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I Love You I Love You: Aesthetics of love in a culturally diverse youth theatre ensemble

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Abstract

Although love is rarely addressed in applied theatre and drama scholarship, it is nevertheless often present in participatory theatre practice. The Traction Youth Theatre Ensemble was based in a culturally diverse and vibrant satellite city south of Brisbane, Australia. While I was evaluating Traction's potential to promote social cohesion, I found that feelings and expressions of love informed and formed the aesthetics of the ensemble process, its ritualised daily practices, and its performances. I argue that love deserves our scholarly attention, if we are to continue pursuing ideals of social justice in intercultural participatory youth theatre practice and research.

Background

The Traction Youth Theatre Ensemble operated in Logan City Australia from 2014-2017, an outreach initiative of state theatre company, Queensland Theatre. Logan is a young, culturally and ethnically diverse satellite city situated around fifty kilometres south of Brisbane, on land that was traditionally owned by the Yugambeh and Yugara Aboriginal peoples. With a population of just over 313,000, Logan's suburbs are home to a high proportion of young families, migrants, refugees and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians, thanks to affordable housing, rapidly growing infrastructure, and proximity by train to its larger neighbour. Despite the strength and vibrancy of this diverse community, Logan has in recent years experienced negative media coverage, including reports on several high-profile

murders, and an interracial street fight sensationalised in the press as “race riots” (Calligeros 2013). Funded by the federal Department of Social Services (DSS) under their Diversity and Social Cohesion Program, Queensland Theatre formed Traction to counteract the negative stereotypes of Logan, provide a much-needed creative outlet for the young people there, and promote social cohesion. At the end of 2016, the Traction ensemble consisted of forty-nine young people aged twelve to eighteen, coming from several different high schools in the area, and reflecting their community’s diversity. The ensemble met after school one afternoon a week, and worked towards devised performances at each year’s end. The young people were exposed to a range of different drama forms and styles with lead facilitator Claire Christian, a youth theatre practitioner of eleven years’ experience and published playwright and author for young audiences. Guest facilitators would also join Claire to offer specific skills in areas of interest to the young people such as dance, stage combat and slam poetry (see Figure 1).

Towards the end of 2016, Queensland Theatre engaged me to undertake pilot research evaluating the program’s efficacy in promoting social cohesion (Woodland 2017). Social cohesion is a contested and problematic term that has been adopted in recent years by policy makers and bureaucrats in the West as part of a broader political agenda of multiculturalism. This was the agenda driving the DSS project funding, and so it was chosen as the focus for the pilot study. I was conscious that the term might seem abstract or unreachable for young people and for respondents whose first language was not English, so for the pilot I generated a set of common themes from the social cohesion literature for use in interviews, surveys and performance provocations that I felt would be accessible and meaningful to the group: Co-operation, trust, belonging, help and support, and success (see Chan, To, and Chan 2006). Ensemble members and audiences were invited to reflect on the ways that Traction may or may not support or facilitate these. Myself and a team of four applied theatre students participated in five Traction sessions in the lead-up to, and following their end of year performance, and recorded our observations of these. We conducted focus group interviews with twenty-two out of the forty-nine participants and attended the end of year performance *I Love You I Love You*. Claire also assisted us in using participatory theatre research methods, framing research questions as performance provocations for the Traction group to consider and respond to around the topic of social cohesion. Finally, I conducted an interview with Claire at the end of the 2016 program. In doing this evaluation, I became interested in how unique and beautiful Traction was in terms of the energy, hope and love that was being communicated by these forty-nine young people in their ensemble process, and their end of

year performance. Although we were present for a very short and intensive portion of the ensemble's lifespan, Claire shared reflections with me about their enormous capacity for compassion, inclusion and integrity, both personal and artistic, that she had experienced over the previous three years. Using the data from the pilot, I hope to explore these powerful feelings and qualities here, beyond the more instrumental notion of social cohesion that informed the evaluation. This paper therefore is a reflection on how these feelings and qualities – particularly love - might have informed and formed Traction's aesthetics, and what this might mean for the society in which this culturally diverse group of young people are about to participate.

Figure 1: Traction workshop session 2016

Framing an Aesthetics of Love

Intimidatingly broad and potentially sentimental, love is a concept difficult to address in scholarly enquiry, but I cannot escape the viscerally life-affirming feelings that I experienced during my time with Traction, feelings that were also expressed by participants, audiences and facilitators. The inadequacy of one word to capture so many different nuances was understood well by the ancient Greeks, who distinguished between eros, agape and philia as

forms of erotic, compassionate and fraternal love respectively¹. It is beyond the scope of this paper to provide an etymology or cultural history of love in all of its permutations (see for example Kaufmann 2011). Instead, I am led by the very specific context of Traction in the development of my thoughts. Kaufmann does point out that popular culture is saturated with representations of romantic love, and that these are primarily concerned with the individualistic pursuit of love and the heady heights of its first flush, rather than any kind of enduring or sustainable conception of love as part of our responsibility to others. Although romantic love will make an appearance, it is not the primary focus of this paper.

The notion of responsibility to others as proposed by Emmanuel Levinas has powerfully influenced contemporary ethics and philosophy, notably through his definition of philosophy as not only the “love of wisdom” in the classical sense, but also a “wisdom of love” (Burggraefe and Bloechl 2002). The co-existence of love and social justice in education proposed by Paulo Freire in his “pedagogy of the heart” (1997) has made a significant mark in contemporary educational theory (see Darder 2002). Erich Fromm (2006) theorized that love is an art, requiring cultivation, knowledge and effort, rather than just a pleasant sensation that happens as a matter of chance. These thinkers were responding to the effects of fascism, oppression and alienation that marked their lives in the early modern period. Since then, feminist scholars such as bell hooks (2000, 2009), Elspeth Probyn (1996) and Rosalyn Diprose (2008) have developed embodied, affective epistemologies of love, belonging and community to challenge the dominance of patriarchal, neo-liberal, individualistic mechanisms of power and knowledge.

Although none of the works cited here provides a singular theory of love that might be conveniently applied, they nevertheless have influenced how I now attempt to figure an aesthetics of love operating in this ethnically and culturally diverse youth theatre ensemble. Following Dewey (1934), Johnson (2007) and Shusterman (2000), I conceive participatory theatre through a relational, pragmatist aesthetic lens (Woodland 2016). This concerns the embodied aesthetic engagement and meaning making that occurs within the participatory process of ensemble building and creating works, the works themselves as collectively experienced in a community-based event, and the radical potential of such affective

¹ This is an over-simplified version of these three concepts. All have been rigorously analysed and debated over the centuries, and each has been used in contemporary theoretical debates around philosophy, ethics, justice, theology, education and more. For one of many histories of these terms, see Soble (1989).

encounters to embody ethical participation and social justice. Thompson's (2015) proposal for a relational "aesthetics of care" built on feminist care ethics, influences my approach here. In her analysis of utopia in performance, Dolan (2010, 2) explores how performances can "lead to both affective and effective feelings and expressions of hope and love" for community, and even humankind. Drama scholars have recently focused on concepts such as beauty, hope, and belonging in exploring the social, and social justice implications of the work (see Bundy 2017, Nelson 2009, O'Connor 2008, Winston 2013); and to me, love somehow seems "ever present but rarely named" (Bartleet 2016, 91) in these analyses. Here, I will therefore treat love as an elusive yet compelling term that winds its way through the notions of community, care, belonging, beauty, hope and utopia that are present in contemporary drama theory, without necessarily being pinned to any of them. I conceive love as part of the affective and aesthetic dimension of participatory youth theatre; an embodied, participatory emotion that has the potential to move from pre-reflective felt states, through performance, and into conscious rituals and practices for community building and social justice.

Traction as Beloved Community

The Love Ethic

What first struck me when we joined the Traction group for their workshop sessions was how the group immediately made us feel welcome and included. We were met with enthusiastic greetings and smiles on each of the five visits, and were adopted into the ensemble's warm-up exercises without question. I was also impressed by the group's social atmosphere, which even during breaks would mix comfortably across differences in age, gender, sexuality and ethnicity. The pilot evaluation highlighted the strong sense of belonging that Traction participants felt in the ensemble no matter their age, gender, background, life experiences, personalities and length of time in the program. As one young man put it, "We welcome everyone, people from all different backgrounds, religions and sexualities are all just coming together" (Woodland 2017, 11). This was evident in how several participants described their first time in Traction, feeling awkward and nervous at first, but quickly becoming integral and valued members of the group. One young man animatedly explained: "It's like the first week, when we have new people here, they are very ... you know ... shy [*shakes his head*]. Not by the end of the night!" [*Everyone laughs*]

This sense of inclusion and belonging was underpinned by Claire's approach as a facilitator, which clearly reflected Freire's notion of teaching as an act of love (Darder 2002). Claire demonstrated this over the course of our research, where I observed many warm interactions between her and the young people, who referred to her affectionately as a mother figure. Within this nurturing atmosphere, Claire established a strong ensemble-building ethic at the start of the program that the participants then maintained. She described to me how in the first few months the young people were much more divided into groups based on the schools they attended, but she had made it an overt strategy to mix them up, regularly reminding participants what it means to work as a cohesive ensemble. In the small group tasks that we observed, the ensemble members always appeared ready and willing to work with each other (and with us) without hesitation, no matter who was in their group. In our focus group discussions around the theme of co-operation, one young woman shared, "You can sit with anyone you don't have to always sit with the one person. You can do activities with anyone. Anyone and everyone!" Another boy explained how this benefited the performance making process: "[Co-operation] is in getting into different groups, swapping, coming up with like a scene with other people you haven't worked with, and getting to know them better and then those scenes will work together to make one ... performance, and that performance gets added to the show."

The idea of belonging as an affective dimension of participatory drama in intercultural contexts has been explored recently by Bundy (2017) and Nelson (2009), who connect notions of belonging with resilience, and sense of community respectively. Diprose (2008) believes that it is the sharing of meaning that engenders belonging, and that these shared meanings must "remain open to the uniqueness, alterity, or strangeness of others" (45). Rowe (2005, 27) suggests, "Belonging is about ... who accompanies you in ritual—in signifying practices that give life meaning." Sharing meaning, accompanying each other in ritual, and participating in signifying practices embodies the work of the theatre ensemble. While the Traction cohort represented the broader diversity of the Logan community, they were united by their passion for drama as an art form. Several participants described the sense that despite the group's ethnic and cultural diversity, their shared love for drama, and the opportunity to express it freely, had a unifying effect that would not exist in other community settings like a school or youth club:

I feel like if I didn't join Traction - if there wasn't a Traction - I wouldn't have seen these people outside of school, if that makes sense? There's common ground like we all love drama, we all come here every Wednesday and work. (Female participant)

The creative process enabled the participants to engage with people from other ethnic backgrounds, and to explore their differences and commonalities in terms of language, religion, culture and customs both socially and aesthetically: "It's also about meeting people from different cultures and finding that experience about other cultures Sometimes other people have different assumptions about other cultures and it's better to see how different people are" (male participant). One of the older girls put it this way:

I feel like here no one gives a crap where you're from. It's about who you are as a person. And that's a good thing about Traction, we don't hold judgement against anyone.

The collaborative ethic of a creatively healthy ensemble must foster this inclusivity, but for the Traction participants, there was a sense that the affective dimensions of this reverberated beyond the confines of the ensemble. One young African woman described her sense of isolation early on:

You know, like at one point I'll just go in the corner and just eat by myself 'cos I just feel like nobody loves me, but that was just all in my head. Claire talked to everyone and they were accepting. They actually apologized for making me feel like I was left out. I feel like, yeah, I need to stay. I need to stay, and it's been just amazing.

This same young woman later told us how difficult it was to convince her parents that acting was her chosen career path: "I told Claire I want this year's show to be awesome, to be able to convince my parents acting is what I want to do." She went on to declare, "Traction is like one of my voices because I literally can't talk to my parents."

Throughout our research, participants consistently referred to Traction as a "family" and emphasised the important place that this family held in their lives. A group of young men in one focus group discussed how much they missed Traction during the school holidays. Another participant described how important it was for her during the most stressful times of university. Another young woman described Traction as "[A] family that meets every Wednesday. ... Now in our third year, it's like we've all grown, like, maturely." In this way, the Traction ensemble could be seen as reflecting the ideal of a "beloved community" (hooks

2009), both in the sense of it being a diverse and inclusive space, and also in terms of Traction itself being beloved by its members.

Traction's ethic appeared to be reinforced time and again through acts of welcome, hospitality, compassion and care on the part of the participants. As one young man put it, "When the new people come in ... we give them love and trust ... make sure they fit in and join our group." Another said,

We're not very one minded "we're all thinking about everyone around us so it's not like, 'My day is great I don't care about anyone else.' It's, 'I want everyone else to be happy as well.' So, we do what we can to help everyone.

Claire told me that when small conflicts arose, the group would self-police before things became serious, and this was instigated primarily by core group of older participants who had been with the ensemble from the beginning. Claire shared that she had asked some of the group members one day, "Why have we never had a Traction couple?" And the young people had said they thought it was because they view each other like brothers and sisters, that dating them would be wrong. Given that desire and romantic love are significant preoccupations for many adolescent young people (and this was certainly reflected in the performance *I Love You I Love You*) it seems possible that the forty-nine ensemble members were suborning these impulses for the greater good of the ensemble, and to progress the ethic of love as responsibility towards others. These examples can be likened to hooks' (2000, 88) conception of a "love ethic" that recognises "our lives and our fate as intimately connected to those of everyone else on the planet."

Rules and Rituals of Regard

Although we were not present for much of the creative work that led to Traction's final performance, it was clear that the Traction community was sustained and reinforced by certain rules and "rituals of regard" (hooks 2009, 229) that supported and framed the creative process. A vital ritual for maintaining the ensemble was the weekly check-in, a drama staple, where participants seated in a circle, one-by-one gave a number out of ten that represented how they were feeling. Following this, they each answered a question about themselves, for example, "When you were a little kid, what did you want to be when you grew up?" Claire told me how important this was in teaching the participants to read each other and develop empathy. I participated in this check-in five times, and each time there was complete silence and focus

from the nearly fifty participants as each of their peers responded in turn. This took upwards of half an hour, but at no point did this respectful attention drop. One young woman said of the check-in: “If ever someone is a ‘two’, we just look after them that rehearsal. Sometimes we’ll take them off to the side and make sure they’re okay ... we just kind of look after each other.”

Another ritual activity in Traction was to offer someone “energy” if they were visibly feeling moved, vulnerable or upset. Here, the whole group would raise their hands and wiggle their fingers towards the person needing their energy. We observed this happen during the highly emotional debrief the week following the final performance. Claire had asked the young people to write down something they wished to say to the rest of the group now that they had completed the performance *I Love You I Love You*. The group then returned to the circle and shared their thoughts. The first boy stood, having only joined the group a few months previously. He started to read from his piece of paper. But then he threw it over his shoulder. “I’ll just speak from the heart,” he said. He spoke about how, despite only having recently joined the group, he felt part of something special, and he started to thank the group for making him feel so welcome. His wavering voice and tensed body communicated a palpable feeling of risk and vulnerability, but there was also a sense of determination that people hear his message. Finally, his voice broke completely and he started to cry. The rest of the group immediately held out their hands and performed the energy ritual, wiggling their fingers towards him. This moment had inherently aesthetic qualities - a ritual performance uniting the affective and the symbolic, shared and felt by the group, and demonstrating “love-as-action” (hooks 2000, as cited in Bartleet 2016).

Claire and some of the young people referred to two important Traction “rules” that had been introduced and asserted from the start of the program. Linked together, the first of these involved taking risks in performance, and the second was not to “justify” or apologise for any performance offers made. The group now had a shared culture and language around these ideas, where they would say things to each other like, “Take a risk!” or, “This is a risk for me, but here it is.” Claire pointed out that this was difficult territory for the young people in Traction, many of whom experienced personal challenges such as mental illness, family breakdown, trauma and marginalisation. It seemed that an important aspect of the group’s ethic of love was its unconditional nature, where the sense of belonging was accompanied by a sense of “no judgement” – a phrase that was used several more times by the young people

in our focus group discussions. Describing how Traction was different from other social contexts such as school or youth groups, one young man said,

You feel more comfortable expressing your ideas because no one is judging you at all. Even if it seems stupid in your head it might actually get you somewhere to a better idea. It might encourage someone else to bring their own ideas.

Another young man put it very clearly with the statement, “[You] forget about the technicality and feel the love.” The young people connected their sense of belonging in the ensemble not only to making performance offers, but also all offers of self and expressions of vulnerability, without fear of judgement. As one young woman pointed out, “I can’t express myself the way that I want to everywhere that I go. So, coming to Traction is like my way of showing who I really am and stuff.” Another young man said, “I’m a pretty shy person ... I can just be myself and I’m not afraid to get judged or anything.”

Performing Beloved Community

The Traction community was built around the participants’ shared passion for drama, and the powerful feelings of finally belonging to a like-minded tribe. Also evident was a desire to maintain and nurture the inclusive culture of the ensemble where these powerful feelings were being experienced and expressed, and to convey this to others. In the focus group interviews, the participants spoke with energy and pride about the qualities of their ensemble. The drama-based research activities, in which Claire introduced our research questions framed as performance provocations, became a platform in which small groups of the young people were able to present and represent the Traction community’s ethos. As a warm-up, Claire invited the groups to create a “documentary about Traction.” The participants presented a series of humorous and heartfelt depictions, most of which included an interviewer asking participants about their experiences of Traction, for example:

Interviewer 1: “What makes you feel welcome in Traction?”

Participant 1: “The energy, the people”

...

Interviewer 2: “Tell us about Traction”

Participant 2: “Everyone is friendly, warm and kind hearted”

One group offered a mock wildlife documentary, in which the narrator announced “In the wild jungle, young theatre kids like this struggle to find others of their own species.” The scene followed the theatre kids as they searched first in high school, and then in university, but were met with hostility by vicious monkeys and savage tribespeople. Finally, the narrator said, “The young theatre kid has nowhere to go, it’s cold, it’s lonely and terrifying. BUT, there is a safe haven.” A scene followed in which the two groups of “predators” came together in a cohesive image where people were leaning on each other and linked physically. They then re-enacted the check-in ritual, and the group’s favourite drama game. Following on from these documentaries, Claire asked the whole group what were similar themes across all of the groups. The participants called out: “Support,” “friendship,” “cultural diversity,” “safe haven,” “welcome.” One young woman called out, “If you don’t have friends, join Traction and you’ll have forty-eight of them!”

Traction’s performance *I Love You I Love You* was a two-hour long event that showed the Traction ensemble grappling with the notion of love, the different ways it manifests, and where it fits within the young people’s worldview and their sense of identity. Claire herself wrote only two of the forty-eight scenes in the performance, with the remainder being the ensemble’s own work. The performance was made up of slam poetry, monologues, small scenes, dance sequences, video excerpts and whole group set pieces that ensured every one of the forty-nine performers had a voice and an opportunity to show their talents. The Logan Entertainment Centre was packed to the rafters with 400 enthusiastic friends, family and community members, and the atmosphere before, during and after the performance was charged with energy and excitement. Throughout the performance, the audience showed a great deal of love towards the performers, through enthusiastic applause, shouting, laughter and cheering, which first matched and then elevated the energy on stage.

The performance opened with the whole ensemble entering the space and reciting lines of poetry. The first of these were drawn from poet Jared Singer’s ‘Love’ (2014) where he challenges normative notions of who should give and receive love, and tired metaphors for love such as the ‘heart’. The performers then branched off from his words to offer their own poetic interpretations of love, each young person stepping forward and speaking a line:

Love is every good feeling.

Like a ton of happiness bricks falling on your heart

Or like drinking a hot cup of liquid while having a panic attack.

It is...squishy.

And uplifting.

Light headed.

And invincible.

Equal,

And inspirational.

Love is...God.

It is something you can't define,

And letting your feelings speak louder than any words can.

Love is Anime

Love is just a chemical reaction that compels animals to breed.

It is that wonderful ball of fuzzy inside your belly.

That feeling is universal.

It's the kind of pain you get from smiling too hard.

Yeah, because love actually is a verb.

It is happy sacrifice.

It feels peaceful.

And it feels safe.

It's only four letters,

L

O

V

E

But it's such a big freaking word.

Exclamation mark!

It is my mother's smile,

And the bright side of my heart.

It's everything subtle and everything grand.

It is the heaven in your hello.

Love is...a sunrise for a nation at war. It is indefinable. Indestructible.

Intangible. Love is...

Everything.

The work that followed was informed by the usual adolescent interests in romantic love, whether unrequited, forbidden, betrayed or intensely realized; and love and death, expressed through regret, grief, sacrifice and loss. In one scene, a young woman told the story of how her great grandparents first met at a fairground in the 1940s. Her nineteen-year-old Nan was one of a cheeky group of girls hanging around a fairground ride, flirting with a group of servicemen in uniform and offering to look after their hats. Another scene showed the tender moment when a friendly conversation between a boy and girl at school turned into something more, finishing with them holding hands. Also explored was the notion of family, for example one young woman's monologue, which included the following:

Family – we've all got one whether we want one or not. You don't need to be born in one. You don't need to have the same blood. Being part of a family means something different to all of us. It's the internal love that never leaves your heart. It's knowing that someone will always be there for you, through the ups and downs but won't ever leave, because you're family. Because you belong.

Another scene dealt with domestic violence, where a mother sent her daughter overseas to live with relatives to protect her from a violent father.

The highly physical, whole group set pieces appeared at regular intervals through the show and reflected different thematic threads through famous Hollywood movies (see Figure 2); for example, the ‘Twilight’ routine, which began with the lines:

Performer 1: Love is...when a man and a woman love each other very much.

Performer 2: Love is...when a man and a man or a woman and a woman love each other
very much.

Performer 3: Love is...when a human and a vampire love each other very much.

And ‘Titanic’ began with “Love is...an emotion that makes you feel like anything is possible.”

The work also reflected some of the young people’s love for their culture, and desire to share it with their audience. A young Aboriginal man gave a poetic and passionate welcome to country at the beginning of the performance in his traditional Noonuccal language. A group of Māori boys presented the Haka, the energetic war dance that rarely fails to excite an audience. One of the participants reported that his friend in the audience had overheard an audience member saying, “Oh I get it, the Haka is showing a love for culture.”

All of this performance material demonstrated the Traction ensemble sensitively and joyfully exploring various notions of love, and certain moments appeared to reflect the young cast members’ emerging beliefs about the links between love and belonging, inclusion and community. Not only did the performance communicate the different concepts of love being explored, but it was also infused with the aesthetic of love that informed and formed the ensemble’s daily creative practices.

Figure 2: Traction performs *I Love You I Love You*, Logan Entertainment Centre, 27th October 2016.

Spreading the love

In one of our focus group conversations, a young man observed of Traction, “We all have the same mindset.”

I asked, “What is that mindset?”

And he replied, “We want to get through the year, make our show as best we can to represent Traction - what we want to show to the world.”

When I asked him what he wanted to show the world, he replied, “How awesome Traction is,” and the group laughed enthusiastically.

After seeing *I Love You I Love You*, audiences could certainly be left in no doubt as to how “awesome” Traction was. According to Dolan (2010), sharing affect with others in the context of a performance event like this invites a particularly heightened sense of belonging, which can be linked to Victor and Edith Turner’s (1978) idea of “communitas,” which Edith Turner herself describes as a “unconditional love” (as cited in the Introduction by Ross 2011,

xxxii). Indeed, one hundred percent of the seventy-five audience members we surveyed agreed or strongly agreed that the performance made them feel welcome, or part of the Logan community. Dolan describes this as a fleeting sense of “communal epiphany,” that might lead audience members towards the “affective potential” of a future where warmth and love continue to be experienced outside the theatre. Audiences might be inspired by *communitas* towards utopia: “To feel themselves citizens of a no-place that’s a better place, citizens who might take that feeling into other sites of public discourse” (Dolan, 15).

After the performed research response mentioned earlier, where groups made a mock documentary about Traction, Claire then offered the provocation, “If you could be who you are in Traction out there in the real world, what might be possible?” One group’s performance contained the following statements that supported their scene:

Performer 1: You could go up to people of different cultures and have random conversations with them and bring them into the family.

Performer 2: There would be more love and no more discrimination and hate.

Performer 3: There would be not as much nervousness and awkwardness meeting new people.

At the end of these statements, the whole group sang to the tune of the Beach Boys, “Wouldn’t it be nice if the world was Traction?” Another group showed a female protagonist navigating her way between scenarios that occurred in the “real world” and “traction.” In the real world, the other performers represented voices in her head saying, “Act tough! Be cool!” When she moved to Traction, the voices became dynamic energy-giving powers that danced around her saying “Traction! Traction! Traction!” The girl then returned to the real world, where the voices changed again, chanting, “Opportunities! Love! Support!” Other scenes depicted how Traction participants had developed the confidence to approach new people and make friends, to stand up in front of the class and recite a poem at school, and to be successful artists in the entertainment industry. In each of these cases it was shown symbolically that the support from Traction had enabled them to reach these goals. These performed responses further formalized and reinforced Traction’s love ethic, and invited a consideration of how this was informing the aesthetics of self- and world-creation for these young people beyond the life of the ensemble. Belonging in the Traction ensemble, and the sense of *communitas* in their final performance, may have invited feelings of citizenship in a “better place” or a beloved community for the ensemble members themselves, their teaching

artists, and their audiences. Certainly, this is how I felt as a researcher. From here, it is not difficult to imagine how the aesthetics of love might reverberate outwards into the multicultural, multiethnic community of Logan and beyond.

Conclusion

It must be apparent by now that as a researcher, I fell in love with Traction. Trying to navigate my way through the chaos of a world that has seemingly lost its moral compass, I came upon this uniquely inclusive and loving space. At this point, I will note that the research team arrived at a particularly potent time in the life of an ensemble. We were only present for the excited anticipation and heightened focus leading up to the final performance (about love), and the debrief sessions that followed a week later, where the group was clearly bathed in the afterglow of collaborative success and achievement. This may well have coloured how Claire and the young people storied the ensemble to us as researchers. Our focus on social cohesion in the pilot study, through concepts such as belonging, welcome, support and co-operation may also have led the participants towards more loving language and representations of their ensemble. Using the data from this short-term pilot work to inform my reflections here means that there has been little scope to investigate lack of love, or not belonging, and there may well have been minorities within such a large group whose voices were quieted or silenced on these subjects.

Each participatory theatre project, piece or event has its own aesthetic qualities, some of which cannot be predicted or planned for. A pragmatist aesthetic view recognises the everyday experiences of the ensemble, as well as its dramatic work, as potential sites for aesthetic engagement, meaning making, and material for aesthetic production. The ensemble demands making performance offers, offers of self, and also a continuous and dynamic “offer of community” (Diprose 2008), formalised through rules and rituals of regard. Thompson’s (2015) aesthetics of care, although certainly present in Traction, does not alone capture the experience of youthful energy, vitality and joy that was communicated by the Traction participants. Nor do I propose that every participatory drama experience is characterized by an aesthetics of love. But I do argue that love deserves our scholarly attention, if we are to continue pursuing ideals of social justice in intercultural participatory youth theatre practice and research. In Traction, I would suggest that love was moving in an affective, ethical and aesthetic cycle: Love for drama united the young people; a sense of belonging or finding a

home strengthened their capacity for artistic risk-taking and aesthetic exploration; repeated rituals and practices of welcome, inclusion and care formalised the ethos of respect and compassion in the ensemble, and further facilitated the affective dimensions of these; and all of this brought about a sense of loyalty and love for Traction itself as a community, and desire to cultivate its loving ethos and communicate this to others.

After Traction's 2017 iteration, there was no further funding from the Department of Social Services for it to continue, and Queensland Theatre had to close the program. Their final performance at the end of 2017 was a joyous celebration of Traction and its achievements over the previous three years. Shortly after this performance, Claire posted the following on Facebook:

When I try and articulate to people why Traction is so special, there are not words, because Traction is a feeling. It's this sublime space where everything I preach about young people and the arts and the world are a reality. These kids genuinely value each other, they work together, they celebrate diversity and artistry and compassion. They are vulnerable and honest and hilarious and they respect and love each other. It's not bullshit - it's real and it's fucking rare. I will never work on a project like this again - it's a unicorn. (Christian 2017, reproduced with permission)

If Traction was indeed a unicorn, then for the rest of us, it must be a unicorn worth pursuing.

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