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### **DRAMA, ROLE THEORY, AND YOUTH: IMPLICATIONS FOR TEACHER EDUCATION**

This paper examines the music/performances of popular Rap artist Eminem to discuss the way that role theory, as developed by Jacob Moreno through his work in psychodrama, is reflected in Judith Butler and Debra Britzman's poststructuralist conceptions of identity. Role theory has exciting implications for teacher education—both for teachers doing drama with youth and for student teachers engaged in developing their roles as teachers. Performative explorations, through which spaces are opened for creative agency and the negotiation of identities, can become empowering occasions.

*Cet article porte sur la musique et la performance du populaire musicien rappeur Eminem; il est sous-tendu par la théorie du jeu de rôle comme l'a développée Jacob Moreno dans son travail portant sur le psychodrame et sur lequel ont réfléchi Judith Butler et Debra Britzman dans une perspective post-structuraliste de l'identité. La théorie du jeu de rôle comporte des avenues intéressantes aussi bien pour les enseignants d'art dramatique auprès des jeunes que pour les étudiants en formation universitaire découvrant leur rôle de futurs enseignants. Des explorations théâtrales ouvrant à des espaces de création et de négociation identitaire favorisent la responsabilisation de chacun.*



If “to be or not to be” is the question,  
then “to be *and* not to be”  
—to me the most succinct conception of performance—  
might be the answer. (Fabian 179)

A popular theatre project I facilitated in 2000 with a group of Rural Alberta high school students for my doctoral research led me to re-think the label “at-risk” to include the perspectives of youth. The youth with whom I worked, the majority of whom were of Aboriginal descent, talked about choosing to engage in risky activities—the kinds of activities that commonly deemed them “at-risk”—for their own enjoyment, “for the rush,” and/or in resis-

tance to the expectations of the school and society. I used theoretical ideas taken from Schechner's performance theory, Prentki and Selman's discussion on popular theatre, Augusto Boal's *Theatre of the Oppressed*, and Jacob Moreno's first volume on psychodrama to make a case for drama education as a site for youth to think beyond roles prescribed for them—such as those defined by the label “at-risk” (Conrad, “Rethinking”).

A more recent popular theatre-based study I conducted with a group of incarcerated boys at an Alberta young offender facility in 2003 challenged me to think further about the value of role theory in drama education (Conrad and Campbell). This paper examines the music/performances of Eminem to discuss the way that role theory, as developed by Jacob Moreno through his work in psychodrama, is reflected in contemporary poststructuralist conceptions of identity. Role theory has exciting implications for teacher education—both for teachers doing drama with youth and for student teachers engaged in developing their own roles as teachers.

Since his first hit album in 1999, Eminem's music—his obscene lyrics, offensive subject matter (including reference to abuse of women, rape, drugs, violence, and homophobia), and his vitriolic style—has stirred much controversy, but also won him much acclaim. Eminem's work is recognized as compelling by both his supporters and his critics.

The incarcerated boys in my study identified Eminem as one of their favourite artists—citing his music as relevant to their life experiences. Specifically a song entitled “Guilty Conscience,” they said, spoke to their current life circumstances. The music video of “Guilty Conscience” depicts individuals in ethical dilemmas—just about to commit a crime. The video uses filmic special effects to freeze the action and insert devil (played by Eminem) and angel (played by his musical mentor Dr. Dre) characters debating the consequences of the crime. The angel/devil technique, used to explore a moment of decision-making, is one that I use often in my issues-based drama education work with youth. That Eminem used this same performative strategy encouraged a closer look. I have since come to appreciate Eminem's music for what it has to say, how he says it, and for its appeal to youth.

True to the genre of Rap music, known for telling stories that reflect “the truth about people's lives” (Sciabarra, par. 9)—much of Eminem's work is autobiographical in nature. In relation to the youth with whom I was working, Eminem's portrayal of growing up a typical “at-risk” youth was resonant. His song entitled “My Name Is” talks about growing up poor in a single parent family,

about his father having abandoned them, about his feelings of being betrayed by his father and by his mother too for lying to him about her drug use, about failing and “acting out” at school, about a suicide attempt at age twelve, about drinking and driving, and so on. Similarly Eminem’s movie *8 Mile*, based on his life story and rise to fame, paints a bleak picture of a risky lifestyle involving drug use and violence in his struggles with his music. His song “Brain Damage” talks about being bullied at school. Other songs of his allude to violent relationships with his ex-wife and his mother. The deeply disturbing content and crude language portray the realities of life and the destructive feelings they engender, without glorifying or romanticizing them. If one can get past the offensiveness of Eminem’s music, it is precisely the absence of any moralizing, I would argue, something to which, in my experience, youth respond with resistance, that offers possibilities. The underlying implication of his music, Sciabarra agrees, is a message to youth that “you have the volitional power to change your life” (par 10).

The “message” of Eminem’s music, the autobiographical “truths” that it tells interest me, but what I have come to find equally intriguing about Eminem as an artist is the way he performs identity. Eminem, born Marshall Mathers, is well known for vocally portraying a series of personas in his music and taking on these characters in his live performances and music videos. In “My Name Is” Eminem introduces a character who appears in many of his other songs—an alter ego named Slim Shady. The character of Slim Shady apparently emerged early in Eminem’s music career, after two failed albums and a suicide attempt. In his book *Angry Blonde*, Eminem claims that Slim Shady became a means for him to dump his feelings—his rage, dark humour, pain, as well as his happiness (qtd in Sciabarra, par. 4). He made use of this character as a therapeutic outlet. On the cover flap of *Angry Blonde*, Eminem states that “This book is made by Slim Shady, from the mind of Marshall Mathers, as seen from Eminem’s point of view. Got it?” In the music video of “The Real Slim Shady” Eminem performs with numerous young males in the background all made up as exact replicas of himself as Slim Shady in short bleached-blond hair and white T-shirt. Eminem uses the song to disrupt simplistic depictions of his identity as highlighted in the entertainment media. When Eminem was accused of homophobia based on some of his derogatory lyrics, engendering highly controversial responses to his work, yet another persona emerged to talk back to his dissenters. Ken Kaniff, a gay character portrayed in a relationship with Eminem, appears as a title character in songs

on two albums. Eminem simultaneously identifies with and distances himself from the characters in his songs, claiming that their words do not necessarily represent his own beliefs.

What I find intriguing is not only that Eminem creates and plays out these characters, including the ways in which the characters are both, at the same time, him (telling his autobiographical truth) and not him (as portrayed through various contradictory persona) (Schechner 123), but also the ways he manoeuvres the selves/not-selves to interact with each other and his “real” self. And so, I am left asking, “Who is the real Eminem? And why should drama educators care?” In the theoretical discussion that follows I address these questions. My aim, by linking identity, role play, and Eminem’s performances, is not to trivialize the process of identity negotiation, but to seek out the subversive potential in its performativity.

Role theory, applied widely in sociology and social psychology, originated with Jacob L. Moreno in his work in psychodrama in the 1920s and 1930s in Vienna and New York. In summing up the essence of role theory in his book *Psychodrama: First Volume*, Moreno says, “Role playing is prior to the emergence of the self. Roles do not emerge from the self, but the self emerges from roles” (ii). Contrary to our common conceptions of self, Moreno suggests that our sense of self comes out of the roles that we play. This realization, in my opinion, has profound implications for how we choose to live in the world.

Role theory suggests that in our day-to-day lives we play many different roles: the roles of friend, employee, son or daughter, mother or father, teacher, student, and numerous others. In our presentation of ourselves in these roles we are engaged in a continuous process of defining, constructing, and enacting roles based on our inner desires as well as external expectations—involving considerable psychic investments. Role-play activities used in education, psychodrama, and therapeutic contexts emphasize that the numerous roles in our role repertoire help us to meet our basic needs and function successfully by offering various strategies from which to choose in various situations. An understanding of role theory, then, is valuable in heightening one’s level of awareness of the process of presentation of self. In drama education, I would suggest, role-play can be a means of nurturing and strategizing a sense of self.

In his drama therapy work with offenders or prison inmates, Clark Baim believes that “we can use the concept of roles and the language of drama to help us understand the factors influencing

who becomes a habitual offender and how he might, if so inclined, leave behind such a destructive role” (142). If all the world’s a stage, Baim proposes, drama can help the offenders to re-write the script and the roles that they choose to play in it (145).

Psychotherapist Adam Blatner, in *Acting-in: Practical Applications of Psychodramatic Methods*, describes the power of role-play originating in the integration of cognitive analysis with experiential, emotional, and participatory involvement. In the dramatic context, the act of embodying a role generates “role distance” allowing the actors to step back, figuratively, and witness their own performances, evoking the capacity for critical self-reflection and insight (xiv). Blatner recommends application of psychodramatic techniques in education to help youth explore their feelings and attitudes, complex life issues, or interpersonal conflicts through the context of role-play or sociodrama. Blatner, along with many other drama specialists, claims that working through drama allows individuals to step back as playwright or director to consider how else a scenario might be played out (150). This meta-cognitive level of awareness encourages reflection on behaviours and assumptions motivating actions, gives youth insight into the various complex parts of themselves, validates their sense of who they are, increases their sense of having choice in their lives, develops empathy, helps youth expand their role repertoires—their capacity to perform a variety of roles that balance and complement each other, giving them more flexibility in playing out these roles in life (129-30).

Similar to role theory, poststructuralist notions of identity as described by feminist theorist Judith Butler and teacher educator Debora Britzman suggest that identity is performative but not essentially done by a performer. As Butler describes, “there need not be a ‘doer’ behind the deed, [rather] the ‘doer’ is variably reconstructed in and through the deed” (181). Butler’s suggestion that the subject is an effect of the performance echoes Moreno’s notion that the self emerges from roles (ii). These poststructuralist understandings of identity can enhance and support our thinking about the Moreno-based role play activities.

In her discussion of teacher identity, Britzman de-centres conventional notions of identity as intuitive self-knowledge based on experience; we create who we are and who we can become through the practices of discourse. She says, “Experience does not ‘tell’ us who we are or what we see: we are the tellers of experience” (26). Identity is constrained by the practices of discourse, social structures, and history, but also subject to creative agency.

Britzman has witnessed, as I have too, student teachers struggle to negotiate the normative expectations of the role of teacher that conflict with their desires to become teachers; what society expects teachers to be does not always coincide with how young teachers see themselves. Britzman believes that “if we can help future teachers theorize about the politics of identity, they may be better able to theorize about their own struggles in the delicate process of becoming [a teacher]” (43). When I introduced my poststructuralist understandings of role theory to students in a recent drama teacher education class, the response was one of relief—a release from a rigid conception of “teacher.” In the process of learning to become teachers, I encouraged them to experiment with the role of teacher—to step in and out of, to experiment with power/authority, and to become aware of the internal and external expectations associated with the role.

In discussing the construction and deconstruction of gender identities in *Gender Trouble*, Butler describes identity as the effects of “rule-bound discourse” played out through stylized repetition of “signifying acts” in our day-to-day lives (184). If gender is performative, then there is no true or real gender, no true identity. Identity, reconceptualized in this way, says Butler, opens up “agency” through “the possibility of a variation on that repetition” (185).

Butler uses drag as an example of performance of gender with subversive potential. She describes drag as a double inversion where the feminine appearance is an illusion disguising the masculine “outside” and at the same time symbolizing the feminine “inside”—a parody of the very notion of an original or true gender. “In imitating gender,” says Butler, “drag implicitly reveals the imitative structure of gender itself” (175). As such she sees gender as an act “that is open to splittings, self-parody, self-criticism, and those hyperbolic exhibitions of ‘the natural’ that, in their very exaggeration, reveal its fundamentally phatasmatic status” (187).

So, who is the real Eminem? And why does it matter? Eminem’s performances of identity, I would suggest, are not so different from the performances of drag that Butler describes. Playing with identity, as Eminem does, and the subversive laughter it engenders reveals the imitative structure of identity itself and opens spaces for questioning how we live in the world—spaces for critical self-reflexivity and resistance. For Britzman, the poststructuralist notion of identity produces a contradictory space for negotiating identities that have the potential both for legitimizing

existing designs and for resisting the way things are. “Critical self-understanding,” she insists, “depends upon a persistent interrogation of one’s own deep investments in, resistances to, and desires to challenge the status quo” (28). In this way negotiating identity can be, at the same time, a construction and a socially empowering occasion.

Butler too believes that the subversive laughter in certain kinds of performative pastiche or parody, such as drag, that show even the “original” to be an effect, can be effectively disruptive or troubling against repetitions that are “domesticated and recirculated as instruments of cultural hegemony” (177). For Butler, “the critical task is [. . .] to locate strategies of subversive repetition enabled by those constructions [of identity], to affirm the local possibilities of intervention through participating in precisely those practices of repetition that constitute identity and, therefore, present the immanent possibility of contesting them” (188).

Contrarily, Jan Jagodzinski, in his book *Youth Fantasies*, complains that poststructuralism’s multiple and shifting identities are the perfect sites for exploitation by designer capitalism (103). The poststructuralist subject, he claims, is “capable of consuming more by being a composite of different ‘selves’ or ‘masks.’ One can ‘wear’ the *self* one wants by constructing a ‘lifestyle’ of choice regardless of class, color, gender through clothes, coded jargon, leisure activities, food preferences, sexual preferences, and so on” (105, italics in original). In this way capitalism has appropriated identity as a commodity, it is true, but even so, Jagodzinski leaves space for hope. In his study of the perverse landscape of the media, he cites Eminem as an example of a contemporary artist who “utilize[s] an a.k.a. and a split mirror of an alter ego to provide a critical distance for self-reflection” (106). Even the outrage against Eminem’s homophobic lyrics and his irreconciliatory response, I would suggest, provide sites for important dialogue.

It is in light of these poststructuralist notions of identity—these contradictory spaces of easy cooption by designer capitalism towards its ends, yet with the potential for critical self-reflection and subversive action—that Moreno’s role theory and psychodramatic methods take on particular relevance in working with youth in the twenty-first century. Understanding role theory through poststructuralism provides methods that open space for dialogue to acknowledge the complexity of issues and avoid constructing simplistic binaries. Drama education, I propose, offers unique opportunities for performativity—for a process of constructing and re-constructing roles and identities and a critical self-reflec-

tion upon those roles towards alternative ends. In drama education, borrowing Britzman's sentiment, we can "celebrate our capacities for creative action" (43).

In my work with the incarcerated youth, engaging in role-play and sociodrama activities allowed such opportunities for critical self-reflection and performative resistance. For example, in acting out fictionalized experiences similar to those the boys said they commonly encountered on the "outs," one youth, when accused of wasting his life on drugs, was able to confront his father about his father's own drug use, exposing the hypocrisy of the situation. In another scenario the youth enacted the managing of interpersonal conflict that arose during competing gang-related activity. They avoided a fight and in the process revealed an underlying ethics shared by the group. In another role play the boys expressed their understandings of the dangers of crystal meth and their sincere concern for their younger siblings' potential future involvement with the drug. In an activity exploring the consequences of criminal action the boys were able to work through possible outcomes of a crime, including outcomes for the victims of the crime, and decide for themselves whether or not it was defensible. In a sociodrama exploring goals for the future, the youth were able to enact the contingencies involved in overcoming an addiction, nurturing a love relationship, graduating from school, and starting a career. As part of this scenario, the role play gave rise to a candid conversation, initiated and sustained by the youth themselves, about violence against women in which opposing opinions were voiced and heard within the peer group. These opportunities to embody roles that potentially could be them was a step towards aiding the youth in the process of re-constructing their identities as other than criminal or deviant.

In the drama classroom, understandings of role theory and poststructuralist notions of identity have the potential for contributing to Freire-inspired pedagogical approaches where the students (as students/teachers) and the teacher (as teacher/student) enter into dialogic relationship. Performative explorations, through which spaces are opened for creative agency and the negotiation of identities, can become empowering occasions. Together, the perspectives of youth and the development of the drama educator can be experienced as a process of becoming.





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