



Personal stories, public voices: Performance for public-making

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Abstract

The project described in this paper rests on a belief in the power and significance of storytelling in social change processes. It also takes seriously worries and critique about 'what happens' when personal stories of troubles or suffering are told to strangers, particularly as they revolve around contradictory claims about empathy. Over several months our research team worked with a group of women who have experienced homelessness and who are advocates for themselves and other women in our community. The women participated in a series of storytelling and image theatre workshops and exercises that formed the basis of a 20-minute dramatic vignette centered on their interactions with social services in the city. The creative process was designed to value the knowledge carried in personal stories of lived experience, while harnessing the power of the arts to evade some of the problematics of personal storytelling in public spaces. The women performed the vignette for social work students. In this paper we reflect on comments from students who witnessed the performance and offer our analysis of their responses in relation to specific features of the drama. In a discursive context that holds individuals responsible for all

manner of social problems, we consider the potential of projects like this one for summoning and mobilizing publics and publicness.

[1] The project described in this paper begins from a belief in the power and significance of personal storytelling in social change processes – the very deep connection of stories and storytelling to our patterns of knowing and caring and doing. The project also emerges from worries about ‘what happens’ when personal stories of troubles or suffering are told to strangers, and across gulfs in experience. We draw on the work of scholars who have explored critically the impulse and the call to tell stories, the various conditions and relations of storytelling, and the consequences of storytelling and story listening for individuals and communities. We focus particularly on contradictory claims about the links between storytelling, empathy, solidarity and social change.

[2] Within communities, the value of personal storytelling is well established. As Plummer (174) puts it, “stories gather people around them,” connecting people with similar life experiences or identities to one another and to a common history and politics (see also Riessman *Narrative Methods for the Human Sciences*). For people who identify as having psychiatric disabilities, for example, the sharing of oppositional knowledge through storytelling is understood to have countered a long history of silencing and

dehumanization, and to have been vital to community-building and social movement organizing (Costa et al.; Church; Reville and Church).

[3] Storytelling and story listening are also held up as means of facilitating understanding across gulfs in experience or identity, and as critical impetuses to join social movements or take actions in solidarity with people whose lives and experiences are unlike our own. Considering the field of humanitarianism, Burchardt contends that issues of rights, embedded as they are in legal and expert-driven vocabularies, are “bloodless.” In a similar vein, Gamson (ctd. in Riessman “Analysis of Personal Narratives”) argues that policy discourse around abortion is excessively abstract, and Segal points to how far removed people in positions of power are from the daily experiences of people who are poor. Personal stories make human rights claims “more broadly intelligible” (Burchardt); they bridge policies and life worlds, help mend or build meaningful social relations between individuals or groups in contexts of tension or crisis (Cruikshank), and thus foster the development of communities of action (Gamson ctd. in Riessman “Analysis of Personal Narratives”). In these accounts and others, storytelling makes potentially ‘distant’ experiences ‘closer’ (accessible conceptually and emotionally engaging). Yet it is not only distance that is overcome: the telling of stories (especially stories of distress), in its elicitation of emotional responses to the teller and others like her or him, is often considered an

effective means of interrupting dehumanizing discourses and images (Curry-Stevens).

[4] In all of these accounts, the conceptual and processual link between storytelling and solidarity across social groups and across gulfs in experience is *the activation of empathy*. In the social work literature and more broadly, empathy is typically taken to combine feeling-with and perspective-taking. Empathy appears often in literature focused on education for social justice. The article *Teaching Empathy* traces efforts on the part of social scientists to understand the “catastrophic failures of humanity” that occurred during the Holocaust, and the discovery of “the centrality of empathy in sustaining the social contract” (Gerdes et al. 109). Empathy is understood to motivate care and action at both individual and community levels (Curry-Stevens). Gerdes and colleagues call for much greater attention to conceptualizing empathy, and clarifying how it can be brought about or nurtured in students (with storytelling as a key approach).

[5] Yet affirmations of positive links between storytelling, empathy, and interpersonal and social solidarity have also been challenged. Stories are “complex communicative events” (Georges 316): as Zingaro notes, in relation to individuals who bear public witness to violence lived, to speak up or out is always to speak “into the spaces of social relations” (16), and these are not in the teller’s control. Misplaced assumptions about a speaker’s

emotional state, victim status, or heroism can constitute crushing interactions for the storyteller in the aftermath of revelations (Zingaro). Considering policy advocacy contexts, Ann Curry-Stevens notes that the targets of advocacy initiatives sometimes refuse to assign credibility to people telling personal stories. This can create a kind of backlash: “storytellers become perceived as ‘damaged’ people who are not appropriate leaders or experts” (349). In other terms, the narrative of suffering may produce feeling, but at the expense of the speaker “as moral agent and critic” (Razack “Stealing the Pain of Others: Reflections on Canadian Humanitarian Responses” 390). Curry–Stevens calls for respect and support for storytellers, and also warns against over-relying on empathy as an impetus for social change, as this holds people who experience injustice responsible (including through the persuasiveness of their stories) for ending that injustice.

[6] In many ways, critiques of storytelling are really critiques of listeners and the conditions of telling and listening. In Jones and Jenkins’ analysis, the intractable difficulties of indigene-colonizer collaboration manifest in part through the colonizer/ dominant group’s “request for sharing” (477). They write about Maori students who found that deeply valued cultural learning was disrupted by Pakeha (non-Maori) classmates who, despite their enthusiasm, often had very different perceptions than their own, and required a wearying level of explanation. Jones and Jenkins cite Barthes’s

arguments about the power of the reader to make the text, and conclude that “when dominant group members are unable to understand the speaker, the indigene’s ability to speak is reduced dramatically” (Jones and Jenkins 478); see also Gair’s “Inducing Empathy: Pondering Students’(in) Ability to Empathize with an Aboriginal Man’s Lament and What Might Be Done About It”). In this context, efforts to tell stories across difference, to listeners with limited capacities and readiness to appreciate the stories, considerably compromised the storytellers’ expressions of self and community.

[7] ‘Requests for sharing’ also emerge in the context of contemporary social service governance, with service users’ stories a valued commodity when the involvement of people with ‘lived experience’ is expected or required. Lucy Costa and colleagues describe the consequences of this: only certain sorts of storytellers (less marginalized, mostly appeased by services) and stories (sanitized) are welcomed (Costa et al.). They note that story listening has done little to change the ways that agencies function or to address broader issues such as poverty, unemployment and discrimination (a point also made by Beresford in his writing about ‘poverty porn’). Their article describes a conference created by psychiatric survivors to raise consciousness about how personal stories can be stolen, commodified, and turned into ‘patient porn’ and to offer concrete strategies for self-protection and resistance. These themes – about processes by which listeners coerce

and distort personal stories, and how storytellers can resist – are extended and deepened in recent writing by Alise deBie.

[8] There are, then, persistent requests for storytelling: yet story listeners often listen inadequately (and this can be diminishing or limiting to the teller) or want certain things said (distorting stories and tellers, and constituting a kind of theft). In addition, critical literature points to ways listeners misperceive their place in the story being told. Building on Sherene Razack’s analysis (Razack “Stealing the Pain of Others: Reflections on Canadian Humanitarian Responses”; Razack *Dark Threats & White Knights: The Somalia Affair, Peacekeeping, and the New Imperialism*), Costa and colleagues suggest that listeners (in their context, service providers) often “hear in ways that protect them from being implicated in systems the storyteller is naming as oppressive, unjust, or discriminatory” (92). Their analysis echoes Roger Simon’s reflections on the tensions that unfold when non-Aboriginal Canadians listen to the stories of former students of Indian residential schools. In part because of the modes of regarding the pain of others available to us at this point in history, Simon says, many non-Aboriginal listeners experience the speaker as a victim, and respond with pity. Heard as narratives of individual suffering and victimhood, each story is recognized as a singular story, and the social and political conditions and processes underlying this violence and suffering are erased. Further, the act of acknowledging the speaker is reduced to an affective transaction – the

other's injury is recognized by the listener only or primarily at the level of the listener's feelings, and "what is forgotten is that victimhood is a position in a power relation in which one might be implicated" (132). Megan Boler makes a similar point, suggesting that students, reading stories of others' lives, are sometimes allowed to experience a "cathartic, innocent ... voyeuristic sense of closure" (266); a felt sense of empathic identification with another individual, but isolated from a broader historical context. Boler suggests that a reading practice directed to social justice must take seriously questions of context, and of responsibility—it must analyse the obligations that issue from engaging the testimony. In these analyses it is not only that the story/ teller is decontextualized or the listener is not implicated; it is that the listener's emotional response leads her to believe that she has 'done her duty' to the story. There is not only failure but harm: the emotional response erases (or eclipses) the need for further action.

[9] Many of these critiques of storytelling and story listening end with calls for context: for configurations of storytelling, and formulations of empathy, that involve much fuller attention to the historical, social and political conditions of the people and peoples whose stories are told. Empathy is still valued, but as 'critical empathy,' 'social empathy' 'structural empathy' (Fook, Allan qtd. in Gair ("Walking a Mile in Another Person's Shoes: Contemplating Limitations and Learning on the Road to Accurate Empathy")) or historical empathy (Bryant and Clark).

[10] Another facet of this critique focuses directly on empathy itself. Many scholars, particularly those drawing on Levinas, claim that empathy inaccurately, and oppressively, assumes a kind of universality of human experience; valuing empathy presumes that it is both possible and desirable to 'know' others. In this analysis, empathy risks disregarding distress that does not map onto conventional categories of suffering; it risks "ignoring the concrete circumstances and the radical uniqueness of the sufferer" (Amiel-Houser and Mendelson-Maoz: 204) and more generally tends to "erase or subsume difference" (Rossiter 13). Here, over-identification with a storyteller by listeners can buttress dominant discourses as it denies the identity position(s), difference, and sometimes the unknowable and unsharable pain at the core of the story's content and/or communicative intention (LaCapra qtd in Bennett 8). Writers who engage this critique commonly call, not for a more contextualized or critical versions of empathy, but for approaches (including particular art works, and practices of reading/ watching) that relinquish or interrupt the empathic position, the position of 'knower.'

[11] Despite significant differences, virtually all of these analyses of the troubles with storytelling point to the vital link between listening and accountability. The more hopeful latter part of Simon's paper raises the possibility of pedagogical and artistic practices that generate new genres of listening – genres of listening that accord the need to "take on a sense of responsibility for a social future that would include those whose stories one

is listening to” (132). What is at stake, he asserts, is not a sad, guilty, or apologetic response to hard stories: at stake is the possibility of “the formation of a new public, one committed to supporting the work that needs to be done in order to further just policies and practices” (138).

[12] It is in this space of hope that the current project emerged. Over the course of several months, our team worked with a group of women who have experienced homelessness and who are advocates for themselves and other women. Graham took us through series of storytelling and image theatre workshops and exercises and, drawing on these, crafted a 20-minute dramatic vignette. The creative process, how the women experienced it, and how we came to the dramatic vignette is described in Nouvet et al. In this paper, reflecting on student responses to the drama, we heed Galloway’s caution that studies of the social effects of the arts very commonly “overclaim and oversimplify the nature of the causal link between the arts and observed effects” (130). The effects of the arts are multidimensional and subjective, and any full exploration of impact takes factors beyond the scope of this study into account (Belfiore and Bennett). Instead, we highlight key attributes of this particular drama (having to do with the play between perspective and standpoint) as they intersect with features of this particular audience (contemplating their identities as future social workers). In the discussion we return to broader themes of listening, and accountability, to consider the potential of this project (and projects with similar features) for

“public-making” (Newman “Performing New Worlds? Policy, Politics and Creative Labour in Hard Times”).

The dramatic vignette: *We Need to Talk!*

[13] The stage is set with three tables, marked ‘income support’ ‘housing’ and ‘food bank.’ There is an empty chair on the audience side of each table, and on each table are several small boxes. Close to the audience is a trolley full of papier-mâché rocks.

[14] The drama begins with the women walking in from the side. Each stands by the rocks and introduces herself and her character: “I’m Bernardine, and I’m playing Rosie...” The woman describes her character’s strengths and sources of pride. She also describes what her character is ‘carrying’: hidden disabilities, histories of violence, care responsibilities and so on. As she speaks she picks up rocks: soon she is balancing five or six of them. When she concludes her introduction she moves to a seat beyond the tables, and eventually all five women are seated there.

[15] The women then start approaching the tables, and engaging in conversations with ‘the chair.’ Each speaks about what she needs, what she is trying to do, what problems she is encountering. As they move between income support, housing, and food bank programs, each woman balances (awkwardly, and with effort) the ‘rocks.’ In each setting, each woman

attempts to fit the rocks she's carrying into the boxes on the tables: to find a program or resource that addresses her needs and circumstances. In most instances it becomes apparent from her talk that none of the rocks she's carrying will fit the available boxes; she learns that she needs another form, she isn't eligible, this service isn't available here at all. Sometimes the woman leaves hopeful that she might get what she needs next time, or at the next service. More often she leaves demoralized and frustrated.

[16] In one short scene, a woman tries repeatedly to convince 'the chair' about her urgent and real need for more adequate housing. Each time we see her rebuffed. She then hesitantly reaches into her pocket, for the rock hidden there. 'I'm a survivor of domestic violence...' she says, her reluctance to speak clearly visible on her face. And it 'works': we see that this particular 'rock' fits into this particular box, and her relief is palpable. She leaves the office clearly unsettled, and meets a friend who asks her what's happened; she explains, and her friend's initial elation that she's secured housing for herself turns to dismay that she's had to disclose details of abuse (that she's not even told this friend) to a stranger. In this scene and elsewhere, we also learn about the extent to which women share information with one another about resources vital for their survival and wellbeing.

[17] Each woman approaches each table at least once. Initially they accept what they've been told; as the drama progresses, they increasingly 'talk

back' to the chair, complaining or challenging. The drama ends with the women dropping out of character, depositing their rocks on the tables, then lifting chairs from the back of the stage to the front, sitting, looking directly at the audience, and saying, in their own voices as performers: 'we need to talk!'

Responses to the drama

[18] The women performed the vignette for social work students enrolled in a mandatory social welfare course that Vengris teaches. Immediately following the drama we asked students for their reactions to it, and we also offered an opportunity to complete an anonymous survey. Below we describe students' commentary about the drama. We focus particularly on their reflections on the explicitly performative aspects of the presentation. Our analysis is facilitated by the fact that Vengris has invited these women to her class in previous years, and is positioned to compare responses between the more conventional storytelling and this performed version.

[19] Several of the student responses focused on the content of the drama:

There's no one in the system looking at everything – it's a lot of individual situations [*student drew a contrast with healthcare, in which she perceives case managers take responsibility for ensuring services are coordinated*].

[It is important to] listen to what they need and not what we think they need.

It seemed like a degrading process when they had to get help – she sort of had to degrade herself by telling a stranger something extremely personal to get something.

I was really bothered by all of it, especially treatment at food banks. I cannot believe the treatment at foodbanks! *[this student went on to say that, after witnessing the drama, she'd choose a policy-focused field placement]*

Why are our social support systems not communicating? Why isn't food part of our health care system?

For me, there's a need for a creative way to get out of the system, because they're just given barely enough in the system.

Amazing performance. The one thing I'm taking away was putting back the human aspect. Shows the level of desperation that all of you were reduced to, the dehumanization. Very important to put the human aspect back in.

[20] In final assignments students were asked to identify messages they were taking away from the course. Nearly every student wrote about the performance (performed two months prior), highlighting the lack of

compassion/ humanity in the social welfare system; the injustice of having to share traumatic stories to get service; an understanding that the social service system is broken; and the importance of lived experience in policy development.

[21] As noted, Vengris is in a unique position in this study, in that she has invited these women to her class in previous years and is positioned to compare students' responses to the more conventional storytelling with responses to this dramatic version. From her perspective, the drama seemed to support students to move beyond the affective responses she has heard in previous years – the felt sense of the stories as tragic, and the women as brave – and into a conviction that something significant must shift to make things better for people. As well, when the women have come as guest speakers in the past, students have not uncommonly proposed solutions to their troubles, and this kind of individual-level problem solving did not occur following the drama.

[22] We are not naïve about students' comments – in the context of a social work classroom, these are socially desirable responses. Some of the comments, as well, may simply reflect a lack of exposure to social services (the course is taken prior to placement experiences). However if the drama prompted or deepened these kinds of understandings for some students, and lessened or evaded merely affective and exclusively individual-level

responses, this is not insignificant for us, or for social work/ social justice education generally.

[23] Students' comments on the performative aspects were of particular interest to us:

[In contrast to a powerpoint presentation, it affects] people differently. They *experience* the information.

You feel invested, you *feel more empathetic* because their emotions are on display. I think I paid attention for a lot longer, *I wanted to hear what happened next, I wanted someone to say yes to them.*

I liked how it re-enacted the situations that we are involved in as social workers (not just hearing about it but seeing the effects harmful social policy does in a re-enactment). I enjoyed how *you saw the interactions between clients and the system, not just hearing* the women explain their experiences – *you got to walk in their shoes.*

These quotes – that highlight the power of drama to generate active engagement, vicarious experience, and empathy – are very commonly cited reasons that social work educators turn to storytelling, and more generally to the arts and art practices into classrooms (Sinding, Warren and Paton;

Wehbi). Students also commented on the symbolic use of the rocks and the boxes:

I liked how you had the boxes on the tables. It really showed that only certain people fit into the boxes.

The rocks *really give you a visual of how much you're struggling*, how they're hard to balance...

Liked the visuals : The rocks – some were so big – they could get out of hand; the boxes – showed how only certain people can get the services.

The use of the rocks and boxes seems to have conveyed something of the precariousness and difficulty of women's lives, and something of the constraint and inadequacy of social services (and something of how the latter shapes the former). Also very salient to students was the empty and silent chair:

I really, really liked the idea of not disclosing the other half of the conversation; you didn't concentrate on this side of the table at all. I loved that. You found another way of getting the information across.

Presented information strategically - leaving that voice (service provider) out. *We could be that future voice - you could be talking to us - it's great.*

I liked that when sitting in the crowd as a social work student *I felt like I could be in that seat in the future either helping or hindering.*

I find it interesting - *that voice could be us; we could be the person saying no.*

You go into your work, *you go through the motions every day* and you may lose respect for people. Puts into perspective the harm we could be doing to people.

[24] The concerns that many critics express about listening to 'personal stories' of struggle – that the listener fails to perceive herself as implicated – appears to have been countered by this particular drama. Clearly these students perceived themselves to be very directly implicated: they could be in that seat, helping or hindering; they could be the person saying 'no.' And beyond (merely) saying no, they could be doing harm: as a collective of (future) service providers, their location in relations of power is, it seems, apparent. As well, at the same time that they are drawn into the drama as future social workers, students also 'see' the action from the women's

perspectives. This is perhaps a source of significant potential in this project: the drama draws this audience into the perspective of the social worker, but the story is told from the standpoint of the women. In addition, the first and final comment above gesture towards other features of the drama that are important to our project: the ways the women are positioned as analysts of (and not merely as living) this experience; and the ways the personal story is rendered collective in part by the repetition of the institutional processes, the 'going through the motions every day.' We take up these points in the discussion.

Discussion

[25] Engaging the contemporary politics of public policy, Janet Newman (Newman "Public Leadership as Public-Making") asks how perceptions of common interest and commitments to public good and public action come about in neoliberal times. She draws from Michael Warner and Clive Barnett's analyses that publics do not (or do not entirely) pre-exist but must be summoned. In an echo of the empathy-driven projects described earlier, Newman points to representational practices "through which an issue is made live or real to others" (316). Yet as she goes on to argue, the effectiveness of public-making depends very significantly on the relationship between the summoner and the respondent: "how, in other words, publics are spoken for and spoken to," (317) and especially who the respondent is summoned as, how she is positioned.

[26] We are prompted by Newman's reflections to ask, How are audience members summoned by this drama – who and how are they called to feel and be and act? What is the nature of the relationship evoked between the storytellers and the story receivers – and how does it relate to (critiques about) empathy? What sorts of responsibilities are suggested or activated for story listeners? How are the storytellers' 'personal' issues translated or not into issues of public salience? What gets made in this artistic and pedagogical intervention?

[27] It seems from students' responses that students were affected emotionally by the performance, and also believed they understood something (more) about what women who are homeless go through in their interactions with service providers. But it was also clear that more was asked of students than feeling or imagining the women's experience. In a fairly obvious way students were called to consider their own role and power and responsibility, as individuals and as a collective. The fact that the chair was empty seems to have prompted them to imagine themselves inhabiting it; the fact that no social worker spoke invited them to imagine themselves speaking from that place. That no social worker is present to speak may also have made it less possible to refuse identification: it is not possible to say, 'I'd never say that...' when we don't know what the social worker said. In a more general way, this feature of the drama may function to lift our focus from the sort of person the social worker is and how she talks to service

users – that is, to counter the conviction that our being moral (anti-oppressive) people, conveying empathy and kindness in our interactions, is sufficient. The construction of the drama makes this conclusion impossible. And in some sense this raises a tension, because the women were adamant that how workers treat them, the workers' recognition of their humanity, does indeed matter (Bouvier). What the performance makes clear, though, is that this is not enough. The problem of the women not having what they need – the problem of how the system fails – is inescapably a problem.

[28] Another feature of the performance relevant to its effects has to do with its collective nature. In the most obvious way it is more than one woman's experience, as there are five women on the stage. But the story is also made collective, made shared, by the institutional processes. More than one woman experiences this kind of interaction with a system representative; the same woman experiences similar kind of interactions in more than one setting. The dramatized 'repetition' matters. It becomes much less possible, with this repetition, to hold on to the idea that individuals are 'the problem.' In this way there is a shift from personal story, to shared story, to the institutional process that generates the shared story – that creates the conditions for these apparently 'personal' experiences, 'personal' stories. This analysis, that assigns particular value to the dramatized repetition of multiple women's experiences in multiple settings, is aligned with methods of inquiry that explore the generalizing effects of

institutional processes: the similar lived experiences that are generated by forces of large-scale coordination that penetrate local settings, mediated by texts (Smith). The promise of such approaches is that recognizing the generalized nature of people's experiences prompts examination and critique, not of how the people might be similar, but of the relations of ruling that operate across institutional settings (McCoy).

[29] The nature of the relationships evoked between storytellers and receivers, summoners and respondents, is a complex and important feature of this project. When the women took the stage, they introduced themselves and their characters. In part this was a decision designed to render them less vulnerable; they could assign to their character aspects of their own lives, but audience members could not be sure which parts were true and which were fiction. This introduction of both self and character also however allowed the women to take two positions: as someone who has lived experience of homelessness, and also as someone knowledgeable in a broader way about the lives of women who are homeless, and of the situations women who are homeless encounter. In the facilitated discussion following the performance the women responded personally to questions, saying 'I...', and they also responded in the third person: they said, for example, 'women who are in situations like Rosie's...' or 'when Rosie encountered this, she...' The drama thus positions the women as both individuals 'with lived experience,' and as analysts and commentators (or in

S. Razack's terms, as moral agent and critic) – with the latter role potentially overcoming resistance to the legitimacy of the former in certain contexts.

[30] As well, as noted above, in the drama itself there is a productive tension (particularly for this audience) between perspective, and standpoint. The students are invited (summoned) by the drama as future social workers, potentially (some would say certainly) complicit in the women's struggles, frustration and suffering; the empty and silent chair clearly offers that opportunity to this audience. At the same time the students are invited by the arrangement of the narrative to perceive the situation from the women's standpoints. In this way, they are summoned as potential allies, friends, fellow service users, fellow citizens. Part of the power of the drama lies in the way it makes choices of identity and relationship vivid. The women on the stage move between (compliant) service user, (angry) self-advocate, and (fellow) citizen. Audience members are called to ask, Who is she to me? Who will I be to her? The final moments of the drama are particularly provocative in this regard. As they lift their chairs and move deliberately to the 'other side' of the desk, the women – and the audience members – become other than they have been. As they place their chairs, sit, and face the audience, the women's voices are a chorus: 'we need to talk.' It is an invitation to dialogue, but one that puts the audience on notice that the speakers are not happy with how things are. In this moment, future social

workers are called to relinquish their more conventional ways of knowing and relating to service users, and to take up a position alongside the women, as citizens engaged in shared effort to define and address a public concern. The students are invited by the drama into service provider-service user relations; the drama also calls them into shared attention, shared and critical analysis with the performers, of the women's experiences and their institutional and political contexts. The shifts in collective identities and possibilities for identification are, we think, key to the ways a drama like this can mobilize publics and publicness.

[31] While much storytelling (and many arts-informed interventions more generally) would hold out hope that the students felt and perceived what it might be like to 'walk in her shoes,' this drama offers students something different: an opportunity to understand something of the conditions of her shoes, and her walking; to perceive their complicity in these conditions; to become more conscious of their own shoes, and their own walking; and to consider and struggle with the responsibility that comes with this knowledge.

Conclusion

[32] Empathy is often cited as a cornerstone of social work and social justice education. However, the connections between empathy and a politics

of transformation, or public-making commitments and actions, are far from assured. Empathizing with 'others' does not necessarily translate into solidarity, or critical engagement with social and structural underpinnings of their / our predicaments, and in some analyses constitutes a kind of epistemic violence.

[33] This project is not, of course, without its own ethical complexities, and limitations. The current paper, while highlighting the significance of the women's standpoints, does not draw on their own narratives of what it was like to participate in drama creation workshops or perform for this audience (for a publication that foregrounds the women's accounts, see Nouvet et al). As well, audience commentary in public space is constrained in various ways, and we were not able to explore the full range of student responses to the drama. It is quite possible that audience members who watched both 'as' students and service users were not drawn as readily by the drama to see themselves as social workers; their identification or alignment might have been more, or more often, with the women. Our awareness of the potential range and complexity of student responses is linked to our evolving methodology: if we are to more fully understand the effects of this kind of work, much fuller attention to the identities, life experiences and expectations of audience members is needed (Belfiore and Bennett). More generally, this project in its future incarnations must consider carefully the common critique of much 'social justice' pedagogy: that it is designed to

teach critical empathy to largely privileged audiences, and in the process often denies the multiplicity of our identifications, and misses or thwarts opportunities to engage (and offer useful knowledge to) listeners from more marginalized social spaces.

[34] The drama described in this paper draws on dynamics of empathy insofar as it relies on affect, and a form of perspective-taking – yet its potential for forming new publics relies on particular arrangements of both. The drama is organized less to activate feelings for the women and more to activate feelings about the limited and often distorting patterns of care prescribed by contemporary social and professional contexts. Audience members are called to appreciate the women’s standpoints, but less as a reconstruction of their subjective experience and more as an imagining of their situations or ‘imagining how it is’ (Goldie qtd in Amiel-Houser and Mendelson-Maoz). Even more centrally, audience members are called to imagine their own responses to the women and their needs and circumstances. In this artful way, they are asked to apprehend their place in relations of power, their potential complicity in the processes of marginalization portrayed (LaCapra qtd in Bennett 9; Furman, Coyne and Negi; Phillips;). The drama plays with dynamics of identity and identification, but evades eclipsing distinct identities and positions. Instead, it calls audience members into vivid apprehension of their choices, including

(and clearly valued in the drama) the choice of 'being' fellow citizens of a new and more just and generous public.

ⁱ In yet another facet of this critique, Badwall (Badwall "Racialized Discourses: Writing against an Essentialized Story About Racism"; Badwall "Colonial Encounters: Racialized Social Workers Negotiating Professional Scripts of Whiteness") describes how social work discourses, including the discourse of empathy, is entwined with white dominance, regulating what can be known and said about violence by clients against racialized social workers and perpetuation racial micro-aggressions.

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