

Turning Together: Playback Theatre, Oral History, and Arts-Based Research in the Montreal Life Stories Project

Nisha Sajnani, Warren Linds, Alan Wong, Lisa Ndejuru and Members of the Living Histories Theatre Ensemble

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Setting: 2010 Congress of the Social Sciences and Humanities of Canada, Montreal, Quebec. The conductor, Nisha Sajnani, is standing and addresses an audience of sixteen theatre artist-scholar-practitioners, educators, students, and community organizers. Seven actors sit on chairs placed at the front of a black box theatre space. There are two chairs stage right, one for the conductor and an empty chair for storytellers from the audience. On stage left are two musicians behind a table laden with instruments.

Nisha: Good Morning. My name is Nisha Sajnani and I am joined here this morning by members of the Living Histories Theatre Ensemble. They will introduce themselves.

Introductions: Joliane Allaire, Paul Gareau, Warren Linds, Lucy Lu, Laura Mora, Lisa Ndejuru, Mira Rozenberg, Deb Simon, and Alan Wong introduce themselves by name.

Nisha: This morning, we will be sharing with you the story of the Living Histories Theatre Ensemble of the Montreal Life Stories project and, in particular, the ways in which we have been thinking about our work as a form of arts-based research through performative inquiry. This will not be a typical performance. Rather, we will be performing our research as well as illustrating our embodied practice.

Life Stories of Montrealers Displaced by War, Genocide, and Other Human Rights Violations is in the third year of a 5-year oral history project that brings together seven community and university research-based working groups in an effort to record and archive 500 interviews with “survivors”¹ of mass atrocity. As the website states, the project

hopes that listening intently to how these survivors speak of their memories may bring us to an understanding of what these experiences mean to them and how they can be retold. Recording their process of remembering and telling will also help us better understand the impact of mass violence and displacement on those who have sought refuge in Montreal and the ways in which their sense of home and community has been affected. Through the practice of oral history, Life Stories intends to create cultural and historical materials for Montreal’s diverse communities, to foster collaboration and partnership between them, to develop interdisciplinary pedagogical tools, and to make a significant, original contribution to the preservation of historical memory in Canada by raising questions about the long-term repercussions of crimes against humanity. (Histoires de vie Montreal/Montreal Life Stories Project)

¹ We use this word provisionally as we recognize it is a contested term.

The Oral History and Performance working group has filtered these goals into a meditation on the relationship between the archive, which is the material that endures, and the repertoire, which "enacts embodied memory: performances, gestures, orality, movement, dance, singing--in short, all those acts usually thought of as ephemeral, non-reproducible knowledge" (Taylor 2003, 20). We have examined how best to convey experiences of displacement through photography, mixed media installations, theatre performances, classroom teaching, on-line education, filmmaking and radio documentaries. Our Living Histories Theatre Ensemble (LHTE) was originally conceived, both as a form of embodied inquiry into the experiences of the interviewees associated with the project who were conducting the life story interviews, and as a performative approach to collective storytelling within and among communities who shared a history of displacement.

Lisa: In the beginning, we wanted to develop a performative methodology that could advance the project's goals. However, as the project progressed, many among our various working groups began to ask the question "why?": Why dig up stories if only to expose corpses? What purpose does it serve for those involved other than, as the description of the project above says, "coming to an understanding of what these experiences mean to *'them'* and to help *'us'* better understand the impact of violence and displacement"?

Warren: These questions were troubling to us. If the larger goal of the project was to raise questions about crimes against humanity, then were we trying to work towards recording a more complete picture of Canadian history, or did the project imply some other effort, such as to remember the repercussions of violence as a strategy to prevent such a history from repeating itself? Was the project a way of working towards an integration of lived experience in Montreal so that those who had experienced mass violence might more easily co-exist with and amongst those who did not share such histories of betrayal, pain and loss?

Alan: Initial articulations of the Life Stories project grappled with avoiding a facile and removed inquiry into the experience of collective trauma, wherein those labelled as "survivors" would do the telling and an unaffected and neutral "other" would do the listening for the purpose of privileging a record: the archive. Efforts at interrupting this dichotomy between the listener and the teller in the life story interview involved framing the encounter as an experience of what Michael Frisch (1990) terms 'a shared authority.' By this Frisch is referring "to what should be not only a distribution of knowledge from those who have it to those who do not, but a more profound sharing of knowledges, an implicit and sometimes explicit dialogue from very different vantages about the shape, meaning, and implications of history" (xxii). Consequently, researchers in the project began to make a conscious attempt to develop their approach to the interview and storytelling process as one involving an exchange of information--a conversation that would allow the teller and listener to become interlocutors working together to articulate and make sense of the historical narrative being offered. As such, "sharing authority" could be viewed as "sharing stories."

Nisha: If we were to explore the practice of Playback Theatre as a method of inquiry to explore, for example, the meanings, experiences, and stories associated with a process of "shared authority," it might involve asking this question (to the actors): Has anyone here ever had a moment of sharing authority that you could tell us briefly about?

Lucy: I belonged to a project called Herstories, the participants of which attempted to work in a non-hierarchical way. It was a struggle, and it took us some time to find a way to meet each other in a collective way where we could share leadership. It was as if we were so used to working within a hierarchy that...well, it took a lot of time.

Nisha: Lucy's experience of sharing authority as a fluid sculpture. Let's watch!

The LHTE represents Lucy's experience through an embodied collage of sound and movement relating to their interpretation of the words and feelings she used to describe her experience. This is called a "fluid sculpture" (Salas, 1993). Here, two actors step forward and mime pulling at opposite ends of an invisible thread, another actor reaches over this imaginary thread and makes an encouraging "come here" motion with her hands, while another actor squats center stage, back to the audience, and attempts to reach out to hold her hands.

Nisha: (to the audience) Do others here have an experience of shared authority-- where it worked, where it failed, or where it was attempted?

Audience member (theatre educator): I was working with a group of youth and was trying to empower them to take on leadership and to...share authority. So, I left the room while they were creating in the hope that they would not be influenced by my decisions. When I re-entered the room later, they told me that they had wished I hadn't left the room...that they wanted the leadership...they wanted me there.

Nisha: (to the actors) As a fluid sculpture. Let's watch!

The LHTE does another fluid sculpture. One actor steps forward and looks out into the audience, repeating, "What should we do, I don't know what to do, will this affect my grade?" Another crouches behind the first and appears distressed, slowly letting a sob emerge and amplifying it over the duration of the sculpture. Another steps out to stage left and observes the action with a crumpled forehead and a "wondering" look.

Nisha: (to audience member who shared experience): Is there anything else you would like to say about your experience of shared authority?

Audience member: After seeing that reflection?

Nisha: Yes.

Audience member (laughing): It made me think about how shared authority does not always mean no hierarchy.

Nisha: (to the audience at-large) Anyone else have an experience of shared authority?

Audience member (graduate student): I feel like when I am asking my group for stories...when I am doing my research...that I am trying to make it shared, but it always feels like some sort of...gentle manipulation...like I am leading them and not like it is really shared.

Nisha: Let's watch!

The LHTE does another fluid sculpture. This time, one actor leads an invisible being around the stage space by a leash. Another repeats, "This story will make my career!" Another appears to be pulling and collecting an unseen substance from the chest of another actor sitting on the floor. Another is squatting stage left and looking disgruntled. Another looks pleased.

Nisha: (to audience member who shared experience): Is there anything else you would like to say about your experience of shared authority?

Audience member: That's it! Especially the look on her (pointing to one actor) face!

Warren: For a few of us, the process of our work conjured up images of an encounter on a bridge--like the bridge that Peggy Phelan (1993) describes when referring to the necessity to accept that we will never understand that which is different from ourselves; but we need to see this inevitability as generative: "It is in the attempt to walk (and live) on the rickety bridge between self and other--and not the attempt to arrive at one side or the other--that we discover real hope" (174).

Nisha: So this is Playback Theatre. The conductor and teller are involved in a conversation, and this conversation is moved into an immediate, ephemeral repertoire. The teller, conductor, actors, and audience members are interlocutors working together to draw closer to the notion of "shared authority" and to create meaning. How many of you have seen Playback Theatre before?

Three audience members put up their hands.

For those who have not seen it, it is a form of improvisational theatre developed by Jonathan Fox and his theatre company in 1974, wherein the experiences of audience members are played back through a variety of short and long dramatic forms. The roles associated with it include: a group of actors who may be drawn from a particular community or recruited for a particular purpose or theme and who are (more often than not) not formally trained in the art of acting; a musician; and an intermediary figure, common to much participatory theatre, who stands between the audience and the stage. In Playback Theatre, this figure is known as the Conductor. Of course, Playback Theatre could not take place without you (gesturing at audience), the storytellers and story listeners.

The utopian impulse of Playback Theatre lies in Fox's romantic attempt to breach isolation and oppression by providing a space where any story can be told and artistically represented towards generating insight and perspective on the human condition (Fox 1994). He writes about it as an "act of service" and as "artful citizenship," wherein different experiences can be shared and witnessed. As a form of community theatre, it has attracted several thousand practitioners working in over 200 Playback theatre companies worldwide.

It has also attracted critique. We are going to share things we have heard--or experienced ourselves--about Playback as a form of theatre for social change. We will do this as a Rhapsody , which is the name of a form that we have developed to convey intense feelings or ideas.

All of the actors take one step forward and turn their backs to the audience, and each one, in a clockwise rotational motion and in random order, turns towards the audience and delivers a reflection on the theme (in this case a critique of Playback) with a pressured urgency in their voices. When another actor turns, he or she effectively interrupts the other actor who was speaking, who once cut off immediately turns around to face the wall again. These rotating reflections continue until each actor has spoken at least twice. They freeze in an image of their emotion on their second turn, which brings the form to an end.

LHTE Rhapsody: *It is way too literal! / Feelings? Talk about feelings!? What is this? Therapy?! / You want me to give you my story and you are going to do what? You are choosing what? Where are you going with that? / That was just ..sloppy... amateurish. You're not artists! / Just nod and agree...you liked what you saw...just nod and agree... / What do you people really feel? You actors are not telling me anything about yourselves. You're not neutral! / Any story? I can tell any story? Well, what about how much I hate THOSE people--you know, THOSE people! Play that back! / Where is the analysis? / You're not anything like me. What makes you think you can play my story?*

Nisha: As you have heard, Playback Theatre has drawn critique for its at times overly literal representation of lived experience, its unrefined aesthetic, and, most seriously, its potential recapitulation of hegemonic relations of power through which complex human experiences are reduced, shaped, and enshrined in sacredness by a seemingly benign authority (the conductor or interviewer), then represented through means not of the teller's choosing by actors whose values remain hidden, and then delivered to a public who may feel some pressure to consent to the action and its signification. There is also the strong textured affectual terrain a theatre like this can create for the audience that is not always comfortable and can result in an overly serious performance, especially when attending to themes such as genocide and mass atrocity. Others critique Playback for being too cathartic, in that it threatens to purge the audience's rightful indignation about injustice by focusing too much on general humanitarian values and by privileging the place of emotion in this work.

These are all challenges for us, so we ask:

What can we come to know about the experience of displacement or about listening to experiences of displacement--or even about shared authority, for that matter--through this embodied inquiry?

What does this form of theatre offer in the way of praxis?

Shaun McNiff (2008) defines art-based research as the "systematic use of the artistic process...as a primary way of understanding and examining experience by both the researchers and the people they involve in their studies" (29). Lynn Fels (1998), in her discussion of performative inquiry, suggests that such an investigative method seeks an interplaying of identification and interpretation through performance that involves risk and collaborative creativity that performs itself in "spiralling circles of realization and recognition" (Fels in Linds 2001, 147).

Our own "spiraling circles of realization and recognition" begin in workshop-style rehearsals that, rather than being a prelude to performance, are part of our research process. While we do not normally stage our rehearsals as part of a typical playback

theatre performance, we would we like to share aspects of our rehearsal with you as a way of making our process transparent--actively demonstrating this for you in the moment through what Ingrid Mundel (2003) calls 'performing process'--to bring you closer to our experience of how we have approached our own relationship to "displacement" as a collective.

Moving onto the rickety bridge: The rehearsal process as performative inquiry

Nisha: During the research creation process, which has involved the Ensemble probing the project's themes, we drew on various other forms of improvisational theatre to guide our exploration of our own relationship to these themes. Included among these forms have been the improvisational techniques of Viola Spolin (1963) and David Read Johnson's *Developmental Transformations* (2009), a form of applied theatre defined as "the continuous transformation of embodied encounters in a playspace,"(89). *Developmental Transformations* has been theorized in relation to the practice of improvisation developed by Viola Spolin, the concept of the 'via negativa' wherein the art of acting is reliant on the elimination of the internal blocks between impulse and action, put forth by Jerzy Grotowski (1968), and ideas related to the relationship between being, becoming, and control developed by Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari (1987), among other sources.

During the rehearsal, we come together in an unstructured gathering, greeting one another. We find our way into the circle and begin to stretch.

The troupe performs the ritual of stretching and freezes.

This would lead us into a form of unison sound and movement, which not only brings us towards a sense of cohesion, but also into an encounter with one another, all the while developing our capacities to notice differences in each other's gestural universe.

The troupe performs this sound and movement exercise and freezes..

This exercise gives way to an exercise reminiscent of Spolin's "Join the Scene" and Johnson's "transformations," whereby one person begins a sound and movement or repeated defined action and enters the circle. He or she is joined by someone else in the circle, mirroring each other, allowing their expressions to become amplified, exaggerated, defined, diminished, differentiated, and transformed in an unpredictable pattern until someone else from the circle "taps out" someone in the middle and replaces him or her, spontaneously transforming the scene and repeating the emergent enactment. This process repeats until everyone has been in the center at least once. LHTE refers to this process as "bodystorming", a kind of embodied, relational free association wherein emphasis is placed on spontaneity, risk, and our capacities to remain present with one another during our 'play'. We warm up in accordance with the chosen inquiry--in this case, the experience of displacement--through our methods of thematic bodystorming.

The troupe demonstrates this exercise through three pairs coming into an encounter with each other..

At some point in our rehearsal, this play gives rise to a formal invitation to shape one's personal experience as a narrative. Consequently, we resume our structured circle and, using a Playback Theatre form called "fluid sculpture," reflect on our experience in the "here and now."

The troupe demonstrates fluid sculptures for each member's story relating to the theme.

Emerging Learnings

Nisha: Our Ensemble has become, in a way, a microcosm of the Life Stories project itself, in that we have come together with our different and distinct histories and co-exist in the same place. In fact, as a team we exist in a Playback Theatre diaspora, having all worked with different companies in Montreal, with some after a time moving to different parts of Canada and the United States; yet we continue to come back to this place together to meet, to bodystorm, to perform. Over the past three years, there have been several learnings that have emerged from our performative inquiry about our experience of displacement and our methodology.

The LHTE performs its own learnings through a method we refer to as "Fireworks," whereby one at a time each actor steps forward to a chosen spot on the stage and shares a brief poetic reflection about his or her learning, then freezes in a sculpture that, for that actor, reflects what he or she has just said. This repeats until all actors have spoken their thoughts and taken a position on the stage. The resulting image represents an embodied reflection of our collective learning.

LHTE Ensemble: Here are some of the learnings we have gleaned from our performative inquiry thus far:

Going Deeper

Our process has been very much like tilling soil, digging up our individual and collective memories that call up moments, fragments of association and experience that we have attempted to come close to while remaining in relationship with one another. Over time, we have noticed that our initial expressions have remained very much at the surface level, such expressions consisting of repetitions of everyday predictable stereotypes. Our continuous play appears to have progressed from this surface play to increasingly profound and complex levels of engagement with the Other, allowing us to develop a greater sense of permeability, intimacy, risk, and proximity (Johnson 2009). In the same way, we might expect that a performance with one group would not yield the same risk and permeability as compared to working with one group over time.

Interrupted Stories

We have noticed that our experiences do not fold neatly into stories. This is especially true of the experiences that we have shared with one another involving some form of loss or trauma. Trauma creates gaps in the stories that we attempt to organize and tell about ourselves (Johnson 2010). The moments of our lives where we have been overwhelmed by having to accommodate a forced intrusion or reality have revealed themselves more often as slippages, stutters, and spurts--a palpable

yearning for coherence (Thompson 2009). The assemblage of disparate, but co-existing impulses has lent itself more easily to the form of fluid sculpture in Playback Theatre.

Silence Does not Mean Absence

While there is a certain imperative to tell, speak, and share experiences in Playback Theatre, we have found that the silences in the liminal spaces--those between words, sounds, and gesture--reveal much more than they conceal. Similarly, the urge to tell, the looks and gestures shared between audience members, and shifting in one's seat during in Playback Theatre performance, is just as important as the stories that are told. They reveal a different, yet equally valuable, kind of presence. It has become important to acknowledge and reflect both the seeming absences, hauntings and traces of the unsaid as well as of what is said.

The Open Container

One of the tensions in our work has been that which emerges between creating a space of safety and enabling risk to be taken. When an audience member tells a story in Playback Theatre, they permit it to move from the private to the public, and from the individual to the collective imaginary and this involves risk (Rowe, 2007). The performance space is a container that enables both actors and audience members to take risks by telling stories of their lives in an atmosphere of relative mutuality and to develop community across boundaries. The word for container comes from the Greek *tenemos*, "meaning a sacred space and time specially prepared and set apart in order to reconnect with ancient energies" (Salverson 1996b, 185). The Ensemble, in its performance, creates such a container and has a gap that cannot be opened too wide or else it would hold, transmit and allow nothing, thereby destroying the structure, so there would then be no connection between storytellers and listeners. Such a space would not allow the storytellers to risk releasing and revealing, through their stories, "what they know and what they are trying to discover" (Salverson 1996a, 47). If the space is "too small or nonexistent, there is no room for the Other, no space across which the familiar and strange can exist upon each other" (47), losing the ability to breathe, grow and be inhabited. Such a container must hold people within the tension that exists in both the pull of connection and the pushing back of difference between individuals.

Martin Ringer (1999) links this aspect of connection to the need for adequate containment in groups within which participants have a "sense of being firmly held in the group and its task, yet not immobilized by the experience" (5). Salverson (1996b) points out that this firmness with flexibility means there must be a space or gap within the container: "This form is moulded as we work together holding the circle of knowing open and inviting a current that prevents steering a straight line through the story or arriving at a predetermined destination" (184). What we strive for are openings and not closings in every embodied reflection offered. No image or story is contained or closed fully, but left hanging in the air, with no happy ending or easy solution, as a contribution to the collective imaginary.

Taking Risks/Risking Failure

Over time, we have found that bodystorming has become a way for our Ensemble to remain on the rickety bridge, to "tolerate the instability of being" (Johnson 2009,

90) that threatens to keep us from engaging with one another. Our embodied free association seems to follow the fault lines of our collective gestural memory, building momentum and transforming, giving rise to an emergent, spontaneous and necessary capacity to notice one's own impulses in relation to others. It has involved risk--the risk to appear foolish, the playful failure, or in Julie Salverson's (2008) words, the "foolish witness" (153).

During both our rehearsals and Playback performances, we have noted that there is often a certain pressure to tell stories that make us look good, where we are either the heroes or victims of the story. Meeting on the rickety bridge requires a risk on the part of the actor and the audience member (the teller) to reveal both preferred, and possibly unpreferred, aspects of themselves. The images we create with and for audiences are a collaborative exploration requiring a risk to "leap" both into and out of embodiment. We take the risk to meet the teller, one by one, in a collaborative exploration, revealing a pastiche of possibilities with which audiences may converse. In response, we have seen audience members take the risk to meet us in the space between. As Julie Salverson (2009) notes, "pleasure, joy and fun in this context are not spectacle or escape, but rather the deadly game of living with loss, living despite failure, living even despite the humiliation of trying endlessly" (39).

Shifting Into the Non-Verbal

Gadamer (1989) states that "[a]ny encounter with the language of art is an encounter with an unfinished event and is itself part of the event" (99). This idea has far-reaching implications for working with Image. Every showing of the Image (e.g. the body as a sculpted frozen picture, or the 'fluid sculpture' in Playback Theatre) becomes part of the Image, even if only in improvisation or rehearsal, because what is "essential to an experience is that it cannot be exhausted in what can be said or grasped as to its meaning" (66). As text, Image is a "cumulative, holistic process" (Ricoeur 1981, 212). The Image is developing, and because it is silent, it allows other layers of the story to embed themselves into the actors and the participants-audience members in the workshop. Thus, the imag(e)inative work of art is always incomplete until it is presented to others who watch it, and even then it creates new openings.

Using imagery to express something that cannot be represented in other ways allows us to explore paradoxes--coexisting and conflicting opposites. It is these visual contradictions in the embodied relations in the Image (e.g., someone smiling while doing something an observer would not think would result in a smile) that are complex prompts that open up questions, moving the exploration of the theme into deeper tissue, where there are more knots that need to be worked through. Image becomes part of a spiralling process that sparks our imaginations, enabling us to dream of alternative futures.

Playing with the image means that we play in a vocabulary and aesthetic (from the Greek word *aisthesis*, meaning perception or sensation--a breathing in or taking in of the world). This language includes our responses to the image presented. Sensing and imagining become one through an awakening of the sensing, imagining heart with a language expressing things which can't be expressed in any other way, thereby playing with/in the ambiguity of the visual, allowing others to write themselves into it. Thus, as expressive forms, Images speak, showing the shapes they are in: "They announce themselves, bearing witness to their presence: 'Look,

here we are” (Hillman 1982, 77). This is a territory with its own laws, which are easily learned. We explore, fool around, muck about, hypothesize, juxtapose, and then retranslate the image back into a written or oral vocabulary through inviting verbal reflections from each teller after each embodied reflection, and by inviting other stories from other audience members. Image as a mode enlivens our experiences, returning us to confront our “animated faces” (Hillman, 87). Subjectivity then is freed from the literal. Each image becomes a subject “out there” performing in front of us. A story bears witness to itself in the image it offers, and its depth lies in the complexities of this image.

Nisha: Our challenge has become about how to extend these learnings and interweave them into our chosen public form, that of Playback Theatre. Thus far, we have found three ways where we have attempted to integrate some of these values into the Playback Theatre aesthetic: the introduction sequence, the conductor's questions, and a new form that we refer to as the "Bridge."

Welcoming Others onto the Rackety Bridge: Introductions in the Performance

Nisha: Usually, Playback Theatre companies begin a performance with an introduction that is intended to extend trust, invite a wide array of experiences, and demonstrate the playback form. The LHTE attempts to facilitate resonance within the audience by intentionally providing as wide an array of experiences relating to the theme. We have made efforts to ensure that the stories we choose do not all make us look like simple heroes or victims. We also are intent on ensuring that the bodies that make up our team are diverse and can visibly signify varied social locations and experiences. Here is an example of an introduction sequence, using three members of our team:

Three members of the LHTE step forward one at a time and share a brief introduction. The other actors create a tight, multi-leveled chorus behind them.

Alan: I have dealt with otherness my entire life--as a gay man, a racial and ethnic "margin resistor," and a sufferer of mental illness. I am constantly seeking ways to tackle my outsider status, and so I try to relate my own otherness to that of different Others through different ways of storytelling. Through narrative performance that is interactive and participatory, I attempt to converse with those whose stories I am embodying. Every story I perform--or re-tell--has something of me inside it, and in this way, I am talking it out with the storyteller, trying to make sense of both his or her life and mine, our othernesses, and make every effort to understand each other, to come to terms with our histories, and to find common ground.

Lisa: I have a hard time staying anchored in the strong and able part of me and feel unsure, overwhelmed, or inadequate. I am afraid, for example, that I will not be able to bear a healthy child and raise it to be well and strong. Nothing says that this is caused by experiences of loss or displacement. My parents and my parents' parents went through prison, exile, refugee camps, murder. I have experienced none of the violence firsthand. Gathering the stories of my family through the Life Stories project and working with my own reality within our Playback group feels a lot like remembering...in the sense of putting the pieces back together. Being in the group allows me to be present to both my own and all the other stories, to process rather

than disconnect or be numb, to be present right here right now with the whole of me and with everyone: whole and enough.

Warren: As a Jewish man growing up in the '50s and '60s in a medium-sized city in Western Canada, I watched TV programs and films documenting the Holocaust, but it seemed far away to me. As far as I knew at the time, no close family relations were murdered, although I knew my father's family had escaped pogroms in Latvia and Lithuania to come first to England, then to Canada. Yet my parents lived through that tragedy throughout the Second World War, so their memories and emotions were passed onto me. I live as part of a historically displaced people. I am also a theatre facilitator and practitioner working with other marginalized groups.

Guiding Us into Safe Uncertainty: The Role of the Conductor

Nisha: We have also thought about how some of our learnings affect the ways in which we think about the role of the Conductor. Fox (1994) describes the Conductor as occupying a liminal space between the actors and the audience, not separate from either, but a conduit for feelings, words, and images. In addition to the Conductor being a fellow actor and emcee, Fox states that "function of the Conductor is also shamanistic, leading actors and audience in the direction of...the *'illud tempus,'* that locus of meaning and rejuvenation which we often think of as a paradisiacal Eden but whose actual rediscovery is fraught with uncertainty" (134). It is the Conductor's questions, invitations, prompts and framings that shape the conversations that unfolds over the course of a rehearsal or performance. This role shapes what can be said and what critique is possible. When we think of the metaphor of the rickety bridge, the conductor is a guide who ensures that those on the bridge are in this process of "safe uncertainty", which is "always in a state of flow, and is consistent with the notion of a respectful, collaborative, evolving narrative, one which allows a context to emerge" (Mason 1993, 195). So the conductor develops such a space where stories shared can live beside, rather than replace, each other.

In practice, the conductor avoids attempts at too-strictly managing the flow of the conversation, allowing instead for loose associations between audience members. In a traditional Playback performance, the conductor might ask, "[D]id that fit with the spirit, if not all the details, of what happened?" (Fox 1994, 226). We have attempted to avoid premature closure or easy consent to what has been played back by asking audiences to consider the reflection offered, but not to remain bound by it.

Audience member (therapist/scholar): How do you tackle the ways in which we are complicit in each other's oppression and liberation? Where is that in what you do? I am really interested in this because of my own history and how I have chosen to focus more on the side of my family that has experienced more marginalization, as belonging to a First Nation's community, than the other side.

Nisha: This is a good segue to the new form we have developed that we refer to as "the Bridge," which we have, in the past, also called the "Overture."

The Bridge: Meeting the Teller in an Embodied Conversation

Nisha: In the Bridge, we are trying to develop a method that performs this "third space" (Bhabha, quoted in Rutherford 1990, 211) as the stories of the actors and those of the audience bounce off and resonate with each other, not to resolve

themselves, but to live in front of all of us. This is a space that is formed when two stories intersect with one another. Where the two meet is a space of flux. We don't know what is going to happen in this space. Willie Ermine, Raven Sinclair and Bonnie Jefferey (2004) point out that the encounter of cultures that give rise to these stories creates an "ethical space" where people from "disparate cultures, worldviews, and knowledge systems can engage in an ethical/moral manner" (20). The knowledge of our practice of performing on the rickety bridge is not simply information; it is also performative, involving a "complex heterogenous blend of knowledge, practice, trusted authority, spiritual values and local social and cultural organization: a knowledge space" (Turnbull 1997, 560). It is in this form that our attempt to play the foolish witness is perhaps most palpable. Here we attempt to disrupt the usual objective neutrality of the Playback actor and risk, instead, encountering the teller somewhere on the rickety bridge.

(to audience member): We will play back your questioning about complicity through the Bridge. In this form, the actors will reflect on a moment from their own lives that resonates with the experience you have shared and will then return to offer you a reflection of your wonderings. Let's Watch!

The actors have their backs to the audience, as in the beginning of the Rhapsody, and one by one turn to face the audience with a personal story that resonates with the audience member's story. It could be from a theme, an incident, an emotional connection the actor feels with the story; the important thing is that, unlike traditional Playback theatre forms, where the actor is a neutral person "mirroring" back the recounted story to the audience, here the actors are recounting stories that happened to them in their own lives. One actor turns once and recounts his or her own story, and then, at an appropriate moment, another actor turns and does the same, while the first actor turns around with his or her back to the audience again until the time comes to turn again to continue telling his or her story. This continues so that after two or three "turns," every actor has been able to tell his or her own story. Each actor freezes on the third turn. Once all actors have positioned themselves in a still image, there is a pause. The musician offers five beats of a drum or other instrument, and the actors slowly step forward and move into a fluid sculpture that is now, again, a reflection of the audience member's story.

LHTE (performing the Bridge):

Alan: I grew up in a middle-class Chinese-Canadian family. I recently bought a condo in Villeray, a working class neighbourhood in Montreal. I feel torn, as if I--

Warren: I have been researching my father's working class history and ignoring my mother's middle class history. I was raised middle class myself, but I never--

Deb: I am a white woman from a middle-class background, and I often feel like I have so much privilege--

Lucy: My parents were refugees from Vietnam, but even though they were refugees who fled a warzone, they still came from a place of privilege as Chinese--

Laura: I come from Mexico , and I am white, but even though I am white, I know that I have Aztec blood in me--

Lisa: My background is Rwandan, and because of this life stories project, I've been talking with my family about their experiences--

Joliane: Even though I'm a French québécoise, I went to an English CEGEP² in Montreal. After the second referendum on sovereignty in Quebec--

Warren: So despite the fact I'm so interested in my father's history with respect to class, I have never bothered to look at how my own mother's family achieved its wealth, especially how they may have used working class people to get that wealth.

Lisa: And when I talked to my grandmother about her experience of fleeing out of the country into refugee camps, she spoke of leaving her property and people behind. I wondered if she meant "owning people" literally.

Lucy: And because my family comes from a place of privilege, I have always felt uneasy about the fact that I have been able to live such a comfortable life while many other refugees and their families have not.

Alan: I mean, I have always been against gentrification, and now here I am engaging in the very thing against which I've spoken out--and I like my condo!

Laura: And I feel Aztec, I feel Indian inside me, but yet I also know I am white on the outside, and everyone treats me a certain way because I am white.

Joliane: Some of my classmates would mock me about the francophones losing this referendum, saying that we should have learned from the last one. And I got so mad because I thought they were right, why didn't we learn?

Deb: I just don't know how to reconcile myself with that, but I know I have to be aware of it.

Musician: (provides five beats)

The LHTE then moves into a fluid sculpture of the audience member's experience.

Nisha (to audience member): Is there anything else you would like to say about your wonderings after seeing this reflection?

Audience member: I didn't see myself in all of it, but some parts really stretched what I was thinking about and clarified the ongoing struggle to keep going, even though I carry such mixed history and cannot escape my own complicity.

Turning Together on the Rackety Bridge

Russell and Ison (2005) contend that living systems are closed to information:

We take this to mean that a human being could not be informed in any predetermined manner by another's communication. What we, as humans,

² *Collège d'enseignement général et professionnel*. Students enter CEGEP after completing six years of elementary school and five years of secondary school.

could do, and actually do, is converse together. Over time, if the conversation is satisfying, change happens at a biological level; the person has learned to be in the world differently and this difference is expressed as an 'improvement'...The only, albeit critical, goal is a commitment to stay in the conversation as long as it is a satisfying experience. (134)

Over the course of our presentation, we have drawn on the metaphor of the "rackety bridge" to explore how we might stay in conversation with each other about the experience of displacement. Interestingly, "the roots of 'conversation,' *con versare*, mean 'turn together'" (Fell and Russell 1994). Another metaphor for how we might stay in conversation, embodying the rackety bridge, is drawn from the biological--the "ecotone" (Booth 1998), where permeable spaces bump up against one another. Ecotone is a term used in botany and ecology to designate the transition zone between plant communities, such as marshland and, better, the drained ground. "Tone" is a Greek term that means "tension," as in maintaining muscle tone. Ecotones are borderland places where the interplay of resources and nutrients contain the characteristic species of each, generating rich possibilities for living. These overlapping places are places of complexity and dynamism.

For this to happen in a human interaction requires conversation and dialogue. This social domain (the performance) involves conversations not just as methods of communication, but also of acts that create spaces where ethical dialogue takes place: "The purpose of being in a conversation is to keep it going" (Krippendorff 1993, 61) and to allow for a constant and ongoing commentary on what is being signified.

Our Ensemble will continue to offer up performative approaches to inquiring into the experience of interviewers and interviewees associated with this project. We have begun to do so in partnership with the Maison d'Haiti, a Haitian community organization in Montreal, as well as the Montreal Holocaust Memorial Centre. While we will continue to refine our methodology, our attention is currently directed towards developing and maintaining the conditions necessary to ensuring a "safe uncertainty" in these performances. At present, we have considered the necessity of working with the same group over time and the importance of working with and within an ongoing community organization. Part of the rationale behind this is that witnessing representations of the experience of displacement, or listening to stories about fear and loss, while offering opportunities for expression and perspective, can also call up more distressing feelings. For this reason, we have found it important to work with organizations that can offer additional resources to participants, such as counsellors and available staff.

As Howard (1996) points out, by going through similar experiences, we might listen better to the experiences of others. Our performative inquiry continues to provide each member of the LHTE with opportunities to encounter their own histories and present experiences of being (dis)placed as well as opportunities to extend the conversation, to encourage acts of witnessing amongst audiences. In this way, we have attempted to come closer to a form of communication that can be a cooperative and communal activity that "is both individually satisfying to all participants (and at no one's expense) and leaves something recognizable behind" (Krippendorff, 1993, 61), which can be called up as long as we remember it. The rackety bridge is the journey *and* the final destination.

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