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**The Mart Theatre Project:
Exploring Identity in a Community-based Applied Theatre Project
with Young People**

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Exploring Identity in a Community-based Applied Theatre Project
with Young People**

by

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Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to the memory of my father, Steve McNamee, Sr., and to the young people of Mart, TX.

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Abstract

The Mart Theatre Project: Exploring Identity in a Community-based Applied Theatre Project with Young People

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This thesis details the theoretical and practical implications of utilizing applied theatre as a tool for the exploration of youth identity and relationship to community. Drawing on traditions of ethnography and reflective practitioner research, this document explores the roles of identity and identity-based inequities as they relate to Mart Theatre Project, an applied theatre project aimed at engaging students in Mart, Texas in a larger community development initiative taking place in their town. The document comprises critical analyses of the roles of student identity, facilitator identity, and community identity as they pertain to a community-based applied theatre process and product. The resulting discussion argues for a continual awareness that that the applied theatre process is impacting and impacted by the identities of the facilitator and the participants.

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Chapter 1: Introduction: Discovering Intersections Among Applied Theatre, Civic Engagement, Youth Development, and Identity

THE JOURNEY TO THE RESEARCH

The Random House Dictionary defines community as a “social group of any size whose members reside in a specific locality, share government, and often have a common cultural and historical heritage” (“Community”). As a young child, I took for granted the feelings of security and camaraderie I found in a community in which I shared common heritage and a geographic location. I grew up on the southwest side of Chicago in the working class, Irish Catholic neighborhood of Wrightwood, where neighbors were my family’s closest friends. I remember spending countless evenings playing hide-and-seek and catching lightning bugs with my brother and other children from the block, while our parents sat chatting for hours on a neighbor’s front porch.

When I was eight years old, my family and I moved to Mt. Greenwood, another neighborhood on Chicago’s southwest side. Three days after we moved, my father was killed in an accident at work. What I experienced at this point in my childhood can best be described as a devastating loss of community. The catastrophic nature of my family’s grief was heightened by the fact that we were no longer physically surrounded by the built-in support system we once had in our neighbors. Between the loss of my father and the loss of a tight-knit community, my sense of security was shattered.

This new neighborhood, Mt. Greenwood, never carried the same sense of community for me that Wrightwood had. As a child, I noticed how people in this new neighborhood talked about difference in a way that made me uncomfortable. In Wrightwood, a racially diverse neighborhood, race relations certainly hadn't been ideal, but racial differences were never overtly spoken about in a negative way. In a sense, race was made nearly invisible. In predominantly white Mt. Greenwood, however, I experienced more overt racism for the first time. At school, children my age casually used racial slurs. I had trouble reconciling a sense of community with the overt fear and hatred of otherness that I found prevalent in many of my new neighbors.

As I reached adulthood, I maintained a belief in the power of communities, where people in a particular geographic area could share values and act as a support network for one another. As an undergraduate, I joined activist groups and developed a passion for social justice. At the same time, I took classes in Creative Drama and carried out observations and fieldwork in public elementary schools, where I began to discover my own potential to relate to young people and address social issues through theatre. After college, I found a position as an AmeriCorps member for Project YES!, where my fellow corps members and I engaged with Chicago's low-income West Town community, and where I began to use theatre to engage the young people with whom I worked. After completing my AmeriCorps service, I served as a resident teacher and artist at a school in India, where I worked with students to devise plays addressing social issues pertinent to their community. I was discovering the power of theatre as a tool for sparking dialogue and affecting community change. I considered how theatre might have allowed a child like me to

address the intolerance I noticed in my neighborhood. *How might theatre invite students to articulate and re-examine power and identity in their community?*

With an interest in investigating this question, I began graduate school in the fall of 2009. During my first year, I learned about the field of Applied Theatre, in which a facilitator uses the tools of theatre and creative drama in non-traditional communities or contexts, often with non-self-defined artists and toward goals of personal or community change (Thompson 15). During my first few years of graduate school, I found opportunities to use applied theatre in a host of classroom and community-based settings. In the fall of 2010, I enrolled in a Community Development class in the university's social work department. As part of the class, students were expected to develop and implement fieldwork projects under the auspices of the Mart Community Project, a community development initiative being carried out in the small town of Mart, TX. The mission of the Mart Community Project was to use the arts to address the poverty and racial segregation that threatened the fabric of this small community. How could an applied theatre project invite young people in Mart to address social injustices and to re-imagine their community? This thesis chronicles the development of three applied theatre projects I carried out with the young people of Mart, TX, with a focus on three questions: *How might young people name and explore personal and community identity in the context of a community-based applied theatre project? How might the process of participating in a collaborative, community-based applied theatre project provide a space for young people to experiment with performing self? And how might an applied theatre facilitator's identity markers be taken into account in the applied theatre process and product?*

THE MART COMMUNITY PROJECT

Mart is a small town in Limestone and McClellan counties, about 20 miles outside of Waco, and about 120 miles outside of Austin. Mart has a population of around 2,300 people and high concentrations of poverty made evident by the many abandoned and decaying buildings that can be seen along the streets. Like many small towns across the American South, Mart experienced a decline in population and economic prosperity in the 1930's when the railroad discontinued passenger service. The community is rural and the population has an estimated median household income is \$32,000, with a per capita income of \$15,050, and 21% of the residents report income below the poverty level—a figure over 8% higher than the national average. District wide, 74% of the students are considered economically disadvantaged, and 39.8% of children under 18 are living below the federal poverty level (“Mart, Texas”). At the time of the 2000 census, the population was reported to be 2,273, 68.3% Caucasian and 27.5% African American, with the remainder of citizens identifying otherwise.

The Mart Community Project is the brainchild of Paula Gerstenblatt, a doctoral candidate at the University of Texas whose family ties first led her to Mart. Gerstenblatt's husband grew up in Mart, and her own work in Mart began in 2008 when she led a group of family members in creating an installation art piece at a site where a family home had once stood. Gerstenblatt eventually partnered with Dorie Gilbert, a professor in Social Work at UT Austin, to create the social work course that first introduced me to Mart.

In the fall of 2010, as part of Gilbert's community development class, I developed a program focused on supporting Mart high school students in crafting

essays to submit to UT Austin's Barbara Jordan Historical Essay Competition. The competition encourages Texas high school students to write and submit an essay about African Americans in Texas history, utilizing oral histories as a major source of their research. This writing program became the first of three applied theatre projects in which I used theatre and drama techniques to engage young people in Mart around issues related to community development: The Barbara Jordan Essay Workshop in the fall of 2010, the Mart Theatre Summer Camp in the summer of 2011, and the Mart Theatre Project in the winter of 2011.

For this first pilot program, I carried out a 5-week-long project, visiting once per week during the students' "Leadership" period (also breakfast time) from 8:30-9:00am. Our limited time together meant that students were not ultimately able to complete their essays before the essay competition deadline; however, the program served as space for me to begin understanding students' perspectives on their community and for the students to begin to explore embodied, performative approaches to self-expression.

In the summer of 2011, I moved to Mart for four weeks to carry out the Mart Theatre Summer Camp. The Mart Community Project rented a three-bedroom house, and for the month of June, I lived there with two other UT graduate students, as well as two community-based visual artists from Senegal and their three children. Living in the Mart community allowed me to spend more time with students and in the community at large. I launched a three-week summer drama camp in which students ultimately created a short digital media piece, entitled "Put a Smile on Mart," a student response to the graffiti that been occurring in Mart. The students showcased their video for a group of their peers at the end of the summer.

In the fall of 2011, I embarked on the Mart Theatre Project. The Mart Community Project had recently received a grant to hold a community planning retreat for select adult Mart residents. I was interested in working with a group of young people to create a theatrical product that could be performed at the retreat as a way of bringing young people's voices into the community planning conversation. I partnered with Ms. Smith, a speech teacher at Mart High School. Each Thursday, for eight weeks, I facilitated the Mart Theatre Project with Ms. Smith's 2nd and 7th period speech classes. My 2nd period class was made up of twenty students, eleven boys and nine girls; one male student was African American, while nineteen of the students were Caucasian. My 7th period class was made up of eleven students, all girls; five of the students were African American, and seven of the students were Caucasian.

My goal at the outset of the Mart Theatre Project was for students to use applied theatre techniques to reflect on the Mart community and, ultimately, for students to create a collaborative, devised theatre piece to be performed for a group of adults (both Mart residents and outside experts) at a community planning retreat scheduled for later in the semester. I explained to students that they would be creating performance pieces that could ultimately inform community-planning decisions in Mart. About halfway through the process, it became clear that transporting students to the planning retreat, which was taking place outside of the Mart community, would prove a challenge; thus, the project was re-imagined as a digital media performance project. Through the use of digital storytelling, I was able to show students' digital work at the retreat even when the students themselves could not be present. Additionally, the integration of digital media into the creative

devising process allowed students to engaged with the project remotely, most notably through the use of cell phones with which students captured and sent me digital photographs to be included in our final digital performance piece. Our final products, which were ultimately a mix of live and digitally mediated performance pieces, were shown both at the community planning retreat and at an additional showcase in the students' high school cafeteria.

In this document, while I draw on all three of these projects as sites for exploration of my research questions, I focus most closely on the Mart Theatre Project. Ultimately, my experience with the Barbara Jordan Essay Workshop and the Mart Theatre Summer Camp served to inform my approach to the Mart Theatre Project. Additionally, through the Essay Workshop and the Summer Camp, I built a relationship with the community and with the high school that allowed me to more easily form a partnership with a classroom teacher.

PARSING TERMS: APPLIED THEATRE, DIGITAL STORYTELLING, AND DEVISING

Throughout my work in Mart, I drew on methods of applied theatre. Applied theatre is a term that can refer to an array of theatre-based practices carried out in a nontraditional setting. James Thompson describes applied theatre projects as carrying three distinguishing features: first, applied theatre “always takes place in communities, or in institutions or with specific groups” and often “where it is least expected;” second, “applied theatre is participatory theatre created by people who would not usually make theatre;” third, applied theatre is, Thompson hopes, “a practice by, with and for the excluded and marginalized” (15). Thompson’s definition suggests that applied theatre takes place with existing groups or

communities; that applied theatre involves group participation and is created by non-self-defined theatre artists; and that applied theatre is most often carried out by, with, and for groups who are somehow marginalized or on the fringes of society. Through my work with the Mart Theatre Project, I was interested in facilitating participatory theatre with young people, most of whom had never made theatre before and whose voices might not otherwise be heard in the community planning conversations taking place in Mart.

In addition to applied theatre, the Mart Theatre Project also involved the use of digital media techniques similar to digital storytelling. Digital storytelling usually involves the creation of a short digital video that layers still images, spoken narrative, and sometimes music to tell a personal story (Lambert 28-47). In the case of the Mart Theatre Project, students wrote and recorded poems and collected still images, which were then combined, along with music, to create a collective video piece. As I will explore in this document, while the idea of using digital media was originally conceived for logistical purposes, the shift in medium also provided unforeseen creative and pedagogical opportunities within the Mart Theatre Project.

The collaborative work students carried out in creating original live and digital performance pieces can also be referred to as devised performance. Devising involves an ensemble of performers working together to create an original performance piece from scratch (Milling 2-3). This collaborative, ensemble-driven model of theatre creation lies in contrast to the traditional model involving the discreet roles of playwright, director, actors, designers, etc. Instead, in a devising model, ensemble members work collaboratively to collectively create a performance

piece, often from some source material. In the Mart Theatre Project, students worked together collectively to devise live and digital performance pieces.

METHODOLOGY

Throughout this document, I draw on ethnography to examine the ways in which identity was indicated and implicated in the applied theatre process and product. I also draw on reflective practitioner research, which involved adjusting the project and my research questions as I ran up against challenges and made new discoveries. In carrying out the Mart Theatre Project, I served as the applied theatre facilitator, working closely with students to build a creative ensemble and to collectively develop live and digital performance pieces. I also served in the role of participant observer, recording daily field notes throughout our creative process and when students' collaborative digital pieces were screened at the Mart community planning retreat. My role as facilitator and participant observer continued when a small group of youth later presented several of our live and digital performances pieces to the Mart community.

My observations aimed at providing detailed descriptions of how students went about co-authoring their digital and live performance pieces. I recorded notes on conversations in which the youth participants reflected on the process of creating and showcasing their work. Based on my observations and interactions with students, as well as students' written and spoken reflections on their own work, I analyzed the meaning and significance of the performance pieces to the students. With each data source, I listened and looked for ways that students named

or didn't name socially constructed personal and community identity. Additionally, I listened and looked for the ways that my own identities impacted the work.

While students were creating, performing, and reflecting upon their performance pieces, I employed methods of micro ethnography. I took video and audio recordings of conversations among the students, performance pieces staged by the students in class and during our showcase, and poems written and read by students. I later transcribed these recordings and then drew upon the transcripts, the students' written poems, digital communication between the students and myself (emails, text messages, etc.), as well as my own field notes to describe and analyze a picture of students' participation in the project, tracking the ways that students addressed issues of identity.

BRIDGING DISCIPLINES: APPLIED THEATRE, IDENTITY, AND CIVIC ENGAGEMENT

The current state of civic engagement in the United States is an often discussed and widely contested issue. In *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (2000), political scientist and public policy professor Robert Putnam argues that the social networks and links that hold communities together have been on the decline across the country since the 1950's, citing decreased membership in civic and social organizations. Yet in their article, "What We Know About Engendering Civic Identity," Youniss, McLellan and Yates refute the discourse that positions decreases in civic engagement as a sign of social decline. Instead, they argue that investigators must analyze the practices and circumstances that lead young people to grow into more civic-minded adults. Based on several field studies, the authors conclude that young people who participate in community initiatives

and in socio-political reform are more likely than their peers to grow into civically engaged adult citizens (Youniss, McLellan, and Yates 629).

The National Coalition for Dialogue and Deliberation (NCDD) defines citizenship as “the act of contributing to public life and participating in solving public problems” (NCDD Resource Center). In other words, citizenship is not a passive state, but instead involves active engagement with the community. Civic engagement, a less easily definable concept, can be loosely organized into three categories: community participation (for example, volunteering or working to solve a problem in a community), political engagement (voting, engaging in a political process), and political voice (protesting, signing petitions, etc.) (Levine 12).

It is widely understood that an increase in civically engaged adults leads to strong communities (see Putnam; Malik). Given this premise, I am interested in how civic engagement can lead to personal development and growth, especially when embedded within a creative applied theatre process. Positive Youth Development (PYD) serves as one model of personal growth for young people. Proponents of PYD argue that young people develop as individuals through involvement with their community (see Lerner 2005). Within a PYD framework, young people are not viewed as “troubled” or “at risk” and in need of adults’ help and protection, as has been the traditional mode of thinking about youth in past decades in the US. Rather, within the context of Positive Youth Development, young people are understood as active stakeholders and leaders in the community who have valuable input and skills to offer. Research in PYD recognizes that in order to grow into successful adults, young people require a sense of competence, usefulness, belonging, and power within the context of a larger community (Johnson 3). Working from these

frameworks, my goal with the Mart Theatre Project was for participants to develop a sense of competence in theatre and performance; a sense of usefulness in helping to inform the goals of an extensive city planning project; and a sense of community among each other and other community members through dialogue. Through the project I hoped to foster civic engagement among my students by positioning them as an invaluable resource to the community, a collective of voices articulating and imagining the future of the Mart community.

In his book, *The Future of Democracy*, Peter Levine notes that civic engagement carried about by individuals who are happy with the status quo can look very different from civic engagement carried out by those who believe that a community needs change (Levine 5). In “What Kind of Citizen? The Politics of Education for Democracy,” Joel Westheimer and Joseph Kahne detail the ways in which “...writers, frequently those on the left, place a greater emphasis on the need for social critique and structural change... Alternatively, those with an often conservative vision of citizenship education put forward a connection between citizenship and character” (2). That is, the politically progressive view of citizenship involves social change related to systems of power, while politically conservative citizenship has more to do with personal responsibility and character education. The authors go on to posit three conceptions of the “good” citizen—the personally responsible citizen, the participatory citizen, and the justice oriented citizen (3-5). The personally responsible citizen acts responsibly and in a law-abiding manner in her or his community; the participatory citizen actively takes on leadership positions within established systems in the community; and the justice oriented citizen actively debates, challenges, and changes outdated or unfair systems within a

community. Westheimer et. al provide evidence that justice oriented citizenship gets the least amount of focus within educational settings (22). Moreover, they argue that participatory and justice oriented citizenship should be privileged in citizenship education because of its emphasis on understanding the root causes of social problems, rather than merely the symptoms (Westheimer et. al 22).

While working with students in Mart, I found myself championing justice oriented citizenship as I sought to critically address and examine identity and related power inequities in the community and the classroom, both through the content I taught and through my pedagogical approach as a facilitator. In his seminal text, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, educator and pedagogical theorist Paulo Freire argues for an alternative to the traditional “banking concept of education” (72). In the banking method, the teacher’s task is to deposit facts into the minds of students, and students are expected to memorize and repeat these facts. The students are viewed as empty vessels waiting to be filled by a teacher, who holds all the power and knowledge (Freire 72). This system, Freire argues, is oppressive in that it does not allow students to reason or discover for themselves, thus discouraging critical thinking. Freire proposes an alternative method of teaching by which students engage in critical thinking and dialogue, with students and teachers who re-imagine their world together (80). In my work in Mart, I aimed to develop my applied theatre sessions within a framework of Freirean pedagogy, posing questions and engaging in conversation with students rather than telling students what to think or passing down knowledge or expertise.

The utilization of applied theatre techniques as the crux of the Mart Theatre Project was essential to maintaining a classroom in which my students and I might

share power in the classroom as we moved toward a critical examination of the larger power structures at play in the community. Applied theatre practitioner and scholar Philip Taylor defines applied theatre as “a theatre that is not simply a presentational medium that occurs within a conventional mainstream theatre house,” but a form that moves into community settings “for the purposes of helping the audience, or the participants, grapple with an issue, event, or question of immediate public and personal concern” (12). In her book *Applied Drama: the Gift of Theatre*, Helen Nicholson critically examines the breadth of work categorized as “applied theatre.” While emphasizing the plurality of practices that fall under this umbrella term, Nicholson points out that applied theatre work involves “intentionality—specifically an aspiration to use drama to improve the lives of individuals and created better societies” (3). In other words, applied theatre works to affect a positive shift in the lives of individuals and/or in a larger community. Nicholson goes on to argue that “theatre, as the most public of art forms, has a particular part to play in the collective exploration of ideas, values and feelings—as a space and place in which society might be reshaped through the imagination” (19). Thus theatre, when used to its fullest potential as a public, collaborative, and interactive medium, lends itself as a tool for dialogue and for the embodiment, or enactment, of what could or should be in society.

Inherent in justice oriented civic education is the critical analysis of identity markers and identity-based inequities within a given community. In her book *Dimensions of a Radical Democracy*, Chantal Mouffe argues that “it is through identification with a range of identities, discourses, and social relations...that individuals might recognize their allegiances with others as well as their

antagonisms or differences” (236). In other words, through analysis of and reflection on identities of self and others, individuals may better come to understand the ways in which they align with others in a community. Nicholson explains that, “drama is a good way for people to extend their horizons of experience, recognizing how their own identities have been shaped and formulated and, by playing new roles and inhabiting different subject positions, finding different points of identification with others” (24). Applied theatre creates a space for participants to explore and trouble their own identities and to find new points of connection with others.

Research in child development dictates that, as adolescents, the students participating in the Mart Theatre Project were already grappling with identity. Erik Erikson, a pioneer in the field of personality development, identifies the goal of adolescence as achieving a coherent self-identity and avoiding identity confusion (15). Erikson’s theories also dictate that adolescents are beginning to develop abstract reasoning, which “allows [them] to think about the future and experiment with different identities” (Clarke 197). Additionally, young people in Mart face the challenges unique to rural adolescents: in their article, “Interpersonal Competence Configurations, Attachment To Community, And Residential Aspirations Of Rural Adolescents,” Petrin, Farmer, Meece, and Byun note that adolescents who live in the rural United States often “experience a tension between the rural community with whom they identify and the opportunities afforded by an urban environment” (1091).

In addition to the understanding of adolescence as a time of achieving and re-envisioning self-identity, Erikson’s theories position adolescence as the time in

which “one confronts a new psychosocial conflict in which pressures to ally oneself with specific groups and to learn to be comfortable functioning as a member of a group are major preoccupations” (Newman 318). In other words, an adolescent is concerned with his or her own identity as it relates to inclusion within a larger group. According to Erikson’s theories on adolescent youth development, a positive resolution to this conflict involves “fidelity to others,” the feeling that the individual matters to a social group and that the social group matters to the individual, while a negative resolution to the conflict involves “dissociation,” or an inability to feel “the bond of mutual commitment” involved in social relationships and group membership (Newman 325). Going into the Mart Theatre Project, I was interested in the ways that applied theatre might invite students to reflect on the groups to which they belonged and to feel more a part of the Mart community. Ultimately, I also noted the way that certain students began to see the Mart Theatre Project as a group to which they belonged.

While all of my students could be presumed to be grappling with the identity formation that occurs during adolescence, it can also be presumed that the students’ experiences varied according to differences in race and ethnicity. Child development scholars Spencer and Markstom-Adams point out that in addition to the task of achieving self-identity experienced by all adolescents, adolescents of color in the United States have the added task of grappling with the negative stereotypes that society often associates with non-white ethnic groups (qtd. in Newman 324). In carrying out the Mart Theatre Project, I was interested in the ways that all of the students’ would name and examine race-based inequities in the community.

Throughout my work with the Mart Theatre Project, I looked at how students' identities were named, analyzed, and re-imagined along our path toward justice oriented civic engagement. In a town with a history of racial tensions, where the hypermasculinity of high school football players is revered, and where poverty levels are well above the national average, I was especially interested in providing opportunities for students to explore identity markers of race, gender and sexuality, and class. I was also curious as to the ways in which students characterized the identity of the town of Mart itself. Through the reflection on identity (both personal and community-based) afforded by the applied theatre process, I hoped that the students would discover opportunities to critically reexamine their own identities in relationship to their fellow participants, other community members, and the town of Mart. Given that studies in Positive Youth Development hold that young people who act as agents of change in their community are more likely to be successful later in life (Johnson 3), I was curious as to the way applied theatre could function as a tool for young people in Mart to be active agents of change as they examined and articulated identity-based inequities in the community.

In this document, I critically examine the role and impact of identity and identity-based inequities in an applied theatre project designed to invite young people to engage with their community. In this chapter, I outlined my methodology and provided a review of literature around applied theatre, civic engagement, and identity development. In Chapter two, I explore the ways an applied theatre and digital media project can provide opportunities for exploring participant identity, building community among participants, and reexamining community identity. In Chapter Three, I offer case studies of three students involved in the Mart Theatre

Project in an effort to explore the creative potential in transgressive adolescent behavior. In Chapter Four, I explore how my own identity markers as the facilitator of the Mart Theatre Project shaped the process and product of the project. In Chapter Five, I draw connections between and among my prior three chapters, acknowledge the limitations and biases inherent in this work and reflecting upon best practices for community-based applied theatre programs centered on civic engagement. Throughout this document, I aim to offer readers my study of applied theatre as a tool for young people to re-imagine self identity, especially in relationship to community.

Chapter 2: Identity and the Mart Theatre Project

Theatre practitioner and scholar Helen Nicholson argues that, “applied drama is intimately tied to contemporary questions about the politics of context, place and space, and this means that working in drama often brings into focus questions of allegiance, identity, and belonging” (13). It is that allegiance, identity, and belonging that I focus on in this chapter as I address the question, *how do young people name personal and community identity in the context of a community-based hybrid applied theatre and digital media project?* Specifically, I contrast my expectations for how students would name identity in the applied theatre process with the reality of when, how, and in what context the naming actually took place. First, I investigate when and in what contexts discussions around identity occurred during the project. Next, I examine how students negotiated and re-imagined identity within the context of the applied theatre project. Finally, I explore the ways an applied theatre and digital media project can invite students to name and re-imagine community identity. I conclude that applied theatre can function as a space for self-representation. I also argue for the role of applied theatre as a positive space for group membership for adolescents. Finally, I posit that the act of reflecting upon creative work can invite students into dialogue about their relationship to their community.

CONTEXT AND METHODS

At the outset of the project, I imagined that students would engage in conversations around identity as part of the process of devising a theatre performance together. I thought that as a part of the devising process students would discuss identity-based inequities in the community. At that time, I was primarily interested in how applied theatre could serve as a vehicle for dialogue around identity-based inequities. My goal was for students to contribute to the community planning in the form of a performance piece that addressed real issues they saw in the community. As the process unfolded, however, I discovered that while students did name personal and community identity throughout the devising process, a great deal of the naming also occurred in the reflection process, after students had created their digital and theatrical performance pieces. Additionally, students were largely uninterested in discussing the role of identity markers in the community when actively invited to do so; instead, conversations around identity markers arose spontaneously throughout the creative process. These realizations about when and how students named identity and identity-based inequities caused me to revisit my data, with an additional focus on how students named identity as part of the creative process and during the post-performance reflection process.

For this chapter, I draw on three ethnographic case studies to address how young people name identity in the context of a community-based applied theatre and digital media project. My goal in analyzing my written and recorded data is to examine ways that students named personal and community identity as part of the Mart Community Project. In the first example, I examine the ways students named self-identity throughout the creative process and reflection process. In the second, I

explore the ways in which collaboration among participants allowed space for students to find points of connection within and among the group. In the third example, I analyze how the reflection process allowed students a forum to articulate and re-imagine the identity of the entire Mart community.

BACKGROUND AND THEORY

Performance theorist Dwight Conquergood argues that “marginalized people require spaces for ‘public discussion’ of vital issues central to their communities, as well as arena[s] for gaining visibility and staging their identity” (360). In other words, central to the empowerment of marginalized groups is a forum for dialogue around community concerns and a space in which individuals gain agency to represent their own identities. Theatre for social change scholar Jan Cohen-Cruz further points out that “self-representation frequently contrasts with mainstream images,” (72)—that is, that popular media images of a particular group (especially a marginalized group) often stand in direct contrast to reality and, therefore, to the ways in which individuals self-represent. Cohen-Cruz argues for the efficacy of “cultural democracy—a collective expression of the people, by the people, and for the people” (74)—as a mode of staging self-identity and participating in public discourse, arguing that “basing discussion on ...incidents from people’s lives...is a viable way to increase political participation” (75). In this study, I am interested in how the Mart Theatre Project functioned as a cultural democracy in which students engaged in identity self-representation as a means of engaging in a larger discussion around the future of Mart.

While Conquergood and Cohen-Cruz champion applied theatre as a space for identity expression (see Conquergood 360, Cohen-Cruz 72), Nicholson argues for applied theatre's ability to help participants identify with one another:

[Applied theatre] is a good way for people to extend their horizons of experience, recognizing how their own identities have been shaped and formulated and, by playing new roles inhabiting different subject positions, finding different points of identification with others. (Nicholson 24)

In other words, applied theatre has the potential to broaden participants' understanding of self-identity by inviting them to discover new points of connection with others. My expectation going into the Mart Theatre Project was that students might find opportunities in the applied theatre process to explore self-identity. As I reviewed my data, however, I began to notice moments when the project served as a space for students to better identify with one another, and I became interested in the ways in which the Mart Theatre Project allowed students to discover new "points of identification" (Nicholson 24) with their classmates.

In addition to inviting participants to explore personal identity, Thompson argues that applied theatre can also ask participants to reexamine community identity, positing, "the act of participatory theatre can ask a community what is working" (148). Thompson suggests that participants use applied theatre to collectively evaluate the assets of a community. Social scientist and geographer Doreen Massey asserts that "what is specific about a place, its identity, is always formed by the juxtaposition and co-presence of particular sets of social interrelations, and by the effects which that juxtaposition and co-presence produce" (68-69). In other words, the identity of place is built on relationships. I am interested in how the collective nature of the Mart Community Project provided a

space for students to articulate and re-imagine identity and to possibly shift the role of young people in the Mart community.

THE MART THEATRE PROJECT AND IDENTITY

Self-Identity and Applied Theatre

As I began my fieldwork in Mart, I was curious about the ways in which students might name how identity and identity-based inequities shaped the community. My goal was for students to devise a theatre piece that depicted some aspect of the Mart Community that students were interested in exploring. I was interested in how students talked about their own class, gender, and race, as well as how these identity markers played out in their Mart community. The state of disrepair evidenced by the town's decaying buildings, as well as the town's high levels of poverty, led me to believe that students might be interested in talking how class issues impact their lives. The strongly gendered history of high school football—an activity and a culture that frames daily life in Mart—fueled my curiosity about the students' perspectives on gender identity and gender roles in the town. Finally, the many manifestations of racism in Mart—segregated neighborhoods and the economic disparities between “black folks town” and “white folks town,” the fact that 30% of Mart residents are African American but the businesses in town and the pictures lining the walls of the public library are filled with white faces —led me to wonder about students' perceptions of race and their experiences with racism in their community. My hope was that the Mart Theatre

Project would provide students a space in which to identify and articulate identity-based inequities in the community.

During the first few sessions of the Mart Theatre Summer Camp in June 2011 (the second of my applied theatre projects in Mart), I facilitated activities that encouraged students to articulate aspects of the community that they would like to focus on for a final performance. My goal was for students to consider both the strengths of the community and opportunities for change within the community. As part of our devising process, I invited students to engage in a poster dialogue around challenges and opportunities they saw in Mart. I hoped to touch on some aspects of the community that proved important to the students, so that students could then begin to devise a performance piece around that topic. On two large pieces of paper, I wrote the headings, “What I love about Mart,” and “What I wish for Mart.” I then invited students to write words or phrases or draw pictures on each sheet of paper in response to the prompt. On the “What I love about Mart” poster, students mainly referenced Mart culture or personal ties: football, family, and friends. On the “What I wish for Mart,” students mostly expressed a desire for more places to go or things to do in Mart: a Wal-Mart, a pool, a café where teens could hang out.

I also noticed someone wrote: “that I could get a job,” This comment opened up one of our first dialogues about power and identity. I wasn’t sure what kinds of opportunities were available in the community, so I asked whether a student looking for a job had any chance of finding one in Mart. “Well, I wouldn’t be able to find a job in Mart, but she might,” said Chrystal, an African American 11th grader, pointing to Casey, a white student seated next to her. Casey responded, “Why?”

before turning to look at Chrystal and answering her own question with, “Oh, right.” Chrystal went on to explain that of the very few businesses in town that might hire students, most would never consider hiring a black student.

In this instance, a poster dialogue, an activity designed to help students brainstorm content around which to devise a performance piece, opened a space for students to identify a racial inequity in the community. However, I should also be clear that the moment did not result in an extended dialogue around race. The students’ interest moved to another discussion, and our conversation about race ended as quickly as it began. What I mean to suggest with this example is not that applied theatre inadvertently provided a space for an in-depth discussion around dialogue. Rather, this instance suggested to me that young people in this town might be interested in addressing identity-based inequities in the community, and that applied theatre might invite them to begin to do so.

In her book *Teaching Community: A Pedagogy of Hope*, critical pedagogue bell hooks maintains that “while it is a truism that every citizen of this nation, white or colored, is born into a racist society that attempts to socialize us from the moment of our birth to accept the tenets of white supremacy, it is equally true that we can choose to resist this socialization” (56). Hooks argues that in the US, we are raised in a racist culture where we are socialized toward prejudiced thinking. It is a responsibility and an opportunity afforded to each of us, hooks argues, to resist and subvert those modes of thinking in our ways of knowing and in the decisions we make every day. By naming this inequity in the town, these students moved toward that space where choice allows us to overcome socialization, and where a new generation of Mart citizens could critically examine the role of race in the

community. My goal as I continued to carry out applied theatre work in Mart was to create a space that deliberately invited students to articulate and critically examine identity-based inequities in the community.

It was with this mindset that I concluded the Mart Theatre Summer Camp at the end of June and launched the Mart Theatre Project at Mart High School in the fall of 2011. With the Mart Theatre Project, I moved deliberately from an extracurricular to a classroom setting as I partnered with a classroom teacher. Up until this point, I had been working only tangentially with Mart High School, working in the building and with Mart High Schools students, but basically running my own programs without any connection to the students' academic classes. The Barbara Jordan Essay Workshop had been unrelated to any particular academic class, and was essentially offered to students as an extracurricular activity. The Mart Theatre Summer Camp, too, had been an extracurricular program. While this arrangement gave me a great amount of freedom in terms of the structure and content of the camp I facilitated, it also created a separation between academic learning and arts-based, community-engaged learning. bell hooks argues against such a divide:

Rather than embodying the conventional false assumption that the [classroom] setting is not the 'real world' and teaching accordingly, the democratic educator breaks through the false construction of the corporate university as set apart from real life and seeks to re-envision schooling as always a part of our real world experience and our real life. (hooks 41)

hooks invites democratic educators to destroy the false barrier placed between school and students' lived experiences and to instead invite democracy into the classroom, both in the form of the content we teach and the ways in which we

teach it. Through engaging with the young citizens of Mart in a classroom setting, I hoped to link community issues to academic learning. When I first approached Ms. Smith about carrying out the Mart Theatre Project in her speech class, she expressed excitement over the opportunity for students to work on a project in which there would actually be a practical application. Up until that point, she explained, students had created and performed speeches designed for imaginary audiences and circumstances. With the Mart Theatre Project, students would have a chance to express themselves for the purpose of making their voices heard by the adult making decisions about the future of Mart. In this instance, students would be required to bring their own identities and experiences as young Mart citizens to the project.

I hoped that by inviting students to reflect on personal identity, I could begin to invite them to bring their own identities and experiences into the classroom. One activity that I brought to the classroom with the aim of sparking dialogue around identity was an activity entitled The Identity Iceberg. I invited students to brainstorm, as a group, different kinds of identities that we each carry. Then, I gave each student a stack of post-it notes and asked them to write one of their identity markers, such as “female,” or “sister,” onto each post-it note, listing as many identity markers as they could think of and would like to share. I then invited the students to stick the post-it notes up on a larger sheet of poster paper, on which I had drawn an iceberg in water. I encouraged student to post the identity markers they felt were most visible to the outside world above the water line on the poster, while posting the identity markers that seem hidden to the world below the water line. Once the students had posted their identity markers onto the paper, I asked the group to

reflect on the ways we identify ourselves, on the visibility of different identities in different contexts, and on the affect of identity in our daily lives and social interactions. The goal of the activity was to begin reflecting on the role of identity in the community—how did their identity markers affect their relationship with the community? How did identity markers reflect where people lived in Mart, where and how they spent their time, who they interacted with?

As a facilitator, I came to the activity with certain expectations about the kinds of things students might share. I based my expectations on personal experience with other classrooms of students and on my past experiences working with young people in Mart. A chart from *Teaching for Diversity and Social Justice* breaks down social identities into the categories of race, gender, class, physical/mental/developmental ability, sexual orientation, religion, and age (Adams 80). Because race, gender, religion, and age were the identity markers that came up most often in my extracurricular facilitations with Mart students, I expected students would write most about these identity markers. Based on previous experience facilitating this activity with other groups in educational settings, I also imagined that students would identify with roles they played in relation to other people in their lives: daughter, sister, student, friend, etc. My experience in the community told me that ability, sexual orientation, and class, on the other hand, were the kinds of identity markers that students might not feel comfortable or equipped to discuss.

Figure 1 offers my coded analysis of student responses within the iceberg activity, outlining the types of identity markers students chose to disclose and discuss through the iceberg activity. Interestingly, many of the ways students chose

to name identify fall outside of what I would have considered personal identity markers. Rather than focusing on things that students “are,” (i.e., Caucasian, female, a daughter, a student), many of the students’ responses describe what students are *like*, such as “I am shy,” or “I am a truthful person.” Due to time constraints, I only facilitated this activity with my 7th period class, which was comprised of all girls. The day I facilitated the activity, only ten students were present in class.

Table 1: Identities Named in Iceberg Activity

Identity Category	Number of entries
personality traits/strengths	8
gender	7
reference to rural/country	7
physical characteristics	7
sport a student plays	5
location (town*, state, or country)	4
reference to autonomy	4
race	2
reference to family	2

*Mart was not mentioned.

Only one identity category that I expected—gender—was addressed repeatedly by the students responses on the post-it notes: 7 out of 10 students referenced gender (all female, in this case). Most of the categories that students wrote about were not ones that I had anticipated. 8 students reported identity personality trait statements, such as, “I am shy,” or personal strengths and abilities, such as “I am smart.” 7 students referenced country or rural living, and seven students referenced physical appearance, such as hair color, eye color, or height. Five students named their identity through a type of sport. 4 students referenced a geographical location (although no one mentioned Mart), and four students made references to autonomy or being an individual. Only 2 of 47 student responses directly referenced race, with “I am Latina/Caucasian,” and “I am African/Native.” One two entries directly referenced family relationships, such as “I have four brothers and two sisters.”

In looking at students’ descriptions of their identities, I was initially struck by the lack of attention to race and religion, two identity markers I expected students in Mart would name readily. My assumptions were rooted in Mart’s recent history of segregation and the centrality of church to the town’s social life, two realities I had come to understand through my conversations with residents, teachers, and students throughout the duration of my time in Mart. Instead, student responses centered heavily around personality traits and physical appearance as markers of their identity. I was struck by the inclusion of identities that I term “statements of autonomy,” such as “I am SOMEBODY,” “I am grown,” or “I am myself.” I interpreted these statements as students referencing themselves as unique individuals capable of making autonomous decisions. “I am SOMEBODY” implies that the student is

referencing her importance in the world as an individual. With “I am grown,” the student is asserting her adulthood. With “I am myself,” the student asserts herself as an individual.

Once students posted their self-identity markers onto the diagram of the iceberg, I began facilitating a discussion around what we saw:

I asked students to describe patterns they saw, and they noted that hair color was mentioned several times, and was always posted above the waterline. I asked how any of these identities were connected to their roles in the community, and no one answered. I asked the all-female group if their gender affected their role in the town; few students responded, except to insist that gender didn’t inhibit their roles in the community. I pointed out that the community revolves around football but that girls don’t play football. The girls shrugged this off; a few girls mentioned that the middle school had once allowed a girl to play on their football team. (Field notes, 24 Nov 2011)

In the classroom setting, I began to discover, students were either less willing, less able, or less interested to name out identity-based inequities in the community than had been the case in an extracurricular setting. I began to read the students’ writing as attempts to paint a picture of themselves as whole, complex individuals, rather than members of a particular demographic. While some students named their identities in terms of formal demographics (race, gender), most of the responses reflected students’ particular interests and personalities. The individualized nature of students’ responses suggested to me that these particular students were interested in asserting their autonomy and individuality.

Ultimately, I found students were reticent to reflect on particular identity markers when questioned about them. Instead, students were interested in exploring and expressing the complex nature of their personal identities through more creative, embodied means. As part of our devising process, I gave students the

prompt, “I am from...” and asked how they might finish that sentence. Students responded that they would usually give someone the name of their town, their school, and their state. I challenged students to think of specific sensory experiences that they associated with what and where they were from—what were things they saw, heard, smelled, tasted, and felt when they thought of the many different places and spaces they were from? I then challenged students to pick up a pencil and pen and finish the prompt “I am from” in as many ways as possible for five minutes. I told them not to edit themselves yet. My goal was for students to explore all the places and spaces they were “from” as a means of exploring personal identity and of connecting identity to community.

My aim with the “I am from” prompt was to tap into students’ perspectives on Mart and ultimately to devise a performance piece that would help insert student voices into the planning process for the future of Mart. I invited students to explore the complexity of identity by naming the places and spaces they were from in a variety of ways. I hoped that by combining some of students’ responses into a single performance narrative, we could create a complex picture of the young people who live in Mart. I wanted to illustrate what exactly young people mean when they say they are “from Mart.” I thought the final piece could give our audience at the community planning retreat a better sense of young people in Mart, what they valued, and how they viewed Mart.

After the group documented their responses for five minutes, I asked to students to put down their pencils and choose one “I am from...” statement that they wanted to eventually share with the class. Once they chose their narrative statement, I invited each student to enter an imaginary personal studio, or a

personal space, somewhere in the room and create a movement or gesture to accompany their one line of text. After five minutes of rehearsal, I asked students to make a circle and share their gestures one by one. I was surprised at students' level of participation and their responses to their classmates:

[The students] were really sweet to each other after sharing an "I am from" line and a gesture around the circle. When I asked about images that stood out, they named a lot of images they had seen (hunting, fishing, basketball, even Lisa's "I am from nowhere" shrug). I asked what made a gesture interesting and student answered: specificity; detail; that it said something about the person. "It is us," one girl answered. I asked what she meant. "You created it and it's about where you're from, so it's you, it's part of you." (Field notes, 20 Nov 2011)

When asked to share a gesture that represented them personally, students were forthcoming and their performances were unique and creative. In contrast to the silence I often encountered when asking reflection questions as part of the Mart Community Project, students were enthusiastically vocal when responding to each other's "I am from" gestures. Students' enthusiasm toward the "I am from" gesture exercise indicated to me that they were most interesting in engaging in creative endeavors that drew on personal, individual experience. Later in the day, during my 7th period class, one student, Keisha, protested when I explained that each participant would choose just one line of narrative to share with the class. Keisha insisted that she be able to share the entirety of her "I am from..." statements, read in the form of a single poem. After this student read her piece aloud, other students followed suit. One by one, each student read her own "I am from" poem aloud. This insistence and enthusiasm from students around sharing their writing eventually convinced me to alter the project so that students could each digitally record an entire poem of their own.

Thompson notes that applied theatre “is where people’s own stories can be presented, heard, and transformed” (148). In presenting their own “I am from...” lines and gestures to the class, students found an opportunity to share their personal identities with one another not in the form of labels, but in a form that suggested a story. The lines of students’ “I am from” poems—“I am from the books I read,” “I am from love and hate,” “I am from a loving mother,” “I am from tractors”—served as a snippet of a story from the student’s life. Through enthusiastic feedback for one another’s work, students indicated that they heard and appreciated their classmates’ willingness to share their stories. With the focus shifted away from students’ identity markers and onto their personal stories, students not only agreed to, but insisted upon, sharing their work with one another.

Group Membership and Applied Theatre

I had expected to study the ways the Mart Theatre Project impacted students’ self-identity and their relationship to the community. What I hadn’t foreseen was the way the project would begin to help students identify with one another and to build community among the group. The connections students made with one another throughout the applied theatre process began to become evident to me as we first began to devise our final performance. In the 2nd period class, students only got as far as sharing their “I am from” lines and gestures with one another. In the 7th period class, students then broke into small groups, taught each other their line and gesture, and then experimented with how they could perform each line as a group, ordering the lines of text and providing transitions between each line. The final poems required that student help to embody one another’s words as they

performed their collective poem. Students in both the 2nd and 7th period classes performed their individual gestures for one another; additionally, students in the 7th period class completed group poems and performed them for one another in class. The way students went about authoring and performing these group poems helps to illustrate the ways in which the applied theatre process helped them to identify with one another. The following is a description of a video recording of one of the groups performing in class:

The ensemble is made up of five girls—two African American students, and three Caucasian students. The girls stand in a straight line, facing their audience. The girl standing in the middle, a Caucasian student who was born in New York, spins around once, moving toward the audience. “I am from pretty pictures...” she says shifting to one hip and holding her hands to form a small frame, “... and catwalks” she finished, shifting her weight and placing a hand on her hip. The ensemble members behind her mirror the same gestures. This girl steps back and another girl, an African American student, stepped forward. “I am from dancing and loud music,” she declares, and she began to dance, as her fellow ensemble members gather close around her and began dancing as well. The girls assemble back into a straight line. One girl, a Caucasian student, walks behind the others, tapping them each on the shoulder. “I am from cheerleading, softball, football, and golf.” Each of her fellow ensemble members, when tapped, move their bodies into the shape of a still image meant to represent a person playing each of these sports. Another girl, a quiet African American student who grew up in public housing in Waco, declares, “I am from a place that’s always on the news.” The girl turns and pretends to hold a remote control. Two girls stand alongside her, looking in the same direction. Two other girls across from them and use their arms to form an imaginary television screen. The girls reassemble into a straight line. Another girl, a Caucasian student steps forward and declares, “I am from feed buckets,” as all of the girls pantomime shaking imaginary feed onto the ground, making “shook-a-shook-a-shook” sound effects. Then, “we are from Mart,” the girls conclude together, each stepping into a still image representing the text they just performed. The first girl strikes a pose that evokes dancing. The second girl creates a still image in which she appears to be holding an imaginary baseball bat and waiting for a pitch. The third girl holds an imaginary remote control and looks forward at an imagined television. The fourth girl holds an imaginary feed bucket. One of the girls,

who recently moved to Mart, instead declares, “We are from Texas,” as they other students declare, “We are from Mart.” (Field notes, 27 Nov 2011)

This performance serves as an example of how students used applied theatre to voice complexities of their identity. By declaring the spaces and places they were “from,” students could share something about themselves. “I am from feed buckets,” helped to establish that the student lived on a farm, and to suggest a plethora of cultural references that might go with living on farm and raising livestock. By declaring, “I am from dancing and music,” another student expressed the importance of music to her life and her identity; her style of movement indicated that the music she imagined was hip-hop, which implied specific cultural references tied to African American identity. This performance also demonstrates how applied theatre invited students not only to express self identity, but to support one another by helping to embody their fellow ensemble members’ identities—the places and spaces they are “from”—onstage. Cohen-Cruz asserts that “art balances intimacy and distance” (103), advocating for theatre’s ability to build connections among participants while allowing for the safe distance afforded by a space of creativity and imagination. In the Mart Theatre Project, the creative process and product served as a bridge of intimacy and connection between and among participants. Students were invited to share personal reflections through their “I am from” prompts; at the same time, students had the choice to decide just how personal, or how literal, their responses to the “I am from” prompt would be. Students were invited to work together closely, often with other students they didn’t know well, to develop short performative group poems based on their own lives. Rather than forcing students to be candid with one another in conversation, the creative process

became a common point of focus and provided students with a purpose and a structure for collaborating with each other.

I continued to note students' growing connections to one another as we moved into the performance component of the project. Some of the students' live performance pieces were eventually shown at a community gathering alongside digital videos of students' individual "I am from" poems layered with photographic images of the town that students captured on the camera phones. On the day of the performance, I was unsure which of the students would actually elect to participate in the afterschool showcase. A racially diverse group of eleven girls—nine from my 7th period class, and one from 2nd period, and one student who had attended the Mart Theatre Summer Camp—chose to be a part of the final showcase. On the day of the performance, the students and I met in the cafeteria immediately after school. We had about four hours in which to discuss the goals of the showcase, solidify the order of the performances, and set up the space for our audience. I was immediately struck by level of commitment that students brought both to the process and to each other. I saw a shift in students' projected identities as they began to perceive themselves as essential to the creative process:

As we prepared for the performance, the students took pride and ownership in arranging the space for our audience as they set up chairs and spread tablecloths on the table to the side where we would serve refreshments. The girls created a front row of chairs meant especially for them. Even though this meant they might be blocking the audience, it seemed important to them that they be sitting in the front row supporting one another... Before the performance, after we had warmed up, the girls insisted on holding hands and praying together. (Field notes, 7 Nov 2011)

I observed a shift in the students' behavior between our time in the classroom together and the time we spent preparing for our performance. After the final

performance, I noted that the girls were all talking and working together, rather than relegating themselves to small groups of friends or racially segregated groupings. Keisha asked me for a ride home at the end of the night. As we drove together, she told me that, before that night, she hadn't known some of the other participants very well, but she now felt like they were friends. (Field notes, 7 Nov, 2011).

The cooperative behavior demonstrated by students on the day of our showcase speaks directly to Cohen-Cruz's assertion that "art balances intimacy and distance" (103). By sharing their "I am from" poems with one another, students began to get to know each other more intimately, not only as classmates, but as individuals. As students shared details of their lives outside of school—details about family, history, culture—through their poems, the students also began to invest more completely in the applied theatre process.

The shifts in group dynamic that occurred on the night of our showcase became more evident during a focus group the following week. In my 7th period class, I asked students to name the ways they had personally grown over the course of the project:

BRE: It taught us to get along...see, there's this girl that was [at the showcase], I don't get along with her. But then I put all of our differences aside, and we I did a little play for everybody. Yeah...(giggles)

ANNE: So was it easier to get along with people when you were working on a project together?

BRE: Well yeah, because...

IMANI: ...because when you gotta do something that needs to be done...

BRE: ...then you just get busy.

ANNE: So when you have a goal that needs to be done, you have to put differences aside?

BRE: Yeah, and I feel that night I had to get my nose set in order to do our play...and Pastor Hunt, he was there, so I had to be in line, or he would blast me in church. (Mart High School 7th period)

Bre and Imani touch on two important points here. First, theatre unites by giving participants a common goal; Bre acknowledged that, although she may have previously had a conflict with another of the participants, on the night of the performance she had no choice but to “get [her] nose set in order to do our play” (Mart High School 7th period). Second, Bre’s mention of Pastor Hunt—the pastor of the largest black church in Mart and a staunch supporter of the Mart Community Project—shows that, in this case, the obligation she felt to our audience was important enough to her that she was willing to move past a former dispute she had had with a fellow ensemble member. Bre and Imani’s sentiments about working together for the good of the project demonstrates increased student accountability to the creative process, to their audience, and each other.

Thompson notes that, “...even the shortest theatre workshop...can leave networks between people, creating new minute linked action fragments that can compete, constrict or lie above hurtful marks from the past” (62). When working to create theatre together, we have the ability to overcome old patterns. The work becomes more important than the old patterns. In our evening together, the participants found a space where they could overcome personal biases toward one another and instead work together as a team. I observed that the students and I got more done that evening—both in terms of planning the performance, as well as engaging in meaningful conversations about the students’ opinions on the

community—than we had in all of my time in their classrooms. While students' commitment to creating a performance together may not denote total identification with one another, it does suggest students' commitment to one another in the form of commitment to the project. Students were most willing to work cooperatively with one another when they were most invested in the group and when our performance was at stake. At this point, students were not acting as individuals, or even as classmates, but as essential members of a creative collective.

Articulating and Reimagining Community Identity through Applied Theatre

When asked to reflect on the digital piece we had created together, students began to talk not only about their classmates' creative choices, but also about the identity of the Mart community itself. Because all but one of the students in my 2nd period class did not participate in the public showcase of our work, these students viewed the final cut of the videos we created together in class the following week. Together, we watched "Our Mart," the video made up of students' individual audio recorded "I am from" poems layered with still images of the town that students had captured with their camera phones. After we had watched the video together, I invited students to articulate their initial reactions. Students' responses included affirmations of their classmates' identities and the spaces and places their classmates were "from":

STUDENT 1: I liked how you could hear everyone's different inflection in their voice, like just the different way that people see things.

ANNE:...so, both how different people's voices sound different, and also the different kinds of things people were saying, about where they're from?

STUDENT 1: Yeah

STUDENT 2: I like that, even though I wasn't here to make a video, because I was sick, I at least got to be part of it through the picture of my house. ...I'm glad I got to contribute something.

STUDENT 2: I like how John said, "I am from God." That kind of stuck with me.

JOHN: I did say that.

Laughter. (Mart High School 2nd period)

Students' initial reactions to the video mirrored their reactions on the day they first shared their "I am from" lines and gestures. Students showed support for their classmate's creative choices and were drawn to "the different ways that people see things" in Mart (Mart High School 2nd period, 17 Nov 2011). The applied theatre process of creating and reflecting provided a space for students to share their lived experiences, often personal elements of identity, in the classroom. At this point in the conversation, however, in addition to acknowledging individual contributions from themselves and their classmates, students also began to move into a discussion about the identity of the town and the community of Mart itself.

STUDENT 1: I liked, like the pictures that stood out to me were like, of like the fields and like the dirt roads around here, cause like, no matter pretty much how you come to Mart, you're gonna have to get on the gravel roads sometime to get here, so like those are the pictures that stuck out to me. Cause like we're surrounding by that, the fields and dirt roads.

ANNE: And it's something distinctive about Mart, right? Like if you went to a city, you might not find that same kind of thing. You wouldn't even find that same kind of thing in Waco.

STUDENT: Someone said "I am from silence" and it kind of made me sad.

STUDENT 4: I liked all the country sky scenes. It kind of gave the...country kind of feel of Mart. A lot of what Mart's about.

STUDENT 1: I liked how Mary... she rhymed at the end of hers. And she said, ... "I am from heaven above," ... I remember hers 'cause it, like, rhymed. And it was like sincere.

ANNE: What did it feel like to see an image [in the video], either an image that you took, or an image that you recognize, that you see in town?

STUDENT 1: It felt like, just like, a normal day like seeing like, Burrito Express and ... it just seemed like a normal day, like those are the things you take for granted in every day, but just to see them like actually being the focus of a video, it like actually made you realize some of the cool things we have around here and take for granted.

STUDENT 5: I don't know, it kind of made me feel like, you know you look at it compared to Waco, and we look really like old-timey, like we don't look as like good as like...

MS. SMITH: (whispering) That's okay.

STUDENT 5: ...like, a lot of people in Mart work hard for what we have now, but we should have better, so...

MS. SMITH: (whispering) We're unique.

STUDENT 6: I think that we should fix up that old theatre.

STUDENT 7: What theatre? We have a theatre?

STUDENT 8: Where is it?

STUDENT 1: Like, beside the dollar store.

ANNE: I think that's a great idea.

STUDENT 2: I agree with [Student 5] how it looks more old-timey than more modern cities but that makes me glad that I live here and not there, because living in a more modern world makes you lose touch with a lot of things that are important, and I feel like living in Mart or near Mart, you don't take as many things for granted, and you haven't lost all the touch with life.

ANNE: So thinking about both sides to that, that Mart does have some things that are old fashioned: Where are the things that we want to preserve— things about Mart that ... like you said, that keep you in touch with some important ideas? And then what are things that you think we could build more, [that] you think that we need to add on to those things in Mart?

STUDENT 1: I agree with [Student 2], like [Student 5] said there are some things that are too old and need to be changed, and like some parts of town that look really bad and like, should be fixed up, but I agree with [Student 2] too, like the old buildings in town and like the train, like the caboose, you know, like those are parts that give us character, that's like what we were when we were established, and like keeping our history around. And to me, those are the things that I appreciate most about Mart, that we're like still in touch with what we were when we started, and we still have character. And haven't just become [consumed] in this new modern world.

STUDENT 9: I think the things we need are like a movie theatre, or like y'all said somewhere to hang out, because there's no point, with gas prices going up, we're wasting all this gas going to Waco when we could stay in Mart if people could just take the time---

STUDENT 8: We need a Wal-Mart here.

ANNE: So maybe thinking about, we have all these things in Mart, how do we bring other things, so we don't have to leave, so we can really enjoy that history, that charm that Mart has?

STUDENT 1: I want to add on about gas money... not only for us leaving town, but like to draw people into Mart, cause people who live outside of Mart and don't come through here or like don't actually interact with people from Mart, they have really bad thoughts about us. I think if we had something to draw them in, like an attraction or something, that it would really change their minds. (Mart High School 2nd period)

Employing digital media in the Mart Theatre Project, rather than applied theatre alone, allowed the students to view their own work and to reflect on it. In doing so, students were able to engage in dialogue about what they saw, to make new connections, and to draw new conclusions. The video was made up of students completing the prompt "I am from..." and of visual images of Mart. In reflecting on

the video, students began to discuss the nature of the town itself. Some students, struck by how the video “actually made [them] realize some of the cool things we have around here and take for granted,” argued for the preservation of the town’s history and “old-timey,” charm, explaining that it kept residents “in touch with what we were when we started.” Other students argued for new development in Mart, explaining that “a lot of people in Mart work hard for what we have now, but we should have better” (Mart High School 2nd period, 17 Nov 2011). In the course of the discussion, some students were made aware of abandoned landmarks in the community, like the old movie theater, that they hadn’t previously realized existed. Through reflecting on a digital performance piece they created together, students were able to engage in dialogue about the value of Mart’s history and the town’s opportunities for growth.

When Thompson asserts that, “the act of participatory theatre can ask a community what is working,” he explains that “theatre here then becomes inquiry” (148). In reflecting on the digital piece they created together, students were able to engage in a larger dialogue around the identity and the potential identities of the Mart community. While students were not drawing specifically on identity markers of race, class, and gender in this discussion, students were using their creative product as a basis for discussion and debate around the identity of the Mart community and how that identity reflected on students. Originally, I meant for the students’ videos to serve as a way for them to contribute the civic dialogue happening at the Mart community planning retreat. Ultimately, the video engaged the students themselves in dialogue with one another about the history and the future of Mart.

CONCLUSIONS

The students involved in the Mart Theatre Project utilized the project as a space for cultural democracy, or “creative expression of the people, by the people, and for the people.” (Cohen-Cruz 74). Both the devising and the reflection processes of the Mart Theatre Project served as forums for what Conquergood refers to as “public discussion” (360), or spaces in which students found opportunities to represent themselves and their communities. By creating live and digital performance pieces which represented Mart residents, were created by Mart residents, and were ultimately created for the Mart residents who viewed them at the Mart planning retreat and the student showcase, the students began to re-envision the role and participation of young people in the community.

Through the Mart Theatre Project, students also found spaces in which they discovered, “different points of identification with others” (Nicholson 24). Given that adolescence is a developmental stage in which “pressures to ally oneself with specific groups and to learn to be comfortable functioning as a member of a group are major preoccupations,” (Newman 318) it follows that the students participating the Mart Theatre Project began to view themselves and one another as part of a cohesive group. While I did not initial intend to study the group dynamic formed within and among participants of the Mart Theatre Project, the applied theatre project ultimately fostered a kind of intimacy that resulted in the formation of a cohesive group dynamic. By commenting on other students’ “I am from” lines and helping to embody those lines, students found an opportunity to support one another’s creative work. In being given the opportunity to articulate the spaces and

places they were “from,” students had a chance to “recogniz[e] how their own identities have been shaped and formulated” (Nicholson 24) and to see themselves in relation to the group and to other group members. By embodying one another’s “I am from” statements in their group performances, students were “playing new roles inhabiting different subject positions” (Nicholson 24). Throughout our process, students transitioned from working as individuals to working collectively toward a collaborative final product.

Finally, by reflecting on a digital representation of Mart that they had devised together, students found opportunities to ask themselves what was working in their community. Through the reflection process, students were able to articulate and juxtapose the value of Mart’s history with opportunities for growth and change in the town. Through creatively interpreting and then reflecting upon their own perspectives on the community, students co-created a space in which they articulated and re-imagine the identity of their community. Scholars in youth development posit that adolescents in rural communities “experience a tension between their attachment to the rural lifestyle afforded by their home community and a competing desire to gain educational, social, and occupational experiences that are only available in metropolitan areas” (Petrin 1091). The reflection portion of the Mart Theatre Project allowed a space for students to articulate these tensions.

While reflecting on their video helped students to articulate their conflicting opinions about living in a rural town, it is important to note that while students were able to weigh the relative merits of preserving Mart’s history and quaint nature versus updating and expanding the town, students did not address identity-based inequities, such as Mart’s segregation, while reflecting on the video. If I were to

engage in this process again, I would invite students to deepen their conversation around Mart's past and future to include identity-based inequities through drama-based strategies such as poster dialogue and image work.

Nicholson discusses the link between community history and identity-based inequities:

One common argument is that communities of location are often romanticized, harking back to an imagined era in which homogeneity, unity and shared values formed the basis of social interaction. A related position, developed by particular feminists, is that localism has had the effect of keeping people in their place, of entrapping the poor and confining women to the sphere of the domestic. (Nicholson 87)

Nicholson argues that nostalgia connected to place can often be linked with the romanticization of what are in reality identity-based inequities. Although we did not make this leap while reflecting on our Mart Theatre Project video, an additional opportunity for dialogue might have been found in a discussion of the links between identity-based inequities and community history.

The aim of the Mart Theatre Project was to invite students to actively engage in their community and to examine and re-imagine personal and community identity. The project invited young people to explore personal identity in three key ways: by creating a space for self-representation, by supporting the development of a supportive group dynamic, and by creating a space for students to reflect on the relative merits of the community. Through the devising, performance, and reflection process, students reflected on self, formed bonds with one another, and articulated their views on the community.

Chapter 3: Identity and Transportation

In this chapter, my interest lies mainly in how the process of participating in a collaborative, hybrid applied theatre and digital media project provides a space for young people to experiment with performing self in relationship to community. Applied theatre, an interactive medium that has the potential to spark dialogue and deepen understanding among participants, is designed to be accessible to those who are not accustomed to or practiced in making theatre (Thompson 15). Similarly, access to digital media-making tools and platforms is now available to a wide range of people in the form of technologies such as cell phone cameras--which can capture still and sometimes video images--and websites like YouTube on which users can upload and share their work electronically. I am interested in how a combination of these mediums can provide a space for experimenting with performing self and connecting with peers.

CONTEXT AND METHODS

For this chapter, I offer three ethnographic case studies that explore how a hybrid applied theatre and digital media project can provide a space for young people to experiment with performing self identity. At the outset of the project, I imagined that the applied theatre process would focus on creating a collective youth voice for Mart. As the process unfolded, however, I discovered that students' interests lay in having their individual, rather than collective, voices heard.

The students' insistence on sharing their "I am from" poems aloud led me to question my overarching goals for the project. The students' willingness and desire

to share their poems, in contrast to the more closed-off behavior many students had displayed when we had engaged in purely collaborative creative work, suggested to me that students were interested in expressing their own personal identity. This process raised questions about the nature of authorship in applied theatre and the role of identity in relationship to community, and the description of this process became a focus of inquiry in this study. With this chapter, I first examine the ways in which students' socially transgressive behavior can be harnessed as a tool for creative identity expression. Next, I explore how applied theatre can serve as a space where students can temporarily re-imagine identity. I also discuss the ways that applied theatre can invite students into a space of connection with their classmates. Throughout this discussion, I also draw on the role of digital media as a complementary practice to applied theatre.

BACKGROUND AND THEORY

As outlined in my introduction, according to Erikson's youth development theory, a positive resolution to the very common adolescent conflict of "group identity versus alienation" involves "fidelity to others," while a negative resolution to the conflict involves "dissociation," or an inability to feel "the bond of mutual commitment" involved in peer relationships and group membership (Newman 325). In the following case studies, I outline the ways that our applied theatre process provided opportunities for young people to move temporarily from a place of dissociation to a space of fidelity to their classmates and community. I am especially interested in the ways that students fostered group membership by re-imagining personal identity.

In their article, "Youth as Active Agents," Daniels et. al draw on cultural theorist Angela McRobbie who notes that seemingly transgressive behavior in young people actually serves youth in their quest to determine identity and social positioning (McRobbie, as cited in Daniels et. al 26); my interest lies in how applied theatre can help young people to discover the creative potential in transgressive behavior. Transgressive behavior in young people can be described as "going beyond acceptable boundaries of taste, convention, or the law" ("transgressive"). For example, adolescents' physical appearance, tastes, or behavior are sometimes considered acts of transgression because they fail to conform with cultural norms. Socio-cultural linguist Mary Buscholtz reminds us that "youths' socially transgressive actions may be understood not as culture-specific manifestations of psychological distress but more importantly, as critical cultural practices through which young people display agency" (531). In other words, the author views an adolescent's transgressive behaviors not as a cause for concern, but as an indicator of the adolescent's desire to assert personal agency. Daniels, et. al assert that as educators working toward educational equity, "we must continue to ask ourselves how we can best affect youth identity so that youth themselves become encouraged to utilize their naturally occurring agency in efforts directed toward reform and transformation in a variety of social arenas" (26). In other words, it is the role of the critical pedagogue to invite students to harness their natural inclinations toward transgressive behavior and utilize those inclinations as vehicles for change.

In discussing the personal shifts that can take place as the result of an applied theatre project, Nicholson draws on performance studies scholar Richard Schechner's ideas around "transportation," or a temporary shift in participants for

the duration of the theatre experience. Schechner explains that a series of transportations has the potential to result in eventual personal transformation, in which the individual experiences a more permanent personal change (270). Championing the role of transportation in applied theatre settings, Nicholson argues that “in the process of transportation, the outcomes are clearly focused by not fixed, and change may take place gradually, a collaborative and sustained process between participants and often in partnership with other supportive agencies” (13). In this chapter, I explore the ways in which an applied theatre and digital media process might invite students to co-create and enter a space in which they find opportunities to experience transportation. I am curious about the ways that a hybrid applied theatre and digital media project like the Mart Theatre Project can invite students—especially those whose behavior often falls into the category of socially “transgressive”—to experiment with performing self and to make connections with others, thus experiencing moments of transportation—or shifts in perspective and experience.

Applied theatre requires that participants feel comfortable enough to participate fully in the process. This is especially important in the high school setting, when students fear alienation from their peers (Newman 321). On the first day of the Mart Theatre Project, I worked with each class to define the skills theatre entails, giving the students a sense of the kinds of activities that would take place during our time together. Each group was then asked to create a group contract in which students decided, together, upon agreements for how we would conduct ourselves in class in order for the process to be most successful. From my perspective, success in this instance meant that students would enjoy our time

together and that our final product accurately reflected students' thoughts and opinions. The intent of the group contract exercise was to create a sense of safety in the classroom and to establish a clear set of boundaries, created by the students themselves, which we could refer back to throughout the entirety of our time together. Students in both classes created contracts that contained agreements about showing respectful behavior, giving everyone a chance to speak, listening actively, and offering constructive criticism at structured times. By facilitating the creation of the group contract, I worked to let the students see that their voices literally would shape our process. Moreover, the group contract aimed to establish a space in which students felt accountable to the group (through their own rules) and confident that the space would support them in taking risks with what they shared and how they shared. In this chapter, I explore the ways that the space we created functioned as a space for experimentation with personal identity and relationship to community.

CASE STUDIES

Each case is drawn from a study of thirty-seven high school youth who participated in the Mart Theatre Project. I selected to report on the following cases because the students profiled were mentioned most frequently in my field notes, and because these students clearly illustrated trends I saw across the student body with whom I worked as part of the Mart Theatre Project. Specifically, these students utilized the Mart Theatre Project as a space to reclaim identity markers, to discover moments of transportation in which they could more fully feel a part of a group, and to find entry points into the project that utilized their strengths.

Lisa

Lisa Jones, a Caucasian female student, was an 11th grader whose demeanor shifted between enthusiasm and aloofness. My experience with Lisa demonstrates the applied theater's ability to create a space where students can re-imagine themselves as leaders in their community, allowing them to actively articulate and actively work to change the systems they find problematic and oppressive. I first worked with Lisa when I facilitated the Barbara Jordan Essay Competition workshop. In contrast to most of her female peers, who tended to wear either athletic or traditionally feminine clothing, Lisa wore baggy t-shirts and shorts, a lot of black clothing, heavy eye makeup, and metal chain jewelry. Lisa joined the workshop along with one close friend, another Caucasian female student, and the two girls, while happy to talk with each other, rarely engaged with other students in the group. Thus, while Lisa's appearance suggested that she viewed herself as an outsider at school, her close relationship with one student in the group made it clear that she actively maintained at least one close friendship. During the last meeting of the Barbara Jordan Essay Workshop, I videotaped interviews with students involved in the workshop. Lisa and her friend appear together onscreen. In response to the question, "What do you think of when you think of Mart?" Lisa smiled and quietly responded, "Really small town." Her friend added on, "Not much going on." Lisa shyly added, "Yeah, except at school. At school there's lots of drama." Lisa frequently referenced the "drama" at Mart High School. The way she rolled her eyes and crossed her arms suggested an air of impatience with her classmates. However, I noticed throughout our project and the recorded interviews that Lisa kind, soft-

spoken nature belied her tough exterior. Lisa contributed often to our conversations in the workshop, participated readily in activities, and showed a genuine interest in the prospect of exploring African American history in Mart and writing an essay. When I asked if any of the students in the essay competition would be interested in interviewing the head of the black Masonic lodge in Mart, Lisa was the first to volunteer. Later, however, I emailed students to check in on their essays over winter break, Lisa replied to let me know that she had transferred to a high school outside of town and had really enjoyed working with me. This exchange led me to believe that Lisa was an engaged student. I wondered if her transfer to a new school had something to do with the high school “drama” she had referenced in the video. In my interactions with Lisa, she was an articulate, engaged student. However, my conversations with Lisa during lunch as well as the ways she positioned social conflict as “drama,” or something insignificant and outside of herself, made me think that she was struggling socially at school.

The following fall semester, I found Lisa sitting outside by herself at lunchtime while I was visiting Mart High School to talk with the principal about the Mart Theatre Project. Lisa explained that she had transferred back to Mart High School after a semester, and the following week, I discovered that Lisa was a student in the 2nd period speech class, one of two classes participating in the Mart Theatre Project.

Throughout the semester, Lisa displayed a desire to be accepted by her peers juxtaposed with a longing to differentiate her self from the crowd. One day when I found her again eating lunch by herself in the school courtyard, Lisa told me she didn’t have any real friends at school. A few weeks later, however, when being

interviewed by a classmate and myself for a video, Lisa was asked to name what she loved about Mart. She answered, “all the friends I’ve got around here.” Lisa’s fluctuating feelings about the quality and quantity of her friendships, as well as frequent references to either having or not having friends, could suggest an uncertainty about her place within the school community.

While Lisa waffled on her social standing at school, she demonstrated focus and a willingness to actively participate during our class periods, often raising her hand to give an answer or ask a question more than other students in the class. She also showed thoughtfulness and commitment to her work; in her “I am from,” poem, she took her time making word choices and used literal and metaphorical images to express her identity. Below is a copy of her piece, in which I have maintained her original grammar and capitalization choices:

I am from nowhere
I am from Drama town
I am from texas
I am from the Country
I am from small town
I am from Jones
I am from America
I am from Army Dad
I am from Changing
I am from Random
I am from neon
I am from motorcycles
I am from Rednecks
I am from love and Hate

Lisa’s poem offers a complex map of the spaces and place from which Lisa feels she is “from.” In her poem, Lisa includes the geographic places she is from—Mart, Texas, and America. She also uses descriptors that reflect the way she sees Mart and Mart

High School—nowhere, drama town, small town. Lisa evokes her family by saying she is from Jones (her surname) and an Army Dad. “Neon” and “motorcycles” offer visual symbols of the places Lisa is from and words like “changing,” “random,” and “love and hate” illustrate Lisa’s worldview and experience. Finally, by proclaiming, “I am from Rednecks,” Lisa self-identifies with a term most commonly used in a derogatory manner.

In addition to her own creative work, Lisa helped cultivate a space where a variety of student identity makers were acknowledged and valued by fellow classmates.

I asked students to choose one of their “I am from” lines and to create a gesture to perform with the line. At the end of class, the students went around in a circle, each student sharing his or her line and gesture. Afterwards, I asked students to name lines or gesture that had stood out to them. Lisa raised her hand first and mentioned that she liked how one boy created a gesture that looked like he was fishing, and another boy created a gesture to show that he was on a motorbike. (Field notes, 10 Dec 11)

By giving her classmates enthusiastic feedback, Lisa helped to shape the ethos of our classroom into a supportive, creative space. Her responses to other students’ poems set the stage for actively celebrating diverse and sometimes marginalized identity markers within the group.

On the day of the students’ final showcase, I attended the 2nd and 7th period speech classes to remind students that, if they were interested in participating in the showcase, they should plan to meet together after school in the cafeteria. I noticed that Lisa wasn’t in class. As I was walking through the hallway, I ran into Lisa talking with a guidance counselor. Lisa appeared to have recently been crying. I said hello to her, and she said hello back and assured me that she would be at the

showcase that evening. I have no way of knowing what Lisa was talking about with the counselor, but I was surprised that even in a time of challenge or seeming discomfort, Lisa, unlike most of her classmates, remembered that the showcase was that evening and had made a verbal commitment to participate.

That afternoon, Lisa played a key role in preparing for the showcase the live and digital performance pieces that the two speech classes created. Lisa was the only student from her 2nd period class to show up in the cafeteria after school. The participating students (eleven girls) and I met immediately afterschool and spent the next four hours planning the course of events for that evening, rehearsing a series of live performances intercut with digital performances introduced live by students, and setting up the space for our audience. When I asked students what they wanted the audience to take away from the evening, Lisa initiated a conversation about the kinds of changes she wanted to see in Mart—namely, a place for young people to gather and “hang out” outside of school and football games. Lisa also talked about how Mart High School should offer college-level classes, to better prepare students for college. In discussing changes she wanted to see in Mart, Lisa also went into detail about the “drama” she saw at Mart High School:

I think we need something where everybody can bond, because, everybody says we don't have cliques, but...[in Mart] we've got cliques, it's not like the 'jocks', the 'preps,' but we've got cliques, it's just... no one every talks to each other, but when they do it's just violence, or fighting. (Mart High School Students)

Despite Lisa's aloof nature and insistence that her classmates were too much “drama”, our conversation about what we wanted our audience to take away from the showcase led Lisa to reveal that she wished that she and her peers were part of a

more cohesive community. She worried about the violence and arguing that took place between social groups at the school. Spearheaded by Lisa's comment, the students expressed that they wanted to create a space in Mart where young people could gather, and they decided to share that plan with the audience during our talkback session.

After this conversation, Lisa showed a great deal of leadership throughout the evening, taking the initiative to set up chairs, move tables, and prepare a buffet table where we would serve refreshments to our audience. When Amari, a student who had participated only in the Mart Community Project summer program, arrived and announced that she wanted to sing a hymn in the showcase, Lisa was a vocal supporter of the idea and offered to introduce her in the showcase. At the end of the evening, Lisa introduced me to her father, who had been in the audience, and asked if she could take a picture with me, which suggested that she felt proud of her role in the project.

The next week in class, I asked Lisa if she wouldn't mind sharing with her classmates a little of what had happened at the showcase. Without being prompted, Lisa stood and walked to the front of the room. I was surprised by the confidence she displayed with her voice and body language as she gave this detailed description of the evening:

Okay, like, we did a lot of things, like we took time to get like, everybody said a little bit of something. Like we had four or five people doing like, "I am from the" little, like, almost like the little performance they did. People did that. Some of us actually said it. But all together we were there to talk about what we wanted to change in Mart, and how we could. Like we all wanted a teen dance place for all of us to go hang out, like maybe a coffee shop or a smoothie shop. And then have other places we could go in Mart and maybe, how instead of a smoothie club we could have like somewhere else where all

us teens could just hang out and have fun without anybody else starting any drama, maybe a place for all of us to go listen to music, beanbag chairs, a place for us to relax and get out of the house. And maybe an arts center or something that we could all go to. But really we were there and just talked a lot about ...a place...for all of the teens from Mart, as a big ol' community from Mart, all the students, and all the other teenagers that aren't really enrolled in Mart but the ones that come and visit, and everybody, and all of our cousins and family and stuff that come, a place for all of us to hang out. (Mart High School 2nd period)

Lisa stood tall at the front of the room and held her head high as she relayed the details of the showcase to her classmates. In this moment, Lisa was in the role of spokesperson for her peers, a liaison between her classmates at the Mart Community Project planning committee. She went on to explain that the students had discussed how they could create a place in Mart where they could make their own decisions—"adults wouldn't be telling us what to do,"—and that a center for teen life in town would mean that they would no longer have to find a ride to Waco in order to have something to do.

Lisa then explained how well the students' ideas had been received at the showcase:

And I mean...everybody...all the audience and everybody that was there really enjoyed what we said, like they were all ready for us to actually get on it and go figure out how we can do it, who was all gonna be willing to help and everything, and everybody thought it was really good, we all said, like, we even talked about what we've been doing in class, about the "I Am From" poems, what everybody would change, she showed the videos that she made of all of us, but so far, from what I've heard, everybody liked it. Everybody really wants us to go and figure out how we can change Mart. (Mart High School 2nd period)

Lisa displayed confidence in her body language and her voice as she explained the showcase to her peers. Lisa's choice to stand next to me at the front of the room

while addressing her classmates illustrated her choice to step, for a moment, into a leadership role in the classroom. In this moment, Lisa was taking on the role of co-facilitator, rather than student. After the Mart Theatre Project ended, Lisa contacted me through email and text message to follow up about the Mart Community Project and to let me know that she'd be interested in attending any community planning meetings that might be happening in Mart.

The transportational space of the Mart Theatre Project invited Lisa to step, momentarily, out of her role as a 'transgressive,' loner adolescent and into a leadership role among her peers. She imagined a space for young people to gather as an antidote to the "arguing," and "violence" that she saw among the "cliques" formed by her peers (Mart High School Students, 7 Nov 2011). When I first met Lisa, she had begun to resist the "drama" of high school through her unconventional clothing choices and loner attitude. Within the Mart Theatre Project, Lisa began to identify and articulate the root of the problems between her peers (cliques), to propose a solution to that problem (a space in the town for young people to gather), and to serve as a leader and a voice for her peers.

The transportation Lisa experienced during her experience with the Mart Theatre Project can be categorized as a temporary shift from Erikson's notion of "dissociation" to fidelity to others (Newman 325). Lisa's initial behavior when I met her—her insistence that she didn't have friends, her complaints about the "drama" of her classmates suggested dissociation from her peers. By taking on a leadership position in the Mart Theatre Project, however, Lisa began to display a "fidelity" (Newman 325) toward her fellow Mart Theatre Project participants.

Keisha

Keisha is an African American female high school junior who participated in my 7th period class. My experience with Keisha helped me to realize applied theatre's ability to harness the creative potential in transgressive youth behavior. I noticed right away that Keisha was very vocal with her opinion in class, and often spoke out without raising her hand. Unlike most of the students in her class, Keisha displayed a strong aversion in class to referring to Mart as her home. In giving directions for students to brainstorm sentences beginning with the prompt, "I am from," I mentioned that Mart would probably be included as at least one of the places students were from, noting that students might also talk about other geographical or social space and places they identified with. "I'm not from Mart!" Keisha declared loudly. I later discovered that at the beginning of that school year Keisha had moved from living in Austin with her mother to living in Mart with her father. The poem Keisha reflected this recent reality:

I am from the Texas capital with a lot of singing birds and buzzing bees.
I am from diversity, many different cultures, and plenty of people to meet
I am from a weird place, "Keep Austin weird," is the logo.
I am from the projects, and not ashamed of who I am.
I am from my mom, a beautiful lady.
I am from love, power, and beauty.

The first three lines of Keisha's poem read like a love letter to Austin. Keisha effectively evokes bright sights and sounds of Austin ("singing birds and buzzing bees"), evokes the Austin slogan ("Keep Austin weird."), and touts the diversity of Austin (a claim she would later amend with the note that while Austin is diverse, it is also segregated). Halfway through her poem, Keisha takes a turn toward the personal. In declaring that she is "from the projects, and not ashamed of who I am,"

she acknowledges and refutes the negative stereotypes associated with public housing. Keisha honors her mother, with whom she was no longer living at the time this poem was written, by describing her as “a beautiful lady.” Keisha ends with a tribute to an unknown person or place (or perhaps herself), asserting she is “from love, power, and beauty.”

As mentioned in the previous chapter, when I suggested that students each choose one “I am from...” line to use in a choral poem, Keisha insisted that she read her entire brainstormed poem aloud. This request prompted other 7th period students to share their poem aloud and ultimately led to my realization that students wanted the opportunity to share the poems in their entirety. Because she was in in-school suspension during the class period when students recorded their “I am from” poems, Keisha’s poem was never recorded and, therefore, did not make it into the final video. Based on previous similar situations with students, I expected Keisha to either protest when she realized that her poem had not been included in the video, or to withdraw and not participate in discussing the video. Instead, Keisha remain vocal about how impressed she was with the video and her peers’ work. As we watched the pieces together as a class, she punctuated the experience with exclamations of “Aw, that was cute!” or “Ooh, I liked that!”

Despite her absence from the videos themselves, Keisha was one of the eleven students who ultimately participated in the showcase. Once our audience arrived, the girls and I moved into a back room of the cafeteria to warm up before our performance. Once we completed a warm-up activity and went over the schedule of events for the evening, Keisha asked if she could lead the group in prayer. We all held hands and bowed our heads, and Keisha led us in a prayer in

which she asked that we all perform well together for our audience that night. Keisha introduced one of the videos and also participated in a short live performance piece created from a few of the students' "I am from..." lines. After the showcase, Keisha took it upon herself to offer to serve refreshments to some of the older audience members. Keisha went through the audience taking "orders," put together plates at the refreshments table, and brought the plates back to the audience members.

At the end of the evening, Keisha calmly explained that her family hadn't show up for the performance and asked if I could give her a ride home. During our ride, Keisha expressed how much fun she had that evening. She pointed out that before the event, she hadn't known some of the other girls who had participated in the showcase, but now she felt like they were friends. When we arrived at her apartment complex, I offered Keisha some of the leftover refreshments from the evening and Keisha asked if I would come upstairs with her to help her carry everything. I also got the sense that she wanted me to meet her family. Before we could climb the stairs, Keisha's father met us in the parking lot. Keisha asked why he hadn't been at the performance, but her father did not give a response; instead, he thanked me for driving her home and asked when the next performance would be. Keisha's body language and the way she spoke to her father suggested that the showcase had been important to her and that she was disappointed he hadn't been there. Yet despite her disappointment, Keisha had participated in the showcase enthusiastically.

By insisting that she and her classmates be given a chance to share their brainstormed "I am from..." poems in their entirety, Keisha helped to transform the

Mart Theatre Project into a space in which here peers felt comfortable enough to share their poems aloud and generous enough to act as a supportive audience to one another. When I first met Keisha, she was a self-declared outsider to Mart who performed resistance through her outspoken manner and her confrontational behavior which, I was told by her teacher, landed her in frequent in-school suspensions. Through the Mart Theatre Project, Keisha not only continued to make her own voice heard, but also honored the voices of her fellow participants. Through cheering on her classmates and leading her fellow performers in prayer before the showcase, Keisha demonstrated a real effort to connect with her classmates in a meaningful way. Despite her disappointment that her family did not attend the showcase, Keisha participated enthusiastically and forged community by serving food to our audience after the showcase.

While Lisa and Keisha initially displayed very different behaviors when I first met them, the moments of transportation they both displayed in the context of the Mart Theatre Project appeared quite similar. Certainly the girls faced different challenges: where Lisa appeared socially alienated from her classmates, Keisha was simply new to the Mart community and was therefore just beginning to forge friendships at school. Where Lisa appeared withdrawn and dismissive of her peers, Keisha displayed confrontational behavior that often landed her in school suspensions. Yet like Lisa, Keisha experienced a space of transportation in the Mart Theatre Project that allowed her to ultimately display a “fidelity to others” (Newman 325) as she complimented her classmates’ creative endeavors, led her peers in prayer before our showcase, and served our audience members after the performance. Child development scholars posit that when adolescents “pledge

[themselves] to others,” they “make a difference in their lives, and that, in return, contributes to [the adolescent’s] sense of well-being” (Newman 325). The Mart Theatre Project afforded Keisha opportunities to show support and encouragement to her peers, thereby forging connections and feeling part of a larger community.

Billy

Billy, a Caucasian male 10th grader in my 2nd period class, was a student who all but faded into the background during our class periods together. Working with Billy taught me the importance of providing students with several different entry points into the applied theatre process. Billy was polite and participated in activities as expected of him, but I never heard much from him otherwise. Billy kept his eyes cast to the ground during most of our classes, and I hardly ever heard his voice. He was one of several students—mostly boys—who, while certainly not disruptive, appeared to be less than interested in the work we were doing together.

About halfway through the semester, I realized I wanted to collect and assemble audio recordings of the students’ “I am from” poems. I planned to layer the recorded poems with photographed images of the town and background music in order to create a short digital video. I initially struggled with how I would acquire these images, until I remembered that most young people today own cell phones with cameras. I gave students my personal cell phone number and instructed them to send me images that answered the question, “Where are you from?”

Ultimately, very few students sent me any images at all. However, on October 20th, the date on which I first asked students to send me photos, Billy sent me a photo of a skyline. The photo appeared to have been taken from atop a tractor;

the green nose of the tractor could be seen at the bottom left of the photo. Beyond that was the dark brown dirt of a fallow field, and above, a deep blue sky. The photo was accompanied with the text, “will this count.” I replied that I loved the photo, and I thanked Billy for sending it.

The next week, it came time for students to record the poems. I called the students into an empty classroom in pairs, and they took turns reading into an audio recorder. Billy clutched his notebook and bounced his knee nervously as he mumbled through his poem:

I am from Mart
I am from the country
I am from sleeping
I am from my mom
I am from tractors
I am from girls
I am from the United States
I am from trash
I am from grease.
I am from work.
I am from farming.
I am from a dirt road.

In his poem, Billy marks the geographical spaces he is “from”—Mart and the United States. Billy displays a sense of humor in listing that he is “from” two interests often attributed to (heterosexual) teenage boys: sleeping and girls. Billy suggests the importance of his family by asserting, “I am from my mom.” The other places and spaces Billy lists being from—“the country,” “tractors,” “trash,” “grease,” “work,” “farming,” “a dirt road,”—serve as literal and figurative images that evoke a rural, agricultural worldview. Billy creates a picture in the listener’s mind of the dirt, grime, and hard work of life on a working farm.

While Billy never appeared comfortable with the more performative aspects of the Mart Theatre Project, he showed enthusiasm and creativity in the written and digital portions of the project. Initially, Billy read so quickly and nervously through his poem that I asked him to take a breath and try it again, this time more slowly. I reminded him that it was all right if he made a mistake, and that I could edit out any mistakes in the final product. Billy read through his poem, more slowly this time. Later that day, Billy sent me another photo of the tractor, this time taken from the ground, so that the whole tractor was visible. Several hours later Billy text messaged me to ask, “would u like a picture of a dirtroad [sic]”. I replied with “Yes! Please. That sounds great!” Soon after, I received a photo of a dirt road crossed with tractor tracks, grass lining the sides and a blue sky overhead. In the final video created by students, Brian’s poem was layered over the images of the tractor and the dirt road, giving voice to the young man behind these evocative images.

The written and digital components of the Mart Theatre Project invited Billy into a transportational space in which he could step out of his role as a soft-spoken student and into the role of artist and documentarian. For Billy, the Mart Theatre Project provided a space for him to voice the perspective of a working-class young person in rural Texas. When I first met Billy, he appeared quiet, introspective, and disengaged. Billy took full advantage of the writing and photography components of the Mart Theatre Project as opportunities to creatively represent his own everyday experience as a member of a farming family.

When I first began working with Billy, I assumed that his quiet demeanor indicated that he was uninterested in the work we were doing; instead, I discovered that Billy was eager to express himself creatively through mediated, rather than live,

performance. In Mart, the boys who were best known in town were extroverted football players. In this climate, boys like Billy, an introverted non-athlete, tended to fade into the background. I learned that while Billy may not have felt comfortable expressing himself verbally or physically in class, the mediated entry points of writing and photography provided Billy with a way into the process.

It was through mediated performance that Billy found the opportunity to experiment with resisting community notions of what young white maleness should look like (like a football player) and creatively expressing his own identity. Like Lisa and Keisha, Billy displayed behavior that suggested he experienced “dissociation,” or a sense of “separateness” (Newman 325) from his peers; I rarely saw Billy look anyone in the eye or speak to anyone. Unlike Lisa and Keisha, Billy did not ultimately connect with his peers in a visible way during the Mart Theatre Project. Yet Billy’s enthusiastic participation in the project through his writing and photography suggested that Billy was interested in connecting with the video’s audience—Mart community members and Mart High School students—through a mediated format.

CONCLUSIONS

These three case studies illustrate some of the ways in which young people might utilize an applied theatre and digital media project as a space to experiment with self: as a space for reclaiming words used disparagingly, for utilizing seemingly transgressive behaviors as strengths, and for opening up new possibilities for self-expression to themselves and to their peers.

Each of the students profiled here display behavior that could be described as socially transgressive—Lisa who wore dark makeup and often presented herself as a loner with no patience for the “drama” of high school, Keisha as an outspoken student who often shouted out in class, and Billy who avoided eye contact and appeared withdrawn. A common risk Lisa, Keisha, and Billy each took was to claim ownership over an identity marker commonly portrayed in a negative light. In her poem, Lisa proclaims, “I am from Rednecks.” Keisha declares, “I am from the projects and not afraid of who I am.” Billy asserts, “I am from trash/ I am from grease.” By claiming language often used against them, these three students each chose to reclaim the “socially constructed identities” outlined by Grady. Grady reminds us that young people decide in many ways each day whether to reify or subvert the ways that their society tells them they should behave based on identity markers like race, gender, socioeconomic status, sexual orientation, religion, and national identity. Lisa, Keisha, and Billy utilized their “I am from” digital and live performance pieces as an opportunity to redefine “rednecks”, “from the projects”, and “from trash and grease”, respectively. When given a platform to name identity in a creative context, Lisa, Keisha, and Billy found the agency to reclaim the words that society could use against them and the communities with whom they identify. Erikson’s theories on youth development dictate that adolescents develop a keen awareness of “new consciousness about one’s membership in groups, the boundaries and barriers that separation groups...and the social implications of being in one group or another” (Newman 319). Lisa, Keisha, and Billy all exhibited an awareness of the negative implications of the groups with whom they felt allied, and

they each chose to subvert those negative social implications by proudly reclaiming these groups as markers of their own identities.

The use of digital media added a layer of safety to the process; students were able to record themselves reclaiming these words, and the inclusion of the recording in our final digital video meant that students did not have to speak these words aloud. In fact, neither Lisa, Keisha, nor Billy chose to speak the above-mentioned lines when sharing a line out to the group. Instead, when sharing in person, the students chose safer statements: Lisa performed, “I am from no where.” Keisha shared, “I am from music.” Billy shared, “I am from tractors.” Thus the use of media allowed students to reclaim the above-mentioned words while maintaining a low level of visibility.

The transportational potential of the “I am from” live and digital performance pieces lie both in the cultivation of a safe space—the group contract and community building activities—and in the process of students reflecting on and articulating the place and spaces that have shaped their identities. Students were asked to brainstorm the places and spaces with which they identified, to describe those places creatively, to share their writing with the group, and to illustrate some of those images with physical movement or photo images. These are activities that involved high level of visibility and call for the cultivation of a safe space. For Lisa, Keisha, and Billy, that process began with the students creating a group contract for how they would maintain a safe space while engaging in creative work together. It is important to note, however, that while both Lisa and Keisha displayed increased interaction with their peers as the project progressed, Billy continued to display outward behavior that I would consider guarded. During our class periods together,

Billy continued to cast his eyes downward and to speak only when absolutely necessary. It was through writing and digital media that Billy felt safe enough to contribute to the project creatively. This contrast suggests that the high level of visibility involved in theatre means that, for more introverted participants, an applied theatre space may never feel comfortable; instead, some students may require entryways into the process that require less visibility.

While digital media was initially integrated into the Mart Theatre Project for logistical purposes, it ultimately provided my students and me with pedagogical and creative opportunities not afforded by applied theatre alone. Specifically, Billy's case study illustrates how digital media and digital communication can serve as an entry point for students who feel more comfortable working digitally than in a live theatre setting. While the group contract the students and I created at the start of our time together was meant to help students feel safe in the classroom, in class Billy remained physically closed-off, kept his eyes cast downward, and rarely spoke. Through recording a written poem and capturing digital images, however, Billy was able to engage creatively in the project in a way that felt safe.

The Mart Theatre Project invited students to utilize their "transgressive" tendencies as strengths. Ultimately, all three students were able to move temporarily from a place of "dissociation" to a space of "fidelity with others" (325). For Lisa and Keisha, this shift was visible in the classroom as they interacted more easily with their classmates; for Billy, this shift occurred not in the classroom, but through digital media. Lisa demonstrated by her leadership before the showcase and while debriefing her classmates on the showcase, Lisa discovered a role in which she could connect with others and highlight herself as an individual. Keisha's

used her vocal nature to encourage and support her classmates as she cheered them on in class and led them in prayer on the day of the showcase. Billy's quiet, introspective nature, while sometimes seemingly incompatible with high-visibility classroom drama activities, proved incredibly conducive to capturing images that encapsulated his daily experience. While it might seem initially that Billy remained in a space of dissociation, I would argue Billy's willingness to write candidly about his rural identity and to include his personal photography in our video speaks, if not to his ability to connect with his peers, then at least to his ability to share his creative work with his classmates. Each of the three students profiled discovered ways to experiment with performing self in the transportational space of an applied theatre and digital media project in the manner that best suited their personal strengths and identities.

Chapter 4: Facilitator Identity in the Applied Theatre Process and Product

In this chapter, I explore how my own identity markers shaped the process and product of the project. The “applied” nature of applied theatre means that practitioners frequently work in settings in which they are “other,” and this otherness unavoidably affects the process and the product of the applied theatre project. In this chapter, I first review the literature on facilitator and educator identity. I then explore the identities I brought to the table as facilitator of the Mart Theatre Project. Finally, I analyze three distinct moments from this applied theatre project when my identity came into focus within the context of the project.

CONTEXT: FACILITATOR IDENTITY IN APPLIED THEATRE

Applied theatre practitioners frequently find themselves in the role of outsider. James Thompson points out that the “act of applying,” takes applied theatre practitioners into a myriad of settings in which they are not experts, and he posits that, “one of applied theatre’s strengths is in its status as the outsider, the visitor and the guest” (20). Later, however, Thompson admits that he makes this statement, “as a disclaimer; an apology for the inevitable crudeness that emerges in the analysis of certain practices by the non-expert” (21). Thompson puts value on the applied theatre practitioner’s ability to act objectively and view a context with fresh eyes; at the same time, he admits that the practitioner’s outsider status can act as a roadblock to the practitioner’s ability to understand the context in which he or she works.

While Thompson focuses on the applied theatre practitioner's role as outsider in terms of a lack of expertise, Sharon Grady looks more specifically at the drama facilitator's role as cultural outsider in relation to her students, positing that "the conflict between teacher and student social identities and assumed cultural norms directly affects what students have to opportunity to learn and therefore the degree to which they succeed or fail in the institution of school" (10). The author links an educator's navigation of differences in culture and identity directly to a student's ability to succeed in the classroom. Grady calls on drama educators to "not only to recognize our own racial and ethnic identities but also of the young people we serve" (32). The author insists that to feign a kind of colorblindness when interacting with students actually does the students a great disservice, arguing instead for theatre educators to adopt "a pluralistic perspective" which involves "self-consciously interrogating our own identity locations (including race, social class, gender, ability, and sexual orientation) and heightening our context sensitivity as we attend to the complex identities of our students and our audience" (Grady 17). Grady calls upon drama educators to work toward a critical and ongoing awareness of the identity markers of our students, our audiences, and ourselves.

bell hooks also addressed pluralism, describing it not as synonymous with diversity, but as a conscious response to the fact of diversity (47). hooks furthers the conversation around pluralism with her notion of radical openness, or "the will to explore different perspectives and change one's mind as new information is presented;" she argues for educators to see themselves as fellow learners in the classroom, and to see their students' opinions and experiences as valuable knowledge (hooks 48). In the Mart Theatre Project, I aimed to position myself as a

fellow learner and to position my students as experts on the Mart Community. hooks's radical openness is based solidly in Freire's argument for co-intentional teaching (Freire 69). As applied theatre facilitators, we are encouraged by critical pedagogues like Freire and hooks to create a radically open space in which we can work alongside our students in a place of "unknowing and discovery" (hooks 47). As I embarked on my work with the Mart Theatre Project, I attempted to maintain an awareness both of my own identity markers and of the existence of blind spots in my own perceptions. My goal was to create a space where my students and I would remain open to hearing and learning from one another.

BACKGROUND: THE MART COMMUNITY PROJECT IDENTITY

Throughout my time in Mart, I was aware that I brought my own biases, identities, thought patterns into our creative space. I carried with me my own many identities and the privilege (or lack thereof) accompanying them: white, female, Northerner, college educated, university student. Moreover, I carried with me an association with the Mart Community Project, a reality that significantly shaped my initial relationship with the town.

As outlined in Chapter One, the Mart Community Project was founded by Paula Gerstenblatt, a doctoral candidate with family ties to Mart. Gerstenblatt's role in Mart is that of both insider and outsider: as a white woman whose ties to the community are linked through a black family by marriage, Gerstenblatt is viewed as something of an oddity in the community, especially by many white community members. (During one city council meeting, a member of city council questioned Gerstenblatt's motives for involvement in the community.) Yet perceptions of

Gerstenblatt, and of the outsiders she brings in from the University of Texas and from a partnership at Baylor University have shifted considerably among Mart residents over the last few years. At a Mart High School faculty meeting held at the end of winter break, the school principal publicly cited Gerstenblatt's continuous involvement with the Mart as a sign that she was truly dedicated to the community. Conflicting perceptions of Gerstenblatt's presence in the town were reflected not only on her as an individual, but on everyone involved with the Mart Community Project.

I felt a shift in my relationship to the community when in the summer of 2011, after commuting to Mart from Austin for months, I moved to Mart temporarily, along with some other artists associated with the Mart Community Project. While living in the community, I had the opportunity to interact with residents in less formal settings than previously possible. One day while filling my car with gas at one of the town's two gas stations, I heard someone call my name. I turned and saw that the volunteer fire department had pulled up to fuel their engine. Two men I met during a meeting at city hall, a city council member and a police officer, appeared also to serve as volunteer firefighters in the town. The two men approached me and we chatted as they inquired about how I was enjoying my stay in Mart. This chance meeting felt distinctly different from the scheduled meetings I experienced with these two men; while scheduled meetings tended to feel formal, this moment felt relaxed and friendly. After this interaction, future scheduled meetings with these individuals began to feel more at ease .

Living in the community with other artists also helped me to make connections to folks in town. Where I had been an outsider visiting once a week, I

was now saying hello to people on the street and talking with neighbors over lunch. Yet even as my relationship with the community shifted over time, I continued to carry my identity as a non-Mart resident. I was facilitating conversations about community development in Mart, but while my students were all Mart residents, I had no history with, or long-term roots in, the town. In addition to my awareness of my status as an outsider to Mart, I was aware of the power inequities between my students and myself, many of which remain rooted deeply in issues of identity. In Mart, a Southern town where, as mentioned previously, 74% of students were labeled economically disadvantaged and nearly 30% of the population was African American, my identity markers stood in direct contrast to many of my students. My whiteness, education level, and socioeconomic status means that I hold privileges that many of my students do not have. The following vignettes, drawn from ethnographic field notes and transcripts of recorded conversations, illustrate some of the ways in which my identities as a facilitator affected the applied theatre process. I explore the function of Freirian pedagogy and radical openness in relation to both the students and the applied theatre facilitator. Next, I examine ways that an applied theatre facilitator can engage with students with whom they share a “community of identity” (Nicholson 94). Finally, I reflect on some of the ways that a facilitator’s “outsider” status can serve the applied theatre process and product.

“Radical Openness” and Applied Theatre

Early in my first Mart-based project, The Barbara Jordan Essay Workshop, my goal was to help students consider what they already knew about African American history in the community and where gaps in knowledge might lie.

Ultimately, I hoped to help students think about the kinds of questions they might ask in interviews with older African Americans in the community. During the first session of the Barbara Jordan Essay Workshop, I explained that we would be taking on roles and creating an improvised scene. I explained that, in a moment, we were going to imagine that a student representative from the University of Texas at Austin has announced that the university will be building a black history museum in Mart. I asked students to imagine who might attend a meeting to get information about the new museum. I shared that students would take on the roles of imaginary Mart community members who might attend such a meeting. I gave student a few moments to decide whom they would play, and to brainstorm a little about their character.

The students took seriously their new roles as Mart community members attending the meeting. I watched the students shift in their chairs, squaring their shoulders or slumping over, looking the world in the eyes or cast their gazes down, as they tried on new physicalities to match the inspired-by-real-life characters they were about to play. Once the scene began, my character bumbled into the room, introduced herself as a student from UT, and excitedly explained that an anonymous donor had given money to establish an African American History Museum in Mart. My character then admitted that she had no idea what African American history in Mart actually entailed and I enlisted the group to help me get this project started. Positioning the students as experts in Mart history, I asked them, in role, to brainstorm the museum's intended audience: Who is this museum for? Who needs to hear these stories?

The students shared an array of possible community perspectives on whom an African American history museum could or should serve. One character explained that African Americans in Mart needed to hear the stories, to know where they came from. Another character chimed in to insist that the museum should be aimed toward African Americans everywhere. A third character suggested that children of all races living in Mart could benefit from knowing the history of African Americans in Mart. A quiet freshman raised his hand: “This museum should also be for the older African Americans in our community, so they can see how the changes they fought for are really happening.”

In role, the students began to discuss what they knew about black history in their community and to offer different perspectives on the importance of this history. When my character asked for an overview of what community members already know about African American history in Mart, students, in role as other community members, spoke of slave plantations, segregation, the Civil Rights movement, and sports stars. One character insisted on the importance of acknowledging both the negative and the positive elements of the African American experience in Mart; another discussed the importance not just of documenting the past and present of the African American community in Mart, but of envisioning the future.

My choice to take on the role of the clueless outsider to the community while positioning students as experts from and on the community, grows out of Dorothy Heathcote’s “Mantle of the Expert,” a dramatic-inquiry based approach to teaching and learning that invites students to step into role as experts on a given topic (Heathcote). The Mantle of the Expert is particularly Freirian in that it positions

students as co-creators of knowledge and works to shift traditional power dynamic between students and teachers into one of equanimity (Freire 69). In this particular instance, many of the students had more knowledge than I did about African American history in Mart. I chose to play a UT student—not dissimilar from myself—as a way to acknowledge my own lack of familiarity with the town, particularly in terms of the history on race. My choice to step into role as an obviously uninformed visitor served a similar purpose to that of Thompson’s “disclaimer.” In a way, it functioned as my own “apology for the inevitable crudeness” that would occur when I attempted to take on a leadership role in helping students write essays about African American history in Mart, a subject which they, as Mart residents, probably knew more than me. In playing an outsider in the scene, I acknowledged my very real limited knowledge about Mart’s history and positioned my students as able to reflect on their experiences around race in their own community. Heathcote’s “Mantle of the Expert” serves as an example of applied theatre’s ability to empower facilitators to create a Freirian space in which students are positioned as experts.

In the Freirian tradition of supporting students to bring their own knowledge to the center of the classroom experience, I worked to position students as co-creators of knowledge in the classroom. In this process, a student taught me the importance of cultivating radical openness for myself as a facilitator by illustrating the faulty thinking at work in my assumptions about race in the community. On the day of the students’ final showcase, I invited students interested in participating in the showcase to meet me in the cafeteria immediately after school. Once the last school bell rang, eleven students were there to perform, all of them girls, and eight

of them from the 7th period class. On the day of the performance, the students and I had about four hours in which to discuss goals, solidify the order of the performance, and set up the space for our audience.

As we started planning for the evening, my students began to clearly articulate their perspectives on the Mart community. When I asked, “what do you hope your audience takes away from this evening?” students discussed changes they wanted to see in the community. In listening to my students describe the community, I began to realize that while the small, segregated nature of Mart put racism on the forefront of my perceptions of the town, the tight-knit aspect of the community, stemming directly from its small size, meant that students often found themselves encountering more diversity than might a student in a bigger city. This reality became especially clear to me when Keisha spoke about her observations of social networks at Mart High School:

What I like about this school is like, when I was in Austin, all I know...I was raised in Austin, so in Austin all I know is Mexican and black people, that's all I been around, that's what I was raised around, and that's all I was really allowed to go with, I couldn't go with, like, white people and stuff, you know. But when I got here, you know, I got here it was like, it was kind of crazy for me to see that, white people and black people they be talking and hanging out and stuff, and so that's when I started talking to her and her and...I like it, personally.... (Mart High School Students)

In contrast to my perceptions of racism in Mart, Keisha saw more interracial friendships in Mart than she had in Austin. Keisha's experience reminded me to examine my own privilege when assessing prejudice: where I, an educated white female in her 20's from the north, saw more segregation and racism in Mart than in Austin, an African American adolescent student from Austin observed and experienced a new level of racial integration among her peers in Mart. Thompson

posits that “the act of participatory theatre can ask a community what is working” (148). A conversation about what we wanted our audience to take away from our performance led Keisha to reflect aloud on the diversity she saw among social groups at Mart High School and in our own group of performers. In this way, Keisha was pointing out what she saw as a strength of the community – a dynamic of which I was not even conscious. As a white woman, I had a privileged and ultimately skewed notion of what racial tension and segregation actually looked and felt like. My privileged vantage point left me unable or unwilling to see that while a larger city like Austin may theoretically seem more diverse and progressive than Mart, the reality of segregation is such that a student of color in Austin may not ever have classmates who are white.

Keisha’s observation, which existed in strong contrast to my own initial perceptions of the town, reminded me of the duty of the teaching artist not only to examine personal biases, but to continually re-examine them as the process progresses. While I had attempted to adopt a “a pluralistic perspective” (Grady 17), I overlooked my responsibility to conduct myself from a space from “radical openness.” Just as I asked of my students to approach our work with an open mind, I needed to allow the possibility for my own perceptions of the community and my students to change. The wake-up call of Keisha’s observation about race in Mart reminds me that, while we teaching artists must adopt a a perspective that acknowledges the diversity of our students, we must also maintain the humility to acknowledge that we will continue to carry misperceptions throughout the process, and that our students are often our best teachers.

The Applied Theatre Facilitator and Identities of Community

At times during the facilitation process, I found myself taking on roles that I hadn't anticipated. On the afternoon before our showcase, as the eleven students and I were setting up the space for our audience, one of the girls, McCayla, approached me. She was crying and said she needed to leave. When I asked why, she told me that she had an argument with another girl in our group, Courtney. I called Courtney over and asked the girls what happened. McCayla explained that Courtney called her a mean name. Courtney defended herself, insisting that the name was just a joke. McCayla explained that there was a rumor going around recently that she slept with a boy from school, and that she thinks the name was in reference to that rumor. Courtney denied knowing about the rumor, insisting that she often called her friends by this name as a joke. I attempted to mediate between the girls, explaining that as women and girls, we needed to work to build each other up rather than cut each other down with ugly words. I asked Courtney to try to see the situation from McCayla's perspective. Courtney begrudgingly apologized. McCayla, sniffing, accepted the apology and decided to stay for the performance.

Although mediator of arguments and gossip is not always in an applied theatre facilitator's job description, this type of mediation is often exactly the kind of work that helps maintain cohesiveness of the group. In this instance, my identity as a woman allowed me to relate to the girls and respond from a place of empathy. The name-calling incident between these girls was hurtful; it was imbued with the shame our society places around female adolescence and female sexuality. As a former high school girl, I understand firsthand the weight of gender-specific insults and the complex dynamics of insecurity and a desire to be accepted often found in

adolescent female friendships. In this space, I acted not as a studied expert, but as a fellow woman who is not that many years out from high school, when identity is forming. This incident highlights the shifting nature of the applied theatre facilitator's role and one way that my identity helped me connect with the students in this project.

In discussing community, Nicholson differentiates between “communities of location”—people living in community because they live geographically near one another—and “communities of identity,” which “are constructed when people recognize their own experience in others,” and which are often “built by those who feel that they share common struggles” (94). While I was still an outsider to the Mart community, my students and I formed a “community of identity” rooted in the fact that we were all young women. Because our common identities as women, I was able to empathize with my students to a degree that allowed me to mediate the situation at hand in order to continue the facilitation process. Ultimately, I don't know that my students understood or cared to listen to my thoughts on how and why women and girls should work to support one another, or why I don't like it when women use disparaging gender-specific terms to refer to other women, even in jest. I also acknowledge that though my students and I share a gender identity, our differing socioeconomic statuses, geographic location, ages, and educations meant that our lived experiences were and are ultimately quite different. What I do know is that the girls felt comfortable enough to discuss the dispute with me, and that both of the girls stayed through the evening and participated in our showcase. I felt that my role as a woman helped in my ability to connect with and mediate between the girls.

The Applied Theatre Practitioner as Editor

While applied theatre performances are created by the participants, the applied theatre practitioner cannot help but have a hand in the product. In the Mart Theatre Project, I felt conflicted about the role of my own voice in the final process. While my 2nd period students were reflecting on the video we created together, a quiet student, Abby, spoke up to discuss my role as editor:

ABBY: The way you made [the video] made Mart seem very homey, very cozy, very warm, very...a place that you wanna be. It...it kind of threw together the whole idea of changing the city for the better, and making it a better place where people can hang out without having to leave. It made Mart seem like home.

ANNE: (To Abby): I love that. Thank you. (To the class): So, that's a great point. So you all provided the writing, and you provided the images. What I did was editing...I really wish, if I had all the time in the world, I would have done this editing with you all, and you could have helped me figure out which images should go with which words. (Mart High School 2nd Period)

Reception of art and images of any kind is greatly influenced by personal experience and identity. As outlined earlier, as part of the Mart Theatre Project, students wrote "I am from" poems and captured digital images, which I then layered, along with music, onto their voice over to create a short digital performance piece. This video became a space of multiple perceptions. Reception theory dictates that audience members analyze a performance according to experience and context; meaning is made when the text is interpreted by the viewer (Jauss 15). Thus, the students who created the video made meaning twice, first as creators, and then as viewers. Both times, the students' identities were implicated in their meaning-making.

The identities I brought to the role of facilitator shaped both the process and the product of the applied theatre project. Within the Mart Theatre Project, students acted as both creators and consumers of one media text, while I served as an intermediary between the two, consolidating and interpreting text and image through the editing process. Students wrote poems based on a prompt that I determined and facilitated. I later helped them audio record these poems, running the digital recording device while students read their poems. I also invited students to send me photos of Mart using their camera phones. I collected students' recorded poems and images and, using iMovie, combined them into a video. It fell to me to decide the order of the poems within the larger video, as well as which and for how long each image would appear on screen. Additionally, as the editor, I had the creative license to cut and rearrange the audio recordings, and to layer audio pieces on top of one another, so that two voices could be heard at once. The editing software allowed me to zoom in and out of images and emphasize various elements in different ways. Finally, I chose a piece of royalty-free music that underscored the students' words and images. Thus, while the students provided the assets, or material, for the video, I—an outsider to the community—arranged those assets to tell a story.

The students' video begins with audio recordings of the youth saying their names. Acoustic guitar music plays underneath the sound of the names. Then the text, "Where are you from?" comes up onscreen. Different voices repeat and layer the words "I am from Mart High School." The text "Where ELSE are you from?" appears onscreen. One voice declares, "I am from a small town." The music changes, and images of Mart begin to appear on the screen: Mart High School, a

tractor, a home, the Mart football field. As the images appear, students can be heard reading their “I am from” poems. They deliver collections of lines that touch on everything from religion to family to food, such as “I am from the books I read,” “I am from a tasty taco,” “I am from a loving mother,” and “I am from God.” The video ends with one voice saying “I am from the United States,” another voice stating, “I am from Texas,” and then many voices declaring, “I am from Mart.” One last note of music plays, and the video ends.

Abby’s assertion that I made the video in a way that made Mart “seem like home” speaks to the complex function that identity plays in the authorship of this digital performance piece. Although, as she mentions, Abby did not have a chance to include her poem in the video (as she was home sick on the day we recorded), she did send me several photos, which I included in the video; thus the piece she claimed made Mart feel “homey” ultimately included elements of Abby’s own creative work. Despite the fact that most of the assets (recorded poems and images) in the film were created by students, Abby foregrounded the role of the editor and/or the applied theatre facilitator. The irony, of course, was that it was the words, voices, and images produced by the students themselves that made the video Mart “feel like home” in the video. Abby’s comment pressed me to wonder why she had attributed the homey feel of the video to my editing.

Looking back at my data, I am also struck by my own reaction to Abby’s comment: after thanking her, I go on to insist that if I had had the time and resources, I would have made sure that the students themselves had had a hand in editing the piece. It is true that I was disappointed that time did not allow the students to be more involved with editing the piece; I worried that students’

perspectives on the town would be skewed by my own within the editing process. Looking back the process, I realize that it was an underlying, although perhaps unconscious, awareness of my own biases toward the community that caused me to question my role as editor. Although I wanted to imagine that I entered the community with an objective perspective, realistically I carried with me the biases of a northerner who grew up in a big city (Chicago): I stereotyped the small Texas town of Mart as poor and segregated, but also as quaint, charming, and full of history. I entered Mart with both a preconceived notion of what changes the community could and should implement, but also with exotified and romanticized notions of what the town was and had been. Ultimately, my own failure to acknowledge my biases drove me to express regret to the students that they could not have been more active the editing process. Yet even when I expressed this sentiment to students, I failed to verbally acknowledge my own limitations as a non-Mart resident serving as editor. I felt conflicted about my role as editor when my goal was for the voices of the students themselves to come across in the piece.

Abby's particular nod to my efforts in the creative process pushed me to reflect further on the power of an editor and facilitators in applied performance work. I began to consciously question whether, through the subtleties of my conscious and unconscious editing choices, I had imbued the video made up of students' words and images with my own perspective on the town. At the same time, Abby's comment that the video felt "like home," speaks to the degree to which the students' points of view were ultimately privileged in the narrative of the video. As the media editor, I had an opportunity to reflect back to the youth their own

spoken and visual representations of Mart in a way that helped them to imagine a variety of viewpoints on their town, on themselves.

I am left with conflicting feelings about the role of the applied theatre facilitator as editor. On one hand, the facilitator does bring biases about the community, and participants could gain a great voice in the final product if they had the opportunity to edit the video themselves. Conversely, allowing students to edit the video would have been logistically difficult, as it would have required student training in the editing software, access to computers with the software, and additional time spent in Mart for editing. I also would have had a difficult time coordinating a way for two classrooms of students—thirty-one students in all—to all have a hand in editing one video. Additionally, my role as sole editor (with some amount of experience in video editing) may have allowed me to edit the video together seamlessly enough that the students' voices *could* be heard clearly without the audience getting distracted by the quality of the video's production value. Ultimately, Abby's comment led me to believe that in editing the video, I managed to step out of the way enough to allow the voices of the students, for whom Mart really is home, to come through. If I were to carry out this project again, however, I would be interested in inviting the students themselves to partake in the editing or, if that was not possible, in having a conversation about editing with students before the piece was shown to an audience.

CONCLUSIONS

When I began the Mart Community Project, I questioned my status as an outsider in the town, a UT student, and a college-educated white female from a

larger northern city would student would hinder me from doing effective work in the community. I was concerned both about my lack of ability to truly understand my students' point of view, and about the degree to which my participants would trust and relate to me. I learned that applied theatre activities themselves, such as Heathcote's Mantle of the Expert, can serve as a way for a facilitator to practice Freirian pedagogy, in which students are placed in the position of co-creators of knowledge. I also discovered that, while applied theatre practitioners are best served approaching a community with an awareness of their own identities and biases, they must also work toward occupying a space of personal "radical openness," in which they possess a willingness to acknowledge their own blind spots and change their view point on what they think they know or understand.

While my identities sometimes marked me as "other" than my students and "other" than the Mart residents, I also found spaces of shared identity and experience. By drawing upon the "community of identity" that my female students and I shared as women, I was able to engage with them not from a place of studied knowledge, but from a space of shared experience and empathy. My interaction with two arguing female students taught me the value of an applied theatre facilitator's ability to thoughtfully connect with participants with whom they co-exist in a "community of identity." At the same time, interactions like that I had with Keisha illustrated that while my students and I shared the same gender, our other identity markers—socio-economic status, age, class, and in some case, race—mean that our experiences ultimately differ significantly, and that the assumptions I make going into a community will often be misguided or simply false. In the future,

I want to pay attention to opportunities for further exploring the role of communities of identity in applied theatre.

While my role as an outsider to Mart meant that I was limited in my understanding of the town, it also worked, at times, as an opportunity to ask questions genuinely or to provide a new perspective. Nicholson articulates that in applied theatre, there exists, “a struggle, an attempt to straddle an irresolvable tension—between the overarching ideal of a radical, just and inclusive democracy for all and a respect for local circumstances, the social contexts of the participants and cultural differences” (13). In other words, the applied theatre practitioner often faces a conflict between working toward change and respecting the cultural circumstances of participants. I argue that an applied theatre’s imagined vision of a “radical, just, and inclusive democracy” (Nicholson 13) for a given population may look very different than the actual ideal. As I learned from Keisha’s explanation of the diversity of her group of friends in Mart, the radical and just parts of a community might initially prove hidden to an outsider. Injustices in the community, too, may also initially (or permanently) remain unseen by an applied facilitator, due to his or her lived experience and identity markers. Ultimately, it is the applied theatre participants themselves who will help to shed light on, as Thompson puts it, “what is working” in a community (148). The applied theatre practitioner, most often an outsider to the community with whom he or she engages, wears inevitable blinders and must often rely on participants’ perceptions to help put the community into focus. Applied theatre practitioners should indeed work toward a “radical, just and inclusive democracy,” (Nicholson 13) but they should work from a place in which participants’ social contexts are continually taken into consideration.

In the future, I hope to practice radical openness as a facilitator not only through working to keep an open mind in relation to my students and their community, but by being transparent with my students about my own identities and limitations. Ultimately, it is impossible for me, as a facilitator, to erase my perspective and the way that it shapes the applied theatre process and product. In my future work, I will strive to be candid with my students about my own biases and limitations in perspective. One way I can begin to make this shift is to engage in the same activities that I assign to my students. When asking students to create an “I am from,” poem, for instance, I can also create a poem about where I am from. By requiring myself to engage in the same challenges posed to my students, I can continue on a path toward becoming a more radically open critical pedagogue and facilitator.

Conclusion

When I first entered Mart, I saw buildings in disrepair, abandoned homes and storefronts, racially segregated neighborhoods, one stoplight, and a shiny new football field standing in stark contrast to the poverty evident throughout the rest of the town. As I worked with Mart High School, my perspective on Mart expanded and I began to view the town in terms of its young people and the unique challenges and opportunities they faced. In the summer of 2011, my relationship to Mart deepened further and I associated the town with my home of fellow artists on Smyth Street, morning walks to the Mart Donut Shop for coffee, and waving hello to new neighbors. As I embarked on the Mart Theatre Project residency, Mart again became about my students: how they saw themselves, how they saw their town, and how they could have an active voice in deciding the future of Mart.

Throughout this document I posed the question, *what is the role and impact of identity and identity-based inequities in an applied theatre project designed to invite young people to engage with their community?* In Chapter One, I outlined the Mart Community Project and my history with the project. I traced the intersections of civic engagement, identity, and applied theatre, and I offered a Positive Youth Development framework, in which young people are encouraged to participate fully in their communities and to act as agents of change. Within this framework I argued for the privileging of participatory and justice oriented citizenship education, a model of citizenship education in which young people are called to be active agents in their community and to critically identify inequities and root causes of

societal issues. As an applied theatre practitioner, I explored the ways that identity shaped and informed our applied theatre process rooted in civic engagement.

In Chapter Two, I studied how young people named personal and community identity in the context of our community-based hybrid applied theatre and digital media project. Applied theatre invited young people to examine and name community and personal identity in three key ways: by fostering self-representation, by supporting the development of a new group identity and dynamic, and by creating a space for viewing and reflecting upon self and community. This project helped me realize that applied theatre can serve as space for enacting “cultural democracy” (Cohen-Cruz 74), by representing our own identities, and “balance[ing] intimacy and distance,” (Cohen-Cruz 103). Development theory holds that “adolescents must accomplish the task of integrating their prior experiences and characteristics into a stable identity” (Strickland 322). By naming the places and spaces they were “from” in their “I am from” poems, students found an opportunity to experiment with articulating and integrating their past experience into a cohesive personal identity. The experience of creation, performance, and reflection in applied theatre also invited students to identify with and value each other in an intentional way. Child development theorists hold that “group identity emerges out of continuous interactions, through which one becomes visible and known to other group members, and they become visible and known to you” (Newman 320). The students who participated in the Mart Theatre Project showcase managed to simulate this history of “continuous interactions” in a short amount of time as they worked together intensely to prepare for our performance. Lastly, the creation of a final digital media project about the community allowed

students to view and reflect upon their own work, which allowed for larger conversations around community identity their place in community outside of our classroom space. Young people living in rural communities face a conflict between their connection to a rural lifestyle offered by their home community and a competing aspiration to gain the social, educational, and career experiences more often found in urban areas (Petrin 1091); through reflecting on the video they had created about Mart, students were able to articulate the tensions that they experience living in a rural community.

As an applied theatre practitioner and scholar, I discovered the necessity of allowing students to name identity on their own terms and as part of a larger creative process. Although my intention in launching the Mart Theatre Project was to engage students in their community, students were primarily interested in expressing themselves as individuals and in telling their own stories. It was only after being given this chance to express themselves independently that students readily engaged in a collective creative process. Finally, I discovered the importance of reflection in allowing students to name community identity.

In Chapter Three, I investigated how the process of participating in a collaborative applied theatre and digital media community-based project provided a space for young people to experiment with experimenting with identity. I discovered that providing a creative platform for young people to create and control their own image-making and representations, the students—especially socially transgressive young people—offered youth the agency to reclaim or revision identity markers that often come with negative connotations. Interestingly, all three of the students I profiled in this chapter chose to reclaim identity-based terminology

within our mediated (rather than live theatre) performances. It was through the digital media that I observed students' working to resist various identity markers and hegemonic narratives about Mart youth. In fact, despite my best efforts to create a safe space for participants to engage in applied theatre, one of the three students profiled still indicated that he was not comfortable performing in live, embodied setting. I discovered that opportunities for mediated points of entry into performance, such as creative writing and digital photography, can invite students with varying strengths and comfort levels into the creative process. A theatre and digital media project that offers multiple entry points for expression and participation can allow young people to engage with the project and self-represent in a manner that best taps into their particular strengths and interests. Young people engage in socially transgressive behavior as a means of performing autonomy and of resisting societal expectations. By inviting students to experiment with naming and performing identity (self-representation) through multiple entry points, the Mart Theatre Project invited young people to move into a place of "fidelity with others" (Newman 325) as they worked together creatively to reflect on their community.

In chapter four, I explored how my identity markers and my role as a facilitator impacted the applied theatre process and product. My identity directly shaped my pedagogical choices, as well as my artistic and editorial direction with the youth; I chose drama activities that positioned my students as experts in their own community, but I also worked to acknowledge the impossibility of getting away from the influences (cultural and otherwise) that I would bring to bear on our work together. My identity as an outsider and as a white woman also caused me to enter

the community carrying certain assumptions around race and segregation in the Mart community; ultimately, my students helped to challenge and shift the ways that I view Mart and my relationship to identity-based inequities. In some ways, I believe my identity as a woman helped me to connect more completely with my female students, especially during points of conflict; but, at the same time, I discovered the inherent limitations in my perspective and interactions with my students based on my identities. This process taught me that applied theatre facilitator must make initial assessments when entering any community, but those assessments will always be flawed or shortsighted and we must commit to actively shifting perceptions and ways of knowing the communities with whom we work.

The identities that came into play most often for me were my whiteness, my femaleness, and my role as an outsider with ties to a university. I would invite other applied theatre practitioners to maintain an awareness of the way their race, gender, and affiliations with outside organizations affect the applied theatre process and product. The power structures associated with these three identity markers affect the way that an applied theatre facilitator is perceived by a community. The applied theatre practitioner also perceives a community through the sometimes limiting lens of these identity markers. It is impossible for a practitioner to ignore their own race, gender, and “otherness” in the room; instead, it is important that the practitioner simply recognize his or her own identity markers and the perceptions, biases, and power structures that accompany those identities.

When I began my work in Mart, I was interested in how theatre could serve as a vehicle for dialogue around identity-based inequities in the Mart community; a year and a half later, my students and I had only begun to touch on these

conversations. My initial interactions with young people in Mart led me to believe that students were interested in discussing race and gender inequities in the town. As I moved into a classroom setting, however, I discovered that students needed to get to know one another and to feel a part of a cohesive group before they were willing or able to discuss larger power structures in the community. It also took me some time to feel confident enough in my role in the community to lead these conversations; I imagine it took my students time to feel that they could trust me enough to have these conversations with me. Ultimately, it was an intensive evening of working with young people to create our showcase that led to conversations around identity and power. My experience with the Mart Theatre Project illustrates that conversations around identity-based inequities requires trust, which in turn requires an investment of time. An applied theatre can serve not to move participants directly into these conversations, but to expedite the process, so that participants and facilitator can begin to trust one another more quickly, more easily, and more willingly.

I began the Mart Theatre Project expecting to study the ways that an applied theatre project could help to increase civic engagement in young people. Because adolescents are dealing with the psychosocial crisis of “group identity versus alienation” (Newman 290), identity was a major focus of students’ attention throughout the process, which caused me (in the spirit of the reflective practitioner) to shift the focus of my study to identity. Ultimately, the role of identity in relation to community became the focal point of my study as I analyzed the applied theatre process and product. If I were to continue with this project, I would be interested in returning to my question of how applied theatre can foster civic engagement. I

remain especially interested in how an applied theatre project can harness adolescents' interest in identity and belonging as a means of promoting justice oriented citizenship, in which students are invited to critically examine systems of power and identity-based inequities in their community (Westheimer 3). Moreover, I remain interested in the degree to which participation in the Mart Theatre Project increased students' future educational and personal success, as outlined in literature on Positive Youth Development (Lerner 10-12). Both of these areas require further attention and study from applied theatre practitioners working with rural adolescent youth.

Coming full circle, I arrive back at this question: *what are the role and impact of identity and identity-based inequities in an applied theatre project designed to invite young people to engage with their community?* Through my work in Mart, I discovered the potential of applied theatre to create a space where participants can express and experiment with personal and community identity. This project reminds me of the importance of remaining open to shifts in my own understandings and beliefs throughout an applied theatre process. Identities and identity-based inequities shape the applied theatre process and our perspective on that process. At the same time, applied theatre can be used as a tool to begin to critically examine and subvert socially constructed identities and identity-based inequities. In my future work, I hope to continue to address identity, along with my participants, in more thoughtful and honest ways. I aim not only to deepen conversations about applied theatre and identity, but to include our young participants in these conversations as well.

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