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Storytelling, Community and Dialogue:
The Making of *And Yet We'll Speak* at Grafton Reintegration Center

By Lillian W. White
Honors Capstone Paper
April 2016

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The blustering winds tug at the papers clutched in my arms. Prisons are usually located on fields stripped of the trees or brush that would protect a person in flight, and the wind drags the temperature down. After passing through security, I wait by the entry building for a “spider”— a portable emergency-call button assigned to every volunteer. I look down the cement pathway leading to the visiting room of Grafton Reintegration Center. When I walk toward it, the beige door is opened by a man in a blue uniform shirt, his style stubbornly evident in the cap cocked jauntily on his head, and the warm smile spreading across his face. This is a familiar journey to the circle of men with whom I and fellow volunteers sit with our backs to a landscape of razor wire, fences and concrete walls, looking into a circle of possibility bounded by our bodies and intentions.

Over the course of eleven months, I have collaborated with the men of Oberlin Drama at Grafton (ODAG) to create a new play, titled *And Yet We'll Speak*. Grafton refers to Grafton Reintegration Center (GRC), a minimum security public prison. The play is performed by incarcerated men and adapted from personal stories in their own words. As the director, I've brought theatrical devising skills and a folkloric perspective on the kind of community formed through storytelling. Together, these approaches propel my interest in the necessity and power of storytelling communities, especially within the acutely dehumanizing environment of a prison.

The scope of this paper is threefold. One goal is to describe essential elements of our creative process, especially the role of improvisatory play and storytelling. A second goal of this paper is to locate these elements in relation to folkloric traditions, focusing especially on multiplicity of authorship. A third, overarching goal is to consider this project and ODAG within the broader context of the criminal justice system. The goals and premises within each of these spheres of focus inform each other, as unfolding choices in one area affect stakeholders in others.

I write this two weeks from our opening performance, and I am keenly aware of the months of work, story sharing, improvisation and play that is *not* visible in the performance. This raises questions about the relationship between process and product: what was the value and function of dozens of games, movements, and stories that aren't part of the script? Considering my role as a director responsible for thousands of choices throughout this process, I ask, what guided and justified my choices? Looking at what is in the play, what was revised or left out, I seek to better understand my own intentions and critically examine how well they were realized or changed by this process.

Outsider

“So, that’s when I got my education--at London.”

“You went to London?!”

“London Penitentiary, Lillian.”

J. erupts into laughter, his eyes sparkling as my surprise registers. Moments like these abruptly reveal the gaps between our frames of reference, how foreign I am to the codes and terms used among the men at GRC. On several occasions throughout ODAG’s history, both volunteers and some of the men have remarked that during ODAG, they forget we are in a prison. The trust, camaraderie and collaboration enable a uniquely liberating space, but of course, the gaps between our positions are always there.

I am particularly conscious of them in such moments as staging a Black father’s private conversation with his Black son about the n-word. The original teller, who has entrusted me with this story, watches from the ensemble, and the gaps between us are charged with meaning and thus with responsibility. *Me/ Him. White/Black. Childless/ Father. Twenty-two/early forties. Country/ inner city. A private room on a campus where I rarely fear for my physical safety/ a bunk that, as of late, is three inches apart from the next one in the row.* Artistically and ethically, how do I appropriately navigate this? Looking at the systems of power within which we all act, I have questioned how and if I have the right to stage this work. I return to a belief that is infused throughout this production, that a story is one vital method of understanding each other *particularly* when we are so far apart. Fundamentally, this project has been one of nurturing a community of people who travel in and out of each other’s worlds along the lines of the story.

This entails earning access and building trust across the spaces between us, through discretion and respect for what is shared in the ODAG circle, and simply through showing up. Bryan Stevenson, a criminal justice activist and philosopher on how to support those in the desperate position of receiving the death penalty, describes learning the importance and power of showing up and listening. In the introduction of his book *Just Mercy*, Stevenson recounts his first visit to death row, to assure a man named Henry that he would not be executed in the following year. Their conversation runs over by two hours, and they speak about family and music more than trial business. When Henry is shackled and taken away by the guard, all Henry asks is for Stevenson to come back: “Don’t worry about this, Bryan. Just come back.” Even though

Stevenson was at a loss for an immediate response and had little reassurance or concrete progress on Henry's case, Henry's main request was for Stevenson to listen, to be close. To be, as Stevenson elaborates in his book, proximate to the effects of mass incarceration and extreme punishment. "We are all more than the worst thing we've ever done," Stevenson writes. Making space and bearing witness to the *more* – the traumas, the jokes, the anger – through storytelling is the work of this play. Stevenson's story demonstrates that both the speaking and listening are critical. Within ODAG, the process of dialogue – actively speaking and listening – is the bedrock of the community and this play.

Part of creating a space for sharing involved offering my own stories. I have excavated my past through art (detailed in a subsequent section) and shared some excerpts of the work at ODAG. I know firsthand the challenges as well as the pride of artistically rendering one's experiences and have used this to facilitate the processing of pain, loss, and epiphany through performance. I used my mediation training from the Yeworkwha Belachew Center for Dialogue at Oberlin College to respond to power dynamics within the group and make as many openings as possible for lone voices. Directing *And Yet We'll Speak* has been a unique type of theatre leadership. Rather than prioritizing a single, overarching vision or speaking for the men, I have facilitated a process and space for sharing stories. The directorial vision has manifested in the shaping of meaning through adaptation, sequence, and staging.

Directing the collaboration of many voices also required asking effective questions and channeling the expertise that is in the ODAG room. Professor Justin Emeka, a guest teacher at ODAG and teacher of Theatre and Africana Studies, noted the delicacy of this process. He emphasized that the actor-director relationship is inevitably altered when the director is culturally outside of the experience she is staging, i.e. when the actors are more expert in what is authentic or believable (such as the interaction between a Black cop and Black child) than is the director. Adapting and directing the stories of others has been a learning process for me of shaping and managing channels of input while illuminating an overall cohesion.

Of course, the emphasis on my position as outsider begets the question of what constitutes an insider. After all, in many ways, the men are outsiders to each other too. Though they share some frames of reference, they experience and make sense of them in very different ways. This was evident, for example, in a story circle about "2.4's" – days when the dorms are raided, the men stripped and their possessions crammed into trunks. The men had several

different coping strategies for 2.4's. Because the men of ODAG come from diverse backgrounds prior to incarceration, as well as a range of positions within the prison and differing sentence terms, ODAG is a place for them to learn from each other through dialogue too.

Histories & Mentorships

I came to this project from a unique academic journey at Oberlin College. As an individual major in Cultural Performance Studies, I am simultaneously interested in the craft of making theatre as well as interpreting the role of performance as a social, political, and cultural phenomenon. To the folkloristic grounding of my major, I bring a performance approach, a postmodern paradigm defined as “an interdisciplinary perspective that conceives of folklore as artistic communication or performance and seeks to understand folklore through studies that situate it in social life and history.” My primary advisors have been Professor Ana Cara and Professor Caroline Jackson Smith. Professor Cara consistently emphasized orality and its ability to build and shape community through dialogue and oral traditions, while Professor Jackson Smith mentored how these processes can be utilized for the stage. Another significant mentor has been Professor Johnny Coleman, whose art classes on Black philosophies and aesthetics highlighted the arts within a folkloristic tradition, with themes, stories, and images reoccurring in artistic products that speak to each other across mediums or time.

My academic studies exposed me to a variety of political and community-oriented performance, such as El Teatro Campesino, Boal's Theatre of the Oppressed, and the agitprop of Bread & Puppet or the San Francisco Mime Troupe. The living newspapers of the 1930s Federal Theatre Project and the more recent documentary-dramas of Anna Deavere Smith and Emily Mann showed me theatre as a form of journalism. The landscape-conscious (or site-specific, to use a contemporary theatre buzzword) productions of Mondo Bizarro and Double Edge Theatre showed actors deeply engaging the geography and history of the islands, hills, and barns they perform in. Each of these groups exemplified methods of responding to landscape, the community they are performing for and/or with, and an interest in oral storytelling and underheard histories.

Alongside scholarship, I had formative theatre experiences that highlighted the ability of theatre to blend the lines between personal and artistic, reality as remembered, and reality as deciphered through performance. *Unexpected Journeys*, my first acting appearance at Oberlin

College in 2012, directed by Professor Caroline Jackson Smith, featured personal narratives performed by the ensemble members. In 2015 I created and performed *the naming of everyday marvels*, a one-woman show about navigating competing expectations of women between my home in the South and Oberlin. This experience taught me how to shift focus towards the voice and insight of a speaker, rather than on what has been done to the speaker by others, and thus served as a particularly relevant experience for me as I embraced the early stages of *And Yet We'll Speak*. These experiences introduced me to the practice of telling stories. They helped me to know how and when it might be more effective to use poetry or fiction to distance stories enough to re-tell them and make them accessible to strangers. This is a crucial process of elevating “my story” to “a story,” a concept which will be revisited later.

I met Dr. Phyllis Gorfain in 2012 while seeking professors with expertise in folklore. A Professor Emerita in English, she was then preparing a pilot prison drama program featuring Shakespeare performance – and she was seeking student volunteers. My initial enthusiasm for Phyllis’s project stemmed from a desire to work with people from other life experiences around a shared passion for theatre. At that time, I was quite unaware of the growing prison theatre movement. In fact, I rarely had to think about incarceration.

I left Oberlin for the following year, during which time ODAG was launched alongside the Oberlin-Grafton Educational Exchange Project. OGEEP, as it was called, was a class run by Professor Pam Brooks in the Africana Studies Department as a prototype for something that might eventually offer Oberlin College credits to incarcerated men. Many of the actors in ODAG were also participants in OGEEP, which I believe solidified a shared engagement in radical analysis that the men have brought to ODAG. While several of the men bring social critiques into ODAG, there seems to be a deeper level of understanding between those who were in OGEEP together. While I was away from Oberlin, I encountered Double Edge Theatre, a company which stimulated my interest in devised theatre. I remained in touch with ODAG by supporting volunteer recruitment from afar and returned to work at ODAG for two years and the presentations of *The Tempest*, *August in October*, and *Othello*.

My academic scholarship, theatre productions, and participation in ODAG sharpened my interest in the life of a community and in playmaking. Moreover, ODAG has become the site where I would be able to focus on the ongoing and lively practice of connecting personal narratives to artistic production. Its overarching mission of increasing “self-knowledge, social

understanding, and enhanced life skills gained from studying and performing meaningful drama” cultivated precedents for story-sharing within the caustic isolation of prison. Storytelling, in ODAG’s history and especially in *And Yet We’ll Speak*, is the work of telling and witnessing humanity that is kept in the shadows. It is a serious intent.

An ODAG Original

In the spring of 2015, Phyllis invited me to lead the creation of a devised play at ODAG. I said I was very interested and made a proposal to the men: that we would create an original play together based on their own stories, under my direction. I planned to use a devising process, which is both playful and open-ended, demanding high levels of focus, collaborative generosity, and patience.

ODAG usually has fourteen to twenty men in its company, and many of them have been in the program since its inception. Throughout my first two years of work there, I cultivated relationships with the men as artists and colleagues, as we all co-created ODAG. The process of making an intentional space, whether a rehearsal room or classroom, is a chance to assert different terms of engagement, ground rules, practices, and guidelines that delineate this environment from others we move through. In ODAG, we draw a circle on the floor, marked by our feet, and we choose to believe that the rules work differently inside it. Organizationally, we use first names for each other – no last names or numbers to refer to the men, no salutations for the volunteers. We make decisions by discussion and vote, under Phyllis’s leadership. Like any organization, this sometimes happens amidst the turmoil of interpersonal negotiations and conflicts, though the stakes are often heightened by the prison environment. Sometimes I sense that battles are being fought in ODAG that I can’t see or fully understand, and there are a number of outside powers, loyalties, and agendas that influence the program. It is an intentional space but like any bubble, it is operating within larger contexts. Creating an original play about personal experiences has been an exercise in bringing in differences while minimizing any destructive impact of asymmetrical power systems or opposing views.

When I proposed creating an original play to the company, I offered a workshop with Sophie Becker, an artist friend and a volunteer at ODAG in 2014-15, to provide a taste of the devising process. The workshop featured physical theatre exercises in which the ensemble moves and stops together, striving for kinesthetic listening and synchronicity without verbal

communication. It is an exercise without a singular “right answer,” and puts individual skills or ego in service to the group’s success, thus providing a multi-sensory experience of what the play might feel like. We also hosted a story-circle in the tradition of the Free Southern Theatre, a civil rights era community theatre. The stories shared that day were strikingly vulnerable and brave, and though none of those stories are in the script I believe the group set a precedent for the process. A week later, the ensemble discussed the project and voted unanimous approval.

Our goal was to create a performance based on the men’s stories, under my direction. We started without a concept or even a title, but rather with a commitment to the ensemble and with two key ground rules: that we would welcome creative license and that every actor would have veto power over the material in the play at any point. My hopes at the beginning were to create a cohesive performance that was tightly woven together, and that drew on the performance styles the men already practiced. This was a desire informed by Professor Justin Emeka’s observations about the politics within theatre making. He writes the following in his essay, “Race, Culture and Color-Blind Casting:”

...in America, if we are not racially, ethnically, or culturally specific, the white majority is assumed as the universal. ...So, if the race of a character that was written for a white actor is not consciously changed to accommodate the actor, this most often forces non-white actors to assume or imitate white culture in order to fit into the world of the play. This serves to further mask the honesty and diversity of American culture in its entirety. Though the race of the character is not identified, white culture is still assumed in the style, speech, rhythm, reference and history of the character being developed...For those Black actors who do [identify with Black culture], it can pose a serious dilemma--as it can be extremely difficult and/or alienating to function in an environment where one’s culture must be left at the door of the rehearsal room in order to function and be accepted. This is not to say that Black actors are not completely capable of being an actor first. However, the depth of a performance is more often than not enhanced by the ability of the actor to bring the totality of their experience and understanding onto the stage.

I wanted this project to explicitly embrace the performance forms the men already practice, from the minister’s homily to spoken word poetry. Hence, I used the open-ended devising process to embrace individual specificities including personal and artistic identity, cultural background, and spiritual inclination.

In order to invite and integrate diverse performance styles, I created some workshops around the precedents set by three key story-sharing rituals in ODAG. The first is the check-in process at every session, in which each member of the group responds to a question (usually

proposed by the volunteers). Sometimes the check-in question is lighthearted, such as something about the weather or one's favorite movie. Other times, questions address scar stories or family heirlooms, leading to deeper sharing. The check-in is a way to get updates about each other, begin the circle, and see each other as unique individuals.

The second ritual is the Q&A talkback after each play, which audiences and actors have repeatedly described as one of the most important parts of the performance experience. It is a chance when, having seen the play and using it as a jumping-off point, the visiting public audiences and the men can engage in an open, direct dialogue together. Finally, we have "Third Thursdays," a monthly session when, in lieu of rehearsal, we have an open space for ensemble members to share letters, poems, monologues, stories, music, dance – anything they wish to communicate through an artistic medium. Modeled after Shakespeare Behind Bars, a Kentucky-based prison theatre program, Third Thursdays are opportunities to see each other and practice one's art as an individual, within the long-term rehearsal process for each play.

Coming out of these traditions, and the knowledge that this play would primarily be performed for non-incarcerated audiences, a mission emerged: in the men's words, "to bust stereotypes," to tell stories that challenged assumptions of prisoners and their narratives. Furthermore, N. articulated a secondary goal shared by several of the men, which was to make their characters familiar and recognizable to audiences, as people whose stories carry themes we can all relate to. And, he added, "I want the whole room to laugh together."

Revelations

R. alluded to the incident of holding his dying friend long before he revealed the full story. The desire to speak about violence was his connection to the character Emilia in *Othello*; Emilia speaks out against the murder of her best friend, and shortly thereafter dies next to her. In *Othello*, Emilia speaks these words in her final moments, as her husband Iago shouts to silence her:

IAGO
Zounds, hold your peace!

EMILIA
O God! O heavenly God!
'Twill out, 'twill out! I hold my peace?
No, I will speak as liberal as the north!

All, all, cry shame against me--
Yet I'll speak.

R. passionately described the personal significance of finally speaking out against violence against women through Emilia. Months after *Othello*, R. elaborated in an individual interview with me on his feelings of loss, remorse, and pain at the murder of one friend by another friend's hands. He agreed to share the whole story with the ensemble in a session dedicated to listening and theatrically interpreting his story.

When he finished telling the story to the ensemble, the company broke into small groups, working to create a theatrical embodiment of the story points. One group performed the competing inner voices in the storyteller's mind, showing a dozen simultaneous responses to the murder. Another group imagined phone calls from the past and from the world of the dead to the storyteller, while another group physicalized the camaraderie preceding the murder. It was a profound day, both in the gentleness and depth of the ensemble work, and in the responses from R. As the original storyteller, he saw and affirmed his truths presented back to him by the ensemble. Essayist Leslie Johnson once described a particular kind of empathy sought in a time of private, isolate pain, writing, "I needed something from the world...needed people to deliver my feelings back to me in a form that is legible. Which is a superlative kind of empathy to seek or to supply, an empathy that rearticulates more clearly what it is shown." This is the kind of empathy demonstrated towards R. that day, a response showing that what he had spoken was heard.

The story of speaking out about his friend's death became part of a central cluster within *And Yet We'll Speak*. The story introduces the title of the play, which emphasize breaking silence through storytelling. Within the process, the day of R.'s story was also an early, integral experience of seeing one's story interpreted and performed back to the teller. While R. shared a kernel of his story months before we embarked on the devising project, other, equally vital stories surfaced by happy accidents. For example, scene seventeen, "Black and Proud" was a story originally told by K. during a check-in prompted by the fact that Phyllis had had a haircut that day, and knew from teaching experience that hair stories were a rich genre. The story provides humor and a clear axis of identity readings (pointing up a theme throughout the play), but likely never would have surfaced within the ODAG circle if we didn't do regular check-ins

and Phyllis hadn't had a haircut. Other stories also made it in through Third Thursday, such as the van story in scene four.

Once we decided to make a play about the men's experiences, even tangents mentioned offhand became possibilities for further exploration. For example, Y. called my attention to the red lines on the prison grounds, which mark boundaries for prisoners within the prison, in a conversation about something else entirely. This led to free writes about red lines, which ultimately became a key motif in the play, evoking boundary and barrier as well as symbolizing the blood of violence and the blood of unbreakable ties across generations.

We practically stumbled upon the train theme, which quickly became a central metaphor and binding device among the stories. R. and J. separately and unprompted brought up train stories. Professor Johnny Coleman, an artist who works from a folkloric approach, reminds his students that each landscape one walks upon is embedded with multiple histories, and that this is always material ripe for artistic exploration. In the context of this tenet, and the train stories coming from ODAG members, I looked more closely at the geography around GRC and led a group freewriting process in response to the freight train that runs outside of the prison. The prompt "When I see the train go by...." led to extraordinarily rich, original words from the men. It tapped into individual memories of the actors and larger legacies, such as the significance of African-American conductors (described in scene nineteen).

We did many improvisations on the train theme, including research and story circles on Black porters, rewriting the lyrics and staging moments from the folk song "John Henry," and story-sharing from several men (of various races) whose fathers worked their lives for train companies. Eventually, the train became a point of reference in a handful of scenes and a binding device that links separate stories together. In our production, the train sounds weave in between scenes, evoking each story as a depot or station on so many life journeys. Further associations, such as those of the Black Migration, the Underground Railroad or the use of prison labor to build up the early train industries, are not made explicitly, but are layers of resonance for audience members who make the connections of trains within American history and culture.

Memory & (Re)Creation

Looking back to the various roots of the stories that came to constitute the play, it is evident that as much as I seek the predictability of a repeatable method, a large part of this work

depends on being fully present to the local circumstances, showing up, listening deeply and asking for more when something interesting is mentioned. Consequently, such a process will inevitably be different outside of the specific context of ODAG. Over the course of this project, I experienced firsthand the folkloristic field method of letting yourself be surprised, releasing what you think you know, and relying on local knowledge by, for example, adapting your interview questions or prompts to follow the thread of a story. The underlying pursuit that shaped how questions were adapted or released has been that of finding out, *how are stories told in very original ways, that do not lean on stereotypes or narrative conventions?* A physical parallel to this has been, *how do we find and create innovative, fresh vocabularies for storytelling through movement and stage picture?* These eleven months have been an attempt to seek some answers to these questions, and, in light of the thousands of choices made and revised throughout the process, much of the learning has been my figuring out the balance of fluidity, responsiveness, spontaneity, and revision in the context of always listening and discovering.

These examples of improvisations and story-sharing that resulted in key elements of the script, including R.'s story of speaking out, the red lines and train, were only some instances of moments within months of workshops, freewriting, interviews and story circles. These workshops were inspired partly by the devising methods I encountered at theatre companies Double Edge and Dell 'Arte, both of which make original productions over long devising processes and through movement training. They introduced me to the enticing but inscrutable idea of theatrical research, i.e., utilizing improvisatory explorations of images or characters, usually within the bounds of a theatre game or exercise, that become the building blocks of a play. This is an "outside-in" approach to making theatre, using physical expressivity to explore interior lives rather than starting with a script, interior psychology and emotional life that then influences the exterior physicality and visual representation of a character.

Performance training at Double Edge Theatre and Dell 'Arte captured my passion for playfully finding connections between seemingly disparate pieces, rather than starting with a concept. The promise of those methods inspired this process, though I did not spend enough time in either place to get more than an initial (and somewhat opaque) understanding of their process.

Another influence and literary cousin to this notion of research is seen in Toni Morrison's essay, "Site of Memory," in which the master writer responds to the issue of how we tell stories in original ways that are capable of even overwriting stereotypes or narrative conventions. In the

essay, Morrison explores her own writing, usually categorized as fiction, as a form of autobiography revealing the interior lives of her ancestors. As she points out, Black people in slavery, when they could document their narratives, often skipped huge traumas for the political purpose of preserving credibility and gaining white allies in the abolitionist cause, and her writing bears witness to these traumas.

Morrison writes about her forbears:

These people are my access to me; they are my entrance into my own interior life. Which is why the images that float around them--the remains, so to speak, at the archaeological site--surface first, and they surface so vividly and so compellingly that I acknowledge them as my route to a reconstruction of a world, to an exploration of an interior life that was not written and to the revelation of a kind of truth.

Morrison goes on to describe how she accesses “the nimbus of emotion surrounding [the image of corn]” to power her writing. The image and the object are “sites of memory” and thus of power. Accessing that power, and the stories within it, is something I’ve tried to achieve within the ODAG process.

In ODAG, forbears include parents, friends lost, even one’s younger self. There are several examples of how I integrated my interpretation of Morrison’s method with devising and used this amalgamation to garner fresh stories. One very clear example, however, is my work with E. He provided a story called “If I Only Did Better” (attached in Appendix A) that reveals his fall from good grades and parental approval to hustling, incarceration, and redemption through prayer. There is truth for E. in this story, and I do not want to discount his truth (though one could argue I did so anyway with my response). For the purposes of this play, and with Morrison’s process in mind, I sought to access more of the interior life of his younger self. By seeing the world through his child-self’s eyes, I hoped to present his younger self as a person of dignity, rather than as someone to be made an example of.

In this vein, I asked for more information about where Eric spent time with his parents, and how he absorbed the parental values that are a focal point in his narrative. He mentioned sitting in the back seat of the car as his parents drove, and later brought in an essay titled “Back Seat” (See Appendix B). This story features one moment, rather than the arc of moments in “If Only I Did Better,” allowing us to glimpse “the nimbus of emotion” that the back seat holds for E. To me, “Back Seat,” while not as action-driven, captures a sense of innocence and shares one

way that children absorb values from those around them. Values shape choices, and my reasoning was that glimpsing this child's value system (in a moment before it was revised through the influence of his brothers and peers) gave layers to the actions the storyteller later committed. Rather than focusing first and foremost on the choices made by E., the story looks at the world he came from. This does not exonerate or excuse responsibility for harmful choices, but, I believe, it anchors an understanding of human actions within a framework that also sees the circumstances, systems, and influences surrounding actions.

E.'s story is an example of my interference; I probed and questioned for a narrative free from condemnation or a didactic message. I have tried to filter my interference in and adaptation of stories through a consciousness about narratives expected from incarcerated men, and to point storytellers in the direction of busting both stereotypes of prisoners and their narratives by revisiting memory sites. How well this has been realized remains to be seen in the performances, but can be studied in part through the scene that was eventually adapted from "Back Seat," evident in scene six (Appendix C).

Cultural critic Yasmin Nair writes:

Personal stories can help to make systemic conditions more easily understood. But is there a way to use them without buying into pathos and abjection? ... What tropes and emotions govern them? If they came from angry immigrants who spoke up forcefully and not as abject humans, would we be inclined to listen? Can we assume that our leftist politics insulates us from the need to examine our own ideologies and othering practices?

Using folkloristic and social justice mediation skills, I used questions and active listening to get to the fresh versions of stories underneath the narratives that might be presented in parole hearings, educational programs, or court defenses. My goal has been to seek the *more* emphasized by Bryan Stevenson. My process, though imperfectly realized, has been to make openings and prompts for joy, anger, critique, innocence – things often left out of widespread portrayals of "the criminal."

At times, I walked the line of resisting one ideological framework by advocating for another. Despite my intentions to de-center my politics, have I pushed E. to perform my idea of an acceptable narrative? How do the ethics and responsibilities change when I move from facilitator to the adaptor, playwright, or director roles? Conversations with Phyllis were critical to my understanding of the importance of accepting and working with stories about regret and remorse.

Revisiting my position as an outsider, I know that I am wary of prisoner narratives that emphasize apology and remorse, especially if those narratives are to be performed in front of public audiences. I am concerned that they distract from critiques of prison or are too easily construed as rhetorics to justify the institution of prison. And yet, there are meaningful, nuanced versions of these stories, and I also understand how audacious it is for me to seek changes to B.'s story of murdering his girlfriend, when he has saved lives and mentored other troubled teens by speaking of his actions. One of the biggest developments of my politics and approach to prison justice throughout this process has been to recognize that critiques of prisons must also accommodate, in the right places and times (and I do still think performances for the public are charged sites for this), dialogue about remorse, regret, and personal transformation. Seeing that, I have come to recognize that I am an outsider too to the deep wounds of recovering from murdering a loved one. It is a different kind of erasure to invisibilize the process of grief, remorse and amends, and I am learning through this process to accommodate both radical critiques of how prison perpetuates harm, and the processing of harms done by some of the people within it.

Serious Play!

Rather than asking direct questions or preconceiving the content of the play based on my ideas about incarceration, I conceptualized the workshop sessions as stimuli to which actors could connect meaning and stories with a wide range of possibility. I used games, questions, and improvisation scenarios to invite actor-poets to author meaning without filtering it through the textual analysis or highly developed world of a script. I follow on Bateson's notion that humans distinguish between different orders of message, analyzing interpretive "frames" (such as, "this is play") to deduce whether the meaning of sometime is pretend or "real" aggression.

Within GRC, we work by different rules to create a theatrical playing space where anything can happen. At moments, we very explicitly entered a different frame, as when reminding an actor delivering racist epithets, "This moment of violence is not you. It is the character's words and actions at this very racist moment, not you. We, the ensemble, aren't going to think differently of you, the actor, because you say these words, because the meaning is different in the context of play." This level of metacommunication, through which we know that the staged violence is not "real," allows risk-taking without consequence or effect in the "real"

world. The paradox, of course, is that by journeying into fiction, play, etc., we gain an understanding and decode something about our experiences in the world and we do go back to (hopefully) carry on more nuanced, considered lives. While the actions within the play do not affect consequences in the play, the performance itself does hopefully make a difference in how the players and witnesses are transformed by what happens in the liminal, ephemeral world we frame as play.

To this end, improvisatory playfulness in the early workshops offered an especially concentrated experience of several central paradigms. Improvisatory playfulness is an exercise in collaboration, as several ideas become something cohesive through the work of multiple authors. Making “playthings” of objects also busts through their fixedness, as actors endow them with power and meaning through imagination and put aside the frames of reality that objects are usually located within. Finally, devising at ODAG brought oral and kinesthetic skills to the foreground, enabling me to draw on the masterful storytelling traditions in the group.

(In)Visible Choices

Of course, many workshops produced work that is not visible in the play. On the other side of innovation, playfulness, and adaptation there has been stress, confusion and anxiety about how so many fragments could come together. The anxiety was furthered by the fact that so much of the devised material *could* have been in the play. The rich exploration led to the challenge of selection, one of my major responsibilities as director.

While I often took cues from pieces that garnered especially strong resonances in the group, some popular, powerful stories and improvisations didn't make it into the play. For example, I led a workshop about endowing everyday objects with meaning. Through improvisations, a tablecloth became a symbol of the life cycle, as a blanket for a child, wallpaper in the home of an independent adult, and a death shroud. A hoola hoop became a delicate portal through the reverence of the actors handling it. Wrapping up, we experimented with different ways to tell an ending by arranging the objects, now rich emblems of the dramatized stories, in tableaux. One actor neatly arranged the objects as though they were at peace. Another actor knocked them over and the “ending” suggested sprawling violence and disorder. Finally, an actor tucked the objects under the tablecloth, clearly “sweeping it all under the rug” and the ensemble laughed knowingly. Though the explorations were valuable, none of these images were used in

the play. In another instance, R.'s story of being robbed and made a fool of by a midget brought the whole ensemble to tears of laughter, yet ultimately I did not select it for the play.

In terms of making selections, I looked for a unique contribution from all the actors, for stories that cohered thematically, that carried a dramatic tension or arc, and that the storyteller was comfortable sharing publicly. Evaluating work by these goals filtered through my subjective eye and I can see how my selection process appeared opaque from the actors' side. Sometimes I revisited stories and improvisations multiple times, but never used them. In some personal oversights, it took me a long time to revisit work, and I sense that that may, at times, have discouraged some actors who didn't know what I was looking for.

While trying to draw forth the cohesion and relationships between stories, I brought different ideas in. I tried putting some things in sequence and looked for ways to evoke two worlds through movement-- a literal and an absurd world, connected by a train. The longest attempt to realize a premise unfolded over January. I tried to wrestle the disparate stories into connecting with each other with the device of a fairy tale and performed commentary. It really didn't work, though I was trying to foreground the dream-like, magical elements embedded in the men's stories and make extremely obvious the construction underneath any narrative. Some great stories that are in *And Yet We'll Speak* came out through exploration of the fairy tale; I did not expect the symbolic character of the "Ferocities" to open up the wealth of stories and viewpoints that it did. It became increasingly clear, though, that this premise was forced and awkward.

From this mistake in over-doing the work at home, away from the organic process in the ODAG space, I learned that it is a skill in itself to see when something is not working. In the early weeks of 2016, we all felt the clock ticking towards performance time and I made several decisions to move us forward. I introduced a working title, *Soul Song*, dropped the fairy tale, and used transitions and sequence to highlight the connectedness of the stories, rather than an umbrella concept. Oddly enough, I can see several remnants of the ideas, though they are now more fully realized visions of the train connecting the past, the present, and the possible. Furthermore, when the storytellers shift between speaking to the audience and acting in the world of their stories, there is a level of mediation and version-making that is visible. After a few weeks, I changed the title to the final version, *And Yet We'll Speak*, a reference to Emilia's line

in *Othello*. The title is a subtle nod to the early roots of the project and an acknowledgement of the hard, necessary work of storytelling, despite those forces working against you.

Within the process of selecting stories, comments arose that this play favors the Black experience. ODAG usually approaches issues of race through plays (such as through the characters of *Othello*, *Caliban*, and *Berneice or Boy Willie*) and, now, through each other's stories. The concept that emerged through this creative process, is that everyone owns the stories in the play. This is not intended to be a call for universalism or sameness. Instead, it is intended to track and test how stories move and change between specificities--between Black and White tellers, for example. A story achieves something on the scale of myth when it expresses an aspect of the human condition so that people from any cultural specificity can relate to it. But, in a quote often attributed to playwright Lorraine Hansberry, "The way to the universal is through the specific." Stories from Black tellers (who are the majority of ODAG members, and, in this moment of egregious policing and sentencing, those most targeted by the judicial system) do not exclude others from understanding something about human conditions and present realities, and the ensemble can collectively embrace these stories while holding the specificities of characters at the forefront.

Discussing casting for scene eighteen (the phone call about the n-word), there was a suggestion to make the father white, to emphasize that these stories do not have to be patterned exactly after the dynamics at play for the original teller. Personally, I felt this brought too much distance into the story – that it would become too much of something else, and while we can all understand a father's concerns for his child, the specificity of race makes the concerns very different for Black or White peoples in America right now. Eventually, I made the choice to place a white actor in the ensemble echoing the line, "Let me tell you something about that word..." and to thereby evoke the thought that white fathers too should discuss racism and how it is perpetuated in language. We are all stakeholders in each other's stories, but, as Professor Emeka noted in his article on casting, specificities matter. While stories can be elevated to "a story" to which we all relate, versions of stories matter and carry political weight within a historical moment.

The whole process has often felt like casting wildflower seeds out to the fields. Some flowers bloomed early, all the lovelier that we saw their fleeting presence. They reminded us that spring was coming. Some seeds landed on hard rock or were lost to the wind. Some, I hope, will

bloom after the play is over, as revelations surprising us just when we think we understand it all, as learning continues to unfold when this play has become a thing of the past. To some extent, the wide reach of experimenting and making more than you use is a part of the creative process, but some of the work for me is learning the art of gardening.

Authority & Authorship

When I asked about his take on the process, D. said that my job as the director has been to show the vision, and that the ensembles' confidence and faith in the play grew as the vision became clearer to the ensemble. "About halfway through, there came more conflicts about how the stories were told and talked about—which is part of it becoming 'our play' and not just 'Lillian's project.'" He brings up the tangled negotiations of ownership, authorship, and identification lying at the heart of this play. These can be glimpsed in the following exchange, which occurred in an April rehearsal:

Phyllis: "Hey Y., can you give me some options for the music your character Riff would listen to in the car? We'll get the recordings together."

Y: "I don't know. It's C.'s story."

Phyllis: "But you're the actor. What would help you get into character?"

Lillian: "Even a few options are helpful, so we can find a selection that works for the play overall."

In this exchange, there are at least three claims on who could make the music selection for scene four: there is the actor Y., the storyteller C., and me, the director (with Phyllis's assistance). Most plays do have playwright, director and actor, but with a more clearly delineated hierarchy. The negotiations are especially visceral when all parties are in the room, and the stories stem from personal experiences.

In our production of *And Yet We'll Speak*, no person performs their own story. I'd presented this as an option when I proposed the project, but it became a ground rule mid-process. I returned from the 2016 Shakespeare Performance in Prison conference and a conversation with Meade Palidofsky, who does similar work of dramatizing personal narratives of incarcerated girls at Storycatchers Theatre in Chicago. She said the stories are never performed by the teller, reminding me of a similar guideline operating at Actors Park Theatre Project, a Chicago-based theatre company that adapts narratives of their youth ensemble. Both companies, who have been

doing this work much longer than I, emphasize that this is a constant guideline, to avoid putting someone through psychodrama, and to give the original teller the opportunity to see their stories outside themselves. There were no concerns raised by the ensemble when I introduced this mid-process, but in future projects I think it will be clearer to establish this from the start.

Over time, this shift in authorship by performing stories through fictionalized characters acquired the folkloric quality of each man's story living through multiple voices and versions. While it was at times confusing, and in the future I see how to make the artistic process clearer, it has been illuminating to observe how singular notions of authorship and authenticity are troubled and expanded through the polyphony of multiple tellers.

There have been some powerful results of casting people to perform other people's stories. Seeing D.'s grounded performance of Yannie, a vulnerable character wrestling with the cycles of violence he has inherited and enacted himself, has been remarkable given condescension towards the troubles of the original teller behind Yannie. We were also able to have nuanced conversations about race when we detached the stories from the identity of the original teller. For example, the van story in scene four features the character Riff describing being pulled over, and later released, by the cops. The original teller is white, and during table work, P., a Black actor, asked, "What if this had been me?" We were able to discuss the choices of casting (and how the story would resonate from a Black or white actor) as artists with options for the kind of story we wanted to tell (though all casting choices were shaped in part by the ages and races of people in the room, as well as the small number of actors who would play women at this point).

P. also remarked that he could really see the stories of the other men when they were detached from the original teller and expanded into scenes. To elaborate in my own words, I think that is in part a result of dissolving the stakes of interpersonal relationships. An actor could examine the story of Greg without worrying much about his relationship to B. (whose story is the foundation for Greg). It was a process of seeing a story told, depersonalized from the original teller, becoming not "my" or "his" story, but "a story." And then, through identification and characterization, the story is re-personalized through the actor, and takes on a new specificity. Physical tics and performances of the story came out of each teller and actor differently, each version offering a unique take on the story.

This was, at times, disconcerting (I am used to giving primacy and authenticity to the original teller, to the one who lived it as “the only expert on their experiences,” to the political of the personally told). It was also incredible to see a story’s truth inhabited by multiple people. As an Obie in a campus climate of intense identity politics, it felt like a bold move to insist that no one play themselves. An actor-poet, M., in particular had trouble releasing his authorial vision, which may be influenced by the fact that he contributed a poem (which took time and craft to compose, a different kind of work than imparting an unrehearsed personal story). M. was very distressed at some points, in how the poem was integrated into the play as a whole, and it took many conversations and learning and listening on both our sides to honor the acting process and the poem’s unique life within the play.

Have I prevented someone from speaking their truth, especially a person in prison with limited access to a platform/stage for their voice? Yes, in a sense — but within the focus of a specific artistic process and exploration of another goal — life of stories past the initial testimony. I do not intend to invalidate the many, many important roles of first-person testimony from someone who lived through something. Instead, I wish to offer this process as an experiment in stories spreading, told so that they keep on going and the life of the story is not dependent on the actions or identity of the original teller. The stakes for this became evident and much more real than I anticipated, and the separation of story and teller proved crucial to protecting the play when the prison administration intervened in the rehearsal process.

Of Arts & Politics

For as long as I’ve worked at ODAG, I’ve been unsettled by the questions of complicity. Does the success of our program make an unjust system look good? Is it really possible to make change within a system? How much is conceded in the process? In his article, “From the Stocks to the Stage,” James Thompson evaluates prison theatre programs within the history of spectacles of punishment, questioning “whether the popularity of certain forms of prison theatre could be understood as a response to the invisibility of the body of the prisoner in contemporary performances of punishment. The mediated presentation of the justice process does not fulfill the public desire to see the live body of the offender.” Thompson describes how the system of execution was eventually taken indoors, where readings of them could be controlled. We too “battle for the control of the reception of [our] performances,” through attentiveness to our

language, advertisements, and performance notes. But the program is inevitably bound up and read against the narratives of incarceration and the insistence on punishment; it is generally read against an assumed inherent criminality. “Prison theatre makers need to question the narrative they create and if they do not actively state a ‘vision of crime,’ they need to acknowledge that one that they do not control will be read ‘by default’ in their work.”

At GRC, “actively stating a ‘vision of crime’” has been entwined with advocating for the play and the process of dialogue that generated it, a campaign that escalated when a prison administrator flagged two scenes to be cut. It began when Phyllis was told summarily via email that scenes seven and nine could not be performed. Approximately three weeks before opening night, we met with GRC staff to discuss the scenes, both of which belonged to ensemble member K. (though, as throughout the play, he did not perform in the scenes).

We met in a bare, windowless cement room, a solitary green plant looking out of place on the brown table. The fears of the staff soon became clear. First, they stated that the scenes portrayed the character Yannie as blaming his mother for modeling violent behavior and failing to protect her children from abuse, and that in so doing, K., who co-authored the story, was evading responsibility for his own real-life violence. This, they said, might make audiences wonder if the storyteller was properly rehabilitated, and that they might question whether the GRC staff were doing their jobs properly. In the context of Ohio Governor John Kasich’s presidential campaign, they were particularly wary of doing anything that could make Ohio prison systems look bad or threaten their jobs. Some preexisting personal tensions between the staff and K. also surfaced, as well a sense of competition between staff and ODAG volunteers about the programs we offered. The major thrust of the staff comments focused on the rehabilitation progress of K., and how that pertained to the perceived success of GRC.

ODAG’s “vision of crime,” highlighted in this major point of difference between staff and ODAG volunteers, includes making space for the reality that K., a violent offender, is also a survivor and witness of abuse as a child, and that there must be space to address this complex truth that isn’t written off as “blaming” prior circumstances. What does accountability in the context of cyclical violence look like? I believe it starts, at least, with facing the stories — both of violence suffered and violence enacted against others. And though K.’s violence is not addressed in the play, the violence performed by the character Greg is, and the themes of environmental influence and personal choice is central to the play.

Some of this was communicated during that meeting, and some of our differences were left aside. We came out of the conversation with several agreements. We agreed to post trigger warnings for the audiences in multiple locations. We asked that the staff and warden come *see* a rehearsal, as one of the biggest hurdles in conversation was separating the storyteller from the story, and reminded the staff that audiences would only see a sliver of each man's life within the context of the play. Attending a rehearsal would help them fully understand how the anonymity of authors actually worked onstage, and to view the text in relation to movement, song, stylized violence, and puppetry. I also agreed to rewrite some of scenes seven and nine and sought to both find language that would address the concerns of the staff, as well as speak truthfully to K.'s story.

The shock of the abrupt censorship, the long conversation and careful edging around the staff's personalities, fears and agendas, and the sense of urgency to not eliminate an ensemble member's voice, as well as the practical need to finalize and rehearse the script combined to make the week feel like a blur. My own frustration was put into perspective in a check-in, during which K. broke down in tears in front of the warden. It began when K. spoke to the ensemble about his anger and disappointment that his scenes were targeted. The warden, who was joining us for that day's meeting, happened to enter in the middle of K.'s address, and as soon as he walked in the room K. directed his speech straight to him. Seeing him speak forthrightly and tearfully to the person who had power over the outcome both highlighted the emotional power of speaking or silencing one's story and made me wonder if we had gone too far. Even though I did not cut the story, is there an irresponsibility in making a promise that a narrative carried for years will finally reach people, when I don't have full control to ensure that will happen? I might have overestimated or taken for granted the control we have in ODAG space, and while it worked out in this instance, it raised my awareness of mental and emotional health as it is connected to story.

"Control of the narrative" was not an intellectual or political prop, nor simply an artistic choice; as I saw in this episode, releasing or silencing a narrative can profoundly impact a person. After the warden, GRC staff, and my advisors came to see the revised play in rehearsal, we received permission to go ahead. Later, in every rehearsal or performance of scenes seven and nine, I would watch K.'s face and see him nodding, eyes closed, as the words of his story flowed out from the performers.

Conclusion

The making of *And Yet We'll Speak* spanned eleven months. In that time, I and my collaborators learned tremendous creative and practical lessons, from managing rehearsal time in a devising process, to how much of the process should be defined in advance, to navigating the many interpersonal dynamics among the ensemble, GRC staff, and volunteers. I would like to be transparent about the fact that among so many stakeholders, I too had my own agenda; as an academic honors candidate, I was deeply invested in creating a sophisticated artistic product. As a young director, I was invested in staging something beautiful and provocative that would ring true for the community I partnered with, as well as gain the respect of theatre professionals.

The final version of the play itself was both structurally sound and emotionally complex, and something the men, Phyllis and I took pride in sharing. Based on comments from the audience, the play had a profound impact. In many ways it satisfied the questions I started out with: Can I direct a community-based play of high artistic quality? Can it be something of value to the community I partner with, as well as something meaningful to the diverse audiences who will see it? Can I apply my knowledge of ethnographic fieldwork to create an artistic environment where all this is possible? Does theatre-making have value as a response to the epidemic of incarceration in America?

Throughout this paper I have addressed the ways that the making of *And Yet We'll Speak* offers insight into the power of storytelling, and how theatre provides a space to literally re-cast what is said and who gets to say it. This project demonstrates that theatre-making *does* have a place in response to social and political injustice, in that it offers opportunities to tell stories well. In so doing, we are able to understand each other more fully, comprehend the events of our times, and get closer to people whose voices are often lost or silenced. Furthermore, this project suggests that a creative process informed by an ethnographic framework is different from professional theatre process, and that the hybrid approach might be useful to future community-based theatre endeavors where the goals are both artistic excellence and social impact.

With a project like this, I measure success in part by arriving at new, deeper questions. Some of the ones I've found are: Which parts of this work could be extracted and refined for a repeatable performance method, that might be a starting point for future projects? How might this work be combined with other initiatives to create a fuller alternative for accountability and

re-entry programs? What role can storytelling (including outside of theatrical contexts) take in creating new paradigms of accountability and transformative justice?

Since the ensemble's decision to do this play with me, ODAG shared a purpose: to make a good play based on the experiences of the incarcerated men, that busted stereotypes. To me, this was at its core a challenge to expand the horizons of our vision as a society — to deepen our capacity to see the humanity of our outcasts and use that knowledge to create a more just and loving world.

Appendix A

“If I only did better.”

By E.

“Momma, I have a note from the teacher. She said to make sure that I gave it to you. Huh, well you should be, I’m your son.Oh the teacher gave me all A’s? Does that mean you are going to give me money like the tooth fairy?”

“Jay, Momma said to turn your radio down, it is too loud. Man, where did you get that, that ain’t the radio Momma bought you. What do you mean it was free? What does a screw driver have to do with it?”

“Man hold your voice down. I don’t want my mom to find out. I six-fived for my brother and he grabbed this brand new radio for me. You should have seen how easy it was. The store was empty and then the alarm didn’t even go off.”

“What is that? It looks like you dropped a bar of soap and it shattered. Dope, what are doing with that? Man you are too young to be getting high.....Sweeew man, I thought that you was turning into a junkie at the tender age of 15. So how much money do you make?”

“If only I knew that it was this easy, I could have been the youngest millionaire in the world by now. [Song by UGK or NWA] I hang around thugs and sell many drugs cause I’m the dope man dope man!”

“Man what do you mean that June is dead? I was just with him last night! What happened?! He was out hustling? I was supposed to be with him! Who were they? Man someone knows who robbed and killed him! (*hangs up phone*) Man I can’t believe that these junkies are that thirsty that they would kill a young brotha just to get high. What is this world coming to? He was only 16!”

“What do you mean that you need money? Man you are the one who turned me out to the street game and now got your hand out to me. You got to step your game up! You are five years older than me and I don’t know who the big brother is, me or you! Here’s a hundred and you better not tell Momma where you got it from either!”

“Naw mom, I didn’t get my report card yet. I don’t know what the teacher is waiting for. ...I feel like I did good this semester though. I should be graduating with flying dollas, I mean colors. I will let you know as soon as I get it though. They are probably holding on to it like they did my last one. It might even be hanging in a frame somewhere. (*while walking out*) Man, I don’t know how to tell her that I haven’t been to school in over six months. I was supposed to be graduating year after next and it don’t look like I am going to make that trip. I have a reputation to uphold and money to get. Besides, that is what this country was built on, getting paid first and worrying about everything else later. Me, then you and them.”

“Man I don’t have nothing for you but hot tips! This is my hustle money! (*running across the stage shooting back at someone else*)

“It was either him or me though; I’m not mad that I am the one still alive and able to tell this story. Man getting here was too easy. It was easier than getting that fast money and all of the glorious things that come with it. I heard my uncle say that this system wasn’t set up for everyone, just those that took the bait. Now whether he was referring to those in poverty or those who had money, I ain’t sure. But I do know that I feel like I have fallen short now. No more straight A’s and now I’m huggin on my momma from a jail cell. It is easy to get into, and almost impossible to get out of.”

“Listen little brother. This prison stuff aint no joke, you have to instill in yourself the discipline to achieve higher levels of education and awareness. I have done it and so can you! Always remember the number one rule: Always strive to be the best that you were meant to be and place god first in your life! Everything that shines ain’t gold. I failed a lot of people who believed in me just because I wanted it the easy way.”

Appendix B

Back Seat

by E.

From the back seat, I heard a lot of conversations. Some might say that is where I was getting the jewels that my parents were dropping. I learned a lot while riding in the back seat; who the rotten people were at my parents' jobs and who were their friends. I think what was most important in hearing those conversations was what made people friends or foes to my parents. I found myself feeling bitter or resentful towards people I didn't even know, based on my parents' comments about them. Sometimes I pictured their friends as heroes. I guess I just went with how my parents felt about people.

I am the youngest of twelve, six boys and six girls. I didn't really grow up with all of these children being in the house with me; most were grown by the time I was born and had moved out on their own. The ones that were still around the house, though, they were the ones that I watched closely to learn life lessons or how to solve problems.....

From the back seat, while riding along the busy streets, I heard my mother ask my father, "What are we going to do with that boy?" I knew that she was referring to Edward, who is the next oldest brother of mine by five years. Momma went on to say that, "At the rate he is going, he will never be successful in life. He doesn't listen to anything she says and he is just plain out hard-headed!" After hearing her say that to my father, I knew that I didn't want to learn from him the behavior that my mother was describing. I believe that every child is born with an innate sense of pleasing his parents and that is what I wanted to do, unlike Edward.

My memory of how good those donuts tasted and smelled had me almost standing in the back seat as we drove by the donut store. Mr. Donut was one of the greatest places in the world to visit. Not today, I guess; Mom and Dad must be in a hurry or something. I know that we are not stopping for donuts because of my behavior; I had been on my best [?]. I heard Mom tell Dad that my oldest sister April was "Sneaking out the house after curfew again trying to follow that boy who lived around the corner. Needless to say, I was sitting back in my seat at this point. You see the boy that lived around the corner is Edward's friend Kevin, and he is the reason my sister is causing my parents concern! I used to like him, but I don't any more!

Today I no longer have that seat in the back of my father's car, but I do have the lessons that I learned while riding there. Needless to say, I am an uncle and yes, Kevin is the father. Edward still has no job and looks for handouts wherever he finds fit. I do my best to be the best neighbor that I can be wherever I live, and I hold myself accountable. For that I am thankful for the rides in the back seat.

Appendix C

Scene 6: The Back Seat

Story by E., Adapted by Lillian White

Characters: Sam, Mom, Dad

(Sam is in the back seat of a car; his parents are driving. We hear the song from above in the car, until Mom and Dad turn it down to talk about dinner plans. Sam, who has been jamming in the back seat, turns to audience as music dies down)

SAM

From the back seat, I heard a lot of conversations. You could say it's where I picked up the jewels that my parents were dropping. I learned a lot: who the rotten people were at my parents' jobs:

DAD

Sheila, you won't believe the crazy shit--*(glancing towards Sam)*-- the crazy *stuff* Pam said.

MOM

Harold! Watch your mouth!! *(Beat)* Now what'd that foolish woman have to say?

SAM

I also learned who their friends were.

MOM

Martha Lynn asked if we wanted to get together again this weekend. We could bring the kids too--Sam, I think they brought a new game she said you would like.

SAM

What is it!?

MOM

Oh, I can't remember the name of it.

SAM

Mooooommmmmmm.

MOM

Honey, now do you think that tone is gonna help me remember?Mm-mm, I don't like it one little bit.

SAM

Okay.

Depending on who was friend or foe to my parents, I found myself picturing those people as heroes or squashing down feelings of bitterness and resentment towards people I didn't even know.

MOM

What are we going to do with that boy?

SAM

Now she is referring to my brother Edward. He's my next-oldest brother by five years.

MOM

If he keeps on like this, he won't get anywhere! He hasn't given me an answer on job applications at all, and I keep seeing Willie at the store. I know Willie is looking to hire help, and I keep telling Edward if he doesn't get going, he won't land that job. Did you talk to him yet?

DAD

He told me he would be at practice again. *All evening.*

MOM

That boy is just plain out hard-headed. I do not like that! Don't like it one bit.

SAM

When I hear that, I swear I will never do what Edward does. I don't want Mom to talk like that about me. Oh! Oh, wow! That's Mister Donut! That is one of the greatest places in the world to visit. Mom! Mom! Can we go to Mister Donut?

MOM

Not today, Sam. (*Turning back to address Dad*) And I am worried about April too. She is sneaking out of the house after curfew again following that boy around the corner. I don't like it. I do not like it one little bit, Harold.

DAD

Mmhmm, honey.

SAM

They're talking about my sister.

Those donuts smelled sooooo good. Oh, man, if Mom wasn't all worried about April and Edward messing up I bet we would've stopped. That boy living around the corner is Edward's friend Kevin. That's who my sister is chasing after. Well, I don't like him any more! Even though he used to give me Jolly Ranchers. If Mom doesn't like him, and we didn't get Mister Donut, then I don't like him!!

(Standing up, addressing audience as a grown man)

I no longer ride in the back seat of my parent's car, but even when I look at my options today, I can just hear what my Mom would say to some of them: "Mmhmmm, I don't like that one little bit!"

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