Building Coalitional Spaces in Lois Weaver's Performance Pedagogy

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In Betty Sasaki's 2002 article, "Toward a Pedagogy of Coalition," she explicitly decries discourses of consensus, particularly those constructed by family metaphors that portray multiculturalism on the liberal arts university campus. For example, Sasaki cites materials distributed by her university that present its multicultural "differences" as all part of its "happy family." Discourses that create seamless narrative subsume difference and assume stable identities, excluding contradictory identities like Sasaki's biracial one. More importantly, such institutional narratives inhibit classroom interactions; students self-censor to avoid conflict and erase differences within the group. Sasaki calls instead for a "pedagogy of coalition" that builds alliances while encouraging students to recognize the multiple contradictions that exist within their own subjectivity, as well as the contradictory positions among class members that are not easily reconciled.

> Because a pedagogy of coalition aims to engage critical discussion of difference outside the purely moral and personal/private domain, it challenges the institutional narrative of good citizenship. One's standing as a member of a coalitional community is determined not only by the risks we take in claiming our difference, but more importantly, by the ways in which we negotiate those claims in relationship to the differences of others. (41)

For Sasaki, the classroom becomes a site where students can contest dominant narratives, as well as each other's, as they discover new ways of relating to one another outside of a merely personal realm. Sasaki emphasizes that students must be able to recognize their own contradictory natures and hybrid identities in order to effectively negotiate their identity among others. The process of claiming and negotiating difference is integral to the formation of the self and the coalition; nowhere is this more evident than in collectively created performance.

For this reason, Lois Weaver's performance pedagogy, which includes her teaching residencies at various universities,[1] is particularly relevant to an examination of how complex identities and difference may be negotiated through performance. In the late 1990s, I worked with Weaver to conceive and produce a residency at the College of William and Mary, a moderate-sized "public ivy" liberal arts school. While William and Mary was consciously working on its identity in relationship to race, other identities—particularly those of queer and working-class students—had been almost completely suppressed in the curriculum and in campus life. We planned a collectively generated performance piece around "the Southern Voice" that explored the style of Southern gothic literature and themes of regionalism and identity. As the producer of the residency and assistant director for the production, I participated in and documented the entire workshop and rehearsal process.

In a liberal arts theatre department that focused primarily on the study of canonical theatre, the Southern Voice project was a radical departure from the regular curriculum. The rehearsal process was guided by a feminist ethic that required students to embrace the uniqueness of their identity on multiple levels that included regional identity, class, sexuality, gender, religion, and race. Such a focus on the personal autobiography of students is always a risky undertaking, particularly in institutional environments in which students many times are trying to transcend specific markers of identity. Weaver's performance pedagogy speaks to a complex understanding of feminist identity that balances individual voices within group creation. Guiding concepts such as "multiple-choice acting," "the layered character," and "improvisation in space" allowed Weaver to construct a coalitional space in which ensemble members engaged conflict and contradiction in productive ways that underlined the fluidity of their identities as they created a jointly authored representation.

A unique aspect of Weaver's work is her ability to preserve the individuality of actors' voices in the exploration of the intersection of their identities, all while critiquing dominant culture. In *Whose Improv Is It Anyway?*, Amy Seham points out that in striving for a "group mind," many performance improv traditions wind up stifling the voices of minorities in pursuit of a unity and flow in the creative process, inadvertently resulting "in the naturalization of mainstream values, forced conformity . . . especially along the lines of gender and race" (64). Despite such drawbacks, improvisation is still an important collaborative structure for jointly authoring group performance. Consensus (or unanimous decision making through mutual agreement) has been another important ideal guiding collectively created work. Also an important concept to second wave feminism, consensus has been critiqued by recent feminist theorists who, instead of emphasizing agreement, value conflict and difference and theorize ways to maintain distinct identities while forging alliances.[2]

When employing such concepts as improvisation and consensus, feminist directors are faced with a dilemma: how does one provide structures for creating collaborative work without reinforcing dominant values or coercing minority voices? Can such work engage different identities, preserving their unique voices and lived experiences, incorporating contradiction and dissent, all while creating a meaningful piece of theatre that is jointly authored by the ensemble? Weaver's performance pedagogy engages multiple levels of contradiction and conflict that underline unique identities and value lived experience, while also requiring student performers to engage each other's identities. Sasaki provides an insightful way of valuing Weaver's work in this residency as complex feminist pedagogy as well as original performance pedagogy. The push for diversity at liberal arts campuses has only intensified since the late 1990s; this project reveals some of the complexities, rewards, and difficulties of deeply engaging difference and identity through devised performance.

In examining the importance of coalition as a collaborative model, I also borrow metaphors that describe the "coalitional space" (Reagon) or the "space of authoring" (Bahktin). Sasaki cites Bernice Johnson Reagon's insight that "coalition work is not done in your home" (Sasaki 37). Instead, one has to leave the safety of home in order to forge a coalitional space that is in opposition to the narratives of dominant culture, yet relational in maintaining critical bonds to others (39). Sasaki notes that not all students are prepared to engage such a rigorous examination of identity that could lead to conflict. Similarly, Weaver's

residency was marked by important failures that reveal the messiness and the limits of sometimes painful coalition work.

The performance was created through student enrollment in a three-credit-hour class. The composition of the fourteen-person class/cast included one person of color, five women, and nine men, four of whom were openly gay. Three of the students had a rural Southern working-class heritage much like Weaver's, who had grown up outside of Roanoke, Virginia. Her position as a Southern working-class white lesbian strongly informed her approach to the material we were reading.[3] Along with regional identity, sexuality, gender, race, and class, religious faith would also become another significant identity factor as the rehearsal process deepened.

Weaver's course syllabus objectives explained:

> Place—where we were born, where we grew up, where we work and perform—influences the things we say and how we say them. This course will investigate the effect of "region" on "voice." In particular we will be looking at the literature of the southern United States and how that atmosphere produced work that has been described as "gothic," "grotesque," "informed by a beautiful brutality," and "concerned with the sense of the awful." We will also look at our own regions and experiences particularly around the issues of gender, sexuality and race, and [how these] might intersect with some of the images found in this literature . . . ("Theatre 479")

Students began by reading various selections from Southern authors like Tennessee Williams, Carson McCullers, William Faulkner, Eudora Welty, Flannery O'Conner, and Zora Neal Hurston. Each two-hour class session began with five to ten minutes of free writing that sprang from the themes of the literature or delved into autobiography.[4] The bulk of the class sessions were spent engaging in performance exercises that explored impulse and movement, ensemble work, and character development. Many class sessions produced short performances, character sketches, or monologues through the improvised exercises. Each student kept a journal recording these class experiences and developed other writing and research ideas. Weaver began the process with many themes, characters, and passages of text from the literature in mind as stimuli to structure writing assignments. As she found intersections between student themes, she guided them toward particular motifs such as those described in the syllabus objectives stated above. The framework for the performance began to develop from exercises designed to bring about collaboration through the students' creation of character and place.

The culminating performance from Weaver's residency, "Be Nice or Leave: A Performance Piece on 'the Southern Voice'," depicted a collection of misfit characters that formed a unique community. Inspired by Tennessee Williams's *Camino Real* and representations of community in Carson McCullers's *Ballad of the Sad Café*, a performance environment was created throughout the rehearsal process that became a surreal and bizarrely distorted Southern town square. The department agreed that Weaver would create a studio production that would not be considered part of the main stage season. Since the scene shop could offer no technical support, Weaver and I chose instead to partner with visual arts Professor Mark Iwinski, a sculptor who was interested in performance art; four of his art students eventually became members of our ensemble.

This approach suited Weaver's process well, as she constantly re-enforced the importance of ensemble members contributing to the physical as well as meta-phorical "coalition space." While the town square was a site for public interaction and community, it was also a place for revealing secrets. Audience members watched a day in the life of the town as they witnessed overlapping, partial, and fragmented scenes that crossed through the town square. Identities literally and metaphorically bumped into each other in this place as characters explored the friction between their desires. Each character was driven by or was chasing a particular desire, addressing themes such as love, death, sex, and acceptance. Several scenes portrayed conflicts between an outsider and an insider to this community. The arc of the show led to bringing this diverse community together as certain power dynamics were reversed or transformed through their interactions.

Rich with references to popular culture, Southern literature, and autobiography, the production was also densely layered with performance languages that utilized text, music, gesture, props, costumes, and the physical environment. The overall performance resisted any traditional standards of literary or dramatic coherence, an important condition necessary to create a pedagogy of coalition that valued and inspired the individual voices of creativity in each of the ensemble members. Instead of a literary coherence, the performance was united by the shared physical environment that was woven together from a process that utilized the themes around regional voice to find a balance between community members' different experiences.

Multiple-choice Acting: A Foundation for Embodying Agency

In working with this group of students who had various levels of performance experience, Weaver quickly introduced them to basic performance skills while she also was preparing them to write and create layered characters. Influenced by her early training with Open Theater and Spiderwoman,[5] Weaver utilized sound and movement exercises that required the actor to spontaneously externalize an impulse into a nonliteral combination of physical gesture and sound that could be repeated. For example, with a rhythmic twisting gesture, an actor adds a nonverbal sound like "chuggah chuggah," and ensemble members rhythmically repeat with the performer until another actor takes up the impulse and creates a new one. Derivations of these exercises were combined with partner work, movement through space, and ensemble development. Not only did such work build skills in concentration, listening, and spontaneous reactions, it also prepared the students for work built upon discreet impulses that resisted continuity, explored contradiction, and worked beyond verbal language. These principles allowed Weaver to coach students to make active choices that could be unpredictable and associative, putting the actor at the center of the creative process. Explaining what she calls a "multiple-choice" approach to acting, Weaver elaborates on her approach:

> You stand in the middle of a pie and in that moment, you have lots of choices. One of them could be an intention, an "I want to," or an action, but it could also be a physical impulse or an image that doesn't necessarily relate to that moment. You . . . work from that to create moment-to-moment acting by being responsive to moment-to-moment stimulus, some coming

    from the associative side of your brain. . . .You use the body as a resource,
    so that you can work through impulse to find a character. (Stroppel 17)

To expand upon these "pieces of the pie," performers employ their creative agency to choose which stimuli to draw from in any given moment: for example, from the external physical environment, sensory perceptions, internal physical or emotional feelings, memory, text, or the ensemble. Such a form of improvisation draws upon the body and the environment as resources and eschews narrative structures that can create conditioned cause-and-effect responses. This technique is also significant for a pedagogy of coalition because it emphasizes contradiction and multiplicity as it calls attention to the absence of a coherent psychology in moment-to-moment interactions. It allowed Weaver to underline for students the multiplicity of their desires and to allow them to explore a range of choice as they acted upon these desires.

    As a foundation laid before creating a layered character and staging the script in space, multiple-choice acting was also a means for exploring the boundaries of identity as played out within the body. Recognizing that we are all inscribed by cultural texts and personal habits that reveal our history and social position, Weaver's work does not attempt to transcend the cultural specificity of the body but provides an opportunity to explore, challenge, and/or embrace those boundaries. Cultural theorists such as Pierre Bourdieu describe these culturally inscribed gestures and behavior as "habitus," or significations that provide an index to our social positions (Holland et al. 17–18). Augusto Boal refers to a similar process of negotiating this cultural inscription as "demechanization." Through his exercises, Boal explains how, "in the act of trying to reproduce someone else's way of moving, singing, etc., we begin to undo our own mechanisations" (89). Similarly, one example from Weaver's multiple-choice acting work showed how a body's particular history can be brought into collision with the present moment and with a shared place within the ensemble's community.

    Through the multiple-choice approach to acting in the Southern Voice project, Weaver developed the inner voice of each actor by alternating free writing assignments with the sound and movement improvisations that moved participants outside the boundaries of their bodies and their habitus. Students performed sound and movement impulses, passing them around the circle, repeating them after one another, achieving a spontaneous nonverbal impulse while remaining connected and focused within the ensemble. As students became more comfortable with the exercise, habitual physical patterns naturally began to emerge. Weaver challenged students' comfort zones by asking them to perform the exercise as if they were in the body of another ensemble member, taking on another group member's impulse pattern that seemed to be the opposite of their own. It is important to note that they were not imitating particular impulses or people, only approximating gestural patterns.

    The resulting exercise raised the actor's awareness of movement patterns within the ensemble, but it was not a game in guessing and identifying one's own pattern on another actor's body. Instead, the recognition came from the interior experience of the process of taking on another's body. Inevitably, stereotypical ways of moving emerged; students could compare and contrast their own impulses with others, examining how they related to the stereotypical movement patterns. For example, a female student saw how her impulses were shaped by years of dance training, creating a gender-specific range of move-

ment. A student of color discovered that his impulses had been restrained and self-conscious, compared to other student's impulses which he could take on without inhibition. The use of another's movement vocabulary became a mask that released certain inhibitions. When reflecting on this exercise after a session, Weaver insisted that students use language that was descriptive and nonjudgmental. Students began to locate their place within the ensemble and within cultural movement stereotypes as they described the movements using language that did not denigrate those same stereotypes.[6]

Paradoxically, by marking the limits of the performer's body, Weaver's exercise encouraged performers to extend beyond the boundaries of their bodies. By learning to see ingrained patterns, the performer could consciously choose either to transgress them or more fully embrace and inhabit them. The exercise was a step toward the process of creating risk-taking performance that shattered social taboos, and it later cycled back to inform the multilayered characters that students created. In moving toward a pedagogy of coalition, it made students aware of the differences among them, those differences that related to both embodied experiences and different physical talents or styles of moving. Weaver broke down boundaries between unified subjects in these exercises, since the dynamic between the individual and the group becomes a defining factor in character creation. An early step in demonstrating to students that they had self-imposed limitations, Weaver's multiple-choice approach emphasized that her process of theatre making was an opportunity to play with boundaries and contradictions, exploring the self/group relationship.

Layered Character: Destabilizing Subjectivity

Like much of Split Britches' style, Weaver's approach to character can be traced back to their first performance, *Split Britches*. Weaver explains her fascination with layers as a mode of creating characters. When researching this performance about her great-aunts who lived in the isolation of the Blue Ridge Mountains, she noticed a pattern of layering: "What is it about women who isolate themselves from a masculine influence . . . what is it about that that makes them want to put on layers and layers of clothes?" (Interview).[7] When creating character, the act of layering identities, like the act of dressing, becomes Weaver's central metaphor and a means of underlining the contradictions of a feminist subject. Layering is a postmodern strategy that becomes a means of mediating between internal subjectivity and social constructions. It allows the actor to engage a dialogical process, examining both "me" and "not me" within the context of a field of cultural representation. Rather than uncritically accepting such cultural representations, the layering allows a critical distance that provides opportunities to contradict, critique, or consciously embrace stereotypes or popular culture. In this respect, the actor/creators of performance art are always in dialogue with cultural phantoms as they discover and position the self in relationship to cultural languages that are used as vehicles to express that self. Weaver's layered characters crack open this principle by extracting and distinguishing layers of meaning, explicitly referencing their cultural origins, and putting these layers in a dialogic juxtaposition with one another in the Brechtian tradition. Without denying the authenticity of the self and lived experience, the use of layers complicates expressions of identity and character, making it possible to explore the process of identity construction and intersections of identity.

Weaver stresses that she strives never to lose "the personality of the . . . performer in the character. You're able to see both" (Interview). As a pedagogical strategy with students, the multiple layers of character creation also provided a mediating function, allowing them to choose moments of exposure without making themselves entirely vulnerable. Caught in between vivid stereotypes and images, these layers provided the actor with sites of resistance through which he has opportunities to demonstrate agency or resist social constructions.

The process of character creation that Weaver uses is not an exact formula, but frequently it includes three or more of the following components: a literary character, a mythical or popular-culture icon, a performance fantasy, and the performer's autobiographical experience. Each layer is externalized through physical/verbal impulse, improvisation, and writing; these layers consequently guide the sequence of the rehearsal process. The literary references or thematic topic form the first layer, simultaneously bringing the ensemble into a similar world in which these characters could co-exist. Personal stories then locate that intersection between autobiography and literary representation, assuring that the actor/subject's unique voice isn't lost within the work. The popular-culture icon stimulates a level of play and camp with the construction. Weaver has noted that this layer frequently introduces the element of butch/femme to the work that allows the performer to either resist or give in to gender roles. The performance fantasy (which may or may not relate to the other layers of the character) adds yet another potentially contradictory dimension of the performer's self and her desires. Through the performance fantasy, the audience witnesses a character/subject striving to be clearly what she is not. For example, Tammy Whynot, one of Lois Weaver's infamously recurring personas, is a lesbian performance artist turned country music singer, who sings rather badly but with great spirit. The desire and the process of fulfilling the fantasy, rather than the flawless act, position the character between two layers, struggling between self and representation and explicitly exploring the contradictions of this working-class Southern lesbian turned performance artist. The performance becomes an excavation revealing each contradictory layer.

In the Southern Voice project, the layered character became the overall vehicle for creating the show. Beginning with the intersection of autobiographical experiences and Southern literature, the students first wrote about a "dreadful" or "grotesque" experience that was inspired by our readings of Faulkner, O'Connor, Williams, and McCullers. Stories emerged about experiences like witnessing a parent's death, thinking that they were HIV positive, and circumstances of violence, abuse, or humiliation. Students then used the multiple-choice acting techniques to condense the feeling associated with this experience into a rhythmic sound and movement impulse. This impulse then became the character, abstracting the feeling of the dreadful experience through sound and movement rather than representing it literally. The character then was developed as a voice, a physicalization, and then an improvised character monologue (separate from and unrelated to the experience or story that inspired it). The story of the experience was not necessarily told in performance, nor even necessarily shared with the ensemble members. As a foundational layer for their characters, this impulse helped students maintain a significant edge and commitment to their performance, one that might not have been there were it an entirely fictional creation. This stage of layering the character created a kind of core, but the actor does not expose it unless he willingly and strategically chooses to do so.

In addition to this layer of the "dreadful experience," other layers in our process included: a performance fantasy, a pop-culture figure or mythical icon, and the style of a Southern author and/or a specific character from Southern literature. One example included the character Blanche. This character began with the actor's autobiographical experience of witnessing the death of a parent from cancer. This dreadful experience then informed a physical impulse that included a slouching gesture indicating her belly button, with a dark, guttural verbalization. Free-writing exercises and improvisation developed this impulse, fleshing out the emerging character with a distinct voice. As the character developed an obsession with guilt, the next layer chosen by the actor brought these feelings into an intersection with Tennessee Williams's Blanche from *A Streetcar Named Desire*, particularly her guilt over the suicide of her husband. Finally, providing inconsistency and contrast to these layers, the actor developed a performance fantasy that included performing in *Stomp*. Weaver specifically encouraged such contradictions, which allowed the actor to broaden available choices as she vacillated between the hyperfeminine, weak, and guilty qualities, and her overwhelming desire to create a rhythmic and athletic performance. Blanche is one example of how Weaver encouraged students to embrace contradictory roles and inconsistent desires, and how she encouraged them to thoroughly externalize an internal experience.

Another signature of the Split Britches layered character is the "breakdown moment" that occurs when actors completely step out of all of these character layers to question themselves or their reason for performing, or to make a secret revelation to the audience. This can be part of the dramaturgical structure of the play as a scene in which the premise of the play falls apart, or included in a single character's monologue.[8] Inspired by Spiderwoman Theatre, Weaver borrows the notion of intentional flaws woven into the performance. The breakdown moment becomes a flaw through which the actor's identity then escapes, puncturing the character and the fourth wall. This moment frequently leads to an interaction with the audience, or it may self-consciously address the rehearsal process. Weaver explains this flaw as a way of holding the layers at bay, demonstrating the actor's ambivalence about her construction (Interview).

In "Be Nice or Leave," the breakdown moment was instigated by the character of Blanche. In this scene, she began lip-synching to Brenda Lee's "I'm Sorry," punctuating the song with an absurd list of crimes combined with autobiographical references. "I'm sorry, Stella, that I let Belle Reve slip through my fingers . . . I'm sorry that I let theatre get in the way of a pre-med major" (18). The breakdown moment occurred when she was confronted by other female ensemble members who intervened in this cycle of apology. These actors suddenly dropped all the layers of their characters, becoming "themselves" as female college students intervening with a litany:

> Why do women have to apologize? . . . What kills me is that a man can say whatever he wants, but when a woman says what she thinks, she's being bitchy . . . No what really kills me is the women who can't even admit that there's a problem . . . What kills me is that we can sit here and bitch and complain, but we still want their [men's] approval. (20)

This scene was constructed from a real consciousness-raising session that occurred during the rehearsal process. Weaver and I had been concerned that many female members of the ensemble were not participating as actively as the

Fig. 1. "What kills me is that a man can say whatever he wants, but when a woman says what she thinks, she's being bitchy . . ." The "breakdown moment" from "Be Nice or Leave: A Performance Art Piece on the Southern Voice," College of William and Mary. Photo: Robert R. Bell, Jr.

others. This meeting directly confronted their silences, while also acknowledging Weaver's and my agenda as feminists who wanted to create a piece with strong female voices. In their final evaluations, many women students noted the significant value of this personal struggle to find a "voice" within the creative process, though some also felt this "agenda" was forced by Weaver (Klein, E-mail). The creation of this scene was controversial in that the actors had to consciously confront and position themselves in relationship to the ideas of "feminism." The layered character had allowed them to explode many female stereotypes within the performance; this creative freedom had broadened the choices, making them willing to explore contradictions and take creative risks, but their silence through much of the process had to be acknowledged as well. The breakdown moment revealed the flaws and conflicts of the rehearsal process, along with the ongoing struggle to find one's own voice within the group.

Another example of the layered character reveals how it assisted students in claiming and negotiating difference, even when conflicts arose in the collaborative process. Many scenes were written collaboratively, while others were written by single authors who used the information about other characters that was generated from exercises. Even when students wrote scenes in this solitary way, they still reported feeling that they were maintaining an intense collaboration (Genoa, E-mail). Specifically, the notion of the layers provided multiple sites for the creation of an alliance or coalition with another ensemble member. One of the students, Cameron Ayres, explained how this concept assisted him in a scene written by another student. Ayres portrayed the character Miss Scarlett, inspired by Scarlet O'Hara and Hollywood images of the South, along with the gossipy narrator from Eudora Welty's "Why I live at the P.O." and "grotesque"

Fig. 2. The Postal Mistress, Miss Scarlett (Cameron Ayres), accepts The Mechanic's postcard to his family. "Mechanic: Well, my mother's side of the family comes from Colombia. Scarlett: South Carolina? Mechanic: No, South America." "Be Nice or Leave: A Performance Art Piece on the Southern Voice," College of William and Mary. Photo: Robert R. Bell, Jr.

stories from the actor's family. Another ensemble member, The Mechanic, wrote a scene requiring Miss Scarlett to reiterate racist misunderstandings of this Latino character's background as he attempted to mail a postcard to his family in Colombia.

> Mechanic: Well, my mother's side of the family comes from Colombia.
>
> Scarlett: South Carolina?
>
> Mechanic: No, South America. (41)

The scene continues as Miss Scarlett associates stereotypical images of mules, drugs, and coffee with The Mechanic's Colombian background. While Ayres had originally conceived of his character in terms of Southern culture and a gay camp aesthetic, he had not considered her in terms of race. Ayres explained that he had to recognize that, though the character reflected many aspects of his own identity, she was a separate creation, and that this scene portrayed only one of the many layers of identity. Furthermore, Ayres recognized that within the context of this community, his character was the most appropriate one to portray this racist point of view (Telephone conversation). The scene made visible the racist subtext of a drag culture that fetishizes figures of white femininity like Scarlet O'Hara, something that otherwise might not have been considered. As an example of a pedagogy of coalition, the collaboration between the layered subjectivities of these two characters required them to acknowledge that one actor's fantasy can contribute to another actor's oppression. Though this scene portrayed an oppressive stereotype, it was a crucial moment for the

development of The Mechanic's character, who later found his voice to talk back to such oppressions through alliances with other characters in the play.

Improvisation in Space: Place Making as Collaboration

While the layered character was a crucial structure in the collaborative writing process, structures for improvising through space also facilitated similar kinds of group collaboration. Weaver used improvisation throughout the writing and staging of the performance piece. The writing process and the staging process were not distinctly separated, with each overlapping the other. As Weaver explains, her performance process is more like painting than theatre (Interview). Because performance elements are equal to textual ones, they are not applied in sequence, but—more like a painter's canvas—anything, any texture, even language, can be added at anytime throughout the rehearsal and performance period. Improvisation allows one to incorporate various performance languages beyond the text, and can be a potential means for group writing. However, as Seham cautions, it is important to note that not all improvisational structures are necessarily appropriate for creating the kind of feminist coalitional space that values difference. I have described how multiple-choice acting and the layered character allowed actors to draw from their embodied experiences to create unique self-representations in dialogue with the ensemble and cultural stereotype. However, when the collective process places these representations within a group context of both the dramaturgical structure and the staging of the play in space, how can unique voices of difference continue to be heard without devolving into a static stereotype or silencing other voices?

Within the early stages of the writing process, Weaver built upon sound and movement exercises in connection with text. Using these exercises, Weaver coached students in creating a vocabulary of impulses. Then selected lines of text from either free writes or Southern literature were applied to discrete impulses that were created separately. Weaver coached students in keeping the integrity of the sound and movement impulse and layering the text on top of it. At this stage, students performed the impulse first, then repeated it with the text—coached not to let the text change the rhythm, physicality, or vocalization, keeping the delivery in the realm of abstract sound and movement. Frequently, this process produced unexpected and ironic juxtapositions that encouraged students to approach the text playfully. From an arsenal of lines and impulses, Weaver then structured a sound and movement repetition exercises in which students repeated these lines and impulses moving through space in two groups of "choruses," with the leader of each chorus changing the impulse at will.

In effect, this improvisation in space created a dialogue of impulses between the groups on stage. As in multiple-choice acting exercises, students were thrown into discovering the particular physical sensations of the moment by playing with rhythm and energy in a group dynamic. By multiplying the impulse of the text through repetition, a carnival-like atmosphere emerged in which actors played with the impulse in space, engaging in playful distortions of meaning. The group repetition also provided a kind of safety net for students, encouraging them to take risks that might include politically incorrect representations or irrational associative choices. They knew that no matter how foolish their impulse was it would be repeated en mass, confirming and validating their voice and that impulse.

Improv in space simulates a state of flow and a kind of instinctual group mind. While resisting cause-and-effect narrative, pictures, moments, dynamics, and even stories began to emerge as the group interacted through the space. In discussing the exercise with students afterwards, several images emerged that resonated with the group; ideas emerged that became later scene assignments; different visual images were noted, the dynamics of our "community" began to solidify, and, occasionally, even a performance scene literally emerged from the exercise itself. For example, a scene developed between Blanche and Miss Scarlett. This scene played out repeated impulses using only the lines "I've always depended upon the kindness of strangers" (Blanche) and "I'll think about that tomorrow" (Miss Scarlett). Repeating only these lines and physical impulse, these two hyperfemmes worked through a confrontation in which each attempted to outdo the feminine gestures of the other. The conflict was quickly transformed into a moment of sisterly recognition as their gestured impulses moved from competing against one another to responding and affirming each other.

As characters began to emerge and solidify, the visual art students were brought into the project to participate in improvisation exercises like the one described above. They engaged in the same writing exercises and sound and movement games as the ensemble, and eventually found their way into brief roles as graffiti artists who occasionally vandalized the town square. One particular exercise allowed for the explicit collaboration of the art students with the actors in creating the place of our performance; it also was a turning point in creating a shared place in a collective project. To assist us in creating a multicentered place, each of the layered characters in our ensemble provided a tour of the physical space that was to become the place of our performance. Weaver had prepared students to engage this particular exercise through previous multiple-choice acting approaches that required them to use environmental and physical stimuli to create on their feet. In these early exercises, students moved through the space as she coached them in using the environment to trigger the actor's personal memories or physical reactions. In this tour guide exercise, however, actors responded through the lens of character, describing and inflecting that character's history onto our aesthetic space. For example, through the exercise, we discovered which characters were outsiders and which were insiders to the community. We learned where the characters felt most comfortable, where they had particular memories in the physical space, and where they held particular investments of interest within our place of performance. (In previously described character exercises, students engaged in similar activities which marked such investments of their emotional life within places on their bodies.) This exercise allowed us to create a particular place that reflected its inhabitants; it also marked potential alliances between characters that later became scenes within the play.

While places are always heavily laden with history and the dynamics of social power, spaces which become cultural places also offer potential opportunities for subjects to inscribe, contest, and empower identities. Anthropologists and cultural geographers have also noted that a place does not merely reflect its inhabitants. It simultaneously constructs and is constructed by them. In theorizing a coalitional space for collective performance, the process of place making became a way of creating a shared subjectivity (a shared culture) that results in a multicentered place rather than a totalizing environment that replicates oppressive dynamics.[9] One feminist geographer reflects on the possibility that "fluid geographies would construct and in turn be constructed by fluid identities"

(Duncan 143). In this way, the concept of the layered character intersected with the use of the physical environment to assist in creating an inclusive place for our performance.

Rather than realistically reproducing a Southern town square, Weaver and student collaborators instead created a fluid landscape that, like the characters that inhabited it, resisted continuity. As per Weaver's description of the creative process, this space was a canvas embroidered through several different exercises and inspirations right up until curtain. While it had some realistic and functional elements of a town square—such as a stoplight hanging overhead and a park bench—the performance environment also had several surreal features that metaphorically conveyed themes that we explored: including decaying white columns, a faded image of a Confederate flag, and a mysterious half-erected statue. Exploring the relationship between public and private and insider and outsider to the town, the environment and costumes used playful distortions to connect inner subjectivity and public life.[10]

As the physical environment began to take shape, Weaver created another exercise that used space to deepen the collaborative engagement of the ensemble. The exercises she called "Passages" were inspired by some of the writings of Lucy Lippard. "Even if one's history there is short, a place can still be felt as an extension of the body, especially the walking body, passing through and becoming part of the landscape" (Lippard 34). In this way, the insiders and the outsiders to our community of characters began to be influenced by this place that had taken on a life of its own. In this exercise, students who now felt secure with sound and movement improvisation began exploring these impulses as they passed through space, utilizing text and props if desired. Like the multiple-choice acting techniques, these were single gestures, phrases or movements that were an impulsive physical and playful response to material presented. A newspaper article about a controversial memorial in William Faulkner's home town inspired several passages that became significant features in our landscape. Students embroidered this incident as they passed through the space, becoming the trashman who cleans the town square, a magnolia tree cut down for the statue memorial, a literary scholar attending the event, an art student ignorant of Faulkner's work, an obituary writer, and the window-dresser of the local dress shop. Each of these character creations was then incorporated into our ensemble of layered characters.

The exercise was quite effective because it required students to interact with a collectively created place rather than improvise with each other as stable characters. These passages became images which diffused the scene, creating a prism-like effect that projected the diversity of points of view within this community, allowing for political commentary through juxtapositions. Eventually, this exercise inspired particular scene writing assignments for students. However, when these scenes were written, Weaver continued to apply the passages exercise so that if one performer's character responded to a moment within another student's scene, she would pass through the town square, throwing out a response, a line, or a gesture, which might complement the scene's action or ironically juxtapose an unrelated image. In this way, a scene was never completely written, even when it was scripted on paper. This allowed students to write improvisationally with their bodies, adding new layers to previously written scenes. Performers eventually created a vocabulary of passages that became their arsenal as we began to stage particular scenes. For example, in one scene,

Fɪɢ. 3. In a "passage" through the scene, Blanche resurrects herself from a cocoon of cobwebs. The Director (Chris Genoa) asks, "Which way is South? . . . Does anybody here know how I can get there?" "Be Nice or Leave: A Performance Art Piece on the Southern Voice," College of William and Mary. Photo: Robert R. Bell, Jr.

the New Age Tourist Moonshine questions the shy Latino Mechanic. The Movie Director rushes through on his way to a shoot (as he always does) and corrects The Mechanic's blocking position, telling him that he doesn't look right unless he's lower than The Tourist. The Mechanic gradually sinks to the floor in his effort to follow direction; this physical image became a running joke as he hit the floor anytime he saw the Tourist. While the image physically commented on the subservience of a person of color in an all-white community, it was also later transformed into a joyous scene in which the Tourist joins him lying on the floor and they begin rolling around laughing hysterically as they learn each other's names. This scene and others like it demonstrated a playful dynamic that allowed the representation to change with each passing force. Like layering of character, these passages created a liberating fluidity to the scenes and the creative process. By keeping ensemble members in this dialectical relationship as they commented upon and contributed to each other's work, they were able to continue to assert their different identities as they constructed a shared world.

Evaluating Feminist Pedagogy and the Limits of Coalition

Borrowing again from Betty Sasaki's "Pedagogy of Coalition," it is important to note both the risks and the limits of such an approach. Sasaki cites Bernice Johnson Reagon, who describes coalition work as follows: "Most of the time you feel threatened to the core and if you don't, you're not really doing no coalescing" (Reagon 356). While Weaver's exercises provided boundaries that allowed individual voices to be cultivated and strengthened, the use of contra-

diction, dialogue, and the dialogic relationship to popular culture created a space for representing difference. The representation of subversive voices was at times uncomfortable, even threatening, for many students. Sasaki explains:

> A pedagogy of coalition, therefore, is a collective endeavor to bring to the surface the unconscious and buried knowledges that will ultimately complicate and question, destabilize and open up for critique the normative ways of seeing ourselves and others. The ground from which we speak is forged not through maintaining consensus, but by making alliances, however uneasy they might be, both internally within ourselves and, externally, within others. (50–51)

While discovering uncomfortable things about themselves and other ensemble members, students were opened to new ways of seeing the world, themselves, and themselves in the world. These results came directly from Weaver's pedagogy, in which multiple-choice acting allowed them to navigate moment-to-moment contradictions and choices; the layered character enabled them to see themselves and the construction of the self in its ambivalent relationship to cultural representation; and the use of improv in space helped them to construct a world with others, literally as well as metaphorically a common ground for coalition.

However, like Sasaki's pedagogy of coalition, Weaver's process strongly relies upon a postmodern conceptualization of identity which requires the actor to engage contradiction and acknowledge fluidity and social construction. Despite feminist ideals of including all kinds of difference, such a premise for this work does not mean that it can be inclusive of all students and all identities. Weaver and I discovered this when one female student dropped out of the rehearsal process three weeks before opening. Self-identifying as a fundamentalist Christian, the student had struggled with many of Weaver's exercises, particularly those that required her to acknowledge contradictions within her own personality. When leaving the cast, she claimed that she was unable to accept the representations of homosexuality within the play; she also felt that her Christian values were mocked when another actor created a scene which portrayed abuse by a religious figure. While a positive portrayal of religious faith would have been welcomed as part of the world of this performance, this student couldn't reconcile herself with these representations that reflected the lived experiences or fantasies of others. On the other hand, in Cameron Ayres's experience, it was uncomfortable for him to discover that his fantasy was part of another actor's oppression, but the idea of the layered character assisted him in negotiating this conflict and the contradictions he discovered about his own identity. Though the female student continued to fulfill her obligations to the course by assisting with technical needs, and she maintained a supportive relationship with other ensemble members, she simply found that she was not able to contribute creatively to the kind of coalitional space that Weaver had constructed. Weaver maintains a kind of openness even as she foregrounds her politics and identity as a feminist, and she is able to facilitate a coalition among a wide range of student identities. However, there are limits to such efforts to be inclusive, and all differences cannot be overcome. Along with a shared sense of commitment and openness, Weaver's process also required a postmodern willingness to accept and play with contradiction.

Feminists have thoroughly critiqued the limits and dangers of a postmodern approach to identity; while Weaver's work values qualities like fluidity, pastiche, and contradiction, she is also committed both to engaging difference and transforming oppressive representations. When I recently asked four students to reflect upon the residency, their responses confirmed the significant value of the work to their formation as creative artists. Many expressed a sense of finding their voice in this project, and each has continued to pursue artistic work that engages this creative voice. Weaver constantly acknowledged that a performer's agency is linked to preserving one's unique identity, deeply engaging one's collaborators, and fully externalizing these ideas in multiple performance languages. These relationships between self, community, and space are absolutely crucial in fully articulating both political identities and creative representations.

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Notes

1. In addition to her performance and directing work with Split Britches Company, Weaver has frequently conducted workshops at national conferences such as ATHE. Some of her university residencies include: Hampshire College's 1989 production of *Honey, I'm Home*, based on *Alcestis*. See Sabrina Hamilton, "Split Britches," and University of Hawai'i's 1993 production of *Valley of the Dolls House*, a production inspired by both Ibsen's *A Doll House* and Jacquelyn Suzanne's *Valley of the Dolls.*

2. Acknowledging that consensus is sometimes practically impossible and other times coercive, feminist theorists such as Iris Marion Young and Elizabeth Spelman discuss ways of maintaining the relational aspects of identity while also providing space for oppositional conflict. See, for example, Young, *Inclusion and Democracy*; and Spelman, *Inessential Woman: Problems of Exclusion in Feminist Thought.*

3. Before founding Split Britches, Weaver studied Method acting as an undergraduate at Virginia's Radford College. Soon after moving to New York she studied the techniques of the Open Theatre before she joined Spiderwoman Theatre in the 1970s. In the early 1980s, Weaver formed the company Split Britches with Peggy Shaw and Deb Margolin. In various productions, Split Britches' work has included other collaborators as well. In addition to the acting and writing Weaver does for her own performances, she also spends a considerable amount of time directing and teaching. She has been a co-artistic director of the Gay Sweatshop in London, and currently teaches at Queen Mary College at the University of London.

4. For example, here are a few of the free writing assignments used throughout the devising process: Using Carson McCullers's quote, "I have to return home periodically to renew my sense of . . . [horror]," students completed the sentence themselves, then repeated the exercise using McCullers's sense of horror as a jumping-off point. Students wrote about "places that they loved" and "places that they hated." Students would merely choose a line of text or an image from a text of their choosing by a Southern author, and this would begin a free write. Writing exercises would frequently build upon improvisations and/or other writing assignments, with students responding to prompts such as "What I really wanted to say was . . ." or "When I heard myself saying ___, I . . ." In response to Zora Neale Hurston's tradition of using the folktale and "the big old lie" and Eudora Welty's bizarre and gossipy characters, students created several writing assignments that required them to tell and embellish "lies." Many assignments looked at the insider/outsider dynamics between an individual and a place or culture: "when I think of belonging, I . . ." These short daily writing assignments then were frequently developed and elaborated from the point of view of a character within the literature or created in improvisation.

5. See Weaver's interview with Elizabeth Stroppel for a detailed description of her early training with New York's experimental theatre companies of the 1970s. For more about the basis of sound and movement exercises, see those used by Joseph Chaikin, described in Robert Pasolli, *The Book on the Open Theatre*.

6. While this exercise explicitly moved students beyond stereotypes, other exercises used by Weaver encourage students to embrace them, particularly in playing with butch-femme stereotypes.

7. Weaver notes in her interview with Peggy Shaw how this pattern prevails among her country aunts, New York City bag ladies, and a quirky relative of the Kennedys.

8. In a classic example from *Belle Reprieve*, Bette Bourne halts a musical number with, "what are we doing? I can't stand it! I want to be in a real play!" Suddenly, the actors momentarily set aside their characters, allowing the audience member to glimpse the rehearsal process as Lois/Stella/Director states, "Now we talked about this and we decided that realism works against us." See Sue-Ellen Case, ed., *Split Britches* (179).

9. I borrow the idea of a multicentered place from Lucy Lippard's *The Lure of the Local.* For Lippard's insights, I am indebted to Weaver, who was heavily influenced by this book while conceiving this performance.

10. Costumes and props became emblematic of certain characters. For example, Miss Scarlett's costume (inspired by Welty's "Why I Live at the P.O.") became a hoopskirt made of postal letters that the character occasionally stopped to read. Portraying the gossipy nature of the town's postmistress, the actor became a kind of moving sculpture at the humorous intersection of everyday object and cultural icon. Other visual images, such as Blanche emerging from a cocoon of spiderwebs and the obituary writer's camera made out of a skull and bones, allowed the performers and artists to externalize images that had been generated from very personal explorations of private emotions.

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