"Don't Tell Me How to Dance!": Negotiating Collaboration, Empowerment and Politicization in the Ethnographic Theatre Project "Hope"

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Abstract: This article contributes to the experimental ethnography literature by providing a critique of ethnographic collaboration, empowerment and politicization. Focusing on my ethnographic theatre project "Hope"—developed in collaboration with Roma women and local actors in Poland in 2003—I discuss the power struggles over representation that defined my project and that arose from our multifarious understandings of theatre as an art form, differences in what the project meant to us and in what we hoped to accomplish through it. I reveal the problematic moral, ethical and political decisions I had to make that forced me to rethink both my methodology and my role as ethnographer.

Keywords: performance-centred research, collaboration, politicization, Roma, ethics, improvisation

Résumé : Cet article est une contribution à la littérature en ethnographie expérimentale qui présente une critique de la collaboration, de la revendication de pouvoir et de la politisation ethnographiques. À partir de mon projet de théâtre ethnographique « Hope » – élaboré avec des femmes Roms et des comédiens locaux en Pologne en 2003 – je discute des luttes de pouvoir en matière de représentation qui ont défini mon projet et qui découlaient de la multiplicité des compréhensions du théâtre en tant que forme d'art, et des différences dans ce que le projet signifiait pour nous par rapport à ce que nous espérions accomplir à travers lui. Je révèle les complexes décisions morales, éthiques et politiques que j'ai dû prendre qui m'ont forcée à redéfinir et ma méthodologie et mon rôle en tant qu'ethnographe.

Mots-clés : recherche fondée sur la performance, collaboration, politisation, Roma, éthique, improvisation

Introduction

This article discusses my ethnographic theatre project "Hope" conducted in the city of Elblag, Poland in 2002-2003. The project was developed in collaboration with research participants—five Roma[1] women from Elblag and six young actors from Elblag's Cultural Centre for International Cooperation where I worked as an artistic director and acting instructor. My husband Shawn—also an actor in the production—was my co-investigator in the project. As methodologies of research, I employed participant observation of the Roma women's lives, unstructured and semi-structured interviews, and a performance-centred ethnography in which I used theatre as a form of ethnographic participant observation, and analyzed it as a product that emerged out of the research process.

The Roma women I worked with belonged to the Roma group called "Polska Rroma" that originally arrived in Poland in the 16th century (Bartosz 1994:73). They settled in Elblag after the communist government banned itinerant Roma caravans in 1968. All the women in Elblag were members of the same community, as many of them had lived in the city for most of their adult lives and, for some, Elblag was their natal home. The actors, who ranged in age from 14 to 19, were enrolled in both my acting and theatre-culture courses at the Centre. They had participated in my two earlier ethnographic theatre productions staged at the Cultural Centre that studied racism and gender inequality in Poland.

Through this ethnographic theatre project, I originally set out to study and document violence in the lives of Roma women. I had hoped that the women would act in the production, but they declined, worried about the potential repercussions from performing for an audience in a country where racism against Roma was widespread; they were also concerned about a possible backlash from their own community. Instead, they decided to participate in the project as playwrights, directors, dramaturgs and

designers, and agreed that actors from the Cultural Centre would do the acting. On many occasions, however, the women joined the actors in improvising in rehearsals, and at times, even improvised on their own.

I knew that violence against Roma was ever-present in Poland, as I had heard about, and personally witnessed, acts of discrimination against them in my country since the collapse of state socialism. The Roma women themselves also spoke about various forms of violence in their lives during my pilot research in 2001. However, when I began my doctoral research in 2002, there had been no ethnographic studies conducted with Roma in Poland, only in other eastern and western European countries (Arias 2002; Okely 1983; Stewart 1997). There had also been no published collaborative ethnographies conducted primarily with Roma women. By collaborative ethnography I mean research that engages its participants directly in the planning and decision-making processes and thus, seeks to destabilize power differentials between ethnographer and research participants (Chataway 1997; Robertson and Culhane 2005; Yeich 1996). Influenced by the performative approaches to research of Conquergood (1991, 1993, 1998, 2002), Fabian (1990), Madison (2005) and Mienczakowski (2000), I believed that the inherently collective nature of theatre held the promise of a more collaborative, empowering and politicizing ethnography with the potential to encourage social critique.

Working in theatre was not new to me. Shawn and I brought to the project over a decade of experience as theatre artists. I hold an MFA in Interdisciplinary Directing from Simon Fraser University and Shawn and I have trained in the non-realist, physical and image-based methodologies of Polish avant-garde theatre artists Jerzy Grotowski, Tadeusz Kantor and Józef Szajna.

However, the relations of power in the field that defined our mutual interactions in the studio complicated my plans and my commitment to collaborative, empowering and politicizing research. The key factor was the power struggles over representation that arose from our multifarious understandings of theatre as an art form, and differences in what the project meant to us and in what we hoped to accomplish through it. For the Roma women, theatre was a form of staged soap opera defined by the portrayal of domestic life, melodrama and realist modes of representation; conversely, the actors and I were committed to the non-realist and metaphoric theatre aesthetic of the Polish 20th-century avant-garde. The Roma women wanted the performance to be a celebration of "traditional"[2] Roma culture; the actors and I saw such representations as exoticizing and apolitical. Naively, I had not expected that such power struggles would be a major issue in my project. Certainly anthropologists acknowledge that while collaborative research aims to overcome power imbalances, those based in class, ethnicity or race, gender, age and sexuality cannot be entirely overcome and can complicate ethnographer-participant relations (Chataway 1997; Fabian 1990; Reid and Vianna 2001). However, power struggles among research participants and with the ethnographer are not extensively examined in anthropological literature using concrete real-life examples. As Waters observes, "frank discussions of the reality of the research experience are much rarer than the sanitized discussions of 'research methods'" (2001:347). Huisman also recognizes that "much qualitative research continues to be presented in a way that does not acknowledge the struggles and dilemmas behind the work" (2008:374). Only recently have some researchers begun exposing the power struggles within the ethnographic process itself (Henry 2003; Huisman 2008; Pratt and Kirby 2003; Szeman 2005); yet even in these more recent accounts, frank examples of the exploitations of power in which ethnographers often personally partake are uncommon. My project—which sought to combine theatre and anthropology—also presented some unique challenges by virtue of its interdisciplinarity. In the world of theatre with which I was very familiar, power struggles between and among playwrights, directors, actors, and designers are commonplace (see Nouryeh 2001; Zelenak 2003), but these players often share some common background and work together toward a common goal. This was not the case in my project. The Roma women had no theatre background and were drawn to the project for various—and not always compatible—reasons. Also, my own complex roles in the project (ethnographer, instructor, artistic director) contributed to the in-rehearsal power struggles in ways that were difficult to anticipate. Finally, the unpredictability and the improvisational character of fieldwork (Cerwonka and Malkki 2007) that forces us to perpetually respond to the shifting and changing contexts around us made it difficult for me to foresee, and thus prepare for, the constant shifting of power, competing personal and professional agendas, and indeed my own inability to stay above the power games that threatened to derail the theatre production.

This paper offers an original contribution to the growing body of experimental ethnography literature by providing a critique of ethnographic collaboration, empowerment and politicization in the context of my ethnographic theatre project conducted with Roma women in Poland. I expose, in candid terms, the ways in which conflicts over representation between Roma women, the actors and me, forced me to make difficult

ethical and moral decisions and rethink both performance-ethnography as a methodology of research and my role as ethnographer.

Theoretical and Methodological Underpinnings

My work finds an affinity with the performance-centred ethnography literature that examines theatre as both ethnographic research methodology and representation (Conquergood 1991, 1993, 1998, 2002; Denzin 2003; Fabian 1990; Madison 2005; Mienczakowski 1992, 1994, 1995, 2000, 2001; Pratt and Kirby 2003; Schechner 1985; Turner 1982). The project "Hope" used theatre performance as a mode of ethnographic participant observation, where I addressed my research questions by collaboratively creating a theatre performance with the participants. However, my fieldwork also involved the study of the performance itself, as I documented and analyzed the performance as a form of representation, and participant and audience responses to "Hope."

Upon commencing my research with Polish Roma women, I was particularly fascinated by the collaborative, empowering and politicizing potential of theatre as a mode of participant observation. I believed that by involving the ethnographer as a "co-performer" who speaks to and with, and not about and for, the research participants (Fabian 1990:7, 43), one could provide a more equitable and empowering form of inquiry. I adopted a collaborative approach to research because it appeared to be most suited to my work with such marginalized people as the Roma.

My understanding of politicization and empowerment was also inspired by Bertolt Brecht's (1964) "epic theatre" and Jim Mienczakowski's "emancipatory drama" (2000). Brecht's (1964) epic theatre sought to engage audience members in social critique and action by adopting various strategies of defamiliarization (A-effect)—actors stepping in and out of character, playing more than one character, offering commentary on the play's action and using symbolic props—which were to portray events on stage from unusual perspectives in order to resensitize the audience to violence and injustice that had become pedestrian.

Brecht, an ardent Marxist, has been criticized for his didacticism (Becker 2010:160-162, 165; Gibson 2002; Lennox 1978); oversimplicafication of reality (Case 1983; Lennox 1978; Ruprecht 2010:39); paternalism (Lennox 1978:94); and underestimation of the audience's critical faculties (Silcox 2010). While conscious of these criticisms and, consequently, the potential risks of employing Brechtian politicization in ethnographic research, I was nevertheless fascinated by, and wanted to adopt in my research, Brecht's notion of A-effect as a strategy for cultural critique. Thus, my idea of politicization can be seen as bearing an affinity with a school of visual anthropology that negotiates "the anthropological" with "the aesthetic expressive" in order to problematize the boundary between fact and fiction, involve the viewer in a social critique of dominant worldviews and, subsequently, challenge the authority of the ethnographer by repudiating any claims of authenticity (Edwards 1997:55, 59, 69).

Moreover, I felt that physical theatre would offer an embodied and "sensuous scholarship" (Stoller 1997) wherein Roma women could articulate those experiences of violence that might otherwise be too ineffable, taboo, painful or embarrassing to be related directly in spoken narratives (Farnell 1999; Stoller 1997). However, while Brecht saw empathy as an obstacle to rational thought, I was convinced that it was indispensable in encouraging social critique, particularly in an ethnographic theatre project dealing with violence. Here I aligned myself with Mienczakowski who sees the emancipatory and empowering potential of "ethno-dramas" in the empathy they invoke in audiences and research participants (2000:135). I was aware that while the discourse of empowerment has been integral in collaborative and participatory research concerned with social justice and activism, it has also been seen as problematic due to its "hidden paternalism" (Sanger 1994:200); its naïve optimism about transgressing power differentials in researcher–participant relations and the possibility of achieving "common understanding" between the researcher and the participants (Lennie 1999:103, 104). However, in my view, empowerment through empathy was not about doing "something... 'to' or 'for' someone" (Lather, 1991:4), but about providing an "input of local knowledge," and an occasion that would encourage the ethnographer, research participants and audience members to critically engage their emotions and sensations in rethinking of oppressive conditions and their alternatives (Lennie 1999:109).

I decided to study the situation of Roma minorities because as a native of Poland, I had often witnessed, heard and read about the racial stereotyping and verbal and physical abuse of the Roma, their exclusion from public spaces and discrimination in both the workplace and public services. Such instances of violence against Roma in Poland have been documented by various organizations, including the European Roma Rights Centre (2002) and Amnesty International (2004) as well as discussed by various Polish and Western scholars (Puckett 2005; Ringold 2000; Sobotka 2001; Stewart 1997). I decided to study violence specifically as experienced by Roma women because

I believed they were marginalized on the basis of their race, ethnicity and gender within Polish society, and subordinated by Roma gender norms (Arias 2002; Stewart 1997). And, there was virtually no ethnographically based research that explored the current situation of Roma women in Poland. Elblag was my first choice as a research site, as I was born and lived there prior to immigrating to Canada in 1992; and, it is where I witnessed countless instances of discrimination, prejudice and violence against Roma.

The six actors who participated in the project were, like me, all white ethnic Poles of middle-to-upper class backgrounds. Agnieszka (19) was a student of Polish Philology at Gdansk University. Sisters Grazyna (18) and Olga (16) were both attending Lyceum in Elblag; Grazyna planned to study at the University of Poznan after her maturity[3] and university entrance exams in the spring. Gosia (18) and Derek (18) were also preparing for these exams. The youngest, Maria (14), was in her first year of Lyceum. All students had little or no prior training as actors; all were taking courses at the Centre in the hopes of eventually becoming theatre professionals. They had also worked with Shawn and me on two previous ethnographic plays that explored racism and gender inequality in Poland. Committed to politically conscious art, they felt that the new project could expose and critique the violence experienced by Roma in Poland; however, they also saw the project as an opportunity to further develop their acting skills, and to gain exposure in Elblag's theatre community.

While I was the actors' instructor, they neither filled out course evaluations, as this was not required by the Cultural Centre, nor were they remunerated for their participation in the project; I also did not assign them grades. I obtained the students' informed consent to participate in the project as performers and research participants with the understanding that they could withdraw from the project at any time.

My search for Roma participants was arduous and lengthy. I travelled across Poland to look for a Roma community willing to participate in my project because when I initially met a group of Elblag's Roma women telling fortunes in a city park during my pilot research in 2001, they expressed little interest in my project. They considered themselves to be "fortune-tellers...[and] not artistic Gypsies" (Field notes 2001). However, when my attempts at recruiting research participants from other cities turned out to be fruitless, I was compelled to approach the Roma women in Elblag again. Initially they were still uninterested in my artistic undertaking, but after a month of hanging out with them in a city park and discussing our children, our lives and the latest gossip, the women slowly warmed up to me, and eventually agreed to participate. They saw the project as an opportunity to earn some extra income (I offered to pay each woman an honorarium of forty zloty ($15 CDN) per three-hour rehearsal), a means of telling the larger public about the struggles of the Roma in Poland, and of generating help from Elblag's citizenry.

Although I worked closely for over a year with most of Elblag's Roma women, five women—Randia, Zefiryna, Ana, Basia and Ewa—ended up participating in the project as playwrights, directors, dramaturges, choreographers and designers. Some Roma women did not want to participate, while others were unable to due to familial obligations or community infighting. My five main participants also excluded a few women from the project, as they considered them to be "[un]reliable sources of information" (Field notes 2002). Randia (55) was a widow who lived with her daughter Zefiryna (25), her son-in-law and their nine-year-old daughter. She suffered from heart disease and diabetes, and lived off a meagre government disability pension. Randia's daughter Zefiryna and her family did not have stable sources of income: they were unable to find employment and were not eligible for welfare. While Zefiryna occasionally did some petty trading, her husband was unemployed, and it was Randia's pension and small earnings from fortune telling that sustained the entire family. Ana (38) lived with her mentally ill mother, her husband, her two young children (under 10) and an adult son (20). Ana's husband traded electronics and cars while she tried to earn some money through petty trading and fortune telling. She suffered from chronic health problems after she had developed a blood clot in her lungs following the birth of her youngest son. She also experienced anxiety and panic attacks. Ewa (32) was Randia's older daughter. She lived with her husband and three children (under 13). Ewa received a disability pension for severe epilepsy and anxiety attacks and her husband sold cars. Basia (43) lived with her husband, her son (15) and her nephew (17) in a small apartment. She and her husband were unemployed, but she engaged in petty trading, and was also receiving foster support monies for her orphaned nephew.

The performance "Hope" was developed through participant observation, interviews, prerehearsal sessions (focus groups) and rehearsals. While the collaborative development of theatre performance was always the main goal of my work, I conducted participant observation and interviews to establish rapport with the Roma women, to learn about their lives in everyday contexts and to generate research material in case the women decided not to

work on a theatre project. However, I also thought that the material generated through participant observation and interviews could be used in the development of a theatre performance if the women agreed to participate.

My participant observation—which spanned a year, and occurred before, during and after the development of the theatre performance—involved visiting the women and their families daily, helping them with their chores, accompanying them to doctor and welfare office appointments, travelling out of town for fortune telling and trading, and attending special occasions (christenings and feast days). In taped interviews, which were both unstructured and semi-structured, I asked the women about the difficulties they were encountering at the time. I also recorded the women's life stories and life histories. In the context of my research, the life histories had a more biographical framework, while the life stories were less time-bound. In the interviews, life histories and life stories, the women predominantly spoke about their personal problems in terms of violence. The meanings the women attached to violence varied according to what was going on in their lives at the time and where we were in the research process. However, for the Roma women, violence encompassed poverty, harassment, discrimination, Roma tradition, domestic violence and poor health.

The women defined poverty as the inability to afford the basic necessities of life, such as food, shelter and medications, and attributed it to widespread unemployment in Poland, prejudice in the work force, the Roma's lack of education, and their incapacity to fortune-tell or trade due to Poles' "general hostility toward the Gypsies" (Field notes 2002). They also claimed the physical and verbal violence and harassment they experienced from non-Roma had worsened since the collapse of state socialism and prevented them from fortune-telling and trading. Furthermore, they believed they suffered from discrimination in both public and private sectors, such as in government offices, schools, hospitals, medical offices and housing rental agencies. Roma tradition was also a significant burden in their lives because, they argued, it restricted their lives and was responsible for the violence they suffered at home. The women identified the custom of marrying off girls at a young age as a particularly oppressive aspect of their tradition that was an obstacle to Roma girls' access to education. As well, they complained that the commonly held belief among the Roma that "a Roma man can do everything, and a Roma woman nothing" allowed the men to abuse their wives physically and emotionally, commit adultery and abstain from house chores, childcare and finances. Finally, the women were despondent over their state of health: many suffered from depression, "nervous attacks," heart disease, diabetes, high blood pressure, schizophrenia and suicidal tendencies.

Yet, while the women often spoke about violence in their lives, they also discussed—especially in their informal conversations—various strategies they used to cope with everyday hardships, as well as their hopes for the future. Their coping strategies included the use of sedatives and passive acceptance of abuse, reciprocating the abuse to which they were subjected, establishing a line of credit with the local grocer or pawning personal items to alleviate the effects of poverty. When visiting their homes and accompanying them on errands, I also noticed that their lives transgressed the violence paradigm of both their stories and my research interests. They women invested a lot of effort, and took great pride in, caring for their children, cooking, cleaning, shopping, fortune-telling and trading. They rushed out from their homes early in the morning to secure the best spot for fortune-telling, stood in long queues to purchase discounted cuts of meat as a surprise for the evening meal, or renovated their flat on their own "so it looks more like a home for Christmas" (Field notes 2003). Moreover, the women at times talked about the future in hopeful terms. They told me about their efforts to save money and make contacts abroad so they could one day leave Poland. I quickly became aware that, coming from the West, I was a symbol of hope for them. Some of the women hoped I would help them immigrate to Canada and often competed with one another for my attention.

Initially, the women were slightly apprehensive about working with Polish actors, but when I assured them that the actors were committed to critiquing racism, the women no longer seemed worried. Our pre-rehearsal sessions, which spanned two months, took the form of focus groups (informal, unstructured or semi-structured group interviews). We met three times weekly, for three hours each session. The women requested that no male actors be present until rehearsals, as they felt uncomfortable about discussing their personal lives in front of men. In pre-rehearsal sessions, like in the interviews, I asked the women about various challenges in their daily lives, and they again spoke about poverty, harassment, discrimination, Roma tradition, domestic abuse and poor health, as well as their coping strategies and hopes for the future.

The next stage of the process involved rehearsals, which took place thrice weekly, three hours per session, for five weeks. Here we developed a theatre performance in response to the same questions the women had addressed in the pre-rehearsal sessions—their everyday problems and fears. Through improvisations and group

negotiations we created the basic storyline of the performance; the play's key images, individual scenes and plot sequence; the psychological, emotional and physical profiles of the characters; blocking and choreography; the spoken text; and the design.

Often the actors would improvise scenes and the Roma women would offer suggestions, but on many occasions, the women joined the actors in improvising or even improvised alone. They especially liked to dance and to teach the actors the steps to traditional Roma dances. Collective writing usually involved the women dictating a scene's spoken text and the actors and I offering suggestions with an eye to theatrical expediency. A typical rehearsal would commence with a warm-up session for the actors, and subsequently, the Roma women and the actors would improvise the spoken and physical texts of the play. To conclude our session, we would rehearse and polish the newly improvised material.

The final version of the performance, publicly presented on 31 May and 1 June 2003[4] in Elblag's Cultural Centre, told the story of a 13-year-old Roma girl, whose name, Nadzieja, translates from Polish to English as *hope*. Throughout the play, Nadzieja recounts her memories of domestic and racial violence until she slips into schizophrenic delusions wherein she befriends and transforms into a dog. Her journey ends in a psychiatric ward, where, with the help of her canine companion, she overdoses.

Shawn and I did not record audience demographics, but based on our observations and the ticket reservation list, we can approximate that the audience (roughly100) was mainly composed of the participants' families, friends and acquaintances, with a few people from the general public. We managed to record in our field notes various informal audience responses immediately after, and in the weeks following, the performance. I analyzed data arising from rehearsal video recordings, transcripts of the rehearsal and pre-rehearsal sessions and field notes.

Soap Opera or Art: Whose Vision Is This?

My commitment to collaborative, empowering and politicizing ethnography was complicated in the project "Hope" by the power relations in the field. One of the key factors was the power struggle over representation that arose in rehearsals and resulted from our multifarious understandings of theatre as an art form. The atmosphere in rehearsals was often tense and fraught with bickering and verbal abuse on the part of the actors and the Roma women. I doubted my own understanding of collaborative ethnography, with the looming fear that opening night would come and the project would implode. A significant source of tension in rehearsals essentially came down to what can be seen as a conflict between mass culture and art. The Roma women's conceptualizations of theatre appeared to be influenced by soap operas. The women were very fond of serials, particularly American and Brazilian, and Randia once made a comment that working on the play was "just like doing a soap opera" (Transcript, Rehearsal 2003).

As a genre of popular fiction—often regarded a women's genre—the soap opera is characterized by an emphasis on the melodramatic and the use of realism and cultural verisimilitude. The soap opera's melodramatic sensibility is evident in its focus on everyday domestic life and family relationships, protracted scenes, a narrative of repetition and similarity, and a predilection for talk over action (Hall 1997:344, 352, 371; Lacey 2000:37-40, 220-223). Its commitment to realism is manifest in its proclivity to depict people, events and objects as they appear in the real world (Hall 1997:360; Shohat and Stam 1994:179), often by adopting Konstantin Stanislavski's[5] psychological realism as an acting style (Gledhill 1992:114, 118; Longhurst 1987).[6] Additionally, time in soap operas reflects real-time, as "the same number of days pass between the episodes for both the audience and characters" (Lacey 2000:40). The soap opera also employs cultural verisimilitude[7]—a representational strategy that refers the viewer to what is accepted as "real": a culture's norms, mores and common sense knowledge (Neale 1981:36-41).

The Roma women wanted to create the play drawing from the conventions of soap operas in both content and form. The storyline they developed had melodramatic characteristics evident in its focus on the everyday, ordinary lives of Nadzieja and her family: the domestic realm where female characters prepared meals, men read newspapers and personal relationships unfolded (Transcript, Rehearsal 2003). The spoken and physical texts the women created also tended to be melodramatic: Nadzieja's physical and emotional life was portrayed through themes of domestic violence, infidelity and jealousy, all mainstays of soap opera. The women's preferred modes of representation were realism and cultural verisimilitude. They tried to represent the fictional world of the performance in a way that they recognized as their own, and that referred the audience to the norms, mores and common sense of Roma social realities. For example, the women located the play's central actions at the table because, as it was evident from their interviews and life stories, the kitchen table was for them an integral cultural space of daily gatherings, where men discussed business while the women prepared the food, sat to rest, eat and exchange gossip, and where families and friends gathered to celebrate extra-daily events,

such as christenings, weddings or holiday gatherings. Furthermore, the women's penchant to have the characters engage in extended discussions at the table as they themselves do in their daily lives mirrored the predilection in soap operas to talk rather than act. Their commitment to realism as a mode of theatrical representation was also obvious in their insistence that the actors, as with many soap operas, adopt psychological realism as their acting style.[8] As in Stanislavski's realist approach to acting, the women wanted the actors to render faithfully in minutiae everyday interactions and conversations.[9]

This attempt by the Roma women to create a theatre performance employing the conventions of soap opera alarmed the actors from the outset, as they largely despised this aesthetic. To them, it represented everything that was wrong with mass culture and women's entertainment. In Polish intellectual circles, both terms carry negative connotations: mass culture is considered to be inferior, and created by popular, rather than true, artists; women's entertainment is viewed as intellectually mediocre and apolitical fluff (Durczak 1999; Filipowicz 1995; Mazierska 2001). For the actors—who considered themselves to be intellectuals, artists and feminists, it was important to avoid the stigma of being associated with mass culture art or women's entertainment. Thus, they clung to the abstract, non-realist, metaphoric, visual and physical forms and conventions of the Polish 20th-century avant-garde (i.e., Grotowski, Kantor and Szajna). While it might seem surprising that the actors had already assumed the identities of intellectuals and feminists at such a young age, most of them came from families of Poland's intelligentsia and, thus, had inherited "highbrow" aesthetic dispositions that were later reinforced in the university-preparatory lyceums which they attended (Bourdieu 1984:1, 6, 56).

Naturally then, they also avoided realism on stage because they considered it artistically inferior. While they appeared genuinely committed to ethnographic work, as amateur actors seeking to establish themselves professionally in Elblag's theatre community, they wanted to showcase their talent in the best light possible. "I hope my friends won't show up... they'll see *that* [Olga's acting] and will walk out immediately...who wouldn't?...I would!," Olga fretted (Field notes 2003). They were especially concerned about the audience's response to "Hope" because of the fiasco of our earlier production of "Horses and Angels" at a national theatre competition. Despite our efforts to create a work of high calibre, the performance failed to win recognition from the jury. When rumours spread around the Centre that the performance was snubbed because the jury believed it expressed "radical, unsupported, feminist sentiments" (Field notes 2003), the actors were heartbroken. Some of them thought they needed to "prove themselves" as artists to local audiences through the project "Hope". This was evident in the words of advice Derek shared with his fellow actors: "We better show people we can act... so they don't think the jury was right [about their verdict]" (Field notes 2003).

Natural then was the actors' resistance to engaging in what they perceived as popular art. They openly scoffed at, ignored, attempted to sabotage, or blatantly refused the Roma women's suggestions and requests. For example, they mocked the melodrama implicit in the texts the women developed by acting in a hyper-melodramatic style—exaggerating their gestures and movements, and incorporating caricatures of pathos in their voices. I often intervened by asking the actors to stop their behaviour, by diverting their attention, or by talking to them outside of rehearsals; however, my interventions usually had negligible effects: "It is hard not to laugh [at the Roma women] when one is blabbing the same things over and over again," quipped Olga. I think that my interventions fell on deaf ears because the actors, to a certain extent, held me accountable for the ill fortune of "Horses and Angels," which soured our mutual relations. Grazyna reproached me one day: "Maybe if *we* had been more attuned to what the jury expected, we would've won!" (Field notes 2003). Here "we" was clearly pointed at me as the director of the project. I believe the actors expected me to compensate them for the disappointment of "Horses and Angels" by demonstrating my alliance with them in "Hope."

The actors' overt resistance to the Roma women's conceptions of theatre led to steadily increasing conflicts and tensions between the two groups. The Roma women responded to the mockery and sabotage by asserting their authority as directors of the project, setting impossibly high performance standards for the actors, and then mocking, criticizing, and at times insulting them. For example, Randia would often remark, "they'll never learn!" when the actors tried to learn a new Roma dance or song. Any questions or suggestions the actors offered about improving their dancing, the women would brusquely counter, "don't tell me how to dance!" (Field notes 2003). And when they were teaching Derek the steps of a Roma dance, they went so far as to scorn him as "crooked-legged," "stiff stick" and "mentally slow" (Transcript, Rehearsal 2003).

"But It Would've Been So Much Fun!": Celebrating Tradition or Fighting Injustice?

Conflicts over representation that played out in rehearsals not only arose from our divergent understandings of theatre

as an art form, but also from the differences in what the project meant to us and in what we hoped to accomplish through it. While in the pre-rehearsal sessions the women spoke of the performance as an opportunity to tell the larger public about the hardships the Roma suffer in Poland and to generate help from Elblag's community, in rehearsals they were preoccupied with creating a performance that would celebrate and share their "traditional" cultural practices with the Gadje[10] actors and audiences. "We could have a large table set up, covered with a white table cloth, and lots of food on it, so they see that the Roma really know how to play!" suggested Ana during one rehearsal (Transcript, Rehearsal 2003). The women wanted the performance to be replete with a traditionally extravagant Roma wedding feast, music and dancing. For the Roma women, such "traditional" cultural practises were also about having fun, as they enjoyed both dancing and singing. The actors, who saw the project as professional development, a way of gaining public exposure in Elblag's theatre community, and a political forum wherein to critique racism, resisted the Roma women's notion of the performance as a celebration of "traditional" Roma culture. While for them the project was also about having fun, as they were passionate about theatre, having fun for them meant doing "serious artistic work" of an avant-garde aesthetic (Field notes 2003). Thus the actors objected to the women's scrupulously realistic celebration of Roma culture because they found it both theatrically uninteresting and politically denuded. "We have to be careful about how we say things...how we represent them [the Roma]" said Grazyna after one of our rehearsals, "we want the performance to speak against racism and not to perpetuate Roma stereotypes" (Field notes 2003).

Also committed to creating an ethnographic-artistic undertaking with a political agenda, I was uneasy about what I perceived as exoticizing representations of Roma culture, because I did not want "Hope" to perpetuate stereotypes of the Roma as a mysterious, carefree and pristine "other," or mask the unequal relations of power that defined the Roma's and Gadje's interactions in Poland, as well as our own relations in the rehearsal studio. Hence, for me, the women's understanding of the performance as a celebration of Roma "tradition" lacked a politics of culture and power, which I thought was essential in a country where, to borrow Razack's words, "minorities are invited to keep their culture but enjoy no greater access to power and resources" (1994:898). Thus, one day I suggested that we incorporate Brecht's idea of having the actors step out of character in order to provide commentary on the performance's action, and to expose it as a constructed event, and not a true rendering of Roma life. My intention was not to obfuscate the Roma women's soap opera aesthetic, but rather, to problematize the representations of Roma culture and "tradition" in the play.

Yet, I have to admit that I also felt guilty about disappointing my actors with "Horses and Angels" and, thus, hoped to compensate them with a more rewarding end result this time around. Furthermore, it would be misleading of me to deny that the artist in me was also, to some extent, concerned about creating a theatrically compelling event that would validate the actors' and my reputations as theatre artists. Ultimately, we were all preoccupied with our reputations, as the Roma women dismissed my idea of including Brechtian techniques in the performance out of a concern that this would only "confuse the audience," "compromise the beauty of the performance," and make "people think that either the actors don't know how to act, or that the Roma are 'not all there [mentally]' " (Field notes 2003). The actors in turn criticized the women's obstinacy, and argued that "politically, nothing will ever change for the Roma if all they show to the audience is how many hens they can eat at a wedding table" (Olga, Field notes 2003).

The tensions in rehearsals increased significantly, and I found myself implicated in what Loizos identified as the anthropologist's "Faustian contract"—the unspoken contract of reciprocity that binds us to our research participants, and expects us to compensate them for their participation in the study (1994:14). My Faustian contract with my research participants required that I be the Roma women's and the actors' accomplice in sabotaging each other's work. Randia made it clear when she asserted: "When we sometimes disagree, Magda, you've got to keep our side, won't you?...because you know what we want and you're our friend." "Tell them [the actors] that you are an anthropologist, you know what you're doing...and it's your play" (Field notes 2003)—Ana counselled me after a rehearsal in which the actors had bickered about costumes. Similarly, the actors urged me to "wake-up and acknowledge [my] responsibilities as director [because] if we leave the performance entirely to the Roma women, the audience will leave [the theatre] bored to death" (Field notes 2003). Thus, the Roma women often invoked my role as their friend or anthropologist to convince me to stand behind their artistic vision, while the actors appealed more to my role as a theatre director. So, slipping on Faust's shoes, I was trying not to give away too much of my soul to either side. I had become a juggler of power in my attempts to balance both the Roma women's and the actors' needs, and ultimately, my own need to hold the

production together. Eventually, however, when the power struggles in the rehearsals threatened to entirely derail the project, I yielded to the actors' demands and convinced the Roma women not to make the wedding feast a significant part of the story, but instead, to foreground arduous, rather than celebratory, moments in the characters' lives. The women eventually acquiesced to my suggestions and we presented Nadzieja's wedding, dance, as well as several other scenes, in a stylised slow-motion to highlight the fragmentation of her schizophrenic psyche. Consequently, the performance that was publicly presented at the Cultural Centre was a melange of "avant-garde" and "soap opera." The performance's amalgam aesthetic was very well received by the Roma women, the actors and the audience; however, the audience members to whom Shawn and I had spoken primarily saw the play as a representation of Roma folklore and culture, and not as a critique of racism and violence. While I attribute this response to the specific context of Poland where discussing racism might have been seen as politically perilous given the country's recent attempts at counteracting global media representations of Polish pogroms of Jews under state socialism; nevertheless, the limits of stylization as a politicizing strategy are evident here.[11]

It is also important to acknowledge that although the Roma women appreciated and agreed to incorporate stylization into the performance, in some ways it was a hollow victory: I believe it had a detrimental effect on the relations between them and the actors, and was, in part, responsible for the unattainable standards of perfection the women demanded of the actors in rehearsals. One night, after watching a run-through of the performance, Randia confronted me: "You have to look truth straight in the eye, Magda...a big Roma wedding would've been so much fun!" (Field notes 2003).

Looking Truth Straight in the Eye

The power struggles that arose in rehearsals speak of the challenges of my specific project "Hope"; however, they are also, to a certain extent, indicative of the conflicts that can characterize community-academia performance research. In such partnerships, conflicts are not uncommon, and only recently have they become a central theme in experimental ethnography literature (Edmondson 2005; Pratt and Kirby 2003; Szeman 2005). Such conflicts often oscillate around questions of what should be represented, and how it should be represented. These are framed by concerns over content, aesthetics, target audience, or the research project's goals (Pratt and Kirby 2003). For example, the use of a realist versus non-realist aesthetic can become a central point of contention between academics and community collaborators (Edmondson 2005; Pratt and Kirby 2003). Western academics can at times privilege a non-realist aesthetic, especially in representations of violence, oppression and suffering, because they are troubled by realism's colonial and imperialist legacy, its problematic claims to objectivity and truth (Edmondson 2005:463), its penchant for sentimentality through the identification of the actor with the character (Pratt and Kirby 2003:22), and the proclivity of its linear narrative to "flatten contradiction and systemize chaos" (Taussig 1986:132). Consequently, academics may favour anti-realist modes of representation, including Brechtian strategies of alienation (Edmondson 2005:22; Pratt and Kirby 2003:22; Taussig 1986:144); Bakhtin's grotesque (Pratt and Kirby 2003:23); dada and surrealism (Feldman and Laub 1992); clowning (Pratt and Kirby 2003:28); and some circus techniques, such as acrobatics and juggling (Edmondson 2005:466). Conversely, according to Edmondson (2005), community collaborators may want to embrace realism as a mode of representation because, in their struggles for justice, they want their stories to be taken seriously as "fact," not "fiction," and to invoke audience empathy and identification. They also may find the use of a realist narrative—"with its promise of restoration," closure, and ability to render the incomprehensibility of violence comprehensible—imperative to safely relate stories of violence and trauma. Accustomed to realist modes of representation as a result of globalizing forces, research participants may also resist non-realist strategies propagated by academics as another version of Western dominance and paternalism (Edmondson 2005:464-468). Such conflicts between community and academic collaborators can be understood in terms of what Bourdieu (1984) defined as symbolic struggles for "distinction," namely, for instituting and authorizing one's own aesthetic tastes over those of others. For Bourdieu, such struggles are often expressed as "intolerance ('sick-making')" of other tastes—one of the most important dividing points between classes. This intolerance, Bourdieu argued, is exemplified in the resistance of the working-class spectators to the intellectual elites' subversions of traditional modes of theatrical expression (e.g., Brecht's A-effect; Bourdieu 1984: 4-5, 56).

Similar conflicts—resulting from different understandings of what should be represented in the performance, and how to represent it—also defined my project "Hope". While I commenced my research committed to protect and advance the rights of my research participants, in retrospect, I see that I neglected to consider sufficiently what such rights meant from their perspectives. Although the Roma women's conception of the

performance as a celebration of their culture might have been, in part, problematic, as it advanced the notion of culture "whereby culture is taken to mean values, beliefs, knowledge, and customs that exist in a timeless and unchangeable vacuum outside of patriarchy, racism, imperialism, and colonialism" (Razack 1994:896), I now recognise that it was unfair to dismiss the women's representation of their culture merely as an identification with hegemonic forces that perpetuated their oppression (Gramsci 1971). In fact, the Roma women's understanding of the performance as a celebration of their culture might have been more "messy" and contradictory than I had imagined. It might have been simultaneously hegemonic and counter-hegemonic, perpetuating some of the more innocuous Roma stereotypes (mysterious, pristine, musical), while at the same time destabilizing some negative ones (lazy or passive victim). Furthermore, the women's desire to turn the performance into a celebration of Roma culture may have been an astute political move, a way of asserting their right to publicly celebrate their ways of life, after over five decades of the socialist state's enforced assimilatory policies (Ringold 2000). Ana, after all, wanted the performance to display an extravagant Roma wedding feast, so "they [the non-Roma audience] can see that the Roma really know how to play!" (Transcript, Rehearsal 2003). Clifford argues that while in postindustrial contexts, displays of cultural heritage have been often viewed as "a form of depoliticized, commodified nostalgia—ersatz tradition," this ignores the fact that "tradition" often plays a crucial role in people's struggles for political and cultural freedom (2004:6, 9). Thus, displaying and celebrating their cultural practices within the play could have been for the Roma women a politicizing strategy of asserting their identity, survival and self-determination. The Roma women could have been acutely aware that in a world where racism is ubiquitous, the only recognition their work might get is in showcasing the "traditional" aspects of their culture. In one of our pre-rehearsal sessions, Ewa asserted, "when there's a Roma concert...people come to the city just to see the Roma dance and sing...but then when the concert is over, and the Roma aren't on the stage anymore, then they call...they call those same Roma thieves and criminals" (Transcript, Pre-Rehearsal 2003). The women's preference for realism as a mode of representation might have been a means of legitimizing their representations of "traditional" Roma culture—a "public form of truth-claiming" (Feldman 1992:60). It was evident the women feared that non-realism would compromise the seriousness of their representations when they argued that Brechtian illusion-breaking strategies might negatively reflect on them and the actors. Finally, what I also neglected to take into account—sadly, given the project's commitment to sensuous and embodied scholarship—was that the women's celebration of their culture via "traditional" Roma dance might have also been about the joy of dancing, a more embodied and sensuous experience that could have been empowering for the Roma women, albeit not in easily rationalizable terms.

Ironically, when my project sought to facilitate a ground upon which the Roma women could articulate their claims for justice by persuading them to foreground the arduous and background the celebratory, and to incorporate stylization as a representational strategy, I denied their right to speak for themselves. Naturally, my project was complicated by the fact that the Roma women and the actors—who had largely incompatible goals and agendas—were my research participants, and as an anthropologist, I was equally accountable to both groups. Furthermore, I also held the roles of theatre instructor and artistic director at the Cultural Centre; and while I generally wanted to privilege the artistic vision of the Roma women, as they were marginalized members of society, at the same time, I also felt obligated to support the actors' artistic ambitions. Certainly, I could have left my employment with the Cultural Centre and, instead, worked with a community of artists with no professional aspirations; but given my limited research funds as a graduate student, I needed the Cultural Centre's production support to realize my project. Consequently, I tried to juggle power in rehearsals in ways that were cognizant of both the Roma women's and the actors' concerns, and the performance of "Hope"—a melange of "avant-garde" and "soap opera"—was the end-product of that. Yet, given the Roma women's marginalized status, this aesthetic stew needs to be seen as a compromise made "under Western duress" (Edmondson 2005:466). Such a "compromise" was possible because I believed, in my commitment to abstract notions of collaboration, empowerment and politicization, that a performance-centred research that combines "the anthropological" with "the aesthetic expressive" would facilitate a critical and equitable research methodology. Instead, in ignoring the Roma women's own expressed needs, my project proved to be an unwittingly paternalistic enterprise wherein I assumed I knew what was best for them.

At the time of conducting my research, however, I did not see my decision to introduce stylization into the performance, and to foreground the hardships of Roma life as paternalistic or disempowering for the women. I was motivated by a desire to appease the actors and prevent the project from imploding, all the while believing that I

was acting in the women's best interests. While I knew that focusing on Roma hardships risked perpetuating stereotypes of the Roma as passive victims, I saw it as a lesser evil in a country that systematically refuses to acknowledge and address violence suffered by Roma. To me, foregrounding the arduous aspects of Roma life constituted a more politically astute strategy. After all, the Roma women themselves argued in the pre-rehearsal sessions that in Poland no one was interested in Roma problems, only in their culture.

At the same time, however, I cannot say that my decision to compromise the Roma women's vision of the performance was entirely calculated. At the outset of my research, I would have never imagined that I could impose my own aesthetic upon the Roma women; but in retrospect, I recognize that fieldwork *happens to us* on a more experiential level. The ethnographer is not "a fly on the wall," who can observe from a distance and easily rationalize his or her research experience on the spot (Cerwonka and Malkki 2007:174), because fieldwork throws us amidst unpredictable relations of power and competing agendas, where we frequently have to make difficult moral and ethical decisions with little, if any, time for reflection. Sometimes, the unfamiliarity, uncertainty and intensity of the ethnographic whirlpool can lead us to make decisions and act in ways surprising to us in hindsight. This is what, in part, happened during this project. While as an anthropologist I was aware that expressions of cultural heritage can play an important role in marginalized people's political struggles (an issue discussed even in introductory anthropology textbooks), in rehearsals I had failed to recognize the women's desire to celebrate their cultural practices as a means of asserting Roma identity and survival. Weighed down by the chains of my Faustian contract, I perceived the women's attempts at displaying their Roma "tradition" in the performance primarily as a counter to the actors' arrogance in rehearsals and, consequently, I made decisions I later regretted.

In fact, I see now that the intensity of fieldwork experience made all of us respond differently in different research situations. While in the pre-rehearsal sessions, I assured the Roma women that I was committed to advancing their rights, in rehearsals I refused them such rights. Likewise, the actors expressed their devotion to social justice research in the pre-rehearsal sessions, but in rehearsals they stonewalled the Roma women's artistic vision. In the pre-rehearsal sessions the Roma argued they wanted the performance to speak out against the violence in their lives, but in rehearsals they were preoccupied with developing a performance that would celebrate their "tradition." Lassiter aptly summarizes this inconsistent nature of fieldwork when he notes that initial agreements between anthropologists and research participants "often shift in new contexts where the power of original discussions becomes compromised by other factors beyond our direct control and beyond our vision of what the project can and will become" (2005:96). For example, it is possible that in the pre-rehearsal sessions the women wanted the performance to focus on violence in their lives, because in this early research stage, they adopted my—and the actors'—goals for the project in order to secure their relationship with us (Lindlof 1995:177). Yet when the contexts had shifted in rehearsals, the women's objectives also appeared to follow suit. Perhaps by the time we commenced the rehearsals, the women had grown more comfortable with their participation in the project and thus, more confident in asserting their own artistic and political goals. Or maybe the imminence of opening night shook their confidence, and they became concerned that portraying violence committed against the Roma in a public performance could compromise their personal safety. After all, when we once brainstormed how to represent violence on stage, the women refused to implicate Poles directly so as not to fuel existing antagonisms.

My failure to accommodate the women's desires and expectations, however contradictory and shifting they may have been, left me unsettled about my entire understanding of performance-centred research, and about my role as ethnographer. Does theatre offer more opportunities for collaborative, empowering and politicizing research? At times I think that my interviews with the Roma women, my daily visits to their homes, hanging out with them as they were fortune-telling, accompanying them on errands, and lending an ear to their stories of joy and sorrow might have given them a greater sense of empowerment than the actual process of developing a theatre performance. In the end, I do not think that there is a simple answer to this question. Every research project and ethnographer-participant relationship is unique. Each is embedded in, and also creates, different and contested fields of power and, thus, naturally will have different meanings and collaborative, empowering and politicizing potentials.

How do I envision my future ethnographic journey in the light of my experiences in the project "Hope?" I want it to be an ethnography of discovery, in which both the research participants and ethnographer learn ways of doing ethnography together, starting anew with each project and each set of circumstances. Undoubtedly, this will involve being more cautious about all of my assumptions about ethnography and art, and I will no longer look to them as the sole guiding principles in my ethnographic

endeavours. Clearly, had I been more flexible about my research objective to study violence as experienced by the Roma women, I would have likely responded more creatively to the women's desires to celebrate their "tradition" through "Hope." Had I been more open-minded about my methodological commitments, I would have recognized that collaboration, politicization and empowerment can bear different meanings, dimensions and implications, depending on who is involved in the project, and where the project takes place. This is an important lesson I had learned over the course of my project. Experiences in the field—especially in unstable socio-political contexts—will always challenge our theories and methodologies, rendering some of them irrelevant in the process. As Greenhouse points out, "people's altered lives challenge...ethnographers to redefine...violence and humane affirmation, structure and agency, hegemony and resistance" (2002:8). Yet, to me, an ethnography of discovery should go beyond merely being open-minded about one's theoretical and methodological "toolkit." It should also involve committing oneself to what I call a "look inward"—an ongoing awareness and critique of the power relations within one's own ethnographic process. Such a critique would consider the ways in which power enters, and is being produced and reproduced, in and through our field relations (Groves and Chang 1999:257). This would demand of us not only modifying our theoretical and methodological objectives in response to such a production of power, but also improvising—in the most ethical and creative ways—our volatile and contradictory relationships with research participants.

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Notes

1 In this paper, as well as in my recent book *Staging Strife: Lessons from Performing Ethnography with Polish Roma* (2010), I use the term *Roma* both as adjective and noun in accordance with the Oxford English Dictionary usage guidelines. While *Romani* or *Romany* can also be used as adjectives, my Roma participants favoured the adjectival form of *Roma* due to the ambiguity of the terms *Romani* and *Romany*, which can refer to both a Roma girl or woman, and to the Indo-Aryan language of the Roma people.

2 The term *tradition* is clearly problematic as it is deeply rooted in anthropology's classical notion of culture—non-Western culture in particular—as "bounded," stable, isolated from its larger social, cultural, political contexts and defined by "tradition" that is diametrically opposed to Western "modernity" (Crehan 2002:37, 53). Currently, anthropologists recognize that cultures are porous, fluid, shifting and interconnected (Crehan 2002:49; Gupta and Ferguson 1997:4); and traditions are not ancient and preserved customs, but continuously constructed and re-constructed in response to changing local and global relations of power (Crehan 2002:54). In this paper, I use the word *tradition* only in reference to what Roma women themselves identified, in the context of my project, as part of their "traditional cultural heritage," because I recognize that Roma culture has not been an autonomous and bounded entity, and Roma tradition is not an antediluvian set of beliefs and practices (Okely 2010:38), but rather, an "imposed, invented, reworked and transformed...site of difference and contestation" (Gupta and Ferguson 1997:5) that has formed "alongside and in opposition to other dominating cultures" (Okely 2010:40).

3 Maturity exams are written by students in Poland in their final year of secondary school.

4 We charged an admission of eight zloty in an effort to raise money for the Roma women.

5 A precursor of realism in theatre was Konstantin Stanislavski (1863-1938), Russian theatre director and actor, and co-founder of the Moscow Art Theatre (1898), whose theories later formed the basis for the development of "Method Acting." Stanislavski's theory of theatre called for realistic characters and stage settings. The actors were to evoke what Stanislavski coined as "emotion memory" in order to faithfully represent the characters' emotional realities (see Stanislavski 1984).

6 However, it is important to recognize that, historically, melodrama and realism have been diametrically opposed to each other. In the 19th and early 20th centuries, realism—with its commitment to a "truthful" rendition of "space and time [and] social and cultural relationships" (Shohat and Stam 1994:179)—was a reply to melodrama's simple plot, stock characters and exaggerated stereotypical and externalized acting. Stanislavski's psychological realism, for example, sought to challenge "the melodramatic theatricalism" by training the actor to use their own emotions in creating psychologically "truthful" characterizations (Wiles 1980:16). It is the 20th-century television genre of soap opera that has co-opted elements of both melodrama and realism by either combining realism's "truthful" rendition of social

landscape–relationships with melodramatic, externalized acting, or more frequently, Stanislavski's realist acting style with melodrama's themes of domestic life, and family relationships (Butler 1991; Gledhill 1992:114, 118; Longhurst 1987).

7 *Cultural verisimilitude* is a term used to problematize the concept of realism.

8 While the women sought to incorporate melodramatic themes into the performance, they favoured psychological realism over melodrama's exaggerated and externalized acting style.

9 For readers interested in Roma performance, there exists substantial literature on the topic (Kertész-Wilkinson 1997; Lemon 2000; Silverman 1996).

10 *Gadjo* is the Romany word for non-Roma people; its plural form is *Gadje*.

11 Given the theme of this special issue of *Anthropologica* (with a focus on experimental and engaged ethnography), in this paper I focus on ethnographic process. Readers interested in a more detailed discussion about the development and performance of "Hope" should see Kazubowski-Houston 2010.

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