Creating Safer Spaces for Immigrant Women of Colour

Performing the Politics of Possibility

NISHA SAJNANI AND DENISE NADEAU

Le projet des femmes de l'Asie du Sud « Créer un espace plus sûr » est un modèle d'éducation communautaire. Les auteures ont utilisé une performance ethnographique pour traiter les problèmes de violence faite aux femmes de couleur et assurent que cette forme de performance permet d'identifier les injustices, permet la diversité et va au delà des témoignages des victimes et ainsi créent des possibilités pour une action collective.

There are now many contemporary claims being made about performance ethnography, in particular that it can produce "political acts as pedagogical and performative, as acts that open new spaces for social citizenship and democratic dialogue, as acts that create critical race consciousness" (Denzin 5). The Creating Safer Spaces for South Asian Women Project is a model of community education and organizing that uses critical performance ethnography to address the problem of violence against immigrant women of colour, a model that we developed in Montreal with the South Asian Women's Community Centre (SAWCC). In this article we propose that it is not just performance per se, but a specific form of performance that provides a way of addressing the political complexities of contemporary social relations at the present moment. We maintain that it is in the "performance of process" (Mundel) that we can create disruptive art forms that challenge injustice, allow for diversity, move beyond narratives of victimization and otherness and thus create possibilities for collective action.

We engage this discussion from our respective locations: Nisha as an anti-racist, popular educator, drama therapist and the coordinator of the project, and Denise as a white anti-racist feminist short-term trainer/advisor to the project. We are both continually in process ourselves looking for approaches that can best reflect our political and aesthetic priorities. As a result, the work we describe here is and will continue to be a "work in progress."

We first describe the history and context of the Creating Safer Spaces program, identify the specific challenges we faced within this context, briefly describe the performance form we developed to address these specific political and methodological issues, and then draw some conclusions as to 1) the ways performance can create critical race consciousness; 2) whether and how performance can foster collective agency for social change; and, lastly, 3) the limitations of working with such a model.

History and Context

SAWCC is an organization with a 20-year history. It provides settlement and support services to immigrant and refugee women from India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh and recently, Afghanistan. For many years it has tried different approaches to addressing the problem of violence against women within the many communities with which it works. The centre has been hosting a community theatre project to address violence against immigrant seniors since 2003. This in turn inspired the centre coordinator to hire us to create a community performance to raise awareness about the complexities of violence against South Asian women in Montreal amongst other South Asian communities.

Both of us had experience in using creative art therapies to repair the impacts of violence and both of us felt that the process of developing a popular theatre piece was as important as the product. Accordingly we developed an eight to ten week training program for groups of six to ten women. This was to not only develop and workshop the performances but also so we could apply a popular education approach to develop the participants' collective analysis of violence against women as well as explore approaches in drama and dance/movement therapy that could contribute to repair the effects of violence in their everyday lives. We did three trainings and considerable test-

ing of our popular theatre workshop in various South Asian communities and then moved it into the wider community, to women's centres, and CLSC's (Centre de Santé et Services Sociaux, neighbourhood health centres) that have an immigrant population base. Throughout the process we were assessing this approach in terms of its impact on the performers and the audiences, its value as critical performance ethnography, and as a medium that represents the complexities and particularities of the experience of immigrant women of colour from the West and South Asian Diasporas. (We included West Asia as we had one Palestinian women in our groups, several Afghani women and, occasionally, women from Iran in the audiences as well.)

The Context: the Importance of Critical Race Analysis

Before and since September 11, 2001, West and South Asians have experienced racism and various types of marginalization in Canadian society and in Quebec. Montreal has a large Arab and Muslim population and the racial profiling that intensified against these populations throughout North America has been played out in various ways in Montreal. As we all know, the indiscriminate white racist makes no distinction between peoples of different faiths from India, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Sri Lanka or the Middle East. So we are in fact dealing with a context which has further exacerbated what anti-racist theorist Himani Bannerji, describes as the fetishization and essentializing of culture and the racialization or ethnicization of difference which has proliferated in a climate of state sponsored multiculturalism.

Canada's celebrations of cultural diversity, in Bannerji's analysis, emerge as an impotent and patronizing multicultural aesthetic designed to reinforce the modernity of white Canada and emphasize the backward religious and cultural traditions of all "others." This enables the construction of uncomplicated, *diverse* minority groups, voided of any historical or social relations of power, while leaving the cultural, political, economic, and representational apparatus of the dominant majority intact (Bannerji). This is the context in which the South Asian "community," an ideological and imagined category of the state, has been constructed.

Sherene Rasack, another leading Canadian anti-racist feminist theorist, emphasizes how race, gender and class interlock within immigration, settlement, and multicultural policies and procedures in the lives of women of colour who immigrate or seek refugee status to Canada. This is central to understanding the kind of violence and oppression these women face inside and outside their homes. Under the political climate of organizing difference around essentialized and static cultures, Canada's "others" had or have to base their cultural politics on their only grounds for eligibility; their visible differences from the average white Canadian. These cultural politics leave out problems of class and patriarchy and create an artificial division of the public and private sphere. It is assumed by both the state and media as well as the legally endorsed, male representatives of these newly constructed so-called communities, that South Asians are essentially traditional and as such, patriarchy is a natural part of their cultural identity and therefore, violence is a natural part of their cultural identity and off limits. The result is that "insiders" are reluctant to speak about it and "outsiders" are reluctant to intervene.

Bannerji points to the risks involved in speaking out in a political climate where violence against immigrant and refugee women of colour is interpreted by the dominant society as the result of cultural practices. "We are worried, understandably, to speak of 'our' brutalities and shortcomings, because of not being even minimally in control of the public and political domains of speech and ideological construction" (136). In cases of domestic violence the media focus is often solely on physical acts of violence by the husband on a wife (the result of "their culture and religion") and all other forms of intimate violence, as well as the structural factors and forms of violence that have made immigrant woman of colour vulnerable to intimate violence, are ignored. Violence against immigrant women of colour and Aboriginal women, as is violence against white women, is treated by the courts, medical and counselling systems as a psychological and individual problem rather than the result of structural violence which can only be remedied by structural and community solutions.

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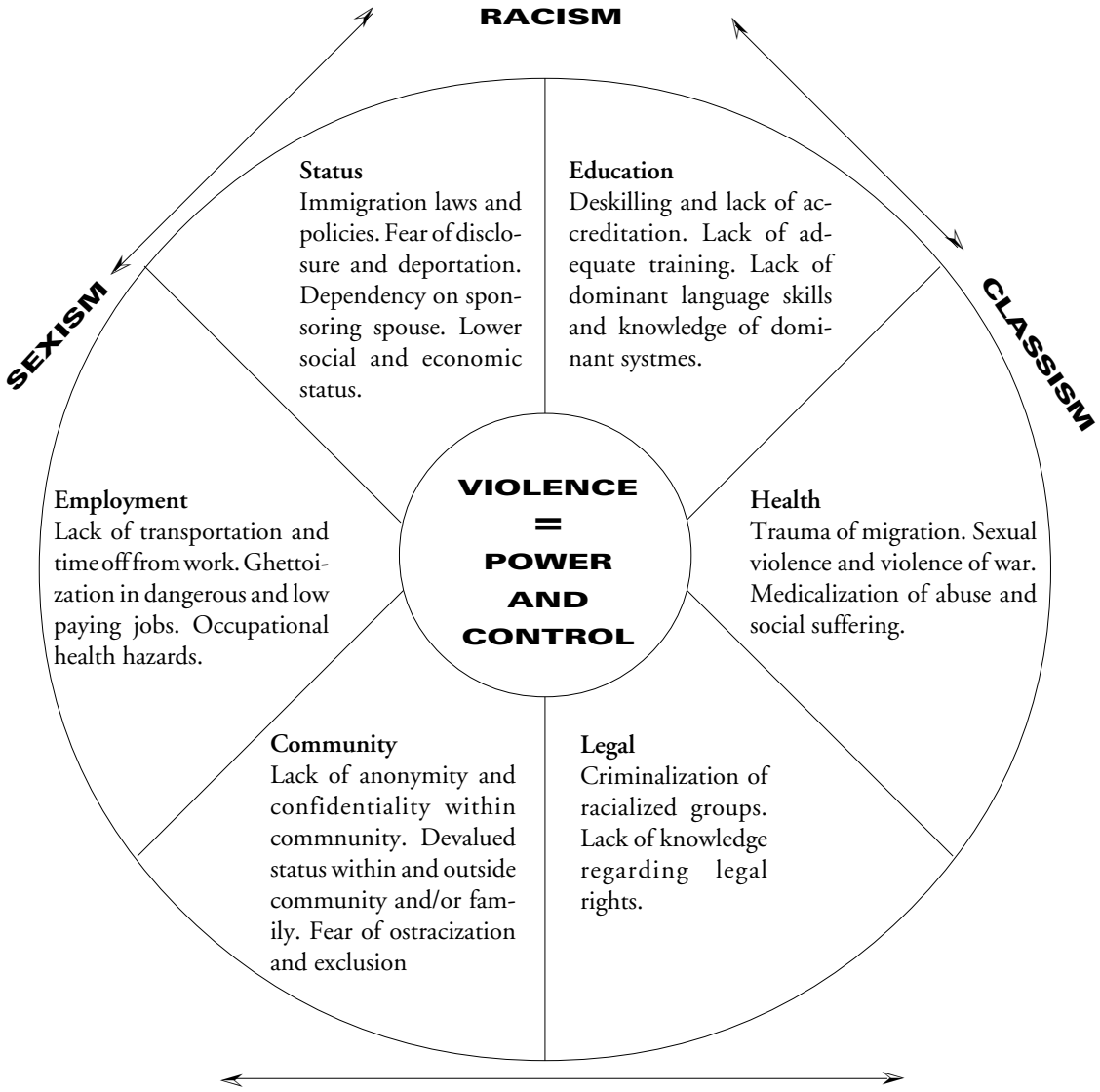
One of the first things we did as animators was to create a Power and Control Wheel that moved beyond the limitations of the widely used Duluth Minnesota Power and Control Wheel that reflects the realities of violence against white middle class



Source: Structural Violence Against Immigrant and Refugee Women of Colour Nisha Sajnani and Denise Nadeau 2005. Adapted from Intersecting Inequalities: Immigrant Women of Colour, Violence, and Health Care *by Yasmin Jiwani, FREDA, 2001.*

women. Drawing on Yasmin Jiwani's work. we created the structural power and control wheel which identifies the areas where immigrant women of colour experience racist and colonial violence.

Immigrant women of colour are at risk in the area of education where women experience deskilling and a lack of accreditation, less access to adequate training and knowledge of dominant systems. In the area of health, women come to Canada with the experience the trauma of forced migration, sexual violence and the violence of war, which is treated with the medicalization of abuse and the invisibilization of social suffering. Within our legal system, women suffer from the criminalization of racialized groups and a lack of knowledge regarding their legal rights. In the area of employment, women experience difficulty with transportation as well as ghettoization in dangerous and low paying jobs, in addition to occupational health hazards. Within their so-called communities, or relational groups, women can also experience a lack of anonymity and confidentiality, resulting in a potentially devalued status in and/or outside the community and/or family and potential ostracization and exclusion. In the area of status, immigration policies and procedures position women as an appendage of her male counterpart, leaving her dependant on her sponsoring spouse; she may also fear that disclosure could result in deportation. Immigrant women of colour also experience a lower social and economic status. Isolated and excluded through all these forms of structural violence and a lack of language skills in both English and/or French (in Quebec), the immigrant woman of colour is in a

condition of higher risk of intimate forms of violence. In accordance with Rasack, these areas of exclusion and violence are the daily lived experience for these of women of the interlocking of racism, classism, and sexism.

Another aspect of our approach was to stress the resilience and resistance of immigrant women of colour in the face of violence. Drawing on the work of Traci West, we supported participants in the trainings to name the ways they survived and resisted, despite the suffering caused by forced migration and ongoing exclusion in Canada. This analysis, which moved beyond the individual immigrant victim story to social suffering and a resilience framework, informed the healing activities we chose in the training, how we workshopped the performances and then how we animated the discussions in the community workshops. Our performances needed to represent the strengths of survival as well as the complexities of the many forms of violence to which the women were exposed. We wanted to avoid the trap of painting the immigrant husband as a one dimensional patriarchal transmitter of his culture, thus avoiding exposing the context he was living in, including loss of status, employment, and increased racial profiling after 9/11; all which narrowed his options and reduce his sphere of power to the home.

This analysis reflected participant's experiences and became the framework for our training. It was also the basis for a guideline that informed our performances—challenging any representation that reinforced the individualization and psychologization of women's experiences of violence. With each audience our intention was to present the multiple violences that immigrant women of colour experience as a collective problem that required addressing the structural racism in Canadian society. One of the first steps to accomplish this was to challenge members of a community to assume collective responsibility to intervene and promote a message of zero tolerance.

Critical Pedagogy and Performance Praxis

The first community performance we created was in the form of forum theatre, albeit highly adapted. Forum theatre is a type of popular theatre found within the repetoire of Augusto Boal's Theatre of the Oppressed, a collection of theatre forms and techniques inspired by the processes of conscientization described by Paulo Freire. In Forum theatre, a group of interested individuals or community members is shown a scene, usually created by or with them, which depicts an issue(s) that is of concern to them. After the scene has been played once, it is repeated with an invitation to the audience to intervene when they have suggestions as to how the situation of the 'oppressed' or disenfranchised might be improved. The play is mediated by a role known as the "joker" who explains the rules of engagement and guides the interaction between the audience and the actors. This dialogic and embodied interaction between the audience and the actors in intended to stimulate a lively and urgent search for solutions to their own challenges (Boal). Forum Theatre has been used by hundreds of popular theatre practitioners and interested groups world wide to address a wide range of social and political, and most recently, psychological forms of oppression. It has also been used specifically to encourage a critical race consciousness in Canada (Goulet and Linds).

However, we also had reservations about using this form of popular theatre as it ran the risk of reducing the characters to a simplistic oppressor and oppressed binary, reinforcing an audience's view of the woman as victim and the man's behaviour towards her as another proof of a backward culture. This has been a common reservation in using Forum theatre. Lib Spry, a popular theatre theorist and practitioner, reminds us that the structural relationships that define this popular theatre form potentially recreate the very power relations it intends to subvert (cited in Schutzman and Cohen-Cruz 12).

Our challenge lay in developing a forum theatre workshop and performance that did not reproduce these dominant and overly simplified representations of power, or reinforce powerlessness. We wanted to highlight the complexities and the potential for agency both amongst the women performing and our varied audiences. Another challenge lay in how to create amongst the audience a sense of collective responsibility and willingness to act as a group with a medium, forum theatre, which, as used traditionally in Canada, has focused on individual protagonists and individual interventions from audience members.

However it is important to note the ideological dynamics and intentions that can inform how one uses popular theatre and to what ends. Baz Kershaw has questioned the use of popular theatre's "performance efficacy"; that is to realize the "potential that the immediate effects of performance may have to influence the community and the culture of the audience, and historical evolution of wider social and political realities" (257-258). Kershaw notes that the attention given to quantitative measurements of impact and outcomes of performances reveal superficial results at best. He directs our attention instead to the conditions under which efficacy, or the achievement of a mutual ideological understanding, is more likely to be achieved. These conditions include attention to the ideological relationship between the community and the theatre performance group. Drawing upon the semiotic analysis of Anthony Cohen, Kershaw posits that an efficacious ideological transaction, one in which the community is able to read the signs and symbols of the actors and emerge with a shared meaning while maintaining ideological integrity, can

result in sense of solidarity with those seen as insiders and outsiders. Under these conditions, the potential for critical performance ethnography to incite the "continual processes of social criticism in the public sphere" (21) that Denzin refers to, is also made possible.

Our challenge has been to get at what Denzin is describing by playing with and adapting forum theatre so that we could create this mutual ideological understanding, that is, so the audience could see it has the same "community of interest" as the performers. In the next section we describe the possibilities of this model for a "critical collaborative performance pedagogy" which could, in Denzin's words, "create an progressive and involved citizenship … by moving persons, subjects, performers, and audience members into new critical, political spaces." (19)

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The Performance of Process in the Community Workshop

One of the first things we did was create a community workshop around the theatre piece so that the performance was part of a larger process. We begin by spending some time in introductions with the audience. We ask participants, often mostly women, (though once all men!) to break into three's, introduce themselves and share what are resources or strengths they have and what languages they speak. (We do this to check for the necessity for consecutive translation and to affirm the strength of speaking so many languages.) Often we have women who can speak as many as five languages, for example Urdu, Bengali, Hindi, English, and French. One of our goals is to remind women they are strong and affirm their resources before we even start the play. We then introduce a short self-care component with two brief body exercises (a breath activity and grounding the legs) that warm the women up and teach them a way of bringing themselves into the present moment if they get disturbed by the play and as a resource to take home. We have a handout on self-care in several languages and it's purpose is to show quick techniques to relieve emotional stress. We then introduce the play and conduct the forum. Finally we spend time in evaluation with the audience, asking them what they most liked and what questions, and/or concerns they still may have.

The Scenario

To address some of the structural dynamics encountered by immigrant and refugee women of colour we created two scenes. In the first a woman wearing a hijab is interviewing for a job. The secretary visibly treats her differently than the other applicant and the boss quickly dismisses her resume after a quick glance and no handshake. She returns home to scene two, an angry husband who comes home to find dinner not ready and who has no interest in her day and wants to be fed immediately. He shouts and threatens her. A bystander with her ear to the wall seems paralyzed. The scene ends as he walks out the door after threatening to hit her with his hand.

Language and Silence

The play itself is done in silence. Not only does this help us with the thorny problem of a multilingual audience but it also allows the possibilities of a multiplicity of interpretations of gestures, postures, and roles. While the animation can be in English or French often the animator/joker works with a translator who may speak Urdu, Farsi, Bengali, Tamil or another language of the group. The silent performance not only deprivileges English as the dominant language but also draws attention to the silence surrounding the issue of violence against women in immigrant and refugee communities of colour; a silence that can only be broken through a collective response of zero tolerance.

The animation of the workshop prior to, during, and after the performance is done in English and/or French and translated through whisper translation or, with the help of a co-animator, it is translated into the preferred language or dialects of the audience, be it Farsi, Dari, Pushto, Hindhi, Bengali, or Urdu. Paul Dwyer, a professor of performance studies whose research centres on ethnographic approaches to rehearsal studies, warns that the Joker in the forum performance must not overlook the control they exert over the discourse that is available to analysis during a forum, especially if they ignore the importance of the dialogue which occurs between staged, embodied interventions. He states that "it is largely through speech that the joker enacts a pedagogical role which may be crucial in shaping the ideological contours of the event" (201). By having the joker attend to body language, looks and gestures, it is possible to expand the options, though the joker is still "in charge." The complexities of translation add

another dimension to power dynamics, with the translator often putting her own spin on the speech.

Intervening- Performing Process with the Audience

In the case of our play, the first intervention after this brief scenario is to go back and freeze moments from the first scene and use what are traditionally called "rehearsal techniques" within the repertoire of the Theatre of the Oppressed in order to critically engage the audience with the scene. We first ask the audience members to identify what the characters are thinking and feeling, i.e., what is going on inside their head. We then ask what options are there for women in this situation. The first scene, dealing with racism in employment practices can result in individualistic intervention ideas such as suggestions the woman take assertiveness training or become more confident. Usually there is someone in the audience who challenges that. Occasionally there is someone who mentions human rights appeals or anti-racism training and we may intervene ourselves with structural options, though it is here that it is harder to name alternatives. A key moment is when we ask the audience how the two scenes/situations are linked .

We also use a "zoom out" technique in the second scene. Standing first behind the man, then the woman, the joker asks, "if we had a zoom lens camera, what are the larger social forces we would see at play behind this character?"This allows the audience to name the context in which South Asian men and women live and to add structural dimensions to this seemingly isolated act. If culture and religion are mentioned, and there are patriarchal aspects to all cultures and religions, we make sure to ask more specific questions so it is not "the culture" or "the religion" that is blamed, but aspects of them that are being challenged.

The bystander embodies the false division between the public and private sphere which threatens further isolation for immigrant women of colour. The bystander—again silent—listening with her ear against the wall, can be anyone, a mother-in-law, a neighbour, a friend, and a child. We spend time with the bystander as here is where the audience often identifies itself and where the potential for a successful "ideological transaction," to use Kershaw's term, is most tangible. We have also used a technique of asking the entire audience to play the bystander. With our purpose of promoting collective agency this character is key in opening up new possibilities for hope and change.

After these interventions, the play is run again and audience members are invited to stop the action in the second scene to propose a way in which the "dignity and respect of the character chosen can be better protected." After each intervention that is made on the stage, the joker asks the one who made the suggestion whether they got what they wanted, and then returns to the audience and inquires as to the feasibility of the suggestion made in their experience. At times, the joker will return to the actors to ask them if something changed for their character during that intervention. These questions tended to promote more dialogue and verbal investigation into the scenario. At times, this would allow the complexity of the relationship between structural and intimate violence to surface and, yet in other instances, leaving the analysis to emerge from "floor" discussions resulted in the deep entrenchment of opposing views and a resistance to continue with the embodied process of exploration and examination. An example of this emerged during the one performance we held with a group of men at a local Indian community centre. One of the first few interventions made was to exchange places with the wife in the scene and demonstrate how, through effective time management, she might avoid potential arguments with her spouse. This incited a heated and urgent debate within the audience who declined to demonstrate further interventions. The discussion soon became polarized and the options for action increasingly limited.

We added a new technique after a challenging session with an Ismaili Afghani group of older women who did not speak English or French, and had come from a background where women had not been allowed to be educated. We had used a variation of this play with an angry father not letting his daughter out and shouting at his wife about the daughter. At one point it seemed no one saw anything wrong with the scene, that it was good that the girl was not allowed out with a "Canadian " boy. It was very difficult to get anyone to stop the play and suggest alternatives. As a final intervention, we asked someone to come up and either play or reshape/sculpt the actors into an image of the ideal scene. This somehow

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broke the audience resistance and when we talked in small groups after the play—during our evaluation process—several women said they wanted their daughters to get an education and/or higher education, and thus, did not want this pursuit to become compromised by the western culture of dating. This particular experience revealed to us not only the importance of showing the ideal, but also the challenges of playing to an audience which is deeply invested in maintaining the fixity of gender roles and resistant to complicating these roles amongst their own community members and in the wider public sphere.

A factor that we cultivate and that removes our play from portraying the tragic victim is the element of humour. This is the result of a combination of factors, including the well rehearsed gestures of our characters, so that even if our actresses rotate the roles, they all give their own style to a few key gestures—the secretary raising her eyebrows at the woman with hijab and then just nodding at her to go into the bosses office rather than leading her in; the husband flicking the TV impatiently as he waits for dinner. This humor is put in by the women themselves and results from the authenticity found in the exaggeration of true experiences from their lives).

The Politics of Possibility

In our approach to forum theatre, both the actors and the audience members are integral to the performance of process, where the "workshopping" of ideas and strategies emerge onstage and not only offstage. By using a wide range of interventions we draw the whole audience into exploring the issue and figuring out ways together to deal with it. By including the emotional dimension, what both the characters and the audience is feeling, we break the individualism, because collective paralysis is often rooted at a feeling level, not an analysis level. The purpose here is to give the options of other actions, and not just actions that individual characters can take, but actions everyone in a community can take.

It is this performance of process that allows us to "destabilize the dominant discourses of Canadianess" where, as identified by Ingrid Mundel, immigrantness is the problem and "Canadian justice" the solution. Rather than presenting an individual woman's private domestic experience, we link race, gender, and sexual violence in a scenario that shows the cumulative and collective nature of the trauma many immigrant women experience. The combination of performance and pedagogy in our community workshops "critiques cultural practices that produce oppression (Denzin 22). Our political claim is that we are teaching the community not to look away from the structural violence operating in this reality.

In the forum piece the bystander invites the audience to see themselves as implicated in this story and as capable of doing something about it. The chance to intervene or watch others intervene as well as seeing a version of the ideal scenario in the end allows women in violent situations to see there are options. While sometimes audience members start with suggesting the wife make the husband a snack to appease him, or, that, if the woman in the hijab looked the employer in the eye she would get the job, by the end we have moved into discussing what behaviours are not acceptable and what are a range of things women and the community as a whole can do so that their dignity and rights are respected.

The urgent nature of the forum event invites embodied action in the "here and now." This immediacy is what creates the impetus to "break though unfair enclosures and remake the possibilities for new openings" (Madison cited in Denzin 18). Here the performance of possibility results from invoking the nearly reachable, almost tangible reality of just transborder relationships in which the dynamics that limit, circumscribe, and mute the potential totality of what we articulate, express, and experience within and across our imagined and political communities are brought to trial.

Considerations and Future Directions

We cannot, at this point, claim that this form of critical performance pedagogy can mobilize a community to action. Its' capacity to "initiate a continuous process of social criticism in the public sphere" (Denzin 21), an essential part of the process of immigrant women of colour re/claiming social, cultural and political space, was tangible during the forum itself and further qualified by anecdotal evidence. However, we do not know what happens outside the space and time of the performance. What we witnessed, in the process of creating forum out of the experience with the women with whom we worked, was a high degree of ideological sympathy and a sense of solidarity and collective determination to address structural and intimate forms of violence against women of colour.

Several considerations emerged as we consider the efficacy of performance, and specifically forum theatre, in galvanizing an oppositional body politic to violence against immigrant and refugee women of colour. Firstly, drawing on the personal stories of women to create an amalgam of women's experience as in the scenarios, can incur particular risks and necessitates particular responsibilities. Rasack surfaces the complexities of using storytelling as a form of resistance. She explains that 'when we depend on storytelling, either to reach each other across differences or to resist patriarchal and racist constructs, we must overcome at least one difficulty: the difference in position between the teller and the listener, between the telling the tale and hearing it" (Rasack 37). We need to ask ourselves how holding such performances in conservative, or otherwise

ideologically opposed or mixed locations supports or restricts the degree of ease and safety a woman living in the intersections of structural and intimate violence might experience in speaking out. We need to give further attention to the multiple ways in which power is expressed in these varied combinations of ideology, gender, ethnicity, and class in these spaces. Are we really creating safer spaces in these public environments?

Secondly, In order to continue the process of social criticism with these communities and within the wider public sphere, it is also necessary to conceptualize our community performances as part of a longer term community organizing strategy. Currently, SAWCC has decided to continue this project and has included it within the a long term strategy of bridging women with culturally appropriate health and social services in three Montreal neighborhoods. SAWCC has also recruited a liason person who can continue to collaborate with the organizations who had either seen or heard of this community performance. We have been returning to the organizations that had invited us to perform the forum theatre play with revised scenes that more closely portray the experience of the women in that particular community such as we did, on the spot, with the Afghani community described earlier. Several workshops in animation have been provided to interested members of the staff and volunteers of the SAWCC to ensure that the role of the Joker can be comfortably enacted by several resource persons. All of these mechanisms have been initiated to support women to organize collectively in their own environments and with the solidarity of women from across the South and West Asian Diaspora.

Another challenge is that many of the women who participated in these processes and performances were able to do so precisely because of their displaced status at the time. They were in-between homes, relationships, jobs, countries, or awaiting papers and proceedings. They had a lot of concerns and also some extra time. In order to facilitate their participation we provided childcare and a basic honorarium to cover the costs of travel and as a sign of appreciation; as well we provided a certificate of completion that recognized their new ability to support women in their community who were experiencing intimate violence. Many have since found temporary work, have registered for language classes, or found other social networks. This means that this performance strategy relies on those women who are committed to this particular means of raising community awareness and have the time to continue with the project. At an organizational level, the absence of consistent and adequate funding for women centers who provide culturally appropriate services also limits the degree to which we can imagine the longevity of this initiative, one that plays an important role in changing attitudes toward violence against women and ultimately contributing to ending woman abuse in Canada.

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Denise Nadeau is a theologian, popular educator, and movement therapist. Her recent work has focused on educating and organizing around violence against women and in combining expressive art therapies and spiritual practices in the repair of sexist, racist, heterosexist and colonial violence. Her publications include Counting Our Victories: Popular Education and Organizing *and numerous articles on non-violence, decolonization and deconstructing whiteness in Christian practice. Her current research interests include the role of community performance and ritual in repairing social suffering and developing a theology of gift as a basis for reparations.*

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