

Article

Reflecting on community-based research with the transgender community in South India

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Abstract

This paper examines how street theatre was co-developed and implemented as a form of resistance and community empowerment in collaboration with the transgender community in Chennai, India. Rooted in the community's longstanding cultural practices of dance and performance, this project mobilized street theatre not only to elevate marginalized voices, but to challenge the enduring legacies of colonial and gendered state violence. Drawing on a community-based action research approach and Freirean pedagogy, the first author, an Indian diasporic social worker and emerging scholar, reflects on their role as facilitator and co-learner in this process. The paper presents street theatre as a culturally grounded, transformative practice that reclaims public space, asserts agency, and creates dialogic encounters with the broader public. It further explores how such research-community partnerships can disrupt dominant knowledge production and catalyze social and personal transformation.

Keywords

community-based action research, street theatre, transgender community, Global South

Résumé

Cet article examine comment le théâtre de rue a été co-développé et mis en œuvre comme forme de résistance et d'autonomisation communautaire en collaboration avec la communauté transgenre à Chennai, en Inde. S'appuyant sur les pratiques culturelles ancestrales de danse et de performance de cette communauté, ce projet a mobilisé le théâtre de rue non seulement pour amplifier les voix marginalisées, mais aussi pour remettre en question les héritages persistants de la violence coloniale et genrée exercée par l'État. En adoptant une approche de recherche-action communautaire et une pédagogie freirienne, la première autrice, travailleuse sociale issue de la diaspora indienne et chercheuse émergente, réfléchit à son rôle de facilitatrice et de co-apprenante dans ce processus. L'article présente le théâtre de rue comme une pratique culturellement ancrée et transformatrice, qui permet de reconquérir l'espace public, d'affirmer une agencivité et de créer des rencontres dialogiques avec le grand public. Il explore en outre comment de tels partenariats entre recherche et communauté peuvent perturber les modes dominants de production du savoir et catalyser des transformations

sociales et personnelles.

Mots-clés

recherche-action communautaire, théâtre de rue, communauté transgenre, sud global

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Introduction

This paper begins with a celebration of a collaborative and creative process rooted in community-based participatory research, which directly informed the development of a street theatre performance with members of the transgender community in Chennai, India. At its core, this paper centers on the collaborative project, focusing on its creation, performance, and the decolonial insights it generated through street theatre art, dialogue, and community engagement. The project itself serves as the foundation of this paper, functioning as both a method and a site of inquiry through which we examine decolonial praxis and community knowledge production. As we critically reflect on our work as PhD students, we draw on how learning within a Westernized university has shaped our thinking, knowledge, and choice of theories and methods. In the decolonial option, where scholars choose among a range of theories and techniques to engage with decoloniality, Mignolo (2011) asks us to reflect not only on our physical location as authors but also, more importantly, on where we dwell. For us, this means utilizing Westernized university methods to work towards decolonization, both physically (as experienced by the first and second authors) and in our “home” (for the first author). Hence, our reflections throughout this paper return repeatedly to this project as a central example of how decolonial collaboration and creative praxis can occur across academia and the community. As we think through this article’s purpose and relevance, the goal of the paper is to map the thinking and experiences of the first author (as a PhD student in social work, female, and cis-gender) when they were invited “home” to co-create a street theatre play in Chennai, India, with the transgender community. Although the term transgender is not used or understood in India in the same ways as in Canada, where this writing is situated, it has been collectively adopted and affirmed by the community involved in this work. This article re-tells a beautiful process of art in motion and sets it within the historical and contemporary context. We also discuss our own learnings and some shared from those involved in the creation. We, as the authors, also grappled with the decolonial option here and how it is done. To set the stage, we provide a brief historical context of India, colonization, and the coloniality of the gender binary.

Writing about this collaboration as a decolonial reflection in a peer-reviewed journal, an extension of the academy, is a balancing act. The call for papers for this publication suggested that the work described reflects evidence-based practices, so to respond to that, we included some information on the legislative context and the research project that informed the street theatre productions. Drawing upon the experiences of a collaboration that occurred “elsewhere” has meant including information about its

relevance in India, for example, including information on government and its policies as well as popular discourse, to set the context. We also felt that this collaboration activated and engaged with the historical context of street theatre in the Indian community, which we wanted to highlight. Finally, there was a methodological component that was used to give it legitimacy in the academy in both spaces, which we also wanted to bring into the dialogues. In working towards legitimacy, the second author joined the project with permission, as a social work PhD student, to help translate the work into a language intelligible to a Western academic audience and to support its development into a publication.

Ultimately, the focus of this paper remains on the street theatre project, both as a process and as praxis, which served as a collaborative, embodied, and creative act that bridged the community's knowledge and academic reflection.

A note on the terminology used, in India, the Sanskrit term *tritiyaprakriti* (तृतीयप्रकृति) combines *tritiya* (third) and *prakriti* (nature or constitution) and is used to signify space and existence beyond the colonial male-female gender binary (Dutta & Roy, 2014; Michelraj, 2015). *Trityaprakriti* has historically been embedded in Hindu mythology, folklore, and sacred texts, including the *Vedas* and *Puranas*, reflecting the long-standing recognition of gender diversity in South Asian cosmologies. These terms lack a direct English equivalent. Dutta and Roy (2014) emphasize that contemporary individuals and communities adopt a range of words, including borrowed, translated, and hybridized versions of "transgender" to articulate their gender identities. Terms such as *hijra*, *kothi*, and transgender are often used interchangeably or in combination, depending on context and self-identification. In this article, we use the term transgender in accordance with the preferred self-identification of the community members with whom we collaborated.

Background

To re-tell or re-story this research requires articulation and a broader discussion of the political and social desire to divest from violence towards the transgender community. To do so, we begin with locating the symbolic role of the transgender community in both culture and Hindu religion. In the past, the Indian myths in Chennai were based on Hinduism, wherein the transgender community was believed to have the ability to bestow blessings at weddings and childbirth ceremonies, for fertility, prosperity, and good luck. For centuries, the transgender community particularly *Hijras*, was invited to perform blessings at weddings and after the birth of boys, ceremonies deeply embedded in Hindu ritual life. These performances were not only symbolic acts of spiritual significance, but also vital sources of livelihood, with families offering financial gifts in return (Michelraj, 2015). This belief was connected to the ability to invoke the goddess powers of *Bahuchare Mata* and *Ardhanarishvara* and bless couples with fertility and protection; *Saraswati*, knowledge and wisdom; and *Lakshmi*, wealth and prosperity (Conner et al., 1999). *Shikhandi* is more commonly associated with the Hindu epic, the *Mahabharata*. *Shikhandi* is a figure who was born female but later transitioned into a male form. This transformation is crucial in the defeat of the warrior Bhishma during the Kurukshetra war, symbolizing the fluidity of gender and the importance of non-binary identities (Conner et al., 1999). As a part of colonization, the British intentionally erased anything not fitting into their gender binary and cemented marginalization into state apparatuses.

Colonial criminalization and the erasure of gender diversity

British colonialization criminalized and pathologized gender expressions that did not conform to the male-female gender binary. During colonial rule, the British attempted to suppress diverse gender expressions and impose a Victorian sense of morality and a rigid racialized gender binary (Mundi, 2022). One of the most damaging impositions was Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code, a colonial-era law introduced by the British in 1861 that criminalized “carnal intercourse against the order of nature” (Indian Penal Code, 1861, § 377). Though often framed around homosexuality, this law became a tool for widespread harassment and surveillance of gender-nonconforming individuals. Under its provisions, transgender persons could be arrested simply for dancing or playing music, activities that were central to their cultural and spiritual roles (Chakrapani, 2010). One legislative method of criminalization was through laws such as the Criminal Tribes Act (1871), which explicitly targeted *Hijra* communities. This legal and moral framework imposed by the British not only disrupted understandings of gender but also institutionalized a system of social exclusion and surveillance that continues to shape the state’s treatment of transgender people today. In response to the changing social structures, laws, and colonialism, the transgender community had to leave behind their traditions and previous means of survival. In 1871, the Criminal Tribes Act labelled the transgender community as crossdressers, beggars, and “unnatural prostitutes,” legitimizing systemic violence such as surveillance, public humiliation, forced displacement, and incarceration under the guise of targeting “a criminal and sexually deviant person” (Biswas, 2019, p. 1). Moreover, being transgender warranted imprisonment and fines if community members, particularly male, were seen wearing female clothing or jewelry or performing in public. The Criminal Tribe Act equipped law enforcement with the power of increased surveillance to regulate and criminalize the transgender community in India. The Act included a ban on public dances and performances, which included ceremonies meaning a loss of income and connections for those engaged in this practice. Further, it cemented the economic devastation enforced by the state (Biswas, 2019; Michelraj, 2015).

Postcolonial continuities of exclusion and marginalization

The violent imposition of these laws had consequences for religion, social connections, and ways of life across India. Colonial criminalization of ceremonial practices and dancing severed transgender communities from both cultural belonging and economic stability. This legal and moral policing aligned with broader colonial strategies aimed at regulating the bodies and labour of marginalized populations, casting Indigenous gender systems as deviant or immoral. Although India gained independence in 1947, these colonial-era frameworks continued to shape postcolonial legal and social exclusions. Postcolonial India has inherited and perpetuates the structures that marginalize transgender communities, limiting access to legal recognition, healthcare, education, and employment, even as their symbolic presence in religious and cultural life persists. The loss of symbolism and traditions continues to reverberate today, contributing to the social exclusion, economic marginalization, and institutional surveillance that transgender people in India still face. Whilst the transgender community was respected and essential in the pre-colonial era, they are now referred to in derogatory terms, and there remains a political and social desire to continue unjust laws. Post-independence, the echoes of British violence remain, and

many have been relegated to illegal begging and sex work due to oppression from the community (Kumar, 2021; Sawant, 2017).

From erasure to limited recognition: The legal and social developments

In 2014, the erasure of legal recognition and protections for the transgender community produced a marked decline in their traditional vocations, such as dancing at weddings, as individuals increasingly feared incarceration. This additional surveillance has led to a monumental increase in sex work that has resulted in complex health issues in the transgender community (Hylton et al., 2018; Sinha, 2019). Recognizing the risks associated with sex work and the petition from the transgender community, the Indian government introduced free gender reassignment surgery (Pandey, 2020). Gender-affirming surgery is named “nirvan,” meaning liberation in Sanskrit. The process of affirmation has been viewed as “rebirth” by the transgender community, as it makes them feel “right” or “natural” (Pandey, 2020). However, the transgender community is reluctant to seek services from government hospitals due to transphobia among public medical institutions and long waiting periods (Ghosh, 2020). As a result, the free gender assignment surgery was accessed by only five transgender individuals in one of the equipped public hospitals per year (Ghosh, 2020). Given the employment discrimination and state-sponsored exclusion that impact their employment in other fields, commercial sex work is often the only pathway to affording such expensive reaffirming surgery.

The historical weight of colonial criminalization continues to shape the everyday realities and systemic exclusions faced by transgender communities in India beyond economic impacts and restrictions on surgery. The social violence and stigma experienced by transgender individuals and communities is due to prejudice against their nonconforming to colonial ideology that is manifested in gender identity. Despite these challenges, transgender individuals and communities have made significant progress in securing human rights recognition in social and political spheres, including housing and societal acceptance (Michelraj, 2015). However, India has experienced notable policy shifts regarding legal identification of gender. Most significantly, the official recognition of the transgender community as a third gender in government legislation, resulting from the landmark 2014 NALSA v. Union of India judgment by the Supreme Court of India (Michelraj, 2015). It affirmed the right to self-identification and protection from discrimination. Some critique the third gender category as embodying a form of hegemony, one that confines transgender identities to narrowly defined and state-sanctioned criteria, potentially excluding those who do not conform to these norms (Dutta & Roy, 2014). This was followed by transgender leaders like Gauri Sawant and Laxmi Narayan Tripathi taking center stage in politics and activism, fighting for legal reforms, including the legal milestone, the Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Act in 2019 (Mascarenhas, 2019). The introduction of the Transgender Persons Rights Bill in 2019 also represented a landmark moment toward decriminalization and formal acknowledgment of transgender identities, often referencing *Hijras*, within the legal framework (Hylton et al., 2018, p. 5). The Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Act (2019) prohibits discrimination in education, employment, healthcare, and public spaces. It mandates that government and private institutions ensure equal opportunities for transgender people and includes provisions for the establishment of welfare schemes, healthcare facilities, and separate HIV surveillance centers.

Critiques of the Transgender Persons Act of 2019 and ongoing struggles

Critics argue that while the Act gestures toward inclusion, it reproduces many of the structural inequalities and stigmatizing practices it purports to eliminate. The gender binary continues to be supported by the state apparatuses in India (Dutta & Roy, 2014; Reddy, 2005). As such, it reflects the state's continued control over people's lives, echoing the colonial legacy of regulation and erasure under the guise of protection. One historical example of state control is in the 2011 national census, which reported approximately 444,000 transgender people under the male category. This classification fails to reflect their self-identified genders and highlight ongoing challenges in official recognition (Sawant, 2017; Sinha, 2019). Therefore, grassroots organizations such as *Sangama* and *Naz Foundation* continue to mobilize issues of healthcare, employment rights, and anti-discrimination legislation. This growing visibility is helping to reshape public discourse and push for systemic changes (Kumar, 2021). While these reforms mark progress, they have also been critiqued for lacking community consultation and reinforcing paternalistic control over identity documentation and welfare (Rao, 2020). There remains a disconnect between policy and practice, illustrating that while legal reforms mark important steps forward, they coexist with persistent erasure and social exclusion that transgender communities continue to navigate.

Despite these legislative advances, the lived realities of many transgender individuals continue to be shaped by systemic invisibility, social marginalization, and exclusion. Whilst this governmental recognition was monumental, many transgender communities failed to celebrate the Bill and took to the streets, resisting and pushing for a revision of the newly passed Bill. The transgender community and activists strongly opposed the Transgender Persons Rights Bill because, despite its stated aim to protect their rights, it failed to acknowledge fundamental civil liberties such as the right to adopt and to inherit and own property. Moreover, the Bill mandated proof of gender confirmation surgery in order to obtain legal recognition of one's gender identity, a requirement that not only violated bodily autonomy but also contradicted the Indian Supreme Court's judgment in 2014, which affirmed the right to self-identify one's gender without medical intervention (Sawant, 2017). Critics argued that the Bill reinforced paternalistic state control rather than empowering the transgender community it claimed to protect. Indian social activists have argued that the Bill restricts recognition to only those born male (Kannan, 2021). The Bill rendered the complexities of people who do not conform to the colonial gender binary invisible in the eyes of the state. By rejecting comprehensive terms such as gender identity and gender expression, the government failed to ensure that fundamental rights are guaranteed to all people regardless of their sex characteristics or gender identity (Kannan, 2021). Moreover, the Bill enshrined surveillance tactics, stating that an individual's sex/gender status can only be male, female or transgender and must be verified by showing an attestation of their gender identity from a District Magistrate (DHNS, 2018). Dutta and Roy (2022) note that even though the Bill is portrayed to be progressive, it grossly violates the principles of self-determination and roots gender into three categories.

Misrepresentation and the revival of transgender art

Institutions, including government bodies, legal systems, and media, have long attempted to silence the

voices of the transgender community in India. Their identities have been erased, their cultures and values misrepresented, misconstrued, and often sensationalized by researchers, state lawmakers, and the media (Schnarch, 2004). This sustained marginalization contributes to the transgender community's broader social exclusion, leading to a loss of pride, visibility, and voice (Rajkumar, 2016). Although the transgender community is frequently studied, it remains largely ignored in the formation of meaningful laws and policies. While there is debate around the problematic elements of legislation, transgender communities are building on the shift towards a recognition of rights in India, asserting their experiences, identities, and rights through various forms of representation. Films like *The pink mirror* and *Chitrangada: The crowning wish* are examples of art and cinema created to disrupt stereotypes instilled during colonialism. This resurgence in public recognition has also coincided with a revival of transgender-led artistic expression, particularly through street theatre. Within this context, street theatre rooted in the transgender community's traditions and knowledge systems became a powerful method of reclaiming space and amplifying voices. Grounded in embodied knowledge, this form of community-based art prioritized accessibility, actionability, sustainability, and responsiveness to the community's past and present lived realities (Graham, 2014; Schnarch, 2004).

Embodied knowledge, and decolonial praxis through street theatre art

India is witnessing the re-birth of several established transgender street theatre groups, such as *Kinnar Akhada* in Uttar Pradesh and *Sampoorna Theatre* in Mumbai. Street theatre in India can trace its roots back to the traditional forms of performance that were used for public storytelling, rituals, and communication. These include *Ramlila*, *Krishnalila*, and *Tamasha*, which were folk theatre traditions performed in open spaces, often as part of religious and cultural festivals. These performances were the precursors to the kind of popular, performance-driven activism in street theatre seen in the later 20th century (Awasthi, 2010). Indian and various fusion art modalities are vastly popular because they are deeply connected to place and history and are dedicated to addressing socio-economic biases and marginalization faced by marginalized groups. For example, *Mazhavil Dhwani* in Kerala is a prominent theatre group that has created a street theatre platform for self-expression and activism. Their platform engages the local community in dialogue about gender discrimination and exclusion faced by the transgender community, aiming to reclaim their rightful place in society through art and the creation of safe spaces (Harikumar, 2019). Wanting to build on the growing momentum, our decision to adapt street theatre as a medium for social activism reflects the work of Loiselle et al. (2014) across India. In their work, street theatre created and performed by transgender communities serve to promote social justice and foster respect from the broader public, supporting their pursuit of a meaningful life. This use of street theatre not only engages the public but also centers the body as a site of resistance and knowledge production, linking the performative to broader decolonial and epistemological commitments.

The body in performance becomes a form of knowing/epistemology. In this epistemology, the lived and living knowledge of the performers can be felt in their presence. Embodied knowledge challenges dominant ways of knowing/being/doing and for transgender communities, narratives that have historically rendered them invisible. This embodiment enlivens the potential to disrupt viewers' taken-for-granted assumptions and ways of knowing, seeing, and relating to the world (Carranza, 2021).

Moreover, performance art that draws on embodied knowing functions as a decolonial praxis, one that not only values lived experience as a legitimate form of knowledge but also invites critical action and collective resistance (Mignolo & Walsh, 2018). For such praxis to be transformative, it must actively “do” something: question hegemonic systems, interrupt dominant discourses, and offer alternative, community-rooted ways of being and knowing (Carranza, 2021; Hamera, 2011). Street theatre does this by reclaiming public space as a site of resistance, confronting colonial and casteist constructions of gender and morality, and making visible the lived realities and ancestral knowledges that have long been erased or delegitimized by dominant state, religious, and western frameworks.

In this spirit of decolonial resistance, the transgender community in Chennai drew inspiration from Freire’s (1970) critique of traditional educational approaches that seek to address social inequities by merely educating oppressors about the oppressed. While Freire’s work is often critiqued for its foundations in western theories such as Marxism, decolonial scholar Catherine Walsh (2015) offers ways to engage his ideas as points of both crossing and divergence, providing a framework for reimagining pedagogy through decolonial lenses. Freire argues that this approach reinforces power asymmetries by requiring the oppressed to perform labour for recognition and change. Instead, Freire (1970) advocates for pedagogy as a method that centers knowledge produced by marginalized groups, emerging directly from their lived experiences. This pedagogy centers knowledge produced by marginalized groups that emerges not from elite institutions or abstract theory but from the concrete realities of oppression, struggle, and survival. In this process, learners embrace a dialogical, co-constructed process where those historically excluded from knowledge production are recognized as intellectual agents. For Freire, such pedagogy is not only educational but also liberatory. By engaging with and validating these forms of embodied knowledge, performance art can disrupt dominant narratives, foster new understandings, and contribute to dismantling exclusionary boundaries. Resistance is grounded in critical reflection, lived realities, subjectivities, and history, one that is animated by love for humanity and transformative praxis. Blending with street theatre traditions, a Freirean pedagogical approach was used as a method of decolonization, rejecting the colonial subjugation of bodies and sexualities to create space beyond binaries.

Localizing street theatre and reclaiming transgender history

Taking this belief, the first author and transgender community members in Chennai began exploring street theatre as a decolonial practice. Street theatre closely aligns with the Indian transgender community’s traditions of dance and art. Historically, transgender dancers had a rich and vital tradition called *toli-badhai*, in which they participated in celebrations and offered blessings in exchange for generous compensation, until Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code criminalized same-sex relations and, by extension, various expressions of gender and sexuality including dancing in some contexts (Banerji, 2018; Kalra et al., 2010). As a participatory citizen education tool, the street theatre can initiate profound change in people by engaging them in producing the oral history of their social and cultural reality. The collective work of creating and performing street theatre was about reclaiming a history of honor and making visible the transgender community in India. While acknowledging the long history and the contemporary forms of coloniality, this work was grounded in the spirituality, beliefs, traditions, and the

land of India. In other words, the performance was local to Chennai. As Dutta and Roy (2014) caution, efforts to broaden the understanding of transgender identities across cultural or national contexts often risk erasing or flattening the specific lived experiences and epistemologies of South Asian and Indian communities. Such umbrella terms, while seemingly inclusive, frequently rely on Western frameworks of knowledge production, which can subsume and marginalize local, culturally rooted understandings of gender and embodiment (Dutta & Roy, 2014). Therefore, neither this article nor the street theatre performances aimed to contribute to an expansive or universal definition of gender, particularly of transgender, and how that materializes in this locality, that could be neatly situated under a transnational umbrella.

Street theatre art in India

Street theatre was developed into an effective communication mode between the actors and the audience for the purposes of social justice and change (Banerjee, 2013). In the early 20th century, street theatre art fused Eastern and Western performing traditions with various audiences. Notably, India welcomed the amalgamation of Western proscenium art and Eastern theatre art during its *Freedom Struggle*. Infused with the Western cultural ethos and language, the proscenium failed to grab the attention of the local Indian audience (Das & Rabb, 2012). This influenced the transformation of proscenium, the art of performing on the stage, into street theatre, the art of performing in the streets along the Indian shores. This transformation was highly influenced by the ideology of reaching the marginalized masses more effectively. This paradigm shift was influenced by the anti-fascist movement under the canopy of the Indian People's Theatre Association. This Association was the first organized institution focused on propagating national consciousness through street theatre (Das & Rabb, 2012). Colloquial language, dance, music, use of props, and costumes defined Indian street theatre's aesthetic characteristics to elicit active participation from the public against colonial rule. In the 1940s, street theatre was used to propagate the need for social and political change to the masses, initiating the anti-colonial struggle (Deshpande, 2007).

In the 1980s, Indian street theatre became an emancipatory tool for the working class to address social injustice. It reinforced a revolution against established power structures by focusing on casteism, class, and gender discrimination. Simultaneously, street theatre saw an influx of participation from intentionally marginalized communities seeking self-determination against social injustice and inequities (Batra, 2011). It was no longer limited to professionals, academics, and dominant groups. At present, street theatre in India is focused more on bringing awareness to globalization, capitalism, environmental protection, and violence against women. The transgender community is focused on breaking the stereotypical representation and telling their own stories through their voices.

During the early stages of conceptualizing our activism, the participating transgender community members and the first author thought through this history of street theatre and unanimously agreed on this arts-based approach with a research component. This collective goal required us to reflect on whose knowledge is often privileged and heard in research and how we can know. Fletcher (2022) reminds us “knowledge is predicated by collective assemblage and multiple subjectivities, according to roles and protocols around who may know, when and where it may be known and shared” (p. 76).

Street theatre presented the opportunity to challenge the disregard of lived experience in European knowledge traditions that are continually being enacted as ongoing colonization (Fletcher, 2022). The participants and the first author disseminated their selected social experiences to audiences, where collectively we engaged in activism (Johnston & Pratt, 2010; Rogers, 2018). This experience fostered meaningful connections with the transgender community, promoted collective healing, and served as a platform for advocacy and raising social consciousness among the wider public.

Methodology of street theatre

The first author, an emerging academic living in Canada and part of the Indian diaspora, began this project through an iterative process of reflection in collaboration with members of the transgender community in Chennai. Along with street theatre, the collaborating group decided on a survey as an efficient method to learning about experiences in the region. When thinking about western research methods, we reflect not only on where we are situated as authors but also, more importantly, where we dwell (Mignolo, 2011). For the first author, this meant dwelling in the shared spaces of Chennai, shaped by both solidarity and dissonance, while also navigating the knowledge borders of the West and the Global South. Dwelling at these borders means that, as an Indian woman in the Global North, the first author moves fluidly between and blends multiple epistemic frames (Mignolo, 2011). In an earlier draft, we engaged the insider/outsider binary to frame our positions in relation to knowledge production. However, after reading Jabiri (2024), we began to question the desire to define ourselves within such binaries, an impulse rooted in objectivist epistemologies that have historically discounted scholars with shared or racialized identities by framing their insights as lacking neutrality or broader relevance. This relational engagement grounded the project in the epistemic locations of those communities. The second author, a white emerging academic, joined during the writing phase to support the articulation of experiences and ideas in the dominant academic language of the Global North, with the group's consent. The language of the Global North is not just English but the vernacular of the Westernized university, that is thought to belong in academic journals. Together, we shared, reflected on, and contextualized these experiences within broader feminist, decolonial, and transnational literatures.

The research was designed to identify collective concerns and lived experiences to guide the creation of an educational and culturally grounded performance piece. It was also used to establish academic rigor, which the collaborating group considered necessary for external validation. Given the aim of information sharing, one intended route for dissemination was via academic journals and conferences, to discuss the street theatre. To initiate the process, the first author co-designed a closed-ended survey to utilize with the transgender community, including those not involved with the performance. The questions focused on two central areas that were identified by the members of the team: (1) societal acceptance and (2) health discrimination and disparities. The survey consisted of 12 multiple-choice and Likert-scale questions, accompanied by two optional open-ended questions for elaboration. Sample questions included: "have you ever avoided a hospital or clinic due to fear of discrimination?" and "how would you rate the level of acceptance of your identity within your neighborhood/community?" The first author administered the surveys in person, reading each question aloud in Tamil. Some participants responded orally, while others wrote their responses either without assistance or with help. Minimal

translation into English occurred during the transcription and documentation phases. All efforts were made to preserve the original intent and tone of participant responses. Clarification was sought where needed through follow-up discussions with participants.

Given the transgender community's historic marginalization and well-documented mistrust of academic and state institutions, snowball sampling was employed for participant survey recruitment. A total of 30 members of the transgender community completed the survey. Participation was entirely voluntary, and informed consent was obtained. No personally identifying information was recorded, and demographic data (such as age range, education, and region of residence) was collected in broad categories to maintain confidentiality.

Ethical approval for the research was obtained from the Madras School of Social Work, and the study adhered to relational and community-based ethical protocols. Data was collected in safe and affirming environments that were identified by the transgender participants themselves. Examples of these locations included a local community centre for transgender elders, a small performing arts space affiliated with a trans-led Non-Government Organisation (NGO), and a private classroom in the first author's institution in India, where community members had previously held meetings and rituals. These spaces were chosen for their accessibility, familiarity, and freedom from police or institutional surveillance. Six community members participated in the street theatre project as performers, collaborators, and co-researchers. Of the six, four were also among the original survey respondents, while two joined later through community referrals. All six contributed to the interpretation of survey findings and the development of the theatre script.

Three group analysis meetings were held following the completion of the survey phase. These were conducted in Tamil and included collective discussion of patterns and emotional themes emerging from the data. While survey results offered initial guidance, decisions about which themes to foreground in the performance were based on a combination of frequency and emotional significance as determined by the transgender performers. For example, issues such as criminalization of dance traditions and survival-based sex work were not the most frequently cited in the survey but were highlighted due to their deep cultural and personal relevance. These meetings were audio-recorded (with consent), transcribed, and translated selectively into English by the first author to support documentation. Excerpts from the discussions were later incorporated as direct quotes in the performance script to maintain authenticity and center community voice. The analysis was not conducted using traditional coding software or frameworks but was shaped through iterative dialogue, storytelling, and co-reflection, aligning with oral knowledge traditions and decolonial methodologies. The first author navigated their role with humility and transparency, building trust over time through consistent presence, respect for rituals and customs, and a commitment to the social justice priorities expressed by the transgender community. This collaborative process ensured that the final street theatre performance was not only a form of public education, but also a tool for community healing, storytelling, and collective resistance.

Insights from the community voices

The quotes that were selected by the group to use directly or enrich a theme to use in the street theatre performance are discussed below.

One of the anonymous participants noted that,

Everyone fails to understand us for who we are. We are more than what happens in the bedroom and stop defining us through our appearances. However, appreciate our courage for being truthful to you and ourselves. Accept us, not because we hold equal rights as you do, but foremost we are also human beings.

The above excerpt is a reflection regarding social acceptance and discrimination faced in places of worship, employment, and access to housing by a participant currently engaged in survival sex work. Eighty-five percent of the participants agreed that to live a meaningful life, they sought to stop discrimination against them and seek respect from society. Twenty-five percent responded that they had lost hope or expectations from the general community. During the project, most of the participants lived on the banks of the river Cooum, which they noted could be a primary cause of their health problems like skin infections, mental health problems, reproductive and hormonal health, and poor access to healthcare. They lived in a well-defined, separate, and desolate row of illegal small apartments in the tenement neighbourhood. Outsiders avoided entering this row for fear of stigma, and primarily, those seeking sexual services from the transgender community tried to avoid being seen in this space.

Moreover, the survey data reflects that this transgender community can only afford such housing due to their challenges in acquiring a job or accessing housing across the city. This leaves them with no other option but to live as groups in different spaces marked by poverty. These spaces are often where other marginalized communities live, who are often the only people who accommodate them.

One respondent discussed seeking medical treatment:

I suffer from acute depression and inferiority complex, but I am afraid to seek treatment for fear of discrimination. I cannot afford medications or treatments as I survive on my income through sex work. My family disowned me, and I was refused employment. Here I am; what choice do I have?

The above excerpt reflects the intersection of medical treatment for illness and economic disadvantage. Seventy-five percent of the respondents were involved in sex work for survival, and only five percent of them sought medical treatment/expertise. Furthermore, 85 percent of participants responded that they were strongly discouraged and discriminated against by medical service providers. Also, 90 percent of participants responded that their immediate family members still do not accept them, adding to the physical and emotional dimensions of erasure. Of the respondents, 97% came out to their families before the age of 18, while five reported running away from home, identifying fear of public social exclusion as the main reason. This suggests that coming out at a young age may have led to adverse familial and social responses, which resulted in some participants leaving their homes. One of the participants shared that:

I regularly try to connect with my family and send them money even if I go hungry. All I want in return is five minutes with them. I hope it will happen one day, and I look forward to that day; after all, I am still their child.

The participant who shared the above quote was just 15 years old when she came out of the closet, and this act triggered bullying and social exclusion by her friends and family. She eventually sought safety and housing in a transgender community in Chennai. As with many in the transgender community, participants felt that even though they had previously held such a high place in Indian society, they now face social exclusion, stigmatization, abuse, and derision from the general community. In our planning, performers noted that using their “stolen voice” dovetails well with activist methods like street theatre art to validate their experiences and create awareness about their socio-cultural reality. In our reflection meeting, while thinking about their participation and sharing their experiences, a collaborator said:

I live in constant fear and anger while witnessing my friends undergoing sexual abuse and exploitation. I fear that if I voice out, I will be criminalized. I burn with anger because of my fear. But this research helped me. Street theatre saved me because now I can voice out our oppression with pride. I am happy that I found a stage to tell my story.

Through this research, transgender community found validation in the street theatre, which resulted in a colossal outpouring of support and encouragement from the broader public, resulting in a free mobile health checkup organized through donations from the general community during the street theatre.

From data to performance: Embodied resistance

Heddon (2012) notes that street theatre is an effective model for social change because it instigates political and social revolution by creating social awareness among the general masses. Our approach was grounded in the transgender community’s dance tradition so that participants could directly respond and engage in their social realities with the audiences (Raynor, 2018). Some of these traditions infuse classical styles like *Bharatanatyam* and *Tamil* folk dance, *kolattam*, and *karagattam*, which are known for their rhythmic beats and energetic steps. The dances often involve colorful costumes, hand gestures, and footwork that is energizing. The performers felt dance connected to their history as a political act of claiming space and visibilizing themselves and their community. Each of the participants brought their unique perspectives to the performance. As an emerging academic, researcher and social worker, the first author brought in the knowledge of street theatre traditions and the capacity to engage in discussions of experiences in a safe environment to mobilize against social injustices. The first author also brought in professional street theatre artists to help train transgender activists, whose quotes are included below. As a collective, the participating transgender community, street theatre trainers, and the first author thought this approach would help us meet the core principle of inclusion by supporting the transgender community participants to self-mobilize against the social and structural inequities by

creating awareness about their social realities.

During the initial stages of development, Dr. Fatima Vasanth, a prominent community-based activist and a retired professor in South India, helped us conceptualize and ground this approach in the experiences, traditions, and culture of the participating transgender community. Using the survey responses as a guide, the transgender community responded by sharing their rich stories regarding societal acceptance and health discrimination to bring lived narratives and embodied storytelling to the foreground. This process helped us to streamline and prioritize our street theatre's focus. The street theatre work went beyond the art to facilitate workshops and conversations between the transgender community participants and college students, premiered a performance by the transgender community, and advertised on television and radio talk shows. This enabled us to create awareness at various venues in Chennai, India.

Facilitating, witnessing and reflections on co-creation and embodied pedagogy

A part of the methodology was a reflection meeting held at the end of the training process, with the entire group. This paper incorporates quotes from the meeting to highlight how the street theatre, created and performed by the transgender community, was intended to function as a pedagogical method. In terms of expanding hearts and minds, as was the goal of the street theatre, one of the street theatre trainers shared their reflections:

I was a bit apprehensive about working with the transgender community at first. I have never shared a space with them, let alone a stage. However, in due course, I formed some amazing, strong friendships. This experience taught me more than I taught them. I am humbled.

The above excerpt is from a cisgender female with over ten years of experience as a performer and trainer in street theatre art. It hints that even with our diverse social and educational backgrounds, our collective journey through this process took us down different paths. We realized that the immediate need was to address and create awareness among the public, which was achieved through street theatre. We hoped the impact of this art form would include creating knowledge, validating experiences, creating a connection between the researcher and the transgender community participants, and fostering self-realization. One of the trainers noted that:

I understood myself and the space around me more clearly. This brought a more intimate understanding of a social reality other than mine. Through this methodology, I was able to connect with the transgender community and experience their culture and take a glimpse into the social reality through their eyes.

This excerpt demonstrates the humbling experience from the embodied knowledge created. One thing street theatre engagement reminds us of is that the focus of the performance had to come from the transgender community to be grounded in culture, tradition, and religion to catalyze social change. While this honoring of lived experience as knowledge is not enough, there are considerations of all the

production member's identities. The street theatre activities were conducted in a safe and accessible space such as the transgender community Elder's home or the first author's hosting academic classrooms. Also, the first author honored the community's traditions by participating in ceremonial practices before each workshop, such as offering prayers, or seeking blessings from the transgender elders, a gesture of respect and alignment with local spiritual and cultural norms. Given their background in the Christian faith of the colonizers of India, the first author struggled with understanding some critical Hindu traditions and some of the transgender community traditions. As Martin (2008) suggests, our ethics are shaped by the relationships and responsibilities we experience in everyday life. Witnessing their traditions helped the first author appreciate their similar and shared cultures and beliefs. The ceremonies were powerful regardless of their differences, and the first author immersed themselves in the experiences. The ceremonies aided them in their journey together, but they also helped the first author connect with the participants.

Street theatre holds the potential to recognize and highlight the oppression of transgender community members through legislation and social practices that regulate bodies and voices, implicating those with power. It provided an opportunity and a stage for those transgender community members who have systematically been told that they do not have the strength to speak to effectively mobilize on their own for social change. The street theatre workshops helped participants/actors connect with each other through the development of performance and joy. It not only opened space to verbalize their oppression, unearthed their unconscious coping strategies, but to express joy, love and happiness in creating together. At the same time, as the facilitator, the first author was regarded as an expert in advocating for their social, economic, and health rights, propelling them toward engaging in ethical and respectful organizing and education beyond this collaboration. In addition, when critically reflecting on their facilitating experience, the first author acknowledged the multiple different identities that we all hold. The participants and the first author embodied different cultures, values, religions, geographical spaces, privileges, and identities. They realized that this was a challenging process requiring more time, energy, and resources.

The first author attempted to create awareness by sharing their findings so that they could embody their identity as a neophyte activist and young academic. Here, the first author aimed to disseminate findings and convey knowledge to society effectively, by providing platforms and venues for the newly trained street theatre artists to tell their stories in their own words and dance. Even though most of them had never called themselves artists, they could have meaningful dialogue with their audiences through the captivating emotional narration of the participating transgender community members' social realities. As a facilitator, the first author also experienced the power of art when the performers demonstrated their gifted sense of rhythm, dance, and eloquence. The street theatre workshop enabled them to navigate and express their wide range of complicated, painful, and oppressive experiences. Through street theatre, the first author observed that they effectively communicated those complex experiences through music and dance when words eluded them. Together, they used the colloquial language of music, movements, props, and costumes to hold a dialogue with their audiences. Additionally, they could express the transgender community's sexuality, traditions, gender identity, and rights effectively and eloquently through the art of street theatre.

Conclusion

The pathway to producing an oral history of social-cultural realities in and through street theatre intentionally created a space for the transgender community's knowledge and relationships. Developing knowledge from the body and experience has many possibilities for social justice. Not only does it disrupt Global North knowledge production in content and mobilization form, but the control is also shared with the creators and witnessed by the audience. The performers chose what to share and how to represent themselves. This informs our critical lenses regarding ethics when engaging in social justice work. Social justice requires the eradication of inequalities in the structures that create and sustain violence and oppression. When engaging in social justice work, we must unpack and not reproduce the silent permissions to re-enact the violence of exclusion. There is a danger in showing the narratives of people who have been marginalized, and as such, safety was negotiated and paramount to the project. This was partly how the ethics of connection was built through micro considerations that existed throughout the project. Finally, in the dialogue between all involved, we have critical thinking, love for humanity, and praxis.

For social work scholars and researchers, this work highlights a co-produced project that opened space for agency over representation, knowledge production, and outcomes. First, ethics must extend beyond institutional protocols to include relational, embodied, and micro-level practices of safety, trust, and care. Secondly, the goals of social justice research should be twofold: action, such as raising public awareness and challenging exclusionary narratives, and transformation, such as empowering communities to tell their own stories and strengthening collective capacity. Yet, this work also requires humility and caution. Representation can unintentionally reinscribe harm if safety and consent are not continuously negotiated. Furthermore, researchers must be attentive to the limits of their positionality and ensure they do not replicate the very exclusions they seek to challenge. Ultimately, this project reinforces the purpose of narrative reflection in social work: to shift both scholarship and practice toward dismantling systemic inequalities, fostering solidarity, and reimagining ethical collaboration as a praxis of justice.

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