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Résumé de l'article

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ARTICLE

Youth Participatory Action Research and Applied Theatre Engagement: Supporting Indigenous Youth Survivance and Resurgence

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Pour les jeunes Autochtones du Canada, cette époque a son lot de défis qui ne définissent pas pour autant l'ensemble de leurs réalités. Dans cet article, Diane Conrad s'intéresse au versant pratique de l'engagement théâtral en examinant trois projets de recherche-action participative auxquels ont participé des jeunes Autochtones dans trois contextes différents : en milieu scolaire, dans une prison pour jeunes délinquants et chez un organisme communautaire au service des jeunes de la rue. Elle explore l'importance d'une approche axée sur le théâtre appliqué pour les recherches menées auprès de jeunes Autochtones, faisant valoir qu'elle évite de reproduire des récits unidimensionnels centrés sur les dommages et permet d'ouvrir sur des processus inspirants pour la survie et la résurgence. Conrad met l'accent sur les façons dont la recherche peut aider les jeunes à s'autonomiser et amener les autres à voir la sagesse et l'espoir des jeunes en parallèle avec les luttes qui façonnent leurs réalités.

Mots clés : théâtre appliqué, recherche-action participative pour les jeunes, jeunes Autochtones, résurgence, survivance

For Indigenous youth in Canada, times are challenging, but the challenges youth face do not define the wholeness of their lived realities. This article focuses on applied theatre engagement, drawing on three youth participatory action research projects with Indigenous youth in three diverse contexts: in a school setting, in a youth offender jail, and with a community-based organization serving street-involved youth. It explores the significance of applied theatre approaches to research with Indigenous youth to avoid reproducing one-dimensional damage-centred narratives in favour of inspiring processes for survivance and resurgence. The discussion emphasizes the ways in which research can offer support for youth to become empowered and for others to see the youths' wisdom and hope alongside the struggles that together shape their realities.

Keywords: applied theatre, youth participatory action research, Indigenous youth, resurgence, survivance

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Introduction

Indigenous youth are inheritors of a colonial legacy characterized by ongoing economic and social injustices. Youth participatory action research (YPAR) using applied theatre methods with Indigenous youth[1] responds to ongoing settler-colonial injustices through opening space to give voice to youths' perspectives and desires. I discuss the significance of participatory approaches with Indigenous youth drawing on three applied theatre projects,[2] emphasizing ways that the research processes offered potential for empowerment for the youth participants and for others to see youths' wisdom and hope. For Indigenous youth, research can and must avoid furthering colonial violence and damage-centred narratives (Tuck 409; Donald and Krahn 124), and assist, in small ways, in supporting their survivance (Vizenor, *Manifest* 1) and resurgence (Alfred, *Wasáse* 22; Simpson 21).

Survivance and *resurgence* are critical analytic tools in Indigenous studies. *Survivance*, introduced by Gerald Vizenor in his 1994 *Manifest Manners: Postindian Warriors of Survivance*, is "more than survival, more than endurance and mere response" ("Aesthetics of Survivance" 15). It indicates Indigenous presence as active, vibrant, and alive, and survival as resistance to dominant discourses of disappearance. For Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, Indigenous *resurgence* is a generative process of nation-building and mobilization for land reclamation and "regeneration of Indigenous political, educational and knowledge systems" (21). Jeff Corntassel sees resurgence in everyday acts that challenge the destructive forces of ongoing colonialism (88).

It may be presumptuous for me, a non-Indigenous scholar, to invoke these terms; I do so to draw attention to these vital concepts. While I did not begin the applied theatre YPAR I facilitated with explicit reference to *survivance* and *resurgence*, I contend that these are powerful concepts for considering how such work can support Indigenous youth. I realize, ultimately, it is not for me, but for Indigenous youth and Indigenous scholars to determine what, if any, relevance this work has for Indigenous survivance and resurgence.

The significance of applied theatre and YPAR with Indigenous youth is in the potential of these methods for revitalizing or regenerating youths' ways of being. Taiaiake Alfred insists stories, ritual, and ceremony are essential for "the regeneration of authentic indigenous existences" (*Wasáse* 249). Carolyn Kenny describes the arts as fundamental to life for First Nations peoples, as ways of experiencing and expressing qualities of life (77). Gregory Cajete notes the role of arts for Indigenous education and development as "an integral part of learning, being, and becoming complete" (141). Arts processes offer youth spaces for the expression of their identities and for sustaining and revitalizing their cultures—for examining who they are, how they understand their cultures and communities, and their place in the world. As a process of re-creation and celebration of self, arts offer possibilities for healing—"for developing and perpetuating a process of life-enhancing relationships" (Cajete 150), to work against the effects of colonization (Battiste 82) and envision possible alternative futures and ethical spaces of possibility (Ermine 202). As Marie Ann Battiste notes, there is promise in youths' "self-reflective narratives that help them to understand their own situation [...] and reframing what has been cast as negative into more positive ways" (71).

Positioning Myself in Relation to the Research

Consistent with ethical practices in participatory research (Absolon and Willett 97), I offer reflection on my social location in relation to the research I undertook with Indigenous youth.

At the outset of my applied theatre research program with youth, in part to better understand my own experiences as a youth, I was drawn to researching with/about youths' experiences of marginalization at school and in the community. I sought opportunities to engage with youth who might fit the category "at-risk,"[3] both to interrogate the problematic label and to explore youths' experiences that lead to that designation. This quest took me to various settings in the Alberta region where I live and work; whenever I encountered youth whose experiences *put* them at risk, a large percentage were of Indigenous descent. While I did not specifically seek to work with Indigenous youth, my work has been largely with this population. I could not ignore the fact that Indigenous youth are marginalized to the extent that they are, and have addressed this throughout my research.

My location as an adult, white settler, university-based researcher studying with Indigenous youth requires ongoing interrogation to perform my subjectivity and make use of my power and privilege ethically. While self-reflexivity is important for bringing into view structural power relations of colonization in which my subjectivity and research are enmeshed, I acknowledge that it cannot mitigate, neutralize, or transcend those relations (D'Arcangelis 340). Rather, I must inhabit the discomfort and complexity of my positionality (Ahmed) and remain implicated in the incommensurable critique of colonial relations (Tuck and Yang 28).

As a drama/theatre education scholar, I sought and found, in applied theatre and participatory action research, approaches that align with my personal political commitments to justice, anti-racism, and decolonization. These were small ways I felt my work might positively contribute to the lives of the youth with whom I sought to work.

Applied Theatre

Applied theatre is an umbrella term for a range of theatre practices[4] outside of traditional theatre contexts "with participants who may or may not be skilled in theatre arts [... but] who have a vested interest in the issue taken up" (Prendergast and Saxton 6). Applied theatre is more process than product, focused with the intention of "re-examin[ing] the world to discover how it works and our place in it" (8) to raise awareness and generate change. It is a theatre form that presents "non-fictional material within thinly-disguised fictions of authentic contemporary reality. [... The actor] is less hidden behind the mask of character and is closer to being [themselves ... and] the fourth wall is permeable, transparent, and often breached by audience members who directly participate in the action" (12–13).

The tradition of applied theatre that informed my work[5] was Augusto Boal's Theatre of the Oppressed; Boal called his techniques rehearsal for revolution (122). David Diamond's Theatre for Living, adapted from Boal, understands that individual and community health is vitally dependent on people's capacity to imagine.

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Youth Participatory Action Research

I came upon participatory action research (PAR) through my applied theatre work in education. My applied theatre practice aligns with Paulo Freire's critical pedagogy,[6] which sees education as "the practice of freedom" ("Pedagogy of the Oppressed" 80), from which also grew participatory research (*Creating Alternative Research Methods* 273). I drew on Ross Kidd and Martin Byram's identification of applied theatre as a participatory research method (3). The dynamic of critical reflection and action, or praxis, central to critical pedagogy, participatory research, and applied theatre, shaped my use of applied theatre as a participatory research method.

PAR arose within community-development initiatives around the world in response to dominant scientific traditions that claimed neutrality, objectivity, and perpetuated colonizing attitudes to knowledge production (Hall 12). PAR is described as a means of producing knowledge, a tool for community dialogue, education, consciousness-raising, and mobilizing for action (Gaventa 121), developing practical knowing in pursuit of practical solutions to pressing community issues (Reason and Bradbury 4). It is research *for*, *with*, and *by* participants, accentuating the inherent human capacity to create knowledge based on local and lived experience (Fals-Borda 152). Ideally, participants are involved in all stages of the research process.

PAR offers a decolonizing research framework complementary with Indigenous research methodologies (Wilson 16) focusing on relational accountability, respect, reciprocity, and relevance for the community with which the research is undertaken. PAR decries extractive research methods in favour of inquiry for practical community-based purposes.

Julio Cammarota and Michelle Fine offered YPAR as a model for engaging children and youth in research (see also Chou et al.; Korteweg and Bissell), which aims to involve youth in engaged praxis through participation in researching issues relevant to their lives (2). Researching *with* rather than *on* youth respects youths' perspectives and their right to be engaged in matters that concern them, including research. YPAR is action-oriented towards benefiting youth. Lisa Korteweg and Alexandra Bissell attempted an Indigenized YPAR as a decolonizing research methodology focused on Indigenous youth "reclaiming, recovering, and reimagining social and political power" (15).

YPAR projects commonly utilize arts-based methods (see Asakura et al.; Skinner and Masuda), incorporating alternative methods and cultural forms that are part of their community's life. Popular art forms, creative media, and youth-friendly approaches offer powerful ways of engaging youth in meaning-making and knowledge-representation building on their interests and capabilities.

Three Applied Theatre YPAR Projects

The YPAR projects using applied theatre methods that I discuss occurred in three diverse contexts with diverse outcomes: a rural high school, a young offenders' jail, and with a community-based organization serving street-involved youth.[7] In each instance, the research context influenced youths' participation and the extent to which YPAR's goals could be achieved. For my doctoral research, set in a rural high school, I framed my study with an understanding of the limitations the school setting imposed for youth to freely voice their perspectives. My

subsequent research in a youth jail was even more restrictive, yet we managed to find space for expression and analysis within those constraints. My study with the community-based organization serving street-involved youth, because the organization's philosophy, similar to my own, was grounded in a socially critical perspective, was the truest example of YPAR.

These three studies were participatory to the extent possible within the given circumstances (Greenwood et al. 175). As the adult, university-based researcher, I and my adult collaborators from the institutions/organization, initiated the projects and set their parameters to varying extents—using our positions, influence, and skills to engage and benefit the youth. The YPAR and applied theatre processes gave priority to youths' interests and experiences, allowing their insights to guide knowledge creation. Their voices were heard directly within peer group and/or community/institutional contexts through performances, which were the action outcomes of the YPAR processes. Youths' insights directed my interpretations of our work, shared through scholarly dissemination—always with the aim of highlighting youths' strengths and wisdom.

As my recounting of our experiences attest, the youth displayed sophisticated understandings of their circumstances and our work reflected youths' vitality and insights. My discussion seeks to acknowledge their agency, respect their complex personhood (Tuck 420), and highlight the ways in which the research supported processes offering youth opportunities to be seen and heard.

Rethinking At-Risk at High School

For my doctoral research, I was interested in exploring the notion "at-risk" commonly applied to some youth. The setting was a rural Northern Alberta high school with a large Indigenous population. I worked with two drama classes over four weeks creating scenes about what they identified as issues in their lives. We performed the scenes in forum theatre[8] style for students at their school and at a neighbouring school.

To avoid framing our work too narrowly, it was not until the end of the study I raised the question of what "at-risk" meant to the youth. They were adamant that they were not "at-risk," claiming instead that their "risky" behaviours, examples of which were depicted in their scenes, were a matter of personal choice. In our discussion, when asked why youth engage in those behaviours, Lady[9] said, "Just because you want to." Lucky responded, "Because it's your own choice." This gave them a sense of agency and control over their lives and left me pondering the motivations for their risky choices. I came across Stephen Lyng's social-psychological theory of voluntary risk-taking, "Edgework" (864), which he describes as "experiential anarchy"—self-created opportunities for spontaneous, authentic actions in response to overwhelming social constraints (875). I wondered if youths' behaviours, which deem them "at-risk," could be seen as voluntary risk-taking in some cases.

The youth-created scene that spoke most directly to "at-risk," and helped us understand the notion on their terms, was called "The Bus Trip," and was based on a story they told about an incident that had occurred at their school the previous year involving an instance of rule-breaking. The scene depicted a group of students drinking alcohol on the bus on the way home from a class trip. The "offenders" were caught, but only after the fact; they suspected

another student had told on them. The incident resulted in the suspension of several students and the expulsion of the instigator of the illicit activity.

Our devising of "The Bus Trip" and our animation[10] around significant moments elicited interesting insights regarding youths' perceptions of the motivations behind their risky activities, peer-group relations, perspectives on rule-breaking, relationships to the authority of the school, and their sense of justice. For example, our dialogue revealed that the instigator made use of this rule-breaking to his own advantage, motivated by the desire for status amongst his peers. When asked about his motivation, Shadzz said, "*(With a big smile.)* I'm cool. I'm the man. They're all drinking my booze." Likewise, others joined in to be associated with the high-status character. Responding to my question if peerpressure motivated Daryl to join Shadzz in the activity, Lady responded, "I don't know if it's peer pressure, but if he wants to be friends with Shadzz, he's gotta do it." The negative consequences of being caught for breaking the rules were outweighed by the positive outcomes of participating.

Asked why he did it even though he was aware of the risk, Sadzz replied, "I don't know, just for the rush I guess." The youth described the "rush" of the illicit activity in the same terms as Lyng's Edgeworkers, highlighting the seductive appeal and enjoyment of engagement in risky activities. The alcohol provided an escape from the shared anticlimax, the boredom of the long bus ride home from the class trip.

The scene revealed that the only reason authorities learned of the incident was through a peer informant, for whom youth expressed disdain. When asked how they felt about informers, Shadzz said, "Informers? They're rats!" Lady responded, "They suck!" Through exploring this incident, the students positioned themselves at odds with governing school authorities and articulated their own sense of justice, indicated by Shadzz's claim, "But rules are made to be broken. You have to break the rules once in a while," and Daryl's response, "Let them worry about their own rules. If they didn't find out we were drinking…" They concluded that since no harm had come from drinking on the bus, the instigator's expulsion was unjust.

By rethinking "at-risk" as risky, risk-taking youth behaviour, or resistance to schooling, the intent was not to validate such behaviour, nor to present it unproblematically. Rather, it provided a counternarrative that unsettled common-sense understandings of "at-risk" to present a more complex picture than one of deviance and deficiency commonly suggested by the label. Youths' perceptions allowed an understanding of youth and risk that reflected their reality, finding potential in their risky or resistant behaviour to reclaim their agency and way of being in the world.

The context of this research limited the extent to which the study met the goals of YPAR. The fact that this was my doctoral research meant I needed to have many aspects of the research determined in advance; it limited the time I could spend working with the youth and required I produce a dissertation as an outcome. While the school setting, no doubt, restricted what youth were willing to share, the research did make space for them to act as co-researchers in generating knowledge about and interpreting their lived experiences and sharing their understandings with other youth through performance.

The example of "The Bus Trip" scene perhaps follows Tuck's call for research that captures desire, which is generative and engaged (416). Desire-based research shifts the theory of change away from the oversimplifying binary of reproduction/resistance towards a synthesis of oppression and agency. It creates an alternative space for exploring the complexity of

personhood, including contradictions, complicities, and interdependencies (Tuck 420). It does not ignore loss and despair, but emphasizes hope, vision, the wisdom of individuals and communities, and celebrates *survivance.* For Vizenor, "Stories of survivance are an active presence [...] an active repudiation of dominance, tragedy, and victimry" ("Aesthetics of Survivance" 15).

Jill Carter speaks of the significance of stories in Indigenous knowledge systems and the power of re-creation stories, the re-creative act, as "survivance-intervention" (61), as expressions of Indigenous presence and sovereignty. For Indigenous youth who are twice as likely than non-Indigenous children to live in poverty (McDonald and Wilson, 12), taken from their families by child services at a rate eight times higher than their non-Indigenous counterparts (Anaya, "Report of the Special Rapporteur" 11), disproportionately incarcerated (Chalverley et al. 12), have high rates of high-school incompletion (Canada Council on Learning 38), and are amongst those lamented missing and murdered (see for example Laboucan-Massimo and Big Canoe par. 1), survivance is vital.

The stories youth created in this project, as in the other two YPAR projects discussed below, perhaps offered youth "a new way of seeing and recreating themselves as sovereign[11] human beings" (Carter 35).

Radical Performance with Incarcerated Youth

My research with youth in a maximum-security young-offender jail was inspired by the study described above; if ever there were youth put "at-risk," surely I would find them in jail. It took extensive negotiations with the facility's authorities to gain access to youth—I had to convince them that my applied-theatre research would not disrupt the "status quo" on the inside; it seemed to me they were more concerned with maintaining control than offering youth meaningful programming. I was invited by the centre's Native program coordinator—an Indigenous female corrections officer[12]—to conduct my study in association with the afterschool extracurricular program she facilitated. This program was a concession to the fact that, as she informed me, approximately 60% of the youth incarcerated at the facility were of Indigenous descent. This disproportionate incarceration rate of Indigenous youth was consistent with statistics across Canada at the time (Chalverley et al. 12). The Native program offered youth interludes of humanity in an otherwise constrained and dispassionate environment.

Through a series of weekly visits over a period of three years, I worked with a varying group of youth, mostly boys, majority Indigenous, ages fourteen to eighteen, engaging them in theatre games and devised theatre activities ranging from storytelling to image theatre[13] and forum theatre. We undertook a number of Theatre of the Oppressed–inspired projects, giving us opportunities to explore youths' understandings of their life experiences, including experiences that led to their incarceration, and to imagine possible futures.

Based on his own theatre work in prisons, which spoke to my experiences, Baz Kershaw describes the freedom invoked by "radical performance" as

> not just freedom *from* oppression, repression, exploitation—the resistant sense of the radical—but also freedom *to reach beyond* existing systems of formalized power, freedom

> to create currently unimaginable forms of association and action—the transgressive and transcendent sense of the radical. (18, emphasis in original)

In my reflection, I found moments of such radical performance both inside our theatre work, in discussions about our work, and during casual conversations and activities surrounding the work. I provide a few examples of moments that were distinctly performative with potential for the radical freedom that Kershaw describes—moments that transgressed and transcended the system of formalized power in which youth were caught, which perhaps also speaks to Corntassel's understanding of Indigenous resurgence as involving "the courage and imagination to envision life beyond the state" (89).

In my passing interactions with the youth, if ever I commented on the way they wore their standard-issue, faded, and stretched-out navy-blue sweatpants low on their hips almost to the point of falling down, a youth might spontaneously pull his pants all the way up to his chest, tight around the crotch, in mocking imitation of some despised authority figure. The countercultural fashion style known as "sagging" is described as a symbol of freedom and rejection of mainstream values, which possibly even originated in prison settings.[14] Such youth-initiated performance that poignantly embodied the potential of radical freedom so intrigued me that I captured it in a play I wrote as an ethnodramatic form of research dissemination (*Athabasca's Going Unmanned* 89). While the youth could not perform publicly—their identities being closely guarded—the play, which was performed for community audiences by professional and semi-professional actors, including Indigenous actors taking on Indigenous roles, gave voice to youths' experiences.

The following story, a version of which was told by a participant in the research, also found its way into the play through the character of Randy, a seventeen-year-old Métis youth charged with assault linked to drug trafficking and awaiting trial:

> When I's 12 … My little brother 8 'n my sister 14 … Mom used to take off with her boyfriend, eh? … They'd be gone days sometimes … No grub in the house … Sister would cry … We used to dream 'bout cheese burgers … Sometimes I'd take my little brother to the supermarket … We'd get a cart 'n go up 'n down the isles [sic] fillin' it up with all the stuff we liked … Just like we're suppos' to be there … No one ever noticed us … Figured mom's around somewhere … When we got all we wan'ed … Pushed the cart out the door … And soon as we're 'round the corner we'd run like hell all the way home … *(Laughing)* We'd have all the grub we wanted for a few days … Did that so many times 'n never got caught … That was six years ago … Since then I been inta every kinda crap you c'n imagine. (*Athabasca's Going Unmanned* 116)

This story illustrates how youth behaviours may be a response to basic survival needs, questioning how we define activity as criminal.

A digital storytelling project with youth involved taking digital photos of the youth on the unit in poses depicting a devised story and then Photoshopping them onto various backgrounds appropriate to the story's events. The result was a short video that allowed youth to imagine themselves engaged in various activities (eating bannock burgers on Moshom's[15] deck, attending a community round dance) on the "outs" to symbolically escape the constraints of

jail, moving into another time/place, and imagining themselves in situations and relationships other than their current ones.

Another project asked each boy to select a magazine image of a man they imagined they might like to be and devise a life story for the individual, including key life events, significant choices, and possible alternative endings. Through enacting the characters via imaginative interactions between self and other, they had opportunities to imagine themselves as otherwise—as other than "offender" or "criminal"—to help them make sense of their life experiences and consider alternatives.

In response to this work, one youth expressed, "It's all about decisions. One little measly decision will change your life totally, completely turn it right around, turn it upside down." Another youth said that the theatre process "helps me to come out of my shoes, so I can look at myself." Their comments implied that the youth had gained insights from the activity they could apply to their lives, but more radically, I felt, since these comments were directed to journalists writing stories about the project, it was how they showed that they understood what the public wanted to hear from them in order to validate the work, which they valued for their own reasons, whatever those might have been.

Another project, which demonstrated sophisticated critical social analysis the youth were capable of based on their own life experiences, drew on a newspaper article discussing our then mayor's suggestion to adopt a bylaw threatening fines up to $10,000 for coercive panhandling. Like me, the youth were immediately struck by the absurdity of the proposition. They saw the tactic for what it was—criminalization of the poor, a way for the municipal government to control undesirable behaviours. The youth saw panhandling as a measure of desperation and identified poverty and addictions as factors that led to panhandling, describing a vicious cycle difficult to escape. They felt rather than creating bylaws government had a responsibility to address needs of the poor, the homeless, and persons with addictions. They linked criminalization of the poor with criminalization of youth by police and "citizens." Based on our discussion about the article, we collectively devised a forum theatre scene[16] entitled "Need Change?" It depicted youth showing empathy for a panhandler targeted by a shopkeeper. When the shopkeeper accused the youth of loitering, they attempted to talk back to him, arguing they were legitimate customers, but dispersed when the shopkeeper threatened to call police. The youth were able to perform the scene once for the jail's administration. Those who attended were impressed by the youths' performance skills and the emotional reality they portrayed—the compassion they expressed for the panhandler—but did not engage with the issues.

The context of this study severely restricted the extent to which youth could participate as co-researchers, so the goals of YPAR were only minimally achieved. All plans for the research were vetted by administration prior to my entrance into the facility and were under scrutiny throughout. All youths' movements in and out of jail and around the facility were completely under the control of the system and what they could say or do was heavily curtailed.[17] Youths' participation was at their choosing, and although the study continued for three years, participation was inconsistent because youth turnover at our sessions was constant, and they could be denied participation at any time for any number of reasons. I was, for legal and ethical reasons, denied access to the youth outside of jail once they had been released; identities of young offenders being strictly protected also limited possibilities for including youth in research dissemination.

What we did achieve in terms of participatory knowledge generation and interpretation through applied theatre was, in my opinion, profound, despite the constrained environment, or perhaps precisely because of it, for as Kershaw suggests, the jail setting is,

> inherently dramatic, because it is built on a context between a supposed immutable rigour of rule and the infinite suppleness of the human soul [… and] also quintessentially *theatrical* because it stages the absolute separation that society seeks to impose between good and evil. (131, emphasis in original)

Kershaw proclaims, and I agree, "If radicalism can flourish through performance as part of *those* social processes [in jail], then it may potentially prosper in many others" (20, emphasis in original). The potential for "radical freedom," for creative expressions of autonomy and agency, for Indigenous youth survivance and resurgence through resistance and renewal were apparent throughout our performance work.

Uncensored Theatre with Street-Involved Youth

Youth Uncensored was a YPAR project with youth involved with the community-based non-profit arts organization iHuman Youth Society, with which I had an established relationship. The organization served youth who experienced street involvement, offering drop-in arts programming, outreach, and crisis intervention. One outreach worker with the organization approached me to facilitate a project to engage youth in developing workshops to educate service providers (educators, social workers, law enforcement officials, healthcare providers, etc.) who worked with youth about their experiences. The outreach worker felt the youth were poorly served by those whose jobs it was to help them.

We spent several months early in the project hosting weekly sessions for ten to twenty-five youth who chose to participate,[18] discussing issues relevant to their experiences with service providers. From these discussions, we synthesized themes, created a workshop structure, and began devising fictionalized scenarios depicting youths' typical interactions with various service providers. Once we had a repertoire of scenes developed and rehearsed, we began advertising workshops to the community.

Over the next two years we presented a total of twenty-six workshops. Any youth who were interested in performing were invited to do so. We presented our scenarios in forum theatre style. The youth actors presented a problem scene, without resolution. Audience members from service provider groups were asked to intervene in the action, to replace characters in the scene, to collectively develop strategies for dealing with the issues raised towards a more just outcome. The youth performed with authenticity and the "great energy and vividness" (Kidd 8) of those who had lived the situations.

One scene was based on youths' perception that they were seen by service providers as the labels that stereotyped their diagnoses, shortcomings, or deviant behaviours rather than being seen as individuals. We called this scene "Labels" and adapted it for various audiences. It powerfully illustrated the potential of our work. For an audience of social workers, for example, a dialogue took place between a casework supervisor and a new social worker receiving a youth's file. As the

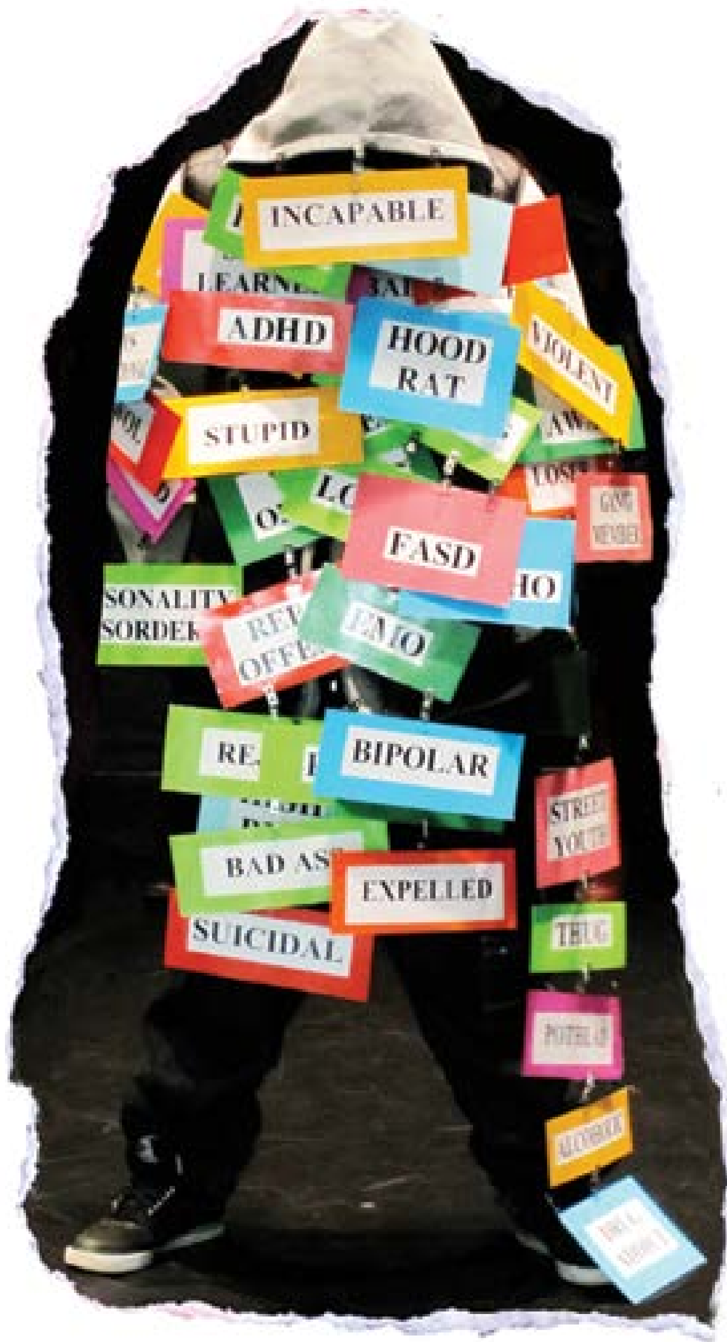

Figure 1. Labels scene. Photo and artwork by Leslie Robinson.

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casework supervisor elucidated details from the youth's file, the youth, standing off to the side, was covered head-to-foot with labels by other performers (see Figure 1) of the spoken or unspoken assumptions applied to the youth. The scene ended with the new social worker approaching the youth while the youth, faceless, reached out their hand from beneath layers of labels.

For the youth and service provider audiences alike, the theatrical process initiated an embodied dialogue like none they had had with one another before. Our evaluations of the workshops from service providers' perspectives, which included post-workshop exit surveys (80), follow-up online surveys (20), and a focus group (3), was conducted by Evaluation and Research Services at the university. Workshop participants' responses indicated that they appreciated the opportunity to converse with the youth:

> Being able to talk openly and to work through scenes with [youth] was really helpful and appreciated. (15)

> It was really great to hear [youths'] perspectives. (16)

They respected what the youth had to say:

> [The workshop] helped me to understand these youth as articulate individuals who have well-founded opinions and expectations. (16)

> Those youth ARE professional experts on what it's like to be high-risk youth, and their presentation brought the theory to life. (22)

The workshops allowed service providers to see the youth in a new light:

> I am guilty of judging a youth by how they look and this workshop really made me think about who they are and what they might need instead of assuming that they are only going to give me grief. (16)

> [The workshop] opened my eyes to not only the challenges and hardships [youth] have faced, but more importantly their strengths and talents. (17)

A core group of youth who had been active throughout the research process also conducted an evaluation of the project from their perspectives,[19] which they chose to present in the form of a video. Youths' comments[20] indicated that the YPAR experience allowed them to see themselves as researchers, telling and analyzing their stories:

> You feel degraded when you get stopped by a cop [...] He said, put your hands on the hood. He goes, what's your nickname? What's your street name? And a bunch of, like five other cop cars come. And I was asking: Why did you stop me? They didn't tell me why, until way later when they gave my ID back. But every time they checked my ID, and my record was clean, they check it five times more, they check it again,

> and again, and again to see if I got any [...] It's because I'm Native, I guess. (Youth Uncensored 00:19:09–00:20:21)

> [The scene we created] just really helps service providers see what a drug addict is actually going through and helps them realize that, hey, this person's a person just like me, it's just that they got shitty cards handed to them in life, and they need someone to, like, give them a way out and actually be there. (00:20:47–00:21:00)

They saw themselves as artists, creating and performing their stories:

> Being able to go on a stage, kinda helps me, and being able to tell my story. (00:08:07–00:08:31)

> The most memorable scene I created with another Uncensored member. We did Carmen's Baggage. It's a collaboration of both our addiction stories. (00:20:25–00:20:37)

They saw themselves as educators, teaching service providers about their lives, needs, and the lives of youth like them:

> People are actually learning from us. I felt like they really respected what we had to say, and, ya, I felt really important at that moment. (00:14:37–00:14:55)

> I think it's really important that high risk youth teach the service providers, because you're not gonna learn about us from a textbook, you're gonna learn from our stories. (00:10:47–00:10:54)

And they saw themselves as activists, speaking up to make a difference in the lives of others:

> Uncensored gives me an outlet to speak my voice, to, like, cops. I get to talk to them about what they do to me. Some of them take and listen. (00:28:56–00:29:07)

> If I can impact somebody, or one person, that's what I want to do, improve the lives of other people. So, doing Uncensored helps me do that. (00:34:10–00:34:19)

The youth also expressed the benefits they felt they gained from participating in the project. They expressed that their confidence had grown, they felt heard and supported, and they had learned more about themselves:

> I didn't really have a lot of courage or self-esteem. Uncensored helped me in that way. It gives me a lot more confidence. (00:07:52–00:08:19)

> Uncensored has helped me grow as an individual by showing me other ways. Uncensored gives me an outlet to speak my voice. (00:28:37–00:28:58)

> Now I am actually able to say what's going on and actually have people hear me. Uncensored has definitely helped me get through a lot of issues, to understand why I was addicted to drugs a lot better and helped me figure out a lot of things about myself. (00:32:32–00:32:55)
>
> [The people at Uncensored] give me a lot of support, I guess, the whole community, umm, taught me a lot of just, like, resilience-ness. (00:33:55–00:34:04)

Of the three cases presented here, the Uncensored project was the best example of YPAR in action. The youth were actively involved in all stages of the research: they responded to a need identified within their community; they worked alongside university researchers and leaders from the organization in generating and analyzing material for performances based on their life experiences; they prepared and delivered workshop presentations, which included performances and dialogue with audiences; and they conducted an evaluation of the program. While the stories youth created and performed included stories of pain, hardship, and neglect, the process of telling them gave youth agency to speak up for themselves and speak back to the challenges they faced in negotiating social systems meant to support them.

Alfred describes resurgence as involving "a dynamic of power generated by creative energy flowing from [Indigenous peoples'] heritage through their courageous and unwavering determination to recreate themselves and act together to meet the challenges of their day" (*Wasáse* 22). In this sense, the Uncensored project, and the other YPAR projects using applied theatre methods described, offered opportunities for the youth to envision alternative futures for themselves on their terms.

Concluding Thoughts

The United Nations Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, and the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls have been major steps forward in our efforts towards decolonization. As James Anaya suggests ("Rights of Indigenous Peoples"), the greatest challenge we still face in implementing the principles we espouse is the imperative for changing attitudes. Alfred ("It's All About the Land" 12) insists decolonization will not be achieved without "a resurgence of authentic land-based Indigeneity" and that "support for Indigenous youth to reclaim, rename and reoccupy their homelands" is needed to ensure that reconciliation is not just recolonization (13).

Dylan Robinson and Keavy Martin assert that

> almost nothing [scholars] can do will lead immediately or directly to the return of land or to the unsettling or dissolution of Canada's claim over Indigenous territory [... but] that even small, symbolic, and everyday actions are significant. While focusing on small actions puts us in danger of feeling that we have "done enough" (thereby

> avoiding the larger decolonizing actions that need to take place), discounting them not only risks creating a sense of powerlessness and despair, but also misses the potential of micro-actions to ripple, to erode, and to subtly shift. (1–2)

While it is not my role as a non-Indigenous scholar to lead the way forward in Indigenous survivance and resurgence, I can, as an educator and artist support processes that, in some small ways, allow Indigenous youth to be seen and heard, to reclaim agency and strength, and to foster more constructive attitudes about them. YPAR using applied theatre methods offers opportunities for youth to tell their stories about the systemic struggles they face, their understandings of their life experiences, and their desires for the future. These are small steps forward in our collective efforts at dismantling colonial structures.

Notes

1 In the research I discuss here, the majority but not all youth were Indigenous. Here I focus on the potential of participatory research using applied theatre methods with Indigenous youth.

2 I have written about each of these projects elsewhere. See the works cited list.

3 To acknowledge the term "at-risk" as a highly problematic label when applied to youth, I enclose it in scare quotes (" ") to cast doubt on its use, or I re-cast it as *put* at risk to highlight the way youth are imperiled by inequitable social structures. Later in the article, in discussing one example of applied theatre, I note the youth participants expressed that they reject viewing themselves as "at-risk," but rather understand their risk-taking or risky behaviours as a matter of choice.

4 Theatre forms under the umbrella of applied theatre include theatre in education, popular theatre, theatre for health education, theatre for development, prison theatre, community-based theatre, reminiscence theatre, and museum theatre (Prendergast and Saxton 4–6).

5 I would like to acknowledge other practitioners who have done applied theatre projects over the years; my work builds on a tradition that offered opportunities for Indigenous youth: Gordon Tootoosis Nīkānīwin Theatre's Circle of Voices Program; Debajehmujig Theatre Group; Persephone Youtheatre's Story Circles; Jan Selman and Jane Heather's *Are We There Yet?*; Warren Linds, Jo-Ann Episkenew, and Linda Goulet's applied theatre health research; David Diamond's *Theatre for Living*; and likely many others.

6 Augusto Boal's Theatre of the Oppressed developed in response to countryman Paulo Freire's popular education movement of the 1960s, which he called Pedagogy of the Oppressed.

7 I use the term "street-involved" to avoid more derogatory terms commonly used to describe youth whose life experiences, for reason not of their own making, do not adhere to mainstream society's ideals for a young person's life. The community organization that I worked with for this project also used the term "high risk" to describe the dire situations in which youth found themselves.

8 Forum Theatre is a Theatre of the Oppressed technique in which activating "problem" scenes are created and performed, and audience members are called upon to intervene in the scenarios to attempt to change the outcomes.

9 The youths' names are all character names they gave themselves.

10 In Theatre of the Oppressed the animation of theatrical moments involves techniques for collectively, through theatrical means and dialogue, uncovering the underlying motivations of characters' actions.

11 Carter here refers to sovereignty in terms of the individual rather than the nation—as self-recognition of strength in one's way of being.

12 I credit much of the success of the project to Doreen, who was an inspiration for the youth and a pleasure to work with.

13 Image theatre is another Theatre of the Oppressed technique using frozen pictures made with participants' bodies to tell stories and explore issues.

14 The "sagging" style is so contentious in the US that it has been banned by some municipal governments, schools, courts, and transportation authorities ("Sagging (fashion)" para. 6).

15 Moshom is the Cree word for grandfather.

16 This scene was never formally scripted. Rather, we devised a sequence of episodes that were improvised each time with different youth playing different characters. To me, their ability to improvise the scene and take on the various characters showed the youths' lived understandings and embodied analyses of the issues explored.

17 There were a few times the content of our work crossed the line of what was permissible, for which I was reprimanded.

18 The youth were paid for their attendance at each session and for participating in performances. We also provided them with food, bus tickets, and childcare. We argued that this was ethical given the youth were spending their time with us rather than attending to their precarious survival needs.

19 The eight youth, four of whom were Indigenous, led the process of planning, filming, and editing the video, facilitated by two graduate research assistants. As PI of the Uncensored project, I kept a distance from the evaluation process. My voice and the voices of the two research assistants appear in the video to provide background and context for the evaluation, interspersed with youth interviews, and other youth-created content.

20 All of the youths' comments included here are from the Youth Uncensored evaluation video.

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