

The Laramie Project in a U.S. Small Town

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Abstract

This report is about how a theatre production entitled “The Laramie Project” was given in a U.S. Midwestern small town. The focus of this report is how the performance was perceived and interpreted by the concepts of “cultural ethnography/performance ethnography” and “performativity.” Discussion includes: (1) a brief portrait of the show and the town, (2) fundamental concepts of “cultural ethnography/performance ethnography” and “performativity,” and (3) an analysis of the performance in context. The implications of this analysis reveal the use of “cultural ethnography/performance ethnography” and “performativity,” as qualitative research tools, in analyzing performance and other communication practices related to social and cultural issues, particularly on conservatism and hatred in society.

Keywords: Cultural ethnography, performance ethnography, performativity
The Laramie Project

The Laramie Project and a U.S. Small Town

In spring semester 2002, the play *The Laramie Project*, was presented at the University of Minnesota, Morris (UMM). This was during my second semester of teaching at UMM, and Ray Schultz, who was the director of the play and a faculty colleague, told me that I had to see it. Even though I was aware of the tragedy of Matthew Shepard in 1998 when I was in Thailand, I did not pay much attention to it. After seeing the play, I found that my perceptions and feelings about the tragedy

and the issues involved were changed drastically.

Utilizing concepts from “cultural ethnography/performance ethnography” and “performativity,” as communication qualitative research tools, permits an examination of how this performance was presented and interpreted in context and how it could affect the audience and probably the whole community, a small town in the U.S. Midwest. Thus, in this essay, I will provide a brief portrait of the show and the town. Then, I will offer a brief overview of “cultural ethnography/performance ethnography” and “performativity.” Finally,

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I will present an analysis of this performance in context.

The Laramie Project, UMM, and the Town of Morris

In this section I will discuss the nature of this play and a brief description of UMM and the town of Morris, Minnesota where it was given. Such information is necessary for understanding the meaning of any play and its impact on an audience. As Chesebro (1998) asserts that a performance may be studied as a communicative phenomenon and that historical background and context embracing such a performance become heavily involved in the process of understanding and interpreting.

The Laramie Project

Kaufman (2001) was inspired by the “brutal murder of Matthew Shepard” in October 6, 1998, to write the script for *The Laramie Project* based on the ethnographic works done by his team called the “Tectonic Theatre Project,” as he says:

The idea of *The Laramie Project* originated in my desire to learn more about why Matthew Shepard was murdered, about what happened that night, about the town of Laramie [Wyoming]. The idea of listening to the citizens talk really interested me. How is Laramie different from the rest of the country, and how is it similar? (p. vi)

Kaufman asserts that *The Laramie Project* is not about the Matthew Shepard case, but is a story about a town, saying, “[T]his is not about the case. This is about the town: why did this happen here, what are people saying, how do they feel and think about

what happened [?]” (HBO Films—The Laramie Project—Synopsis).

UMM, Morris, and The Laramie Project

The University of Minnesota, Morris (UMM) is a University of Minnesota undergraduate liberal arts campus view as “unique as an academically rigorous, public undergraduate liberal arts college” (UMM Brief Description/Fact Sheet). The campus is located in the town of Morris, which is in the prairie region of West Central Minnesota, 160 miles northwest of the twin cities of Minneapolis and St. Paul. Morris has a population of approximately 5,000, including the UMM students. The Morris community consists of “a variety of retail, manufacturing, agricultural, and service-related businesses” (UMM Brief Description/Fact Sheet). Nevertheless, the town is considered rural, agricultural, and very conservative, which is the opposite of the UMM’s liberalism and sophistication.

On February 14-16, 2002, “The Laramie Project” was produced in the Black Box Theatre, in which Morris area community members, including the city’s mayor, made “cameo appearances in collaboration with a University of Minnesota, Morris student cast and crew” (UMM in the News). Having realized the town’s characteristics, Ray Schultz, the director of the play and UMM assistant professor of theater at that time, intended to raise social issues for the campus and the community through his production, saying,

The original production of “The Laramie Project” had eight actors portraying all the character[s].... We’re doing something a little different this time. Parallels can be

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found between the towns of Morris and Laramie, indeed Laramie and many small towns all across America. In the case of Laramie and Morris, both communities have a large percentage of college students, both are in rural locations and, as most towns do, both boast [of having] community members with a wide variety of perspectives and opinions on almost any topic you can think of. (UMM in the News)

Thanks to Schultz's explanation of his inspiration, the production may be discussed as a communication effort between the producer and the audience, which included both university and town people, in regard to the community's social issues including conservatism and hatred toward certain groups of people. In the next section, an overview of key concepts from "performance ethnography" and "performance as political action" is presented. Subsequently, these concepts are employed as a framework in analyzing the presentation of this play at UMM.

Performance Ethnography and Performance as Political Action

Two conceptual frameworks are useful for an analysis of the play at UMM. The descriptions are given below.

Performance Ethnography

Wood (2004) explains the essence of performance ethnography as it "attempts to understand how symbolic behaviors actually perform—and sometimes challenge—cultural values and personal identities. In other words, individual and group performances reveal some things about how

we see ourselves and about the values, traditions, and customs that make up our culture or social community" (p. 124). According to Wood, performance may "reconstruct or reproduce the cultural views," one example of which is graffiti, which "consist of symbols that reflect the values, issues, and identities important in particular cultures or social communities...[and] also inform others of values, identities, and issues important to a particular social group" (p. 124).

Conquergood (1986) says that in "ethnography of performance," performance can be understood in two ways: (1) performance as cultural process, and (2) performance as ethnographic praxis (p.55). In "performance as cultural process," cultural performances are "culturally reflexive events" and can be understood as "social productivity," as Conquergood explains,

Cultural performance, such as rituals, ceremonies, celebrations, myths, stories, songs, jokes, carnivals, contests, games, parties, politesse, and other expressive traditions, are culturally reflexive events that focus, interpret, punctuate, and endow meaningfulness to experience.... It is the capacity of cultural performance to induce self-knowledge, self-awareness, plural reflexivity, that makes it political. (p. 59)

In "ethnographic praxis as performance," Conquergood (1986) suggests that it, as a second level of analysis or understanding, can be viewed as "a delicately balanced performance between ethnographer and native consultants"

(p.60). He adds that the mutual understanding between the two parties, shown through the performance, is what must be examined, saying,

The relationship between ethnographer and native is not a natural one; it is absolutely constructed and contingent upon a willing suspension of disbelief by both parties in the encounter... Authentic fieldwork depends on acknowledgement of its mutual constructedness through performance, fiction, intersubjective dialogue between Self and Other.... The performative view brings ethnographer and native together as co-actors, mutually engaged collaborators in a fragile fiction.... Instead of the researcher presented as detached and controlling, the performative view admits the fragile situation of the fieldworker.” (pp. 60-61)

As an application following analysis of these two levels of ethnography performance, Conquergood (1998) went to the Ban Vinai Hmong refugee camps in Thailand several times in 1980's and “helped design and direct a health education campaign which used this wealth of performance” (pp. 220-221). Analogously, *The Laramie Project* at UMM also an ethnography performance may be analyzed. First, however, an overview of “performance as political action” or performativity is necessary.

Performance as Political Action

Wood (2004) posits that performance as political action, i.e., “performativity” in

performance studies, “is a key concept both for performance studies scholars who embrace the political character of performances and for scholars in other branches of performance work” (p. 132). Wood explains that performativity is fundamentally important because “performativity is not the mere representation of preexisting identity (or other reality); performativity means that it is performance that we enact, or generate, the very phenomenon to which performativity refers” (p. 133).

Pollack (1998) explains that performativity emphasizes “the process by which meanings, selves, and other effects are produced...the embodied process of making meaning” (p.20); the active collaborative role of audiences in producing the meaning of performance is emphasized. Consistent with Pollack's perspective, Wood (2004) asserts that performance has the potential to reinscribe as well as to resist what it presents, which can be cultural practices identities, and relationships, and then changes among audience members may happen.

Consequently, performance may become “a primary means of critiquing social meanings and the identities and practices they foster” (Wood, 2004, p. 134). Then, such critique “offered by performance as political action challenges the very social conventions and norms that frame—and perhaps limit—individual identities and social relations” (Wood, p. 134). Conquergood (1991) raises four questions derived from such practices:

- What is the relationship between performance and power?

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- How does performance reproduce, enable, sustain, challenge, subvert, critique, and naturalize ideology?
- How does performance simultaneously reproduce (and thus highlight) and resist (and thus invite change) hegemony?
- How does performance accommodate and contest domination? (p. 190)

The fundamental questions guiding performance ethnography and analysis of performance as political action have been presented. An analysis of *The Laramie Project* may be offered.

Analysis

This analysis of *The Laramie Project* at UMM, based on performance ethnography and performance as political action, consists of two parts. In the first part an examination of how the play was presented and interpreted is presented. In the second part, an investigation of the impacts of the play is reported in response to the four questions raised by Conquergood (1991).

Performance Ethnography and The Laramie Project at UMM

In discussing how *The Laramie Project* at UMM was presented and may be interpreted by performance ethnography, two questions are addressed: (1) How did the performance reveal or reflect the values, beliefs, and the status quo of the community? and (2) How did the meaning of the those values, beliefs and the status quo emerge as a mutual understanding between the audience and the performers in that context?

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Reflection of the Reality at UMM and Morris

The play became the talk of the town after it was advertised throughout the UMM campus and the town of Morris. UMM is a liberal place, the town is very conservative, the content of the play is related to a hate crime of a homosexual. Ray Schultz wanted to establish cognitive parallelism between Laramie and Morris because he knew there had been controversies about homosexuality and homosexuals in Morris. In specific, in November 2001, both UMM's homecoming king and queen were gay men, which has raised disputes about appropriateness. Many people in Morris and nearby towns were upset by this incident and they protested in many ways, such as by stopping their donations and not sending their children to study at UMM. The play was presented a few months after.

Thus, the play revealed a reality of the town and the UMM campus: the existence of two worlds in one place called Morris. The major theme of the play that was revealed so prominently was prejudice and hatred towards those who are non-heterosexual and non-white. Of course, there had been groups in Morris who have tried to create common ground, but the success of their efforts was still unknown. The issue of "mutual understanding between the audience and the performers" must be raised.

Mutual Understanding: The Audience and the Performers

Three types of audiences attended this show: those who were homosexuals, those who tolerated homosexuals and homosexuality, and those who wanted to know more about homosexuals and

homosexuality. Those who were against homosexuality were not part of the crowd. Also, some members of the cast in this performance were town people, including the mayor. Such involvement indicates that collaboration between the two communities—the town and the campus—emerged.

Mutual understanding between audience and the performers became real and intriguing as a result the performance. There was a “dialogue” after the performance; audience members expressed their understanding of the subject matter projected in the show through their questions, concerns, and admitted frustrations.

Performance as Political Action and The Laramie Project at UMM

The four questions raised by Conquergood (1991) provided a basis for analysis.

- *What is the relationship between performance and power?*

Performance of *The Laramie Project* reflected power struggle between two groups: (1) the homosexuals and those who tolerated homosexuality and (2) those who did not tolerate homosexuals and homosexuality and were more likely conservative in viewpoint. In the UMM context, the performance was seen as a vehicle for the former to speak their voice and be heard. The audience, in general, perceived there to be oppression in the context.

- *How does performance reproduce, enable, sustain,*

challenge, subvert, critique, and naturalize ideology?

This performance enabled the voice of the homosexuals and those who tolerated homosexuality to be heard while challenging the existing power of the mainstream in context. Certainly, it was also a criticism that the oppression was wrong, that prejudice and narrow-mindedness towards homosexuality were illegitimate, unfair, and dehumanizing, and that those who oppressed and held negative attitudes towards homosexuality needed to change their mindset.

- *How does performance simultaneously reproduce (and thus highlight) and resist (and thus invite change) hegemony?*

As stated above, the play demanded immediate changes within the community, including resistance of hegemony and the oppression against homosexuality. However, the effects of the performance did not last long. Changes which would resist and challenge hegemony were not sustained; the community did not challenge hegemony or oppression of homosexuals and homosexuality after the show.

- *How does performance accommodate and contest domination?*

The performance did not contest the domination of those who did not tolerate homosexuality in the community though it did provide a need for fairness and open-mindedness within the community. Unfortunately, the domination continued because there were agencies that encouraged

and perpetuated hatred and unfair treatment towards homosexuals and homosexuality in the community, such as certain church groups and prevailing conservative values.

but have never been realized and addressed by community members. Performance is not only for entertainment purposes, but is also for the better “well-being” of those who have been oppressed by dominant culture.

Conclusion and Implications

This paper has been a report of a qualitative analysis of the performance of *The Laramie Project* produced at the UMM campus in February 2001. A brief portrait of the show and the context—UMM and Morris—has been provided, as well as an overview of “cultural ethnography/performance ethnography” and “performativity” as conceptual frameworks for analysis. *The Laramie Project* may be understood as a political tool fostering social awareness of the existence of homosexuals and homosexuality and their problems.

Herein, the issues of social oppression, cultural ethnography/performance ethnography, and performance as political action or performativity are related to each other as communicative phenomena. Future research using these concepts might include analysis of other kinds of social oppressions that may happen in problematic contexts, such as being a non-white in a rural and remote area in the U.S. or being a Burmese illegal worker in a Thai factory or workplace and how such oppressions are projected through performances given to audiences in those contexts.

The Laramie Project at UMM is an example of social oppressions that occur throughout the U.S. and elsewhere. Performances such as this may help people be aware of problems that have long existed

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