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‘ They have this statistic about us ‘

**Young people impacted by incarceration
using theater to counter prejudice**



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Abstract

The work presented in this thesis looks at how young people impacted by incarceration, experience the creation of their own original theater performances. Through a lense of storytelling and narrative creation the thesis explores how these young people choose to share their stories and life experiences. The study is based on the efforts of a non-profit organization in the USA working with currently and formerly incarcerated youth, creating original theater performances. The thesis explores the multiplicity of processes involved in the sharing of life stories, -discerning processes on individual and collective level. By using theater the young people are able to counter the prejudice and create resistance towards the bureaucratic labels placed on them by the juvenile criminal justice system. Weaving through the layers embedded in sharing and working creatively with lived experiences, the thesis describes participants voicing a sense of empowerment, understanding and recognition from the performances they created.

Keywords: social anthropology; storytelling; theater; collective identity; incarcerated youth

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Preface

I look around the circle before I step into it and start making a motion as if I'm brushing my teeth. Behind me, someone says 'Hey, Sofia, what are you doing?'. I answer that I'm out picking blueberries. We then switch places and Oliver, one of the Maine Inside Out participants, starts acting as if picking blueberries. The game is called 'What are you doing?' and it is this group's favorite warm up game. It's Thursday evening and we are holding our weekly theater workshop at the juvenile detention center. We play a couple of more rounds during which Dan has to juggle kittens, Carter is chased by a dinosaur and by the time we finish we're all laughing and warm. We pull up the plastic chairs and sit down in a circle and I pick up the wooden talking piece and suggest that we all check in. I ask the participants to share whatever they're coming in with today and ask if there is anything from last week that they would like to work more on today. Oliver stretches out his hand to receive the talking piece and says that it's been a good week, nothing really to share and that today he's excited to really get started on the play. Next is Dan, who sighs deeply and wearily says he has just been sleeping all day and that he at first didn't want to come. He explains that he was in a bad mood because of something a staff had said to him earlier, but now he is glad he is there. We finish the check-in circle and my co-facilitator Joel asks everyone to get up and put the chairs away because we are going to do some sculpting.

We stay in a circle, standing, and turn our backs to each other. Joel asks us to shape our bodies into a position that we think resembles a moment when we felt strong. After a couple of minutes of holding our different positions, Joel tells us to turn around and asks if anyone would like to share what their sculpture looks like. Oliver steps into the circle and takes his pose most of the group, me included, follow by demonstrating their own poses. After we've all had a chance to show our poses Joel passes the talking piece asking us what it felt like to take our poses and what we saw in the other poses. Carter says that it felt awkward to stand with his back towards the others but that it was cool to see what the others had done. Dan agreed that it was 'Yeah, pretty cool'.

1. Introduction

The excerpt in the Preface, above, is from 2017 when I was facilitating theater workshops at the youth detention center in Maine (USA) with a nonprofit organization called Maine Inside Out (MIO). Reading Marita Eastmond's (2007:261) research conclusion was a turning point for me. With a plea of urgency she states that there needs to be a shift in how we choose to listen to marginalised people, and that if we give way to distrust and let our privilege lead, people's voices will be lost. With my own experience from working with theater I wondered if getting involved in theater projects that create original performances from lived experiences could help create that shift? I was inspired by the observations Jane Plastow (2017:965) describes from a six month applied theater project in Uganda. A participant felt like he had been given 'life skills' through the process of creating the play. Could theater be a tool to help better understand a specific situation; what happened, and what could have happened instead? If theater could provide these opportunities, could there be a shift in how people in general view those who perform and give way to listening instead of labeling?

I facilitated theater workshops with MIO, who works with currently and formerly incarcerated youth creating original theater performances. The workshops I facilitated were both at the juvenile detention center as well as out in the community. The young participants created original plays based on what from their own life experiences they thought was important to share with an audience. My co-facilitators and I used a mix of theater games, writing prompts, physical theater exercises and worked with community artists to offer singing, rapping, dancing and drumming. These were all components to support the group in exploring themes that felt important for them to share. Even though the goal was to perform, our focus was intently on the process of getting there and all the aspects involved in that process.

During my time working with MIO, I witnessed and facilitated in the process of creating fourteen performances, working with groups of five to twelve participants. As I was in the midst of the work, following the process and being present for pivotal moments I took for granted and did not question how it was that a compelling original theater production would be created without any props, scripts or predefined roles. After moving back to Sweden and

spending almost a year away from the work with MIO, I started to recognize a curiosity. I was curious if an anthropological perspective could capture the magic I had felt and witnessed, and give a glimpse into what the work felt like for the people doing it. I am inspired by how David Graeber describes the power and ability of ethnography in his book *Direct Action* (2009:14-15).

My hope is that, like Graeber in describing his study, this ethnographic text can offer a taste of all the complexities, emotions and connections that are involved when creating a performance from real experiences. My aim is to put words to the experience and fully explain it to a reader who wasn't there, who didn't see it or feel it. In doing so I have recognized that my previous perspective was that of a facilitator who had not shared similar experiences as the participants creating the performances. I knew what it felt like to step onto a stage and feel the opportunities of playing someone else, but I did not know what it was like to play myself in a scene from my own life. So I decided to ask participants of Maine Inside Out.

Purpose and Research Questions

The purpose of this thesis is to explore how young people, impacted by incarceration, experience the creation of original theater performances.

My overall research question is to see if, and if so, how young people with lived experience of incarceration feel that they are able to create a collective story through theater performances that is being recognized by society.

Specific research questions:

- According to the young people involved in MIO performances, what conditions are needed to enable them to tell their stories?
- How important is working with a group during the process?
- What happens in the meeting with the audience?
- How does performing affect the person telling his/her story?

Method

During the last week of November and the first three weeks in December of 2019 I went back to Maine, USA, to MIO, my old workplace. I spent four weeks interviewing participants and facilitators and joining the programming as they were preparing for a performance and closing of the year. My arrival to Maine was a couple of weeks after their big annual performance, the premiere of their new play, and I was greeted by an organisation in the midst of growth and change. I was staying in Portland, where MIO has their office, but joined each of the three community groups in Lewiston, Waterville and Biddeford for their meetings to be able to introduce my thesis and meet most of the participants. Prior to my field studies I worked with MIO for one and a half years, and before that I had been a volunteer facilitator. Since 2015 this has given me the opportunity to know and work with several participants and staff members, and I have kept myself updated with the organization, and the work since then.

My method during this field work included both interviews and participatory observation as I fully immersed myself in the programming of community groups, leadership council, staff meetings and one performance. Because of the limited time frame of the field work, and because MIO had just had it's big annual performance, during the time I was conducting this field work, there was no scene creation, and limited rehearsing for the performance. My observations of conversations of the theme for the annual public performance were very helpful in understanding the context of the play and many of the interviews. For the purpose of this thesis I found it helpful to complement these observations with field notes from my time as a facilitator, to illustrate some of the creative processes and my previous role. This methodological choice, as well as my previous relationships with the people I've studied means that my study undeniably illustrates what Marita Eastmond (2007:261) describes when she writes that researchers become 'woven into the story'. In light of that, my aim has been to explain my role in the creation of this thesis, so as to display transparency. Similarly to what Hanna Wittrock (2011:50-55) discusses in her dissertation, I chose to participate in exercises as participant, facilitator, as well as an observer, to fully participate in all aspects of the work alongside my interviews. In short, I am not trying to present this thesis through a pretense of

objectivity as I myself am ingrained in the work, but rather to make the reader aware of my role as participant, facilitator and observer to illuminate the results I've heard and seen.

I was surprised by the enthusiasm of participants and others for the interviews, and believe that my relationship with the people, organization and work was a large contributor to the trust I felt. I presented my interest to do interviews to the different local MIO groups so that anyone who was interested could then choose to approach me, and several did. I then followed up and in most cases was able to make an interview happen. At first I was attempting to get a mix of experience with MIO, gender and age but in the end circumstances, interest and availability were the deciding factors. Ulf Hannerz (2003:212-213) discusses similar experiences during his field work, and agreeing with him I let the circumstances lead. There were several more people who wanted to be interviewed but, both timing and transportation became obstacles for us all. As my research question pertains to the participants experience of the theater work and the smaller scope for this thesis there were not enough opportunities to expand my research to include questions that would enable me to engage with the audience.

I conducted nine semi-structured interviews during which my questions were centered around the four research questions stated above, as well as themes such as *work process*, *group*, *performer*, *performance* and *audience*. Each of the interviews followed a similar structure and I used both the themes and research questions as guidance, but I also made a point to catch up with each person and create a conversational atmosphere, such as Davies prefers (2008:120-121). I met with informants in their home towns or before or after MIO meetings. The interviews took place in coffee shops, the car I was borrowing, the MIO office, the lobby to the stage, a burrito restaurant and in the hallway of one of the meeting places. One interview was with a participant who was then being held in a correctional facility.

All of the interviews, except for the one inside the correctional facility, were recorded. I have chosen to use direct quotes at times to illustrate informants own wording and give the reader an understanding of the experiences each informant describes. Quotes are marked and are directly transcribed from the recordings. I have chosen to illustrate pauses or silences by space or ... in the written quotes. No one felt the need to be anonymous and almost

questioned me why I would choose to offer that option. It became clear to me that these are people who have become accustomed to sharing their life stories in front of audiences through the work they do with MIO. I did, however, chose to give each informant a pseudonym to create anonymity in a context that is evolving and where some informants are not fully in control of their future as they are still involved in the justice system (Eastmond 2007:261). The list below shows each informant who was interviewed with their pseudonym, age, preferred pronoun and how long they have been a part of MIO. In addition there are other people who appear in the text through my earlier notes who were not interviewed as a part of this study, but have consented to be mentioned by a pseudonym.

- Alexis 21 yrs old, she, her. 4.5 yrs with MIO
- Don 20 yrs old, he, him. 5 yrs with MIO
- Kiya 22 yrs old, she, her. 6 yrs with MIO
- Ahmed 23 yrs old, he, him. 7 yrs with MIO
- Mark 22 yrs old, he, him. 7 yrs with MIO
- Cassia 44yrs old, founder and co-director, she, her. 12 yrs with MIO
- Julia 24 yrs old, she, her, 6 yrs with MIO
- Yonas 19 yrs old, he, him. 5 yrs with MIO
- Adam 17 yrs old, he, him. 3-4 yrs with MIO

Ethical considerations and reflexivity

When I first started working with MIO I was asked:

‘ Who are you, entering that building, what are you coming in with? ’

The person who asked me this wanted me to think about my status when, entering the prison, asking me to be aware of my privilege of being free and able to leave once the workshop was over.

I’ve kept this question with me throughout the process of this study as well. I wanted it to remind me of my role in the work and to be aware of myself in the process of the study, what I give and take (Davies 2008:109). To base my ethical considerations on this awareness feels helpful to me as I’ve chosen to work with questions with respect to which my privileges as a researcher, and as a white woman with a middle class Swedish/American - bilingual

background, needs to be acknowledged (Enria :324-325, Plastow & McQuaid 2017:962). My intent is not to focus on this but to portray my ability to choose to work with these questions from a perspective of not having lived the same experiences as the people I study. Originally, I approached this work from having experience in theater and knowing the feeling of possibility that the creative process and stage offers. Coming back as a researcher I add another purpose that needs to be acknowledged as well (Plastow 2015:108). I am therefore approaching this work with a perspective as a theater-creator, facilitator and anthropologist.

During my work with MIO I never asked someone what their story was, I just let them lead in what they chose to share. And I am continuing to practice this as a researcher. For the purpose of this thesis the actions that placed a person in the system of incarceration aren't of interest unless those actions are shared as a part of the creative work. During my interviews I have focused on the creation of a scene and not as much on the story of the scene. There are moments, however, when I have chosen to specifically describe the plot of a scene in order to illuminate the process and the issues that are important to the person being interviewed.

Previous Research and Theoretical Framework

There are several existing studies that explore theater as a tool to create space for marginalized groups (Plastow & McQuaid 2017, Enria 2016, Lit 2013, Horghagen & Josephson 2010). Many of the projects featured in these studies use similar methodology to each other as well as to MIO. The studies I have found to be useful for this thesis come from a broad spectrum of geographical representation as well as working towards different groups of people, noting that the projects are geographically diverse, but not necessarily the researchers. I have chosen to utilize research from other disciplines to complement my anthropological perspective, however they are all conducted through qualitative methods. My focus is slightly different from most previous research, as I am looking at how the experience is perceived by the participants rather than on the impact of the performance to the audience, researcher or development goal of project. Each existing study has focused on a different group of people, such as asylum seekers in Norway, young people in Ethiopia, and people with mental illnesses in Hong Kong, amongst others, as further described.

Jane Plastow (2015:124), who inspired the approach of my thesis has worked in several projects in Africa, discusses the significance and possibilities of occupying public space in a creative way, and what that means both on an individual, and collective level. Siu-Wai Lit (2013:65-67) describes how she saw the performers, suffering from mental illnesses, pass through different stages of transformation during the creative process and how the performance led to a conversation of recognition from the audience in a project in Asia. Sissel Horghagen and Staffan Josephson (2010:173) write that they saw participants, who were asylum seekers, become empowered by interacting, cooperating and then presenting a performance together as a group during a theater project in Norway. Luisa Enria (2016:323) describes how she saw participants of a theater project in Sierra Leone work through traumatic events by creating scenes based on their own stories and how they could support each other by stepping into each other's scenes.

There are also relevant studies that don't primarily focus on theater but more on the act of storytelling. I find these useful to construct my theoretical framework. Dalia Rodriguez describes how storytelling can be used as a tool to counter oppression, as well as a way for a community to heal (2006:1069-1070). She uses two narratives to illustrate how women of color face racism within the academic world in North America. Rodriguez states that storytelling creates opportunities such as community building and ability to shape resistance. She writes that storytelling can be a tool to understand oppression as well as a way to heal from it, and move forward. Rodriguez illuminates this through her qualitative method of autoethnography and explains that the act of storytelling can lead to empowerment of marginalized groups of people. Joseph E. Davis has a similar approach to the uses of storytelling as he writes how it can be used to create social change (2002:19-20). He describes the storytelling process as a social transaction. This helps illuminate the relationship between storyteller and listener as co-creators. He explains a bond taking shape and a "we" being created by the story that the two now hold.

As a way to further describe the bond that Davis refers to I chose to add Victor Turner's (1967:137-140) theory of *spontaneous communitas* to my theoretical framework. I find that the anthropological perspective is able to describe the emotional aspect of how the bond is created, rather than simply a transaction. Turner describes that *spontaneous communitas* can

be created during an unstructured, liminal, stage where something remarkable such as an emotional performance takes place. The bond that is created by *spontaneous communitas* can be felt by a group of people that are unknown to each other. As the word suggests the event does not have to be assumed of being able to create the bond beforehand.

Vibeke Steffen's (2013:196-200) research on the integrated usage of spiritual healing amongst Danes in contemporary society offers theoretical tools to understand how theater can be used to deal with challenges of daily life. Through her research she was able to discern that people were using spiritual healing practices as an integrated tool to navigate daily life, rather than a particular response to crisis situations. Steffen describes an ongoing process of introspective exercises that in turn result in meaningful social relationships. In her research she notes that more people are choosing to engage in individual spiritual practices because of a cultural shift to an individualistic society reflecting people shaping their lives subjectively, rather than collectively.

My main theoretical tool is Marita Eastmond's usage of storytelling and the creation of narratives (2007:249-255,260). Even though her research inspired me I at first I did not see the connection to my own study immediately. As I dove further into my research I realized that her ability to capture the multiplicities of storytelling would be most useful to apply to my own findings. She conducted anthropological research on forced migrants usage of narratives and storytelling. Eastmond explains the process of how people create their narratives based on their lived experiences, but also how these narratives shift in regards to who is listening. Through her research it becomes evident that relationships are formed through storytelling, but also that these relationships affect the telling of the story. She discusses the difference between migrants' testimonial stories as told to fellow migrants, and as told to a judge who might be determining their fate. Eastmond writes that narratives have the ability to create a sense of belonging, and shape a collective identity. Through the telling of these individual and collective life stories she describes the ability of people to find new ways to move on from harmful and traumatic experiences. She writes that narratives have the ability to give the person who is sharing their story a voice of their own rather than being standardized by a bureaucratic system. This she claims can be a means of countering prejudice and create understanding.

Disposition

The following chapters will present my research. The following chapter “Contextualizing the Theater Project” introduces the geographical location and background around youth incarceration in the USA. It also gives further insight into the method theater that MIO works with as well as the programming of the organization. The third chapter “Creating a Collective Identity” explores how individual stories are shared and what the creative work process looks like when involving lived experiences. This chapter also describes the group process and how individual experiences differ when working through emotional memories. The fourth chapter “Getting a Voice and being Understood” examines the ability of theater to counter prejudice and creating space for invisible stories. The thesis ends with concluding remarks reflecting on findings of the research as well as pointing out interest areas for further research.

2. Contextualizing the theater project

Where is Maine?

‘Most people in the US think Maine is a part of Canada’, Alexis, a MIO participant, told me when I asked her how she would describe Maine to someone who has never been. Maine is the most northeastern state in the USA and borders Canada into the north and the Atlantic Ocean to the east. There’s a picturesque rocky coastline with lighthouses and lobster shacks along it. The coast is a major tourism destination, particularly in the summer. The inland parts of the state both west and north are covered in forest and it is one of the least populous states in the USA (United State Census Bureau 2019). On the border to New Hampshire you will find the White Mountains and throughout the state there are lakes and agricultural land.

When I asked Mark, another Maine Inside Out participant, to describe Maine he said he wouldn’t just tell someone, he would show them.

I would go to my hometown’s, Portland and Biddeford. I would take them to where I hung out. Where the ferries come in, over where the lobster boats dock. Maine has some great lobsters- I love lobsters. We have the best blueberries too. - Mark

Fishing, manufacturing, finance and insurance are some of Maine’s industries, along with naval shipbuilding, lumber, tourism and outdoor recreation (Bureau of Economic Analysis 2018). The majority of Maine’s population live in the southern and central part of the state, which is where government offices, hospitals and universities are located (Maine Center for Disease Control and Prevention,2019). Public transportation is not available between or in most Maine cities, making individual vehicles the most common mode of transportation. The unemployment rate in Maine is slightly lower than the rest of the USA (Center for workforce and research Information,2019). There are significant differences between coastal and southern counties, and northern and western ones where the unemployment rate is higher.

Youth Incarceration in the USA and Maine

There are currently 48 000, or more, confined youth (people under the age of 18) in the USA who are living in detention centers (Sawyer:2019). These are youth who have been

committed, or detained, in a locked facility due to involvement with the juvenile, or criminal justice system. A majority of them are sixteen years old, or older, but there are also young people in ages down to twelve. The number of confined youth has decreased substantially in the last ten years and Sawyer writes that this is due to a changing attitude on both national and state level of looking at alternatives to incarceration.

In Maine there is one juvenile detention center, there is no official number of youth that are committed currently as this thesis is written, but looking at the Department of Corrections overview of the year 2019 it seems to fluctuate between fifty and thirty youth (Maine Department of Corrections 1,2019). The number fluctuates as the detention center serves both committed and detained youth waiting to go to court or another placement. The facility itself is built to accommodate 163 youth and has also seen a large decrease in numbers of youth being committed in the last ten years (Maine Department of Corrections 2,2019).

As the population of Maine is small compared to other states within the USA, it's population of incarcerated youth is also small. Research, however, shows that Maine tends to sentence their youth for longer sentences (Maine Department of Corrections 1,2019, Sawyer:2019). Nationally, eight percent of confined youth spend one year in a locked facility, in Maine the average sentence for any committed youth is one year. The majority of confined youth in Maine have committed crimes classified as misdemeanors and are seen as a low-moderate risk (Dumont & King 2017:1). Amongst the youth being involved in the juvenile justice system in Maine there is a disproportionate amount of people of color and native americans that are confined compared to the overall population, writes Dumont and King.

Currently Maine's juvenile justice system is being reevaluated by a task force comprised of legislative and legal representatives, as well as practitioners and individuals from impacted communities (MJJSARTF:2019). They are, after receiving critique in form of research and legal cases, looking at reinvesting in a care model that would avoid incarcerating young people the way Maine has been doing.

The Organization Maine Inside Out (MIO)

MIO, the organization I focus on in this thesis, has been creating original performances since 2008 (Maine Inside Out 2019). The performances are created by the participants and based on

their own experiences. MIO uses theater as a tool to engage the community in dialogue about issues impacted by or leading to incarceration. They incorporate transformative justice in their methodology, emphasizing on healing the harm caused by crime and incorporating all those affected by the injustice in the healing process (Maine Inside Out 2019, Centre for Restorative Justice and Reconciliation 2019). MIO regards all harm to be stemming from oppression and use theater to create social change. Their theaterwork is based on theories and practices of Augusto Boal and Paulo Freire (Maine Inside Out 2019). Exercises, games and praxis that the groups use to create the performances are grounded in the values of Freire's (1993) critical pedagogy and tools of Boal's *Theater of the Oppressed* (2008). According to Boal, a group that has experienced oppression can unite in creative work to address the injustice that they have lived through. Freire (1993:50-51) explains that by locating and acknowledging oppression, the oppressed can consciously engage in the dialogical work to change their own status. By using theater as a way to identify the oppression the actors involved will regain agency and can explore opportunities to collectively counter their oppression.

With these theories and practices mentioned above MIO has created their own method to create original theater performances to fit the environment and people that they work with. To provide facilitators and participants a structure of equal accountability of communication when engaging in reflection, creative process, or conflicts, MIO uses circle process, as Key Pranis describes (2019). By physically standing or sitting in circle formation Pranis explains that by using a talking piece each person in the group is given space to speak without being commented. The MIO talking pieces are themselves significant to the organizations history (Sanchez 2018). Some are created by participants at the detention center and some have been purchased at significant moments of the community groups. The circle process is central to MIO's way of communicating.

The frame of MIO's model at the detention center has been to hold a workshop session during 10 weeks that culminates in a public performance at the center. The performance is of the original play that the group created and is followed by a dialogue between the audience and performers. The organization has held programming at the youth detention center since 2009. The programs have been based on voluntary participation and more than 250

incarcerated youth have created performances at the youth detention center in Maine with MIO (Maine Inside Out 2019). For the first time since 2009, MIO is currently *not* holding any programming at the detention center. Cassia, one of the three co-directors and founders, explained during our interview. As the juvenile justice system in Maine is undergoing reevaluation, the task force mentioned above, the Department of Corrections are not interested in signing any new contracts until they know what the future plan is for juvenile justice in Maine.

Since 2014, MIO has expanded their programming by holding similar workshops supporting reintegration and community building for communities outside the detention center (Maine Inside Out 2019). By creating an original performance and then touring it around Maine, as well as out of state, the ‘outside’-programming involves participant-led workshops as well as participant -led advocacy and leadership development. At first the set up was very similar to the workshops held at the detention center, with the same theater structure and meals being provided. MIO participants who were released could continue the work in the community. The programming in the community is still similar however it differs slightly reflecting different struggles faced by participants living on their own rather than in a contained environment.

MIO holds community groups in four cities in Maine: Biddeford, Portland, Lewiston and Waterville. A majority of the MIO participants live in, or close by these cities. There are other places within the state where several participants live, but the organization is currently limited to these four cities both by logistics and staff capacity. Each community group consists of five to twelve persons, on average, and meets regularly every two weeks. Meetings increase in frequency during the lead up to performances. There is also a group called the leadership council, which started in its official capacity 2019 and has been meeting weekly. According to Ahmed, one of the first MIO participants and a member of the leadership council, the leadership council consists of a group of participants who have been involved with MIO for a while and are interested in more leadership opportunities. In the community MIO can offer each participant a monetary stipend connected to a work project such as a community meeting, rehearsal or performance.

‘ What are you doing? ‘ - following along a MIO theater workshop

In the introduction of this thesis there is an excerpt from a theater workshop at the detention center in 2017. Here I wish to continue that excerpt to illustrate the practical and reflectory work of a theater workshop, and it’s progression of playcreation. This is a base that the participants and facilitators operate from when approaching a subject and building a scene. It is important to keep in mind that every group and workshop looks differently.

Joel takes the talking piece back and asks us to divide into pairs. He then explains the different ways we can sculpt each other, demonstrating by sculpting me into a pose. He gives us the prompt of sculpting the other person at a time of feeling lonely and the group starts to work. We do a couple of different prompts in pairs before I ask if anyone is interested in sculpting a group scene based on the writing we had done last week. Oliver volunteers and says he needs three people for his scene. He places them in positions and then steps back, does some adjustments and then says he’s ready. I ask the rest of the group to first identify what we see physically, without trying to interpret anything yet. Someone says, ‘ I see one person sitting, and two standing’, another says ‘the standing people are looking at each other and their bodies are turned away from the sitting one’ and Joel says ‘the sitting person has his head in his hands.’ I then ask the group to say what they think the scene is about, and more suggestions are offered. To follow this, I ask Oliver to tap a person on the shoulder and then take their position so that they can view the image as an audience. They do the same to the next person and so on until everyone has seen it from the audience point of view.

Joel asks the group if they’re willing to continue to work with this scene. They are and the original three take their positions again. This time Joel asks Oliver, as it’s based on his writing, to go up to each person in the scene, hold their shoulder and verbally give them the emotion that the character in that scene would have. The emotions that Oliver gives them are similar to the ones we had suggested in the earlier stage, when I asked the group to interpret the physical poses. As I am watching Oliver placing his hand on the seated person with his head in his hands, and saying ‘lonely’, thereby giving the emotion to the pose, I suddenly feel a strong sense of sadness. After this Joel asks Oliver to tap each person on the shoulder to signal that the actor can say a line based on the emotion they’d just received. Oliver does this

for a while, choosing who can speak and respond by tapping their shoulders. He steps back and looks at the trio and then says that he thinks he's finished. We stand up in a circle and use the talking piece to talk about what this experience was like for everyone, what we felt, both as actors and audience.

Based on the comments by the group we decide to try again and this time Oliver wants to play himself in the scene. Instead of tapping someone on the shoulder the actors will improvise with help from the lines they used earlier and the comments during the circle. We try again and then circle back up, using the talking piece to offer feedback on what we as an audience saw, or thought would be interesting to try, and also to allow the actors to name what felt good or bad and if they wanted to do something differently. After a couple of more tries it was time to close out the session and we sat down in our circle. I asked the group to recognize a moment during the session that they particularly enjoyed, and what they wanted for snacks the next time.

This shows how, step by step, the scene was created and how the theater work involves reflection by both facilitators and participants. Reflecting throughout the creation process offers an ability to explore the possibilities of the situation being portrayed through creative work (Boal 2002:6). The theater work itself offers participants a chance to show something that has happened, but also what could happen. This excerpt illustrates the incorporation of Boal's practical theater exercises with circle process. The workshop and methods used do have similarities to therapeutic tools. Horghagen and Josephson (2010:169) consider that it is important to keep in mind that within applied theater projects participants don't necessarily need the theater to be a therapeutic tool. Horghagen and Josephson conclude that each participant possesses a knowledge and experience that they can contribute to society in a new way. I find this to be relevant for the work of MIO and will therefore not discuss the methods further in relation to their therapeutic qualities. I do acknowledge that the actors receive tools that they can use on an individual level to counter day to day struggles and will discuss this further on.

3. Creating a Collective Identity

Establishing Trust

Yeah, I remember because they brought food. They brought food in from the outside, and it wasn't even that good, it was like this bakery stuff, and they made their cinnamon rolls with raisins. But it was the best because it wasn't jail food. And they were also really nice, like you don't always get, like, very nice people. - Julia

This is from my interview with Julia, I had just asked her if she remembered her first time with MIO. She told me that this was about six years ago and she was committed to a long sentence at the detention center. Julia explained to me that she was very suspicious of everyone, including the facilitators of MIO. Like Julia, many of the participants I interviewed have been with MIO for a long time and most of them started working with the organization when they were incarcerated at the detention center. Scepticism mixed with curiosity and a lack of other activities seem to be the initial feelings as people joined a MIO group. At the detention center, MIO was offered to anyone who was interested during a time of day when there was nothing else going on. Many explained that the group was something to keep them busy as well as a chance to eat some food from outside of the detention center.

Kiya said she joined pretty shortly after she got committed and explained that at first it was just something to do, but then she ‘ got into it ‘. I was interviewing her on our way home from a Waterville meeting, and she told me this as we were sitting in the car outside her mom’s house. I’d been there once before, three years ago when I had driven Kiya home after she had been released from jail. That time she said it all felt so weird and strange, being back home after three and a half years. Today her 11 month old daughter was curiously exploring the car from her baby seat, while we were talking. She told me that joining MIO was ‘ way out of my comfort zone ‘, but that after the first performance, she kept with it during the whole time she was committed.

Don and Alexis both joined Maine Inside Out in the community. They each went with a friend, but they lived in different cities so joined two different community groups. Both of them had spent some time inside the detention center, but not as long as either Julia or Kiya. I had previously only worked with them in the community groups, including going on a

weeklong theater residency to Michigan. Don and Alexis recounted that they went with a friend and then just continued to go with them. Don said he wasn't really sure about the meetings and the theater work when he had first started and that he was overwhelmed by the new people, and talking in front of them. He did say he really enjoyed the food, and also that it was a job opportunity as he could, once he joined, get paid for the work. Don kept going and eventually started to enjoy the creative work as well as becoming more comfortable with the group. Alexis told me that she had also enjoyed getting to know more people, especially from the other community groups.

Food is a central part in all the conversations about joining MIO. As illustrated above, it's often one of the things mentioned when a participant talks about first joining a MIO group. Horghagen and Josephson (2010:173) write that during their study they found that daily routines, such as meals and transportation to the theater project, offered opportunities for participants to connect with each other. They wrote that this increased the feeling of being a group. For the MIO groups at the detention center it was a chance to eat something else than the bland ' jail food '. It was also an opportunity for connection, of sitting down and eating together, as I was told when I first started working with MIO. For the community groups this was the same but it also became a meal that participants could count on getting. As participants were struggling with transitions, being newly released from prison, or trying to support themselves financially and with housing, meals offered by MIO supported participants ability and interest in participating in the theater work. Ahmed explained that when he was inside the detention center and first joined MIO, it was important for him to both feel and see that the facilitators meant what they were saying. He said that the actions of the group were equally as important as what the people in it said to him. Ahmed recounted the food being a very concrete way for him to see the facilitators giving care, which in turn was a start for him to build trust and engage in the theater work.

For the participants that I interviewed, starting to work with MIO wasn't succession in a linear process, the reasons to join weren't necessarily connected to the theater work itself, but rather to the logistics around it. The comments by informants point to how facilitators approached them with a long term perspective in mind, knowing that the work they intended to do was a process that would take time. The approach seems to have created a foundation of

trust for the participants to further continue to work with sensitive and vulnerable issues through theater.

My Story, Your Story, Our Story

During the interviews, when I asked my informants what it had taken for them to share their first story, I was answered with explanations of how the atmosphere in the groups felt different, how patience was important, and showing up again and again offered a reliable routine and expectation. Kiya explained that being in a group where many of the others had been going through experiences similar to those she or her friends were having created a new environment that she hadn't experienced before. She told me that the girls in her MIO group at the detention center were the reason why she felt comfortable sharing something very personal and emotional. During Horghagen and Josephson's research (2010:172) they made a similar observation. Participants they talked to in their study, who did not know each other or even speak the same language, appreciated using theater games and exercises in addition to meals as a way to connect with each other and build relationships. They describe how participants were encouraged to share their own stories after seeing someone else do the same. Kiya described feeling the same way. Horghagen and Josephson (2010:172) conclude that by seeing similarities in others stories participants could develop a more conscious perspective on their individual challenges. Kiya referred to the other girls as her support system and told me that it felt good to be there for someone else, as well as knowing that they would support her emotionally when she needed it. During the interview she said ' it was just a good environment to be in, to be able to have a group of people that know what's going on, even though they might not have gone through it, but they have seen it, or they've had friends. ' She told me that they had fights and that there was drama but at the end of the day they were all living together at the detention center and knew they would be for a while, so they continued to show up for one another.

I asked Alexis how a safe environment for sharing is created. She told me that you can't push people in the MIO groups to share their stories because ' we've been pushed our whole lives ' . She continued to explain that listening and honoring someone when they choose to share is extremely important. To listen without judging, or even commenting on what they're sharing

would invite others to share too. Alexis explained that by recognizing a person for just sharing sets a tone of a safe space. In her study, Lit (2013:65) points out that the initial stage, the creation of a space to share stories, was one of the bigger components to the work. She separates the act of sharing a personal story from the act of working creatively with it. Among my informants, Alexis made a similar distinction by saying that there's a difference between just sharing something and sharing something for the group to continue to work with. She said that it's important for the group to recognize when they are invited to co-create with the sharer. Sometimes it's just about supporting one person telling their story. She also explained that sometimes when there are a lot of people feeling recognition with the event, the initial personal story becomes 'our story'. This is how she explained it to me as we talked about the current play and two of the scenes in it:

She has her own personal poem. So we're just kind of like the characters that surround her to make her the spotlight. But Lewistons' scene, where it's about them going through and watching the different things that they have seen in Lewiston. Like, oh yeah, I see this all the time so it's just like taking all these different experiences and putting them together and seeing that everybody is part of them, because they've all seen it. - Alexis

This is what Don told me about the scene he created for the 2019 performance:

And then there's one scene where there's me and my girlfriend having an argument and I'm getting arrested because they thought that I was a threat to her, she's a caucasian woman so we labeled as profiling, and so I put it in the play, to kind of represent that. - Don

When he shared what had happened with the group there was a lot of recognition from other group members, many reported they had similar experiences of racism and discrimination from authoritarian officials, or had friends that had similar things happen to them. This was an example of a time when sharing evolved into 'our story' as Alexis had mentioned. Don invited the rest of the group to create a scene with him. Alexis told me that during the making of a scene there's an opportunity for the rest of the group to add their experiences into it. 'I think a lot of our stories are similar' she said, and in this process the group can define how they are all involved and what their experience looks like.

It becomes clear that there are two processes happening simultaneously. One is for a person to be heard, supported and recognized. The other is when one individual's experience

becomes a collective one. Through the sharing of stories Davis (2002:19) describes a “we” being created, Rodriguez (2006:1070) describes a similar transferral from one holder of the story to a collective one. Eastmond (2007:256-258) explains that the collective identity is created by combining multiple life stories into one, telling a story about the collective. Alexis and Don describe several participants adding their experience into one scene, weaving in their individual stories to create a collective representation of what they have each experienced. Cassia expanded on this during our interview, adding the theater perspective of the transformation of the story.

It's coming from someone's true story but then it transcends into something, through the art, through the theater work, it becomes something that's not like someone's true testimonial story.

By witnessing and participating collectively through suggestions, reflecting emotions, voicing recognition, or just enhancing the scene creatively, the story shifts from an individual story to a collectively shared one. Cassia said that not everyone is going to have a shared experience of what the scene is about, but the care for the person or the work itself can create a connection to it. Eastmond’s approach to understanding how storytelling creates a collective identity explains how the scene transcends from being a personal testimonial to a collective one (2007:256-258).

Eastmond also noted in regards to the creation of collective identities that historical narratives can be woven into current ones (2007:258). This was not something I found to happen in regards to the scene creation, which seemed all solely based on participants’ actual experiences, but I did observe this happening in poems written and presented by individual participants. Through my observations during this field work, but also while I was a facilitator working with MIO I heard poems that Ahmed wrote and performed. His style of writing was to connect his experience of racism with historical events, such as slavery and colonization. Incorporated into the performance, these poems would add to the collective identity and collective narrative. The collective feeling and recognition of each others' experiences can create a sense of belonging (cf. Eastmond 2007:255), as Kiya so clearly expressed.

Navigating Oppression and Trauma

Once the structure of the scene is created the praxis of the theater work is to continue collectively to work with the scene by trying different things, and reflecting. Plastow writes that reflection and action is the Freirian praxis and needs to be continuously woven into the creative process (2015:119). The praxis is a way to process and maneuver oppression and can offer a perspective to empower the oppressed. Rodriguez writes that sharing and understanding the oppression is a way to negotiate healing as well as creating resistance (2006:1069). The scene described above that Don created wasn't his first one to create, but it was the first one he directed. Don told me that it felt different this time because he wasn't playing a character taking blame for something or saying sorry. ' But this time I'm really, like, standing up for myself and saying, This is not right and you can't be doing this! - and it's nice to finally be able to do that.' The sense of empowerment that Plastow (2015:119),124 and Rodriguez (2006:1069) describe becomes evident through how Don described his scene work.

Sharing life stories, even in a safe space, is not always easy. Several researchers write about how memories can be painful to relive (Eastmond 2007:258-259, Enria 2016:323-324, Jerke et. al. 2018:180). In the context of trauma and displacement, Eastmond writes that people often found the need to share their experience as a testimony to counter the harm that had been done to them. She describes many of her informants suffer from sharing their stories out loud. Even though most of them found it to be helpful in the long run, the balance between remembering and moving forward was described as painful. This seems to be true in other studies as well, but looking at the projects using theater as a tool to counter harm and oppression, actions to support the remembering, mostly seems helpful. During my interview with Kiya, she described the initial process to be emotional and at times 'nerve wracking'. She said that it was emotional especially to hear other people's stories but also that this is what made the work 'amazing'. Enria discusses how the theater work gave her informants a tool to externalise the painful experience and distance themselves from the event (2016:323-324). By doing so in a creative space they were allowed to share their story, but didn't have to place themselves in it each time. Lauren Jerke et. al. describes a similar

possibility being created by stepping into other peoples scenes and not playing yourself; this offers an opportunity of distance (2018:180). The theater, according to them, helps create a protective barrier between the participants and their traumatic experiences. During my interviews I heard answers to both support this position and describe the discomfort of working with traumatic memories. This is what Mark told me:

Sofia: What's it like to be in someone else's scene?

Mark: They put me the way they want me to be and I have to learn their lines. It's awesome because it's not only that they are my friends and they've told me this story before and I already feel their pain. Now I'm in this exact scenario and I can picture exactly what happened in that space at that exact time. I think it's amazing because people wanna help each other. They took the time to do this. We do this on our own time, we do this cause we want to, because we need to.

All of the informants that I interviewed, who are participants, said that by working with other people's scenes you actively showed your care. That by stepping into someone else's scene and working with their story you could show that you are there for them and that you want to help them. Eastmond points out that storytelling can be a way to alleviate suffering and move forward (2007:251). By sharing your story there's a possibility to negotiate the past and find new ways of moving forward, both individually and collectively. During my interview with Don, he explained how the group process of listening and working with someone's story could mean; ' We're just telling you to tell your own story, what you relate to, or what you've gone through. Anything that you give can be a big help to somebody else. Just by sharing your story. '

Kiya described a different experience of stepping into other peoples scenes and playing characters from their lives. She felt like she was taking over someone's story, even if they had asked her to play a character in their scene.

...like you're you but, you be me too and, you live my life. You know what I mean? Like, you live me through the story I'm telling you, and while I'm telling you what you should do. I just don't.... It's, it's weird.

Kiyas comment illustrates how participants perceive the theater work differently. It points to how the individual processes take shape differently. Kiya and I had worked together inside the detention center and then stayed in touch after she was released. She had been involved

with MIO on and off since she was released and even though she had been more active in the fall and winter of 2019, she wasn't part of the cast for the annual performance. During our interview Kiya spoke mostly about her experience working with MIO inside the detention center. I found it helpful that I had been working with MIO for a couple of years before doing my research. This allowed me to follow along her reflections on her past years, and connect with where she was today. Plastow and McQuaid (2017:962) intentionally resist looking at their theater projects through a linear succession. They, instead, propose a more long term investment in relationships to be able to see all of the nuances of a theater project and how it influences an individual's personal experiences. Plastow points out that in one of the projects she worked in it took a participant five years to voice feeling empowered by the work she was doing (2015:124).

Continuous Reshaping of the Story

I interviewed Yonas at a correctional facility, the day before he was released. It was an adult facility and we were speaking through phones and looking at each other through glass. Yonas was very excited and anxious, he told me he couldn't wait to get back to his other family, MIO. We had worked with each other both at the youth detention center and out in the community so I asked him about the difference in doing the MIO theater work in each place. He told me that he would often be easily distracted while working with MIO inside. This was because there were so many things on his mind connected to being incarcerated. He explained that he had to constantly keep himself in line to show up the way he wanted to for MIO. Coming up with themes for a play was always hard because there were so many things that he wanted to share and say. In the community, however, he found it to be really easy to decide on a theme that he felt strongly about and to put all of his energy into creating a play about that theme. Eastmond offers further insight on storytelling in relation to what is happening around the storyteller (2007:249-250). She discusses how stories of the past are told in relation to what is happening in the present. According to Eastmond storytelling is situational, and culture helps shape how the story is told, but also how it's understood. In her research she mentions the power dynamic between storyteller and listener and how this affects how the story is portrayed. This aspect helps decipher some of the feelings Yonas

mentioned around creating a play in a contained environment where he was not in control of his own life, compared to creating a performance as a free man (Eastmond 2007:261).

Yonas continued to explain that when he was inside the detention center and performing, the context of wanting to change the situation he was in was often already understood by the audience. When presenting the play in the community, and being free, he felt that he had to be clearer with the message and that he and the group had a responsibility to represent the people that were still inside. Eastmond writes that through narrative storytelling the teller has the ability to create continuity both in time and place (2007:254). Yonas's comment illustrates how he, through the performances, hopes to create a continuity of connection to the people inside. His feeling of responsibility is embodied through the performances' collective identity being represented (Eastmond 2007:258).

4. Getting a Voice and Being Understood

I think it's just like an overall, this is what we did. This is how we did it. Here's a great piece for people to kind of get a glimpse of what we're going through. -Kiya

The Ability of Theater to Counter Prejudice

Alexis told me how she was never able to meet or talk to the people making the decisions about her sentence. She described a feeling of powerlessness, of never being able to share her side of the story. She wished she had been able to defend herself, and instead felt like she was just a name on a file that adults were passing around. Eastmond expressed a similar concern as she was seeing the effect of migrants personal testimonials being replaced by their medical records in the bureaucratic process of asylum seekers (2007:260). During Eastmond's research she often heard that the genuine stories of asylum seekers were lost due to standardization and bureaucracy. Details of how migrants perceived their experiences were never recounted in official spaces. I asked Alexis what the performing meant to her and she replied: 'I think with our play, it's a chance for us where no one can interrupt us. No one can tell us we can't talk. No one can tell us that this isn't our story. No one can tell us to not say certain things because it's not appropriate.' The theater allows Alexis to express her life experiences subjectively, contrary to the external descriptions given to her by the juvenile justice system (Steffen 2013:196). The theater seems to offer her a place, and a voice to resist the standardized category she previously had been placed in (Eastmond 2007:261, Rodriguez 2006:1069).

As the initial story of a lived experience is transformed into a performative scene there is an intertwining of selection, reflection, creative work and organization (Eastmond 2007:260, McQuaid & Plastow 2017:966). Eastmond points out that there is a continuous fluidity between all of the actions in story-telling. As written earlier, I see a two simultaneous processes occurring when sharing life stories. Being heard, supported and recognized (1) and the transcending of one individual story to a collective one (2). Now I suggest a continuation with a third process, the performers' expectation of the audience (3). Below I have marked the three processes entwined within each as reflected through Mark's description of what it was like for him to perform his scene in the play:

I don't get nervous but this time I really was, cause' it was such an important piece about my son, I almost actually choked up onstage. (1)

It wasn't even the fact that so many people were there, I would've done it even if no one was there...just to get my voice out at that moment in time (1)

That's another thing with Maine Inside Out, we don't just do it for other people, we do it for us. This is an escape for us that is away from the system that is away from any oppression we've ever faced. (2)

We go there, we can be ourselves, all these other people have this statistic about us, but they have not taken a walk in our shoes (...) (2&3)

We do this for us, I did that for me to get it out there

Because I can't really talk to anyone about it, a lot of people understand but they don't know how to handle it (1)

So going up on that stage...

All those people that don't know me but know my story can talk to other people about it (3)

Mark told me how this performance was one of the more important ones he's done with MIO. He said that it was important for the audience to hear his whole story and felt that he had been marginalized to a number on a file, similar to what Alexis described. He told me that through the performance, people who didn't know him, could hear his story. He described a chain link being created when new people would see the performance. By performing for people who didn't know him personally he explained that the chain could grow larger. Through Mark's description it becomes clear that he is looking for understanding from the audience. During Enria's study in Sierra Leone the young people she worked with described similar expectations as Mark (2016:322). She found that the performances created a space for them to point to the systemic failure that they had experienced as well as their own part in the events that they portrayed. Mark, similarly to Alexis and Eastmond's informants, felt misrepresented by prejudice and statistics and was hoping that the performance would be a space for people to hear about his experience, the way he lived them (2007:260, Enria 2016:322).

Making Experience Visible

' It felt great and relieving ' Don told me of the premiere of the annual play as we were sitting down after a leadership council meeting. He explained how several people from the audience had come up to him and appreciated his scene and what he was standing up for in the play. I

asked him who was in the audience and he listed judges, teachers, people of color, and people from the LGBTQ community. He concluded that there were a lot of people there. I know from my previous experience that the audience that comes to the annual performances each year is a mix of family and friends of the cast and facilitators, community members that have followed the organization for a while, teachers or volunteers from the detention center, and people who have just heard about it for the first time. When I asked Don if he made eye contact with anyone in the audience he told me about a girl that was sitting in the front row and how she was crying during the performance. Afterwards she had come up to him and told him that this is what she needed, knowing that someone else was going through the same thing as her. Don said that ‘...her speaking out and being in tears. It was just strong and amazing.’ In her research, Lit heard similar reflections to Don’s from a participant (2013:74). That after hearing from an audience member who was acknowledging similar experiences to what had been portrayed in the performance, the participant could voice a feeling of empowerment from representing herself in a new way.

Towards the end of my field work in December 2019 I was able to attend the MIO performance. There was a very specific audience at this performance, as they often are following the premiere. This audience was made up by the appointed task force reevaluating the juvenile justice system in Maine. To illustrate what it was like to sit in the audience I use my own notes.

I sit in the back of the auditorium watching the audience walk in, it’s a very different crowd compared to their last performance. It’s a mix of people who are involved in the juvenile justice system such as the commissioner of Maine, lawyers, social workers, and teachers. I can see everyone from my seat in the far back, there are about 40 people in an auditorium that usually fits 300. I recognize some people from when I would work with groups at the detention center, both staff and lawyers. Some I have never seen before and I ask Alexis and Mark who are behind me, watching people as well. I am both nervous and excited as it’s already been a long day of rehearsal and mixed energies leading up to this point. The lights in the auditorium go down, the introductory film starts to play. My mind goes to the participants, I wonder what the performance will be like after hearing so much about it. The auditorium is still, quiet, expectant. I can feel the energy of the performers behind me, ready

to enter. There's a lot at stake, especially today. Julia walks up onstage, her voice is loud and she brings a powerful presence to the empty stage. The cast of 23 walk through the aisles and up onstage, the lights are bright on them and everything else seems to slip away.

Right after the performance I asked Adam what he was feeling and this is what he answered me: ‘... kind of like those after-performance jitters you know. We just got, we got a lot of people thinking about what needs to be done and they're going to be down there doing that meeting.’ (the task force meeting following the performance)

Don had told me that this is one of his favorite plays that he had created with MIO and I asked him why. We were sitting next to each other on a bench so I couldn't fully see his face, but he sat up straighter and said: ‘it's a chance for us youth to be able to bring our voices up, just stand up to the elders and say we know what's right for us and you guys need to listen.’ In each interview I am told that the performance creates a space for ‘people to listen.’ Plastow and McQuaid write that through their research it became evident that the performances made invisible experiences visible. The experiences became visible to people of power who had never sought out to hear the life stories directly from the people impacted by oppression (2017:968). During the MIO performance this audience consisted of people with legislative power, policymakers as well as officials working practically in the systems that the performers were addressing.

Intentionality in Storytelling

I had previously only worked with Dan at the detention center, as described in my field notes earlier, he had now been out for about a year and the annual performance was his first one being free. In the play Dan said: ‘The system failed me. I was able to take responsibility for what I did, but they were not able to take responsibility for how they failed me.’ Dan's line in the play displays an intentionality as well as a performative construction of his life experiences from living in group homes to being incarcerated. Enria (2016:324) states that in the theater project she was studying in Sierra Leone the focus was not to portray one truth but to give a space for the young people to represent their reality and themselves. Using Eastmond's (2007:260) theoretical framework in relation to storytelling, this line

demonstrates the continuous work of narrative truth . Dan's line encompasses his lived experience, externally projected experience, the consequences of them both and what it all has come to mean for him currently. Eastmond concludes her research with a concern that the space for these types of narratives to be voiced are scarce. By looking at the previous research along with my own study, theater seems to offer the space for participants to voice their narrative truths. Horghagen and Josephson (2010:174) write that the performance allowed their participants to occupy space they otherwise would not have access too. Plastow (2015:124) describes the ability for the participants in her study to occupy public space in a creative way, as an opportunity for them to recognize themselves as humans equally worthy as those in their audience.

During my interview with Cassia she pointed out how over time, the participants in the community groups have been able to be more intentional with their choice of life stories to share. She said that one of the reasons for this was that in the community groups there are participants who have done this work for several years and now know the tool of theater well. She explained:

They understand the tool, they know what to expect from it. They know how to get their message through it and developmentally they went from being a 16 year old to a 23 year old, something like that. So as they're finding their own voice, and continuing to get stronger with the use of their tool that's showing up in the contents of the play.

Drawing back to what Alexis said about the playcreation process, that sometimes it's about supporting one person sharing, and sometimes there's an opportunity for the group to add their experiences. The MIO community groups all consist of participants who have experience of different involvement in the theater process. Some are new, some have been in MIO for a long time and some have been newly released but have done the theater work for a while inside the detention center. This means that there are a lot of different expectations by participants with respect to what the performances would lead to, and mean to the audience watching the play. Kiya told me that she thought people in the community did want to know ' what jail is like ', and that they do care. In the middle of the sentence she did however pause to say ' granted, they're the ones that are voting to put people away. ' She then continued to say that they are also the people that come to the plays and other meeting spaces to try to create change.

Cassia talked about a similar curiosity to what Kiya mentions, with respect to the effect that incarceration has on a population that isn't directly impacted by it. Often after a performance there are several people who reach out to MIO, wanting to engage in the work in different ways. During our interview Cassia was trying to find the right word for how a population that is seemingly protected by incarceration, also is negatively impacted. As she was telling me this she paused and then said: ' this is a really binary way to look at it but, within our country of mass incarceration you're either impacted by it or you're protected from it '. She continued that she thought the protection itself created a negative impact, and that it was this that caused people to want to connect, understand, and create change. Wittrock (2011:23-25) writes that there is something magical about theater and theater performances in the sense that people trust it. She means that there is an already established faith in that theater will create something new, change and provide possibilities.

Wittrock describes it as a blind trust at times, that doesn't always lead to anything. After a MIO performance when audience members give feedback to performers, or reach out to the organization this might be because they feel a connection to what they have just seen. Wittrock (2011:131-132) uses *affected* to describe the reaction of the audience members. Through the trust that they have for the theater they (the audience) allow themselves to be *affected* and ascribe truth to what they are watching. Wittrock means that it's the power to *affect* that creates the efficiency of the theaters' ability to invoke change.

A Liminal Connection?

Yonas told me that everyone becomes connected during a performance, audience and actors. Similar to the "we" being created between storyteller and listener, that Davis describes (2002:19-20). I can't help but see certain parallels to Victor Turner's theory of *spontaneous communitas* (1967:137-140). I don't propose that this is completely adaptable for this situation, but it does illuminate some of the aspects of connection that I heard informants expressing. *Spontaneous communitas* emerge during what Turner calls the liminal stage, where there is no institutionalized structure. In this case the performance onstage disrupts the usually assumed structure of what is possible, the time of the performance is liminal. Lit

(2013:74) writes about a similar observation about the liminality being an opportunity for the audience and performers to connect. Usually this stage is connected to a ritual (Turner 1967:137-140) of a rite of passage, but I am not saying that the performance is that. The beginning and the end of the performance is, however, defined by expected structures, such as Turner describes *spontaneous communitas* to be. The *spontaneous communitas* can be created between people who find themselves together in crisis, or in a place generating high emotions, recalling what Don said about the girl in the first row crying during the performance.

Turner describes a bond being felt between people who have never met each other before (1967:137-140). He writes that *spontaneous communitas* can involve a transformation for the group involved and that there is something magical about it. *Spontaneous communitas* help describe how audience members can feel a sense of connection with performers over what has transcribed during the performance and dialogue. Turner's theory can provide further nuance the discussion and is not directly on point because the MIO performances cannot be seen as a rite of passage, or a ritual such as he describes. Turner does write that *spontaneous communitas* most often happen between people with similar power status, which is not the case during the MIO performances, as often times audience members have more power than the performers. Turner's *spontaneous communitas* help illustrate how performing rather than talking can form a different kind of connection; the magic of theater. When I asked Don what the difference for him doing a scene on stage would be compared to telling me about his experience he said:

I'll say is you get to see me in action on stage instead of just reading an article about me, so you don't get the full story. But in Maine Inside Out, in the theater world you can express yourself. And you can get other peoples input on what you're sharing. -
Don

Plastow and McQuaid write about similar opportunities to what Don described being created through theater (2017:968). They say that by watching an action onstage the audience can ascribe their own feelings and thoughts to what they're seeing. As Eastmond writes, the context of the storytelling also affects how it's understood by the listener (2007:250). In the scope of this thesis I was not able to include interviews with audience members. There was, however, an opportunity for audience members to share their reflections publicly. Directly

following the performance I watched as the audience members were asked to reflect on what they had seen in regards to their role on the task force. Many gave thanks, congratulated the performers on their bravery and their ability to convey their stories. One man, in the back of the auditorium said that he was a probation officer and that the performance made him realize that he wanted to learn more about the performer's experiences with being on probation. He said that he would like to have more in-depth, individual conversations with the performers to understand what he could do differently in his official role. As this was at the very end of my field studies I am not sure if those conversations happened, or will happen. It does demonstrate that the performance may affect the audience members and his reflection and feedback, made publicly, does offer recognition and a sense of understanding that several of the performers were looking for.

True Connection Demands Engagement

Through her research, Enria found that, with respect to the theater projects she worked with in Africa, the performances alone often did not lead to much change (2015:123). She wrote that emotions, the audience feeling *affected*, would not create the action hoped for by the projects. Through my interviews and observations I was told about connections being made, positive and empowering feedback that the actors received from the audience, but also an uncertainty about whether their message was received. Don told me that once the play was over and the audience members were clapping he did not think they had understood the message of the play in the way that he was hoping. He thought they would be more somber and that the energy wouldn't be as excited and celebratory as it was. He said that he had felt some seriousness, and sadness from the audience during the performance, and talking to people afterwards, but not as much as he thought he would sense.

Alexis shared a similar concern to Don and also said that she wished that there were calmer places for the performers to talk to the audience so that 'we can see if they actually got it'. Aside from Plastow and McQaid, previous research does not offer any insight to similar uncertainties by participants (2017:968, 2015:123). Alexis described the aftermath of the big performances as overwhelming, and hectic with lots of people wanting to talk to performers. I asked her how she would want it to be different and she explained that another structure, or

space might be more constructive for a more meaningful dialogue. She reminded me of the workshops that we had held after performances when they were performing in Michigan. During a workshop Alexis thought there could be a deeper understanding of the issues, and that it would be more clear how people with different experiences could be involved in creating a change.

Alexis's comment is similar to what Cassia said earlier, that by creatively working together on a scene there can be a connection to it without everyone having shared the experiences portrayed. In Plastow's research, she found the theater projects did lead to opportunities for development and change for the participants in the project, herself included (2015:123). She recognized that this was done by engaging and keeping with the process and praxis of continuous reflection and action. I find that unless there is an opportunity for the audience to creatively engage, they might not be able to connect in the ways that performers wish.

Sharing Your Story and Moving On

Steffen's (2013:197-200) research on people using spiritual healing to navigate daily life can be comparable to how participants of MIO describe their use of theater for individual development. In her research, Steffen found that the practice can offer a tool to navigate emotionally internalized experiences, which is what Yonas told me that the performances allowed him to do. He said that 'it felt good to show what is inside of me.' Adam told me that the performance allowed for him to express things he normally wouldn't say. Steffen (2013:197-200) observes that even though the practice is at first an individual activity, it is often done in group and therefore the social relationships become a part of the tool and the progression of it. Plastow makes a similar observation, describing both individual and collective development through her projects (2015:123). She recognized that the two would be entwined and Ahmed voiced a similar observation. He said that if it weren't for MIO, he probably wouldn't be where he is today, seven years later. He explained that by feeling seen and heard by both individual facilitators, but also a group of peers, he started to work with MIO, and theater. Steffen found that people used both the practices and relationships in an ongoing process to navigate daily life (2013:198). Kiya described how the theater had done that for her:

Kiya: I have a second second look on things, before I just kind of acted on them

Sofia: Yeah?

Kiya: And now I, like, take that second to step back and ask myself questions...

Sofia: ... and you connect that with some of the work you've done with *Maine Inside Out*?

Kiya: Yep. Some of the, like, the tools that we use in group.

Don explained one of the tools to me. He said that the theater allowed him to look closer at situations to see things that might have been avoided. He talked about his scene that was based on his experience with the cop coming up to him and his girlfriend. He said that by staging the situation through sculptures with MIO, it allowed him to see that if the cop had kept going it would have been very different. This is the potential of theater that Boal (2002:6) describes, by looking at situations again the performer can create different outcomes. As mentioned before, Eastmond states that the shaping of stories is affected by both past and present (2007:254-255). She also describes that a person telling their story can do so in regards to their imagined future. Don explained how he found the theater work enabling him to see things he previously had not: ‘ that there's a lot of different perspectives to every story and you can start to realize that when you do it in slow motion. ’

Mark and I were driving into Portland and he had just told me about what it had been like to perform his scene. After some directions on which exit to use to get to his brothers' house, I asked him:

Sofia: So bigger picture question...what does it mean?

You're telling your story right?

Mark: Of course,

I'm sharing a chapter in my book (i.e. his life)

Sofia: What does that do to you?

Mark: It helps my writers block, my book is not done, it's not even close to being finished. Doing this play, getting out there.... it really just sets a whole new chapter in my book that I can write about.

The ability to move on after performing their story was voiced by several other participants in addition to Mark. Don told me that there was no point in dwelling on something that had already happened, but that he could talk about. He said that it felt good to share and that part of it was for his own mental health. Both Rodriguez (2006:1069) and Eastmond (2007:251) describe the ability of storytelling to allow the person sharing their story to heal and find ways to move on. The performance is a large component of the MIO process, and on an individual level the performance seems to mean more for the performer than the audience. Collectively though, the performance seems to allow a powerful sense of recognition and empowerment.

Concluding Remarks

Inspired by the ability of ethnography to capture a glimpse of what it is like to share your story through an original theater performance, I started my research. I sought to explore how young people impacted by incarceration experience sharing their own life stories in order to create a play. By using the theoretical framework of storytelling in the sense of Eastmond's (2007) usage, I am able to illustrate how stories of lived experiences are organized and shared individually, and collectively.

Through interviews, observations and my previous experience working with MIO I was able to interact with participants and facilitators as they were preparing for their original theater performance. By conducting interviews, I was able to further hear about the process of making a performance based on the participants' lived experiences. The performance offered an event rich with complexities of multiple expectations and outcomes. The creative process and praxis of creating the performance revealed several processes embedded in the act of storytelling.

Continuous engagement and long term relationships are essential for a researcher to be able to fully understand the complexities of working with stories of lived experience. This became apparent through my own experience as well as previous research. I found that previous research was more often focused on the outcome of one performance, rather than the long term process of understanding the experience of creating the performance. It was helpful to counter my findings to previous research in order to outline tendencies and similarities in a global context.

Through my theoretical framework I was able to distinguish three processes that storytelling in the work of MIO encompasses. The first one being the initial sharing of one individual story where the storyteller seeks a space to be heard, seen and recognized. The second process, that often happens simultaneously when MIO works to create a play, is the recognition from other group members leading to the shaping of a collective story and identity. The third process is the performers expectation of the audience and this in turn shapes how the story is told onstage.

According to Eastmond (2007), sharing a life story is always a creation and needs to be understood in regards to what is around the storyteller. The relationships that the participants have with each other as they work together are an essential aspect of how the story is told. Participants described that a sense of belonging and hearing recognition from other participants encouraged them to engage in the theater work. By allowing similar experiences to be embedded in each others stories they created a collective identity that was represented through the performances they created. By using Steffen's research (2013) on an integrated approach to looking at spiritual healing I was able to further explain the continuous effects to theater work that many participants voiced. The relationships and the collective identity contributed to participants feeling supported. Many explained that the theater work had allowed for them to look at other aspects of their daily life differently. Steffen's perspective illuminates that people seeking certain practices for one reason often find their personal outcomes in other ways, in this case using theater tools to approach situations in daily life differently.

The three processes display the intricacies of individual and collective work, shaping lived experiences into performative scenes. Even though there is a strong sense of collective identity, the work itself means different things on an individual level. This is where the multiple expectations for the performances become revealed, as individuals expressed hopes of outcome to support their subjective needs and reasons for sharing their story. There was also a strong sense of collective expectations, some of these elevated by the responsibility of representation for those who were still incarcerated.

As each performance was followed by a dialogue, or a space for performers and audience to meet, there were several informants that voiced a connection being felt between the and audience members. To understand the connections that participants voiced being created with the audience, I chose to draw upon aspects of Turner's (1967) theory of *communitas*. His theory offers parallels to what informants describe, but doesn't fully apply. To nuance the discussion of the effect of the theater on its audience, I found it helpful to turn to Wittrock's (2011) usage of *affected*. If one were to continue research on this topic it would be interesting to incorporate responses from the audience. That would show if these perspectives are

applicable to the sensation that the participants described, or if there are more aspects that need to be taken into consideration.

Can theater projects offer a shift in how we choose to listen to marginalized people? I asked this question as I explored my thesis purpose and still find it relevant and interesting. To fully answer it I find the need for more research to be done as there are many dimensions of this work that I was not able to discuss in further detail. A continued examination of the entwined processes of individual and collective storytelling in regards to people with lived experience from the impact of incarceration is needed. An interesting aspect would be to further dissect the impact of contained environments on a play creation process and gender. Further it would be interesting to incorporate a nuanced measuring of impact that would include subjective experiences of both participants, facilitators and audience members in contained environments versus out in the community. A study that could incorporate a more detailed perspective of power could provide insightful results to broaden the discussion of theater done this way.

The overall research question for this thesis was to see if, and if so, how young people with lived experience of incarceration feel that they are able to create a collective story through theater performances that is being recognized by society. I found that the theater provided a space to make invisible stories visible. The creative approach allowed for young people to resist external bureaucratic descriptions from the juvenile and criminal justice system, as well as to counter the prejudice they had previously received. Participants voiced that they felt empowered and in control of their own life by the work they did through the theater and that this enabled them to continue on, beyond the label that had been placed on them.

During the last scene of the performance Mark says:

‘ I am my past, but I am also my future. If only they knew that I did change ‘

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