

A Reflection - Performing the not-yet: creating meaningful dialogue in refugee advocacy through applied theatre

*Here's my hope: that **emotions** might move us to **social action**... that **empathy** might enhance our **critical thinking**... that we can beckon to a future characterized by **equity**... that sounds like the Utopia, don't you think?*

Abstract:

The community engagement under review was an interactive applied theatre workshop; audience specific and I focused on encouraging participants to leap into their imaginations to enact the *not-yet* through creative process. In this short essay, I reflect on how participation fostered an exploration and creation of meaningful dialogue for refugee advocacy.

Context/Content

Over the past few months, I have been studying and preparing for my doctoral candidacy exams. Through my interactions with different communities of scholars from my readings and at global talks (in the Centre for Global Studies, University of Victoria), I have met and engaged with theorists/theories, students, projects, ideas, thoughts and perspectives that I constantly critique/question the relevance of their works and areas inquiry to my practice in the arts. These disciplines, theories and expertise are important to life and like James Baldwin, the famous American author and social critic reiterates, 'life is more important than art; that's what makes art so important' because it launches into our imaginations to engage with human existence. And these theories can be used to interpret or interrogate our actions.

Considering how invested and committed the community that I worked with is to theory/'talks', I deliberately searched for ways to draw them in, move their bodies, engage their emotions and provide different avenues for reflection. For instance, I incorporated what I called 'found quotes', (some words I gathered/inspired from my readings). My idea of 'found quotes' is borrowed from the notion of *found poetry*ⁱ. I also show case some of my poems, an art that I believe bring words passionately and personally for conscientization, purgation and critical reflection. The poems were part of my reflection especially with my communities of practice that I have worked with elsewhere as a guest, visitor and at times as an intruder. Each poem and quote hopeful showed contradictions and complexities on varieties of issued which we explored using applied theatre as a method of inquiry.

We performed the story of a girl and built empathy to discuss issues beyond the individual. Aya, a twenty-year-old girl migrated with her family to three different countries, Jordan-Syria-Turkey because of the crises in her country of origin/birth, Iraq. Despite facing terrible situations, she was resilient and worked to support her family financially and emotionally. She applied for resettlement but her application was denied due to security reasons.

I invited participants to leverage on memories that reside in their bodies. We harnessed the power of empathy and launched into our imaginations/world of fantasy to perform. By using the language of *not-yet*, I refer to a self-imposed notion of utopiaⁱⁱ, not in the sense of *impossibility/or too good to be true*, but in the sense of accepting the possibility of that which we long. However, I recognize that equitable such vision of the world is possible even though it might be messy, painful and concerted effort to get there. Human suffering, exploitation and imbalance social relations are recognized but can be changed by humans who are agents for transformation and social struggle. In such a world, therefore, hope becomes a powerful tool to hold on to what is ahead so that our advocacy and collective struggle won't be characterized by fear and despair but it will be an *educated hope*ⁱⁱⁱ.

Reflection

Aya's story served as a connecting point to explore practical concerns that relate with refugees especially in relationship to the on-going concerns around the world. Through our collective role play, we brainstormed on possible solutions on how those in that situation can address such problem. We had legal practitioners, social workers that shared practical insights into affective ways to prepare for refugees before they get to the host country. For instance, one of the participants shared how the organization she works with fundraise and send to refugees to learn English language, get medical attention especially on their dentition because these areas proof really challenging for refugees when they arrive the new country.

By staging the notion of *not-yet*, we explored the idea of hope through our imagination with focus on the question: 'what does it mean to be hopeful?' As I informed the team we planned the workshop together, 'if hope is missing in our resistance, struggle, advocacy, critical thinking and collective action, then, we cannot succeed because it is only hope that can defeat fear and despair'. Although the world is characterized with chaos presently, but through our collective actions, we can rebuild, reframe and renew our world. It will take time, energy and lot of work but it is possible to build an atmosphere of equity again. What is quiet fascinating in such creative spaces is the glimpse of hope, life and insightful perspectives that each person brings to the creative space.

Furthermore, with such moments of collaborations through *emotional labour*^{iv} come a sense of agency and community. We experienced *regimes of emotion* with how feeling rule at all level of social discourse and interactions which are a way of articulating the political uses of emotion^v. Performing the *not-yet* empowers our community to critically consider diverse possibilities; a pedagogical and performative practice that provides the foundation for enabling human beings to learn about their potentials as moral and civil agents. Using applied theatre techniques, we drew connections between private troubles and social issues. Participants engaged the affective and the cognitive to envision through their imagination the vision a future that is characterized by equity, love and hope.^{vi}

ⁱ Found poetry is a type of poetry that is created from words and phrases gathered from other sources and reframing them into lines, stanzas – meaningful poem.

ⁱⁱ The idea of utopia presented in this workshop recognizes the complexities and contradictions involved achieving a collective vision of a world of equity. Hope in this sense is not ignorant, rather, it is an 'educated hope'.

ⁱⁱⁱ Henry Giroux, *When Hope is subversive, Tikkun*, Vol. 19.2. Henry Giroux's notion of *educated hope* is characterized by critical education, political agency and concrete struggle. It is anticipatory not messianic, mobilizing not therapeutic thus empowers human to engage with institutions, present behaviour, and everyday practice rather than disengage.

^{iv} Arlie Hochschild's work on emotional labour articulates how the emotion is invested, employed and communicated at any given frame, incident or situated. It draws attention to multilayers of affective responses engaged, performed and expressed at different circumstances which is dependent different factors.

^v Hochschild coined the term *regimes of emotion* to explain how emotions are expressed in social discourse for political language especially in public and media discourses on global issues. Her example was the 9/11 discourses and by extension, the discourse around security, refugees and immigration concerns that have become incessantly the topic of conversation.

^{vi} Monica Prendergast in her newly released monograph, *Staging the not-yet: how dramatic ensemble creates utopian space, Drama Australia Monograph No. Ten*. Brisbane: Drama Australia, valorizes on theatre as sites for utopia space. Through the imaginations and creativity, stage and staging the not-yet builds a realization of hopes, gives visibility to the unsaid and frees our thoughts to be played right before our eyes.