

# **Performance Inquiry as Political Participation: A Storied and Embodied Model for Community Based Research**

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***Abstract:*** *This paper introduces a model of arts-based research using performance to center a sub-altern perspective utilizing a feminist process of data analysis and representation. Stories are collected from narrative interviews and then analyzed and expressed as performance text in the communities where they originated. Research becomes accessible beyond the academy while purposely centering previously marginalized voices.*

The nature of research in adult education has shifted over the last two decades from primarily positivistic to more qualitative. There has also been a shift in the population of adult educators from mostly white males in the 1970's to predominately woman and growing numbers of people of color. Yet, there is still limited research published from an arts-based perspective, and very few examples of data that is performed. While performance ethnography (Denzin, 2003; Alexander, 2005; Madison, 2005) and ethnotheatre (Saldaña, 2006) are discussed in other contexts there are few examples within the field of adult education.

The sub-altern, as defined by Beverly (2005) is a social position that is not, and cannot be adequately represented by the human sciences or the university. Performing subaltern narratives embodies a moral and political contestation to what has previously been understood as true or fixed in research methodologies. The performance-text becomes a set of processes, procedures, and technologies for decolonizing the imagination. According to Sandoval (2000) this is known as the methodology of the oppressed. This model extends the possibilities for performance of data through the incorporation of poetics, dramatization, and body movement as interpreted by the researcher while honoring the integrity of the participants' stories.

According to Freire (1970, p. 94) "Many political and educational plans have failed because their authors designed them according to their own personal views of reality, never once taking into account the members-in-a-situation to whom their program was ostensibly directed." By their very nature qualitative investigations embody the willingness to embrace new ways of understanding data. In performance-text the researcher reaches for and shares her interpretation of the data and her vision of how to communicate the stories in a way that will impact the audience's understanding of their implications, and her own standing in the community. It is subjective cultural work-it means to privilege one community's history.

This model highlights a strategy to develop, conduct and disseminate research in a way where libratory learning can take place. Additionally, it is intended to assist adult educators seeking other than text based methods of sharing research and to open up new possibilities for doctoral studies, particularly within communities of color.

## **Theoretical Underpinnings**

This model evolved out of popular education (Freire, 1970) and popular theatre (Boal, 1979 and others). It draws on the work of Denzin (2003), Saldaña (2006) and others. It extends narrative inquiry methodology (Clandinin and Connolly, 2000; Riessman, 2008) by conveying

stories in an embodied and performative way, thus reaching out to a wider audience. As Butterwick and Lawrence (2009, p. 37) described: “As our bodies often hold the knowledge that is not yet present in our conscious minds, theater can be way of telling our stories and bringing them out in the open, where we can begin to engage in dialogue and eventually create new stories that help us deal with difficult or oppressive situations.”

Pollack (2006, p. 1) states that “Performance won’t stand still long enough for theory to wrap it up nicely.” Thus, there is no one definition for performance or one single model of performance text that can be utilized the same way over and over again. On the contrary, performance-text as an arts-informed methodology is open to interpretation including past experience with communities of color, and the researcher’s own positionality. The text is imprinted as much by the researcher as by the narratives. Additionally, much of the truths exposed in the text are based on the researcher’s willingness to be open to risk, and her respect for the stories that must remain untold. The researcher must be open to the disagreement or rejection of the stories, and their interpretation by the community she seeks to educate.

### **The Case: Brown Girls’ Chronicles**

The model was created based upon “The Brown Girls’ Chronicles”, (Nieves, 2009) a narrative investigation by Yolanda, examining the ways second generation Puerto Rican women, the daughters of Puerto Rican immigrants who arrived in the United States during the 1950’s Diaspora, constructed their identities while coping with the oppressive structures and outward manifestations of marginalization, racism, sexism, and essentialism that literally render second generation Puerto Rican women nearly invisible. The political and historical construct of Puerto Rico’s five hundred years of colonization, and in particular, the last one hundred years of U.S. exploitation of the island’s people have impacted how second generation Puerto Rican women have created coping mechanisms to relate to the world, their community, and each other. Using Critical Race Theory, Latino Critical Race Theory, and Critical Race Feminism as a lens to interpret the data, what was revealed through the performance-text was a previously unexamined dimension of their experience. The performed narratives that can also be classified as counter-stories reveal components of their lives and beliefs that are traditionally not exposed to people outside of their community.

### **Yolanda’s Reflections One Year After the First Performance**

For over four years I kept field notes on my experiences, thoughts, and dreams regarding the performance-text. On some days I simultaneously felt great exhilaration and pain as I reflected on the stories I was privy to. On other days, I was deeply troubled with doubts on the feasibility of the whole project, but I became fully immersed in the investigation. It was all-consuming.

On May 3, 2007, in my journal I wrote: *I woke up from a dream with the words “the body expels text” resonating in my head.* On Saturday, May 19, 2007 I made a serious notation: *We need a morally informed and political theater written by Puerto Rican women for Puerto Rican women on local stages. It is a weapon for fighting racialization and marginalization...(I) need to write and perform culture as an anti-colonial performance where ideals for womanist and radical democratic interrupt the meta-narratives imposed on us.* The idea of the investigation as performed narratives truly started to germinate in my mind.

Between 2007 and 2009, I tested parts of the performance-text and gauged audience reaction by conducting probes. I attended conferences in Manchester, England; Guanajuato, Mexico; San Juan, Puerto Rico, and presented at various universities in Chicago. Would the stories resonate with audiences? I am a one-woman performer in all the probes, but I received positive responses to the performance-text. I decided to move forward with the project.

During late summer and early fall of 2007, I was immersed in the attempt to understand how narrative inquiry, radical adult education, and performance-text work together as a liberatory project. I noted in my field notes that I was embracing Freire's (1970, P. 87) idea of "...to speak a true word is to transform the world." Conducting extensive reading on radical educators while taking playwriting classes at the Chicago Dramatist Theater, and doing side research on Puerto Rican history, I wrote in my journal: "*I am amazed that every time a person or group challenges the status quo they are labeled as subversive all around the world!*" I had a sense that stepping out-side-the-box of traditional academic discourse and research was going to pose a challenge to myself and the academy.

During this time I felt it was imperative to ask what distinguishes narrative inquiry from ethnography. In my journal I eventually answered my own questions. I noted the following: *1.) the difference between narrative inquiry and ethnography is that the emphasis is on the personal story itself-the story can be a cultural picture but it is a singular and subjective one as well, and 2.) the extensive relationship between the researcher and the co-participant becomes significant for the research. It is through the trust generated in the researcher/co-participant relationship that the story is given. Narrative inquiry cannot be confined to one model-the stories are context reliant, relationship-reliant, and requires a respect for what remains undisclosed.* Narrative inquiry manifested in a performance-text must be like a tree that bends in the wind.

By April 8, 2008, I was having second thoughts on moving forward on submitting the performance-text despite the fact that my literature review and methodology chapters had been written. Additionally, I had completed my interviews, and the eighty pages of performance-text had been scripted. As an insider-outsider researcher and my membership in the subaltern community I had just finished researching, serious qualms began to surface as to the moral justification of my investigation. Afraid that my research, having been done from the perspective of the subaltern voice, would be used by the colonizer to gain more control of the women that had already experienced exploitation, I seriously considered doing an auto-ethnographic investigation and shelving everything I'd written. I felt I had no right to further exploit the women even though they had signed contracts. I called all of my interviewees to discuss my reservations. Each one tells me her story was a gift to me and that I should move forward with the performance-text. With this cultural blessing, I decided to proceed.

During the fall of 2008 word was out in the Puerto Rican community of my investigation. Several women came together to discuss the possibilities of their participation in interpreting the text. In January 2009, a group of women met at my house to start discussing and rehearsing the performance-text. The women chose a name for themselves-The Vida Bella Ensemble. During the next eight weeks, as we began to add body movement to the stories, there were moments we had to pause, wipe our tears, and hold each other as the stories given as gifts to the researcher now became embodied in the minds and hearts of the ensemble members. The past was being resurrected in the present, and I realized that there was no model nor reference point for what was happening to the ensemble or the performance-text. We were all acquiring new consciousness at a multitude of levels.

On March 14, 2009, the week after the first four day run of the performance-text at the Chicago Center for the Performing Arts, where over six hundred people had witnessed the research, in my journal I made a note about another dream: *I walk toward a bridge that connects two tracks. As I start to cross the bridge two trains come in. Over my shoulder, looking back, I see a large group of people. Some are going my way. The other group is going in the opposite direction.* I also wrote: *It's important to rise above all the explanations of what this thing is...there are no words/there is no language to describe what happened these last four days on stage and back stage. I did "performance" outside the margins of theater.* I did performance outside the margins of academia. Getting the doctorate was no longer the most important goal. It was about telling the truth and excavating subjugated stories and voices.

### **The Model**

To help explain our performance inquiry model we invite you to consider a forest of trees as a complex and multilayered process. Performed narratives blossom very much like the leaves and fruit of a tree. One of the events that "grows" out of the process of performing narratives is the unveiling of subjugated truths that have been hiding in the soil of history. Also, the performativity of race, culture, ethnicity, class, religion, and the dramatizing of those experiences in a community based setting is a call to consciousness and liberatory learning, not only for the researcher, but for all the stakeholders involved.

#### *Stage 1- Tilling the soil*

The researcher, whose responsibility it is to tend the growth of the tree, begins the investigation by tilling the soil. She digs through decaying leaves and fungus that help fertilize the soil where the tree seedling will be planted and grow. In this manner, the tilling through the decaying leaves and fungus can be likened to the excavation of memory. Through the interview process, the questions the researcher poses tills through the experiences and memories of racism, marginalization, and essentialism of her participants. These apparently negative aspects of experience that are found in the depth of memory help "fertilize" the soil. In this way, the soil is readied for the planting of the participants' seeds-the initial stories garnered from the interviews.

#### *Stage 2-Planting seeds*



The seeds or stories, given to the researcher as gifts by the participants/stakeholders, are closely examined and analyzed by the researcher. The researcher then takes the story/seeds and plants them in the soil that has been readied for this event. Each seed has the potential of bearing a seedling and growing into a tree. The growth of the seeds/stories depends on a variable of conditions that include the researcher's ability to integrate herself into the forest community, and her ability respond to the unknown variables of the environment. Like a tree, the researcher must be able to bend with the wind and weather all kinds of conditions.

#### *Stage 3- The seeds take root*



The growth of the seedling tree is helped along by the sun, and rain. As the seedling takes root we can liken it to the researcher who takes the stories and plants them in the hearts and minds of volunteer performers (who act as sun, rain, and nourishment.) The performers are actually co-researchers in that through their characterizations they

help to interpret the data at another level. Working together, the researcher and the volunteers/ensemble members help the seedling tree grow.

*Stage 4- The tree grows to maturity*



With the growth of a new tree, branches and fruit emerge. The mature tree, with branches that sweep and reach outside the original margins from where it was originally planted, members of the forest/subaltern community can gather to find new nourishment from the fruit of this new tree, or admire its beauty and strength through witnessing and experiencing the performed text. Members of the forest community/the audience takes the fruit and continues to share the fruit and seeds the tree has given.

In this way, the performance-text, like the tree, has grown mighty, by the careful tending of the researcher and volunteers. The soil, seed, rain, sun, and temperature (and other variables that the researcher cannot control) have contributed to the unique growth of the tree and of the performance. All can come to view the tree, walking away with different perspectives depending on their point of view, the critical dialogue that ensues among the audience and family members, and their private reflections on the performance-text.

### **Conclusions and Implications for Adult Education**

Most artists understand, consciously or intuitively, that research is a critical aspect of the creative process. At the same time, creativity is an important component of research. For the visual and performing artists, their risk is personal; if they fail the risks and failures permeate their reputation. Similarly, if they succeed the rewards bestowed on them are well-deserved and will propel them to another creative venture. However, for a researcher who attempts arts-based or arts-informed research methodology, the investigation has much more and far reaching effects. It involves a wide-range of communities: interviewees and their families, the volunteers who perform, the community that will receive the stories, and the academic community that will hopefully be open to data as performance. Additionally, the nature of performance-text as data will contest and divulge political and social truths related to race, ethnicity, gender, class, and language in ways that will disturb hegemonic standards of theater and academia. It will ask the community of learners to reflect on their personal participation and complicity in the silencing of their own stories. The researcher that embarks on this method must be open to stand in the center of this unique intersection.

Performance-text as a methodology requires researchers to conduct inquiry in an interdisciplinary manner; they must explore and be open to the shifts in the research. The data will take on a life of its own and will acquire an intrinsic and organic push to grow with its own will. If the researcher will be doing research with a subaltern community, the need to be flexible becomes even more critical because the researcher must, at some points, abide by the rules of the community as the community begins to embrace the research-not the rules of academia.

Performance-text as an investigative methodology is a wide open field for researchers. As it compels the researcher to consider the repercussions of privileging subjugated knowledge it is also a rich multi-layered process that will force all those involved to reflect on hegemonic practices and act on new knowledge. When narratives are performed in marginalized communities-that community becomes a new site for learning; those that had hitherto for been excluded from learning come away from performed text as a new and stronger collective of people. It is in this way that performance-text is liberatory, inclusive, moral, and just.

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