

Critical Connection

Critical Connection: Method, Power, and Knowledge

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We all want to make a difference—an intervention, so how to do this and not have our work fall into some sort of platitudinous missionary work? This is a constant question embedded in an often contradictory set of circumstances. I have slipped into this trite do-gooder simplistic work more often than I care to acknowledge; however, when I have fallen into this trap, what has helped is to be reminded that working in the academy does not provide all the answers. Literature and theatre provide tools of reflection, through metaphor and nation languages, and push the dynamics of power relations by having audiences engage with characters to create new solutions. As academics these forms—literature and theatre—can also help us reevaluate what we study, how we study it, our own relations to power and notions of citizenship while continuing to highlight the unique political and poetic possibilities that emerge, for me, from the Caribbean experience.

The Caribbean experience crystallizes that intellectual work, especially scholarship that is linked to social justice and making a difference, is, at the very least, a two-way street. Thus, given my disciplinary boundaries, what does this two-way street look like? Literature, the arts writ large, produce power and promote citizenship through advancing cultural agency—in two ways: first, as a way to reflect lives lived and second, as a way to *imagine* change. Power is both conceptual (the imagining) and concrete (the political and social manifestations). On the other side of the street, community work unmasks the contradictions and triteness that I am prone to in the solitary writing process because it reveals that the lived experience is not neat.

One definition of cultural agency that has been generative is Mary Louise Pratt's. She defines this idea as "a cultural intervention that seeks to promote, legitimate, and energize certain practices in the interest of reinforcing democratic life; as an act not derived from a fixed program but created from *within* the situation from which it intervenes" ("Afterword" 328; emphasis added). Here Pratt emphasizes that solutions are created from inside—both within a particular set of circumstances and highlights that cultural interventions cannot be transferred or imposed in a wholesale fashion; and within the psyche (mind, heart, soul). Additionally, in her 1991 essay, "Arts of the Contact Zone," Pratt contends that literature, depending on how it is read, can be a hegemonic tool. However, even then she recognized that in contact zones, which are those "social spaces where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, literature, particularly autoethnographic texts [1], can be teaching spaces that interrogate hegemonic centrality" ("Arts of the Contact Zone" 33). Students can find the critical potential in literature to image change by inhabiting a character's experience.

For example, as I conceive and write about these experiences I am aware of the two audiences I (try to) address. One is a US-based academic audience (students and colleagues), and the other is a Caribbean audience of regional academics as well as regional publics. First, in the contact zones that are classrooms of redress—African American Studies, Women's Studies, critical composition, etc.—the audience (students) are: (a) predisposed to change, or (b) suspicious of these spaces of redress. Hopefully, both types of student will be provoked to explore their understandings of the world. Nonetheless, these spaces of redress are often dynamic because the "agenda"—reading in a particular context (i.e., one that foregrounds who has been excluded from mainstream cultures, why and how the excluded have confronted their status), is established from the outset. In such classes, the title, course

description or syllabus establishes the context for reading, the basic approach. While teaching obviously will vary based on the instructor's intention, in my case this question of what can literature or art do to foster change is one that we engage with from the beginning.

Is putting that question of exclusion, marginalization and oppression on the table enough? Not always, this leads to the second part of my answer. We need various tools to help students read in these contexts. This means providing historical, political, and social contextualization in addition to formalist tools for deconstructing the primary text. For example, in my classroom students respond (both orally and in writing) to prompts using a character's voice which is informed by the character's particular set of circumstances. Students imagine an experience from a character's perspective. However, before doing so, they have to explain a character's situation to the best of their abilities. In addition to revealing what they have gleaned, this exercise assists with overall comprehension because, to be effective, they have to answer the follow: what is the setting, tone, point-of-view, mood, etc. Such parsing and grounding of the character's world helped students understand choices they originally dismissed. In this way, the character's world is realized in their heads and we ease into more comparative analysis. The most suspicious students begin to acknowledge a character's choices even if they don't agree with them. Frankly, this is the best situation for me because it reveals the thaw in our contact classroom.

For audiences beyond the classroom (but not excluding those in the classroom) another method for coalescing cultural agency, latent knowledge, and power will be theatre. The genesis of this piece has been my experience with Augusto Boal's Theatre of the Oppressed (TO) particularly Forum Theatre, which allows witness-participants, or spect-actors as he calls them, to make meaning by intervening in the action on the stage and imagining "change." Performance methods applied to literary and theatrical texts will be a bridge—in this reflective and imaginative process. The critical potential of theatre is in large part the same critical potential that literature provides—it is the process of reflection. Pieces which reflect one's reality in idioms that are recognizable facilitate the imaginative process for change.

Literature enables reader-participants to engage with ideas and concerns through an intermediary—the creative text. This means that though the issues are pressing, they do not carry the same survivalist weight that a governmental or policy report does. These creative texts provide room for discovery, engagement, and problem-solving. To return to my earlier discussion on the contact zone classroom which provides an "ideal" space where participants know the question and it also generates an ideal reader/participant, who chooses to enter this zone. Though these ideal(ized) participants make the contact classroom interesting, I am more curious about the reluctant participant. By this I mean the person who cannot afford or would not choose the contact zone classroom. In fact, the contact zone for this participant might be life—living and working in spaces where s/he is constantly grappling with ethnic, linguistic, class, gender and sexuality differences.

The context for reaching a reluctant participant is culture in its most broad manifestations in rituals, festivals, (street) theatre, and so on. The argument can be made that people choose their spaces of convergence and association. While this is true, I believe that these places offer the opportunities for change because they are outside a didactic space and often "sneak-up" on a participant. Here, the creative text, especially if it is communally-experienced, facilitates the process of redefining self-interests from simply an individual to a community, and eventually from one community to several until like a ripple it expands throughout a nation. The creative text helps us (readers/participants) apprehend often painful processes in which we are asked to relinquish power and explore benefits which are not necessarily evident to the superficial self, or the most primal "me." To my mind, to truly integrate this belief at the personal, often economically-straitened level, involves using artistic deploy-

ments in ways that embed at the core of one's being and imbue citizens with the overall notion that working through differences, which are tremendous, terrifying, and often traumatizing is a good thing.

As Wilson Harris might say, the creative text is the morsel which once ingested transforms the one who consumes it—even if it is only in a minute way (22-24). The next step is building on that morsel of transformation encouraging one's participation in the world. This space/place of reflection is important to [emerging] democratic projects because if we can't envision another world, we are destined to refine faulty institutions and reproduce hegemonic practices. Though Raymond Williams would caution that these institutions seem fixed and unchangeable, if we cannot imagine their unfixity we are likely to reproduce exactly the same things. While democracy, especially in the U.S., is publicly performed by voting or through institutions—the legislature or the court—in the English-speaking Caribbean, where governance takes place in small spaces, familial and economic connections make politics not just local, but personal. Caribbean democracies are highly personalized because of these connections and therefore “democracy” manifests differently than it does in most imagined communities in the West. In these places, cultural deployments can serve two purposes. It can be unleashed by the power structure to ensure elite survival or it can be used at smaller levels—the school, the church, the civic organization, or the neighborhood—to reinforce participatory and egalitarian tendencies positively or negatively imagined in the creative morsel.

In Raymond Williams's “Structures of Feeling,” he articulates the fallacy of separating the personal from the social. Williams argues that the social is seen as fixed and institutional, while anything that does not fit into this model is characterized as personal and idiosyncratic (128-29, 132). Ultimately, Williams contends that the alternative to hegemonic messages embedded in fixed forms is “feeling and thinking which is social and material” and which manifests through a practical or lived consciousness (130-31). Structures of feeling for Williams are the relations of experience which “go beyond the systemic beliefs of social institutions and join them with meanings and values that are actively lived” (132). Therefore, in terms of democratic life and the Anglophone Caribbean this involves exploring the legacies of the plantation system in cultural production like the calypso—an indigenous form based on African satirical storytelling and musical traditions. Calypso and akin cultural forms are about affective or emotional power, which as Pratt states can be “energized in the interest of reinforcing democratic life” (132). The need to manifest different (or more expansive) notions of democracy (or participation) in the Caribbean means not only examining cultural products like Rawle Gibbons's *Calypso Trilogy* (see below), but it also involves internalizing these [progressive aspects of democracy] morsels in one's self. Feeling democracy and recognizing where one's sense of individual power intersects with neo-colonial and plantation economic and political structures is one way that Caribbean publics can blur the binaries between feeling and reason and experience and belief. Theatre, particularly participatory varieties which use local situations, languages, and norms facilitates the move beyond self-absorption and helps us push our own limitations.

Briefly, Caribbean theatre practices are comprised of two mainstays—total and ritual theatre or the profane and the sacred (Banham 198). Total (areyto) theatre is an array of “complex theatre-dance forms which incorporate music to recount the historical, religious, and cultural repertoire of the society” (159) which appeals to a broad audience, according to Judy Stone. Ritual theatre (cohaba) is in the “priestly ceremonial” (169) tradition that retrieves Caribbean coping mechanisms through the overt use of ritual forms. Some claim that total theatre is “the only truly West Indian theatre,” because of its incorporation of festival forms and folkloric characters such as: Midnight Robber and Jab Molassi, who are part of Trinidad and Tobago's carnival (Stone 71-72). Total theatre is a vehicle for social commentary comparable to the musical forms of calypso and reggae that are embedded in it.

Similarly, ritual theatre employs the rituals and aspects of festivals that have emerged from Caribbean realities in order to probe the psyche of the region's people. Ritual theatre not only uses the ritual for content, but as form. Innovations facilitated by the Caribbean Lab, an arm of the Jamaican School of Drama, led to the development of ritual theatre (Stone 143). Mastery of this form lies in "extracting the theatrical essence of any ritual while retaining the interplay of the ritual" (144). Moreover, these rituals are part of a pan-Caribbean heritage that Rawle Gibbons argues "can speak with absolute faithfulness to an audience in any part of Caribbean" (57). Ritual is one way to facilitate an experience, which through familiar actions, creates awareness. It is witnessing the everyday in profound terms that allows a space for consciousness-raising and in Williams's "Structures of Feeling" exposes institutional (i.e., social) unfixity and opens a window for change. In this article, I focus on Rawle Gibbons's total theatre play which has ritual undertones, *Calypso Trilogy*, and the methods of Theatre of the Oppressed.

Caribbean theatre, described in a 1952 review as "a living lab of the playwright, the actor and the audience" (Stone 152), is in essence a site of national contestations and the struggle for and with cultural meanings. Arguing for the theatrical space within the nation-building process, Edouard Glissant claims "there can be no nation without theatre" because it creates the opportunity to illuminate people's experiences through reflection (197). Therefore, it is through a reflective theater that harnesses and represents indigenous experiences that a person, native, citizen can come to terms with her nation and the larger world (196). Rawle Gibbons's *Calypso Trilogy* is a compelling example of how theatre fosters community-building which will eventually build a Caribbean nation. Through indigenous forms like the calypso, Gibbons structures his play as entertaining, participatory cultural history that illustrates a wide spectrum of issues. These include race, class, and nation while engaging the audience in their own image and through their own language, Trinidad and Tobago's Creole.

In *Calypso Trilogy*, a series of plays which chronicle the development and history of calypso in twentieth century Trinidad, the characters repeatedly break the fourth wall and engage the audience by inviting them to sing along from their seats or to join the performers on stage (29, 112).[2] This imaginary construct—the fourth wall—normally demarcates the world on stage from that of the patrons; however, in Gibbons' text there is constant interaction between characters and audience, which is one way to make the direct reflective or mirroring effect more dynamic and substantial.

For example, calypsonian Ming makes rounds through the audience to collect money so that Spoiler, another kaiso artist, can support his family and avoid incarceration (Gibbons 85). Such engaged interfacing, though often played for laughs, fosters patron investment in the characters' lives and ultimately their own lives, since these characters are reflections of their histories. Ming's collection concretely illustrates the initial undervaluation of calypsonians by the society and may even remind members of the public about their own domestic juggling and, perhaps, have them wishing that someone would take up a collection on their behalf. Though relayed comically, Spoiler's fund drive makes real the proverb, "Hand wash hand, mek hand come clean." By the end of the play, the economic hardships of the artist and other characters may have viewers making the same connection about the global phenomenon of poor places, going with literal and metaphorical "hat in hand" to richer countries, although such an analysis more than likely comes with further reflection rather than in the frenzied interactive space of theatrical performance.

For Williams, this type of emotional or affective work both in the text and the audience's response, highlight power relations that are external and internal. Each moment like this which appears formed is unmoored by such connections and gives rise to new structures of feeling. This contextualizing is a way of producing informed or active citizens. When

people are making these connections they are active; they are agents and they are making linkages between the creative text and their present. In other words, they are undermining the social fixities they have inherited.

Another aspect of producing citizens who in turn exercise power is through using nation language within the text. Nation language, often referred to as Creole, is defined by Edward Kamau Brathwaite as a way of communicating embedded in the history of enslavement, dispossession, and survival (5-7). These communication patterns have emerged in the Caribbean through a fusion of African and European vocabularies and syntax (5-10). Nation language as represented on stage foregrounds the subconscious power of language and allows an audience to see and hear themselves in historical and transformative ways. Such linguistic validation supports the building of community and citizenship and empowers an audience by legitimizing their voices. In a sense, nation language is part of a latent consciousness and is an instrument for recuperating the past, representing the present, and forging a future.

In fact, Pratt argues that language is one way to mirror, parody and construct an oppositional representation to those created by the colonizer or the power structure. In this trilogy, except for tourists, every character speaks Creole (Gibbons 90). Mr. Wright, the white calypso promoter; Jean, a white beauty queen; and Lula, an East Indian cook, speak this nation's language. Beneath this 'talk' and the employment of various linguistic registers is the idea of *metaphor*. One illustrative example is the exchange between Figs, a calypsonian and "idler," and Ribero, a Portuguese club owner. Ribero questions Figs about the promotional language for Spoiler's fundraiser—a charity event to help Spoiler fulfill his role as family provider that Ribero's club will host. Figs decides to market the event as a "fountain of youth" dance. When Ribero voices his concerns that such exaggeration is on par with perpetrating a hoax, Figs replies, "Hoax? Ribero, Ribero, This is Trinidad, Carnival Country! Anything could happen! You have no sense of metaphor or what?" In a country built on linguistic trickery and turn of phrase, Figs's exaggerations are expected and accepted because the *metaphorical* terrain is elastic enough to encompass these fictions. Figs's comment not only indicates that language should be hyperbolic, but also creates a space for realizing this fantastic possibility because in Carnival country anything can happen. Thus, we can imagine extreme possibilities when the laws of non-carnival country are suspended. This text manages to chronicle and comment on Trinidad's calypso history using the music itself as a structuring device, while including the various ethnic players present in the nation.

Liberation Theatre Methods

Gibbons's play (and groups such as Art in Action and the now-defunct Sistren) along with strategies taken from Augusto Boal's Theatre of the Oppressed are two ways forward to build the self from the deepest places within, while also building community—the most local denominator in nation building. These interventions move theatre and its methods from the stage to personal/community/national development. Sistren's collaborative methodology was, like Boal's, based on personal testimony, improvisation, and role-playing "through games, songs and culturally specific techniques" (DiCenzo 82). Using theatrical methodologies in this way is, in effect, about cultivating agents—citizens who can make changes at the individual level expanding outwards from there. The most critical change is one of imagination and vision. It is the ability to imagine past one's limitations and lack, which ultimately means imagining compromise. In places with limited resources it is often difficult to imagine sharing anything with one's ethnic or class "enemy" and thus, to begin to envision these changes through art and in one's self is transformative.

Boal's overarching goal is to move spectators to become active subjects in their own lives so that they are invigorated through the mechanisms of theatre and government, to change their lives. Particularly interesting is Boal's construction of Forum Theatre, which begins with the formulation of a problem as depicted in a scene. After the initial performance, the

“spectators/spec-actors” are encouraged to intervene with possible solutions or other ways to image the situation and the characters’ motivations. Forum theatre demands and promotes awareness, if not engagement, of power relations. In this intervention, participants imagine how to change—even incrementally—various power dynamics.[3]

Berenice Fisher critiques Boal’s method as having a dependence on a homogeneous audience with “an already developed consciousness” (190). Outside of such a community, TO “runs the risk of *reproducing* rather than *representing* oppression” (190). In plural Caribbean societies such concerns indicate the challenges of localizing these theatrical methods and devising place-based continuums. Caribbean implementation of these strategies means dealing with the heterogeneous audiences in the region. In this regard, Sistren’s method, which utilized cultural forms—games and music from this space—is a way to counteract this possibility. Using cultural forms, also seen in Gibbons’s play, is one level of community around which to coalesce. Continually recognizing the possibility of cooption and thus the necessity to incessantly refine the process are other aspects of the imbedded power of the theatre process itself as well as the power embedded in the systemic structures under challenge.

Tenure Frenzy

That said, I would like to return to the aforementioned challenge to the academic—which remains. Applying performance strategies beyond theatre to other forms like the novel and short story, allows literary critics to engage in the public sphere (in other words, in a civil dialogue) in a way, perhaps, they had not previously considered. As we each pursue our notions of change, especially in literary studies—these interactive methods not only engage the critic as citizen, but also an audience. To this end, we should consider how our spaces of production—teaching and publishing—can be used for similar interventions as encouraged with Forum Theatre.

In other words, this is about expressed participation with the wider world because citizenship is about the *doing*. While it may sound redundant to say “activist citizen,” I do want to invoke the notion of a person who participates “politically” in their work, whether it is scholarship or not, as well as in their lives beyond work. What I find valuable in the Caribbean and the African Diaspora is the idea of *art* that is both beautiful and functional (i.e., in service). Caribbean thinkers who are scholars, creative producers, philosophers, and political agents are unappreciated in the academy, but these are the models that drew me to this work. Nonetheless, I have found it a particularly difficult juggle to theorize about (and want to actualize) Caribbean citizenship on the ground from a paid position in the U.S. academy. My own citizenship (born in the Caribbean and a naturalized U.S. citizen) is not unlike many people in the Caribbean Diaspora. However, given my intellectual and political interests I have to ask: as citizen, who am I interested in producing? In part, I’m looking for a way to participate with my scholarship, so I’m simultaneously creating my self as citizen as I develop ideas on pan-Caribbean citizenship. Working in the U.S. academy means that I am necessarily removed from the region and thus it is a difficult proposition to participate in change there unless one finds a project on the ground. Being hyper-conscious of this means that I attempt to keep my intentions (and their possible consequences) in the foreground. What is my intention here? Is it about peer-reviewed journals or people-reviewed empowerment? Of course, it is about *both*—a job and justice. In this space, of consciously producing myself and a political project, I examine how theatre in the Caribbean intervenes in developing our nations.

To return to Pratt’s definition using culture to reinforce and energize democratic life created within specific context it means that an original goal within cultural studies—political participation—is reinvigorated (Pratt, “Afterword” 328). As articulated by Pratt, cultural agency has helped refocus my work within a tenure frenzied environment because it and the

theatrical methods mentioned keep the issue of practice within the classroom and within various cultural contexts central. The more I am able to integrate literary studies with performance studies, the more I can help build community and democratic expertise, as I learn from and share-in the knowledge generated by other stakeholders. I believe this type of collaborative scholarship leads to a dynamic process of collaborative living and perhaps real change.

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- [1] Autoethnographic texts are texts in response to a conqueror's ethnographic constructions of a native. The autoethnographic text "undertakes to describe [the native's or marginalized] experience in ways that engage with representations others have made of them" (33). *Profession* 91. New York: MLA, 1991. 33-40.
- [2] In fact, one review mentioned that eminent feminist scholar, Rhoda Reddock, was part of the chorus for one incarnation of the play.
- [3] In my own work I've used these methods in two ways: (1) the idea of rehearsal or prismatic rereadings of the past and (2) Creole to Standard English or English to vernacular translations.

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