

The Impact of Participating in a Verbatim Theatre Process

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Verbatim theatre involves interviewing a community of storytellers based on a topic or event, recording these conversations, and using the stories as stimuli to create performance. In 2014, I wrote and performed in a verbatim play titled bald heads & blue stars, and triangulated a documentation of this process through a Reflective Practitioner Case Study methodology to research a theory, model and impact of verbatim theatre practice for my PhD. I identified that there was a significant gap in the field of research concerning the impact that involvement in a verbatim theatre process had on a community of participants. To address this gap, my research included a series of anonymous surveys with the interview participants (who I refer to as the community of storytellers) who shared their stories in the creation of bald heads & blue stars. This community of storytellers were fifteen women from across Queensland who have experienced alopecia, an autoimmune disorder that results in varying degrees of hair loss. At three key junctures across their involvement in the verbatim theatre process the community of storytellers were invited to complete a survey about their experience. This article analyses their responses in reference to the broader academic field and suggests that involvement in a verbatim theatre process intervened in the storytellers' self-awareness, enriched their interpersonal communication around the central themes of the performance, and created stronger community connections.

Introduction

bald heads & blue stars (2014) is a verbatim play that explores the female experience of alopecia, an autoimmune disorder that results in varying degrees of hair loss. Writing and performing in this play was the context for my reflective practitioner case study researching the theory, process and impact of verbatim theatre practice. This article focuses explicitly on the experience of the verbatim process from the perspective of the women who were interviewed. I refer to the interviewees as the community of storytellers, and explore the impact of three distinct moments throughout the creative development process: the initial interview, reading a draft of the play, and viewing the final performance. My verbatim theatre practice places emphasis on a community's lived experience, and shares the stories of this experience through performance. I am therefore intervening in the community in order to create a performance that tells a story *about* that community, and in this case study the intervention was driven by the explicit agenda of exploring concepts of female beauty and the balding body. The case study data indicates that participating in this verbatim theatre process impacted the community of storytellers in a variety of ways. They express positive self-awareness, enriched interpersonal communication among family members and a stronger connection to the broader alopecia community. The responses were predominantly positive, however, there were also moments of discomfort and confrontation as

the storytellers witnessed the re-telling of their stories. This article interrogates and analyses the various artistic practices and ethical considerations made across the process of writing and performing *bald heads & blue stars*, and how this practice directly impacted the community of storytellers.

A Review of the Current Field of Research on Impact

There is minimal research that explicitly investigates the impact of involvement in a verbatim theatre process on the community of storytellers. I have therefore drawn on research conducted within the field of research-based theatre and critical pedagogy to make parallels with the research conducted specifically around the impact of verbatim theatre.

Amanda Stuart Fisher, a pioneer in the field of research concerning the impact of verbatim theatre processes on the community of storytellers, argues that a verbatim theatre process can be 'one based on reciprocity ... grounded upon conviviality and of potential therapeutic value' (2011: 194). She suggests that storytellers often choose to participate and 'strongly [want] their experiences to be shared publicly' (2011: 201), they 'enter into this process willingly and do get something back in return' (2011: 205). This 'something back' was perceived by the storytellers in her project as gaining a

critical distance on their experiences, allowing them to better understand and work through the implications of that experience, as well as an opportunity to connect with people who had similar experiences (2011:206). Stuart Fisher's method of practice 'placed the empowerment and wellbeing of the mothers themselves at the heart of the project' (2011: 198). This method manifested in an inclusion of the storytellers throughout the creative development process and a continual resolve to be reflective practitioners (2011: 207). Stuart Fisher suggests that this 'ongoing process of self-reflection' and questioning 'why we are doing what we are doing and how we think it will benefit the participants' (2011: 207) is a starting point for an ethics of practise for verbatim theatre, and I will shortly outline the theory of practice that underpinned my process in *bald heads & blue stars*.

Caroline Wake's analysis of impact is grounded in the concept that verbatim theatre could be considered a form of realism due to its mimetic conventions, its 'moments of mimesis or re-enactment' (2013: 106) that are witnessed by the audience. She explores the impact for the actors and storytellers of the realistic aesthetics (performing in the style of realism) used in Ros Horin's *Through the Wire* and suggests that mimetic witnessing, whilst 'ethically problematic ... was also politically efficacious' (2013: 117), specifically, in the context of *Through the Wire*, the combination of autobiographical inclusions, casting one of the storytellers as himself in the performance and the avoidance of double silencing¹ by only interviewing and writing four refugees' stories into the performance, all contribute to Wake's assertion that this verbatim work is an example of mimetic witness and realistic aesthetics. Mimetic witnessing is ethically problematic. It relies on the storytellers re-engaging with their experiences (which in Wake's case study were considerably traumatic), can reproduce the 'other' as a spectacle (2013: 116) and, if the storyteller also participates as an actor, it can force them to function 'as a signifier of authenticity' (2013: 116), taking on a greater level of responsibility in the production than they may have anticipated. Wake's articulation of impact on the community of storytellers is a unique contribution to the field as it explores what she perceives to be the negative aspects of impact.

Wake extends the discussion to include the political impact of verbatim theatre on audiences more broadly. She argues that it is precisely due to verbatim's realist aesthetic that it can be 'politically effective' (2013: 118) as this helps to facilitate identification between audience and story. By making the performance more realistically familiar, the political elements of the story are made more easily accessible for the audience. While this identification or familiarity can be 'potentially coercive, colonizing and collapse difference' (2013: 118), as also cautioned by Stuart Fisher, it can act to destabilise what an audience thinks they know about a community. From this 'destabilisation comes potential recalibration' (2013: 118) which can potentially lead to political mimesis.

Wake defines political mimesis as occurring 'where spectators respond to images of protest or political action by recreating them in another time and place' (2013: 118), that 'having had political activism modelled for them on stage, audience members felt able at least to attempt these actions off stage' (2013: 119). Wake's article effectively interrogates notions of realism and mimetic witnessing in relation to verbatim theatre and successfully makes a case for the political potential of this aesthetic, whilst simultaneously acknowledging its ethical complexities.

Engaged Verbatim Theatre Praxis

Research that analyses the impact of practice should also interrogate the ethics that underpin it. I have named my theory of practice Engaged Verbatim Theatre Praxis, and it is informed by the theoretical frameworks of critical theory, critical pedagogy and feminist theatre practice. A detailed explanation of how these frameworks inform my practice is beyond the scope of this article, however, I strongly advocate that articulating a theory of verbatim theatre practice contributes to its field of knowledge, creates a departure point for genuine critique and provides a theoretical framework for artists who claim kinship to reflect on and discuss their practice.

Engaged Verbatim Theatre Praxis is a decision to practice and create theatre inspired by a community's verbal stories in a way that:

- values listening to and sharing personal experience and community stories so that people are heard, visible and empowered through connection and community;
- embraces collaboration, dialogue and experimentation with theatrical languages and conventions throughout the process of development to create innovative performance;
- challenges normative and oppressive ideals, broadening our consciousness and transforming our understanding.

I interviewed women about their bodies. Specifically about how they perceive those bodies, how they feel they are perceived by others, and how geography, relationships, context and time affect these perceptions. I wanted to place the evidence of their experience into performance to raise awareness, shape identity and transform or broaden the public's understanding of beauty and what it means to be feminine. Through a collaborative devising process I have artistically rendered visible the inner workings and ideologies of these stories of experience with the explicit goal of consciousness-raising and social change. Bordo defines the body as 'a powerful symbolic form, a surface on which the central rules, hierarchies and even metaphysical commitments of a culture are inscribed and thus reinforced through

the concrete language of the body' (1997: 91). It can be further suggested that our bodies are a medium of culture, the way we 'perform' our body belies our discourse, our values and beliefs. Judith Butler states our identity is 'tenuously constituted in time – an identity instituted through a stylised repetition of acts' (1990: 270). The way these acts are read by others defines our relationship to our context and the other bodies in it. This is particularly pertinent in my verbatim theatre process in this case study. In my Australian contemporary context, baldness is most commonly associated with men or illness. For the women I have interviewed, performing their feminine gender (through the use of wigs, makeup, jewellery and tattoos) is an intrinsic part of their daily life, an active choice made each and every day. As Butler states, 'gender is a project which has cultural survival as its end, the term 'strategy' better suggests the situations of duress under which gender performance always and variously occurs' (1990: 273). Some of the women I interviewed experience this duress of cultural survival every day, feeling they are 'compelled by social sanction and taboo' (1990: 271). Through a discussion of the female body, particularly the bald/ing body, I aim to demonstrate an alternative symbol of beauty and femininity and enable the opportunity for a potential transformation of the way female bodies are inscribed.

At present, these bald/ing female bodies are continually being 'memorised' on, and memorised with 'the feel and conviction of lack, or insufficiency, of never being good enough' (Bordo 1997: 91). By exploring the 'inner workings or logics' (Scott 1999: 83) of these memorised experiences and working within the theoretical frame of gender and identity as culturally constructed and performed (Butler 1990), I have created a politically feminist performance that challenges normative understanding of beauty and strives, through the combined reflection and action of praxis, to transform notions of feminine strength and female identity. By researching the impact of participation in a verbatim theatre process I am investigating how effective my intentions as playwright have been, and how my practice has intervened in the lives of the community of storytellers.

Survey Responses

Involvement in this verbatim theatre project has had a significant social and emotional impact on the storytellers from the alopecia community. To investigate this impact the storytellers were surveyed at three key junctures in the verbatim theatre process: after the initial interview, after reading a draft of the play and finally after seeing the live performance. Including all of the survey data is beyond the capacity of this article, and I also acknowledge that data are specific to my case study. Derek Paget acknowledges that 'it is always difficult, of course, to demonstrate specific ways in which the arts lever social change' (2010: 176), however, the

longitudinal approach incorporated into my impact research has enabled the induction of case study specific examples of transformation and social change within the storytelling community. By analysing the practice that led to this transformation, the findings from this research can be applied in other contexts.

Survey One – The Interview

The first survey (which was completed by fourteen of the fifteen storytellers) explored the storytellers' personal response to sharing their experiences in the initial interview and how the practice of the playwright in this space impacted them. Thirteen storytellers indicated that the reason they initially contacted me was to help with my project, followed closely by a desire to raise awareness about alopecia (eleven out of fourteen) and thirdly because they wanted to share their own stories (nine out of fourteen). The responses focused on the theme of consciousness-raising through enhanced understanding, a value that converges with my discourse as an artist. Only four of the women indicated that their involvement was driven by an interest in theatre, indicating that the verbatim theatre process has the potential to engage those who may not normally attend or be involved in theatre and introduce them to this experience. A crucial learning for my practice as a playwright is therefore to understand that in a verbatim theatre project you may be working with people who are not familiar with theatre and theatrical literacy. This knowledge informed how I introduced the storytellers to the draft script later in the process, such as explaining that the writing in italics are stage directions, and that there were also lighting and sound directions written into the play.

I assumed that it would be important to the storytellers to be kept informed throughout the play writing process, and six out of fourteen indicated that this was 'very important' and six out of fourteen rated it as 'important'. These responses prompted me to continue my dialogue with the storytellers across the project, such as communicating via email when I had settled on a title for the play, when the production company accepted the play as part of their season, and when promotional images were chosen. In the third survey at the conclusion of the process the storytellers spoke about feeling part of a community surrounding the play and its production, and I suggest that maintaining communication across the duration of the project assisted in the storyteller's sense of belonging.

The survey asked if the storyteller found personal value in sharing their stories, and eleven out of thirteen answered in the affirmative with themes of connection, self-reflection and building awareness the most prominent responses. Their comments included:

Absolutely. I think sharing my alopecia story connects me to others who are also going through similar experiences (S1R1).²

Found it therapeutic to put my story into words esp with someone who has been thru [sic] similar experiences (S1R9).

Yes I did. Very few people know about my condition and it was very liberating to talk about it so comfortably (S1R11).

These responses indicate that the interview created a 'place for discussion where there has mostly been silence' (Gray et al. 2000: 141). Significantly the answers indicate that the women felt they had learned something positive about themselves after sharing their stories:

As with every time I tell my story new things come up and I discover more about myself (S1R10).

Within the academic field the verbatim interview is sometimes problematised as a space of potential. Often used in a positive frame there is a 'liminal quality heralded by the word "potential" – it can always go both ways' (Heddon 2008: 7). Leffler argues that the verbatim interview could be a disempowering experience for the storyteller, suggesting the idea a theatre process might demand someone to 'tell me your story' has been misrepresented as a therapeutic dramaturgy and instead could be reminiscent of a Christian discourse of confession (2012: 348), designed to admit a perceived 'wrongness' about one's character or behaviour (2012: 351) and is therefore a negative positioning of the storyteller. He argues that the verbatim interview establishes the framework for a self-deprecating discourse. This is something I sought to avoid by having the storytellers contact me if they were interested in being involved. The data reveal that rather than a discourse of confession, the storytellers experienced a discourse of connection, self-awareness and a desire for outreach. As suggested by Anderson and Wilkinson, the verbatim theatre process celebrated listening to community stories, an act which values that community's identity and builds individual's self-esteem (2007: 15). Correlations can also be drawn to literature on narrative therapy to help validate the value of involvement in a verbatim theatre interview. Smith et al. explain that narrative therapy:

... is based on the idea that telling stories is the main way in which people make sense of, and communicate, their experience ... They are, therefore, heavily influenced by our family, social and cultural contexts. There are always alternative stories that can be told about a single event (2012: 191).

This idea that we can re-think or re-story our experiences was evident in the storyteller's response to question seven, where they were asked if the interviews affected the way they thought about their alopecia experiences.

Four out of thirteen indicated that it hadn't, while nine out of thirteen responded that it had altered their personal view:

Some of the things that Sarah shared with me about her personal experiences made me open my mind with certain aspects of alopecia (S1R6).

It made me realise that I have come a long way in my acceptance of my alopecia. Meeting Sarah was very inspiration [sic] as she is such a courageous lady (S1R14).

Once again the theme of connection emerged:

It made me feel less isolated. It made me feel more positive about it (S1R1).

Smith et al. explain that expressions such as 'offloading' (S1R1) or finding conversation 'therapeutic' (S1R9) are indicative of the concept of catharsis, 'the idea that expressing emotions is healing in itself' (2012: 45) and that the value is amplified when followed with reflection and clarification. All thirteen of the women responded affirmatively that they would recommend others be involved in an interview like this. When asked to explain why, a number highlighted the value of sharing life experiences and used the lexicon of stories and sharing:

Yes, I think finding a voice for your story, even as it evolves, is a very large part of accepting and understanding yourself (S1R10).

Definitely ... I think talking brings out suppressed issues and helps people find new ways of thinking about problems ... problem shared is a problem halved (S1R12).

I was very interested to see if being involved in the interview had provided opportunities for the storytellers to extend their dialogue on alopecia with others. Eight out of thirteen indicated that a lot of their friends and family already know about their condition or that they 'don't have a problem with sharing' (S1R2). Three of the women reflected that the interview enabled them to discuss their experiences with their family:

It was an opportunity to talk about it again, just a little, with my husband and daughter (S1R1).

This opportunity to further discuss their alopecia experience can be framed as an opportunity for the storytellers to reflect and clarify (Smith et al. 2012: 45) their experiences, further enhancing the positive impact of the interview as an opportunity for catharsis.

Survey Two – The Script

The focus of the second survey (which nine of the fifteen storytellers responded to) was to learn about the experience of reading a draft of the play. I was interested to know if the storytellers had read a play before, and whether I had provided enough introduction to theatrical literacy. Five out of nine storytellers responded that *bald heads & blue stars* was the first script they had read and all nine felt that they understood the format of the play. This indicates that the pedagogy applied in my email communication when introducing the play was effective, and also supports the finding that verbatim theatre is a unique way to engage people who may not normally have the opportunity to do so.

At the outset of the interview I had explained what my artistic intentions were for the stories and my approach to verbatim theatre. This included that some of their experiences may be re-told word-for-word and others may be used as stimuli for creating characters and scenes. However, I couldn't be sure that how I explained the artistic process would transfer seamlessly to what they expected, which is why I asked them about this in question four. Seven out of nine storytellers responded that the script had turned out either as they expected or that it exceeded their expectations:

I would say it's turned out even better. I like that it's very visual and light hearted at times (S2R8).

In regards to sharing our stories, Sarah has done what I expected. Used our language and tales to make up suitable situations for her characters to describe. The format of having alopecia as a character was interesting and not something I expected, but a great idea (S2R9).

These answers respond to the inclusion of stage directions and this was something I had explicitly set out to incorporate. I wanted to paint a clear theatrical picture in order to give a sense of what the play might look like when performed. The storytellers also commented on the inclusion of alopecia as a character. Rossiter et al. discuss an ethnotheatre performance entitled *The Work of Talk* in which cancer is personified as a character. They hypothesise that:

... the emotional impact of this metaphoric presentation of cancer as a character may be far more significant than could be evoked by written text or verbatim enactments of data that are more realistic (2008: 136).

As is explored in the responses to survey three, the inclusion of a characterised alopecia in *bald heads & blue stars* was one of the most enjoyable elements of the performance for many of the storytellers as it enabled a

metaphoric and therefore highly accessible and engaging representation of their experiences.

Survey Three – The Performance

While verbatim theatre is often praised for its democratic potential and for its empowering of marginalised stories or validating of oppressed identities, Chou and Bleiker raise an important question: '[w]ho are the people actually attending these productions? Are they really those who are marginalised within society' (2010: 573)? For all of its lofty goals, to what extent is verbatim theatre accessible, engaging or available for the very people it wishes to empower and validate? Due to the dispersed nature of my community of storytellers the live performance was not an accessible option for many of them. Of the fifteen women interviewed only seven were able to see the live performance in August 2014, and of these seven only five completed the final survey – one third of the total population of storytellers at the outset of the project. However, as will be demonstrated through their survey responses, these five women found the performance highly engaging and a validation of their experiences and identity. They also each brought a number of family members with them (one storyteller brought fourteen people to the show). Through partnership with the Australia Alopecia Areata Foundation, the performance was filmed and copies of the DVD made available. However, Chou and Bleiker's provocation is a pertinent point for critical self-reflection on behalf of the playwright in a verbatim theatre process. Have I done enough to share the performance with the community from which it came? By what scale do I measure 'enough'?

Of the five storytellers who completed the final survey, three gave the performance a ten out of ten and two gave it nine out of ten. They described it as entertaining, humorous, thought provoking, and a good representation of the alopecia experience. The combination of light-hearted humour and tense sadness has been one of the most frequently praised aspects of the performance, followed closely by the personification of the condition of alopecia as a character. Responses included comments such as:

... [i]nteractions between the performers esp [sic] with the character of alopecia. Looking out for my stories and engaging and identifying with the others ladies stories and knowing the process that we all went thru [sic] together yet apart (S3R3).

While Stuart Fisher has explored the identification that occurred between the storytellers and the actors (2011: 200), this response indicates that the storyteller was identifying with the content of the play, with the knowledge that these stories emerged from the same process they themselves had been engaged in 'together yet apart' (S3R3). However, I suggest that the survey data indicates that the identification in my case study had

similar effects to those experienced in Stuart Fisher's, that the identification 'was a positive, even therapeutic aspect of the project' (2011: 200). One storyteller expressed 'identifying with the other ladies [sic] stories' (S3R3). This echoes the first phase of Freire's theory of conscientization, when you realise that your own experiences 'resonate with the experiences of others' (Ryan 2011: 95). In Freire's conscientization process, Ryan has identified three phases: awakening awareness, critical analysis and changing reality (2011: 95). The awakening awareness phase is when learners 'come to realise that their experiences, albeit unique stories, resonate with the experiences of others' (2011: 95). This new awareness (or to use the lexicon of feminist theatre practice, this process of consciousness-raising) leads to critical self-reflection and transformation. This theory of conscientization is a useful framework for analysing the learning and impact on the community of storytellers in a verbatim theatre process.

Staging alopecia as a character made the intangible frustrations and challenges of the condition a tangible bodily force that visually and physically had an impact on the other characters:

I enjoyed the confronting scene where the girl is screaming at alopecia. I felt it would truly demonstrate the desperate feelings that those with alopecia deal with, but people don't see (S3R5).

This response reflects Rossiter et al.'s suggestion that 'the act of theatricalizing data allows for a whole new form of interpretation and analysis, one that uses theatre's fantastic, imaginative possibilities' (2008: 136). For the majority of the women interviewed, their daily routine involves a painstaking process of hiding and covering their alopecia, so the act of making it visible was both a liberating and confronting experience. This is highlighted by the response to which part of the play they enjoyed the least:

The fight between alopecia and Laura [actor] was gut wrenching – although I didn't cry – many did (S3R1).

It took me a while to 'get' the tussle scene between Alopecia and Violet as the performance prior to that had been mainly verbal without much physical but once I got it I could identify with the struggle (S3R3).

For one storyteller it was the intense authenticity of some moments that were least enjoyable:

The parts I enjoyed least reminded me of embarrassing moments I have experienced with alopecia. People praying for me, asking

stupid questions etc. Have [sic] said that, those embarrassing moments were really well explained! (S3R5).

The moments she refers to here were sections of the play that were performed in the present tense, rather than stories told from a reflective past tense perspective. This meant that the emotion, interaction and mood were designed to recreate those of an embarrassing moment on stage. This response suggests that the awkward and unsettling emotions attached to the real life version of these experiences was authentically rendered in the performance. Echoing Leffler's discussion on the aesthetics of injury (2012: 351), the storyteller's response here suggests that the pain of the experience is not only felt when a storyteller performs their own stories (as suggested by Leffler 2012: 350) but also when these stories are witnessed in the performance of others. There are also echoes to Gallagher et al.'s warning about the use of naturalistic re-creation in verbatim theatre and the potential that literal representations of difficult life experiences can be traumatising for storytellers in the audience as they may be forced into re-feeling the emotion of the initial incident (2012: 38). While the storyteller's response in S3R5 does not convey a sense of having been re-traumatised (particularly as she qualifies the scene reminded her of similar events, they were not directly based on the specificity of her experiences) it is interesting to note that the scene on which she is reflecting was a naturalistic re-creation. This may provide insight and awareness for playwrights in their practice of translating interview material into performance.³

The Impact of Participation

The storytellers expressed that the performance prompted changes in how they perceived their personal experiences, stating 'I have come a LONG LONG way in my ability to cope' (S3R1), 'hearing others experiences has give [sic] me a less alone feeling' (S3R5) and 'I am now more confident to go about as a "bald lady"' (S3R4). Burns states that stories can 'alter the way we think or feel about something' and can also alter 'something in our mind-body processing' (2001: xix). Smith et al. extend on this, suggesting that these impacts are explained by the philosophy of social constructivism 'which proposes that meaning is [instead] shaped by a society of a culture. People create their personal identity by identifying with some of the stories which exist in their family and broader culture' (2012: 191). Viewing the verbatim theatre performance provided a unique opportunity for the alopecia community to witness stories from their broader culture.

Stuart Fisher suggests that the 'strangeness' of seeing a personal story theatrically interpreted can give 'an almost uncanny glimpse of their own lives from another perspective' (2011: 202). One storyteller commented

that being involved in the project influenced how she thought about her experiences, however, that this was 'only after seeing the play. Answering the questions and talking about it didn't change my perspective greatly, but hearing others experiences has give [sic] me a less alone feeling' (S3R5). Gray et al. suggest that the value of the live performance of experience has advantage over textual representations of experience because theatre 'sustains connections to bodies, emotions and the full range of sensory experience' (2000: 138). Rossiter et al. extend this argument suggesting that theatre is particularly adept at interpreting, translating and disseminating health-related knowledge as both the fields of health and performance 'revolve around complex questions of the embodied human condition' (2008: 131). As all verbatim theatre deals with human experience, and all experience is embodied, I extend on Rossiter et al.'s argument beyond solely health-related content and suggest that the impact of verbatim theatre on audiences is because of the similarity and proximity of form and content. Verbatim theatre is an actual embodied experience about actual embodied experiences, and this contributes to its transformational potential for both the community of storytellers and the broader audience.

Being involved in this project has created a sense of belonging for many of the storytellers, as expressed through their discourse on connection and 'that I was not alone in how I feel. Really comforting actually' (S3R2). In Vikki Bell's introduction to *Performativity and Belonging* she states that 'the term 'belonging' allows an affective dimension – not just be-ing, but longing' (1999: 1). It implies not only finding a sense of self (identity) but also identifying with others. It is 'an achievement' as 'one does not simply or ontologically "belong"' (1999: 3), belonging is an effect of our understanding and performances of self. Verbatim theatre places a variety of performances of self on stage and when shared, influence a public and community's consciousness, resulting in one storyteller stating she finally felt '[u]nderstood' (S3R5) and another that she 'felt heard' (S3R2). The verbatim theatre performance shares what Fortier describes as 'practices of group identity' and 'marks out terrains of commonality and delineates the political and social dynamics of "fitting in"' (1999: 42). The performance gave one of the storytellers hope that 'these experiences can be explained and demonstrated' (S3R5). This storyteller has conveyed a realisation that it is possible to authentically share her experiences and that this may in turn lead to greater public understanding.

Verbatim theatre is a complex theatrical process and form. Through an analysis of the storyteller's involvement at three key junctures, I suggest that involvement in a verbatim theatre process positively intervened in the storytellers' self-awareness, enriched their interpersonal communication around the central themes of the performance, and created stronger community connections. I have articulated and interrogated the

artistic practices that led to this impact, such as the positive outcome of continued community immersion and communication across the process, as well as the problematisation of writing scenes with realistic and present tense aesthetics. Being aware of the kind of impact the performance may have for the storytellers can inform a playwright's decision making process, and my research has provided unique insight into this practice and its impact. The findings of this research demonstrate the value and positive impact of verbatim theatre in areas of personal and community identity and consciousness raising around social issues. This transformational impact is particularly pertinent to verbatim theatre because of the similarity and proximity of form and content. It is an embodied experience *about* embodied experience.

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End Notes

1. 'Double silencing' refers to a situation where a storyteller might have been identified as belonging to a community who rarely gets to have their story heard (and is therefore silenced by the broader community and media), but then after being interviewed their story is not included in the final production (and is silenced again).
2. Throughout my research I refer to the surveys as S1, S2 and S3, and when referencing a specific respondent I have coded the material as follows: S2R5, which would refer to the second survey and the fifth respondent to complete that survey.
3. Further articulating my playwriting practice in this verbatim theatre process is beyond the scope of this article, however I describe this practice as translating verbatim transcripts through the dramatic languages (elements of drama and conventions) into performance. The emphasis in this article is on acknowledging that how a playwright chooses to translate verbatim material into a script or performance can have both positive and negative impacts on the community of storytellers.

The Eater of Light

They will keep eating
 until no planets are left
 or stars to navigate by
 unless we can lure
 the Beasts into a portal
 for vestal virgins.
 Damp crows in a huff
 at sunrise as my patience
 shatters, the trouble with hope
 is resisting its music.

DAVID REITER,
 CARINDALE, QLD

At the Board Meeting

they tell her she's no longer
 effective, that her decisions are
 not incisive anymore,
 that her judgement is judicial
 to separation and that from herein
 they are appointing another
 to take her place, until such
 time as she can grasp
 the be-all-and-end-all
 like she once used to;
 but, she stumbles,
 tells them she cannot remember
 everything, is struggling with names
 as the cancer continues
 to spread
 heartless.

NOEL KING,
 TRALEE, IRELAND