

Who's in the Room?:

Constructing Communal Boundaries in US Community-Based Performance

By

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Abstract

Community-based performance projects construct embodied performances of communal identity both on and offstage. They stage communal identity by using content gathered directly from the community for the performance scripts, applying signs and signifiers in the production design, and using community members as the primary performers. Community leaders across the country commission this work in the hopes that it will revitalize the local economy and empower members to work together and celebrate their communities. Ideally, the relationship between the professional artists and the communities with which they work is reciprocal. However, the power dynamics between these two factions is seldom simple and every choice in the production process depends upon the way in which individual voices are heard and incorporated into the performance. In my research, I critically examine these moments of decision in the production process, and the negotiation of reciprocity in performances that direct, and codify, the identity of the communities they represent.

The examples that I examine in this study expand any overarching definition of the field, demonstrating the need for flexible frameworks and parameters for community-based performance; however, for all three companies, community remains a central component of their mission and value statements. Cornerstone Theater Company in Los Angeles, California, Swamp Gravy in Colquitt, Georgia, and Pangea World Theater in Minneapolis, Minnesota represent community on a spectrum of defining characteristics, ranging from geographical to thematic, fixed to fluid, and local to global. By understanding the various approaches to community in a field as broad as community-based performance, we can better understand the potential and

possibilities for the field on a socio-political level. The purpose of this project is not to compare the methods of these three companies in order to develop a “best practices” model for the field; comparing these companies is impossible because of the diversity of their contexts, approaches, mission statements, and aesthetic approaches. Instead, the analysis of these three companies together provides a sense of the diversity of community-based performance practices, as well as the myriad opportunities for, and challenges of, constructing community in the long or short term.

Introduction

What Kind of Community?

When I began this project, I did not actually know if I liked community-based performance. I knew that I liked the *idea* of it: that the notion of engaging communities in dialogue over relevant issues through performance appealed to my socio-political sensibilities. My experience with more didactic forms of political theater, such as agit-prop or even Theater of the Oppressed, demonstrated the need for more subtle modes of social change that maintain the agency of the individual audience members and allow for dissenting opinions. I did not know if community-based performance fulfilled this ideal, but I believed that it could and I was eager to see if my theory was correct. I did not experience a fully produced community-based performance (even as an audience member) until I participated in Cornerstone Theater Company's Summer Institute in Fowler, CA in 2011. Despite my lack of firsthand experience, I entered the process as a know-it-all—having read everything (so I thought) that there was on Cornerstone Theater and community-based performance. I was also incredibly eager and extremely skeptical of the possibilities for the production, in terms of the notions of community, of representation, of authenticity, and of aesthetics.

On opening night, after three short, intense weeks of rehearsal, I had the perfect vantage point from which to watch the performance. My role as spotlight operator placed me on top of the scaffolding, directly behind and above the audience and stage. From this perspective, I could see everything that took place during the performance: the reactions from the audience, the socializing and preparations taking place backstage, and the park visitors who were not expecting

to watch a play, but who stayed until the end. Perhaps it was the emotional roller coaster of the Institute (Cornerstone warned the students of this phenomenon at the beginning), or my amateur skills as a spotlight operator (it is not easy focusing a small point of light in complete darkness), or my exhaustion after a long, hot day (we saw temperatures of over 100 degrees everyday in Fowler), but I was incredibly moved by the performances of *A Man Comes to Fowler*, and experienced what I can only imagine is *communitas*, in the full sense of the word.¹ After weeks of anxiety over missing actors, lost sleep, intellectual overload, and forgotten lines, I felt pride for my community of Institute students, Cornerstone staff and ensemble members, and Fowler residents and fans. During the production, we were all working towards one mutual goal, to develop a performance that in some way demonstrated the characteristics and stories behind the region.

This feeling echoes what Jill Dolan describes in her book, *Utopia in Performance*. As she explains, “Utopian performances describe small but profound moments in which performance calls the attention of the audience in a way that lifts everyone slightly above the present, into a hopeful feeling of what the world might be like if every moment of our lives were as emotionally voluminous, generous, aesthetically striking and intersubjectively intense” (5). During the two performances of *A Man Comes to Fowler*, I felt hope and possibility in the sharing of stories and in the openness of community. Indeed, I believed in the existence of community, even as I knew that the relationships that I developed over the four weeks of the Institute were temporary. The community that developed around *A Man Comes to Fowler* was not the community of Fowler,

¹ According to Victor Turner, *communitas* is a “spontaneously generated relationship between leveled and equal total and individuated human beings, stripped of structural attributes” (*Dramas, Fields, and Metaphors* 202)

based on geographical location, but was a new social group based on shared work and relationships.

As with *communitas*, these relationships were ephemeral; we developed them in a liminal space that was only possible through unsustainable material conditions (I was very aware of the bills and work that waited for me at home in Madison while I worked in Fowler). Furthermore, the social drama that unfolded over the four weeks of the Institute centered on the production process, rather than on controversies and schisms in the community of Fowler itself. We (Cornerstone ensemble and staff, Institute students, and community participants) tended to discuss the production and stories in the play rather than our own personal/political ideologies. I was not aware that my political views diverged so explicitly from many cast members until after the Institute during the 2012 Presidential election, when our politics were overtly publicized on Facebook. Our political ideologies impact the ways in which we approach and enact social change. Without challenging and addressing these divergences, can we transfer the energy and spirit of *communitas* into a socially active and inclusive community? Furthermore, Victor Turner identified *communitas* as inherently unstable in contemporary social conditions: “The historical fate of *communitas* seems to have been to pass from openness to closure, from ‘free’ *communitas* to the solidarity given by bounded structure, from optation to obligation” (202). It is very likely that, were the Institute to stay in Fowler, it would evolve into a bounded, closed community of participants in which *communitas* was a rare occurrence. As I describe in chapter two, this seems to be what took place in Colquitt, Georgia, as *Swamp Gravy* shifted from liminal social drama to stable yet socially limited community theater.

What kind of community did we create in Fowler both on and offstage? What kind of community was already present before Cornerstone entered the area and staged the stories of the town in the city park? Was there a community to begin with? Will the relationships that formed among Fowler residents during the play continue and if so, how will they influence the community at large? What did I experience during the performances of *A Man Comes to Fowler* and how did it inform my understanding of community-based performance? Can the utopia of the performance translate into utopic practices offstage if the political and social ideologies of participants remain undisclosed? These are some of the questions that I attempt to address in this dissertation as I strive to understand some of the ways in which community and communal identity are defined, developed, created, and staged in performance. I do this not merely as an intellectual exercise, but because it is abundantly clear that the issue of *community* lies at the heart of the field; and yet, it remains an ambiguous, fleeting concept that is at the very least confusing, even as it raises the potential for exclusionary social practices that perpetuate systemic social inequalities.

The examples that I examine in this study stretch and test any overarching definition of the field, demonstrating the need for flexible frameworks and parameters of community-based performance. However, for all three companies, community remains a central component of their mission and value statements. Cornerstone Theater Company in Los Angeles, California, Swamp Gravy in Colquitt, Georgia, and Pangea World Theater in Minneapolis, Minnesota represent community on a spectrum of defining characteristics, ranging from geographical to thematic, fixed to fluid, and local to international. By understanding the various approaches to community

in a field as broad as community-based performance, we can better understand the potential and possibilities for the field on a socio-political level.

The Field of Community-Based Performance

Scholars and practitioners utilize a number of terms to define similar approaches to theater and performance, including: community-based art/theater/performance (Cohen-Cruz), community theatre (Eugene van Erven),² community performance (Kuppers), Community Performance (Geer),³ creative cultural development (Adams and Goldbard), grassroots theater, and many others. Each of these terms represent a conscious ideological choice; for example, participants of the symposium, “Grassroots Theater in Historical and Contemporary Perspective,” held at Cornell University in October 1992 as part of the Community-Based Art Project, chose the term “grassroots” to highlight the political activism behind the work. Later, Haedicke and Nellhaus raised questions about the term “grassroots,” pointing out that it is “at least as ambiguous as community” (11). Arlene Goldbard prefers the term “cultural community development” because it encapsulates the ideas they believe are central to the work: the participatory nature of the work, the broad possibilities for creative expression, and the “dynamic nature of cultural action” (*New Creative Communities* 21). For this project, I use the term “community-based performance” in large part because it is becoming standardized in the field of theater and because I am interested in continuing the momentum around a shared language. I also

² This term is generally rejected in the US, due to the negative connotations associated with amateur theater which mimics Broadway, rather than original work based in community.

³ Geer began using the term “community performance” to describe his work with Swamp Gravy. It has since been taken up by a variety of other scholars and practitioners. I distinguish the intended use of term, either to define the field as a whole, “community performance,” or to describe Geer’s own practice and methodology, “Community Performance.”

believe that the term allows for a breadth of approaches and methodologies (be they artistic or political), while still describing a particular practice and mode of producing artistic work.⁴

The notion that community is central to community-based performance is implicitly redundant. However, because community is not easily defined the very choice of the term raises red flags about the nature of the work and the breadth of styles and practices included in the field. I define community-based performance broadly as a form of artistic and social practice that engages communities for an extended period of time to create original work that is relevant to the individuals who participate. Community-based performance values process as much as it does product, and there is almost always some form of social change as the motivating factor behind the work, even if it is not explicitly stated by the company producing the project. As I demonstrate in this dissertation, all of the terms that I use in this definition are loaded with possibilities and pitfalls: for example, engaging community might only involve certain demographics, as we find with many Swamp Gravy productions; or, the notion of “original work” might seem to exclude certain adaptations or remounting of productions, even as the lens of community drastically alters the original impact of the dramatic text in question.

The majority of community-based performance projects are generally led by a company of artists and organizers who are initially outside of the community itself. This supposed dichotomy between outsider/insider, community/artist, organizer/participant, makes some artists at companies like Pangea World Theater uncomfortable with the term community-based

⁴ For Cohen-Cruz’s justification for the term see: *Local Acts* 1-2.

performance, as it carries with it automatic relational power dynamics. Community-based performance scholars and practitioners seem aware of this potential hierarchy in the field and outline certain “best practices” or principles that might alleviate some of these concerns. *Local Acts*, by Jan Cohen-Cruz, is the most comprehensive introduction to community-based performance as it offers a sense of the historical inspirations for the work and outlines some of the key principles guiding the practice for many companies. In addition, Petra Kupperts introduces the field to future and current practitioners in her books *Community Performance: An Introduction* and *The Community Performance Reader* (co-edited by Gwen Robertson). These texts are useful in that they offer guidelines and analysis of certain approaches to community; however, they remain necessarily vague, allowing for (mis)interpretations and a wide range of outcomes in terms of practice and the construction of community. In the following section, I outline some of these principles, mainly those of Cohen-Cruz, in an effort to identify the potential for hierarchical and/or inequitable constructions of community and relationships between company and community. I focus on Cohen-Cruz because her text remains the most definitive analysis and description of the field. Her framework allows for a wide variety of approaches to community-based performance, even as it solidifies certain central key principles.

The Principles Behind Community-Based Performance

Cohen-Cruz defines community-based performance by four major principles: communal context, reciprocity, hyphenation, and active culture. Communal context focuses the craft and vision of the artists and production, wherein “artists use their aesthetic tools in concert with a group of people with lived experience of the subject and with whom they work to shape a

collective vision” (92). This principle works in conjunction with reciprocity in that professional artists and community members are both contributing to the process, albeit in different ways with different skills. In researching community-based performance in practice, I discovered that reciprocity is perhaps one of the most challenging principles to achieve and almost always raises issues of power, privilege, and equity.⁵ Skills and contributions, as with the notion of commitment (a requirement of any creative process, as well as a necessary element for membership into most communities), are connected to value in our society that complicate the collaborative process. These values are also contextual: the work of professional theater artists might not be valued highly in mainstream society, but in relationships with non-professionals working to create a performance, the skills become more valuable. Furthermore, resources such as time, energy, and income dictate who can participate in creative projects and for how long. If reciprocity implies shared responsibilities, it might be challenging or even impossible for some members of a community to participate at various points in the production process.

Reciprocity does not imply equality in the distribution of resources, but the issue is implicit in any collaborative process. Generally, community-based performance practitioners provide the bulk of the production labor, while community members bring the inspiration and content for the work. Theater productions are prone to hierarchical structures, wherein a director leads the creative vision which the actors and directors enact onstage and in rehearsal. This power dynamic is somewhat reversed in community-based performance, in that the community dictates the vision of the production, depending on the structure of the company. Dipankar

⁵ I use equity rather than equality because the contributions of participants are not uniform, but vary based on their experiences, identities and skills.

Mukherjee, Artistic Director of Pangea World Theater, attempts to develop work collaboratively through ensemble and often does not cast actors in particular roles until weeks into the rehearsal process, thus subverting hierarchical structures within the cast. During the Cornerstone Institute, Laurie Woolery, director of *A Man Comes to Fowler*, took a more conventional approach to directing, casting, and blocking scenes, due in large part to time constraints. Both modes of directing are reciprocal, as the work is founded in communal context, however they imply different levels of reciprocity throughout the process. The issue goes back to resources: more time allows for more collaboration at every stage of the production and resources vary depending on the goals for the production and company as a whole.

In some instances, the relational power dynamics between community and company might verge on colonialism. Is it cultural exploitation if theater companies are mining communities for their stories before moving on to the next project without engaging in long-term social change and exchanging skills and resources? Cohen-Cruz recognizes the possibility for unequal power distributions in community-based performance and emphasizes that, “Artists doing such work would do well to educate themselves about the causes of social inequity and expand their art-based strategies accordingly or to collaborate with people who have” (91). Cohen-Cruz calls for interdisciplinarity in the work; the combination of skills from artists, community organizers, social justice advocates, and others who are aware of systemic social inequity. This speaks to the third of Cohen-Cruz’s principles of community-based performance: “hyphenation,” in that the work is made up of multiple disciplines, aesthetics, and functions (97). We can see this approach taken by companies like Pangea, whose partnership with the Minnesota

Advocates for Human Rights enables the artists in the company to facilitate trainings on domestic violence for immigrant and refugee women. However, not all companies partner with non-artistic organizations in this way and are therefore more vulnerable to criticisms regarding responsibility, efficacy, and exploitation.

The last of Cohen-Cruz's principles of community-based performance, "active culture," "reflects the recognition that people frequently get more out of making art than seeing the fruits of other people's labors" (Cohen-Cruz 99). This notion gets to the fundamental motivation of social change behind this field. The act of making rather than receiving—creativity as opposed to complicity—is key to community-based work, and is manifested in a number of ways depending on the chosen practices. As Kupperts explains, "Many community performance practitioners understand their work to be a form of **political** labor: facilitating creative expression as a means to newly analyze and understand life situations, and to empower people to value themselves and shape a more egalitarian and diverse future" (*Community Performance* 6 [emphasis in original]). This sense of empowerment through action is also central to community organizing, particularly for activists like Saul Alinsky in his seminal text *Rules for Radicals* (1972). For Alinsky, the role of the community organizer is to "First rub raw the resentments of the people of the community; fan the latent hostilities of many people to the point of overt expression" (116). The connection between community organizing and community-based performance is found in the role of the organizer/outside artist. For Kupperts and Alinsky, the outsider is important because they demonstrate through different forms of expression the social inequities that might be just below the surface in a community. In short, they strive to break down complacency and hegemony.

In the context of the insider/outsider dynamic in many community-based practices, the role of the artist as instigator raises issues about power, privilege, sustainability, and responsibility. These issues are especially prevalent in temporary projects when the artists plan to leave the community after pointing out the systemic “problems” within it. Therefore, Alinsky, Koppers, Cohen-Cruz, and others develop “best practices” that might mitigate some of the potential for exploitation and irresponsible social activism. For example, Alinsky asserts that “People have to make their own choices. . . . No organizer can tell a community what to do” (91). He also gives a list of certain characteristics that the organizer should embody such as curiosity, irreverence, and a free and open mind (72-80). Koppers’ version of the organizer is “open to change, open to be challenge, open to be improvised through theatre, dance, music and visual art practice” (8). Koppers and Alinsky agree that the organizer/artist is acting with and for the community, based on their articulation of the needs and problems present at that moment. However, this still raises the question of “who is the community” and how do you ensure that all voices are being heard in the process of art-making or social change? Alinsky defines community as “An organized, communal life; people living in an organized fashion” (115), which raises further questions about the requirements for the notions of organization and communalism. Koppers asserts that the community performance practitioner has to define community for her or himself, though she acknowledges that there are ramifications and responsibilities with any choice (8).

Ultimately, not all community-based performance projects have explicit and overt social change as the goal of the production. There is a tension in the field as to how committed

community-based art is, or should be, to issues of social justice. In their recently published text, *Story Bridge: From Alienation to Community Action*, Richard Owen Geer and Jules Corriere of Community Performance International include “committed action” as the final outcome of a five step social and performance process: “STORY→PERFORMANCE→RELATIONSHIP →CONVERSATION→COMMITTED ACTION” (51). In my interviews with Cornerstone ensemble members, many were reticent to say that the work of the company is overtly defined as theater for social change, even as they recognized that it was often an outcome of many projects. Despite Cornerstone’s reticence to fully enter the field of theatre for social change, their mission statement asserts that the company “builds bridges between and within diverse communities in our home city of Los Angeles and nationwide” (Cornerstone “About”). Clearly these bridges serve a purpose and imply that connecting diverse communities might in some way contribute to or alter society in a positive way.

In *The Politics of Performance*, Baz Kershaw examines the issue of efficacy in community-based work, particularly in British alternative and community theater. He identifies “four main operational approaches” to the relationship between company and community, the combinations of which impact the efficacy of a project in terms of enacting political and social change: Making theater *for*; Taking theater *to*; Making theater *with*; and, Mounting theater *in* (244). Companies who are more localized and aware of the relevant issues in a community are potentially more effective in translating these issues onstage. However, in order to enact social change, community-based performances must also offer ideological oppositional representations through inter-textuality within the context of the community and society at large. Without

providing this “dialectical aesthetic”—“which enables a company to express and explore the fine balance between ideological incorporation and resistance in conservative community contexts” (248)—community-based performance companies risk reifying conservative and hierarchical community dynamics. Indeed, my chapter on Swamp Gravy describes this phenomenon when productions avoid addressing systemic racism and poverty in the community of Miller County, GA. In order to evaluate the efficacy of a particular project, critics of community-based work need to take into account the stated goals of the productions and the contextuality of each community. However, regardless of the efficacy of the work in enacting social change, *community* remains a central concern and ultimate goal, even as the envisioned nature of community differs depending on the approach.

The notion of community and the field of community-based performance share ambiguity and diversity on conceptual and practical levels. They are both about making choices, whether on stage or through relationships. Cornerstone chose Fowler, CA to stage the 2011 Summer Institute, it chose to use the term community, and it chose to define community around certain fluid parameters. These choices are reflexive and dynamic and they have aesthetic and social consequences that go beyond the fixed term of the production. In this dissertation, I examine these choices and their consequences in an effort to demonstrate the complex implications of community-based performance work. These implications are not always positive, and they are not always long-lasting but they always have consequences outside of the performance.

Community-based performance projects have the potential to shape, define, create,

perform, alter, and maintain community at every stage of the process. In all instances, community is socially constructed by the participants, organizers, and artists, but also by the social and political context in which the work is taking place. Community is performative, in that it does not embody an organic ontological position but is reiterated, fabricated, and produced through repetitive acts, symbols, and gestures. I am drawing upon the term “performative” from Judith Butler’s theories on gender and sexual identity (“Gender Trouble” 1990). This theoretical framework is useful and appropriate for community because it describes the development of communal identity through social practice; in this case, the social practice of community-based performance. The process of staging a community in production is mirrored, for better or worse, in the community at large, and the efficacy of the production determines the nature of the community. Furthermore, Moya Lloyd’s response to Butler is a reminder that performativity is not an isolated, individual experience, but is rather greatly impacted by “material and symbolic structures” within which the repeated acts occur (“Performativity, Parody, Politics” 200). In the case of communal identity, these structures are particularly relevant because community is shared and also relational.

Complicating Community

The complexity of community . . . relates to the difficult interaction between the tendencies originally distinguished in the historical development: on the one hand the sense of direct common concern; on the other hand the materialization of various forms of common organization, which may or may not adequately express this. . . . What is most important, perhaps, is that unlike all other terms of social organization (*state, nation, society, etc.*) it seems never to be used unfavorably, and never to be given any positive opposing or distinguishing term. (Williams *Keywords* 76)

After attempting to identify strict definitions for the term “community,” Raymond

Williams ultimately acknowledges the complexities of the term, based on its historical and socio-political usage. He points to “senses and a particular quality of relationship (as in *communitas*)” (75) which exemplify the nature of community in society. Invocations of community carry with them certain social and political triggers which can be used by activists, organizers, and politicians in strategic ways to establish connections across and with individuals and groups. Furthermore, these invocations are almost always considered positive, at least historically, even as there are extreme examples like the call to *volk* in Nazi Germany that should make users of the term suspicious. It is no wonder that community-based performance practitioners continue to invoke the term; perhaps it is inescapable.

The philosophical approach to community varies widely across the field. Mary Rousseau in *Community: Ties that Bind*, argues that only purely altruistic sacrifices for another subject can lead to authentic community. She asserts, “Community, then is a psychological reality, an act of will that constructs a tie that really binds. . . . And without altruistic identification, one person has no share in another’s existence” (45). Rousseau insists on a nearly impossible commitment to another with no regard for socio-political conditions that inherently influence relationships and interject power dynamics into any discussion of sacrifice. By denying contractual relationships or those based on mutual benefit, Rousseau privileges the Saint with the capacity to think altruistically, let alone to behave that way towards others. Such an approach also perpetuates notions of “commitment,” “reciprocity,” and “sacrifice” that carry political connotations limiting who can participate and for how long.

Jean-Luc Nancy in his seminal text, *The Inoperative Community*, argues against notions

of community based on planning or production. As he explains, “One does not produce [community], one experiences or one is constituted by it as the experience of finitude.

Community understood as a work or through its works would presuppose that the common being, as such, be objectifiable and producible” (31). While Nancy’s rejection of productions of community is important in that it identifies violent invocations of community and the potential for political terror, there is no room in this definition for social activism and an acknowledgement of the power that community can bring to socially disadvantaged and under-represented groups. Many philosophical approaches to community, although useful in the questions they ask, are largely inapplicable to community-based performance; especially when it comes to the logistical challenges to the work and the socio-political dynamics that construct and influence community relations and representations. I therefore turn to sociological research into community, although I avoid studies that seek to define the term with any rigidity or finitude.

In *The Symbolic Construction of Community*, Anthony Cohen works to shift the discourse surrounding sociological research in community from attempts towards a conceptual definition, to focusing on the ways in which community is defined by its members. To this end, he argues that “A reasonable interpretation of the word’s use would seem to imply two related suggestions: that the members of a group of people (a) have something in common with each other, which (b) distinguishes them in a significant way from the members of other putative groups.” This is a relational approach to defining community that simultaneously implies “both similarity and difference . . . the opposition of one community to others or to other social entities” (12).

Therefore, it is the *boundary* that marks one community from another and that provides the

necessary parameters for inclusion or exclusion. Cohen continues throughout the text to analyze the ways in which these boundaries are negotiated in a variety of contexts and in relation to outside threat or influence. However, he emphasizes that while communal identities and boundaries ultimately exist “in the minds of their beholders” (12) and are used as rhetorical devices depending upon the goal of the user, when members are asked to speak for and about their community, it becomes “more than oratorical abstraction: it hinges crucially on consciousness” (13). Cohen demonstrates the ways in which communities are reified by outside threats to their identity; boundaries are strengthened when the Other becomes more defined. Furthermore, although the community is represented through shared symbols, the meanings behind these symbols are open and fluid, allowing for multiple interpretations within shared identity (14-15).

The relational and constructed nature of communal boundaries and symbols demonstrate that communal identity is imagined, a framework introduced by Benedict Anderson in *Imagined Communities*. As he explains, nations are imagined communities because “The members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them” (6). Although Anderson uses the concept primarily to analyze the origin and spread of nationalism, it also allows for a greater understanding of the possibility for, and existence of social communities, especially in urban environments when members of certain communities might never know of each other through face-to-face interactions. Even in smaller cities or towns, residents do not know every member of their community directly, though they might still perceive that they belong in this category, as was the case with Fowler, CA, the site of

Cornerstone Theater's 2011 Sumer Institute. These open definitions of community still allow for exclusion, discrimination, and inequity. The capacity to imagine a community that is diverse, inclusive, and equitable rests on the individual and the specific choices that are made throughout the process of constructing community. Do we imagine a community whose members reflect our identity locations based on race, class, gender, ethnicity, sexuality, or, is it possible to extend membership to those who might not look, think, or act like us? Furthermore, do we imagine an active community based on behavior and work, or, is it possible to be a member of a community without participating actively in its construction or maintenance? The examples in this dissertation demonstrate that community-based performance includes a wide range of possibilities for how community is, and can be, imagined and ultimately, performed and constructed.

The performative acts that create community in community-based performance are firmly rooted in logistical and material necessity. While companies might have the best of intentions, they ultimately work with the resources that they have, including funding, time, energy, and space. We see this in the Cornerstone Institute in which, although the notion of community as dramaturge is central, the process did not allow for a community reading, a vital opportunity for the community to respond to a production. I saw this in my own community-based performance project, *Girls Act Madison*, where a limited budget and a team of two organizers greatly altered our capacity to include a diversity of participants across class and racial boundaries. Therefore, scholarly studies that examine the systems in place which determine the logistical frameworks for community are most useful for this dissertation. This also connects back to the notion of

reciprocity: definitions of community which require commitment and shared action necessarily limit who can participate based on access to information and resources. These requirements are also politically loaded, as projects that value community while ignoring systemic socio-political conditions necessarily maintain the status quo.

Scholars such as Iris Marion Young, Barbara Arneil, Miranda Joseph, and Yvette M. Alex-Assensoh, in the fields of political science, gender and women's studies, and African American & African diaspora studies, provide a critical framework with which to address inequities in community formations. They look at community through the lens of systemic social inequity—a particularly pertinent lens when discussing theater for social change that works in primarily disadvantaged communities. As with the performativity of gender construction, community is not an isolated ideal, but a powerful political concept with many implications in terms of inclusion/exclusion, naming/denying, and subject/object relationships. Alex-Assensoh and Arneil critique the notion of “social capital” as a purely positive resource in developing and maintaining communities in the face of supposedly alienating modernity. As Arneil explains, social organizations such as churches, clubs and philanthropic groups often encourage assimilation and hegemonic ideologies. As she explains, “It is not just the amount of connectedness that matters but also the *nature* of those connections: to what extent do certain kinds of communities or connections serve either to empower or to dis-empower particular individuals or groups?” (75 [emphasis in original]). Marion Young echoes this critique of community, particularly as it is used in feminist rhetoric, stating, “The dream [of community] is understandable, but politically problematic . . . because those motivated by it will tend to

suppress differences among themselves or implicitly to exclude from their political groups persons with whom they do not identify” (*Feminism/Postmodernism* 300). In *Against the Romance of Community*, Miranda Joseph asserts that “To invoke community is immediately to raise questions of belonging and power” (xxiii) and argues that positioning community as the romantic counterpoint to capitalism and the state (as many scholars do) in actuality makes it a supplement to corporate interests and socio-political hegemony (1-3).

This is not to say that community is inherently negative; on the contrary, these authors recognize the importance and value of community, even as they provide arguments and analysis for how it is misused and exploitative. Marion Young calls for a “politics of difference,” which “lays down institutional and ideological means for recognizing and affirming differently identifying groups in two basic senses: giving political representation to group interests and celebrating the distinctive cultures and characteristics of different groups” (319). The politics of difference are similar to the practices of Pangea World Theater, wherein the company seeks to include voices from a diversity of groups, while maintaining the identities and experiences of individuals within them. At the end of *Diverse Communities*, Arneil asserts that a “just community in diverse societies would be mutually respectful, equitable and inclusive, as well as the site of division and contestation, for the foreseeable future” (211). As with Marion Young, Arneil appeals for difference within community, rather than a homogenizing, though unifying, identity. When communities are constructed in community-based performance, it is vital that they recognize their constructed nature as such. By keeping definitions “respectful, equitable and inclusive,” companies might avoid the privileging of certain identities over others. Community-

based performance scholars Haedicke and Nellhaus see heterogeneity as a way of strengthening a community asserting, “Diversity and differences of opinion can weaken a community, but they can also provide it with great strength—if a way can be found for its members ‘to put their heads together’” (19). The triumph over adversity in this claim mirrors Turner’s ritual process of social drama, which ultimately leads to *communitas*. However, as my examples demonstrate, the logistical challenges of producing a community-based performance sometimes alter the best laid plans of mission statements and company philosophy.

Methodology and Chapter Breakdown

This project examines the logistical and political challenges that community-based performance practitioners face. Community is a powerful construction and, as evidenced in my interviews with company members and participants, the concept plays a large role in the lives and relationships of individuals. For community-based performance, the process of creation is a shared goal that provides the context for community; however, this new community of creators cannot be separated from the socio-political context in which they developed. This research is an extension of the work that was started by scholars like Cohen-Cruz, Nellhaus, Haedicke, Koppers, Adams, Goldbard, and Kuflinec. They set the stage for critical analysis of community-based performance by providing a shared language and understanding of the nature of, and challenges to, the work. In this dissertation, I intend to occupy this stage and use it to critically examine the performative practices that construct community in community-based performance. As Nellhaus and Haedicke affirm, the social relationships between companies, actors, communities, facilitators, organizers, and audiences are complicated and entrenched in “a

dynamic of authority based on knowledge and/or expertise.” Because of this dynamic, “the stance, assumptions, and motivations of those involved, the discourse surrounding the event, and the relationships between the groups and between language and issues of knowledge and power must constantly be interrogated” (15). I strive to interrogate the process of community-based performance across three very different, and critically significant approaches to the field. Every stage of the process involves choices which contribute to, or impact the construction of community; particularly at the borders of inclusion/exclusion.

The practitioner/scholars mentioned above recognize the need to critically examine this work, although they call for a kind of criticism that understands and acknowledges the nature of community-based performance as independent from Broadway and regional theater. Cohen-Cruz defines five factors for the critic of community-based performance to consider, especially when they are outsiders to the particular project:

Aesthetically, given the emphasis on merging life and art, believability of character would be an appropriate measuring stick. Second, the critic might assess a project in relation to a company’s long-term mission. . . . The critic might also look at aesthetic means used to convey emotion not dependent on a fully experienced cast. Third, given that community-based performance unfolds over multiple phases of which the performance is but one, it might be informative to know what happened before and what was planned to happen after this production. Fourth, the critic might find out what the people involved got out of it, both performers and audiences. Fifth, the critic could enunciate her own responses, acknowledging her particular bias for or against such a model of art. (188)

Cohen-Cruz’s greatest concern is that the critic take into account the entire process, as well as the aesthetic, political, and stylistic differences that come from working with community. I agree with Cohen-Cruz’s suggestions for scholars and critics of community-based performance and took them into account during my own research for this dissertation; although, again, logistical

challenges interfered at various points with the “purity” of my methodology.

For every company, I was determined to conduct interviews with a mix of company members, staff, and community participants. I was able to meet this goal, although there are always more people to talk to. I also wanted to respect the process, as well as the final product, and so it was important for me to see the company in action through rehearsals as well as performances. Beyond the final product, I also take into account the impact on constructions of community post-performance with each project (as much as possible). Lastly, I understand that every community-based performance project is very different from the next, and so I attempted to get a past and present interpretation of each company by researching whatever archives and documentation they might have of past productions and evolutionary moments in company history. My methodology varies in large part due to the different capacities of each company to support and assist an outside researcher. Unfortunately, this inequity in capacity is, I believe, a major reason for the inequity of research and outsider awareness of certain companies. For companies with small staffs and limited time and resources, the inquiries of a graduate student researcher can be something of a burden, even as the companies are frustrated by the lack of national attention and recognition. For my own part, I was working under a limited budget and time frame which made me always aware of what I was missing or lacking in my research. Although my research produced more content than I can possibly fit into this particular project, I acknowledge that it is not nearly representative of all of the work that these companies do, nor of the experiences of all of the participants and communities with which they work. Therefore, the scope of my research varies depending upon certain logistical requirements, as well as on the

structures of each company.

Because I was able to work with Cornerstone for five weeks, due to their Summer Institute program, my research traces the production of *A Man Comes to Fowler* almost from the beginning through to the end. Therefore, my methodology exemplifies a micro analysis of the choices behind Cornerstone's construction of community in Fowler, CA, even as I attempt to give a basic overview of their approach to the field. This first chapter on Cornerstone Theater lays the groundwork for the kind of analysis that I do throughout the dissertation. I attempt to break down the production process into various components, the combination of which impacts the kind of community that appears onstage in the final performances. Furthermore, Cornerstone's approach is influenced by the nature of the Institute, which uses community engagement as a pedagogical tool, further complicating the relationships and dynamics between community members, Cornerstone staff and ensemble, and Institute students. My analysis of *A Man Comes to Fowler* demonstrates the high stakes of this work, as well as the logistical challenges that are present in any community-based performance project, even when led by established professionals with a long history in the field.

I paid two visits to Colquitt, GA for my research into Swamp Gravy, and conducted numerous phone interviews with participants and artists both past and present. Scholars have yet to publish extensively on the work of Swamp Gravy, so this chapter provides historical background for the work that began over twenty years ago and has gone through many evolutions since its founding. I was able to visit during the rehearsal process of *Solid Ground*, and so I used this production as the starting point for my field research and as a point of

comparison for previous productions. During the second visit, I conducted more interviews and participated in the Building Creative Communities Conference. This conference gave important insight into Swamp Gravy's role within the fields of community organizing, as representatives of cities and towns across the country came to Colquitt to learn the Swamp Gravy method. The twenty year history of Swamp Gravy represents the challenges that come into play when community-based performance remains in one geographical region. In addition, the connections of the performance to tourism and the economic survival of the community display a tension between social change and capitalism which connects to Miranda Joseph's critique of community. There is no doubt as to the economic benefits of Swamp Gravy for Miller County, GA, even as many of the productions (not all) construct community through the lens of nostalgia and entertainment.

Pangea World Theater is almost unknown in academia and there is very little that is published about their work—a fact that I hope to remedy with this dissertation. The breadth and scope of their programming is overwhelming, especially for a project of this kind, and Pangea, as with all three companies, merits its own book. I visited Minneapolis, MN three times: once for a brief introduction into the company and interviews with Artistic Director Dipankar Mukherjee and Literary Director Meena Natarajan. The second visit lasted a week as I documented the pilot intensive for the National Institute for Directing and Ensemble Creation, an ongoing project that will be an important resource and network, primarily for directors of color and women. It was during this week that I was really able to witness Pangea's process, in their relationships with peers and colleagues, their skills as facilitators, and at a rehearsal for *Breaking the Silence*. The

third visit provided opportunities for more interviews with participants, artistic collaborators, and staff. Because of the diversity of their programming, I focus on *Breaking the Silence* in particular, while pointing to the ways in which Pangea's commitment to multiculturalism through equity inform all of their work and aesthetic and political priorities. For Pangea, community is constructed through personal relationships, even as they envision a global community of immigrants, artists, and activists.

The purpose of this project is not to compare the methods of these three companies in order to develop a "best practices" model for the field. I acknowledge that comparing these companies is a bit like comparing apples and oranges because of the diversity of their contexts, approaches, mission statements, and aesthetics. You cannot evaluate community-based work without taking these factors into account. The analysis of these three companies together provides a sense of the diversity of community-based performance, as well as the myriad opportunities for constructing community in the long or short term. In the conclusion, I describe my own foray into community-based performance in the Fall of 2012, when I worked with fifteen girls ages nine through fourteen in the Madison area. While I don't believe that this project was a failure, it gave me a personal understanding of the limitations of this work based on logistical capacity. I hope that this project provides a framework for future research into the field, as well as a raised awareness of the political and social impact of certain approaches for future practitioners and scholars. As Haedicke and Nellhaus assert, "Making choices in a fictional situation has very little cost, whereas the cost in real life can be great" (18). I believe that community-based performance has the potential to have a very real impact on society, even if it

begins on a local level. My interrogation of the choices that construct community is based on respect and appreciation; however, because of the high stakes and the potential for real social change, we must ask ourselves at every stage of the process: What kind of community are we performing, defining, and constructing in community-based performance?

Chapter One

Community as a Pedagogical Tool:

The Cornerstone Institute Summer Residency

Cornerstone Theater Company is perhaps one of the most well-known examples of community-based performance outside of the field. Unlike the other companies in this study, the work and history of the company are documented in a book by Sonja Kuflinec, *Staging America: Cornerstone and Community-Based Theater* (2003). While the general principles guiding the work remain the same across the twenty-seven years of its existence, some of the practices and goals have evolved and shifted based on changes in location and ensemble members. The principles of respect, diversity, and process are as present in their work today as they were when the company was founded in 1986 (perhaps even more so after years of experience). However, certain techniques and methodologies which are highlighted in Kuflinec's description of the company, such as adaptation, don't seem to apply as directly as they once did. Today, Cornerstone works consistently with professional playwrights in the development of new work, based, as always, in the community in question.

Cornerstone Theater Company is a quintessential community-based performance company: their projects are all conducted with community in mind, and much of the content and talent comes from the community itself. Cornerstone is also very flexible in its understanding of community as a descriptive approach. Many of the large-scale production cycles are based around theme, rather than similar identity characteristics. The current production cycle, *The*

Hunger Cycle, centers on the issue of hunger and food production and distribution. Therefore, Cornerstone seeks community participants who have some experience with this theme, which allows for a great deal of fluidity in terms of casting and content development. Cornerstone is also unique in its size and capacity for programming. The company now boasts a budget of around \$1.1 million annually, allowing for a “large” full time staff (in proportion to other community-based theater companies) and large-scale, professionally produced performance projects. The majority of the budget comes from grants and private donors, allowing for a pay-what-you-can approach to ticket sales.

The Cornerstone Institute Summer Residency program, which I participated in during the Summer of 2011 is particularly useful for research purposes. This residency is a valuable pedagogical experience for anyone interested in studying the company itself, or the field of community-based performance in general. During this Institute, I learned about the history of the company, and the Cornerstone “method”: the principles and practices most utilized in Cornerstone productions. However, the experience of the residency is not exemplary of all of Cornerstone’s work, but is more of a glimpse into its methods. The purpose of the residency is twofold: to engage with a community in the creation of a new production, and to teach the Cornerstone methods to a group of students who are there with the express purpose of learning about the company and applying some of the methods to their own performance practices.

While this chapter will certainly describe and outline the history of Cornerstone and highlight some of the main principles behind the work, my main concern is to critically analyze the 2011 Institute in Fowler, CA as an example of a community-based project produced by an

established and “successful” company. Due to the sometimes competing goals of community engagement with pedagogy, the approach to, and relationships with, community in this instance are particularly dynamic. Although Cornerstone is committed to community engagement, based on genuine interests in the communities with which they work, the students are there to learn about Cornerstone, not necessarily for the community itself. The community created in the Institute can be broken down into three tiers: Cornerstone staff and ensemble, the Institute students, and the community participants from the region. Each of these tiers was fluid, and yet each represented a position that carried certain implications (both positive or negative), roles, and power dynamics . This example demonstrates the challenges of working with community, even for a company as successful and thoughtful as Cornerstone. Although company members have the best of intentions, engaging with the concept of community has the potential to erect or perpetuate social boundaries, even as it opens the doors for new relationships and modes of social interaction.

The History and Evolution of the Company

Cornerstone’s beginnings are well-documented and analyzed by Sonja Kuflinec in *Staging America: Cornerstone and Community-Based Theater* (2003). In this section I highlight some of the main events since the founding of the company, and demonstrate the ways in which Cornerstone developed since Kuflinec published her text. Alison Carey and Bill Rauch founded Cornerstone Theater Company in 1986. The first five years of the company, referred to as the “rural years” by fellow members, were spent traveling the nation and producing adaptations of classic texts in regions that were under-represented in mainstream theater, and/or lacked the

resources or desire to produce their own. According to Peter Howard (a founding ensemble member, professional actor, and playwright), Cornerstone was “founded on the very notion of participation.” He continues, “We knew that we wanted to have people on stage, community onstage as well as contributing to the script . . . and then everything else has evolved on that platform of maximizing participation while balancing that with artistic integrity and logistical practicality and our own evolving curiosities as artists and humans and citizens” (Interview). This notion of participation, in conjunction with artistic integrity and personal curiosity, is at the forefront of any Cornerstone Theater project. In the early years, it was a curiosity as to whether classic texts were relevant to non traditional theater makers: “it was really serving our own questions about whether, especially these great texts, had relevance outside of our elitist, educated circles, and as a way to sort of test and try out technique and storytelling . . . and to take a certain kind of artistic risk” (Howard). The company has evolved over the more than 25 years of its existence, though it continues to include “communities” in every step of the theater making process.

In developing the Cornerstone methodology, it was not the company’s initial intent to produce adaptations of classic works, but it soon realized, particularly in the production of *Hamlet* in Marmarth, North Dakota in 1986, that adaptation was the most direct route to creating accessible work for local audiences. As described by Kufinec, “The adaptation allowed further collaboration with residents as well as yielding a play that more fully engaged its audience” (74). Also in these rural years, the company developed a cyclical structure of production, in which they put on plays focusing on specific communities and then end the process in a “bridge show”

that brings members of every community together into a completely new play. This structure ensures that Cornerstone reconnects with communities even after their initial production with them while fulfilling their goal of “bridging communities,” as stated in the mission statement. In five years, Cornerstone travelled and produced theater in Virginia (in three different counties), North Dakota, Texas, Florida, Kansas, Nevada, Oregon, Mississippi, West Virginia, Maine, and then across thirteen states during their national tour of *The Winter’s Tale: An Interstate Adventure*.

As a traveling theater company, Cornerstone resided in each location for months at a time, allowing members to experience a community in a way that was not possible with visits alone, however frequent they might be. Lynn Jeffries (an original and current ensemble member of the company as a costume and scenic designer) views these residencies as one of the highlights of her experience with Cornerstone. Her description of this experience demonstrates the curiosity of the company as a whole and their commitment to learning more about the country than what might be found in areas with regional and well-supported theaters:

I have a much deeper understanding of parts of the country . . . and that’s a real gift. I consider that to have been my graduate school. We hit most of the regions of the country and I have a very personal understanding—based on four months—of what it’s like. I hope it makes me a better citizen, I’m not sure that it does, but it definitely makes me much more aware of what’s happening in the rest of the country. (Interview)

While company members acknowledge that they can never acquire a comprehensive and complete understanding of a community, however that might be defined, these rural years indicate their endeavor to develop enough of a relationship so that community members felt comfortable sharing their own indigenous knowledge.

When the company finished their national tour, there was consensus among members that it was time to move to a more fixed location (although they did not intend to remain there as long as they did). In 1992 they moved to Los Angeles, California and began producing a body of work that is as diverse as their definitions of community. These projects include, but are not limited to: *Three Definitions of Community*, by age, by geography and, by culture and language (1992-1994); the *Watts Residency Cycle* (1994-1995); the *BH Cycle*, in four locations whose names all start with the letters B and H, ending in a bridge show (1997-1999); *The Faith Based Theater Cycle*, eight separate productions based on the theme of faith, culminating in a bridge show (2001 and 2005);¹ and, the *Justice Cycle*, five productions focusing on issues of justice, culminating in a bridge show (2007-2010).² This list demonstrates the shift in approach to community upon arrival in Los Angeles. Rather than focusing on location, the ensemble began to utilize a thematic approach that defines communities based on their experience with these issues. In addition, rather than continuing to locate communities that don't have a great deal of theater available to them, because Los Angeles is saturated with theater the rhetoric shifts to focus on communities who are not represented in the theater that is there (Howard). This shift seems to be more about broadening the rhetoric and it includes previous community partnerships while also bringing in themes and demographics of people who are otherwise ignored by the majority of mainstream theater. The company will return to primarily location-based communities in their Summer Institute productions, which began in 2004 as a way to provide the growing number of

¹ This was the last major project with Bill Rauch as the artistic director.

² This list does not include a great number of projects such as: ensemble shows which do not use community performers, and Cornerstone's many educational programs.

interested outsiders with an opportunity to learn the Cornerstone “methodology” firsthand.

A lot changed when Cornerstone moved to Los Angeles, but perhaps one of the biggest shifts occurred in 2006 when Bill Rauch left the company as artistic director and Michael John Garcés took his place. While Rauch is primarily a director, Garcés, though he has a great deal of directing experience, also approaches theater from the perspective of a playwright. This difference played a direct role in the evolution of the company, and the ensemble members refer to Cornerstone now as a playwright-driven and new play development company (although the plays don’t often have lives outside of the particular production). As a “playwright-driven” company, ensemble, and staff members are aware of the process of mediation that occurs when listening to people’s stories and then placing them in a theatrical narrative that is ultimately re-conceived by a single author. It is the playwright who comes in with the initial question for the community and who interprets their stories. The playwright’s ability to be inspired, or lack thereof, can either propel a project or serve as a challenge for the entirety of the production process. Of course, the playwright was important (and Alison Carey as founder and initial playwright was a central figure in the Cornerstone process) prior to Garcés’ start as artistic director, however, Bill Rauch’s charisma and voice as director and founding member clearly played just as important of a role.

Upon its move to Los Angeles, the company not only had access to a diversity of communities in a centralized location, but they also could hire outside artists as designers, actors, directors, and playwrights with their own diversity of visions, approaches, and philosophies. The evolution of the company is well documented in the mission and values statements developed by

the company over the years.

Mission/Value Statements³

Written in Oct. of 1987, the first mission statement focuses on the early residencies and the original “experiment” in art making:

The Cornerstone Theater Company has begun with this challenge: go into different American communities, learn what makes good theater, and try to inspire a love of theater in new and varied audiences. Founded by Artistic Director Bill Rauch and Managing Director Alison Carey in 1986, Cornerstone has spent up to three months each in communities in Virginia, North Dakota, Texas, Florida and Kansas producing revitalized classics and original works with local people as cast and crew. Cornerstone is the only theater of its kind in the nation.

This early mission statement, with its simple language and stated goal of learning about theater and inspiring audiences, is a clear indication that these early years were primarily about making theater. As the years progressed and the company learned techniques and lessons about working with non-theater making communities (often the hard way), their mission statements began to reflect their evolving sensitivity to certain key issues.

The second mission statement, written in June 1989, replaces the phrase regarding “what makes good theater” with the word “innovative,” as though the company came to understand that taking risks and making new work (evidenced in the shift towards adaptation) were what they considered to be “good theater.” They also became aware of how “different” these American communities could be, adding: “These shows reflect the spirit of wildly diverse parts of America . . . and guide Cornerstone in its discovery of an aggressively American theatrical aesthetic.” Lastly, they added a component that indicates their desire for longevity in the

³ The Mission and Value Statements referenced in this section were included in the Summer Institute materials (“Mission Statements, an evolution” 2007).

company's impact on communities with the assumption that these shows "give towns a running start in the establishment of their own community theaters." This mission statement is about searching, discovery, and legacy, though always in the pursuit of a form of theater that will satisfy the emptiness left behind by mainstream, regional forms of art making and audience involvement.

In later mission statements Bill Rauch and Alison Carey are no longer mentioned by name, a reference to "classics" is added briefly in 1991 and then taken out again in 1992, poetic language describes their developing methodology and then is simplified and condensed in 1995, and ultimately, the notion of community evolves from being based in location through the company's travels, to being based in Los Angeles, while including a larger "national" community. Common themes in these statements include: inclusivity, diversity, national identity, participation, and a reference to theater. The most current mission statement (which, according to Donnelly, is due for an update) reads:

Cornerstone is a multi-ethnic, ensemble-based theater company. We commission and produce new plays, both original works and contemporary adaptations of classics, which combine the artistry of professional and community collaborators. By making theater with and for people of many ages, cultures and levels of theatrical experience, Cornerstone builds bridges between and within diverse communities in our home city of Los Angeles and nationwide.

Of note is the reference to, not only the diversity of the communities in question, but also of the company, and indeed, Cornerstone strives to represent their own community of Los Angeles in demographics and artistic experience.⁴ Pangea World Theater is also committed to maintaining

⁴ According to the 2011 US Census, Los Angeles County residents are 27.6% White not Hispanic, 48.1% of Hispanic or Latino Origin, 14.2% Asian, and 9.3% Black (United States Census Bureau "Quickfacts; Los Angeles, California").

diversity in leadership positions, which likely adds to the diversity of participants and audience members. However, as I demonstrate in the next chapter, diversity remains a challenge for Swamp Gravy, leading to only temporary relationships between white veteran cast members and African American residents in Miller County, GA. Pangea and Cornerstone understand that, in order to have diversity in community, they need to have diversity in company members, artists, and leadership.

It is also worth noting the addition of the phrase “building bridges between and within diverse communities” (added originally in 1996) to the mission statement. This sentence not only expresses the company’s desire to make connections, but also an understanding of the ambiguous nature of community itself, as often members of the same community are not aware of their mutual membership. Indeed, the label of community can cover a huge diversity of identities, opinions and sub-communities, as evidenced in the 2011 Institute in Fowler which brought together Baptists, Buddhists, atheists, and outcasts of all kinds into one community based only on their location in the same city.

In fall 2005 the Cornerstone ensemble also added a values statement (in which much of the language was pulled from the 1996 mission statement) to further clarify the motivation for the company and the philosophical ideology of the ensemble:

We believe society can flourish when its members know and respect one another, and we value theater made in that spirit. We value art that is contemporary, community-specific, responsive, multilingual, innovative, challenging and joyful. We value theater that directly reflects the audience. We value the artist in everyone.

This values statement is a recognition of the implications that Cornerstone’s work can have beyond the process of simply making theater. It holds the company and its work to a set of

standards within the creative process, while demanding reflection at every stage of production. Within this statement lie the foundations for community-based performance in general, especially that of reciprocity in the notions of respect and the acknowledgment of the artist in everyone. This last point was a contentious one for the ensemble. To state that the company “values the artist in everyone” implies that everyone is an artist, which might undermine the hard work and dedication that professional artists put into their crafts and careers. However, such a statement demonstrates a kind of theater making that is “valuable” beyond the carefully crafted perfection of the professional.

During *A Man Comes to Fowler*, director Laurie Woolery and others often referred to the “natural” talent of the community performer; referring more to personal characteristics and innate stage presence than learned skills. This reference seems to pertain to the ability of the non-professional actor to provide authenticity to a performance based on their experiences and embodiment of local customs and mannerisms. Community performers are artists trained by professionals to project their personalities onstage in front of an audience. The notions of authenticity in performance and “natural” talent are potentially problematic as they risk essentializing identity and objectifying individuals based on certain overt signs, especially when considering the comparatively short length of these productions. As with any kind of theater, certain productions present multi-faceted characters more than others; in community-based performance, it is important to also assess the process of production in allowing for nuanced relationships with, and judgements of, community participants.

The assertions in the values statement are manifested in a variety of ways within

Cornerstone's methodology and approach to community. In terms of art making, Michael John Garcés argues that the goal of the rehearsal process with community participants is not necessarily pedagogical, to teach everyone how to be professional theater makers, but rather project specific. The director of a Cornerstone production is facilitating a community member's participation in a particular process so they can "fill a particular role." As an example, one of the challenges to working with non-professional actors is getting them used to projecting their voices. As Garcés explains, the Cornerstone director is "making sure that people are heard, not necessarily training their voice" ("Directing in a Community Context" Notes). This is a very subtle difference and it speaks to Cornerstone's very goal-oriented approach. At this moment, the company is not so interested in giving participants the long-term tools to make future theater projects, but are focused on facilitating them to be the best that they can be for that particular production.⁵ This approach is easily contrasted with Swamp Gravy, wherein, based on the longevity of the project, veteran cast members become professional artists trained in the Swamp Gravy aesthetic.

According to Howard, Cornerstone is not so concerned with the survival of the theater and audience outreach that is at the forefront of the discourse in American theater today. Although the company works very hard to include people who might otherwise never participate or attend a theatrical production, they do so based on personal interests (the idea of experimenting) and art making, rather than on the creation of future audiences and sustainability. As he asserts, "For me, it's more about . . . sharing this art form that we loved with audiences and

⁵ This speaks to another shift in the company's approach from the rural years when they often gave seed money for communities to start their own long-term theater projects.

communities that we perceived to have fewer preconceptions about what theater is. [It] was artistically self serving in the best way” (Interview). This approach is successful in that Cornerstone is lauded for the artistic integrity of their work, more so than most community-based performance companies. In the tension between performance and ritual, Cornerstone productions center more on the former than the latter.

Cornerstone enacts social change through relationships and performance, though it does not define the work explicitly as “theater for social change.” The values of respect and theater that is “joyful” demonstrate an approach to community engagement based on positive interactions, rather than didactic preaching. When asked what it means to “challenge a community,” Jeffries responded, “There are theater artists who are trying to challenge people, and that's not really a driving force for me. . . . It's not like its all one big circus of celebration, but ultimately, I need to be having conversation with someone that is a civilized conversation” (Interview). Cornerstone has a vested interest in the community as short-term residents who, due to their own community-based philosophies, demand a great deal of time, energy, and resources from long-term residents. It does not behoove the company or the community to create unnecessary conflict during the production process, only to leave and return to their lives as professional artists once this vested interest is over. As Jeffries explicitly states, “We never want to say fuck you to the audience” (Interview). This issue revolves around the potential long-term impact of Cornerstone's collaborations with communities, and their desire that this process remain respectful, joyful, and reciprocal. This requires a careful negotiation between respecting a community's assumed comfortability with certain subject matter, while

leaving space for dissenting opinions which might not be included in overtly vocal narratives from voluntary participants.

Cornerstone's "Definition" of "Community"

Cornerstone, especially in their productions that revolve around a theme, is at the forefront of defining the identifiable boundaries and parameters for a community with which they will be working. In these cases, the definition is somewhat teleological, as they seek to produce a play about a particular community and then end up creating a show about those who came to the table to share their stories and perform onstage. According to Cornerstone's *Community Collaboration Handbook*, "The ensemble usually identifies the community through a collaborative process that can begin with the interests or passions of an ensemble member" (7). Then, through the process of community engagement, they figure out what the parameters for that community will be even as they invite as many participants to collaborate and aid in the process of developing a script and, ultimately, a production.

It is part of company philosophy that a Cornerstone production include as many elements from the community as possible and so, as Paula Donnelly (ensemble member and original Institute Director) explains, "If we can go local, we're gonna go local" (Interview). However, another oft repeated mantra in a production remains, "Who's in the room, is who's in the room"; or, because they cannot possibly hope to represent every aspect of, and subgroup within, the community, it is important to acknowledge those who are present while attempting to engage those who are not. As Howard explained: "It plays out in that inevitable question of who comes to the party, who shows up, given the resources you put into putting out the invitation, letting

people know, making yourself known” (Interview). According to Howard, the more attractive the invitation, the more participation you have from members of the community. Thus, it is Cornerstone’s chosen responsibility to work to include as many members from the community as possible as they constantly question, “Who is not in the room? What voice is left out? Who is not a part of the community?” even as they are defining the parameters for the community within the production process.

The community engagement process is dynamic and the boundaries of the community in question are in flux at every stage of the production process. For example, while it might make sense to partner with a community organization in terms of research and logistics, it is also possible that this partnerships will deter other groups within the community from participating. In Fowler, there was a great deal of support from the churches in the city (of which there are many) but the company also worked to include what they call “neutral” spaces, such as the library and the park, as audition and performance locations. This requires a constant negotiation and flexibility in terms of the boundaries that define community identity. Ultimately, it comes down to who shows up, and Cornerstone recognizes that their version of the community and the community’s story is not the only one possible. In addition, rather than defining a community that is already in existence with finite boundaries, a Cornerstone production seems to create a new community (perhaps within this larger preexisting one) out of those who choose to participate.

In “Welded to the Ladle: ‘Steelbound’ and Non-Radicality in Community-Based Theatre,” Sara Brady critiques Cornerstone’s collaboration with Touchstone Theater in

Bethlehem, PA, arguing that the voices of community leaders were valued over those without as much power and agency. She states, “Loaded with the good intentions of aggressive ‘inclusion,’ the project’s artists failed to realize that connection with community entities inevitably means connection with dominant voices—albeit the dominant voices of perhaps a marginalized part of the geographic community” (“Welded to the Ladle” 69); however, earlier in the paper she lauded Cornerstone’s process of community engagement based on their efforts to locate and visit a variety of spaces that represent a multitude of groups within the community. Many participants in this production, including ensemble members from both Touchstone and Cornerstone as well as community participants, responded to Brady’s article by publishing letters to the editor. Bill Rauch’s response acknowledges that while it may be true that “a cast of 56, no matter how racially or age diverse, does not mean the ‘whole community’ is represented” (19), and he continues with the wish that Brady had voiced her concerns while she was herself a participant in the process. It seems that, while Cornerstone works toward inclusion, always looking for those who might be left out, this process is necessarily incomplete, messy and, in the end, impossible. As Garcés explains, “Theater is about making choices. . . . In order to define a group of non professionals that you’re working with you set some sort of boundaries, you set some sort of a label on it so you can start making choices about what the play might be about and whatnot.” Cornerstone could strive for years to exhaustively define a community (that is dynamic and fluctuating constantly), but at the end of the day they have to put on a production and it becomes necessary to focus on those participants who chose to invest so much of their time and energy into the process. Brady’s critique reminds us of the potential consequences of defining

community, even in impossible situations.

There are two dynamic definitions of community within a Cornerstone production: the abstract idea of community based on the interests and artistic curiosities of the ensemble, and the very real, and spatially based community of participants who are physically in the rehearsal room and on stage by the end of the production. Like Cohen in *The Symbolic Construction of Community*, Cornerstone approaches community based on use and functionality and this concept is emphasized in the personal definitions of community from ensemble and staff members. As a company, Cornerstone is resistant to a singular definition of community, but as individuals, they seem to greatly value community as a desired kind of interpersonal relationship that requires personal investment and commitment on the parts of its members. In interviews, Howard, Donnelly and Sabrina Sikes-Thornton (on staff as a grant writer and a student in the Fowler Institute) all spoke of community as being active and involving commitment from participants. It is also something that can be improved upon constantly, acknowledging the dynamic nature of a Cornerstone production that constantly works to expand and identify boundaries. Cornerstone is defined by its own members (particularly because of the consensus-based decision making process) and so the ways in which these members define and approach community are of the utmost importance when examining and analyzing the company's methodology. Commitment is also a large part of theater making, and an issue that also comes up in the chapters on Swamp Gravy and Pangea. Strict requirements for commitment from participants restricts who can participate based on access to resources. For *A Man Comes to Fowler* and other community-based productions, "commitment" was a necessary factor, not only in who could participate in

the production, but also in terms of who was identified as “community” by the end of the production.

The Summer Institute

The first Cornerstone Summer Residency took place in 2004 in Lost Hills, CA, an unincorporated town of 2,000 in Kern County. Titled *Waking Up in Lost Hills: A Central California Rip Van Winkle*, and with a cast of 44 (including 28 local residents), this production was in many ways a return to the “rural years” of Cornerstone’s history, but also provided an opportunity for outside practitioners, academics and artists to learn the “methodology” behind the Cornerstone process. The Institute was, in part, developed following a collaboration with the Cal State University Summer Arts program (*Growing Home*, 2001) in Fresno, Ca. In this “four-week residency, students from throughout California and residents of this historic farming community collaborated with Cornerstone artists to explore the complex negotiations between development and agriculture” (Cornerstone “Past Work”). *Growing Home* allowed the company to share their work in a pedagogical context while still incorporating the production aspect of the process. This relationship between theory and praxis is at the center of the Institute where “participants learn both through classroom training and hands-on creation of a community-specific production” (Cornerstone “Institute”).

The *Cornerstone Theater Company Community Collaboration Handbook*, written by consultant Ferdinand Lewis and contributed to and revised by Bill Rauch, Alison Carey and ensemble and staff members, is a comprehensive description of the Cornerstone “method” and serves as a textbook for Institute students and others interested in the company. In addition, the

Institute offers supplementary material such as dvds of past productions, articles by and about the company, and copies of previously utilized production material such as audition forms and community partnership agreements. These resources provide a framework for Cornerstone's methodology, while classes taught by ensemble and staff members and participation in the production problematize any notion of a "best practice" as students understand the dynamic nature of community engaged work.

Despite the development of the *Handbook*, there seems to be a tension in the ensemble regarding the need to define and identify the Cornerstone "methodology," while at the same time remaining flexible and rigorous in their analysis of process and product. In the class on "Community Representation" (aka, whose story gets told and who gets to tell it) I came away with more questions than answers as we spent the majority of the time brainstorming possible solutions for complex situations from previous productions. We also came up with a list of questions based on the problematic notions of "community" and "representation," including: what responsibility do we have to represent every aspect of the community?; when do you decide and how do you gain permission to address hard issues?; who is this play for?; and, how do you frame the nature of this work to community (and ourselves)? As Howard, facilitator for this class, stated, "It's always more complicated" and "there's always more to know" ("Community Representation"). In a theater project that attempts to combine "quality art" with "quality community building," choices must be made, but those choices are never considered definitive, at least in theory.

The Cornerstone Institute is clearly an important part of the company's programming.

The availability of resources, in conjunction with the ability and willingness of Cornerstone ensemble and staff members to discuss methodological issues, both positive and negative, are due in large part to the format of the Institute in which pedagogy requires answers to a broad spectrum of queries. When I remarked to Jeffries upon the self-reflexivity of the company, she responded that it was “partly because of the Institute. . . . When we started the Institute, we suddenly had people asking why we did things and we had to come up with some sort of answer. And it’s been very helpful to have to do that” (Interview). In addition, as Donnelly noted in an interview, the Institute connects Cornerstone to a wide range of people and organizations that, due to restrictions on time and resources, the company would never have been able to connect with otherwise. As the company continues to gain notoriety due to media attention and academic publishing, the Institute provides an opportunity for outsiders to understand the process in a context that requires commitment beyond a single interview or act of spectatorship; again raising questions of accessibility and privilege. I can attest to the hard work and dedication that is demanded of the Institute student, as you spend four weeks working over ten hour days with only a total of three days off. These long days are a roller coaster of emotions and experiences because they compact years of Cornerstone work into such a short time. However, this is also an effective and efficient pedagogical method, even though you know that you are getting an incomplete picture as the Cornerstone “method” changes from project to project.

It is this last factor that is a point of concern for Jeffries, and no doubt, for other ensemble members as well. When the Institute started and this notion of a “methodology” began to be thrown about, Jeffries remembers that some participants found it intimidating and were “terrified

that they weren't doing it right, as though there was a right way to do it." She references a comment made by an early community participant from Shurz, Nevada who spoke of the process in these terms: "You come in, and you've got your bag, and I've got my bag, and we trade some things around." Jeffries continues, "And I thought, that is what the Institute is—it's just a bag, a bag with some shit in it. Some of it might be relevant to what you're doing right now and some of it might not." The point that Jeffries is making allows for a reciprocal and dynamic relationship between teacher and student during the Institute, much like the relationship between professional artist and community collaborator in a community-based performance project. It also releases some of the pressure on students to be "perfect" when engaging with a community for the first time. However, as Jeffries states, "We're probably dumping more stuff from our bag into your bag during the Institute than vice versa" (Interview). Students come to the Institute to learn the Cornerstone "method," whatever that might mean, but in the process of learning, they are also representing the company during the production process.

As we were told on the first day, there are three levels of community during the Institute: the community of Fowler, the Cornerstone community, and the Institute community. These communities were not nearly so well-defined in reality. As far as the Fowler community was concerned, at least in the beginning of the process, the Cornerstone community and the Institute community were one and the same. Therefore, there is a burden on the students to not only work to represent the Fowler community as comprehensively as possible, but to also represent the Cornerstone company in their dealings with community members, even as they are learning, many for the first time, what it is that the company stands for. This tension is ever present in the

Institute and stems from the dual tasks of pedagogy and artistic practice. Although it seems that students are learning by example, we are also, in the eyes of the community, leading by example because we are tasked at the outset with canvassing for auditioners, publicity and our individual tasks such as stage management, acting, and community engagement.

The Institute is an extremely truncated process that seems to be getting more and more compacted every year. The issue of time will come up throughout this chapter as it seems to be one of the biggest factors limiting and restricting the Cornerstone process. Ideally, the Institute would be given eighteen full months in which to begin engaging with a community, acquiring logistical support, conducting story circles, and lastly, putting together a performance. Because the Institute takes place on a yearly basis, engagement must begin in a new community while the company is still working with the previous one. No process is ever perfect, and, as happened with the Fowler Institute, logistical difficulties (in this case with finding housing for students, staff and ensemble) greatly impact the creative and social process. In *A Man Comes to Fowler*, multiple factors led to the lack of a community reading, an important event that provides a formal opportunity for community members to respond to the script before it goes into production.

In the following sections I describe and analyze the process of putting together *A Man Comes to Fowler*. While I had access to some of the events leading up to my residency in Fowler through a blog and updates from Paula Donnelly, my firsthand accounts do not begin until the day before auditions took place. However, I will piece together the run up to the production process as best I can based on interviews with those present, as well as the blog and email

updates from Paula Donnelly and others involved in the process.

The Production

Fowler

Fowler, California, is a small community located in the San Joaquin Valley approximately 5 miles south of Fresno. Fowler is considered one of Fresno County's best kept secrets. With its distinct "Americana" atmosphere, friendly citizens, close proximity to Sequoia and Yosemite National Parks, and just a few hours drive to San Francisco, the Central Coast, and Los Angeles - it's a great place to live and work. (fowlercivty.org)

According to the 2010 census, the city of Fowler, CA (in Fresno County) has an estimated population of 5,570, of whom 66.2% are persons of Hispanic or Latino origin, 1.9% identified as black, 47.3% as white (20% not Hispanic), 11% as Asian and 2.4% as Native Indian. According to the Census County Division, Fresno County has a population of 10,800, 3,338 identified as "other." These numbers speak to the growing diversity of Fowler, and of the larger area of Fresno County and the Central Valley in California. This is primarily a rural area in which agriculture is the largest industry. As with many agricultural regions, land is important and carries a history of its own; in Fowler, this history includes the forced removal of Japanese Americans from their farms during Internment, the increase in Mexican American farmworkers through immigration, and the present state in which Armenian Americans own some of the largest distributing centers and farms in the region.

Cornerstone came to Fowler because of one family in particular. In 2008, Nikiko Masumoto, a young woman who technically grew up in Del Rey, though her family's house has a Fowler address (many of the farms in the area are on the border of a number of small cities in Fresno County), participated in a free public storytelling project in Los Angeles related to food.

The project culminated in a staged reading of the developed plays where she met Laurie Woolery, ensemble member and director of *A Man Comes To Fowler*. Nikiko then participated in one of Cornerstone's two-day Intensives (a pared down version of the Summer Institute) where she met Donnelly, Garcés, and several other Cornerstone members. It was during this Intensive that she began talking about Fowler, particularly its connection to agriculture and the diversity of the community. As she describes it, "there's this really diverse community, but it's glazed over cause it's in the Central Valley. And we think of San Francisco, the Bay Area, LA, but not of Japanese Americans, Armenians, Latinos in the Valley" (Interview). As someone of mixed race (Japanese and white American), Nikiko is personally drawn to the history of Japanese Americans in the Central Valley, her grandmother lived in the camps during Internment.

Nikiko Matsumoto is very well-educated, with a BA from UC Berkeley and a master's degree from UT Austin, and both her parents also have graduate degrees. Nikiko broke the trend among young Japanese Americans in the area by returning to the farm after receiving her degrees. This decision demonstrates her dedication to the area, as well as to organic farming. However, after having left Fresno County for a number of years, Nikiko finds herself needing to reestablish her place in the farming community, both as an educated farmer herself, but also with her marginalized identities as queer and liberal in a region that is largely conservative. To this degree, Nikiko and her family are members of the community as farmers and landowners, but are also outsiders as educated elite and marginalized by sexual difference. Despite the relationship with the Masumotos, Cornerstone's connection to Fowler was not solidified prior to their residency in the city and it was up to those in charge of community engagement to establish a

sense of trust and good will towards the project.

When discussing the initial stages of engagement in Fowler, Donnelly referenced the diversity of the region, particularly with regard to the Japanese American and Armenian American communities. However, as evidence of how easily plans can shift, the same communities (within the larger Fowler community) who drew Cornerstone to the city, were also the most reticent to participate, either in story circles or in the production. As Donnelly describes, “We were drawn specifically by the idea of the Japanese American, Armenian American communities here, and then when we got here, it was like, okay, we have to talk to whoever talks to us. We can continue to seek these people out, but they weren’t talking to us—the Japanese or the Armenians really” (Interview). Although Cornerstone intended to tell the story of one community, they needed to focus on who came to the table, while at the same time, honoring and respecting the stories that were not being told in the larger community. This tension between active participation and passive abstention existed at every stage of the process up until the performances when community members who came to see the show expressed their frustrations that certain communities did not participate or that others were too present in the production. Although the city boundaries of Fowler are clearly defined, the identifying communal boundaries are not, especially in a process like Cornerstone’s that enables participation from groups at all levels of community engagement or connection. Fowler is a small city, but it is also a constantly changing one, reflecting the dynamics of the larger Central Valley demographics.

As referenced in the description of Fowler on the Fowler City website, the city is “one of Fresno County’s best kept secrets,” which might be an attempt to reappropriate the city’s status

in Fresno County as unknown and overlooked in the shadow of Fresno proper. As one community participant described it, one becomes “invisible in the Central Valley.” In talking to residents of the town, it seemed that many were used to the low profile of the city and, in fact, many preferred it, identifying it as a key reason for staying in, or moving to, the city. When compared with Fresno, Fowler appears for some to be a safe place, based largely on its size and isolation. Another source of pride are the Fowler schools, mentioned by many residents as one of the key factors for staying and for raising families. The mascots of the high school, the Fowler High Redcats, are displayed throughout the town, on businesses, tshirts and cheerleading outfits. At the time of the Institute, the city of Fowler had recently come together to raise money for an impressive and beautiful new library after years of ineffective funding on the municipal and state levels.

In talking to some community participants in *A Man Comes to Fowler*, there seemed to be general consensus regarding the importance of community and the necessary requirements for inclusion or exclusion. One member, who moved to Fowler at a time when he was struggling with addiction and credits the city (and religion) with his transformation into a successful business person, defined community as, “Like a village of people that work together—work together as far as our lives are connected together . . . I’d say like a family, a big bonded family.” He describes Fowler as “a tight knit community.” Another Fowler resident and business owner who grew up in the city, moved away for school and then moved back, referenced the city as a prime example of community, because of the willingness of some residents to help others. Community is also “a sense of home” and a safe and comfortable place to live and work.

According to a community participant who moved to Fowler with his wife who grew up in the area so that they could raise their two daughters in a “safe place,” community is “the stock of people working together for the common good.” And, a young woman who was getting ready to leave Fowler for college, described community as “All the good people in town... that come together to make a good cause, a better change for the world” (Interviews).⁶

These residents describe a quaint, supportive, and in many ways, conventional, small town environment. There is no doubt that this description is fitting for many residents and in many instances; however, within a day of entering the town, we also began to hear another side to the story while canvassing for auditioners. According to one older woman, the city had a “night life” of drinking, drugs and petty crime, and she was glad to see something positive like the play taking place. The city also has clear boundaries along class and racial lines, divided (as in many areas) by train tracks and by the highway that was built around the middle of the twentieth century. The discrepancies in how the community represents itself do not necessarily mean that any one perspective is fallacious or misleading, but rather speaks to the various depictions and interpretations of a single community by multiple subgroups in the area. Depending upon one’s identity location, the city of Fowler can be both a safe and positive place to raise children, as well as a segregated and secluded city that is starting to be overrun by negative influences.

In *Diverse Communities; The Problem with Social Capital*, Barbara Arneil argues against Robert Putnam’s popular treatise on the decline of community and of social capital in American

⁶ Apart from Nikiko Masumoto, the names of community participants are not given due to the need to ensure the privacy of those who asked to remain nameless.

society. Whereas Putnam associates social capital with the amount of social connectedness, regardless of the nature of the connections, Arneil emphasizes that social capital is defined not only by behavior, but by strict power dynamics and struggles for hegemony. She argues, “Social capital is not, therefore, a benign force working equally in the interests of each and all, but, by virtue of past accumulation, draws boundaries around and between people, reconstructing the same power differentials between those who belong and those who do not in more formal institutions” (8). In order to “belong” and to gain social capital on an equal level with those in power, one must assimilate to, and work within, the norms of society, a process that takes time and resources. While philanthropy might help people with their problems, it also perpetuates an unequal distribution of power in which those who have social capital give charity to those who do not. Such a perspective seems to be antithetical to the notion of reciprocity that is at the base of any community-based project. However, if these systems are already in place within a community at the start of the project, it seems difficult for an outsider to create and stage an alternative narrative while asking for resources and time from those in power.

Fowler is not out of the ordinary in the pride that many of its residents feel towards their community and the generosity and kindness of its members. In the rehearsal process, a section was added to the play that focused specifically on the number of clubs in town, and composite characters represented a couple who founded a food bank in town (from which a few of the actors had benefited years ago). However, I also heard from a number of people in town who continued to feel like outsiders, despite having lived there for more than 15 years. This phenomenon became a source of frustration and humor for those within the Cornerstone

community, as we attempted to talk with Fowler residents and were continuously told that they were unqualified to speak for the town because they “had only lived there for eighteen years.” In addition, although Fowler is a small city, the majority in the cast of community participants (apart from those who were related) did not know each other prior to the production, and many considered themselves outsiders to the community in a variety of ways.

It became clear early in the production process that the stories gathered in story circles, and later put into the script, were not the stories of the people who came to audition for the play and who would eventually embody these stories on stage. Because of the truncated process of the Institute, and the especially shortened process of I-8 due to logistical issues, there was not a lot of room to adjust and rewrite to accommodate those who came to auditions and who committed themselves to the production. And yet, there was also a desire to continue to honor those who shared their experiences even if they did not choose to participate in the staging of their stories. The decision to focus on one perspective over another in the staging of the community, as facilitated by Cornerstone, depends, according to Cornerstone methodology, on who comes to the table. As I continue in the following sections, I will examine the process of community engagement and production to determine which perspectives were included and which were left out.

Community Engagement in Fowler

Community engagement is a continuous process for Cornerstone. From choosing community partners to publicizing the productions, the company is working to engage a community, or communities, in the play. Community engagement began in Fowler when Nikiko

Masumoto started talking about the city and suggested that Cornerstone work in her community. At this point, engagement in the community was extremely limited, and Nikiko was acting upon her own personal initiative, even as she became an impromptu spokesperson for the city. Once the ensemble decided to look into a possible residency in Fowler, Paula Donnelly and Raquel Gutierrez, ensemble member and Manager of Community Partnerships, began reaching out to connections in the Central Valley, particularly in Fresno, where they had already done some work in previous years. According to the *Community Collaboration Handbook*,

Building relationship and gaining trust is a slow process, a sort of courtship grounded in our Core Principles.⁷ It begins by identifying the primary contact person(s) within the community. The Manager of Community Partnerships works hand-in-hand with community partners to accomplish major start-up tasks such as locating physical resources and making introductions to other community members and organizations. (5)

On their first trip to the area in November 2010, Donnelly and Gutierrez stopped first in Fresno to meet with a connection, before driving through Del Rey and then into Fowler. They attended a city council meeting that night where they introduced themselves and the project. They also walked through the small downtown and stopped at the School District office where they left informational packets.

While these initial trips proved fruitful in terms of meeting with residents of the town and getting a better sense of the parameters of the community, finding community partners who would help “accomplish major start-up tasks” was difficult. Paula Donnelly and Ashley Walden, Institute Associate, did as much preparatory communication work as possible before making

⁷ As stated in the *Community Collaboration Handbook*, “What we’ve learned from experience is that each successful community collaboration has at its core four basic principles that guide the entire development and production process. While you may not hear company members use these phrases explicitly in the course of their daily work, you can see the principles in action in the way the work is performed.” These principles are: respect, diversity, flexibility and mutual mentorship (2).

trips to Fowler; however, connections were often missed and it was hard to find people to follow through with providing housing (one of the biggest requirements for the Institute). A major breakthrough occurred in February when Julie Marie Myatt, playwright for *A Man Comes to Fowler* and ensemble member, and Paula Donnelly met a man from the Buddhist Church of Fowler who seemed very receptive to the idea of producing a play about the city and could act as an ally in convincing the Buddhist Church to allow the Cornerstone and the Institute students to reside there for a month. After a great deal of discussion among Buddhist Church members, revolving largely around potential damage to the property and the need for a drawn up contract with liability insurance (this is not uncommon for community partnerships and Cornerstone holds a large insurance policy for such occasions), it was finally decided that key staff and ensemble members would reside at the Church, while Institute students stayed at a hotel two blocks away. In addition, the director, playwright, set designer, and one of the ensemble members stayed in a rental house in Reedley.

This living arrangement was not ideal, however, the logistical roadblock was seemingly unavoidable as Cornerstone, in asking so much from its community partners, needs to take into account the most sustainable and beneficial arrangement to all involved parties. Ultimately, the potential damage to the parking lot, the cost of air conditioning (Fowler gets rather hot in the summer), and the disruption of the annual Obon Festival (a major event at the Buddhist church in which members from all over the Central Valley attend) required that Donnelly come up with a more cost-effective and less disruptive solution. Unfortunately, the time spent in acquiring sleeping arrangements greatly detracted from the rest of the community engagement process, not

least of all because for a while it was unclear that the Institute would even be possible in Fowler if these basic logistical requirements were not met.⁸

Cornerstone generally takes the following steps towards identifying and engaging a community: research, outreach, community partners/advisors, story circles/community readings, performance, and continuing relationships (Cornerstone “Identifying and Engaging Community”). The research portion of I-8 consisted mainly of learning more about local industry and the history of the city and its people by conducting interviews, visiting the library and touring local businesses, including the Fowler Packing Company, one of the largest shippers in the industry. These initial connections also qualify as outreach in that they start the conversation and hopefully create some buzz around the event. As previously stated, the Buddhist Church of Fowler became one of the main community partners for I-8 and the Baptist Church also allowed use of its facilities throughout the entirety of the rehearsal process. The Presbyterian church, Catholic Church, and AME Church also provided space for auditions.

Although a variety of faiths were represented, their inclusion in the process potentially excludes many who do not follow some form of Christianity or who do not identify with any kind of institutionalized religion. In recognition of this potential, auditions were also held at the library during one afternoon and this location proved to be the most fruitful in terms of engaging people who might otherwise not participate. Many of the community members who would eventually become actors first heard about the play as they were walking to the library, including many of its supposed “outsiders.” Although community partnerships are necessary for securing a

⁸ Institute students were updated continually on the changing living arrangements. The blog post from July 5, 2011 gives the final verdict on the situation (Donnelly “some updates: housing”).

level of long-term commitment to a project from members of the community, they are also loaded with potential conflict and restrictions. Community groups represent a particular facet of a community and they can be exclusive or off-putting to other members who do not identify with the same set of principles or characteristics. A handout on “Identifying and Engaging Community” lists under the heading “Seek and Identify Community Partners/ Advisors”: “gain credibility within the community, access to people use of spaces, audience building” (Cornerstone 2009). However, in partnering with a community organization, although Cornerstone may accomplish some of these tasks, they may also be alienating others in the process. The company might “gain credibility” with one faction of the community, only to lose it with another.

In Fowler, this played out in a rather comical misunderstanding, as many residents of the city immediately associated Cornerstone Theater Company with the mega church, also called Cornerstone. While some viewed this association positively, others were turned off and it was up to members of the company to explain that they were not a part of the church, but rather a theater company in Los Angeles (which might also turn potential partners or participants away). Donnelly refers continuously to the need for “neutral” space in the process of community engagement. The park was chosen as the performance venue for this very reason; it is outdoors and open to everyone. The library was another potentially neutral space, emphasized further by the contribution of many in the community to its construction; however, even here you cannot reach everyone, including those who are illiterate or who do not have the necessary leisure time to read or attend library events. These issues exemplify Arneil’s critique of social capital as an

exclusive mode of maintaining hegemony and social hierarchies. Clubs, churches, and other gathering places can be an efficient way to engage a group of people, but they can also represent boundaries that carry over to the larger community, boundaries that Cornerstone members as newcomers may not be aware of.

Cornerstone has to actively work to engage people in a variety of locations, at various times and with numerous approaches, in order to get close to any kind of comprehensive representation from a community. Sabrina Sikes-Thornton, who was working on the community engagement team during I-8, describes her experience this way: “what I learned—this struck me time and time again—was that, if I really wasn’t trying to engage people, if I wasn’t trying to get them to do anything, then by the end of whatever conversation I was having they would just not do it” (Interview). Sikes-Thornton’s comments speak to the unequal dynamic at play in terms of commitment to a Cornerstone production: while Cornerstone has committed their lives to community-based performance, the majority of potential community participants have no initial reason for taking part in a play with a group of strangers. I personally found it easy to forget this dynamic as I found myself getting upset and surprised when people who I thought would be perfect for the play dropped out or did not seem to take the process seriously. And why should they? It is up to Cornerstone to provide a reason for people to put their already full lives aside for a month to put on a play that may or may not be about their personal experiences or tell their stories.

Cornerstone partially addresses the issue of limited resources and accessibility through its policy of pay-what-you-can ticket sales. Cornerstone is a non-profit organization that gathers

funds through grant-writing and donor support for the express purpose of making their productions economically accessible to a broad spectrum of potential audience members. As one community participant asserted, this factor played a direct role in trust-building within the Fowler community. As he explained, “[I] let [people in the town] know that this is what you guys are doing. You’re not taking money, and it was for donation and benefiting the food bank here. It was like, ‘oh, I get it, they’re here to play. They’re not trying to say, this is the ways it’s supposed to be done, and using our resources and running away’” (Interview). The fact that Cornerstone is not benefiting economically from their Institute productions, at least in ticket sales, creates a supply and demand chain based not on monetary elements, but on cultural resources. Cornerstone is not asking for money but for stories and the service that they provide in return may be different for all involved, although it’s important to note that some kind of return is expected or implied in this relationship.

As with most community-based performance projects, the “return” for a community’s invested stories is experienced as much during the production process as in the final performance product. Returning to monetary demonstrations of Cornerstone’s impact on community, Donnelly explains that one aspect of community engagement also plays out in acquiring resources locally whenever possible. In this sense, the project becomes a kind of lengthened tourism boom for an area, as students, staff, and ensemble members require housing, food, and a wide range of resources, from props to costumes to rental equipment. Of course, tourism also implies limited engagement with a community and this sense of impending absence was always present in our interactions with the Fowler community. Even as I became close with a number of

community participants, I knew that I would be leaving in a few weeks and that my relationships were temporary. Facebook allows me to keep in contact with a few Fowler residents, however, the intimacy that we gained over the course of the production was undeniably temporary. This is not inevitable, though in the return to everyday life, the intense relationships created in the process of putting together a production appear exceptional rather than the norm.

In this sense, the relationships that Cornerstone creates during the process of putting together a production are comparable to the experience of *communitas*, developed by anthropologist Victor Turner and further incorporated into performance theory by Richard Schechner. According to Turner, *communitas* is a “spontaneously generated relationship between leveled and equal total and individuated human beings, stripped of structural attributes” (*Dramas, Fields, and Metaphors* 202). *Communitas* is the anti-structure, it is “society experienced or seen as an unstructured or rudimentarily structured and relatively undifferentiated *comitatus*, community,” and it can be linked with “spontaneity and freedom” as opposed to “obligation, juralty, law, constraint, and so on” (49). In the following sections on the rehearsal and performance processes of I-8 and *A Man Comes to Fowler*, I will examine and critique the nature of *communitas* created in these moments of play and potential social upheaval.

The Script and Design

Unlike collaboratively devised/ensemble theater, or other forms of applied theater that utilize multiple authors, Cornerstone values the vision and inspiration of the playwright to tell the story for each community-based production. This leads to a multitude of styles and approaches that make Cornerstone an eclectic artistic company and, coupled with the diversity of

communities with which it works, prevents the company from growing stale both aesthetically and in terms of content. The main philosophies behind the values and mission statement guide the work but, other than that, Cornerstone artists have a great deal of freedom to create as playwrights, directors, designers and performers. Howard acknowledged this freedom in my interview with him, when he emphasized, “I have more power in this organization to do whatever the hell I want than I know I would have anywhere else, and I have the resources to do that” (Interview). Of course, this emphasis on the artist necessarily influences the reciprocal relationship between Cornerstone artists and what ever communities they are working with. In valuing the playwright and acknowledging that it is their artistic vision that is ultimately leading the direction of the play (while being inspired by the community), Cornerstone is also avoiding the challenge to tell every community member’s story, and *the* community play becomes *a* community play.

That being said, there are still methods in place that work to involve the community in the creative process. In gathering content for the script, the playwright, along with the community engagement team, visits the community to conduct story circles, talk with members and get as comprehensive a view of the context for the play as possible. Story circles were developed after the company moved to Los Angeles as a way to gather content efficiently, while at the same time raising interest and awareness around the production. According to Howard, who led the class on story circles, they are an opportunity to ask people something that they’re not expecting. They are structured conversation where Cornerstone gets to know the community and the community gets to know Cornerstone. They’re also a source of casting, potential

audience, and text for the plays (notes 7/22/11). Howard emphasizes, however, that every moment in the process is community engagement and so, in addition to story circles, street encounters, one-on-one interviews, participation in public events, and questionnaires/written info are taking place simultaneously. While some of these, such as story circles, almost always occur in a Cornerstone production, the other means of gathering content will differ based on the style and interests of the playwright and the success, or lack thereof of various methods. In the case of Fowler, there was very low turnout at the scheduled story circles and so Myatt, Donnelly, and others also participated in a local clean up event put on by one of the churches, conducted one-on-one interviews with people from the community and worked to engage people on the street or in businesses whenever possible. The challenge of gathering content in creative and diverse ways goes back to Sikes-Thorton's point about the need to actively engage people, rather than waiting for them to come to you. It's not enough to advertise story circles and hope that you'll get a big turnout. Even with a large number, it still only caters to those in the community with available time and resources, as well as initial curiosity or interest.

In Fowler, despite attempts towards community engagement prior to the start of the Institute, there was still a large number in the community who were not aware of the play and who did not attend or contribute to the story circles. Indeed, one community participant described Cornerstone's presence in the community as a "secret": "They kept their secret, they didn't tell very many people about the story circles" (Interview). Had Cornerstone relied on only one form of community engagement at only the initial stage of the process, it is clear that only a very small portion of the community would be represented in the production. As it stands,

playwright Julie Marie Myatt was faced with a number of challenges following auditions when the company realized that those who were cast in the show were not, to a large extent, the same people who contributed content in the story circles to the script. There then follows a necessary negotiation between the desire to honor those who shared their experiences during the story circles, while at the same time acknowledging stories and the efforts that the community performers are bringing to the process by attending rehearsals all the way up to the final performances.

Another mode of engaging the community in the script writing process is the community reading, a public opportunity for the community to respond to the script and for the playwright to make adjustments based on this response. According to Susan Haedicke, these moments in which the community responds to the script are vital to the dramaturgical role that the community plays in the production. Although the dramaturgical methods vary across companies, she identifies certain reoccurring characteristics: “Unique script development strategies, the role of the script in the production process, the role of the audience in the artistic process, and the political activism that is inseparable from this type of theatrical activity” (“Dramaturgy in Community-Based Theatre” 126). A community reading greatly increases the role of the audience and wider community in the artistic process and provides more opportunities to develop the script based on the responses from attendees. Of course, as with the story circles, the community readings in no way ensure that everyone in the community is contributing; however, the community readings are another step towards engagement before the rehearsal process begins and choices become more solidified. When asked about the role of the community readings, Cornerstone ensemble

members speak to their importance and provide a number of examples in which major changes were made to a script based some of the feedback that participants gave. Remembering her experience with the play *Someday*, based on issues of reproductive rights, Myatt recalls a major adjustment to the staging of the play in which letters from community members were read aloud by physical actors, rather than over speakers. This change was made because a pro-choice activist at the community reading had an issue with the loss of agency that developed when the letters were disembodied from their female authors.

Unfortunately, due to time constrictions and the lack of an initial motivating force within the community, a community reading did not take place for *A Man Comes to Fowler*. In fact, the first time that the play was read in the community was in the first rehearsal by the already cast community participants. This first meeting was already full with scheduling concerns, design presentations and the reading of the script and, while some valuable feedback did come out of this initial reading, the time restrictions and potential for participants to be overwhelmed by information no doubt deterred some from speaking up. In addition, at that point the script seemed to be mostly set and so the opportunity to make changes was not presented as an overt option to community participants. No one can speak to what might have occurred or what changes might have been made had a community reading taken place. However, when asked about this loss, ensemble members all recognized that it is not ideal and was most certainly an unfortunate outcome. Of course, there are a number of opportunities in the rehearsal process for changes to be made, and Myatt and director Laurie Woolery were open to feedback whenever it was given, within the time frame of the very short production process. This issue of time most certainly

impacted the possibility for major changes to be made in the script and staging of the play.

Although Woolery and Myatt wanted to be mindful of the opinions of the community cast, it was a major challenge to stage such a large production with such a large cast in only three weeks. At a certain point, because of the need to memorize lines and blocking (which can be difficult for first time performers and seasoned actors alike), not to mention scheduling challenges and the loss of cast members, the production needed to be solidified in order to be ready for the final performances.

A Man Comes to Fowler, written by Julie Marie Myatt, is similar to *Our Town* by Thornton Wilder in its narrative style and overall tone. Blending dramatic scenes with the device of a narrator, known simply as, “Man,” Myatt’s play follows a mostly linear trajectory outlining the history of Fowler, while highlighting key events and characters. According to Laurie Woolery, director of *A Man Comes to Fowler*, *Our Town* was perceived by Myatt and other ensemble members as “accessible” (“Cornerstone Theater Company 101”). Like the stage manager, the Man in *A Man Comes to Fowler* is an outsider who watches the action take place, but rarely participates or interacts with the characters. The Man, played by Peter Howard, is primarily a narrative device to tell the story of the town; but, as rehearsals went on, it became clear that there needed to be some form of justification or explanation of his presence in order to enrich the play and add depth to the plot and content. Ultimately, the man became a ghost character who “died in the fog on Golden State Blvd” (*A Man Comes to Fowler*). His spirit remains in this area and he is forced to seek out a sense of home in what was formerly a transitory location between two major cities.

The design of the show developed in conjunction with the script, as well as the location of the park as the performance venue. The park includes an already constructed performance space in the form of a concrete rectangular area, as well as a small stage. In designing the show, Lynn Jeffries chose to use the stage, which was ultimately too small for the large cast of over thirty, as the location for shadow puppets and a projection screen, which many community members cited as one of the most impressive elements of the show. Because Myatt was still writing the script when Jeffries began her design, the stage design needed to be flexible in order to accommodate whatever action occurred in the final production. As Jeffries describes, “I try to just come up with an attractive multi-level space that you could plug various things into because I don’t know what I’m creating so I don’t create anything” (Interview). The levels were created primarily through the use of raisin bins from local farms and packing companies, an example of using community resources for the design of the show. The main area of the stage was kept bare, with a mix of raisin bins and basic boxes provided by Cornerstone upstage that could be moved for basic scenery (tables and chairs, for example).

The main stage is similar to *Our Town* in its simplicity, requiring that the audience imagine, rather than merely see, many scenic elements. However, the shadow puppets were used purposefully to bring in key images from the community, including signs and buildings that would be immediately recognizable to Fowler residents as coming from their town. Also, unlike *Our Town*, the empty stage is not merely empty, signifying theatrical elements or the lack thereof, but carries with it the signifiers of the community as a public space. Everyone in attendance will bring their own meanings and memories of the space depending on their previous

relationships to it. As Marvin Carlson describes in *The Haunted Stage*,

Even when locations have been selected primarily because they were the most convenient or most available space for a performance, they were necessarily to some degree ghosted in the minds of the public that came there by whatever psychic or semiotic role that the space played in the normal course of events, just as the local dentist in a community theatre production may continue to be ghosted by the audience's knowledge of his community life even if he were cast primarily for his handsome appearance or his resonant life. (134)

Prior to Cornerstone's production, the park was used as a hang out spot for Fowler youth, a concert venue, a location for a car show, and many other purposes that are beyond the scope of my interaction with the community.

While the empty stage of *Our Town* emphasizes the lack of scenery and theatrical accoutrements, the empty park stage, surrounded by the constructed scaffolding and bleacher seating conveys a new meaning that builds upon the previous uses of the space. In interviews with community participants, many spoke positively of the newly discovered potential for the park as a performance venue. When asked if the community had changed at all by doing the play, one participant responded that he thought there would be more "community theater" from then on and that the process of finding a venue seems easier because we "just proved we can do it in the park—it can be that simple" (Interview). The production of *A Man Comes to Fowler* transformed the park into a potential performance venue and, for all who attended and participated, will forever inform their interactions with the space.

A Man Comes to Fowler begins with a dark stage, lit only by the puppet screen upon which is projected the rain coated windshield of a car, complete with animated wipers. Audience members familiar with the area immediately recognize the location based on the rainy, foggy

weather, and the signs through the windshield that drivers might see on the road upon entering the Fowler area. The signs were chosen by Lynn Jeffries for their recognizability and aesthetic appeal (in short, because she liked them) (Interview). These first images in the play included a Parlier sign, a town near Fowler that was described by one cast member as a “rough town,” a sign for the town’s local palm reader, and the Fowler sign which is located along old highway 99 and is lit with neon lights at night. These signs garnered a great deal of response as the audience recognized them and seemed to delight in their placement on stage. In each performance, the Palm Reader and Parlier signs were met with laughter by the audience, following a brief pause when the audience recognized them in this new context, while the audience actually applauded the appearance of the Fowler sign.

These signs, the first visual images in the play, are a clear example of community aesthetics, and are signifiers of an area for those who are familiar with it. However, although designer Lynn Jeffries chose the signs for their recognizability and visual interest, she was not, nor can she ever be, aware of the personal meaning that the signs had for Fowler residents and visitors to the area. As Jeffries explains,

I tried to make the choices community specific, but I’m also making choices based on storytelling and my own taste. . . . I can’t channel the community aesthetic because I don’t think there is such a thing, and there’s no way for me to completely subtract myself from the equation and design the set that the community would design if the community knew how to design a set. (Interview)

Jeffries’ perspective is similar to that of the Cornerstone playwright or director, in that they attempt to “channel the community” but recognize their own role as the artist in shaping whatever content they receive, while acknowledging that it is only one version of the story.

Not only is the Cornerstone artist unable to tell every community member's story or to depict a cohesive "community aesthetic," but they can also never know what effect or meaning a signifier might have upon every member of the community. In *Theatre Semiotics*, Marvin Carlson speaks to "the enormous difficulty of determining, from outside any culture, what codes are operating in the culture, as well as their relative importance and their interrelationships" (112). Carlson is referring to attempts to interpret or conduct semiotic analysis of theatrical texts from contexts outside of one's own historical and cultural experience. He continues, "the difficulty need not discourage attempts, but should encourage humility and a recognition that learning to 'read' an old picture in the way it was originally 'meant to be read' may be closer to a pious hope than a particular critical choice" (112). Carlson's advice could apply to community-based performance practitioners who seek to "read" a particular meaning into, or interpretation of, the aesthetics of a community. This is the challenge for an artist in creating a community specific production that is outside of their personal experience. While in the broadest sense, community-based performance works to engage the audience on a local level, by bringing in aesthetic elements from the community itself the phenomenological experience of those elements is rooted in the individual rather than the community as a whole, and so seems impossible to capture from an outside perspective.

Stanton B. Garner's analysis of the "phenomenological attitude" as choosing "the perspectival over the universal; it seeks to ground the general in the local instance" (*Bodied Spaces* 5), is reflective of Cornerstone's creative process and philosophy. The challenge of perspective remains illusive and at times daunting when one acknowledges the difficulty of

further interpreting the individual experience within the communal even while working within a “local instance.” Anthony P. Cohen approaches the challenge of interpreting communal symbols by focusing less on the personal meanings behind the symbols and more on their communal usage. As he states, “symbols do not so much express meaning as give us the capacity to make meaning” (15). He continues:

Culture, constituted by symbols, does not impose itself in such a way as to determine that all its adherents should make the same sense of the world. Rather, it merely gives them the capacity to make sense and, if they tend to make a similar kind of sense it is not because of any deterministic influence but because they are doing so with the same symbols. The quintessential referent of community is that its members make, or believe they make, a similar sense of things either generally or with respect to specific and significant interests, and, further, that they think that that sense may differ from one made elsewhere. (16)

Therefore, what distinguishes communities is their use of symbols, but this does not imply that all community members ascribe the same meanings to the symbols in their interactions with them.

Cohen’s description of the use of symbols in communities relieves some of the burden of responsibility for the Cornerstone artist to “get it right,” if one acknowledges that there is no one right answer or interpretation. However, there still remains the difficulty of choosing symbols to represent the community in the first place, thus Jeffries’ reluctance to claim a notion of “community aesthetics” in her design process. It seems to be something of a gamble when choosing symbols from the community to bring into the design and therefore the rehearsal and production process become the test of whether the designer chose well. It’s a question of whether or not the jokes will land or the choices will be recognized by the audience of so-called experts from the community, either as participants in the process or as audience members. In the case of

A Man Comes to Fowler, based on the audience's response of laughter and applause upon the appearance of the signs, it seems that Jeffries chose well. However, as an outside observer, it's impossible to know if the applause and laughter were based on a universal interpretation or whether each audience member had their own reason for responding, one of which might be group pressure. In the case of the Parlier sign, there did seem to be a discrepancy in the response based upon the individual's relationship to the town. Whereas one community participant who lived in Parlier spoke of its "roughness" with a sense of pride, Jeffries remembers an encounter with another participant who, upon seeing the Parlier sign for the first time responded with incredulity at its inclusion in the play. This mixed reaction to the sign might be seen as transgressive in the sense that its place in the opening sequence of the play provokes a recognition of the proximity of the two towns and the applause might foster a larger sense of community beyond just Fowler, to include the broader Central Valley.

The opening sequence of *A Man Comes to Fowler* ends abruptly with the sound of a car crash and a blackout. Immediately following, a spotlight comes up on the Man who stands on an empty stage, looks around and at the audience and begins speaking: "Fowler, California... This is what I've learned" (*A Man Comes to Fowler*). He then continues with the basic information of the town, the meaning behind the name, and the year of its founding. When he gets to the ethnic demographics of the people, beginning with "Latino," the chorus enters from all directions to finish the list and disrupt the Man's isolation. The relationship between the chorus and the Man was initially unclear in the script and still might be interpreted in a number of different ways. Operating much like a Greek chorus, these performers respond to and correct the Man, acting as

a kind of ombudsman for the narration of their town. This relationship was developed over the rehearsal process, and the initial script had the Man speaking a great deal more lines that were later given to the chorus. These changes were made in an effort to empower the community participants to tell the story of the town, rather than an outsider, which mirrors the role of Cornerstone in the Fowler community, and, more specifically, Julie Marie Myatt as a playwright.

Myatt's reflection on the process of writing *A Man Comes to Fowler* speaks to the challenges that she faced as an outsider and as someone whose experience differed greatly from many in the Fowler community. Myatt describes herself as an "Army Brat" who was always moving during her childhood and so never really felt connected to one location. While she had written community-based plays before with Cornerstone during the Justice Cycle (*Someday* 2008), Myatt found it easier to write a play about a community based on a topic rather than a location. When speaking about Fowler, Myatt stated that she "didn't have an emotional connection because she was never connected to a place" ("Writing in a Community Context"). For her, writing about a town necessarily implied a rootedness to a place and, because she never had that, Myatt felt unqualified to tell this kind of story.

Her view would evolve over the course of the production as she came to realize that the conflation of roots and stability was, in many instances, a false one. When asked if, after working on this production, she had a better sense of how place-based communities operate, Myatt responded, "I think that just because they all live in one place doesn't mean they don't feel like strangers and outsiders. . . . I think I had some assumptions about place, that it is a stabilizing force. . . . I think in some ways it probably is, but life is unstable. So just because you stay in the

same place doesn't mean that rootedness necessarily remains" (Interview). It is understandable that Myatt would speak of roots and stability regarding an agricultural community that literally is rooted to the land. However, during the process of the play, it became clear that not all are necessarily rooted to the land in Fowler. In fact, a good portion of the cast live did not live in Fowler and very few had lived there their whole lives. Although, in the context of the performance, the chorus was meant to represent people who lived in the Fowler community, in reality, the bodies on stage were made up of an Institute student, a woman who lived in Fresno but whose mother lived in Fowler, a Fowler resident originally from Los Angeles county, and others from a diversity of backgrounds. This dynamic raises the issue of authenticity in that, while community-based performance is unique in using the bodies of the community to tell "their" story, in reality, the body of an individual is itself seldom representative of one location or experience.

The relationship of the Man to the chorus does seem to reflect the relationship between Cornerstone and the Fowler community. The chorus is onstage during the entire show, watching and responding to the events that unfold and interjecting scripted information; however, it is the Man who is ultimately responsible for the narration of the story. The Man's leadership role is similar to that of the Cornerstone playwright in that, for example, Myatt felt a great deal of responsibility to "get it right" in terms of an accurate retelling, while ultimately acknowledging that the chosen lens for the play was her own. During the class on "Writing in a Community Context," Howard and Myatt spoke of an "activating question" that the Cornerstone playwright takes with them into whatever community they are working with at the time. While this question

might evolve and change over the course of the play, it informs the initial interactions that the playwright has with the community during story circles, informal conversations, and other kinds of engagement. During the Faith Based Cycle, for example, the question came down to, “how does faith unite and divide us?” (Howard “Writing in a Community Context”). I asked Myatt what her guiding question was when entering Fowler and she told me that it was simply, “Why stay?” (Interview). Given Myatt’s lack of connection with any one place, this question makes a lot of sense and clearly exemplifies the playwright-driven process that Cornerstone has evolved into. Although Myatt did not ask this question to anyone directly, either in story circles or informal conversations, it clearly informed the structure and tone of the play. The overall plot of the play—a Man searching for the meaning in a community that he is now forced to call home—seems to be an attempt to justify the telling of this story about this particular place. In addition to asking, “Why stay?,” Myatt also sought to discover what made Fowler special or different or unique from any other place, which might be why she chose to frame the story in this way. This also explains the reason behind the style of the play, which is more fact-based rather than centered around active narrative scenes.

The Man narrates the major events of the town that were gathered from story circles and research. Interjected into this narration are scenes which activate the events and provide a more personal insight and interpretation of them. Some of the scenes are fictional and somewhat abstract, such as those with ghost characters who comment on the events or express their nostalgia for times gone by. For the most part, the Man does not interact with any other characters in the play, apart from the chorus. However, in these ghost scenes, we see him take a

personal interest in the dialogue by echoing some of the lines spoken by the other characters and imitating the overall tone and style of the scenes. This decision was made in rehearsal as a way to contextualize the man's presence on the stage and in the story. While it wouldn't make sense for him to interact with the living, albeit historical, characters, as a fellow member of the ghost world, it is fitting that there be some connection between him and these other spirit figures. Perhaps they are on a similar journey, trying to find their home or to make a new home in this new community of circumstance.

In addition to these more stylized scenes, Myatt also interspersed more literal representations of the stories provided by community members, primarily in the form of three couples whose lives evolve over the course of the production. John and Alice, Atsushi and Sumiko, and Ed and Lydia, are made up, according to Myatt, of composites of community members (although many community members identified their sources right away). John and Alice, the first couple in the script, are followed from childhood to old age as are Ed and Lydia. Atsushi and Sumiko are a young Japanese couple whose lives are represented in conjunction to the main events associated with Japanese Internment. We see them interned, their life in the camp, their efforts to start over after camp, and again in 1998 when congress passes the Civil Liberties Act apologizing for Internment. John and Alice and Ed and Lydia are more conventional love stories, following their courtships as children and then through their lives as married couples, parents, and members of the community. These scenes put a personal touch on the historical events narrated by the man, by centering them on the lives of real people who lived in the town and experienced the events firsthand. They also provide a nice counterpoint to the

scenes with the ghosts by adding a sense of realism—audience members in the know can look at these couples and compare them to the members of the community whose stories provided their inspiration.

A Man Comes to Fowler differs from other Institute plays because of its similarity to documentary style theater—a genre that Cornerstone tends to stay away from. Unlike previous productions that used community content, gathered through community engagement, Myatt's play relates back many stories that were told to her almost word for word, in addition to information about the town pulled from her own research. The characters are composites of Fowler community contributors to an extent, but some, such as Ed and Lydia (a couple that is followed throughout the play from their meeting as youths to their experience of growing old together) were clearly identified by the members of the audience who lived in Fowler. This negotiation between fictional interpretations of the stories and a direct telling of them with key identifiers (such as the founding of a food bank, used by members of the community) created a certain amount of tension at the start of the play, requiring a decision about who gets named and who remains nameless.

In the first reading of the play, a young female cast member remarked upon this discrepancy, citing her relation to the mayor (recently elected as the first Latino mayor in the town) who was renamed, while certain businesses, such as the packing company owned by an Armenian family had their names retained. Ultimately, the decision was made to take out all of the last names in the play, as well as the names of the businesses. In interviews with community participants, many understood the need to take out the names, while at the same time remained

disappointed that certain people or businesses were not named directly. As one participant explained when asked to describe the overall tone of the play,

I kind of feel bad that they didn't name some of the packing companies, but did keep everyone with a different name . . . and I think it's better when you do it that way—because I know they had mentioned they talked to a lot of different people, and some characters . . . might have been a combination of good and bad from different people. And yet, we were able to recognize these we people in real life—we knew who they were, most of them. (Interview)

This description of the play reflects the discrepancy between the interpretation of the play by community participants and audience members, versus what was intended by Cornerstone artists.

This dynamic speaks to the challenge of representing only a portion of the community, or, as Cornerstone ensemble members like to say, one version of the story.

This play, in particular, presented a tension of what to include and what to leave out because it did read more like a historical documentary rather than a work of fiction. However, unlike documentary theater, there is not an element of fact-checking in this process, especially when there wasn't time for a community reading. In my interview with her, Donnelly discussed this challenge: “I had a lot of anxiety with the first draft of the script naming people by name . . . and I had explicitly said, when I talked with people about what we do, it's not one person's story, it's not documentary” (Interview). For Donnelly, one of the main issues was the discrepancy of messages being related to the community about what would be included in the play and the overall tone. In addition, because there wasn't an opportunity for participants of the story circles to see how they were depicted prior to the final performances, it was especially important that Myatt get the story right, and/or generalize the story more so there wasn't such a large burden of truth put on the play. Ultimately, the script ended up going in the direction that Donnelly had

hoped it would, by taking out the names; however, it still focused largely on some major details given by participants in the story circles and therefore placed a lot of emphasis on those stories in proportion to the rest of the play. There was, therefore, more responsibility placed on Myatt to choose stories that reflect a large portion of the community, in addition to those who showed up to auditions and to the story circles. What made this process even more difficult, was the fact that those who showed up for auditions, were not the people who spoke and shared their stories at the story circles and so Myatt and director Laurie Woolery needed to negotiate these different versions of the community at every stage of the rehearsal process.

Auditions and Rehearsals

Canvassing for auditioners, as well as the auditions themselves, began the day after our arrival to the Institute. Our tools were flyers in English and Spanish, information given in a presentation the day before, as well as a few talking points and words of advice. We were told to try to engage with as many people as possible to get the word out about the show. As Raquel Gutierrez, Manager of Community Partnerships explained, “even if they don’t make it to the end, they’re part of the journey” (“Cornerstone Theater Company 101”). Apart from these tools, it was up to the Institute students to come up with their own “pitch” and responses to questions about the company and the show. We went out in pairs, as individuals, or in groups as large as four or five, with an attempt to include both Spanish and English speakers in each group. Cornerstone and ensemble members referred to our presence as an extra boost of energy and revitalization to the process, based on previous experience with the Institute. Here we were, a group of individuals who had committed four weeks of our lives to learning about Cornerstone

and participating in the process; we were clearly engaged and invested, and so the hope was that our engagement would be infectious for the larger Fowler community. Of course, interest and engagement does not imply expertise, indeed, quite the opposite because our participation in the Institute meant that we had a lot to learn. We were also coming from a variety of experience levels and know-how about the company and community-based performance in general.

A few of the challenges that I noticed in this process of learning by doing, or the blend of theory and praxis in a community-based performance context, were that 1) The Institute students were not fully aware of the development of the Cornerstone mission and values statements and therefore of certain key issues like respect and “valuing the artist in everyone,” and 2) We were not aware of the logistical challenges to the work, but only of the possibilities and the “best case scenarios” (I personally found myself falling into this trap many times over the course of the production). The former was demonstrated most clearly in the rhetoric employed by Institute students when speaking to community members. One of the most common questions that we were asked was, “Why are you here?” Many Fowler residents did not understand why people would commit so much of their time to doing a play about Fowler and naturally they were curious as to why their town had been chosen, and, to a certain extent, what was in it for us.

On the first day in Fowler, Paula Donnelly advised us to stick with the personal when answering this question. However, the personal seemed selfish and in some ways irrelevant when we were trying to convince residents to participate. My personal answer would have focused primarily on this dissertation and the desire to research Cornerstone as a theater company; in truth, the location of the Institute was not very important to me and, I would venture to guess that

the same was true for most of the other Institute students. Perhaps answering truthfully might have been the best response for Fowler residents, but, as far as I could tell, none of us chose this approach. Instead, we focused on what we thought might be the “right” answer, even at the risk of sounding disingenuous. In some instances, these responses were potentially condescending, as Institute students talked about “giving a gift to the community,” as opposed to learning from the community or hearing stories.

The issue of reciprocity, of needing each other in a collaborative partnership in which the performance is not possible without equal sharing from each party, is a difficult one to grapple with and put into practice. Jan Cohen Cruz emphasizes that community-based performance is not about “giving” in the sense of philanthropy and charity programs. As she explains, “community-based art is in distinct contrast to ‘community service,’ bringing to mind a soup kitchen with the well-fed on one side ladling out soup to the hungry who receive it on the other side. This one-directional model is not reciprocal; it does not support meaningful exchange” (*Local Acts* 95). Whereas Cornerstone talks about bridging communities and combining the “artistry of professional and community collaborators” (*Mission Statement*), Institute students might speak of *building* communities and *giving* community collaborators the tools to tell their stories. These are seemingly small distinctions, and yet they greatly alter the overall approach to the community in that the former views all participants as equals, whereas the latter conveys the notion of the professional artist as potential savior who sacrifices their time to serve communities in need.

This is a complicated negotiation of rhetoric and is extremely easy to fall into. In the

initial presentation on the background and basics of Cornerstone, Garcés referenced the use of the term “underserved” communities to describe community-based work, which seems to imply an attempt to serve, as opposed to the more reciprocal notion of collaboration. Indeed, potentially implicit in the search for communities that are not represented in mainstream theater is the assumption that these communities are therefore lacking and that community-based performance is there to fill that gap; an assumption that is founded on one group providing a resource that the other group needs. Of course, this is, to some extent, an issue of semantics and one might argue that, so long as the methodology behind the work is collaborative and reciprocal, the rhetoric is less important and need not be focused on. However, it does explain the confusion on the part of some Institute students as to how to answer the question, “Why are you here?,” especially when the personal response is unrelated to the specifics of the community. It is important to question the possibility of reciprocity in this process and, if this kind of relationship proves impossible, to reassess the value of the work for both professional artists and community collaborators, as well as to develop a more accurate description of the relationship between the two.⁹

In order to remain reciprocal, it seems that the professional artist needs to gain as much in the way of a positive experience and newly acquired knowledge as the community collaborator. In order to provide this experience, the professional artist needs to have a genuine interest in the

⁹ In an email exchange on May 10, 2013, Paula Donnelly included a clarification by Garcés as to his use of the term “underserved”: “Michael adamantly does see the intention of the work as reciprocal collaboration and not as an attempt to serve. While the phrase ‘underserved communities’ is used in describing the work we do—much more frequently by some than others—Cornerstone’s intention is not to serve but to share an artistic experience and in the process create good theater wherein the community contributions to the play—in story, advice, presence and otherwise—are what in fact add to the excellence of the product.”

viewpoints of the community, as well as the ability to convey that interest. Institute students have a genuine interest in learning about Cornerstone and committing to the production process, which may or may not develop into a genuine interest in the community within which they are working. That being said, the Institute students clearly have a vested interest in the process of putting together an Institute show and, in some ways, are gaining as much as, if not more than, the community collaborators through their participation. Indeed, the Institute students literally paid for the educational service provided by the Institute, which raises the question of whether the community then becomes more of a pedagogical tool in this process. Regardless of the personal reasons for participating, Fowler residents, for the most part, viewed Cornerstone as a unit and it wasn't until later in the process (if ever) that participants were able to distinguish between the students and the teachers.

The second challenge, that of reconciling the logistics of the very truncated Institute production with the desire to include everyone, also began at the start of the audition process. Institute students were told to canvass and engage everyone but we had a limited understanding of the time commitment required from participants in the play and of the reasons behind some of the basic rules, such as only casting children who were eight years or older. We reveled at our abilities to bring people to the auditions, all the way through casting, only to learn days later that they dropped out or just stopped coming due to reasons outside of our control (such as outside responsibilities, lack of initial understanding about the process, or trouble at home). Cornerstone members emphasized that we were not social workers and were there to put on a show, but it was easy to lose sight of that in the frenzy of activity and emotions during the production process.

One of the most frustrating examples of this for myself and other Institute students was exemplified by a young man, Mike,¹⁰ who decided to audition for the play spontaneously after visiting the library. He seemed interested in every aspect of the production, and on the audition sheet checked off every box in terms of how he might want to participate in the production. After the call backs, he told me a bit about his life and that he'd just moved into town three months before. He saw the show as a chance to be a part of the community where, as he explained, "I'm an outsider because I'm white." According to him he was stopped by the police six times the first day in Fowler. It seemed clear, at least to many of the Institute students, that this young man was seeking some kind of community and that the production might be the perfect opportunity for him to find it. As with *communitas*, a Cornerstone production process makes everyone potentially equals, disrupting the norms of society and creating a new, albeit liminal, location where change can occur. In this space, Mike could play a role that was unlike the outcast persona that was his label in his everyday life. He was given a speaking role with a good deal of emotional content and his scene partner, who happened to be an Institute student, began to work with him to learn the lines and develop their roles. About a week into the rehearsal process, however, Mike stopped showing up, after arriving late almost every day. We were unable to contact him and, when he finally did show up, learned that he was having trouble at home. There were clearly factors outside of our control but the most frustrating one was that, while Mike seemed to enjoy the rehearsals, long as they were, and the company of the rest of the cast, he clearly did not seem to "value" the process and the level of commitment required to see the

¹⁰ The name was changed to preserve his anonymity as much as possible.

production through all the way.

I say “seem to” because I can only go on our interpretation of what was happening. It may be that Mike didn’t actually care about the play, or that he was unable to commit due to circumstances that we weren’t even aware of. After we had not heard from him for five days, Laurie Woolery made the decision to assign his roles to other members of the cast, demonstrating the need for flexibility during the rehearsal process. When he returned during tech, Woolery, Nikki Hyde (the stage manager), and MC Earl (ensemble actor) took Mike aside to speak with him and figure out if he could commit to the remainder of the show. The decision was made to keep Mike in the show with a walk-on role. There were mixed reactions to this decision by members of the cast, Institute and ensemble/staff. Some felt that it was important to allow Mike to return to the show because they felt that he clearly needed the community that it provided. Others, such as Sikes-Thornton, argued that we weren’t doing him any favors by letting him return and that it sent a message to the rest of the cast that it did not matter how much time you put into the process, as long as you showed up for the final performances. As she explained in an interview, “I don’t know that he learned anything from that experience, and I actually think that it devalues everyone who has shown up for every rehearsal. And, maybe that’s not our place to teach those lessons, but you’ve got a kid who doesn’t get much love and parenting, obviously, and someone has to help him figure out that if he wants to be committed to something, he needs to show up and he needs to do the work” (Interview). Sikes-Thornton’s negotiation between the desire to *teach* with the acknowledgement that this might not be her place, or the place of Cornerstone, speaks to the challenge of this kind of work.

Although Cornerstone claims that it is more about art-making than it is about social service, the creation of this new community made up of community collaborators and professional artists carries with it the burden of community defined by each individual. As previously stated, both Cornerstone members and Fowler residents alike defined community—based on action and commitment—on the idea of helping each other in service of the community. While to some extent, this is manifested in the process of working together to put on the production, I believe that there is also the potential for a level of intimacy that creates new kinds of relationships beyond the creative. When asked to define community, Nikiko Masumoto referred to relationships within groups as a kind of spectrum, based on the level of intimacy within them. She explains, “There’s a dynamic of knowing people but not knowing people that differentiates community from like, family or from a public. I think anonymity is part of what defines a public—public space, public forum—whereas community is between; where people know each other on some level but there’s also some level of unknown” (Interview). For some, the community of Fowler might fit this definition, in that they were aware of other members but might not know them personally. This conception echoes Benedict Anderson’s approach to the developments of nations as “imagined communities.” Although Fowler has only approximately 5,500 residents, the relationship that they have with one another mirrors that of Anderson’s nation.

The community of participants in *A Man Comes to Fowler* seems even more imagined because the majority did not know one another prior to working on the show, and many were not actual permanent residents of the city. Their connection to the city, however, became somewhat

irrelevant during the production of the play, because Cornerstone's goal was to create a *version* of the community's story that anyone with a connection might be able to tell. For some, this connection was built over generations of residency in the area, for others, the connection was through family members or was brand new, due to a recent move. When these strangers began working together on the play that was supposedly about "their" community, they developed a new connection that might evolve their relationships from imagined to real. This connection is based on shared sacrifice of time and energy, as well as artistic creation. In interviews with community participants, some spoke of this sacrifice as a moment when they realized that they were committed—as though they passed the point of no return. One participant referred to his reluctance to participate and his "inability" to drop out. As he describes it, "I sort of backed in [to the audition process], then I got the role and I kept thinking, 'where's the night that you could drop out?' . . . And then, the next thing you know, we're doing dress rehearsals and then the performance" (Interview). When asked at what point he realized that he was actually in the show, he responded that it was during one of the rehearsals where he didn't know his lines and he was so frustrated at himself for his lack of preparation. For this participant, the moment of full commitment occurred at the same moment of recognition that he was invested in doing the work of preparing for the show. It was a personal, not just communal, investment.

Most of the participants that I talked to referred to the huge time commitment of the show as being the main reason for their reluctance to join the cast. The interviewee quoted above is a farmer and the production took place in the middle of harvest season. Other participants were small business owners who worked long hours already and so the rehearsals took up every

additional free time that they had. Cornerstone ensemble and staff work to be flexible and accommodating of everyone's schedules and previous commitments. Nikki Hyde, stage manager for *A Man Comes to Fowler*, cited "clarity and communication" as the necessary qualifications for working with a community cast (Interview). While she affirms that the same is true for professional performers, it's especially important that the community cast feel able and willing to talk with her about their issues while remaining clear about what is required of them at every step of the rehearsal process. The first rehearsal/read through was challenging for me to watch because, after riding the high of the audition process and our abilities to successfully recruit people to the cast, Hyde's explanation of the grueling and extremely fast-paced rehearsal process made me worried (justifiably) that some would choose not to, or be unable to, participate. Indeed, as the rehearsal process continued, Woolery, Hyde, and Myatt adjusted many elements of the production to accommodate those who dropped out for various reasons. These logistical elements play a large part in the creative choices made during the rehearsal process.

After recognizing that the people who auditioned were not, for the most part, the same people who contributed to the story circles, Myatt and Woolery worked to incorporate some of the new talent and personalities into the show. These changes include: the addition of a new scene for a local writer and farmer, cheers to highlight the local cheerleaders and beloved Redcats, and cameos for a young boy with an amazing Michael Jackson routine and an adorable little girl as the California Raisin. However, the effort to include local talent is not so easy as merely inserting it into the play, the talent must also be able to participate and succeed. For example, the girl who eventually played the California Raisin was initially given a speaking role

that required her to be onstage for the entirety of the show, despite Cornerstone's policy of only casting children eight years or older. It became clear after the first read through that this was too much responsibility for someone of her age and, after a great amount of deliberation on Woolery's part, she was kept in the show with a brief but memorable role. The cheerleading scenes proved a challenge due to scheduling issues and the majority of the cheers were developed by Institute students and Woolery. Many of the roles that seemed just right for certain people had to be given to other actors and cross racial casting was chosen over writing out the roles entirely.

This issue of cross racial casting is prevalent in theater, however, for a field that focuses on empowering people to tell their story, it becomes especially important to analyze casting choices. In *A Man Comes to Fowler*, the main concern for racial casting occurred with the Japanese characters and the story of Internment that was a major event in the region. Julie Myatt included these stories based on story circles, one-on-one interviews and conversations with members of the Buddhist church, as well as her own personal interest in the subject. However, when it came time for auditions, very few Japanese Americans joined the cast, leaving several roles unfilled. After attempting to find Japanese Americans to fill the roles, the decision was made to cast Institute students as opposed to taking out the roles altogether. When asked about the role of cross racial casting in Cornerstone, Gracés stated that, while there is no strict rule or policy in place, it is important that these decisions are made with a good deal of forethought and sensitivity. As he explained, "Whenever you're casting, it's about making choices, and I think what makes art rigorous is about being really specific in terms of your intuition and also your

rational thought about why you're making choices you're making" (Interview). For Garcés, casting choices should be made in order to tell the story in the best way possible. Sometimes that leads to "color-blind" casting and sometimes it seems necessary to maintain racial similarities between character and performer.

Nikiko Masumoto, who was cast in the role of Atsushi, the Japanese American woman who was interned, wondered if anyone in the audience noticed that she is half Japanese/half white. She recognized the hostility that exists in the Japanese community regarding people of mixed races but applauded Cornerstone's inclusions of these Internment stories, despite the lack of Japanese bodies to tell them. She looks at the issue more broadly stating, "I think it does amazing work in thinking about memory, and who has the capability and availability to remember and tell a story. And I think it does get into dangerous territory, which I love, of acknowledging difference, but moving on so that stories are still represented" (Interview). For Nikiko, the discrepancy between the body of the performer and the story of the role they are playing is, in and of itself, a statement. In *A Man Comes to Fowler*, a community-based production that sought to include members of the community in the telling of their shared story, this statement is one of absence and begs the question, why didn't more Japanese Americans and, as will be explained later, Armenian Americans, become involved in the production? For the Internment stories, it was fortunate that there was some representation of Japanese Americans in some of the roles. Nikiko admits that she might have had an issue had there been no casting of Japanese Americans at all in the play. There also was representation of these stories in the script due to the role that some played in the story circles and engagement with Myatt, Woolery, and

Donnelly prior to the production process. However, another cross racial casting choice with the characters of the three Armenian brothers who founded a packing company in the area, reflected the loss, not only of Armenian bodies, but also of their stories.

The Armenian American community has a strong presence in Fowler, with members sitting on the school board, the city council and employing many residents with local businesses. Despite this presence in civic life, and attempts toward engagement, Armenian Americans did not participate in *A Man Comes to Fowler*, either in the story circles or in the production. This absence was felt by participants in the play, as well as by audience members and it seemed that this lack of engagement was not unique to the production but rather extended to other forms of community life as well. On opening night I spoke with a white Fowler resident who asked pointedly if the Armenian community had helped at all to put together the production and then seemed chagrined when I responded in the negative. A community participant remarked that their absence was perhaps due to the fact that Armenians took over the land from the Japanese farmers during Internment, a statement that was not backed up with fact. Another community performer mentioned the participation of Armenian Americans in the Civil Rights movement at a time when non-white Americans of all ethnicities worked to better their position in society as a comparison to their position in Fowler today in which they are isolated but economically powerful.¹¹ He describes their absence in these terms, “It was sort of like a page got left out, and it wasn’t anyone’s fault, but it just got left out” (Interview). To continue the metaphor, in *A Man Comes to*

¹¹ I am aware of the potentially essentializing use of “they” in reference to Armenian Americans in Fowler however, this echoes their position in relation to the production, both in terms of Cornerstone and other community participants. Their presence in Fowler became, in many ways, mysterious and impersonal as we heard about them only from third parties.

Fowler, the signs of the ripped page were still present and noticeable. The Armenian American community is clearly a strong presence in *Fowler*, and those I spoke to had mixed reactions and responses to the fact that they did not participate in the production.

In this instance, the documentary style enabled some reference to the Armenian American contribution to the *Fowler* community by including the story of the three brothers who founded the National Raisin Company (although the name was taken out). In casting the three brothers, Woolery chose a complete mix of ethnicities, body types, and generations, which made for a somewhat comedic stage picture even as it highlighted the lack of Armenian bodies in those roles. For those familiar with the story, this absence would be immediately apparent, whereas for those who did not know the original ethnicity of the brothers, it might only be a funny moment in the play, especially as the men were wearing 1970s clothing, complete with bell bottoms. The inability of Cornerstone to engage with the Armenian community exemplifies the challenge of fully representing a community which, like most, is made up of sub-communities with their own rules and modes of socializing. Because of the truncated process of the Institute, and Cornerstone's position as outsiders in a location with a great deal of history, it is impossible to know all of the inner workings of the community, as well as its politics and power dynamics. The audition and rehearsal process subverted these dynamics to a certain extent by casting people who might not feel connected to the community initially, while unknowingly reifying others through inclusion or exclusion of key groups.

The tone of the rehearsal room in a Cornerstone production is set by the director, as with a conventional theater production. In this case, Laurie Woolery commanded the room with

humor and a sense of intimacy. When speaking to the cast she called everyone “friends,” which allowed for a sense of equality and fun during a grueling rehearsal schedule, especially in the heat of the Central Valley. Woolery also made a point of whispering certain directions to cast members as if it were a secret in order to raise the intimacy of the scene, create mystery, and make that performer feel as though they were special. When interviewed about their perception of the production process, several community participants referred to Woolery’s creative energy and her positive spirit that immediately put them at ease even as they were attempting something that was new and potentially terrifying as performing a role in front of strangers. One man stated that Laurie was probably one of the more creative people he’d ever met, “with the patience of Job and the wisdom to go along with it. She was very good at working with all different groups of people, from very young to very old” (Interview).

In the second rehearsal, Woolery focused on movement and taught blocking with fun exercises that worked to put everyone at ease and begin the process of building a team. This movement based approach extended to the rest of the process and facilitated the large group numbers and fast-paced style of the show in which scenes overlap with one another. However, it also meant that there was necessarily less time for a conventional “table talk” rehearsal in which members of the cast could ask questions about the script, their characters, or feel completely free to critique elements of the play that they might not agree with. Again, some of this might be covered during a public reading, but there wasn’t time for that in this Institute. There were, however, a number of key moments in which members of the cast, one member in particular, spoke out about their concerns or interpretations of the script. Myatt included a poem written by

Jose Montoya that describes some of the beauty of the natural environment from the perspective of a grape picker. During the rehearsal of this poem, a cast member asserted that she interpreted its meaning as being about “lazy Mexicans,” an opinion that makes sense given the conflict between immigrant workers and Anglo Americans in the region. Such a comment demanded attention from Woolery and Myatt and the staging reflected these concerns by having the entire cast, excluding the reader of the poem and the Man, stylistically picking grapes.

Woolery asked Nikiko Matsumoto to come up with some choreography for this scene, based on her knowledge of farming in the region and her background in performance at UT Austin. As the cast started to learn these movements, there was some conflict as those with backgrounds in farming took issue with the specifics of the tools used or applied techniques. This rehearsal exemplified the community-based approach more than any other because Woolery was truly looking for expertise from the community; however, this rehearsal also required a great deal of negotiation of multiple voices, all with strong opinions, in, as usual, a short amount of time. This rehearsal depicted the possibilities and the challenges of community-based performance. It was a chance where everyone with a background in farming could contribute, but there was also limited time and so ultimately, Woolery relied on Nikiko as the expert to lead the particulars of the movement. This decision is understandable given the multiplicity of voices and time pressure, but it might also represent a lost opportunity for the cast to collaborate on a shared image. That being said, this scene was extremely powerful for both the audience and Cornerstone team. Woolery included a song that was suggested by the woman with the initial critique of the scene, providing a new perspective to the scene and response to the poem. The song, “Brown

Eyed Children of the Sun,” written by Daniel Valdez in 1973 for the Chicano movement, refers to the challenges faced by migrant workers as a group, contrasting with the individualistic approach of the poem which focused on one worker’s interpretation of the natural world.

The scene with the poem progressed collaboratively, even though not everyone in the cast was able to contribute; however, the Cornerstone director does not necessarily work collaboratively at every stage of the production. One community participant expressed his confusion about this element of the creative process, stating, “One of the big questions I have is, how collaborative can we be?” (Interview). While Woolery might have wanted to include everyone’s voices and opinions in the final product of the show, the time constrictions, and perhaps her directing style, meant that there were not always suitable opportunities for cast members to express their opinions or contribute to the overall vision of the production. This process would be very different for a director with a different approach to directing and collaboration, which is similar to the role of the playwright in Cornerstone. While the majority of the content and tone of the piece might be “based” in a community, the style and specific approach to the content ultimately comes from the individual artist.

The director of a Cornerstone production needs to understand that “the community member is an artist with equal voice and contribution to the process,” however, they are also the leader and are responsible for giving feedback and ensuring that everyone performs to the best of their abilities. As explained earlier, Cornerstone’s approach is not necessarily pedagogical but is instead oriented towards the goal of putting on a quality production. While the director makes the effort to find a common language, without using theater jargon that might be alienating to some,

there is not basic tutorial in theater speak or concepts. Cornerstone utilizes “mutual mentorship” in the rehearsal room by blending professional artists with less seasoned performers. The ensemble actors in *A Man Comes to Fowler*, Peter Howard and MC Earl, demonstrated this by providing advice when solicited and setting a good example. Howard made a point of asking questions that he surely knew the answer to already, but that might be important for the larger group to be aware of. In this way, he avoided talking down to people or assuming a lack of knowledge from the outset. Simultaneously, members of the cast were teaching the ensemble and Institute actors about the community, such as how to pronounce certain words

Despite these efforts, there were still a few participants who in interviews expressed confusion around certain elements of the production or basic theater concepts. Although Cornerstone generally does not provide a glossary of terms or basic theater tutorial, one of the participants told me that she would have appreciated receiving some introduction to theater, especially when terms continued to be thrown around without a definition, such as “strike,” “stage left and right,” and “tech.” Like the Institute students, community participants were learning by doing, but because the process was so limited in terms of time, there were not always the opportunity for teaching moments. In addition, it was not always understood what the roles were for everyone in the rehearsal room. While it was clear that Laurie Woolery was the director, Julie Myatt the playwright, and Nikki Hyde the stage manager, the Institute students were never really introduced as such, apart from their individual roles in the play. Indeed, it was never really clear that the community participants were aware of the Institute, which seems contrary to the element of transparency that the company values. Cornerstone is in the community not only to

put on a production, but also to use the production process as a learning tool for outsiders. There might be a missed opportunity in not sharing that information with the community and allowing them to partake in some of the Institute events and share their knowledge beyond the production process. Even a short talk back or informal conversation following the final performance would allow for shared feedback between Cornerstone, the Institute students, and the community. As it stood, there was a final class led by the Masumoto family, attended by Cornerstone ensemble and staff members and Institute students, as well as a reunion a few months later in which attendees viewed the video of the production. Donnelly attempted to get feedback through a survey that community participants could fill out at the reunion, but apparently there was, as usual with voluntary surveys, a very low response rate.

Feedback and Final Thoughts

The challenge of quantifying or qualifying community-based work is always present and is often the subject of pre-conferences or panels for applied theater scholars and practitioners. Cornerstone relies on outside funding to keep their productions accessible by providing pay-what-you-can tickets, ultimately requiring that they provide some kind of proof as to the value of their work. For the most part, Cornerstone grant writers rely on firsthand accounts to back up the work and, in my post-production interviews, participants were quick to respond positively to effect of the production on the community and on themselves personally. In terms of the documentary style of the show, one participant explained, “It’s gotten people aware of what’s happened in the past, and that past brings people together” (interview 8/16/11). Although not everyone in Fowler is a long time resident, this participant speaks of a new shared history that

people can reflect on. Another member of the cast spoke of the scenes about Internment in more pedagogical terms, along the lines of: history won't be repeated if it's remembered. However, he also warned that Cornerstone didn't need to go further in its depiction of these moments of conflict "that was a really sad time in history, and I can only hope that it never is repeated. It was a sad time especially for Fowler cause it wasn't a big town, everyone knew everybody, and everybody had their own reaction . . . but it didn't need to go further" (Interview). When asked to explain this response, he argued that it would merely make everyone feel uncomfortable, even though those moments in the play were still effective in provoking a sense of guilt. (The community actor who played the Internment agent continuously apologized for her performance throughout the production.) This mixed response reflects the understanding that it is important to reflect historical truth, in all its awkwardness, while still leaving room for a positive communal experience. It also begs the question: when is it okay to go further with the story?; and, is this really the role of the outsider or does it need to be conducted by members of the community?

Another response by a cast member to the production, though positive, expressed his frustration at the lack of attendance and participation by certain sub-groups within the community; namely, Yonsei (fourth generation) Japanese Americans. While he applauded the inclusion of the Internment story in the play, as a way of creating shared empathy and understanding, he was also disappointed that the younger generation didn't share in what might presumably be even more relevant for them and their families. As he explained,

Japanese Americans communities clearly struggled with Internment for years and years, and they're still struggling with it today but they don't realize how they're struggling with it. And that's where the play could help illuminate that . . . you know, bring life to it. . . . I was wishing more Yonsei were there so they could stop and think, this is what my

grandparents went through, who are probably dead. So where's the story? Who has the story? Who has this collective knowledge? (Interview)

This response speaks to the missed opportunities of the production to reach certain groups within the community. Although the sharing of stories from the community might create a kind of "collective knowledge," the intimacy and localized nature of theater limits that collective to those who participated and attended the performance. It is then up to those witnesses to continue to share with those who were absent.

When asked to speculate on the long-term impact of *A Man Comes to Fowler* on the community, participants spoke of both their personal development, as well as that of the community. One member, who felt like something of an outsider in Fowler prior to his involvement in the production, and who suffered from a personal injury that forced him to retire early from a career in technical theater, explained, "I have learned that if I set my mind out to do something, there isn't anything I cannot accomplish without the right help... I can go out into the community and hold my head up high. And if somebody wants some attention, I'm there to help them with their needs" (8/16/11). This participant internalized his role in the production as the Wise Old Man and plans to carry it into his daily interactions with other members of the community. The renewed sense of worth was also echoed by another member of the cast who suffered from a major back injury. The act of creating a production seemed to have a positive effect on the self-worth of many of the participants.

One of the most common responses regarding the positive effect of the production on the community was in reference to the children who participated. The adults that I interviewed felt that these children gained confidence, especially those who were shy at the beginning of the

production. One of the most touching moments was in the “opening night ritual” in which everyone involved in the production shares their favorite moment of the play or rehearsal process. Two young boys in the cast started crying as they described how much the play meant to them and their love of everyone else in the play. There were also several younger members who spoke of their newfound confidence and “their ability to do anything that they set their minds to.” These responses speak to the very real sense of empowerment that might be gained in a community-based performance project in which members take the risk of performing in public and acting as representatives for their community.

In addition to these individual experiences, several community participants also spoke of the empowerment of the city of Fowler as a whole, due to the coverage that the production received. As with many other small towns in the Central Valley, Fowler is overshadowed by large cities such as Fresno, San Francisco, and Los Angeles, and is often overlooked by media outlets and politicians; unless a crime was committed in the area. *A Man Comes to Fowler* garnered attention with news articles in the *Fresno Bee* and brought audience members from all over the region. Not to mention that the Cornerstone Summer Institute brought students from all over the country (Minnesota, Wisconsin, Washington, Massachusetts, South Carolina) and even the United Kingdom. In this way, the production added legitimacy to the region and a sense that the city of Fowler was worth paying attention to. As one participant explained,

The valley is very unique, and I think it’s quite common for rural communities, small communities—they don’t trust their stories. So, it takes outsiders to legitimize it . . . it means other people care about the story, it must be an important story. . . . I talked to one community member and he said, ‘We in Fowler never get on the front page, at least not for something positive’. (Interview)

It seems that for this small community, the outside attention was essential to the validation of the community. Although many members were already proud of their small city, its schools, churches and clubs, the focus centered on it by people from across the state and even the country in some ways extended the scope of the community and included it in the collective (universal?) conversation.

Although everyone that I interviewed spoke positively of Cornerstone, some were more conservative in their speculations on the long-term impact of the production. While the community created by the production was extremely friendly and seemingly intimate, one member also recognized its ephemerality. When asked if she thought the relationships would continue after the production, she responded: “I don’t know if all the relationships will continue as strongly as they are right now, but we’ve all made new friends, new acquaintances, and I don’t think we’ll ever lose that. If we see each other somewhere we’ll say hi, whereas before we probably wouldn’t” (Interview). This cast member seems realistic in her understanding of the relationships that developed over the course of the production. Returning to Nikiko Masumoto’s spectrum ranging from the public to the family, the participants in *A Man Comes to Fowler* began as mutual residents of the same public space, and maybe of the same community. Over the course of the production, some started to use the term “family” to describe their relationships with one another as a sense of intimacy and collective experience developed. Following the production, however, although the relationships will never dissolve completely, they might slip back into communal, rather than familial boundaries, although now they are real as opposed to imagined. In this way, the production might be compared to the concept of *communitas* in that, in

the liminal creative space of the rehearsal and performance process, boundaries were broken and everyone took the risk of performing in public. Once the ritual of the production was over, a sense of normalcy returned as people continued their daily lives. The power dynamics of the community shifted to include a new group with a new sense of common ground based on their experience within the production.

As with every community, even in the production of *A Man Comes to Fowler*, there are always those who slip through the cracks and remain outsiders. In my perspective, this person was Mike, the young man who was almost dropped from the show after failing to attend the majority of rehearsals. Mike was an outsider to the community prior to being cast in the show, and I believe that he remained one as a member of the cast. As with other Institute students, I wanted him to succeed and I know that I perhaps viewed him more as a social service project than an artist and expert in the community. I hoped that he might continue to find mentorship from some of the older male cast members who I knew, based on their own personal experiences, might be able to relate to him and provide some advice. However, when I shared this concern with them in my post-production interviews, they had trouble remembering who Mike was, causing me to believe that he was not included in the “family” of the cast in the same way that other, more “suitable” members were. I don’t fault these cast members for forgetting Mike. As previously mentioned, the production required a huge sacrifice of time and energy from people who already had very full lives. I also don’t fault anyone working with Cornerstone for the same reasons: there just wasn’t enough time to give everyone a lot of individual attention. The cast was treated as individuals but the needs of the production were the main concern. This example

speaks to the limitations of community building within a temporary production process. While I hope that Mike took something from the process on a personal level, I cannot say that the experience changed him from outsider in the community to full-fledged member.

There is not an independent rubric for success in a community-based performance production, outside of a company's mission statement or specific goals. Cornerstone's claim of building bridges "between and within diverse communities" does not necessitate a particular political outcome or kind of constructed community. The social impact of a production might be felt in new relationships across and within communities, and the sharing of knowledge and experiences that raise awareness of other perspectives. Many of the participants in *A Man Comes to Fowler* considered themselves to be outsiders from the start and the production worked to bridge these differences without erasing them. It remains to be seen if this community of participants exists in the long-term outside of Cornerstone's influence; however, there is no doubt that the staging of Fowler throughout the production constructed a new vision of the community for the duration of the process.

In writing about Cornerstone, Sonja Kuflinec asserts that the kind of community that it defines and performs is never uniform or homogenous. She argues: "No community is monolithic; part of the task that Cornerstone sets itself is finding multiple voices within a community nevertheless defined by what they have in common. The paradox of their work is that it begins with commonality in order to invite difference" (183). While the community engagement process of *A Man Comes to Fowler* certainly invited and encouraged difference, the final version of the production was representative of a more unified vision created in the

rehearsal process and led by Myatt and Woolery. The example of the Summer 2011 Institute demonstrates the complexity of constructing communities of difference in a production process which requires some sort of common vision: Whether it is through shared commitment of time and energy; understanding of the material; acceptance of the parameters for community defined at the outset; or, the sense of belonging and communality that many (not all) experienced by the end of the process. It also exemplifies some of the limitations of community as a construct to include and represent everyone; there will always be those outside of the boundaries no matter how openly community is defined. Lastly, this example demonstrates the need for reflection at every stage of the process to ensure that different voices and visions are represented, even (especially?) for a company as established and successful as Cornerstone Theater Company. Ensemble members are clearly aware of this last point but this chapter shows some of the logistical challenges that might intercede in the day to day engagement and approach to community in any community-based performance project.

Chapter Two

Choosing Ingredients: Twenty Years of Cooking Swamp Gravy

Swamp Gravy began in 1991 as a seemingly far-fetched idea to revitalize the local economy of Colquitt, a poverty stricken area in southern Georgia. Colquitt resident Joy Jinks and director Richard Owen Geer, PhD (Northwestern '93) came up with the idea to use local stories as the content for a play in order to build pride in the community and attract attention and money to the town. The Colquitt/Miller Arts Council has since developed and funded a wide range of social and cultural projects in the area, including a series of murals and the New Life Learning Center for Children. The Swamp Gravy Play Committee produces a new play every year, attracting millions of dollars in revenue from tourism. This chapter examines the evolution of these plays over the last two decades, as the company negotiates the tension between economic concerns and social change.

Swamp Gravy is a unique example of community-based performance because it is rooted in one geographical community; unlike companies like Cornerstone that work in different communities for almost every project. I argue that the challenge of working in one location with a somewhat fixed community, along with the discrepancy between the goal of developing a new cultural community based on inclusivity, and bringing in outside money to the local economy, complicates a simplistic notion of the methods behind community-based performance.

Throughout the years, those who work on Swamp Gravy remain committed to the goal of creating new plays based on the stories of residents in the Miller County area. This aspect of the production process is firmly rooted in the tenets of community-based performance that require a

play be “based” in the community in which it is performed.¹ However, the current audience of a Swamp Gravy production is made up largely of tourists to the community, a factor that certainly aids in revitalizing the community economically, while decreasing the cultural and social role of the plays for local residents. Many of the Swamp Gravy participants that I spoke to referred to the lack of local awareness about, and attendance of, the Swamp Gravy plays. As Debbie Sloan, long-time performer explained, “We have more people that come from out of town—and people here will tell you that it’s like, since it’s here, it can’t be that good” (Interview 2/5/12). Lastly, although some directors, such as Geer and Gerard Stropnický (director for Swamp Gravy from 1999-2002, and then again in 2009-2011), focused their attention on bringing African American and lower class members of the Miller County community into Swamp Gravy productions, all of the productions have a majority white cast (albeit still made up of the community), and this is only exacerbated in productions that make little or no extra attempt towards integration.

These elements demonstrate that, while Swamp Gravy might be labeled community-based performance in that it uses the stories and local talent from the community in the production process, these methods do not automatically ensure that the plays will be inclusive of all members of the community (residents of the area) in terms of audience or cast members.

Furthermore, Swamp Gravy constructs and performs community around economic incentive,

¹ The term “community-based performance” encompasses a wide diversity of approaches, styles and methodologies. Geer developed the term “community performance” to reference the kind of work that he was doing in Swamp Gravy at its inception. Geer uses the term Community Performance to refer to a particular practice and methodology that he developed through his work with Swamp Gravy and Community Performance International. In this article, I use the term Community Performance, only when referencing Geer’s work specifically. I will use the term community-based performance to refer to the field in general. For a definition and description of Community Performance as Geer intends it, see: Richard Geer, “Of the People. By the People and For the People: The Field of Community Performance.” Also: Richard Geer and Jules Corriere, *Story Bridge: From Alienation to Community Action*.

exemplifying Miranda Joseph's critique of community as a supplement to capital (*Against the Romance of Community*). According to Joseph, "Posited as the other, its opposite, community is often presented as a complement to capitalism, balancing and humanizing it, even, in fact, enabling it" (1). The tension between the much-needed monetary capital produced by Swamp Gravy, and the need for social change and equity in the region, are at odds with one another: the capitalistic motives seek to maintain the status quo, while the socio-political goals work to challenge and combat complacency. This tension plays a role in the construction and, ultimately, the production of community in Miller County, GA.

The Founding of Swamp Gravy

The idea for Swamp Gravy began in 1991 when Colquitt, GA resident Joy Jinks and director and then PhD student Richard Owen Geer, both of whom are white, met at a conference in New York state. Jinks, who refers to herself as the "town busy body," grew up in Colquitt and has "a long history of working with people who do international community work" (Interview). With her skills as a social worker, she wanted to find a way to give back and considered joining the Peace Corp. However, as she explains, "It dawned on me that I should use my talent and ability where I understood the culture and the language" (Interview). Jinks then began focusing her attention on sustaining and growing the local economy and culture in Miller County. Meanwhile, Richard Owen Geer, with decades of experience working in mainstream theater, began to realize that the most powerful work (emotionally, artistically, and socially) came out of projects that were centered on the specifics of a particular community. During the conference, Jinks overheard Geer describing his new theory for Community Performance. According to

Jinks, the two had a “chance conversation, and [she] told him about [her] little town, and he told [her] what his dream was of theater of the people, by the people and for the people. And he said, if you’ll do an oral history based play, I’ll come down there and we’ll do it” (Interview). Geer’s first visit to Colquitt was in June of 1991 and from there, “the conception took root, changed and developed” (Geer *Community Performance* 17).

Prior to this meeting, Jinks and other women in Colquitt strategized ways to revitalize the local economy and culture. Geer outlines these plans in his dissertation:

In 1989 [Jinks] and a group of (mostly) women met to create a five-year plan for the revitalization of their community. The conception included the renovation of the Colquitt Theater, a boarded up movie house on the town square as a home for live theater, and the development of a historical play about Miller County that could attract visitors. (Geer 17)

Jinks and other local leaders in Colquitt developed the idea of a theater project after attempting more conventional forms of economic revitalization such as “smokestack chasing”: the attempt to attract manufacturing jobs to the region. According to Jinks, this idea failed due to the small population and the lack of an educated workforce (Interview). In 1983 she, along with three other women, founded the Mayhaw Tree, a small business that was the first of its kind to produce and sell Mayhaw Jelly.² According to *Benchmarks of Progress*, a book published by the Ruth T. Jinks Foundation,³ the women “did not start out to make money. It was an effort to create jobs for women and to give local people options in an economically deprived community that was losing money” (Kimbrel). The women were successful in creating a strong local business and,

² As described in *Benchmarks of Progress*, “the ladies decided that the world did not know about the mayhaw, a tiny crabapple-like fruit that grows on small trees in the wetlands of southern Georgia, South Louisiana, and East Texas, and Miller County was covered in them” (44).

³ At the time that the book was published, Clyde Jinks, husband of Joy Jinks, was acting President. According to The Foundation Center, the Foundation ranks 43 of the top 50 Georgia Foundations by total giving, with a total of 2,228,747 as of 11/30/2004.

“at the end of their ten year run, they were grossing more than a half-million dollars in sales annually” (44). Even as she was running a successful business, however, Jinks continued to search for other ways to help her community economically and socially.

In connection with the dying economy, Jinks noticed an extreme lack of self-esteem in her rural community that needed to be acknowledged and changed in order to attract or sustain any kind of growth. As she explains, “We just kept thinking, maybe we need to celebrate ourselves, because we’re kind of the people that get left behind. And rural people have a low sense of self-esteem because we’ve seen . . . our family members get educated, become lawyers, doctors, make a million dollars in real estate and never look back” (Interview). Jinks is referring to the “brain drain” or talent outmigration that so many rural areas face. This desire to see her community develop a sense of pride and self-worth, coupled with the drive to revitalize and develop the local economy, was the driving force behind *Swamp Gravy*, at least from the perspective of Jinks and other members of the Colquitt/Miller Arts Council. However, no one could have predicted that the project would last for as long as it did, or develop into the kinds of programming that exists in the community today.⁴ Indeed, as with most community-based performance productions, one of the primary challenges for Jinks and Geer was to find a way to deliver their ideas in a way that the community would understand. It wasn’t until the first production, *Swamp Gravy Sketches* in 1992, that Miller County residents began to see the potential benefits that the project might bring to their community. Unlike the 2011 Cornerstone

⁴ It should also be noted that, although *Swamp Gravy* and the Colquitt/Miller Arts Council are associated and credited with a wide range of projects and successes, including Colquitt’s role as the host of the Global Mural Conference in 2010, the parameters of this project require that I focus on the performance aspect of the work. However, when mentioning the economic successes of *Swamp Gravy* the production, they almost always go hand in hand with these other very successful projects geared towards long-term community development.

Institute, the majority of talent, motivation, and resources for the Swamp Gravy production came from Miller County, with Geer and Carson as the only initial outsiders.

Colquitt, GA in Miller County

In order to understand why Joy Jinks and others in Colquitt were/are so motivated to work for the betterment of their community, we need to understand the problems that they face in terms of economic degradation in the region. In his dissertation, Geer describes the town of Colquitt as it appeared when he first entered in 1991:

At the convergence of Highways 27 and 91 is Colquitt's town square. . . . At one corner are the handsomely remodeled city offices, but just down the block is a welding shop and a bus station that are dirty, ugly, and old. There is an air of stagnation about the square. Nothing is thriving. Driving off the square in any of several directions, one comes upon handsome homes and well-kept neighborhoods where the white population lives. Driving east and south one quickly comes to "the quarter," so called by whites and the African Americans that live there. Here one finds houses that are well kept, simple but liveable apartments, and houses that are quite literally falling down. (*Community Performance* 193-194)

Geer goes on to quote a resident from "the quarter" who describes their poverty stricken neighbors as living without running water and the ability to buy food on a regular basis. This description summarizes some of the major material conditions in Colquitt and the region in general at the time Geer wrote this description: local businesses were dying due to the inability of the residents to support them, in addition to extreme economic inequality, largely along racial lines.

In a recent interview, Geer referred to poor white residents in Colquitt as "one of the least visible minorities in this community." Whereas, "poor black people are almost synonymous with black people because there isn't much of a middle class in Colquitt of blacks," poor white people

are often overlooked, at least in Swamp Gravy, perhaps because, “middle class white people can act like them, but they’re not [them]” (2/2/12). This dynamic of race and class seems to permeate most discussions of inclusivity in Swamp Gravy for outsiders and insiders alike. However, as Geer points out, attention is mostly paid to bringing in African American actors to the production, which might be due to the history of racial segregation in the South. Of course, Miller County and other regions in the South are not unique in the segregation of towns along race and class lines. The same phenomenon exists in Fowler, CA and yet, because of the different histories of the two regions, the issue is not at the forefront of discussions as it is in the South.

When Geer wrote his dissertation: farms occupied 72% of the land area in Miller County; the county ranked fifth in peanut production; African Americans were 30% of the population; one in six people received some public assistance; and, in 1990 the per capita income for the county was \$12,932 (*Community Performance* 196-198). According to the 2010 census: the population of Miller County was estimated at 6,141, of which around 30% were African American; per capita income was \$19, 895; 18.2% of the population lived below the poverty line; and agriculture was still the number one industry (United States Census Bureau). Colquitt is not listed in the online census data for 2010, but according to City-Data.com, Colquitt currently has a population of around 2,000, of which about 49% are African American. The town is below the state average for median household income and above the state average for “black race population” (City-Data.com).⁵ These numbers demonstrate that, like a lot of small towns in southern Georgia, Colquitt continues to struggle economically, and any project that seeks to be

⁵ According to the the 2010 census, the median household income in Georgia from 2006-2010 was \$49,347 and African Americans were 31% of the population.

“of, for, and by” the community needs to include the African American population. In the following sections, I will describe and analyze the ways in which Swamp Gravy and the Colquitt/Miller Arts Council dealt with these factors of segregation and inclusivity.

The Main Tenets/Philosophies Undergirding the Work

When I asked Swamp Gravy performers and leaders to tell me what they thought a Swamp Gravy play “does best,” most referred in some way to its ability to bring people together regardless of age, race, class, or gender. The current mission statement, originally written by Geer and Jinks, reads,

Swamp Gravy’s mission statement “is to involve as many people as possible in a theatrical experience that empowers the individual, bonds the community and strengthens the local economy while crossing the boundaries of class, race, economy and social class.” (Swamp Gravy “Mission Statement”)

It’s surprising, given the original financial motivations behind Swamp Gravy, that the mission statement does not include any reference to economics or attracting outside attention and resources. Indeed, the mission statement focuses on inclusion and providing an opportunity for all Miller County residents to come together for individual and communal empowerment and bonding. This claim of inclusivity—as a large part of the Swamp Gravy PR campaign—holds participants, artists, and administrators to a high standard that goes beyond ticket sales.

Therefore, every Swamp Gravy production can, and should, be held to this standard and, as will be demonstrated with examples later in this chapter, some live up to the challenge while others do not.

The mission statement is based in Geer’s notion of Community Performance, primarily his tenet that this kind of theater is “critique cloaked in celebration” (Interview 2/2/12). As he

explains in his dissertation, “The form is popular in communities because it celebrates the history of the (usually small and rural) town. Important to the play’s social efficacy is that it foregrounds the previously suppressed voices of ordinary people; community plays are critiques cloaked in celebration” (*Community Performance* iii). The “celebration” aspect of this theory fulfills Jinks’ search for a way to raise the self esteem of the community; however, the way in which *Swamp Gravy* is also a “critique” is less clear and is open to interpretation. When asked to explain this aspect more fully, Geer referred to some of the hard stories that were shared while gathering oral histories: such as the story of the white man who would rather let his future grandson die than allow an African American midwife onto his property. According to Geer, the ability to address and represent these edgy, challenging stories bonds a community more completely than if they refuse to face the adversity and shame of the past (and present). He asserts that these stories bring a community together “in a way that we might band together as brothers and sisters if we were fighting a war—we were fighting a war against the larger culture” (Interview 2/2/12). The critique then, is found in these stories that challenge the status quo and the complacency that comes from ignoring a community’s past. The celebration is felt at the end of this journey when the community has faced these hard stories together and survived. In terms of narrative structure, Geer’s technique follows a conventional linear trajectory that builds to a climax and ends with an uplifting sense of hope. He wants the audience to leave feeling hopeful about their community, even after hearing stories that reveal a less positive truth.

Although Geer no longer directs for *Swamp Gravy* (his last production, *Swamp Gravy: Ain’t no Tellin’*, was performed in 2008-2009) his philosophies and goals for the work live on in

the practices of many of the veteran cast members and volunteers. Don Chandler, a white Colquitt resident, has participated in Swamp Gravy since the very beginning, along with his wife. Chandler referred to the fact that the project “talked about melting the different classes of people, socio-economically and racially” as one of the primary reasons for getting involved in the first place (Interview). He then goes on to discuss the economic benefits of the project; however, it’s clear that he views the potential for inclusivity and social progress as a highlight and essential aspect of the work. While many others refer first to the amount of outside money that Swamp Gravy brings in through tourism, there is still a recognition that the plays, at least at one time, brought a diversity of people together for social healing and the building of community across boundaries of difference.

When I asked participants if the plays still accomplish this function and bring people together, many stated that they did, although not as much as they used to. None of the community participants that I spoke to had a clear answer as to why Swamp Gravy is less diverse, making it necessary to analyze the evolution of the production process over the past twenty years. Many of the methods and aesthetic choices used at the beginning of the project remain in place today, while some of the behind-the-scenes, logistical work of bringing in audiences members and a diverse cast is deemed less or more important depending on the director. Therefore, the aesthetic tone of the Swamp Gravy production remains fairly consistent over the years, even as the social and cultural impact on the community has diminished.

Perhaps unsurprisingly for a theater project rooted to one place, Swamp Gravy has developed an almost formulaic performance structure over the past twenty years that Jinks refers

to as a “beautiful ritual of community” (Interview). The consistency of the aesthetic tone also facilitates an interpretation of the plays as a brand for the region, warranting Swamp Gravy’s title of “Georgia’s Official Folk-Life Play” in 1996, thanks to the help of then State Representative Cathy Cox (*Getting to Know Georgia*). While the publicity benefits the region economically, it also solidifies expectations for, and institutionalizes the productions, branding Swamp Gravy as a Southern treasure to be preserved which ultimately extends to the community that is constructed on and offstage.

The Production Process

For the most part, the basic production process in a Swamp Gravy play stayed consistent throughout the twenty years since its founding: the play committee (made up of members of the Colquitt/Miller Arts Council (CMAC) and other Miller County residents who are already active in the community) decides on a theme for the upcoming play; the story gathering committee, chaired by Sarah Ann Keaton, puts together a portfolio of stories based on that theme and gathered over the years from Miller County residents;⁶ and Jennifer Trawick, Executive Director of the Colquitt/Miller Arts Council, was in charge of hiring the playwright and director for the production. The stories are then given to the playwright, sometimes with a set of requirements for the narrative structure of the play, who then crafts them into a storyline. Apart from Debra Calhoun Jones (a Colquitt resident who was mentored by Jo Carson), and Will Murdock (a Colquitt resident who grew up with Swamp Gravy and was the playwright for the 2012 production, *Live and Learn*), Swamp Gravy uses outside, professional playwrights and directors.

⁶ It is the case that some Swamp Gravy productions re-use stories, or bring in those from earlier story-gathering efforts, though Geer and Corriere believe that only freshly told stories convey a contemporary relevance for audiences.

Jennifer Trawick recently retired from her position and was replaced in the Spring of 2012 by Haley Rice, who held the title of Artistic Director and was the first full time director in residence in Colquitt. Katherine Willis, Production Manager, is the only full-time staff member left at Swamp Gravy, due to losses in grant revenue. Unlike Cornerstone and Pangea, Swamp Gravy is funded almost entirely through ticket sales which, as with many theaters across the country, is not enough to pay a full-time staff.

The Colquitt/Miller Arts Council (CMAC), the program that officially produces Swamp Gravy, also produces May-Haw (started in 2005), an annual variety show featuring talent from the local community, and the CMAC Youth Theater (started in 2007) in which children and teens in the area perform in conventional productions such as *Peter Pan* and *James and the Giant Peach*. According to my interviews with Swamp Gravy participants, May-Haw draws, by far, the biggest crowd, as it is focused on pure entertainment through comedy and song. In 2003, CMAC began a brief foray into “professional theater,” featuring outside actors in original plays and off-broadway productions. Directed and written by Rob Lauer, *A Southern Christmas Carol* boasted 10 professional actors and has since been produced across the country. Other plays in the “professional theater” era of Swamp Gravy include *Smoke on the Mountain* and a new version of *Huckleberry Finn*. Although CMAC continued to produce Swamp Gravy plays, this period represents an overt attempt to market from the success and attention the community was garnering from the plays. At the height of its popularity, Swamp Gravy performed at the Summer Olympic Games in Atlanta and the Kennedy Center for Performing Arts. Community organizers and activists continue to look to Colquitt as a model for how to transform their own areas

through the arts, though I believe that they are drawn most to the locally-based productions that focus on social change than those that model professional, regional theater. Again, this period, led by Lauer, demonstrates CMAC's economically driven desire for national recognition and outside revenue. According to Miranda Joseph, and supported by the content of the shows and the diversity (or lack thereof) of the cast, such motivations contrast with efforts to enact social change in the community.

The majority of Swamp Gravy plays have a clearly defined aesthetic that carries over from production to production, regardless of the director or playwright. One of the most visible characteristics of this is demonstrated by the costumes and props, which are generally representative of the past.⁷ Although years are never specified, the plays seem to be staged sometime between the start of the 1900s and the 1950s. This staging choice might make sense in that the plays developed from stories gathered from Miller County residents, many of whom were alive during these years. However, as Swamp Gravy volunteer/performer William Carroll—who lives about 45 minutes from Colquitt and works as an educator, prevention instructor, motivational speaker, and actor—points out, staging the stories in the past doesn't mean that all of the stories are from that era. Indeed, he remembers a play about a tornado that went through the area only a few years prior to the production (Interview). Rather than a logistical choice, the temporal location of Swamp Gravy is rooted in social and political purpose.

Geer described the choice as “historical parallelism,” in that recent and potentially divisive subjects and events are placed in a location with a certain amount of temporal distance.

⁷ While most productions are staged in the past, this is not the case for all of them. For example, *The Big Picture*, directed by Gerard Stropnický and written by Debra Calhoun Jones, Jules Corriere and Jo Carson, was entirely contemporary.

His theory is that if you're staging a story with strict partisan lines, for example, and people already know how they stand on the issue, staging it in the present is too close to home and personal positions are already determined. However, "if [he] could put it back fifty years, disguise republican and democrat, cast it in terms of . . . the human issue that's at the center of it, then perhaps . . . we won't have a knee-jerk reaction to, and an identification with, issues that prevents us from having an open mind." As Geer explains, "Once we discover that we together embrace this altered vision that is in the story, then we may take that compassion . . . out into the community and it may actually soften what's happening between you and me or give us a possibility of an accommodation" (Interview 5/24/12). The challenge with this theory is that it only works if you take up the divisive stories and subjects in the first place and if, as was the case with Geer and Stropnick, you connect the productions to community organizing efforts to diversify the cast and audience members. In addition, if the audience fails to connect the stories to their own context and they are only viewed through a historical lens, then it is possible to dismiss them as historical and therefore no longer relevant. Or, in the case of stories that end on a positive note, without any kind of social critique, the plays give off a sense of idealized nostalgia and a longing for "the better days" without a realistic critique of the material and social conditions in the past that led to extreme racial inequality and segregation.

In addition to altering the audience's reception of the stories, setting the plays in the past can either highlight or downplay the bodies of the performers and their relationships with one another and with the shared historical narrative of the play. Freddie Odum—a white community participant, social studies teacher, youth director, and city councilman (many of the people who

choose to join the cast of *Swamp Gravy* are already prone to community organizing and volunteerism)—pointed out that when you have mixed races on stage in a *Swamp Gravy* play, you are staging integration at a time when it wasn't a reality. For Odum, this has the potential for positive social change, because it “blurs the line between race and gender,” creating a performance reality in which these factors might not matter as much as they do off stage (Interview 2/4/12). This is a re-imagined history that, unless the story deals with racial segregation specifically, is based in color blind casting and a dismissal of historical fact. This choice, albeit positive and stemming from the desire to bring people together and imagine a different and more inclusive version of history, might be viewed as sentimentalism, especially in a play where race is never acknowledged or discussed.

Of course, if the goal of the plays is to celebrate community, then the staging of stories in which the community overcomes hardship, regardless of race and gender, is a constructive choice. As Don Chandler explained, setting the plays in the past helps the audience “remember days gone by” and develop “an appreciation for what you have now” (Interview). Many of the stories in *Swamp Gravy* are gathered from people who remember working hard and struggling, as well as finding comfort and support in their community. These stories provide that trajectory of hope that Geer discusses—based on the evolution of his ideas with playwright Jules Corriere—and they can be powerful and empowering for those who experience them, when coupled with the hard stories that ask the community to think more deeply about their role in enacting social change and their relationships with one another.

The ritualistic tone and structure of the plays is another unique aesthetic characteristic

that can either increase or decrease their social impact on the community. Beginning with the very first production, *Swamp Gravy Sketches*, directed by Richard Geer and written by Jo Carson in 1992, all Swamp Gravy plays start with the “Storytelling Song.” This song, written by Colquitt resident and volunteer Karen Kimbrel, served as an artistic representation of the project for presentations in the community and for potential funders. It has since become a musical introduction to the play that sets the tone and the process of sharing stories that is so central to a Swamp Gravy production. The song begins slowly, with the voice of a lone singer and the lyrics, “You’ve got a story, and I’ve got a story, we’ve all got a story to tell.” The song is then picked up by another singer, somewhere else on stage: “Oh you’ve got a story, and I’ve got a story, it’s one we know so well.” After which another singer begins: “You tell me yours, and I’ll tell you mine, and we’ll. . . .” Whereupon the entire cast joins in with the words, “and we’ll put it all together and spice it all up, and we’ll have a storytelling time” (Kimbrel). The song is a metaphor for the process of making the literal swamp gravy, a common Southern dish that’s made up of whatever ingredients the cook might have lying around. These lyrics, and the staging in which cast members begin separately and then come together, work to create an immediate sense of sharing among the audience, and the building of community on stage.

The ritual of a Swamp Gravy production ends with the “I Remember,” in which the ensemble cast, distributed around the stage, sings “Amazing Grace” while others recite the lines: “[name of someone who has passed], I remember you.” Prior to the start of the production, cast members solicit names from audience members in order to involve them more fully in the ritual. They also include names from community members and Swamp Gravy contributors, such as the

much-beloved playwright Jo Carson, who died of cancer in 2011 and who originally developed the “I Remembers.” Needless to say, this is one of the most touching moments of the production, and many audience and cast members are in tears by the time it is over. Like the “Storytelling Song,” the “I Remembers” connect back to the production process of story gathering because the names are often those whose stories were performed that night. Joe Varga, the original scenic designer for *Swamp Gravy* and mastermind behind Cotton Hall (the venue for the productions), described this moment in the play as “very moving for anybody that had any kind of contact at all, even us outsiders in the community. And, it’s a very moving way of very openly, very simply saying something about where this came from” (Interview). The “I Remembers” expand the community beyond the cast of *Swamp Gravy*, Colquitt, Miller County, and even Georgia, to include anyone in the audience who shares a name. This ritualistic act also exemplifies the community-based performance tenet of using local names and relationships for the emotional content of the production.

Geer recognized the power of ritual to enact social change in performance when he developed Community Performance. Citing Victor Turner and Richard Schechner in his dissertation, he compares Community Performance to social dramas, which go through a process of liminal instability before creating a sense of *communitas* and then, perhaps, social change (*Community Performance* 79-86). In his analysis of social drama, Geer included the production process from his arrival into Colquitt, to the aftermath of *Swamp Gravy Sketches*. However, the narrative structure of building up to a climactic crisis before ending on a hopeful note also mirrors Turner’s four stages of social drama: breach, crisis, redress, and reconciliation/schism

(*From Ritual to Theatre* 10). The ritual of a Swamp Gravy performance sets the stage for the possible enactment of social drama, in which controversial stories create a breach of the status quo by acknowledging social and economic inequalities. The emotional instability created in the sharing of these stories, and the uncertainty of how to approach them, might also be called a liminal state that has the potential to create *communitas* between cast and audience. The ritual of redress occurs in the “I Remembers,” as they remind the audience of their shared relationships, even as they allow individuals to remember their lost loved ones. Ideally, the production ends in a real reconciliation of the community (provided the audience and cast are made up of diverse members of the area, and not only of outsiders or of a homogenous social group) to come together after the ongoing social dramas of stories about segregation, racial and economic inequality, and other controversial subjects.

Turner’s notion of social dramas might be found in any theatrical production that includes the disruption of social norms. However, for a production to enact social change, in which the community that experienced the drama is transformed from what and who they were before, the breach must be controversial enough to disrupt the status quo and lead to a potential crisis in the community. In a region in which race relations are so tense, based on centuries of conflict, the mere act of including white and black bodies on stage together is cause enough for crisis. Indeed, efforts by Geer and others to include both white and African American participants was, and continues to be, met with resistance and words of caution.

In an article about the early years of Swamp Gravy, Geer quotes a Colquitt woman who “feared that trouble would be stirred up, old ghosts lurking down the hall, racial incidents,” and

another resident who warned, “you are about to open a can of worms if you carry the black business too far” (“Out of Control” 106 & 108). These Colquitt residents were concerned that the social drama of *Swamp Gravy* would lead to greater schisms in the community between the two races, rather than the reconciliation that Geer envisioned. While *Swamp Gravy Sketches* did not include any highly controversial scenes in terms of content, it did include a cast of 20% African American, Miller County residents. According to Geer, during the social drama of the production, this integrated cast came together in a process of *communitas* and reconciliation that had the potential to influence the region at large. As Geer explains, “The performance context probably contributes more to social change than could the content of any scene” (109). Colquitt resident Don Chandler agrees that the integrated community in a *Swamp Gravy* production has a direct impact on the community outside of Cotton Hall and gave this example: “When I walk down the streets and meet one of my fellow performers who happens to be of the black race, and I give them a big hug on the square in front of everybody who wants to see it, they just accept that now” (Interview). The very act of bringing the two races together into one performance space is, to a certain extent, a breach of the social norms; however, as these reconciliations become a new kind of norm, it is important to create new breaches and potential crises in order to continue to move the community forward.

While Geer recognized that, at least for *Swamp Gravy Sketches*, it was enough to create an integrated community in the cast, he envisioned more controversial content in the plays and posited, “Later, when the community is ready to hear them, stories of racial difference will likely be told” (*Out of Control* 109). Some of the plays, such as *Land Between the Rivers*, directed by

Gerard Stropnick and written by Debra Calhoun Jones in 2001, did deal directly with racial difference, especially in the scene about the “disappearances” (when African American men would disappear completely after any kind of social disruption of white hegemony). You can also point to the work of Jules Corriere, whose plays *Nuthin' but a Will* (2005), *Visiting Hours* (2006), *Reunion* (2007) and *Ain't No Tellin* (2008) include stories that confront some of the darker histories in Miller County. However, other plays, such as *Solid Ground*, directed by Phil Funkenbusch and written by Tom Poland in 2011, never mention race and the production program only lists two African Americans in a cast of one hundred. While plays like *Solid Ground* continue to include the ritual framework of the “Storytelling Song” and the “I Remembers,” they do not create a breach of social norms or a potential crisis in Cotton Hall, thereby limiting the potential for social change. If the community, defined by those who are in the cast and members of the audience, do not face the crisis then there is no need for redress and reconciliation.

The ritualistic potential in a Swamp Gravy production varies greatly depending on the choice of stories, and the goals of the Play Committee, volunteer cast, director, and playwright. However, the structure of the productions that frames the stories in moments of inclusion and communal bonding, ensures that some kind of *communitas* will occur between the audience and the cast. Furthermore, although many of the plays fail to include a proportionate number of white and African American performers, based on the demographics of the region, the cast is never entirely homogenous, but includes residents of all ages and occupations who often do not know each other prior to the production. It seems to be the relationships that people form during the

productions that keep them coming back every year, even if they might take a hiatus from time to time. William Carroll began participating in Swamp Gravy in 2008 and describes his reception into the cast as extremely welcoming: “I feel like I’ve seen the heart of people just wanting me to be around. . . . It’s something that touches your spirit, it’s something where you see a connection [where] you probably didn’t envision a connection” (Interview).⁸ Carroll found a family in Swamp Gravy and relationships that will continue even after he is no longer a performer in the productions.

Over the years, a Swamp Gravy community has developed of “veterans” and, in many cases, their children. The perseverance of these volunteers to continue participating in productions, despite the huge time commitment required of them, speaks to the power of *communitas* and, to a certain extent, the normalizing of that phenomenon following the beginning of the project. In his book, *From Ritual to Theatre: The Human Seriousness of Play*, Victor Turner argues that *communitas* is never permanent:

We thus encounter the paradox that the *experience* of *communitas* becomes the *memory* of *communitas*, with the result that *communitas* itself in striving to replicate itself historically develops a social structure, in which initially free and innovative relationships between individuals are converted into norm-governed relationships between social *personae*. (47 emphasis in original).

This is not to say that the relationships that form in a Swamp Gravy production are artificial; but, after a period of time, roles are solidified and rules are established that replace old norms and are

⁸ While both Jinks and Geer love and respect Carroll, they also acknowledge that his position as a middle-class African American man make it easier for him to participate in the productions, in contrast to other African-Americans in the region. Many African Americans with decent paying employment work shift jobs which require them to work unconventional schedules and therefore prohibit participation in night rehearsals and performances. The other long-term African American volunteers prior to Carroll were school teachers, whose jobs made it possible to attend rehearsals in the evenings.

“safe,” as compared to the periods of breach and crisis in some of the productions mentioned above. While this phenomenon is no doubt useful in expediting the production process with a shared language and skill set, it might also be insulating, in that veteran cast members become complacent with the community that has formed and are less compelled to seek out new and diverse cast members. This also includes recruiting new leaders, particularly from the African American community. As I show in the following chapter on Pangea, diversity in leadership is central to diversity in participants as it demonstrates long-term commitment to representations of certain groups and individuals.

The challenge of recruiting new cast members, due in large part to the time commitment (which might rule out those who work several jobs or have an unconventional schedule), is ongoing. Debbie Sloan, longtime cast member, songwriter/composer, and teacher, described the recruitment process as primarily through word of mouth. As she explains, people who are in Swamp Gravy “talk to other people, or they have friends and family who come to see ‘em perform and they say, yeah, that looks like fun. . . . Sometimes it just takes somebody that they won’t say no to. In other words, that person won’t take no for an answer” (Interview). When Sloan is recruiting new cast members, her primary goal is to find talented singers because that’s where her interests lie as an experienced singer and performer. This method of recruitment is successful in many instances, although it relies upon pockets of community that already exist, rather than an expansion of the Swamp Gravy cast to include those who have no prior connection to CMAC or the volunteers.

The Swamp Gravy production team also puts out notices and advertises in various

venues, including online, but the word of mouth method continues to be the most effective in recruiting new members. In an interview, Stropnický described the effort that he makes to connect with communities beyond those who are already aware of, and interested in, Swamp Gravy. He explained that in 2000, when he began work on *Love and Marriage*, he “started to go visit the black churches, and nobody from Swamp Gravy had been there in a while, except for the black members of Swamp Gravy” once there, he’d “meet with the pastors and talk . . . and invite them back in, or invite them in; that work is not once done, it’s constant” (Interview). Stropnický still relied on the personal touch that word of mouth provides, but he also made a point of connecting with those outside of the already established Swamp Gravy community. He also had the benefit of witnessing the rehearsal process under the direction of Geer prior to taking the lead on his first production. Phil Funkenbusch, director for *Solid Ground* in 2011, did not have any prior interaction or experience with Colquitt or Swamp Gravy, apart from what he’d read and a conversation with Geer over ten years ago. He relied on the Play Committee and Colquitt/Miller Arts Council to take charge of advertising auditions and casting the show and therefore did not make personal connections with communities outside of those who were already included in the Swamp Gravy network.⁹

These experiences demonstrate that, in order to make the productions inclusive of all sub-communities within the Miller County region, volunteers and professionals alike need to actively work to establish and maintain relationships with diverse networks of people. Participating in Swamp Gravy is a huge time commitment, and the continued support and energy that veteran

⁹ I am in no way faulting Funkenbusch for not making these personal connections. His time in Colquitt was very limited and in my interview with him he acknowledged that there is a great deal that he would do differently now that he has a sense of the production process. There is a very steep learning curve for this kind of theater.

cast members contribute to the plays is impressive and inspiring. The ability to commit that much time, however, is also based on socio-economic status, in that one's occupation must provide a consistent schedule, with a certain amount of free time, childcare, transportation, and flexibility. Anyone who participates in the productions is asked to sacrifice their time and energy, but some might feel this burden more than others, based on their economic and social circumstances. Stropnicki described a few of the attempts to relieve some of the burden for African Americans (who, again, based on the demographics of the region are generally lower or working class) and the reactions by some in the cast who interpreted these actions as potential favoritism. As he explains:

We've had to make up carpools, arrange driving, and there's resentment from some of the white community who is also poor. And we could never quite come to the place where Swamp Gravy could use some of its resources to buy a bus and hire a driver and pick people up and make the effort. And that's economic more than it is racial, although, in the deep south, it's always both, and deeply engrained. And so, if you're making allowances for folks to rehearse at odd hours because they have low paying, odd jobs, and other cast members get resentful... you're in an interesting place. (Interview)

This issue of presumed favoritism, or exceptions for some and not for others, is extremely complicated, especially in a form of theater that relies upon volunteers and sacrifices from all participants. However, in presuming that all should sacrifice without exception, there is also the presumption that all who participate are equally benefiting and finding the same kind of reward in the experience.

Everyone I interviewed was already connected to Swamp Gravy in some way and viewed

it as an unquestionably positive contribution to their lives.¹⁰ This perspective might not be shared by those who do not see themselves in the representation of community that Swamp Gravy performs, such as African American residents. In order to make the plays palatable for some by decreasing the stories of conflict and the history of race relations in the area, you are also denying the experiences of those for whom these issues cannot be ignored or put off until a later date. This is a constant negotiation between those who are in the room and already committing their time and energy to a cause that they believe is valuable, and those who are not in the room, with a perspective that will remain under-represented until they are approached and engaged. The amount of energy expended on recruiting cast members who are outside of the pre-established network depends on the goal of the production. If the goal is to increase ticket sales and bring in outside revenue, then the already overworked and underpaid Swamp Gravy staff and volunteers make better use of their time and resources by advertising across the region and drawing attention beyond Colquitt and Miller County. If, however, the goal is more in line with the stated mission statement—“to involve as many people as possible in a theatrical experience that empowers the individual, bonds the community and strengthens the local economy while crossing the boundaries of class, race, economy and social class” (“Mission Statement”)—then making local connections and providing incentives to a diverse group of potential participants must be a top priority.

The standard methodologies behind community-based performance are not enough to ensure that the cast and audience will be diverse and locally-based. If one were to just examine

¹⁰ Due to a lack of time and resources, I was unable to interview Miller County residents who are not involved directly in Swamp Gravy. This is a huge gap in my research that needs to be filled in future studies of Swamp Gravy and other forms of community-based performance.

the audition process for a Swamp Gravy show, it would seem to be, and to a certain extent it is, extremely welcoming and inclusive. While everyone is required to audition for the production, anyone who auditions is automatically cast in the show, regardless of ability, age, experience or availability. As Joy Jinks explains, “We’ve always said that [you] hold a mirror under your nose and if the mirror fogs up, you’re in” (Interview). Because of this policy, the casts of a Swamp Gravy production are generally very large—*Solid Ground* had 100 cast members listed in the program—and therefore all of the roles are double, or even triple, cast. This method contributes to a tone in the rehearsal room that is incredibly different from anything that you might find in professional theater. In some instances, the entire cast might never be together on any given night, up to and including the opening performance.

As director Phil Funkenbusch explained in an interview, the stage manager—in the case of *Solid Ground*, Katherine Willis (who has worked with Swamp Gravy since 2006)—puts together a rough rehearsal schedule based on everyone’s availability, and then, at the beginning of each rehearsal reads off the names of who is playing which parts that evening. When Funkenbusch went back to Colquitt for the Spring performances, he was surprised to see people in roles whom he had never met or rehearsed with before. In some instances, people learn the afternoon of a performance that they will be playing a role for the first time. As he explains, “People just don’t think a thing about it, they just step into a part” (Interview 5/22/12). This ability and willingness to step into a role at a moment’s notice is certainly impressive and speaks to the experience that many of these cast members have with this form of theater, many of whom had no prior experience with theater before the founding of Swamp Gravy.

The tone of the rehearsal room is also very informal, with people coming in and out, carrying babies, while children help adults out with a missed line or cue. It's an atmosphere that encourages mutual mentorship and cast members are free to give each other comments and suggestions, a practice that is forbidden in most professional theater. When scenes are played out, those who are not directly in the scene watch from side stages and vocalize responses, a practice that Don Chandler explained is meant to encourage and motivate cast and audience members alike to pay attention and participate in the action (Interview). Rehearsals begin with a prayer circle, in which members of the cast can request a moment of silence, prayers for loved ones, or a discussion of events that occurred both in and outside of the rehearsal room. As Stropnick explained, "You can't work in the south without working hand in hand with the church" (Interview), and it is certainly taken for granted that everyone present is, in some way, a believer in the Christian faith.

This religious factor adds a unique element to the personal goals participants have for the plays, as many members connect their contribution to the productions with their faith. When I asked Chandler if he'd changed personally since working on *Swamp Gravy* he responded, "Maybe it's opened up that window for me to be closer to God. Since I'm not as active as I need to be in the church . . . I've looked at this as being our little church. Cause God's alive and well in Cotton Hall" (Interview). Freddie Odum echoed this assertion when he explained that his work with *Swamp Gravy* provides an opportunity for him to act out his Christian faith in a way that connects with his social activism (Interview). Clearly, the religious undertones in *Swamp Gravy* provide an incentive for many to participate actively; although, a lack of outward religious

conflict or diversity does not preclude its existence.

Stropnický recalled an incident during rehearsals for *Land Between the Rivers* in 2001 in which various sects of the Christian church collided and the cast was compelled to acknowledge each other's differences. As he described it, they were working on the final scene with choreographer, Kevin Iega Jeff, which culminated in a symbolic baptism. What was supposed to be a routine blocking of the scene became a shouting match about deeply held beliefs regarding the meaning and the methodology behind baptism. Stropnický explains, "There's a reason why there is yet another church every half mile—all those Baptist churches broke off from one another about the baptism. . . . And in making a choice that Iega had worked out, it became about . . . the one thing that had divided the community" (Interview). As the director, Stropnický chose to stop the rehearsal, make a circle, and allow everyone the opportunity to voice their beliefs and differences. He asserted that "We're not asking anybody to be converted, or to convert anybody else. Just talk about what baptism means to you and your faith community" (Interview). This moment is an example of a breach in social norms because the complexities and diversity of religious beliefs are seldom discussed in public. The cast was able to reconcile their differences as a community, and the moment became much more metaphorical and representative of the panoply of opinions and beliefs in the room.

While the tone in the Swamp Gravy rehearsal room is extremely supportive and demonstrative of the creation of a new and positive community, as the above example demonstrates, it is not necessarily homogenous. To use the swamp gravy metaphor, the more diverse your ingredients, the greater the likelihood of a breach and potential crisis in this

seemingly normative community. While crises might divert energy away from the creation of the final product, with a rehearsal process that is too short and complicated by divergent scheduling needs, they also provide opportunities for the liminal space of *communitas* and the development of a new cultural community in which differences are acknowledged and appreciated, rather than denied.

Up to this point, I have mainly been speaking only of the production process after the script is written. However, in shaping the narrative that will be rehearsed and performed, the playwright has a huge responsibility to either choose stories from the oral history repertoire that will walk that fine line between critique and celebration, or those that will be less controversial in an effort to appeal to a mainstream (white) outsider audience. In the following section, I compare two plays: *Solid Ground*, written by Tom Poland in 2011, and *The Gospel Truth*, originally written by Jo Carson in 1995. These plays demonstrate the potential that Swamp Gravy productions have to fulfill the standards set by the mission statement; or, to play it safe by leaving out stories of social conflict that might be critical of the hegemonic community.

Solid Ground and The Gospel Truth

Solid Ground was commissioned by the Play Committee in recognition of the hundred feet-tall mural, “The Peanut Farmer,” that wraps around four silos across the road from Cotton Hall. The mural is an impressive and beautiful dedication to the farmers of Miller County and was funded in part through their donations. The title, *Solid Ground*, refers literally to the importance of the soil and land for the agricultural industry, but is also a metaphorical reference to the strength and support that religion and the Christian church provides during hard times. The

themes of the play, agriculture and hard work, are similar to those of the very first Swamp Gravy production, *Swamp Gravy Sketches*, although in this recent version, religion plays a greater role in the plot.

The central plot revolves around the character of Lee, a hard-working farmer with a strong connection to the land. Lee is a good man, as demonstrated by his love for his mother and the support that he gives to Milton, the son of a good friend who died trying to save his farm from fire. Lee sends Milton to college, wanting him to have an easier life than that of a farmer. However, Milton is tied, as if by birth, to the land and he soon returns to help Lee with the farm. Although Lee is clearly a good man, the other central characters are concerned and fear for him because of his rejection of the Christian church. The primary concern of Milton and Lee's mother throughout the play is to get Lee to church so that his soul can be saved, a pressing concern given the hard and dangerous life of the farmer. As Milton states towards the end of the play, "My main fear was that Lee would die without finding Solid Ground. I dedicated myself to paying him back for all the good things he'd done for me and mama. Now was he a good man? Without doubt . . . Lee is a man overfilled with good deeds, but deeds ain't enough" (Poland 2011). At the climax of the play, Milton finally confronts Lee about his lack of faith and pleads with him to return to the church. By the end of the scene, although Lee is clearly moved by Milton's pleas, it is uncertain that he will take him up on the offer to attend church that Sunday. In the penultimate scene set in the church, just before the "'I Remembers,'" Lee makes a dramatic entrance, reciting the Lord's Prayer along with the Reverend, to the relief and joy of Milton and Lee's mother.

The dramatic tension revolving around Lee's return to the church is supported and

relieved by sub-plots and story lines. These scenes, which are composites of stories gathered from the region, support the notion that, while farming is hard and often ends in tragedy, life goes on with the support of the community and the church. The tragedies come mainly through disasters that are presented as fate, outside of anyone's control, as opposed to actions perpetrated by anyone in the community. Droughts, fires, storms, and accidents make the life of a farmer hard, but there is no one to blame apart from fate. These events are presented as tests of faith, and the ability of the characters to overcome them speaks to their personal strength and their belief in the righteousness of the Lord. In addition, rather than serving as a breach of social norms, resulting in potential crises and schisms, these events are rallying points for the community to support one another in hard times. There is never any danger that the community won't come together after the telling of these stories because they are based on the hardships of the individual by events outside of their control, rather than on the actions of the community in perpetuating social inequality or irresponsibility. The community is presented as a purely positive entity, that is separate from the poverty or hardworking conditions that make for hardship in the life of the farmer. By distancing community from these material circumstances, community is positioned as a supplement to capitalism and to hegemonic social norms. As Miranda Joseph asserts, "Arguments such as these, which presuppose the independence of community from capital, suggest that capitalism should not be held accountable for poverty or social dislocation" (11). *Solid Ground* ignores social inequities, focusing instead on the support of community and faith, thereby denying efforts towards social change that focus on systemic material conditions.

These moments in which the community comes together in the support of the individual and their family are touching, and members of the audience might be reminded of the importance of communal bonding, but they all end in celebration without critique. You cannot critique a national disaster and, while Lee might be criticized for refusing to join the church, when he does join, the societal norms of conformity are reinforced, rather than adjusted or re-examined to include the potential for diversity. This seems to be what the Play Committee wanted. When I interviewed Tom Poland, he explained that when he was given the oral history stories, he was also told by the Play Committee that “We want this man to find the lord, we want his soul to be saved before his mother dies. That’s the main thing we want you to do” (Interview). Poland then had to work backwards to ensure that the plot delivered on this final event. He was also told that he needed to change key identifiers in the stories in order to ensure that the anonymity of the storytellers was preserved, a practice which seemed to be followed in Jo Carson’s work, although in her plays many were still able to identify some of the tellers. While this policy is clearly meant to respect the voices of those who shared their stories, especially in the event that the stories are in any way embarrassing or shameful, it is also potentially undermining of individual identity and experience.

Poland was given basic information about the original storytellers, such as their ages, but races were left out. As he explained in an email exchange, because Swamp Gravy has had a difficult time recruiting African American cast members, leaving out the races of the storytellers ensures that the stories can be told by anyone, regardless of race, which allows for color blind casting (Email 9/8/12). I believe that this practice is meant to be inclusive of any performer, but

it also relieves the burden of finding cast members who are not in the pre-established Swamp Gravy network, especially as *Solid Ground* never discusses or approaches the notion of race or racial conflict. In the run through that I saw, the week before opening night, William Carroll played Milton opposite a white Lee. This kind of casting choice certainly blurs racial boundaries, as argued by Freddie Odum, and re-imagines a cross racial relationship that might not normally be accepted in this society. However, the casting is not the main concern in the play and the race of the characters is never acknowledged or discussed. Ultimately, the focus of the play is on the struggles faced by the community and their ability to overcome them together, with the help of their faith, or “Solid Ground.”

Solid Ground is in keeping with Don Chandler’s assertion that Swamp Gravy is “a way to make people remember, to make them more appreciative of what they’ve had and those folks who came before us. Giving thanks for what they’ve done” (Interview). Again, it’s a celebration of the ability to overcome hardship and never a critique of the moments when the community was to blame for the struggles of others. This narrative is touching, and it’s difficult not to be impressed by the challenges faced by those who came before; but, in appreciating what you have, you do not strive for what could be. It seems that Tom Poland delivered the Play Committee what they wanted, a play about a man whose soul is saved and who finds the “Solid Ground” that keeps the community together, despite the hardships of farming. *Solid Ground* is a celebration of Southern farmers, and Tom Poland was a suitable playwright for the job.

A self-described “Southern writer,” Tom Poland was born in Georgia and raised in South Carolina. His books include *Reflections of South Carolina*, a book of photographs celebrating the

state and Southern culture, and *Save the Last Dance for Me: A Love Story of the Shag and the Society of Strangers*, a history of the popular Southern dance, the Shag. Poland is committed to preserving Southern culture and the home page of his website begins with the following assertion: “The South I grew up in is slipping away. It’s not my South anymore. Still, though, if you get out on the back roads you can find remnants of what was once so common. . . . That’s what I love best: finding a quintessential Southern setting and sharing it with you” (Poland “Son of the Deep South”). Poland is deeply attached to Southern culture and in his work he strives to share that with his readers. The makers of *Swamp Gravy* are also clearly interested in preserving Southern culture, and the process of gathering oral stories is a form of documentation, in addition to providing content for the plays. If this were the main priority of the project then Poland is the right playwright for the job. However, in focusing only on preservation, the play seems primarily celebratory and sentimental, and there is no place for criticism in this narrative. In other words, *Solid Ground* does not enact Geer’s theory of “critique cloaked in celebration,” nor does it critically examine viewpoints and experiences that are not already “in the room” in the *Swamp Gravy* network.

Swamp Gravy plays are not only about celebration and there is, indeed, a wide range of content and narrative approaches taken over the last twenty years. As a comparison, *The Gospel Truth*—which is perhaps the most successful and popular *Swamp Gravy* play thus far—goes beyond unpredictable natural disasters to reflect upon some of the ways that the community is complicit in producing social inequity and injustice. Originally written in 1995 by Jo Carson, *The*

Gospel Truth was directed by Richard Geer in 1995 and 1998, and then by Stropnicki in 2009.¹¹ It was remounted multiple times, and was referred to several times in my interviews with various participants. Swamp Gravy volunteers and leaders clearly appreciate and respect this play and it is representative of the community's ability to stage difficult stories that have the potential to create a breach in the social norms and develop a new kind of cultural community in the aftermath.

The narrative structure of *The Gospel Truth* follows the Ten Commandments, with scenes and stories based on sermons delivered by the character, Preacher Jack. The Preacher is a fully fleshed out character who was burned by fire four times in his life, the last time being the one that killed him. His relationship to fire is what led him to be a preacher in the first place, and the narrative of how and when he was burned provides one of the through lines in the play. Although he is clearly a God-loving man, who fears the fires of Hell, the lesson learned is that bad things happen to people, regardless of how good they are. The *Gospel Truth* clearly has a strong moral tone and the laws of the Ten Commandments are delivered with verve and vigor by the Preacher, emphasized by the breaking of a plate for each law; however, the scenes that follow each law leave room for moral relativity. Each story provides an example of the difficulties in abiding by the Ten Commandments and asks the audience to consider the possibility of a grey area, or at least the challenges faced by some based on their circumstances. This is not to say that the play condones a dismissal of the Commandments, but rather encourages critical thinking and an acknowledgment that the identity location of each individual plays a role in their ability to easily

¹¹ The play was original titled, *Swamp Gravy*, before it was called *The Gospel Truth*, in 1995. Many of the stories were also adapted and retold in later productions titled *The Blue Doctor* and *Good Medicine* (1998). Debra Calhoun Jones and Jules Corriere also contributed writing to remounted versions of the play.

follow these biblical rules.

As with *Solid Ground*, *The Gospel Truth* also includes a good and honest man who refuses to accept the Lord as his savior, although in this case the play does not end in a conversion. In this example, although he seems to believe in God and grew up with the church, he purposefully refuses to be forgiven for his sins, ultimately, because he enjoys them too much. This is a much more upfront and honest rejection of the church than that of Lee in *Solid Ground* (we never really learn why Lee refused to attend church), and seems to be based on a recognition of the character's own faults and his desire to avoid hypocrisy. Indeed, the character describes a "French Creole, Catholic" friend who sinned by drinking, womanizing and dancing every Friday of the week, but who would make up for it on Saturdays by confessing his sins to the priest and asking him for forgiveness. As the character explains, "Seemed like a pretty good arrangement to me, 24 hours out of week were dangerous, but any other time he could have died and gone straight to heaven" (Carson). While the character is never overtly critical of the church, he does make the audience consider this hypocrisy and possible connections to their own lives. It is important to note that this character is ultimately a lost soul, and I believe that the audience is meant to pity, rather than empathize with him. The man rejects God's call, as described in a story in which he was in church when he heard God's voice telling him to "come and live a different life," and he chose to ignore it, only to realize later that he will never get this chance again. However, the inclusion of this character in a play about religion, and the questions that are raised about potential hypocrisies in the church, complicate a simplistic notion of faith and conversion and provides a counter-point to the status quo.

Another example of a moment that requires the audience to think critically about the religious creeds that they no doubt hear all the time, comes after the sermon about honoring “thy father and thy mother.” In this scene, a woman describes her relationship, or lack thereof, with her parents. Raised by her grandmother, the woman never really knew her parents and they certainly never loved or supported her during her life. After two abusive marriages, she met her father for the first, and last, time when he offered her a rooster and fifty cents. She states, “I don’t think my daddy’s coming back, but I didn’t think my mama was either, and she come to live with me” (Carson). Despite a lifetime of neglect, the woman still took care of, and completely supported, her dying mother. This generous act clearly gives her the moral high ground and is in keeping with the Preacher’s sermon; however, it’s also extremely unsatisfying and unfair, and again, makes the audience think critically about the challenge of abiding by the commandments in every situation.

One of the most powerful moments in the play, and one that was referenced by many of my interviewees, is “Covet,” based on true stories told independently by multiple sources. “Covet” is a haunting scene about the sexual molestation of young girls by a local deacon. The scene is set at the man’s funeral and the now-grown women remember the molestation and wonder if the other women in attendance were also victims. The message is truly tragic and complicated, because it takes the theme “covet” and applies it, not only to the deacon, but also to the girls, who blame themselves for coveting the toys and money that their abuser gave them in exchange for sexual acts. “Covet” is also critical of blind faith in church leadership in that no one in the community questioned this man’s behavior and the entire community attended his funeral.

It therefore demands a critical examination of the community's responsibility to take care of those who are incapable of taking care of themselves. Geer talked about this scene in an interview, asserting that he, as the outsider, was not sure if the community would allow this story to be told on stage; however, when it was presented to the cast, the majority agreed that it needed to be shared with the community. As he plainly asserts, "Now that was guts to say that, especially in the face of a Baptist deacon, cause religion is—you think race is the thing you don't want to talk about—no, it's religion" (Interview 8/30/12). This scene in particular is representative of a breach in social norms and provides a potential for crisis in the shared experience of shame and shock, as well as for healing and reconciliation.

The Gospel Truth does not deal directly with the issue of race until the second scene before the end. The Preacher has just finished his sermon and the character mentioned above, who failed to find God, approaches him to discuss an injustice that is not covered by the Ten Commandments. He tells the story of the difficult childbirth and the white man who had such a hatred for African Americans that his family had to bring the African American midwife in to deliver the baby in secret. As the character explains, "she saved the woman and delivered the old man his first grandbaby. And the brothers still had to take her home under cover of night for fear of her safety" (Carson). He then asks the preacher, "Now, where, Preacher, where in the set of laws is the law against this kind of poverty of heart and mind?" When the Preacher responds with the quote from John 14:34—"A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another even as I have loved you"—he asks why that was not included in the sermon. To which the Preacher replies, "Because this congregation wants to be admonished, they want things laid out clean and

the law does that. And the truth is you have to learn to live with law before you can even begin to think of something so difficult and radical as tolerance and grace and love.” This scene is clearly a meta-narrative of Swamp Gravy and those in attendance at the production. Although it is a bit blunt and could be criticized for being “too little, too late,” it is at least a recognition of the injustices faced by the African American community in the region. Carson acknowledges this injustice, as well as the audience’s presumed inability to hear these stories at that point in time. This short bit of dialogue therefore plays it safe by talking about talking about race, while setting the stage for future “sermons” that might directly address the topic. Of course, this is based on the assumption that CMAC will encourage and support the presentation of these sermons in the future.

The Gospel Truth is a powerful play, full of humor and tragedy, some of which the community is responsible for, and some of which is out of their control. The greatest difference in a comparison of this play to *Solid Ground* is the responsibility that Carson gives to the audience to think critically about their social norms and rules and how different experiences and socio-economic positions influence the approach that individuals might take to them. As the director, Geer had a clear vision of what he wanted a Swamp Gravy play to be and do, within the parameters of the community, and he had already formed relationships with many in the community that established a sense of trust necessary to broach hard subjects and risk a community crisis. In addition, Carson was a playwright with an obvious interest in using and telling hard stories, who had also worked in the community before and had the benefit of

interacting with its members and evolving a script with, and after, conversations and analysis.¹² Compare this situation to that of Poland, who was only able to visit Colquitt once, for a spring production of *Solid Ground*, and Funkenbusch, who was working on his first Swamp Gravy production and chose to defer to the veteran cast members in order to learn the production process.

Community-based performance is about process as much as it is about the final performance product, and for *Solid Ground*, despite the informal rehearsal setting and freedom to change certain lines, the process was more in keeping with conventional theater. Poland received feedback for his play from the Play Committee, many of whom are leaders in the community, but he did not have the benefit of hearing from a large section of the population, such as during a public reading or in the rehearsal room. In addition, as a new outside artist, Funkenbusch was still establishing relationships when he arrived, and did not have a direct hand in the playwriting process, or in choosing the theme of the play or the stories that were used. Poland and Funkenbusch were commissioned by the Play Committee to serve a purpose (with an explicit end), not to serve as outside eyes and perspectives that might be critical of the status quo.

This example brings up an issue that occurs in many community-based performance processes: the reciprocal relationship between the outside artist and the community. In the case of Swamp Gravy, the community for *Solid Ground* was established over the past twenty years and was made up largely of those who worked on productions and were leaders in the county. The Play Committee did not hold community meetings to choose the theme or readings of the

¹² Debra Calhoun Jones, also a playwright for Swamp Gravy, wrote a detailed history and analysis of Jo Carson's work for her dissertation titled, *Jo Carson's Contribution to the Swamp Gravy Recipe*.

oral stories, but rather selected a theme that was in keeping with their larger community development project with the murals. This choice was based more on economic development than the potential for social change and, while that is certainly an important priority for the region, it does not fulfill the claims made in the Swamp Gravy mission statement. I am not making a judgement about this choice and, in fact, find it impressive and groundbreaking that members of the Miller County community have been so successful in the economic revitalization of the town. However, the prioritization of the economic benefits of the Swamp Gravy plays, over inclusivity and the telling of stories from the community for the community, demand a re-evaluation of the methodologies at work and their relegation to either community-based performance, or more conventional forms of community theater.

As referenced in the introduction, the tenets behind community-based performance have a great deal in common with those of community organizing, particularly as espoused by activist and organizer Saul Alinsky. In *Rules for Radicals*, Alinsky emphasizes that the direction, content and tactics of the community project must come from the people within the community: “People have to make their own choices . . . no organizer can tell a community what to do” (91). The community-based performance practitioner, especially one who is an outsider in the communities with which they work, needs to remember this basic principle, as does the outside critic. Ideally, the outside artist and the community will have a reciprocal relationship, in which both parties are mutually benefiting and learning from one another; however, this is easier said than done and reciprocity might look very different depending on the project. In the case of Swamp Gravy, the community (the Swamp Gravy community, if not the entire Miller County community) took

ownership over the project, and the visions of the outside artists, perhaps rightfully so, take a back seat in the development of the plays. What this means, however, is that the community therefore has more responsibility to ensure that they continue the process of critical awareness and artistic and social progression in order to bring a diverse group of participants and audience members into the construction of community. In *Solid Ground* it seems that they played it safe and catered more to the vision of the Swamp Gravy leadership and the prioritization of outside revenue.

Conclusion

As stated at the beginning of this chapter, Swamp Gravy is a unique example of community-based performance, in large part because it has lasted as long as it has in one geographical community. If nothing else, the ability of those community organizers to keep the project going and expand and develop the local economy is extremely impressive, and it is no wonder that Swamp Gravy has become a model for other communities all over the world. I was fortunate enough to attend the yearly Building Creative Communities Conference in 2012, which provides workshops and mentorship for people who are looking to develop a similar kind of program in their small communities. When you drive through southern Georgia you see small towns that are clearly suffering from job loss and outmigration of the population to other regions; however, when you drive into Colquitt, you find a town square lined with shops, a beautiful, newly renovated historical hotel, multiple restaurants, breathtaking murals, and a theater that produces new work every year, based off stories told by members of the community. The work of the Colquitt/Miller Arts Council is incredibly impressive and commendable.

The last twenty years of Swamp Gravy demonstrate a tension at work between the desire to bring in outside revenue, to turn this theater into a “goldmine” for the community, and to create plays that are inclusive of all Miller County residents, as described in the mission statement. This tension might be due in part to a discrepancy between the initial goals of the community, which centered mainly on economic revitalization, and the goals of the outside artist, Richard Owen Geer, who wanted to experiment with a new kind of theater “of, by and for” the community. In interviews, many of the community participants I spoke to mentioned the economic benefits first, and only addressed the issue of inclusivity when asked about it directly. Indeed, there was a desire by several interviewees to widen the range of outreach even more, in order to draw in more outside revenue, or to make the plays lighter in tone than they already are, to ensure that the audience is entertained. Of course, the goal of economic revitalization is still “for” the community, and everyone who works on the plays does so in an effort to create positive change for every resident in the town. In prioritizing economics first, however, Swamp Gravy also runs the risk of highlighting the celebration of community, without providing any critique, reflection, or the inclusion of voices that are not already in the room.

As I write this, it looks as though CMAC might hire Gerard Stropnicki to co-write and direct the next Swamp Gravy production. According to Stropnicki, Haley Rice, the new Artistic Director, was aware of many of the issues that I mention in this chapter; primarily those dealing with the construction of an exclusive and majority white performance community. Unfortunately, CMAC lost the funding necessary to keep Rice on staff full time. In my discussions with him, Funkenbusch used the “fork in the road” metaphor to discuss the current state of Swamp Gravy,

implicating the importance that every choice makes for the long-term impact and existence of the program. My research was timely in that it brought me to Swamp Gravy at this pinnacle moment. I am encouraged by my conversations with Stropnick, Geer, and Funkenbusch, even as I recognize that it is not up to the outside director alone to enact and instigate social change; the desire for change and inclusivity must come from CMAC, in partnership with the larger community across race, ethnicity, and class.

In her book, *Against the Romance of Community*, Miranda Joseph dispels the myth that community is always positive by analyzing “the social processes in which they are constituted and that they help to constitute” (viii). She exposes the ways in which community is invoked in order to promote capitalism, at the risk of the domination and suppression of diverse voices, opinions, and identities. Using Joseph’s argument, Swamp Gravy, as a presentation of Miller County to the outside world, becomes a brand of Southern culture, and as such it is in the interest of the brand that those behind the work present themselves according to the expectations and the desires of their consumer. As demonstrated by the example of *The Gospel Truth*, this is not the case in every Swamp Gravy production, nor, I believe, is it the intention of those who are so fully committed to the work. Joseph ends her book with a positive claim that resistance to capital is possible and that community can be a motivating force for inclusion and social change. As she asserts, desire for social change can be motivated “by evaluating the personal and institutional practices in which we are each inevitably engaged, bring our abstract analysis to bear on the particular relations by which we are constrained and which our own performative actions produce, and struggle to re-articulate those relations and practices” (174). Practitioners of

Swamp Gravy need to re-evaluate the goals and motivations for the project. If they discover that they want to connect back to and continue the struggle (and it is a constant one) for inclusion and the development of a new cultural community-based on that principle, then they need to re-evaluate their methodology.

The example of Swamp Gravy demonstrates that community-based performance principles alone do not ensure the inclusion of the entire community. Those who produce the work must first decide that it is a priority, and the motivation for the project, before negotiating the difficult issues of commitment, sacrifice, reciprocity, and agency. In the final chapter, I examine the work of Pangea World Theater, a company that makes social justice a primary goal of their artistic practice.

Chapter Three

Constructing an International Community:

Art and Equity in Pangea World Theater

Pangea World Theater was founded in 1995 as a direct response to the alienating and hierarchical structures and practices of conventional theater, particularly for women and artists of color. Pangea Artistic Director Dipankar Mukherjee, a contracted director for the renowned and well-funded Guthrie Theater in Minneapolis at the time, sought to create a space where artists and community could meet and create in ways that respected the integrity of the individual, while building ensemble with mutual mentorship. As Mukherjee explained in an interview, Pangea began with questions: “Is it possible to have a space where we can do excellent art with a consciousness of social justice and human rights, without compromising artistic excellence? Is it possible to really create a room with equity? Is it possible to engage in serious conversations about race, gender and class?” (Interview). As with Cornerstone, Pangea’s founders experimented with structure and practice in order to make work that is relevant for audiences outside of the conventional, regional theater industry. However, Mukherjee and Executive Literary Director Meena Natarajan were also intent on addressing issues of social justice and equity in every element of their work, from play selection and development, to the rehearsal room, to their daily interactions with their neighbors in the Lake Street area in Minneapolis, MN.

For Pangea, community is not only a group of like-minded or similarly situated individuals, but also an ongoing process of development; it’s not just about the project, but about

the building of relationships between individuals that matter for Natarajan and Mukherjee and the rest of the staff in the company. They work with a wide range of communities, organizations, and artists, both locally and internationally; and, because the work is tied up with relationships which are usually ongoing, they continue these projects beyond their initial inceptions. Unlike Cornerstone, Pangea's programming with a community extends beyond a final performance or cycle. Unlike Swamp Gravy, Pangea partners with multiple communities, aiming for representation of the diverse demographics in the Twin Cities.

This dynamic makes for a diverse and considerable list of projects throughout the years and at any given time. Included on this list are: play festivals featuring independent artists from the area and the globe; devised, large-scale ensemble productions; the production of plays by artists of color using ensemble techniques; a five year collaboration with Teatro del Pueblo, a theater company in St. Paul based in the Latino community; the development of a Directing Institute for artists of color and women of ensemble based work; collaborations with Native Americans for an Indigenous Voices series; a two year performance project with the Latino immigrant community, which organizers are working to extend to other immigrant communities in the area (*Hyphe-NATIONS*); *Breaking the Silence*, a training piece that dramatizes the issues faced by refugee and immigrant abuse victims, originally commissioned by the Minnesota Advocates for Human Rights; and many others. With a full time staff of only four, Pangea does not stop with the communities and organizations that they are already collaborating with, but are constantly asking, "Who is not in the room and why?"

Pangea is not necessarily a "conventional" community-based performance company. Not

all of their projects fit the definition outlined in the introduction; however, their commitment to relationships in and out of the rehearsal room and to the inclusion of original work and voices not normally heard on stage certainly fit within the principles around which community-based work is centered. In this chapter, I survey and analyze some of the ways in which Pangea approaches and constructs community at every stage of the process. I argue that Pangea is quintessentially a “multicultural” performance company, interested in the creation of a global artistic communal space. “Multicultural” is a complicated word, with a variety of implications and political ramifications, and Pangea avoids many of the negative connotations of the term through their commitment to social justice and equity.

History and Beginnings of Pangea

Pangea World Theater begins from the fundamental paradigm of diversity in the world. Our work expresses this reality and our organization advances this possibility consciously. Since its inception in 1995, Pangea’s goals have included creating a new literature with stories from different communities for theater, changing our methods of auditioning in order to include artists from diverse communities who are not trained in the traditional western methods of the audition process, and creating new possibilities and new aesthetic realities for a more diverse audience. As the community of the Twin Cities has become increasingly diverse with the influx of new immigrants, Pangea has actively sought individuals from these communities to be part of our artistic and advisory team. (Pangea “About Us: Overview”)

The beginnings of Pangea World Theater seem to rest squarely on the words of South African theater practitioner Athol Fugard, as paraphrased by Mukherjee, who was his pupil: “He always said that if you are saying no to something, you have to say yes to something else, otherwise it’s just impotent complaints” (Interview). Mukherjee and others were saying no to the hierarchical structures of mainstream regional theaters—in which directors are driving the artistic vision, playwrights are white men, and actors hold MFAs or BFAs and speak in Standard

American English accents—and, rather than maintain the status quo, they developed a new space for creative development. This space was (and is) about respect through awareness and social, political, gender, and race consciousness. Although Mukherjee is the director for many of the productions, he allows for open dialogue among cast members, playwrights, designers, and staff in terms of the aesthetic and political directions of the productions. Even works that are not fully devised by the cast are rehearsed in an ensemble structure, to avoid tropes such as the star system and the tyrannical director. While there are always exceptions, traditional, white-male driven and directed theater is largely dismissive of the inequities faced by people of color and women, both in and out of the theater industry. Even directors who are aware of such issues, might not prioritize them, in favor of plays in the Western canon that are supposedly “universal” across identity locations.

As Mukherjee explains, “Those were the conversations that were percolating before we created a space . . . a mental space, which we wanted to call Pangea . . . a term in geography that before the continental drift happened . . . the earth was together” (Interview). The metaphor of Pangea envisions a space where people come together. Unlike utopic versions of racial and ethnic harmony, however, in which lip service is given to diversity, while individual cultures are whitewashed, Pangea would include awareness of, and respect for, difference and inequities at every stage of the process.¹ Based on the examples that I describe below, Mukherjee, Natarajan, and all the artists, activists, and organizers associated with their work, are reaching this goal, though it continues to be an ongoing challenge. Pangea sponsors and creates work that questions

¹ As in the introduction, I use the term equity over equality in recognition that the needs of every group and individual are not uniform.

hegemonic aesthetics and politics, while building relationships based on respect and equity.

While the founders of Pangea had the best intentions at the outset, they did not immediately “arrive” at this place in their theater practice. Indeed, Mukherjee came from a professional theater background and as such brought a variety of approaches and norms that are not necessarily conducive to a diversity of artists and practitioners. He described the initial round of auditions for the first Pangea production, *Conference of the Birds*, written and adapted by Natarajan, in which, though they were hoping for more artists of color, as with conventional theaters the majority of auditioners were white. Mukherjee spoke with a friend who suggested that he adjust the language of the audition notice: from “multicultural casting” to “we want to create a space for people of color” and “we want to create a space of equity” (Interview). In short, the notice was made more specific, Mukherjee was identified as the director, and the intentions of the production were clearly outlined. Although this notice cost four times the amount as the previous one, more than 75% of those who showed up at the following round of auditions were artists of color.

Apart from the notice, Mukherjee maintained his standard audition practice, including requests for a headshot and resume, and classical and contemporary monologues; practices that privilege those who are familiar with “the business” of mainstream theater. These norms were also challenged in this second round of auditions, in which an elderly Anishnaabe man arrived without these materials in hand. According to Mukherjee, the man did not have a head shot and, rather than monologues, he delivered instead a story from memory. As Mukherjee describes it, the man’s performance of this story was incredibly skilled, incorporating all of the voice,

movement, and creative skills that any director could hope for in an actor. This experience demonstrated the need for still more flexible and open practices when it came to auditions and outreach for the productions. Mukherjee no longer requires a headshot, resume, or monologues, allowing instead for less rigid forms of evaluation and performance.

A final example of the formative challenges that Pangea faced in the early years of the company occurred in the first rehearsal for *Conference of the Birds*. As the director, Mukherjee had the entire session planned out, including two minutes of silence (now standard practice for every Pangea gathering) at the beginning. Mukherjee describes the meeting:

It was a dream day. We started rehearsal, we welcomed people, talked about Pangea, wanted two minutes of silence. We said, ‘this is your space, you can do what you want.’ Suddenly Isabelle [the only African American actress at the Guthrie at the time] started screaming at the top of her voice, just shouting: ‘tell him to stop, tell him to stop!’ (Interview)

She was pointing to Jim Northrop, the Anishnaabe man described above, who was burning sage in the auditorium in order to bless the space. Although Isabelle is extremely sensitive to smoke, Northrop interpreted her shouting as a disrespect of his culture and immediately felt betrayed by Mukherjee, who promised him a space of respect. Mukherjee and others realized that this space needs to be consciously constructed and that it’s not enough to offer it without deliberate facilitation techniques. He explains, “It became about race. It became about marginalization. And, even an African American woman with a Native man—it became about patriarchy, it became about race. All this baggage in the room, we all bring it” (Interview). The next two weeks of the rehearsal process were about building a team and putting in place the skills and understanding of what the team needed to feel respected and heard in the space. Mukherjee came

to realize that previous experiences with issues of race and gender inequities require an acknowledgement of these dynamics in the room before participants can move forward with trust and mutual respect.

The diversity of Pangea's programming demonstrates the growth that the company made following these initial obstacles. Rather than applying these lessons to individual projects on a micro level, the structure of Pangea's programming is a larger example of the commitment to social justice and the production of under-represented voices onstage. Pangea understands that, in order to have diversity onstage and in community, agency needs to be given to a diversity of artists, community leaders, and organizations. Therefore, they partner with communities and organizations across the Twin Cities area, while also supporting international artists and broadening perspectives of audiences and participants in the region.

Overview of Pangea Programming

Over the last seventeen years, Pangea has developed a long list of programs and productions that blur the line between art and social practice. Some standard practices across these diverse projects include: the two minutes of silence at the beginning of every session, intended to allow for relaxation and a renewal of energies for the tasks at hand; the development of respectful practices for every new group, using a lot of large white post-it notes hanging from the walls; an invitation to Mukherjee and Natarajan's home for a shared meal; constant evaluation of the process at every stage; and, the one continuous rule in the production process (according to Mukherjee): "Never leave the room with residue in your heart." In other words, have the conversation at the moment in order to remain open and honest with the group and

focus on the work. Apart from these practices, the projects vary considerably based on the community or organization with which they are working or the curator in charge of developing the project.² As the overview from Pangea’s website describes, the company is committed to including diverse voices from the Twin Cities region, while also supporting international artists who bring in unique perspectives and experiences.

In addition to originally devised, ensemble based performances, and large scale productions of work written by artists of color, Pangea sponsors and develops a number of ongoing production series that further their goal of including “a new literature with stories from different communities.” The *Indigenous Voices* series, created in 2001, features Native artists who explore and raise issues that are particular to their communities, both locally, nationally and globally. *Hyphe-NATIONS: Immigrant Matters* brings together members of the Latina/o immigrant community in the Twin Cities for theater training, workshops, forums, language sharing programs, and performances aimed at raising awareness and humanizing the experiences of many who feel marginalized in mainstream society. *Bridges*, curated initially by Mukherjee, Natarajan, and poet/writer/performer/activist/teacher J Otis Powell³, is a multi-disciplinary production series that brings together artists from a variety of backgrounds and experiences. Using Open Space Technology, these artists collaborate to create new pieces “across art forms, cultures, aesthetics, borders, and traditions.”³ The *Voices of Exile* series “gives writers from

² Pangea uses the term “curator” to refer to the person bringing different artists, communities, and organizations together under a certain title, approach, theme or style.

³ Harrison Owen developed Open Space Technology as a facilitation structure that gives agency to participants and allows for flexibility in agendas, discussions, and techniques. According to *Open Space World*, “In Open Space meetings, events and organizations, participants create and manage their own agenda of parallel working sessions around a central theme of strategic importance, such as: What is the strategy, group, organization or community that all stakeholders can support and work together to create?” (Herman “About Open Space Technology”).

immigrant and refugee communities a chance to develop works in their own language and English for their own communities and the broader public.” This series incorporates artistic approaches beyond performance, including the visual arts, and features artists from the South Asian, Hmong, and Arab-American communities. Last on the list of current productions series, is *Alternate Visions*, in which, “emerging playwrights spend an extended period of time writing and developing new plays with dramaturgical resources, travel and research funding, and production support” (Pangea “Performances: Production Series”).

These production series do not completely represent the entirety of Pangea’s programming over the years, though they certainly demonstrate the diversity and depth of the its commitment to sponsoring stories and aesthetics outside of conventional, regional theater. Along with programs like the *Morphologies: Queer Performance Festival*, produced in partnership with 20% Theatre and RARE Productions, featuring queer voices/issues and artists from across the country, the production series demonstrate Pangea’s commitment to furthering the cause of social justice and equity through art. In creating a space for these voices and perspectives in theatrical production, Pangea constructs new communities based on diversity and respect, and builds relationships in which members of these communities are allies and advocates for each other, rather than strangers in competition for diminishing resources. At a time when arts funding is harder to come by—both from non-profits and individual donors—and big budget arts organizations continue to receive the majority of the resources, collaborations between

companies striving for diversity become extremely beneficial, if not necessary, for survival.⁴ In the following section, I analyze the ways in which these collaborations construct a thriving and supportive community of artists (both new and experienced) in the Twin Cities, based on lasting relationships, respect, and equity.

Pangea's Notion of Community in Theory and Practice

In theory and practice, community in Pangea is directly tied with relationships, and professional relationships are inseparable from personal interactions and intimacy. When asked how Pangea defines community, Natarajan explained, "Community is in everything we do. . . . It's both about the one on one and what we can create together in a room. . . . Community's not there just because there's a bunch of people in the room, community actually is there because we are in sync with each other in some way, shape, or form" (Interview). This definition is not unlike the practical definitions of community utilized by Cornerstone and Swamp Gravy: community is who is in the room, creating the work, more than it is a semantic, abstract concept based on supposedly shared identity characteristics. What I found unique, however, in Pangea's use and approach to the term was the way in which this definition informed every personal and professional interaction with individuals and groups.

In her article on Pangea, Andrea Assaf describes the following event, as told by a colleague who was visiting Pangea's studio: "There was a delivery, and Dipankar stopped what he was doing to greet the young man from federal express, and offer him a glass of water. The

⁴ An October 2011 report by Holly Sidford for the National Committee for Responsive Philanthropy (NCRP), *Fusing Arts, Culture and Social Change*, states that while "just two percent of arts and culture nonprofits have budgets of more than \$5 million. But they receive 55 percent of contributions, gifts and grants." The report also found that "10 percent of arts and culture grant dollars are classified as benefitting marginalized communities (2007-2009). 4 percent of arts and culture grant dollars are classified as advancing social justice" (9).

colleague was surprised that Dipankar took the time for this interaction. Dipankar responded, ‘But wouldn’t you do that when someone comes to your space?’” (“Redefining Innovation”). Community extends beyond those in the room of a particular production to include everyone who Mukherjee and Natarajan interact with. These individual encounters, based on respect and equity, very often lead to extended collaborations. Nashad Muse, ensemble member of *Breaking the Silence*, first met Natarajan through her work with WATCH, a court monitoring program in Minneapolis focused on ending discrimination in the criminal justice system. They developed a relationship, and Natarajan asked Muse if she would be interested in performing in *Breaking the Silence*. Muse had never considered performing before and was busy with school, work, and family; however, the relationship continued to grow. Natarajan hosted the baby shower for Muse’s first child, and trust developed between the two women. Muse eventually gave in and joined the cast of *Breaking the Silence*; she has now worked with the program for about four years and is a frequent participant in other Pangea programs, including *Hyphe-NATIONS*. As Mukherjee explains, these relationships are deliberate and dynamic efforts to provide spaces for interacting on a deep level:

In order for a space to be called a neighborhood, you connect with people around you. And, in order to build a relationship, you go deeper and, even with a stranger, you give it a period of time. And then, if we want others to be interested in what our lives are about, we have to be interested in what others’ lives are about. (qtd. in Townsend “Pangea World Theater”)

This quote speaks to the heart of Pangea’s approach to community in that it revolves around sincere interest and engagement that blurs the line between the public and private spheres.

Alejandra Tobar-Alatriz, director and curator of *Hyphe-NATIONS*, met Mukherjee and

Natarajan at a workshop that she was facilitating and they immediately proposed that she work with them on a project. They supported a two-year project with the Latino immigrant community and Tobar-Alatríz can't imagine that the relationship will end anytime in the future, unless the work demands that she take the project elsewhere. Even then, the friendship and support will certainly continue. The work of Pangea, led by Mukherjee and Natarajan, is inseparable from these relationships. In addition, these relationships do not end with one project, but extend through a production series: exemplified by *Hyphe-NATIONS*, in which the first two year phase is now developing into an ongoing effort to bridge the Latino immigrant community with other immigrant communities in the area. If the collaboration does not meet expectations, or the curators receive feedback suggesting changes or additions, they can incorporate these into future productions because the projects continue. This is one of the characteristics that Natarajan loves most about the company, and she sees all of their work—from the personal relationships, to community development, to collaborations with social organizations, to playwriting and directing—as art. As she explains, “We are art makers and art makers working with community. I don't care about the definition, it's art” (Interview). Even the act of breaking bread together at their home categorizes as art in the ongoing creative process of Pangea.

Pangea also develops community in the rehearsal room and production process through their commitment to ensemble rather than hierarchical theater structures. Mukherjee acts as the director in many Pangea productions, although the power is distributed during the majority of the production process among everyone involved. Ensemble in Pangea does not mean homogeneity in terms of aesthetic agreement, and certainly not when it comes to identity locations. The first

priority is to provide a space where everyone feels respected and able to express their ideas. As Mukherjee asserts, “Disagreement will always be there, but can we deal with it with respect?” (Interview). The first few weeks of the rehearsal process are about building in this respect and inclusivity and consciously asking “How do we create community?” Indeed, discussions in these early stages revolve around the notion of community: how the participants relate to it in their personal lives and what it might take to develop it in the production process.

The script is not the primary focus of these first few weeks and 99% of the time (according to Office Manager and ensemble member Katie Herron Robb) the actors don’t even know what specific parts they are playing until later in the process. The point is not to build a team only when the performers are in role, but to build a team as individuals with lived experiences and positionalities that inform their artistic and social practices and approaches. Artists are encouraged to bring their experiences into the process, with prompts such as, “Bring one thing that you bring from your culture and your background which you think will help the room” (Mukherjee Interview). In order to create respect for ideas, identities, and communities, the ensemble process allows for reciprocal modes of listening and sharing that value the individual, apart from their respective role in a singular production. This approach is a continuation of the connections between art and politics in Pangea World Theater.

Community also extends beyond the local to include the commissioning of work by artists across the nation and the globe. There is a dynamic tension between the local and the global in every aspect of Pangea’s work. The name of the company implies the bringing together of artists and communities from all over the world and the immigrant experience is portrayed

throughout many of Pangea's productions and collaborations. Mukherjee and Natarajan are immigrants, though they have lived in the Twin Cities for over twenty years. The Lake Street area in which Pangea's studio and office are located is incredibly diverse both racially and ethnically. Joyce Wisdom, Pangea board member and Executive Director of the Lake Street Council, claims that "You can track over one hundred years of immigration on lake street. . . . [With] every wave of immigration to the United States and Minneapolis, businesses were created on Lake Street" (Interview). The most recent "waves of immigration" brought immigrants from South America and Somalia. Although there is not a singular "immigrant experience," Pangea strives to find connections across communities in programs such as *Voices in Exile* and *Hyphe-NATIONS*. This is not a question of audience outreach alone, Pangea includes on its website the following assertion: "As the Twin Cities has become increasingly diverse with the influx of new immigrants, Pangea has actively sought individuals from these communities to be part of our artistic and advisory team" ("About Us: Overview"). By including members of these immigrant communities in leadership positions, Pangea gives agency to artists over their own representations; though, as will be discussed below, because these representations are so uncommon in mainstream media, they take on certain implications within the communities themselves. In this sense, community building is not restricted based on country or region of origin alone, but extends further to include artists from outside the mainstream who find support and shared values in Pangea's philosophies and practices. Furthermore, Pangea does not only value the immigrant experience, but is also dedicated to the representation and sponsorship of aesthetic and political perspectives from Indigenous artists.

Although diverse in comparison to Minnesota at large, Hennepin County, where Pangea is located, according to the 2012 Census, is 77% white. Pangea audiences reflect this statistic as they are also generally majority white. Therefore, Pangea is not only reflecting immigrant perspectives back to their communities, but also presenting them to an audience who might not identify directly with these perspectives. In addition, through their commissioning of work from international Indigenous and non-Indigenous artists, Pangea brings in voices and perspectives that are new and challenging even to nonwhite immigrant communities. As Katie Herron Robb explains,

We feel it's important for us to be artistically challenged from ideas and from people from outside of our community locally. So it's definitely important for us to bring people from other places, but we can't bring people from other places and not invest in the local community. It's really important for us to do both: to challenge our audiences with politics from outside of MN but also to challenge them with sometimes similar politics from right next door to them. (Interview)

The staff and artists (the staff are all, deliberately, artists) at Pangea don't see themselves outside of this effort to challenge audiences, but commission outside artists for their own political and aesthetic needs and journeys. In this way, by building a base of collaborators and audiences who are used to being challenged with outside perspectives, they are in the process of constructing community around political and aesthetic curiosity, which is very much aligned with their commitment to social justice. As I explain in the following section, this commitment is uniquely multicultural in its definition and structure in a way that furthers equity rather than masks systemic inequality.

Pangea as a “Multicultural” Company

Pangea chooses the term “multiethnic” over “multicultural” in mission statements and program descriptions. Indeed, many organizations avoid the term “multicultural” for political and social reasons, connecting it to hegemonic practices that seek to whitewash or undermine systemic inequities while “celebrating” cultural backgrounds. “Multicultural” is a useful description, however, for a company like Pangea, because their work demonstrates the possibilities for the term, especially when taking into account the company’s commitment to social justice. For this reason, I use “multicultural” because it connects Pangea to a body of critical theory and political activism that works to define the term through socio-political parameters. For scholars and activists, practice is more important than semantics, and Pangea fits within the framework of politically conscious critiques of multiculturalism such as those by Angela Y. Davis and Gregory Jay.

Like “community,” the term “multicultural” is both descriptive and connotative. It describes groups, activities, programs, and events that include more than one culture, either through membership, content, or context. However, for many in the fields of social justice and critical theory, the term also connotes somewhat superficial efforts towards political correctness that seek to value a multiplicity of cultures, while ignoring and perpetuating very real and persistent systemic social and cultural inequalities and inequities. Gaining traction in the 1990s, multiculturalism shifted the focus away from race to include other forms of identity such as ethnicity, religion, language, and symbolism. In *Mapping Multiculturalism*, Avery F. Gordon and Christopher Newfield bring together analyses that consider various implications of

multiculturalism both in theory and practice. Although they come from different academic backgrounds and fields, the authors in this anthology share an appreciation for the ways in which multiculturalism is inseparable from race in our current political context, and therefore also “link race’s complex cultural questions to questions of power and institutional authority.” As Gordon and Newfield assert, “They see race and racism not only as intricate cultural issues that involve all aspects of individual and group life, but as immersed in economic, international, political and policy dynamics” (2). By connecting culture to race and race to explicit power structures, these authors view calls for multiculturalism that ignore race as complicit in the perpetuation of hegemonic inequities. For those who did not know him, Mukherjee’s initial audition notice referring to Pangea as “multicultural” might fit into this category. In order to demonstrate that he was not merely giving lip service to diversity, he needed to demonstrate that Pangea is a space of equity and respect for people of color.

Gregory Jay identifies two distinct directions for the “movement known as multiculturalism.” The first type of multiculturalism “celebrates diversity of cultural groups. . . . It sees the identities of individuals as primarily cultural, determined by their membership in a group, not as an expression of individual consciousness” (“Taking Multiculturalism Personally” 613). Critics of this direction interpret these efforts as obscuring systemic relations of oppression because it focuses on individual cultures, rather than the relationships across or between them. Therefore, the second type of multiculturalism “is less interested in celebrating difference than in resisting oppression. . . . Rather than accepting the borders between cultural groups, it insists on analyzing how cultural divisions are constructed historically through racist policies or other

institutions of oppression” (614). For his part, Jay rejects elements of both directions, as they essentialize experiences around group identity and downplay the potential for personal agency. Pangea’s multi-ethnic approach is more similar to this latter interpretation of multiculturalism, as the company recognizes difference, while focusing on the experience and agency of the individual. Furthermore, members of Pangea use sustained and equitable relationships as a model for enacting social and political change.

According to Gordon and Newfield, multiculturalism was a response to the invocation of “color blindness” and the rejection of race as a relevant social category, usually by those in positions of power (3). The term was not a clear alternative, however, and in emphasizing culture over race, it potentially creates a false sense of equality: what do years of oppression matter, if we’re all members of our own distinct and precious cultures? Angela Y. Davis expounds,

What happens when we shift our arguments away from charges of racism and begin to talk about difference, diversity, and multiculturalism? . . . In this context, we must be aware of the fact that multiculturalism can easily become a way to guarantee that those differences and diversities are retained superficially while becoming homogenized and harmonized politically, especially along axes of class, gender, and sexuality. Although this is not an inevitability, multiculturalism can become a polite and euphemistic way of affirming persisting, unequal power relationships by presenting them as equal differences. (“Gender, Class, and Multiculturalism: Rethinking ‘Race’ Politics” 44)

Although written in 1996, this issue continues today, both in politics and in the arts. Theaters across the country seek to create more diversity in their audiences without changing the diversity in their staff, artists, and seasons. Therefore, while they might include a few plays written by artists of color, they do not alter the power dynamics in theater structures that are largely led by

white directors, playwrights, and administrators.⁵ Herron Robb described some of the distrust that artists of color have towards some of these mainstream theaters, based on their tendency to either ignore them, or treat them as tokens for a single production. Pangea collaborates with various artists and organizations of color, such as Native Americans, over extended periods of time and for ongoing projects like the *Indigenous Voices* series, which has now been running for 11 years. As Herron Robb explains, “It’s not so simple to say, ‘we want more diverse actors.’ Well, do you want more diversity on your staff? On your board? With your directors? With your backstage?” (Interview). These extended relationships build the trust necessary to alter justifiably negative assumptions about projects seeking particular races or ethnicities. Pangea’s website claims that, “In Minnesota where 17% of the population is people of color, our productions regularly draw audiences of more than 30% people of color” (“About Us: Theater Overview”).

In creating a “multicultural” space, Pangea does not use diversity merely as a tool for bringing in new audiences, but as an inherent element of their mission statement and practice. Diversity of race, class, gender, and culture enter into every aspect of Pangea structurally, aesthetically, and politically. Furthermore, the notion of diversity goes beyond the most salient identity characteristics of race and gender to include a heterogeneity of experience and positionality. When staging a production of *Oedipus el Rey* by Luis Alfaro, for example, in collaboration with Teatro del Pueblo, there were few assumptions about what it means to be Latino/a in any broad sense of the term. Although the play was written by a Latino playwright,

⁵ The Guthrie Theater, although lauded for certain productions that bring in diverse cast and perspectives (it co-produced *The Falls* in 2006 with Cornerstone Theater Company, was recently criticized for its 2012 season, producing shows written and directed by majority white men. See: “Guthrie Theater’s Debt to Women and Diversity” by Marianne Combs in *MPR News*, 24, April 2012.

features Latino/a actors in a setting that might be considered relevant to a type of Latino/a experience (in a prison, in a barrio), Mukherjee, as the director, did not assume that all of his ensemble actors would agree with the implications or the nuances of this experience and therefore be able to represent it onstage with any kind of authenticity. Instead, Mukherjee and the cast spent weeks discussing language alone—Chicano, Latino, Hispanic, Mexican—and Herron Robb (the only white female member of the cast) asserts that this kind of attention to detail was vital to the cast taking ownership over their roles and the themes of the play (Interview). Furthermore, Mukherjee is not Latino himself and so, to avoid perpetuating misrepresentations of Latinos from outside the community, it was vital that he be able and willing to defer to the lived experiences of the ensemble and the collaboration with Teatro del Pueblo, specifically with Alberto Justiniano as the artistic director of the company. Herron Robb explains, “The actors are creating the blocking, the director’s not imposing that and so, in that way, when he’s doing a show like *Oedipus el Rey*, he has Latino actors in the show who are creating [it] just as much as [he is]. And so, it’s not that their voices aren’t there and heard and present” (Interview). In this instance, through the practice of ensemble Pangea provides a space for multicultural contributions to the production, even when the play is supposedly representing a single cultural perspective.

Multicultural programs might diminish difference outside the norm by offering everyone the opportunity to participate without changing social inequities that provide equal access to discourse, representation, and information. Although Pangea casts productions across race, gender, and ethnicity, it does not believe in color blind casting. On the contrary, Pangea very

explicitly “sees” race and acknowledges that one’s position, based on the intersectionality of their identities, makes them a unique individual with perspectives that are worthy of being presented on stage. This practice is demonstrated most clearly in the way that accents become political markers in a Pangea production. Rather than demanding that actors alter their accents to fit the assumed style of a production, such as Ovid’s *Metamorphosis*, actors are encouraged to keep their own, acquired accents, so long as the overall integrity of the script is maintained. This practice even extends to language in some instances and the multi-lingual actors often experiment with switching between their acquired languages, depending on the action in a particular scene.

This approach to accents and language is not always understood, especially when reviewers and performers are so used to accents being put on as a conscious “character choice.” One reviewer, writing about *The House of Bernada Alba* (produced also in collaboration with Teatro del Pueblo), found the accents to be “distracting” and “inconsistent.” As she explains:

Another distraction is the inconsistent use of dialects by the actors. Some actors speak with heavy Spanish accents, others with slight Spanish accents, and others with American accents. I was not certain if this was just a failure by certain actors to stay in character or if the multi-lingual accents was an intended effect. (Wolfe *Twin Cities Daily Planet*)

Although I did not see this production myself, I can imagine that these accents were “inconsistent,” considering that the actors were not directed to try to speak in any accent outside of the ones that they already have. The ensemble members were not all from the same area or background, and to pretend otherwise would be to erase their differences and experiences. In this instance and in others, the accents are an extension of the actors’ bodies and identities, and it is not Pangea’s intention to ignore these embodied characteristics in the process of putting together

a production.

Again, this principle is not always easily understood, even by members of the ensemble. In an interview, Mukherjee told the story of a white female actor who, in portraying the character of Midas in *Metamorphosis*, insisted upon using a British accent. When asked why she was making this choice, the actor replied that she saw the character as pompous and so a British accent seemed to fit. Mukherjee explained that such a portrayal is based on stereotypes and not in line with the principles of Pangea, nor in keeping with the actor's own identity: she was originally from Texas, not the United Kingdom. The actor responded, "But you're not telling Alberto to lose his accent—he's from Puerto Rico—you're not telling Barbara to lose her accent." Mukherjee attempted to explain that these were their own, authentic accents and to speak without them would be to alter them. He asserted: "We cannot essentialize a whole country or a culture. It's like saying every Native actor has to dance onstage with feathers" (Interview). In an ideal version of this story, the actor would come to understand that accents are not only aesthetic, but also political markers, and that to compare her performance of an accent with the other actors who were merely speaking in their mother tongue is to perpetuate the notion of American Standard English as neutral; thereby Othering the accents of her fellow ensemble members. This transformation did not occur in this instance, unfortunately, and she no longer performs in Pangea productions. Mukherjee needed to step in as the director to ensure that the principles of social justice and respect continued, though this meant taking some of the power out of the hands of this particular performer.

Pangea's version of multiculturalism that is committed to social justice and equity puts it

squarely in line with companies such as New WORLD Theater, founded by Roberta Uno at University of Massachusetts, Amherst in 1979. This institution produced and sponsored work from a global community of artists, many of whom might not be given a chance otherwise in the mainstream, traditional structures of American theater. In addition, New WORLD Theater provided an opportunity for politically and culturally conscious artists to discuss their work with likeminded peers. Uno presents some of these foundational conversations in her book, *The Color of Theater: Race, Culture and Contemporary Performance*, published in 2002, including four performance texts, essays by artists and scholars like Thulani Davis, and interviews with artists of color such as Brian Freeman (who also participated in the Directing Institute, sponsored by Pangea and Art2Action). These essays, interviews, and performances go a long way in establishing a field that, in actuality, crosses many other fields. For example, despite the tendency of funders and other institutions to define the work as “multicultural,” Uno questions the context involved in this term and “became uneasily familiar” with it, “as a hegemonic, discursive site to which I was assigned” (9). New WORLD Theater avoided simplistic labels for the work that the featured artists were bringing to this majority white college campus and Uno, as their sponsor, provided that forum.

Like New WORLD Theater, Pangea provides opportunities for new voices to emerge onstage in the Twin Cities, and these voices most certainly embody multiple cultural perspectives. However, Pangea avoids the pitfalls of multiculturalism that perpetuate hegemonic discourse and ignore systemic inequality by making social justice a central characteristic of the approach to and goals of the work. In the remainder of this chapter, I analyze Pangea’s *Breaking*

the Silence program, as it is characteristic of Pangea's aesthetic and political values and practices. The example of *Breaking the Silence* also demonstrates some of the ways in which Pangea defines and uses community as a descriptive and connotative concept. While community is about relationships between individuals and ensembles, it is also a descriptive term for groups with shared experiences, and is used to further social justice issues by developing shared goals and visions around these experiences.

Breaking the Silence

In 2005, Minnesota Advocates for Human Rights (MAHR) approached Pangea to develop a performance training piece based on a report published December 10, 2004: *The Government Response to Domestic Violence Against Refugee and Immigrant Women in the Minneapolis/St. Paul Metropolitan Area: A Human Rights Report*. The initial training event took place at the Annual Conference of Minnesota State Court Judges. Pangea worked with the Advocates for Human Rights previously on projects regarding issues such as immigration and child labor in Pakistan, and so there was already a relationship between the two organizations when the project began. Originally called *Journey to Safety*, *Breaking the Silence* is a powerful play that uses real stories and theatrical techniques to humanize the experiences faced by many immigrant and refugee victims of domestic violence.⁶ The piece was initially workshopped with an ensemble of six or seven women, a few without prior theater experience, and about half of whom were from advocacy groups. The women were all given the full report and they began

⁶ According to Natarajan, the name was changed to better reflect the reality of the situation that many women face, as well as the goals of the project. *Journey to Safety* came across as too idealistic whereas *Breaking the Silence* implicated the larger institutional structures surrounding the issue, as well as one of the major challenges that the institutions face in addressing domestic violence in immigrant communities.

developing scenes based on the information and their own experiences as immigrants and advocates. Natarajan then took the report, and all of their contributions, and crafted them into a forty-five minute piece. The ensemble shaped the piece, with Mukherjee as the director and Natarajan as the final playwright.

In reading the report in conjunction with the play, it is clear that the ensemble stayed very close to the information and content of the former in their dramatic interpretation. The 157 page report gives detailed evidence as to the need for greater awareness and action on the part of the legal and criminal justice systems regarding immigrant and refugee victims of domestic violence. It highlights many of the particular challenges that these women face, based on cultural, legal, and economic circumstances. It also gives solid justification for greater action, based on inadequacies in the state and local justice and medical systems, as well as regarding the obligations of the state under international human rights law. According to the report:

Minnesota Advocates' findings are derived from over 150 interviews, primarily in Hennepin and Ramsey Counties, with judges, lawyers, prosecutors, public defenders, advocates, probation officers, immigration officials, medical service providers, interpreters, child protection employees and others regarding their interaction with refugee and immigrant women who have been battered. (1)

The methodology behind the report was more qualitative than quantitative, making it an ideal source for a performance piece because it is based on real life stories rather than numbers alone. Another issue worth noting is that the majority of the content came from secondary sources, i.e. people who interact with victims, rather than the victims themselves.⁷ This detail demonstrates the overall goal of the project, which is primarily to work with the institutions that have the

⁷ The report later includes, "Interviews with survivors of domestic violence identified by advocates as individuals who wanted to tell their story" (8).

power to make changes as opposed to a ground up approach, which emphasizes that change should come from those with the least amount of power.

According to the report, the purpose of the project is: “To evaluate the government’s compliance with its obligations under international human rights law to protect refugee and immigrant women from domestic violence;” “to articulate program and policy recommendations” to protect immigrant and refugee women from domestic violence and to “promote accountability for violent offenders;” and, “to educate the community about the obstacles refugee and immigrant women face in establishing safe homes for themselves and their children and in prosecuting their abusers for criminal conduct” (7). The “community” referred to in the last goal is primarily the criminal justice and legal institutions in charge of providing protection and justice for victims of domestic abuse. However, because the report and the performance are based mainly on secondary sources and these sources are the primary reading and viewing audience (all for the good of the women themselves), the issues of community, audience, and representation become increasingly complex. There are multiple processes of mediation occurring in this program that might serve to diminish the voices of immigrant and refugee victims, rather than heighten them in an effort to raise awareness about their plight. This could be especially problematic considering the challenges that these women face in their own communities and in the institutions that are supposed to protect them.

The report identified five major obstacles that “prevent an effective government response to violence against immigrant women in the Minneapolis/St. Paul metropolitan area:”

1) language barriers; 2) fear of deportation and legal systems; 3) obstacles in the law and

the implementation of the law; 4) cultural barriers and community pressures; and 5) funding issues. (9)

Each of these issues are supported by testimony and some statistics, and they demonstrate the ways in which many immigrant women are/feel isolated and powerless. Furthermore, these issues are, more often than not, interconnected. For example, a woman may be reliant on her spouse/partner financially, thereby increasing her worry that he will be deported and making her unable to support herself and her family. In addition, the language barriers faced by many of these women make many government programs inaccessible due to a lack of information and support, and there is very often a lack of interpreter support in many agencies based on funding or organizational inadequacies. While the report managed to center on these five major challenges, there is no singular experience that defines all immigrant and refugee women, especially considering the diversity of backgrounds and experiences. As the report states, “Minnesota’s refugee and immigrant populations have increased in recent years, with people coming primarily from Latin America, Thailand, Cambodia, Laos, Russia, Somalia and Ethiopia” (5). Giving every woman the respect and sensitivity that is demanded in any situation requires a great deal of flexibility and resources that government institutions often lack. Therefore, it is important that the program, while remaining specific and thorough in its content and recommendations, also reminds those active in these institutions that they are dealing with human experiences that defy a singular approach, which is where Pangea’s role becomes

especially important.⁸

The issue of representation is incredibly important and complex in *Breaking the Silence* because there are so many modes of mediation that separate the original experiences of the victims of domestic abuse from the final versions of these stories in the report and in the script. Furthermore, although many in the ensemble have first hand experience with some of the challenges that these women face, and are immigrants themselves, for the most part it is not the victims telling their own stories to an audience of their peers. The play is mostly performed for those in positions of power, which makes sense in terms of enacting institutional change, but raises the stakes to accurately represent experiences that are already so marginalized in society. Although all parties involved have the best of intentions, they are ultimately speaking for and about, rather than speaking with, the subjects of the report and performance. In “The Problem of Speaking for Others,” Linda Alcoff identifies some of the key issues inherent in any instances of representation, including attempts to only speak for oneself. She connects the content of the speech act to the identity location of the speaker, rightly affirming that one’s position embodies a certain level of power, or lack thereof (*Cultural Critique* 6-7). Furthermore, when a speaker in a position of power represents those with less socio-political agency, they risk furthering the process of objectifying the subject: the subject of the speech becomes an object due to a lack of nuance and agency in the representation. As Alcoff explains, “The practice of privileged persons speaking for or on behalf of less privileged persons has actually resulted (in many cases) in

⁸ The report addresses the concern of essentializing the experiences of all immigrant and refugee women in an opening section: “While this report presents some generalizations about the experiences of refugee and immigrant women in Minnesota, Minnesota Advocates acknowledges that the experiences of refugee and immigrant women in the Minneapolis/St. Paul metropolitan area are diverse” (4).

increasing or reinforcing the oppression of the group spoken for” (7). In the case of *Breaking the Silence*, the discursive context surrounding the representations, in which Pangea and MAHR are presenting their interpretations of certain experiences to those who have disproportionately more agency than the subjects being represented, presents serious issues of power and privilege.

Alcoff is by no means suggesting that speaking for others is always politically damaging. On the contrary, she suggests that avoiding the act of representation is generally impossible and, perhaps, politically irresponsible (17). She argues, “There is no neutral place to stand free and clear in which one’s words do not prescriptively affect or mediate the experience of others, nor is there a way to decisively demarcate a boundary between one’s location and all others” (20). Furthermore, there might be instances in which, due to socio-political inequities, it is the responsibility of those with access to the public sphere to speak for those who are currently denied access. She suggests that those who attempt to speak for others consider “four sets of interrogatory practices that are meant to help evaluate possible and actual instances of speaking for:”

1. The impetus to speak must be carefully analyzed and, in many cases (certainly for academics!), fought against. (24)
2. We must also interrogate the bearing of our location and context on what it is we are saying, and this should be an explicit part of every serious discursive practice we engage in.
3. Speaking should always carry with it an accountability and responsibility for what one says. (25)
4. In order to evaluate attempts to speak for others in particular instances, we need to analyze the probable or actual effects of the words on the discursive and material context. (26)

This last point is crucial for Alcoff, and it connects to the importance of responsibility and accountability in the third set. Ultimately, Alcoff asserts that, although speaking for others might

be unavoidable and even constructive, the speaker(s) must always be aware of the power of their speech acts and the ways in which they reify or subvert existing power structures.

In analyzing the report by MAHR and the subsequent performance by Pangea in terms of these interrogative practices, it seems that there is a certain awareness of the power dynamics implicit in these representations. When casting *Breaking the Silence*, Pangea strives first to hire ensemble members who have some connections to the experiences faced by immigrant and refugee women. Nashad Muse, who came to the US from Somalia (though she is originally from Kenya), has been in the ensemble for about four years. In addition to her experience with WATCH, she also has firsthand experience with domestic violence after her sister was attacked in her home in Kenya, as well as an aunt who was in an abusive relationship for many years. Maria Liliana Espondaburu, originally from Argentina, is an original member of the ensemble and long time, professional advocate for immigrant and refugee women. Although cast members like Muse and Espondaburu might not be victims of domestic violence themselves, there is less mediation between their experiences and those of the victims due to their locations as allies and immigrants.

In terms of the issues of accountability and responsibility, Pangea seems critically aware of the power that comes from speaking for others and the potential political outcomes of their representations. This is evidenced most clearly in the ways in which they develop the characters of the women, based on the bodies and experiences of the actors. At no point in the script is there any reference to a specific community—i.e., the Hmong community, Latino community, Somali community—although the actors may come from these communities themselves. This practice is

intended to avoid oversimplifying experiences and stereotyping behavior that could damage the community at large. As Herron Robb explains, “We don’t want to perpetuate negative stereotypes. At the same time, it’s important to tell the truth. . . . For instance, the judges need to see how different people go through life in different ways; they don’t necessarily need to box the Hmong community into a corner” (Interview). This convention was also practiced in the MAHR report, which states, “Minnesota Advocates presents its findings in large part without highlighting the ethnicity or national origin of the individuals involved” (4). Although MAHR and Pangea cannot ensure that stereotypes will not persist, they can acknowledge the potential for them and seek to avoid reifying them as much as possible. This is also why Pangea includes non-immigrant white women, such as Herron Robb. Her location as a white, female, American citizen reminds the audience that domestic violence is not relegated to immigrant and refugee women alone, although they might face additional challenges.

Determining the outcomes or effects of work like *Breaking the Silence*, like any community-based or applied theater project, is a challenge. In many instances, the outcomes may not be immediately determinable, but are manifested later in the accumulation of small acts based on increased cultural and social awareness. Because *Breaking the Silence* is produced in collaboration with non-profit and governmental organizations like MAHR, there is shared capacity to survey responses from training attendees, as well as to get a sense of the overall impact of the project. As articulated in a description of the program provided by Pangea, *Breaking the Silence* (called *Journey to Safety* in the literature) produces 4 major outcomes:

- Raised awareness of the barriers facing immigrant and refugee victims of domestic abuse.
- Domestic abuse advocates who are more empathetic and understanding of immigrant

victims. Empowered immigrant women and women of color. Outreach to diverse immigrant minorities through public forums and workshops. (Pangea)

These outcomes are measured primarily through: post-workshop feedback; increased participation and calls for more trainings; new and creative ideas and increased support for programs/processes; as well as observations of immigrant women and women of color in terms of increases in empowerment and numbers of women seeking support. Most of these outcomes are based on shifts in particular social interactions, rather than on particular policy changes. These seem like suitable adjustments because communication and access to information are the primary factors in providing support to immigrant and refugee women, based on the MAHR report. Furthermore, these kinds of outcomes allow for more sensitivity and awareness of individual experiences, rather than across the board changes in process that potentially erase difference and objectify the individual based on her socio-political status alone.

As demonstrated by these factors, although *Breaking the Silence* clearly “speaks for” immigrant and refugee victims of domestic violence, it does so in a way that is socially and politically aware of, and accountable for, the potential repercussions of these representations. As a multicultural company, in which the voices of immigrants are central, Pangea takes on the responsibility to speak for those who do not have access to the public sphere in order to speak for themselves. Furthermore, *Breaking the Silence*, although only around 45 minutes long, is a complex and nuanced representation of the experiences of many immigrant and refugee women. *Breaking the Silence*, based on the MAHR report, demonstrates the ways in which the experiences of the individual are directly connected with a multitude of outside factors, most of which are outside of her control. These factors stem from the interrelations of different types of

community, which, in these examples, is not always a positive force. Although we all belong to multiple communities, *Breaking the Silence*, demonstrates the ways in which these communities are sometimes in opposition to one another, exerting a great deal of social tension and pressure on the individual who is caught in the middle. Unlike Swamp Gravy's *Solid Ground*, the community constructed in *Breaking the Silence* is an ambivalent but powerful force. This performance of community demonstrates the importance of conscious political action and awareness as the group pressures of community can easily suppress the needs of the individual. The remainder of this chapter summarizes the play itself, while analyzing the complexity of community dynamics in certain situations.

Breaking the Silence begins with a mostly improvised and interactive scene in which members of the audience are given forms to fill out that are intentionally unreadable. The actors give the audience verbal instructions on how to fill out the forms, but they do not speak in English. According to the script, "This scene exposes the audience to the unfamiliarity that immigrants feel as they try to negotiate the system" (4). Although I only experienced this scene in a dress rehearsal, I found it very effective, particularly because the made up language of the forms was so convincing (there were words or phrases that I thought I should understand, but could not) and the actors were so oblivious to my confusion and frustration. This scene is generally controversial in many of the performances. Herron Robb, who has acted and contributed to *Breaking the Silence* from the beginning, described the reaction from some of the judges as particularly annoyed and bothered. They clearly "got the point" and were ready to move on. However, in feedback after the performance, many refer to this moment in the play as

one of the most powerful (Interview).

Perhaps the most negative response came from a rural community in Minnesota in which many audience members left after this scene and others expressed real anger in the talkback following the performance. As Herron Robb described it, “You could have heard a pin drop with the anger that was in the room when we were doing the show” (Interview). Part of the issue with this performance might have been that the audience was not prepared for the nature of the content beforehand. They were primarily made up of all white members of a neighborhood watch program, and were not invested in the issues that the play deals with on a personal or professional level. In addition, the alienating experience of multilingual performance is a challenging one for all audiences, even if this is the goal of the piece itself. The experience of this particular performance demonstrates some of the limitations of the piece, as well as the potential for its use outside of the communities towards which it is directed (who are already invested in the material on a personal and/or professional level). It is also important to note that the need for diversity and representation occurs also when speaking to a white majority audience. Perhaps this particular performance was ineffective because the audience could not see their community represented clearly enough to trigger a connection. This connects back to Kershaw’s four operational approaches mentioned in the introduction, the right combination of which are necessary for effective political theater. The audience did not believe that the play was relevant enough to their lives and so were not invested enough in the process. Of course, domestic violence affects all communities regardless of color, race, ethnicity, and class, but some audiences might need to see people like themselves experiencing it in order to make an

emotional and political connection.

The dramatic action in *Breaking the Silence* begins with the “Police Scene,” in which two police officers arrive at a house to investigate a domestic disturbance. This scene is repeated: the first time the woman who was abused does not speak English and so the police do not understand the circumstances surrounding the violence. They cannot write a complete report and, because the husband speaks English, they believe his side of the story and take the wife in for violent behavior instead. This initial scene demonstrates the frustration and alienation that a woman might feel due to language barriers and a lack of appreciation for her situation from the police. Although they are trying to help, the police have limited resources in terms of communication and information. Therefore, they greatly misinterpret the events which took place, and these misinterpretations ultimately end up in a police report that will influence the remainder of the victim’s interactions with the criminal justice system. When the scene is repeated, the wife speaks English and so, although the scene is still emotional and she is clearly afraid, she is able to communicate her side of the story. This time, the police listen to her testimony and the scene ends with an arrest of the husband. The husband is taken away, though he taunts the woman with her lack of economic security: “What are you going to do now? Tomorrow you won’t even have food, dtghghuu (*spits*)” (14). Together, these scenes demonstrate the challenge that language barriers present for a refugee or immigrant victim of abuse: even when she gathers the courage to share her story with the authorities, if they cannot understand her then there is no guarantee of safety or protection.

The second scene, “Medical Institutions,” continues to portray some of the challenges

caused by language barriers, particularly when it comes to receiving proper health care and maintaining accurate records. In this situation an interpreter is again absent and the doctor on duty is already tired and frustrated at the end of a long shift. The woman is afraid to say that her partner caused her injuries, even to someone who could understand her, and she is also unable to fill out the insurance forms. The doctor and staff try to ask the woman's child to interpret for her, an action that further decreases the woman's agency and also puts the child in a difficult situation, as she is asked to reveal the truth about her father against the wishes of her mother. Later in the play, we hear the inner voice of the woman from this scene, who expresses her fear, concern and confusion, not to mention her physical pain. The woman worries that the system will take away her children; she worries that the doctors won't believe her because her "body does not bruise like white women" (26); she is offended when they ask her to undress; she is worried that they will give her information to immigration services; and, she is torn between the pressure from her community to keep the status quo and the advice from her advocate to seek help in trying to end the abuse.

These inner monologues are dramatized in the play through movement centered scenes that feature a variety of perspectives. These voices are, again, pulled almost directly from the report, though they were developed and humanized in the rehearsal process. The women move in a circle or square formation, repeating movements that connote the acts of cooking, serving the family, working, and, to punctuate the dramatic intent of the lines, being slapped. The lines deal with some of the many pressures and challenges faced by immigrant and refugee women including: cultural and community obligations and tensions; distrust of the police, due to the

increased attention paid to immigrants after 9/11 and fears that are brought over from their countries of origin; the lack of cultural capacity and sensitivity in the shelters; and, the idea that if they leave their situation, or their partner is deported, they'll have nowhere to go. The first scene in this montage ends with the line, "These multiple systems are coming into my life. The system is fragmented. My life is not" (24). This final line demonstrates the lack of agency that women in these situations have, not only in their personal lives, but also in their interactions with the systems that are supposed to support and protect them. There is justifiable concern, based on lived experience, that once they enter into the system they will lose control over their immigration status, healthcare and that their children will be taken away by child services. By hearing these voices and perspectives, the hope is that the audience of government workers might gain a greater understanding of just a few of these many challenges, even if they are not universal or all-encompassing.

Scene 3 and scene 4 continue to highlight the feeling of alienation and loss of agency due to language barriers, cultural pressure, and economic and immigration status concerns. Scene 3, "Paper-Paper," connects back to the opening of the play, this time from the perspective of the refugee or immigrant woman. The woman is directed from station to station in a never ending demand for forms, papers, proof of identification, and documentation. The demands become more and more ridiculous—"We'll need a blood sample, soil sample, carpet sample, stool sample and the blood of your firstborn" (36)—demonstrating the overwhelming, bureaucratic "red-tapism" of government agencies (29). In addition, once again there was not an interpreter available to help the woman navigate through this chaos, and the scene ends with a huge mess of

papers scattered around the stage as she collapses to the floor. Again, the central perspective for this scene comes from the refugee or immigrant woman; and yet, a scene like this is quite critical of the bureaucratic process that is ultimately working to help rather than hinder someone in her position. These scenes are meant to demonstrate some of the obstacles that prevent women from receiving proper help, with the hope that those in the audience who work in the system might be able to make changes that enable the process to run more effectively. Furthermore, the play is generally followed by a talk back and extensive discussion in which audiences can dialogue about the scenes and brainstorm strategies for improvement.

The final scene takes place in a court room and this time, the woman has an interpreter who is meant to help her communicate with the judge and give her testimony regarding the abuse she received from her husband. In this instance, the interpreter is an advocate for “the community” rather than for the woman, which the audience recognizes with two versions of the scene: in the first, the woman speaks in her native language, and in the second, she speaks in English, though the judge still cannot understand her. Before the trial begins, the interpreter tells the woman, “In our culture, we solve these things amongst ourselves. We get advice from the community elders” (42). She is trying to convince the woman to lie about the abuse or to drop the charges, and shames her by accusing her of betraying her culture and community. The woman is determined to tell the truth and wants the abuse to stop, however, she cannot communicate with the judge directly and so is entirely at the mercy of the interpreter. As we learn in the second version of the scene, the interpreter mistranslates the woman’s words to the judge, attributing her injuries to her own clumsiness and representing her as unstable and overly

emotional. In the final lines of the play, the woman attempts to communicate her frustration through the interpreter crying, “All these voices in my head, all these voices telling me what to do... All I want is some help for me and my children.” The interpreter represents these words to the judge as, “I am hearing voices in my head... And I want you to do what’s best for my children” (47). This final scene is an extremely powerful and unnerving representation of the lack of agency for immigrant and refugee victims of domestic abuse; even if they have an interpreter and a court trial, there is no assurance that they will be heard. There are programs like WATCH, which monitor the courts, but, like many non-profits, they do not have the resources to attend every trial and provide interpreters for every witness and victim.

Although the conflicts in *Breaking the Silence* come directly from the report, the addition of movement, staging, and dialogue humanize these conflicts and demonstrate the complex tensions between the identity locations of immigrant and refugee victims of domestic abuse in their cultural communities and in the institutions that try to help them. The initial report, as well as the play, strive to represent these locations in ways that honor the experiences of individuals, while providing an overarching sense of the challenges that these women face and the need for sensitivity and awareness from institutional actors. In order to understand the various levels of experience and representation in *Breaking the Silence*, it is useful to consider the kinds of community being referred to, in the report, performance, and training facilitation.

In “Argument Communities,” Raymie E. McKerrow identifies four major types of community, all delineated by their position in the “lifeworld” (space/time, real/imaginary, free/conditioned/forced): personal, social, philosophical, and technical (28-40). McKerrow is

referring to these communities in terms of arguments, a useful approach for *Breaking the Silence*, in which the primary purpose is to make a case for a particular kind of action and shift in perception. The personal communities are those surrounding individuals and their personal relationships, and are determined by the strength of the relationship and the importance of the argument to the individual in comparison to the relationship. In this instance, the personal community is represented most clearly in *Breaking the Silence* by the relationship between the victim of domestic violence and her abuser. In domestic abuse situations, this personal community is almost always built around an unequal distribution of power, further complicated by the potential citizenship status of both parties and their economic arrangement.

Social communities are those that involve the public, or “collective” concerns. As McKerrow explains, “Social arguments are audience oriented: the construction of reasons on behalf of claims owe their existence to one’s analysis of an identifiable audience” (34). The social community represented in *Breaking the Silence* is made up of those in the institutions—advocates, doctors, police officers, judges, prosecutors, etc.—as well as by the immigrant community and culture that the victim is coming from. These communities are often perceived as being in opposition to one another, wherein mistrust of the criminal justice system might make a woman more likely to listen to her own community. In addition, the social community of the government needs to be aware of the social community in which the victim the identifies with, in order to appeal to her on a level that makes sense for her situation. Unlike idealistic invocations of community, *Breaking the Silence* presents these dichotomous social communities as dynamic and ambivalent. For an immigrant and refugee woman, her social community might not be a

completely supportive and positive element in her life as it is focused on reifying tradition and conservatism, more than on what is best for the individual. Similarly, the community of the institution, while perhaps well intentioned, brings with it its own bureaucratic norms and biases that further objectify the woman who is torn between these two forces.

The social community of the institution is connected to the notion of the “technical” community, a characteristic that adds a sense of elitism and inaccessibility in its dealings with immigrant and refugee victims of domestic violence. As McKerrow explains, “Argument in the technical domain requires a language that precisely names the objects under discussion. One’s knowledge of the issues under discussion is measured, in part, by the ease with which the language of the speciality is employed” (36). Each governmental and non-profit agency employs its own language and knowledge requirement which, when added to language barriers, further prevent women from interacting as equals with these communities. Her own cultural community might also be considered a technical community, with its own language and knowledge base; however, the two communities are vastly unequal in terms of the distribution of political and social power in society at large.

Lastly, the philosophical community, according to McKerrow, is the “moral conscience of the people” (38). In this community, philosophers argue reason and judgement and, “while argument in this community also is concerned with problems, its disposition is directed at the ‘issue’ rather than at the individual or the social context” (39). *Breaking the Silence* is almost completely focused on the individual and the social context and so, while the moral question of social responsibility is certainly present in the performance, the discursive space of the

philosophical community is less apparent. The moral argument in the play is enthymematic; assuming that an audience connects enough with the material to identify or accept it. Perhaps this community is more evident in the report, particularly in the reference to international human rights law. In this section of the report, MAHR reminds readers of the United States' obligations, "arising under treaties and customary international law to guarantee equal protection of the laws and the right to an effective remedy" (28). This exhortation is about moral obligation, based on the United States involvement in the international community just as much as it is about the experience of individual immigrant and refugee women, based on their particular social contexts. While this argument is certainly rational and compelling, it undermines the subjectivity of the women in question, which is why it is so important to present this case in conjunction with the humanizing dramatic representation of the issue by Pangea.

The fact that all of these communities are represented simultaneously, both in the MAHR report and in *Breaking the Silence*, demonstrates the complexity of the content and representations in these texts. Community is at the forefront of Pangea's work, both descriptively and philosophically, but it is not entirely idealistic and utopic. As with the concept of multiculturalism, community is more about social and personal interactions, in conjunction with an awareness and commitment to social justice and equity. Pangea acknowledges the negative influences of community in certain circumstances, even as they strive to construct alternative modes of community development and interactions.

Conclusion

I asked Katie Herron Robb if she thought that Pangea was a "community-based"

performance company. She responded with a yes and a no: yes, in terms of some of their work, especially with projects like *Hyphe-NATIONS* and *Breaking the Silence*; no, because she did not agree with some of the connotations of the term (Interview). As a buzz term, community-based performance connotes certain assumptions about power dynamics that are disagreeable for a company like Pangea. In relationship with the professional theater world, community implies amateur and trivial, which is not inherent to the term community based performance; however, the foundation of many community-based practices, in which outside theater companies enter into a community to do a production and then leave, is based on power dynamics and access to information that need to be critiqued if there is to be an attempt towards equity and respect. As with the other companies that I looked at in this dissertation, it is not the intent of Pangea to perpetuate cultural colonization or systemic inequities. The company's practices of long-term, sustained interactions with community, based on personal relationships, provide an example of community-based work that avoids unequal distributions of power as much as possible.

In *The Color of Theater*, writer Thulani Davis describes the potential of artists at the intersection, going beyond the term "multicultural" and all that it stands for to include the embodiment of multiple modes of identifying, practicing and perceiving art and society. As she explains,

Artists at the intersection continue a long tradition of innovation. They do not simply replicate and preserve, as is the priority when people are first cut off from homelands, but we follow another tradition, which uses and reshapes the traditional materials, the found texts, or classical forms to make new kinds of work. With luck, these new kinds of work will speak truthfully and powerfully of our evolving realities. ("Theater Beyond Borders" 22)

The diversity of Pangea's programing, along with their commitment to social justice and equity

in multicultural forms of art making and political activism is ideologically compatible with the quote from Davis. Pangea, and the artists and communities that they collaborate with, are at the intersection of a wide variety of identity locations. Their five year collaboration with Teatro del Pueblo embraces the collisions of communities and increases artistic and financial capacity for the sustainability of their work. Their commissioning of international artists challenges the political positions of their audiences and of themselves, while also building the potential for a global artistic community, based on respect and equity. Their commitment to ensemble based production development provides an alternative to hierarchical modes of creation that honor the individual while erasing the difference in the community. Because Pangea strives to present so many voices and perspectives in their work, the issues of representation and community become incredibly complex and there is always the potential for problematic misrepresentations. Their commitment to social justice, however, provides a framework for creative and political practice that allows for evaluation and flexibility that can generally prevent these missteps before they are cemented in social consciousness. Pangea might not be a community-based performance company in a nominal sense, but their approach to community provides a complexity that is extremely constructive for current and future community-based performance projects.

Conclusion

Moving Forward and Girls Act Madison

Although the structure of this dissertation—broken up into three chapters, each focusing on a different company—comes across as a comparison of community-based performance methods, the reality is that a comparison of these three companies is impossible. Not only are the goals and priorities of each company very different from one another, but the contextual circumstances in which they work is as well. As stated in the introduction, the logistics of producing community-based performance play a central role in the construction and performance of community, exemplified by my analysis of Cornerstone, Swamp Gravy, and Pangea. Although Pangea manages to construct diverse communities focused on equitable, long-term relationships, it does so in a city that is already diverse and politically progressive; especially in comparison to the demographics of Miller County, Georgia. Swamp Gravy develops long-term professional artists, trained in a particular kind of aesthetic because these artists grow up in Cotton Hall and generations of performers continue the tradition of performance. The community constructed in *A Man Comes to Fowler* might seem ephemeral or temporary, but the quality of production and the beauty of the performance can impact those involved, either as performers or audience members for years after it is over, even if the individual relationships weaken.

The goal of this dissertation is not to do a direct comparison of these companies—to develop a “best practices” model for future practitioners/scholars—but rather, to demonstrate the efforts that go into producing community-based performance and to complicate notions of

community as inherently positive, inclusive, supportive, and permanent. Cornerstone, Swamp Gravy, and Pangea demonstrate the challenges that come from working with community as a concept and practice. Using the concept of community raises the stakes for practitioners and scholars alike as it brings in so many expectations for the work that might be outside of the control of the individual community-based performance companies; however, using the term “community” is a choice, and that choice needs to be recognized as such and critically examined in order to move the field forward in academia and in the fields of community organizing and theater.

When Cornerstone claims that it “builds bridges between and within diverse communities,” there is an implicit assumption that these communities exist and that they are defined enough to diversify (Cornerstone “Mission Statements”). Swamp Gravy’s mission statement asserts that it “bonds the community,” implying that there is again, a community already in place, but also that the bonding of community is a positive outcome of the work (Swamp Gravy “Mission Statement”). Pangea refers to community primarily through difference when it defines its goals as creating “stories from different communities for theater,” and including “artists from diverse communities.” Furthermore, it defines the Twin Cities as a “community” even as it acknowledges that the area is becoming increasingly diverse (Pangea “About Us: Overview”). Community in this instance is also taken for granted, although the chapter on Pangea demonstrates that the company strives for something more than a nominal definition of community. These mission statements do not tell us how these companies define and construct communities, but the shared use of the term allows for connections as well as

implications for how they perceive their roles as theater artists. All three of the companies in this study view community as positive and relational. Community is also a work in progress and the energy that is put into progressing or expanding the boundaries of community depend on the goals and capacity of each project.

The community that was constructed during *A Man Comes to Fowler* did not exist prior to the production and it may not continue after. Still, the play expanded the boundaries of who can speak for Fowler when previously that right was only granted to those who lived there the majority of their lives. The play did not represent every group in the city, either narratively or physically, but Myatt's script and Woolery's casting and direction re-imagined and re-presented Fowler to its residents: it reminded some of the past, while using Latino/a bodies to consider the future. Cornerstone plans to produce an Institute cycle production that brings together participants from all of the Summer Residencies to date. This cycle will construct a new community based on their experience with Cornerstone but community participants will act as representatives of their cities, of their communities. It will be interesting to see who is chosen for these roles, though no doubt much of the decision will come down to the logistics of availability and resources. The ability to represent community in this cycle does not mean that the individual encompasses every aspect of their city/town, it means that they are in the room at that particular point in time.

Swamp Gravy's construction of community expands or contracts depending on the production and the tension between theater as industry or theater as social change. The community performed in *Solid Ground* was normative and teleological: it presupposed the

existence of a supportive, foundational community without putting any effort into examining how this might be created in reality for groups who do not have access to the production either as participants or audience members. *Solid Ground* is not representative of every Swamp Gravy production, however, and the capacity to create real, economic change in the region separates this program from many other community-based performance projects. The last twenty years of Swamp Gravy constructed a supportive community of veteran volunteers, all of whom have the area's best interest at heart, though there is always more that can, and should, be done.

Community organizers like Joy Jinks, Karen Kimbrel, Don Chandler, Sarah Ann Keaton, Charlotte Phillips, Jennifer Trawick, and so many others, are pioneers in long-term community development through theater. I believe that they invested too much time, love, and energy over the last twenty years to consciously ignore the issues that I outlined in chapter two in the future.

Pangea's *Breaking the Silence* constructs community on two levels: the community represented in the play, and the community offstage developed in the rehearsal room and through personal relationships. The community in the play is largely adversarial; this representation asks audiences to question the nature of community as a purely positive factor in the life of the individual. Although Pangea recognizes that community is not always beneficial, it strives to create new community through equity, respect, diversity, and social justice. In the midst of all of their other programming, Natarajan and Mukherjee are looking to expand *Breaking the Silence* to include the male perspective; both in terms of how men are complicit in domestic violence, and also for how they can be agents of change. *Hyphe-NATIONS* is beginning to connect with the Somali community, opening the boundaries of the immigrant community beyond Latino/as. The

five-year pilot collaboration between Pangea and Teatro del Pueblo continues to intrigue artists and companies across the country. Justiniano from Teatro del Pueblo hopes to write about the partnership to help other companies partner with one another to share community, skills, and resources. These programs, in conjunction with the Directing Institute for women and artists of color, construct community across regions, practice, experience, and identity; however, art and social change remain a central focus in every exchange and relationship.

There is no single, cohesive definition of community that is relevant for all three examples. If anything, the approach to community that these companies share is that community is temporal and relational, though even that changes depending on the location and purpose of the discourse. The “community” referred to in mission statements and grant proposals is almost always positive and preexisting; whereas the community constructed and performed in every production process is ultimately defined by those in the room. As demonstrated in this dissertation, choices made throughout production (including pre and post), partly determine who ends up in the room, how long they stay there, and how much they contribute to the process. The socio-political circumstances for every individual and community also play a large role in who has access to the room, based on their availability, interest, and resources. Because community is performed onstage and performative in that the actions in the production impact the society offstage, the choices made during community-based performance projects, and the socio-political circumstances in which each project takes place, need to be critically examined. This examination does not need to come from an outside scholar or critic, and indeed, many practitioners are aware of these issues already; but, this research frames these issues for the

academic community and will hopefully inspire more rigorous research on this and other issues in community-based performance in the future.

For my own part, this research makes me more aware of the stakes at play in community-based performance. I am more critical of my own practices and constructions of community, even if I do not have the capacity or ability to include everyone in the room for every project. I conclude this dissertation with a look into my own community-based performance project, funded by a grant from the University of Wisconsin, Madison Center for Humanities, Humanities Exposed Program (HEX). My dissertation research directly inspired this project, and I utilized many of the techniques and methods that I learned from my field work with Cornerstone, Swamp Gravy, and Pangea. I also entered the project with a certain amount of humility, knowing that I cannot be critical of others without applying that same rigor to my own work. In terms of my scholarship, I believe that this personal experience with the field gives me insight into the challenges of community-based performance. It is not necessary for scholars to engage in practice in order to write about and critique this work, but doing so adds an awareness of the logistical factors that impact the representation and construction of community through performance. I know that, in writing about my own work, I lose a certain amount of objectivity; however, this objectivity never really existed in the first place. My role as an outside researcher is always tempered by the relationships that I form with each company, and by my biases and judgments at every stage of the process.

I started Girls Act Madison in the Spring of 2012, partnering with Emily Keown, then a PhD candidate in Education at Edgewood College. Our community of participants included girls

ages 9-14 in the Madison area. The project was free for all participants, thanks to the HEX grant. Keown and I started Girls Act because of our shared interest in empowering girls to be creative and speak for themselves. We both had strong female role models when we were that age, and we hoped that we could somehow pay it forward through this project. As stated on the Girls Act blog:

[We] also wanted to provide a space for girls to express themselves creatively and share their stories as a way of taking control of who they are and how they interact with each other. So often the media portrays girls as weak, silly, superficial and competitive, and Girls Act Madison provides a chance for girls to prove that these messages are wrong. (“About Girls Act Madison”)

We did not include the term “community” in any of our grant applications or promotional materials, choosing instead to keep our rhetoric specific and focused on the individual and their relationships with the media and other girls. I do not consider this demographic to be a “community” in any organic sense, though it is certainly stereotyped homogeneously with branding geared towards “tweens” who supposedly all think and act alike. We worked with over 30 different girls between September and December 2012, with 15 girls performing in the final production at the Overture Center for the Arts. While many of the girls loved Justin Bieber and One Direction, many hated them; we brought people together who, due to their ages, locations, schools, and interests would never meet one another or become friends otherwise. There were cliques in our project, particularly a group of girls who went to the same school and stayed together through much of the production, but for the most part we all worked together towards the common goal of the final performance. Working together did not automatically turn us into a community but it did develop a communal tone that allowed for shared language and goals.

The first four weeks of the project were about raising awareness and gathering stories and content that might end up in the performance. We also used this time to start building “community”: first by discussing the differences between our communities through art and performance exercises, and also with theater games and storytelling exercises geared towards increasing creativity and breaking down self-consciousness. With every exercise, I tried to model humility and playfulness, using Cornerstone ensemble member and director Laurie Woolery as my inspiration. Woolery talked about “acting the fool” when directing, and I’ve found it to be an effective technique for enabling participants to feel comfortable performing for the first time with a group of strangers. The second month we began to turn some of the stories and exercises into scenes. Although Keown and I directed the girls through certain games and exercises, they provided the content and ultimately decided what went into the show and what didn’t. Furthermore, they served as playwrights, directors, and performers, while Keown and I generally only offered suggestions. In comparison to the three companies in this dissertation, I believe that we gave our participants a great deal of distributed agency over the creative development of the play. I considered acting as the playwright to shape the play from their stories, but found that the participants took so much ownership over the process that it was, for the most part, unnecessary. The girls also developed and voted on the title for the final performance: *Girls the Original: We’re Not Boys*.

Working with minors is challenging in large part because of the notion of “commitment.” As with any community-based performance, Girls Act required a great deal from the participants in terms of time, transportation, and energy. Because we worked with minors, we also involved

their parents and guardians in the process, and if they were not on board with what we were doing, then the girls could not be either. This factor greatly limited who could participate, in addition to the usual restrictions of economic circumstances and socio-political accessibility. Participating in Girls Act was a privilege, and the girls who made it through to the final performance were from higher class and/or social backgrounds. This is not to say that they were all from rich families, but they had parents and grandparents who could take them to and from rehearsals and who supported their participation in a new, creative program. About midway through the rehearsal process, we needed to secure commitment to the project through a permission slip that detailed the remaining scheduling dates and performance.¹ We lost several girls at this point because of logistical concerns and a lack of communication with their guardians.

The HEX grant application stresses the importance of reciprocity between the HEX scholars and the community with which they are working. The application requires that the applicant identify a “community partner,” which might be defined as: “A public or private non-profit that is representative of a ‘community,’”; “grassroots organizations”; “a community-based organization”; or, “new formations of community partners created by HEX scholars that bring previously unconnected constituents together” (*HEX Application 2012-13* 4-5). My community partner was Keown who, although not connected directly with an organization, had years of experience working with girls in this age group in a variety of schools and after school programs. We received the grant with the stipulation that we find a more institutionalized form of

¹ The participation slip and grant application for Girls Act Madison are included in the appendix.

community partner; however, although we worked with the after school program at Madison School and Community Recreation, Jefferson Middle School, and Spring Harbor Middle School, Keown remained my practical community partner because of her connections with other organizations.

This partnership extended the reach of our project, as we could work with multiple institutions in different capacities. From September through December 2012, we received support through space and publicity from various public libraries, middle and elementary schools, community centers, and the Overture Center for the Arts. The diversity of our partnerships with these various organizations meant that we were almost never meeting at the same place two weeks in a row; however, it also allowed for a wider reach, at least for those with transportation to our various locations. We held weekly workshops/rehearsals at different public libraries every Saturday, and many of the girls who participated in these stayed with us throughout the entirety of the project.

We extended the invitation to participate to girls all over the Madison area, regardless of school or affiliation; however, due to Keown's prior working relationships with Spring Harbor and Jefferson Middle Schools, we held bi-monthly workshops at these locations from October through November 2012. We met at Jefferson right after school almost every Thursday, with girls from Spring Harbor taking a bus to meet us. This brought a diversity of participants to our workshops because they were not hindered by transportation or accessibility issues. Unfortunately, once it was time to bring all of our girls together in order to create a cohesive performance, we lost most of our participants from these Thursday sessions. Although we told

the girls that we would help with transportation, and gave them multiple informational fliers and permission slips, we never knew if their parents or guardians had any idea that they were meeting with us or of the nature of our project. We worked with some amazing girls in these sessions who seemed truly excited by the prospect of performing their own stories for their families and communities, but because of their status as minors and our inability to communicate with their guardians, we had no way of ensuring their continued participation after we stopped meeting at their schools.

The final phase of the project involved structuring and rehearsing the final performance. While the girls were responsible for the majority of the creative content and the direction of the show, I took responsibility for two scenes: one introductory scene at the beginning and one smaller piece in the middle. The introductory scene included only content that was written by the girls. Earlier in the process, we asked them to free-write based on the prompts: “I felt strong when” and “I felt weak when.” The wide range and creativity of responses seemed demonstrative of the group dynamic and I pieced them together into one montage and directed the movement with input from the girls. I also made a point of distributing the lines in this scene so that the girls, except on a few occasions, did not deliver their own writing but only those of another girl. This took the pressure off of many girls who were self-conscious about their writing or concerned about exposing themselves to their families and friends.

This last point addresses another issue that came up in the rehearsal process: although the girls became closer and seemed comfortable with one another, it was very difficult for them to talk about serious subjects. For the most part, they went for a comedic aesthetic, rather than

anything sad or dramatic. This was exemplified clearly at one rehearsal when many of the girls expressed a desire to play the “mean girl.” The archetype of the mean girl comes from movies like *Mean Girls* and many other pop culture references, and was a favorite role for many of the girls who found it easier to be an over-the-top snob than to be themselves. Keown and I introduced the project to all of the girls by discussing the lack of realistic representations of their age groups in the media; and, while many of the girls agreed that this was the case and expressed their desire to represent themselves, many also shied away from doing so in games and exercises. In these instances, the girls seemed to be presenting the media constructions of their “community,” rather than their own experiences and personalities.

To say that the girls were not representing themselves is to imply that they have authentic selves to represent. Going into the project, I know that I had a vision for the kinds of stories that might be told and the kind of community that we would perform onstage. This vision came from my own experiences at that age, which were developed through my own socio-political circumstances. While Keown and I worked to give the girls agency over the creative process and avoided rigid and all-encompassing terms like “community,” we were in charge of the project: we made the rules and we provided the parameters in terms of how they should be followed. I believe that Girls Act was a success in that each girl learned something about theater, writing, and creative processes. We also created a space of mutual mentorship, respect, and support with the girls, which can be difficult at that age, especially with archetypes like the “mean girl” so prevalent in popular culture. Despite this success, I know that the community created in the rehearsal room and performance space will not exist beyond these temporal and physical

locations. I also know that we did not come close to representing a unifying community beyond the individuals involved in the process.

My dissertation research prevented me from accepting the term “community” as a description of Girls Act and of the desired outcomes for the project. I felt that it was too much of a responsibility to utilize and publicize the term, and I’m not sure that I believe in its effectiveness anymore, at least for my own community-based performance work. After critically examining the practices of community-based performance through three different approaches, community seems like an incredibly challenging concept to grasp and construct. In order to even attempt to represent or construct community, you need the capacity to include a wide range of voices, perspectives, and experiences at every stage of the production process. Otherwise, you risk an essentialist or exclusive construction and performance of community. Cornerstone, Swamp Gravy, and Pangea work hard to extend the invitation to participate, but they fight an uphill battle through logistical challenges and socio-political circumstance. The payoff of constructing community in the room, based on those who (can) accept that invitation, is potentially powerful and life-changing for those who experience it; however, I know for my own project, the number and diversity of participants was small and I am reticent to speak to the impact of the production beyond the thrill of performing.

The humility in my tone is in part a response to much of the current rhetoric surrounding community-based performance. I am skeptical of descriptions and analysis of projects that are largely self-congratulatory and make big claims regarding outcome and the building of community. However, my tone is also a luxury because my project only lasted for one

performance and I do not seek continued funding for a continued existence. Girls Act Madison was a one-time experiment and, although neither Keown or I received any monetary payment, the grant paid for all other expenses. The companies that I examined in this dissertation do not have this luxury: although they strive for critical awareness, the public rhetoric around their work is largely positive. Community-based performance, while gaining traction to an extent, is still marginalized in academia, theater, and community organizing. Long-term practitioners need to constantly demonstrate the nature and effectiveness of their work to funders, scholars, critics, and fellow artists. I am sympathetic to these concerns but wonder how to move the field forward critically when so many companies struggle daily to survive.

I did not develop this dissertation through collaborative ethnography, but I found this methodology useful in the ways in which I approached my field research and writing process. I sent revised versions of every chapter to the company's in question and incorporated the feedback back into my analysis. Giving the companies a chance to respond to my work both now and in the future is a vital factor in terms of representational agency and power dynamics. I also played the role of the participant observer whenever possible, and strived to respond in the moment with critiques or analysis rather than waiting until I was home and distanced to make these judgements. I believe that the principles of reciprocity, hyphenation, active culture, and communal context also apply to the outside critic or scholar. Through trust, honesty, and critical rigor, relationships between academia and community-based performance might enable new kinds of scholarship and analysis of this field. Future projects that develop trust with companies while maintaining a critical perspective of the issues of representation, agency, community, and

impact are necessary to a critical expansion of community-based performance in theory and in practice.

Appendix

HEX 2011-12 APPLICATION

(fill out this portion and send back as word file, please name your file:
lastname_HEX1112)

Part I: Contact Information

Preference is given to students beyond their master's year, with more than two semesters of study left before the completion of their degree. All graduate students in the humanities are eligible.¹

Name: Liz Foster-Shaner

HEX project title (tentative): Performing Media/Performing Ourselves

*Your department(s): Theater and Drama

Your Community Partner (if known): Emily Keown

Degree and expected date of completion, if you know it: PhD, December 2012

Faculty director of your dissertation, if designated: Mike Vanden Huevel

Title and brief summary of your dissertation, if known:

Community Aesthetics: Issues of Representation and Authenticity in US Community Based Performance
Community-based performance companies continue to invoke the concept of “community,” despite a lack of clarity regarding its definition, and critical analysis of the problematic history related with the term. This project examines the aesthetic approach of three companies within the US (Swamp Gravy in GA, Cornerstone Theatre in CA, and Pangea World Theatre in MN), using a critical lens based on sociological and anthropological theories and praxes regarding “community.” Through qualitative research in the field I seek to understand the practice of defining, and then staging, a community, while questioning its supposedly “organic” pre-existence.

Briefly state your research interests:

¹ Humanities Departments and Programs are listed on the Humanities Portal website at: <http://humanitiesportal.wisc.edu/programs/>. Consult with Center for the Humanities staff if you belong to a non-humanities department yet are interested in implementing a HEX project. The UW-Madison humanities departments comprise: [African Languages & Literature](#), [Art History](#), [Classics](#), [Comparative Literature](#), [East Asian Languages and Literature](#), [English](#), [Folklore](#), [French and Italian](#), [German](#), [Hebrew and Semitic Studies](#), [History](#), [History of Science](#), [Jewish Studies](#), [Languages & Cultures of Asia](#), [Linguistics](#), [Medieval Studies](#), [Music](#), [Philosophy](#), [Religious Studies](#), [Scandinavian Studies](#), [Slavic Languages](#), [Spanish and Portuguese](#), [Theatre and Drama](#), and [Gender and Women's Studies](#).

Fundamentally, my research revolves around forms of theater that consciously work to enact social and/or aesthetic change. Within this large category, I am interested specifically in issues of identity and representation, and power and privilege in community-based performance and other forms of applied theater. I am also interested in pedagogical and aesthetic factors that develop when doing theater with participants who don't have a professional background or make a living in the theater.

PART II: Please briefly and separately address each of the following prompts. Note that completed and detailed answers are important factors of the decision making process. Please answer each question to the best of your ability. Unless specified, no answer should be more than 100 words.

Project Goals:

1) **Description of your project (up to 250 words)**

This project brings young girls (ages 9 to 14) together to discuss and perform various aspects of media representations of women. Beginning with story circles and content generating workshops, we will solicit various interpretations of, and experiences with, seeing ourselves as women and girls portrayed in the media. During this initial stage, we will work in a variety of settings, going from public schools, to after school programs, to community arts centers. The next stage of the project will work with a core group of girls to develop and explore performance styles and techniques in order to best portray their experiences on stage. This core group of girls will be developed based on interest in the project and level of commitment demonstrated. We will do everything we can to make our project inclusive, while at the same time taking into account time and budgetary restrictions. Throughout the course of the project we will be creating a theatrical production (in which the script is developed through content from the initial workshops) that will then be performed in front of the participant's peers, families, friends, and other members of the community. The theatrical performance is not meant to in any way “authentically” represent young girls between the ages of 9 to 14, but to provide a format for these girls, in particular, to voice their opinions, experiences and stories. In this way we hope to provide a counter-representation of women and young girls to those provided by mainstream media.

2) **A three sentence summary of your project**

Performing Media/Performing Ourselves brings together young girls from the Madison area aged 9-14. Over the course of the project the girls will discuss issues of media representations of women and girls, while learning performance techniques and other forms of artistic expression. The project will culminate in a theatrical performance based on the work and content developed in these sessions.

3) **What are the goals of your project?**

The ultimate goal of the project is to explore issues of media representations of women and girls in our society. The second major goal of the project is to teach girls various performance styles and theatrical techniques, as well as other forms of artistic expression.

4) **Who is the target audience of this project? Who will it reach?
(Examples: age, interest group, etc...)**

Our target audience is young girls between the ages of 9 and 14 who live in the Madison area. Beyond

that, we hope to bring in audience members within the community of all ages, genders and backgrounds. While we will primarily focus our attentions on girls, we will also advertise the project throughout the UW campus and larger Madison community.

- 5) **What logistical challenges are associated with this particular project/community partner/ participants and how will you address these challenges? (Examples: child care needs, transportation, hearing impairments, access to computers, privacy issues etc...)**

One of the largest challenges that we anticipate is finding a diverse core group of girls who will participate and be committed to the project throughout its entirety. In order to address this challenge we will be open and upfront about the the time commitment and requirements of the project from the very beginning. We plan to have parents of the participants sign permission slips near the beginning of the project that will include all scheduling and hopefully the locations of the workshops. This permission slip will act as a kind of contract for participants and their parents. At the same time, we will encourage participants to bring friends and family members who may be interested in the project, up until the time that we actually need to begin rehearsing for the performance.

- 6) **If you are considering a specific community partner, how does your project address a need or needs as identified by that organization?**

My community partner is Emily Keown, a fantastic community artist and educator with a lot of experience working in the public schools and community organizations here in Madison. We share similar styles, techniques and philosophies. Once we begin working with specific schools and after school programs to find participants, we will be met with a variety of needs and expectations. Again, our goal is to have the project schedule determined well in advance so that we can be open and clear about our needs and requirements at the start of our partnership with these organizations.

- 7) **What might you envision as a capstone for this project? Would the project be suited for a capstone? (Examples include a website, a pamphlet, a performance, a presentation, etc...)**

Our capstone for the project will be a performance of two to three nights that will be open to the public. A performance is definitely suited to the project as it incorporates the issues of representation that we will be discussing and workshopping. Giving the participants an opportunity to represent themselves will be a fantastic learning opportunity as it brings its own challenges and benefits and will demonstrate many of the concepts and techniques that we will introduce.

- 8) **How direct and frequent would you anticipate your involvement with your community partner will be? How much actual participation time do you imagine this project would require on a weekly basis?**

Emily Keown and I plan to be partners in the truest sense of the word. We will draft our

lesson plans together and lead the workshops as team facilitators. Emily has a lot of experience working with this demographic, as well as artistic experience, and I bring my background in theater and community-based performance. We will meet with the participants once a week, up until we get closer to the performance where we will most likely begin meeting 2-3 times a week. We hope to get a lot of the planning underway prior to the start of the project but will perhaps meet before each workshop to solidify our plans and discuss any issues that may come up.

- 9) How would you gauge the successfulness of your project? What specific goals would you aim to accomplish?

As with any community-based performance project, it will be very difficult to gauge the “success” in any quantifiable way. Overall, we will examine the level of participation from the girls and their enthusiasm for the project in general. The “success” of the performance will be defined based on the level of work while also taking into account the larger process leading up to the show. We plan to hold post-show talkbacks where audience members can ask the girl's questions and learn more about the project. In both mine and Emily's experiences, we have found that tools such as voluntary questionnaires are not generally the most enlightening as they don't account for all levels and kinds of participation and learning.

Timeline of Your Project:

- 10) Do you plan to implement in the fall 2012 or spring 2013 (please see option 1 and 2 under “Project Timelines”)?

We plan to implement the Fall 2012 timeline.

- 11) Do you plan to implement for one or two semesters? If you plan to implement for two semesters, did you meet with the HEX Coordinator before submitting this application?

We plan to implement our project for one semester.

- 12) How often do you plan to meet with your participants each month? For how long? How many participants do you anticipate?

We plan to meet with our participants once a week for one to two hours at a time. When we get closer to the performance we will meet 2-4 times a week, depending on availability and need.

- 13) Please provide a brief timeline for your project. See **Appendix C** for a sample timeline.

Spring 2012

February and March – We will meet 2-3 times a month to share our knowledge of and experience with issues of representation in the media and the tools at our disposal to approach this topic in discussion and through artistic expression. We will conduct research into this topic in order to fill in the gaps in our knowledge and expand our resources.

April and May – We will begin solidifying our lesson plans. We will also begin contacting Madison public schools, after school programs and other community resources to secure spaces and other kinds of support.

Summer 2012

Over the summer we will tie up loose ends in terms of logistics and the structure of our lesson plans and workshop format.

Fall 2012

Beginning in September, we will go to various schools and after school programs in the Madison area to begin the process of gathering content and sparking interest in the project. Regular workshop and rehearsal sessions will begin later in September once participants have a better sense of their schedules and commitments. We will then meet once a week with the ultimate goal of performing in early December in order to accommodate other obligations that participants may have.

Community Connections:

14) Why are you well suited to work with this community?

I am well suited to work with this community because I have a good deal of teaching experience and I have a passion for community-based work. I have conducted a drama workshop with this demographic, as well as with K-1 students in Drama and Education, and with college students in Theater for Cultural and Social Awareness. Ultimately though, I am well suited to work with this community because, I personally benefited from this type of project when I was at this age and I know how important it is to provide girls with a space to discuss and express their experiences.

15) Do you have past experience with community organizations?

Yes. Over the Summer I participated in the Cornerstone Theater Institute in which I engaged directly with community organizations to put together a large scale theatrical production inspired by and based on content from that community. Community members not only provided the stories that went into the script, but also the majority of the talent as actors in the play.

Academic Research:

16) How will your own humanities work, research, and or engagement be integrated into your project?

I plan to draw directly from my research and experience with community-based performance. I learned a great deal by studying the methodologies and philosophies of well-established community-based performance companies like Cornerstone Theater and Swamp Gravy and I am looking forward to putting that knowledge into practice. I know that this project will not only draw from my dissertation research, but will also add a new perspective to my analysis and writing as I experience on a personal level the process of producing community-based performance.

Girls Act Madison Fall 2013

Dear Parents and Guardians,

As you know, Emily Keown and I have been working to organize and plan the public performance for Girls Act at the Overture Center on December 21st and 22nd. So far, we've held workshops on Thursdays and Saturdays to discuss storytelling, learn acting techniques, and play games that develop community among a wide diversity of girls from all over the Madison area. We've had some amazing discussions and are so excited with the group of girls who have expressed their interest and commitment in the project. We are confident that the play that is developed out of these discussions will be unique and powerful and we can't wait to see what it looks like!

At this point, our workshops have been fairly informal, as we are developing content and working to create a safe and comfortable creative environment. However, beginning in November, we will begin writing the script in earnest, assigning roles and rehearsing the play. For this next stage, we ask for commitment on the parts of the girls who participate and their parents/guardians in providing transportation. I've included the rehearsal schedule below, along with the dates for performances. Please look over this schedule and consider whether your daughter can attend the majority of the dates. We won't rule anyone out with one or two existing conflicts, especially if they have expressed their willingness to participate in the project, however, it is important for the consistency and integrity of the rehearsals that she is able to attend the majority of the events over the coming months. We are also working to put together a carpool so please let us know if you are interested in being added to this list.

As always, please email or call with any questions, and we will post the schedule on our blog:

<http://girlsactmadison.wordpress.com/>.

I look forward to working with all of you over the coming months and have so enjoyed the opportunity to work meet your girls and hear their stories and experiences!

Liz Foster-Shaner
PhD Candidate, UW Madison

Here is the schedule of rehearsals leading up to the final performances on December 21st and 22nd. We do not have the specific locations for all of the rehearsals but we will get those to you by the end of October.

In attempting to accommodate various needs and preferences, we are holding some rehearsals in the morning and some in the afternoon. Please let us know if this is preferable for you or if you would prefer consistency across the dates. Please mark those that you can attend, as well as those that you are unable to attend.

We appreciate your support and commitment to this project and can't wait to see how it evolves!

Please return this form by Saturday, November 3rd, either in person or over email.

Rehearsal	Can Attend	Cannot Attend
Saturday, November 3, 1pm-3pm		
Saturday, November 10, 10am-12pm		
Saturday, November 17, 1pm-3pm		
Saturday, December 1, 10am-12pm		
Saturday, December 8, 1pm-3pm		
Saturday, December 15, 10am-12pm		
Thursday, December 20, 5pm-8pm (Final Dress Rehearsal at Overture, dinner will be provided)		
Friday, December 21, call at 5pm (Performance at the Overture Center at 7pm, dinner will be provided)		
Saturday, December 22, call at 12:30pm (Performance at the Overture Center at 2pm)		

Name of Participant _____

Name(s) of Parent(s)/Guardian(s) _____

Phone Number(s) _____

Email Address(es) _____

Protocol SE-2011-0372

**Community Aesthetics:
Issues of Representation and Authenticity in
US Community-Based Performance²**

Interview Script

Note: The particular order, number and wording of these questions may change depending on the person being interviewed. However, the overall tone of the questions and emphasis on the person's own opinion will remain constant throughout the research project

1. Describe in your own words your connection to, and the nature of your participation with, (insert name of community-based performance company here).
2. In your opinion, how would you describe the goals and outcomes of the community-based performance project which you participated in? Were these goals met or were they altered in any way over the course of the production?
3. How were the goals of the project decided upon? How was the community included in this decision?
4. How did you become active in this community-based performance project?
5. How would you describe your relationship with other participants and does this impact the performance and definition of community as a whole?
6. How do you define theatre and performance? Is this definition in keeping with your experience with community-based performance?
7. How does (insert name of community-based performance company here) define “community?” Does it change over the course of the project? How?
8. How do you personally define “community?” How has your participation in this community-based performance project altered or solidified your definition?
9. In your opinion, how does the company's definition of community impact the staging of that community in the performance?
10. Describe the steps necessary to create and stage a community-based performance project

² This was the working title of the dissertation at the time that I applied for IRB approval.

from beginning to end.

11. What is your role in the above process?
12. In your opinion, how does the staging of community in performance compare to the community off-stage? Where do you place yourself in the community both on and off-stage? How do you see yourself represented in this staging?
13. In your opinion, is the community accurately represented in the community-based production?
14. If so, how do you think this was accomplished?
15. If not, what do you think the restrictions or challenges were to an accurate representation?
16. What does an “accurate” representation of community look like? Who has control or power over this definition?
17. In your opinion, what was the role of artistic expression in the community prior to the community-based performance project? Has this changed in any way over the course of the production?
18. In your opinion, how has the staging of the community impacted the community off-stage? Has it been expanded or reduced in any way? If so, please describe this change.
19. Describe any changes made to the community due to the community-based project in either the long or the short term.
20. In your opinion, what does this community-based project mean for the community in the long-term?
21. Has your personal identity changed at all over the course of the production? If so, how?
22. Has your relationship with the community changed at all over the course of the production? If so, how?
23. Will you participate in another community-based performance project in the future? Why or why not?

UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN-MADISON
Research Participant Information and Consent Form

Title of the Study: Community Aesthetics: Issues of Representation and Authenticity in US Community-Based Performance

Principal Investigator: Michael Vanden Heuvel (phone: 510-316-2615) (email: fostershaner@wisc.edu)

Student Researcher: Elizabeth Foster-Shaner (phone: 510-316-2615)

DESCRIPTION OF THE RESEARCH

You are invited to participate in a research study about the definitions and applications of "community" in a community-based performance production.

You have been asked you participate because you are either a community-based performance company member or a community member who has participated in a community-based performance production.

The purpose of this research is to better understand the process of staging communal identity and the influence of a community-based performance production on a particular community.

This study will include all willing participants in a community-based performance production, including company members and community participants.

Interviews can take place either on the phone, at a location of the participants choosing or at the site of the community-based performance production.

Audio tapes will be made of your participation if your consent is given first. Only the researcher will have access to these tapes unless prior consent is obtained. Tapes will be kept as long as necessary for transcription, before they are destroyed.

WHAT WILL MY PARTICIPATION INVOLVE?

If you decide to participate in this research you will be asked to answer questions about the process of producing a community-based performance. Participants are asked to give only their own opinions of the process and not those of anyone else or of the community as a whole.

Your participation will last up to 2 hours per session and will require at least 1 session which may amount to 4 hours in total.

ARE THERE ANY RISKS TO ME?

We don't anticipate any risks to you from participation in this study.

ARE THERE ANY BENEFITS TO ME?

We don't expect any direct benefits to you from participation in this study.

HOW WILL MY CONFIDENTIALITY BE PROTECTED?

While there will probably be publications as a result of this study, your name will not be used, unless you wish it to be. Only group characteristics will be published.

<p style="text-align: center;">University of Wisconsin-Madison FWA0000399</p> <p>Protocol: SE-2011-0372 Approved: 6/28/2012 Expires: 6/27/2013</p>
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If you participate in this study, we would like to be able to quote you directly without using your name, unless you would like your name to be published. If you agree to allow us to quote you in publications, please initial the statement at the bottom of this form.

WHOM SHOULD I CONTACT IF I HAVE QUESTIONS?

You may ask any questions about the research at any time. If you have questions about the research after you leave today you should contact the Principal Investigator Michael Vanden Heuvel at 510-316-2615. You may also call the student researcher, Elizabeth Foster-Shaner at 510-316-2615.

If you are not satisfied with response of research team, have more questions, or want to talk with someone about your rights as a research participant, you should contact the Education Research and Social & Behavioral Science IRB Office at 608-263-2320.

Your participation is completely voluntary. If you begin participation and change your mind you may end your participation at any time without penalty.

Your signature indicates that you have read this consent form, had an opportunity to ask any questions about your participation in this research and voluntarily consent to participate. You will receive a copy of this form for your records.

Name of Participant (please print): _____

Signature

Date

I give my permission to be quoted directly in publications without using my name.

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