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Young People, Immigration and the Theater of Verbatim Research

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In this issue of Ubiquity's Creative Strand, we are blessed with a very unusual and longer piece that straddles the border between a play and a piece of research, *Listening Across Borders: Verbatim Ethnodrama of Participatory Youth Research on Immigration*, by Leah Panther and Lisa York. An ethnodrama, for the uninitiated, is, in originator Johnny Saldaña's words, a live theater piece created directly from qualitative research conducted to "investigate a particular facet of the human condition" (Saldaña, 2016, p. 1).

I was intrigued, having a strong background in theater (a bachelor's degree, and as a director and actor in over 70 productions) but because this is "verbatim" research, very little has been altered to make the piece seem more "theatrical." It is raw and slightly disjointed, the way people naturally are when they speak in real life. The characters only rarely refer to each other by name when they speak, so an audience would not know any of the character's names without a guide. Presumably, if performed for them, they would have access to either a paper copy or a digital version on their phones while watching the play.

Each of the characters/actors in this piece recalls verbatim their actual experiences conducting interview research with family members, friends and others, generally about different facets of the immigrant experience. The names used, including colorful ones like "Dr. Squiggles" were selected by the youth researchers themselves. Generally, the young people performing and who conducted the research were in their mid-teens, 15-17 years of age. Some of them are immigrants themselves, others are the children of immigrants. All have fascinating tales to tell.

The stage directions are sparse and to the point. The stage is described as empty and "eight chairs sit in a semi-circle, with the audience completing the circle" (Panther & York, 2025, p. 1). Sometimes, characters stand and address the audience directly; there is no "fourth wall" to break; this is presentational theater.

One center of concentration is on language; the character Dr. Squiggles says, “I am my language,” (Panther & York, 2025, Prologue, p.1). Much of the conversation is freewheeling and reflexive; the young people talk about their topics, but they also react to one another and contemplate, as young people would, the difficulties and joys of doing actual research. Most of the setting takes place in and concerns the town of Tucker, Georgia where the young researchers live. The authors of this piece are mentioned in the dialogue, too. So as mentioned, this was not only the results section of a study, it was an actual drama about what it was like for young people to conduct research for the first time.

Each of the researchers goes about what they do in a slightly different way. One uses keywords to describe what people say, another writes down what interviewees say in addition to the video record. They used an AI program to transcribe what was said from the audio record to transcript form. Sometimes, they went back after interviews and critiqued what they had asked their participants.

The play breaks down into scenes that describe the process of doing the research. Scene 1 was about actually creating the research questions. Scene 2 concerned collecting data. Scene 3 was data analysis. Scene 4 was dissemination. So, this was a process that a researcher would recognize. Each section was announced by an actor/researcher rising, stepping forward and announcing what the scene was about.

To make it easier on themselves when asking tough questions of their interviewees, the researchers created a kind of notecard game where questions would be identified as “Yellow for deep, orange for deeper, and black for deepest” in terms of what the young interviewers felt were the different levels of probing that the questions required of their participants. To examine the

cards that were used, visit <https://www.linguisticjusticecollaborative.com/about-georgia/storying-tucker-the-story-of-us/>.

Connected to this work is a website and podcast. To listen to the youth podcast, visit <https://www.linguisticjusticecollaborative.com/the-ljc-podcast/>. I strongly recommend to the interested that they avail themselves of the above external resources. There, they will find a lot of important contextual material that will help bring alive this theater piece, which is itself rather unusual in form and is particularly unusual in that it functions as a bona fide piece of real research and is also part of a scholarly paper.

As I read this interesting work, I kept wondering: Does it stand alone as theater? In other words, what if people other than the young researchers were brought in to perform it? Age-appropriate actors could certainly be found to act this in a “black box” format with a small audience. The question is, without the context of the actual actors who were themselves the researchers, would the piece work? And a concomitant important question is, was that what it was intended to do? It is conceivable that while one or two performances of this in a real theater by the original researchers is contemplable, having it function as a true theater piece that a theater group unconnected to this research might like to perform might mar its true intent. So, my advice is to read it carefully, perhaps out loud, and savor what it has to say about the diverse and beautiful immigrant experience here in America. I did and was rewarded for it.

References

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