent in those structures, and how the results of inequality result in substandard environments for people of color.

Due to my frustrations, I gave up on explicitly trying to draw out environmental justice narratives through the TO exercises after the first three workshops. Instead I broadened the subject matter to family life in Elyria, a topic for which the children had much to share. When it was time during the fourth workshop for the class to brainstorm ideas for the final play, I asked them to consider family life in Elyria in addition to what they had been learning about their city through the mapping project and the Great Outdoors field trips. The result was a play about three families from three different times in Elyria’s history. The children were incredibly adept at creating family backgrounds and problems. Their idea to have a time machine that connects the three families together so that they could help each other with their problems was imaginative and impressive. The children’s ability to weave together such a rich plot made me realize that even though they still have almost a decade of cognitive development ahead of them, they are

keenly aware of their surroundings and have a strong ability to incorporate their observations and experiences into imaginary contexts. And to my surprise, several of the familial problems that the children generated were in fact, environmental justice issues. By letting students act out experiences about family life, which they understood well, instead of notions of the environment that they were less familiar with, the environments that surrounded and influenced their imagined family interactions came naturally.

The third and fourth graders at Save Our Children taught me that children make great researchers if they are given the chance. I cannot expect children to conduct research in the same way a social scientist does. Collaborating with child researchers requires doing research in a way that is experiential, relatable, imaginative, and fun. It allows children to be creators and analysts through play. While this research method may be uncommon, the results are incredibly valuable. By including children's voices in environmental justice discourse, gains can be made towards not only distributional justice, but procedural justice as well. Children are observing, honest, and creative, and their interpretation and presentation of local knowledge as it relates to their environments constitute an underrepresented perspective in environmental studies that deserves acknowledgment.

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Appendix: Example lesson plan

PART 1: PHYSICALITY, TRUST AND SKILL BUILDING

- 1:15-1:20—Circle up; Introduce name and movement. Call out a name and everyone remembers the movement, or vice versa.
- 1:20-1:25—Breathing and Stretches. Deep breaths, concentrate on filling to the brim and emptying it all out. 3x in each position: hands on tummy, then rib cage, then shoulders then arms up. Get on tippy toes in this position. Tall as a tree inhale, down to the ground exhale, feel every vertebrae. Try to get the breath to last through the movement. The goal is to go as slow as possible. Then shake it all off, arms, legs, head, making whatever noises you want. Become an animal, let it all free.
- 1:25-1:35—human knot, starting off with a circle holding hands, tangle and then untangle. (Explain that this game is silent.)
- 1:35-1:40—Play dead or play bear (“The Bear of Poitiers”)
- 1:40-1:50—“The Clapping Series”
- 1:50-2:00—The Mirror Sequence (there are 12 sequences—read through them and pick 5-10, then post them here.

PART 2: STORY BUILDING AND WORKING OUT THEMATIC PROBLEMS

- 2:00-2:30 Image Theater: make a thought web on the board with the students, then they make a tableau of that web.
- Put images together, have them interact, still frozen. What does everyone see as it relates to the theme?
- Make a scene out of one of the images. How did it relate? Was there a protagonist and an antagonist? Plot? (Learning new words.)
- 2:30-2:35- talking about the process and the experience
- 2:35-2:45 A last, fun game. THE ATTENTION GAME.