

Synopsis

The goal of *Mirror/Echo/Tilt* is to work with people affected by the criminal justice system to create a visual, performance based curriculum that reframes personal narratives, promotes individual agency, and breaks down the myth of the criminal.

Summary

Mirror/Echo/Tilt is a project created in collaboration with people who are court-involved, formerly incarcerated, or otherwise affected by the criminal justice system. Through a curriculum based on visual storytelling, participants translate personal narratives into performance in order to replace a culturally embedded conception of criminality with new language so that the mind and body may think, feel, and move in a way not defined by their previous experience with incarceration. Our goal is to facilitate participants' agency to tell their own stories and ultimately, reframe existing narratives defining the "criminal."

It is designed to be a living curriculum, to be modeled and adapted for different publics and implemented in collaboration with diversion, alternatives to incarceration, and other such programs, which actively impact an individual's case/probation/or court status.

Our aim is to research, develop, document, and archive our curriculum online, expanding the project's reach by training participants to be mentors in their own communities, and ensuring its continued evolution beyond the scope and timeframe of the original work. Empowering previous participants to be facilitators themselves expands the possibility of reducing recidivism for the instructors as well as those whom they may impact in their own communities.

Goals

Through our workshop process we unpack the mechanisms operating behind the criminalization of black and brown bodies. Participants translate personal narratives into performance in order to regain agency in the telling of their own stories. A focus on concepts of aspiration and joy is thus necessary – the radical reimagining of how one sees her/himself within narratives of incarceration, imprisonment, and reentry, and is later able to retell this personal history.

We use performance to strip down personal stories to their emotional core, and to convey the most essential elements with minimal gesture as a way to look for the meanings at heart of their experiences with incarceration. We then perform scenes without spoken language to create space for new interpretations to emerge.

Our objectives do not merely lie in the representation of an issue; we do not attempt to skim the surface of mass incarceration and recidivism. Instead the goal is for participants to see the power they have to create change on a personal level, by working together to reinterpret one another's stories and exploring how those stories can be transformed.

Themes

- Reconfiguring the Hero Figure – Joseph's Cambell's *The Hero's Journey* as a structure to reimagine the narratives of imprisonment and reentry
- Masculine Identity as Performance – everyday visual posturing vs. the media's visual codification of the black / brown body as criminal
- Doubling - mirroring or re-inscribing of trauma through another body or scene in order to reveal hidden thoughts, emotions, and realities

- Double Consciousness – the lived, conscious perception of feeling identity as divided into two parts (that which is embodied and that which is perceived / inscribed onto you by others) and the negotiation of this consciousness toward the re-envisioning of existing personal narratives

Core Methods

- Silent, minimal, frozen gesture: the distillation of a story to its most essential elements. Stripping narrative of spoken language allows the event to become “distanced” enough for the group to objectively analyze the forces surrounding the event, whether systemic, environmental, or self-imposed.
- Externalization: the process of interpreting and translating a personal story through another’s body to externalize the memory of a traumatic event. This distances the original storyteller from their remembered narrative, allowing them to more objectively analyze a situation likely to be clouded by emotion.
- Media analysis: especially as related to depicting black and brown Americans in a range of genre, including literature (The Invisible Man), television (The Wire), cultural studies (Joseph Campbell’s The Hero’s Journey) and journalism. This brings awareness to the tools used by the media to represent people of color, in comparison with how they choose to represent themselves.
- Media visualization: the framing, recording, and collective discussion of scenes using cameras or cell phones. This facilitates the group to see the larger structure of the narratives anew; increases individual investment in the process; and strengthens self-esteem, by seeing one’s own story reproduced, while incorporating documentation into the learning process itself.

Lessons

INTRO (WEEK 1) - Walks (or How to Walk in Your Own Shoes)

Need room for this.

Walk as yourself, to fill the current space—explore every corner of the space, to take up space. Change you pace and rhythm – speed up, slow down.

Then, walk as you would walk in different settings, like:

1. Walk as if you were on your street, in your neighborhood.
2. Walk as if you were in your school, at your job.
3. Walk as you would in court, as you just walked in court.

Did your walks change? If not, was that a conscious decision? If yes, what were the differences—the slight shifts in tempo, posture, style? How do those subtle shifts carry meaning? Why did your walks change?

Every day is a performance – from the moment we choose what to wear to the way we walk down the street – every decision, every movement, whether conscious or not, carries with it some meaning.

It is important to understand that every gesture is loaded with meaning. Meaning is internalized by each person... we each have our own interpretations and associations of this meaning. But meaning is also placed onto our bodies by other people... it is important to also understand this bigger picture.

Suspicion, for example, is the reason (the meaning) that Laquan McDonald was shot 16 times upon arrival... why Tamir Rice was shot upon arrival, why Jonathan Ferrell was shot upon arrival, why Freddie Gray was pursued, why Walter Scott was shot in the back, why 50 bullets were shot into Sean Bell's car and why Trayvon Martin was followed.

WEEK 1 - Minimal Gesture (or How to Abandon Words)

Using a prompt (e.g. isolation, desperation, anxiety) pairs of participants tell each other a story, or describe a moment related to a personal experience in as much detail as possible. Visual information is key (i.e. posture, time of day, clothing, expression, movement, color).

1. As the first person tells the story, the second person attempts to mentally record as much information as possible, before alternating.
2. Each individual then translates their partner's story into a performative gesture (action, movement) without using words. Rather than capture the entire narrative, the goal is instead to relate the emotional content of the story's most essential moment.
3. By subtracting from the performance more and more, the 'actor' should work toward distilling the narrative down to one memorable action that encapsulates the story.
4. The group is then given the opportunity to discuss their own interpretations of the scene.
5. The 'actor' then describes the scene and explains their own choices in translating the story.
6. Finally, the original storyteller may share the narrative, volunteering as much information as they feel comfortable.

How did it feel to have (the essence of) your story pictured in front of you? Do you agree with the person's assessment of which aspect of your story is most important or essential? Did the performance and/or group's interpretations in any way impact how you would tell the story next time?

Alternative

1. As the first person tells the story, the second person attempts to mentally record as much information as possible, before alternating.
2. Each individual (sculptor) then translates their partner's story into a single image, positioning the other participants in a tableau related to the story while reciting the narrative aloud. Rather than capture the entire narrative, the goal is instead to relate the emotional content of the story's most essential moment.
3. As the performance takes place, the original storyteller records the action using their cellphone.

4. The sculptor and storyteller should then trade roles. The storyteller recites the narrative once more, in their own words, while making any modifications to the tableau as the original sculptor captures the words and altered scene with their cellphone.
5. Finally, the pair may share each other's videos to view the comparison.

How did it feel to have (the essence of) your story pictured in front of you? Do you agree with the person's assessment of which aspect of your story is most important or essential? Did the telling and/or performance cause you to revisit the your memory differently. What choices did you make in re-sculpting the scene? Did you tell the story differently as you modified the scene, then when you originally recounted it for your partner? After viewing the two videos, what were the major differences in how the story was told and interpreted?

We can perform the entire narrative as if it were a movie. But we all know this movie. It has been played out for us over and over again. But by distilling the story down to the most essential moment – we see how one gesture carries all the meaning. The anxiety of being pulled over by the cops – that fear of the unknown – is captured in one moment... the turning of the head and the expression in your face. And whether or not a person has ever been pulled over by the cops, everyone understands the feeling of your heart jumping out of your chest.... that is where we all connect.

WEEK 2 - Collective Storytelling (or How to Mind the Gaps)

1. The group shares in a collective listening/viewing of a series of edited segments from [The Wire](#), which follows one particular character, Michael Lee, who over the course of many episodes turns toward a life of crime. It is important that no one interpret the material on behalf of the group as the video is screened. This is each individual's opportunity to offer their own interpretation.
2. As the video progresses, each participant should silently attempt to mentally record, in as much detail as possible, one to two key moments – information she or he feel is crucial to the narrative.
Each participant is given the opportunity to write down, from memory, those few key moments from the story. The group collectively places the moments in what they consider chronological order, allowing the participants' recollection to take preference over accuracy.
3. Outlining the narrative into three sections - beginning, middle, end - analyze what language is used to define the character and his turn toward crime as oppose to larger themes or theoretical understandings. The group should attempt to deduce from what is actually seen in the video—visual information takes precedent over personal interpretations.
4. Finally, one member of the group reads aloud the different "chapters." While read aloud, the group spontaneously creates an image by positioning themselves in different performance roles. This action can be produced for each section – beginning, middle, end – or shaped to capture the entire narrative holistically.
5. As a group, observe closely and try to deduce embedded meaning hidden beneath the given narrative.

Where are the gaps in the information that is offered by the video segments? When are we explicitly told something about the character / storyline and when are we left to infer pieces of the narrative on our own? What meaning is found in these gaps? After all we are left with, what singular piece of information about the character is most important?

Alternative

Split the room so some are storytellers and others are audience.

1. First teller begins a narrative based on a prompt (e.g. risk, conflict, terror, escape) while other tellers are outside of the room.
2. After a designated length of time, the next teller enters the room.
3. The first teller then repeats the last sentence or few words while the next teller listens carefully.
4. Freely interpreting the narrative, he or she then continues the story.
5. Continue the process with subsequent tellers until reaching an “end” to the narrative.
6. Can also be executed with an audio recorder so that the entire group participates (reciting the story into the audio recorder as opposed to splitting up between tellers and listeners) and/or listens to the entire recording at the end.

Where did the narrative go? Was the story more or less resolved? Is there still cohesion to the narrative even though there were multiple tellers? How does it feel to have your portion of the story hijacked by someone else?

We pull apart narratives to read between the lines... to see what the story is attempting to portray for us and from there, what gaps remain—what we are left to interpret for ourselves. It is in these gaps that the real story is told.

This process is not about your guilt and innocence. This is about your awareness. I firmly believe that with knowledge and awareness – an understanding that meaning is bigger than all of us in the room –comes power. And with power one can choose to navigate life with different options, through different choices.

WEEK 3 - Stop! Think! (or How to Listen to Your Internal Monologue)

Each participant contemplates how to represent a significant event in their life and/or a corresponding idea (e.g., conflict, fear, escape) as a single image. In pairs, each participant tell another all the information necessary to create (sculpt) that image, leaving out any info regarding the before and after of the event.

1. The participant who has listened to the depiction (sculptor) arranges the room, objects, and people in the room into a single tableau to portray this event or idea. If describing an event, others (actors) may be given minimal information about context (i.e., its 1999 in the Bronx). If representing an idea, like incarceration, minimal information may be given concerning the character, such as “man, 30 years old,” while leaving room for the actors to interpret the details.
2. Without moving, the actors then voice the running interior monologue of what their characters are doing, thinking and feeling.

3. The original teller then mentally records the actors' interpretations of events as a way to analyze their own personal narrative.
4. They may then choose to re-sculpt the scene—adjusting positions and relationships of people, setting, and objects to see how it affects the monologues.

How does it feel to have someone else portray an important event from your life? Where were the gaps or inaccuracies? By sculpting the scene yourself were you able to capture more authenticity or accuracy? How would your relating the before and after of the event affect the shaping of your narrative?

Alternative

1. The participant who has listened to the depiction (sculptor) arranges the room, objects, and people in the room into a single tableau to portray this event or idea. If describing an event, others (actors) may be given minimal information about context (i.e., its 1999 in the Bronx). If representing an idea, like incarceration, minimal information may be given concerning the character, such as "man, 30 years old," while leaving room for the actors to interpret the details.
2. The original storyteller should then weave in and out of space, at times facing a frozen group member.
3. The storyteller performs an action that mirrors or deflects the gesture's meaning.

What choices did you make when encountering a gesture? Did you choose to mimic, confront, or maybe console the person? How and why?

*So we connect the dots. We start by understanding the inherent meaning in subtle gestures... how a simple walk, or tilt of the head, or stare is loaded with meaning. Then we build. We study how media, in this case *The Wire*, attempts to portray a young man's turn to criminality. We learn how to read narratives... to find the nuance, the embedded meaning.*

Then we build. We translate our own stories into a scene to see how it is played out before us. So that we may have the opportunity to see where the narrative fails... how the performance is not telling the story accurately enough. We gain the tools to describe the narrative differently, using language that was not given to us or placed upon our bodies—to tell the story the way it needs to be told, so that our truth is conveyed. So that it is our story to tell.

WEEK 4 - The Hero's Journey (or How to See Oneself as Hero)

As a means to reiterate the project's purpose and turn the group's sight onto the possibility of changing narrative, the session starts with readings. First a passage from the end of Ralph Ellison's *The Invisible Man* is read aloud to frame a conversation surrounding how one is perceived vs. how one may identify her/himself and their position in the world. The group then moves onto an examination of the narrative structure of *The Hero's Journey* - Joseph Campbell's pattern of narrative that appears in drama, storytelling, myth, religious ritual, and psychological development. This framework is introduced to show links between the hero narrative and stories of survival, renewal, and transformation among group members, as a way to redefine language used to describe their own personal process of reentry.

Using a prompt (e.g., protection, freedom, aspiration), pairs of participants tell each other a story, or describe a moment related to a personal experience in as much detail as possible. Visual information is key (i.e. posture, time of day, clothing, expression, movement, color). The group then moves onto composing a performative action under the same goal of transforming personal narrative toward a more positive outlook.

1. The participant who has listened to the depiction describe the key information of the story to the rest of the group and captures its most crucial moment as a frozen gesture.
2. Each member of the group then inserts her/himself into the scene with a frozen gesture, one by one, to further define, add to, or distort the narrative.
3. Finally, each individual is asked to slowly leave the scene, again one by one, as a way to dissolve the original memory and examine if/how the narrative has been shifted.

As additions / modifications were made to the scene, what new relationships emerged? How has the embedded meaning in the original gesture been altered? At any point did it become less important that the scene be specific to your story? As this scene disappeared, did new information surface? Did your memory of the event evolve at all?

Alternative

1. One participant recites their own story connected to the prompt and is then asked to leave from view.
2. Each member of the group is then asked to imagine a role for themselves in sculpting the scene (participants may occupy the same role unknowingly).
3. All at once and without communication, the group inserts themselves into the scene with a frozen gesture, one by one,
4. The original storyteller is asked to return to the room and quietly observe the scene.
5. Slowly the storyteller must move around the space to further define, add to, or distort the narrative by altering gestures.
6. Finally, the storyteller may choose to insert themselves into the scene as a way to introduce some level of personal authenticity, or even an imagined or more positive outcome.

Did the scene feel foreign to you? What choices did you make in modifying the information before you? Was it difficult to insert yourself into your own story? What process did you go through to finalize this scene using your own body?

It is your choice, moving forward, regardless of other people's perceptions of you, to define yourself as criminal or as someone who has possibly made a mistake - a mistake that has brought you this place. Moving forward you have a choice to define yourself as someone who has the ability to make choices.

Sometimes all that is required is one word for subjectivity to be reintroduced. In the retelling of your story it is that word that expressed your individual emotion. That singular sentiment is how you insert yourself into the narrative, how you gain a bit of power in the ways you are seen. It is with that word that the story becomes only yours to tell.

Is there potential in thinking of a possibility that exists alongside reality, without the intent of replacing it? If it is indeed conceivable to teach the notion of possibility within difficult circumstances, then agency in the retelling of one's story, and thus introspection, may lead to an acquisition of power. In the retelling of a narrative, maybe the outcome does not need to be altered in order for one to see the possibility of change. The question, therefore, remains, could it be possible for person to embody a memory and internalize it differently?