

Theatre and drama education and populism: The ensemble ‘family’ as a space for dialogic empathy and civic care

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This article, understanding populism as an essentially undemocratic ideology, argues that the pro-social theatre education approach of ensemble pedagogy can offer a model of educational practice which counters these anti-democratic rhetorics by creating a shared space for the enactment of empathetic discourse. Via an ethnography of the UK Shakespeare Schools Foundation festival project, the notion of the theatre education ensemble ‘family’ as a model of civic caring is offered as an alternative, feminist ‘care perspective’ on civic and political rhetorics, in contrast to the patriarchal ‘justice perspectives’ which facilitate the reductive anti-democratic rhetorics of populism. Thus, this article concludes that ensemble approaches to theatre education, viewed through this feminist pedagogy lens, hold rich potential for developing learners’ capacity to resist populism and act in socially hopeful ways.

Keywords: democracy; ensemble; family; drama

Introduction

There has been a global surge in populist rhetoric across the political spectrum in the last 20 years (Lewis *et al.*, 2019). This rise intersects international political contexts in a range of complex ways. Within the UK, populism has typically been connected to far-right rhetorics, as in the vote for Brexit in 2016 (Browning, 2019); and more recently the 47 parliamentary seat gains of the Conservative Party under the leadership of a divisive Boris Johnson in the 2019 election. Experiencing this from my position as a theatre education practitioner and scholar, typically working in racially and culturally diverse areas of London, the racist Islamophobic and misogynistic (Elgot, 2018; Pengelly, 2019) elements of this far-right populist public discourse is of immediate concern. However, in responding to this edition’s call for contributions considering the intersections of populism and education, this article focuses not on a party-political populist perspective, but on what Müller argues is its underlying anti-democratic nature (Müller, 2016).

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Recognising the contested definition of populism (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017), this article understands it as a fundamentally anti-democratic endeavour, drawing on Müller's work in this area to argue that moral exclusionism, totalitarianism and a static approach to government characterise populist rhetoric across the political spectrum. From this opening premise I discuss theatre education's long-held claims towards democratic social justice outcomes (Neelands, 2009a; Gallagher, 2015; Finneran & Freebody, 2016). In particular I focus on the theatre education concept of ensemble pedagogy as a potential counter to populism in its ideological focus on democracy via the creation of spaces for dialogic empathy (Boyd, 2009; Neelands, 2009b; Enciso *et al.*, 2011; Pigkou-Repousi, 2012).

My 2014 ethnography of a UK GCSE drama class participating in the ensemble-focused Shakespeare Schools Foundation (SSF) festival project sought to further explore the processes by which ensemble pedagogy theatre education projects can achieve these democratic aims. In this article I focus on the analytic theme of 'family' within this study as an *in-vivo* metaphor for exploring how the care-led and relational identity work of the participants shaped their engagement with the SSF project. I connect this to notions of civic caring and the enactment of teaching as emotional labour, as discussed in feminist literature (Henry, 1992; Porter, 1996; Noddings, 2013; Gallagher, 2016; Tronto, 2017). I explore how—within their ensemble 'family'—participants were able to negotiate empathetic discourse (Sennett, 2012) in their social and creative interactions, and draw on a localised familial capital (Yosso, 2005; Ngo *et al.*, 2018) and sense of active civic care (Neelands, 2009a; Gallagher, 2015) in the negation of conflict. I argue that family as an educational metaphor for the enactment of democratic civic care within the classroom articulates a generative and nuanced reading of the democratic potential of ensemble-based theatre education as a counter to populist ideology.

Populism: thin-centred and anti-democratic

In addressing how theatre education pedagogy can offer alternatives to populist discourse, I begin from Mudde and Kaltwasser's definition of populism as a 'thin-centred' ideology (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017). In this definition, the populist perspective is not based on any single substantive political viewpoint, but is defined by its understanding of society as 'ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic camps, "the pure people" versus "the corrupt elite"' (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017: 5). In this model, populism's 'thin-centred' central division cannot appear without taking the form of some other, 'thicker' ideology. Yet they also recognise that populism's notion of championing the will of the homogenous 'pure' or real people 'profits from the growing global hegemony of the democratic ideal' (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017: 40). Some have found hope in this democratic reading of populism, arguing that the route to countering the threat to human rights from the current rise of the populist far right in western nations is to develop a corresponding populism of the left (Mouffe, 2018). However, within this article I take the position of political scholar Müller who argues that, regardless of political creed, populist ideology in and of itself represents a fundamental threat to democracy (Müller, 2016).

Müller identifies three key anti-democratic aspects of populism. These are its exclusionary nature, its reliance on totalising moral claims and finally its static perspective on politics. I will explore each aspect below, drawing from recent political examples. Firstly, Müller posits, populist ideologies are exclusionary in that they seek to create a sense of a moral crusade against ‘corrupt elites’ by the ‘true’ people of a nation. The anti-democratic nature of this is the claim of the singular ability of the populist leaders to express and enact the will of these true people. In his words:

The claim to exclusive representation is not an empirical one; it is always distinctly *moral*. . . The populist logic also implies that whoever does not support populist parties might not be a proper part of the people—always defined as righteous and morally pure. (Müller, 2016: 3)

As well as removing critical nuance from political debate, this notion of the will of the ‘true’ people allows populists to cast anyone disagreeing with or disagreeable to them as enemies of these homogeneous ‘true’ people, often drawing on existing prejudices. This can be seen in US President Trump’s exhortations for Democratic Congresswomen Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, Ayanna Pressley, Rashida Tlaib and Ilhan Omar to ‘go back [to the] places from which they came’ (Pengelly, 2019) Trump’s statement is racist: based on racialised assumption and ignorant of the fact that of these four US citizens, three *were* born in the country. However, as a piece of populist rhetoric, it serves to deny the legitimacy of his opponents by excluding them from his definition of ‘true’ Americans. The populist mobilisation of the notion of a homogeneous ‘true’ people therefore denies pluralism (i.e. the heterogeneity within communities and individual identities). Plurality, as Müller argues, is an understanding of the populace central to democracy: ‘For democracy requires pluralism and the recognition that we need to find fair terms of living together as free, equal but also irreducibly diverse citizens’ (Müller, 2016: 3).

The totalising moral claims of populism are the second area Müller identifies as fundamentally anti-democratic. Though often combative, he argues, populist political actors are not actually seeking debate in any true sense of the word. As Müller describes it, populist arguments are ‘of a moral and symbolic—not an empirical—nature [they] cannot be disproven’ (Müller, 2016: 39). In this way, they do not seek to refute the empirical claims of opponents, but to undermine the legitimacy of the very political institutions their opponents represent. A recent UK example of this can be seen in a July 2019 press interview with Boris Johnson. Johnson initially responds to questions on the detail of his Brexit plan by repeatedly referencing ‘paragraph 5C of The General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade’, but when pressed for further information responds with: ‘Why this defeatism? Why this negativity? Why can’t we rely on the goodwill and the common sense of these parties to get this done?’ (Wood, 2019). In this, Johnson avoids empirical debate on contested political details, but locates himself in a ‘common sense’ moral positionality: standing for ‘goodwill’ against his detractors’ ‘defeatism’ and ‘negativity’. This is anti-democratic, as it removes the possibility of debate and denies what Müller highlights is the essentially contestative nature of democracy embodied within the undertaking of elections and associated campaigns (Pappas, 2019).

The third anti-democratic quality of populist ideologies Müller identifies is the static view it takes of political processes. By denying the heterogeneity of populations, and refusing to undertake substantive empirical political debate, populism ignores the fundamentally processional nature of democracy. If we accept the populace is diverse and the best course of political action is always contestable, it follows that we must understand democracy as an ongoing *process*, not the singular assertion of a moral right. The reliance on a static moral claim to legitimacy, and an associated denial of democratic process, can be seen in both Trump's 'go home' statement and Johnson's bemoaning of 'defeatism' in the examples above. Both present the definition and will of the people as singular and absolute, and thus the political positionality of Trump and Johnson as the morally undeniable realisation of this will. Under this logic, any debate or modification of this project cannot be read as part of the pluralistic, contestative or processional nature of democratic government, but as the malicious attacks of corrupt elites and enemies of the people seeking to undermine the realisation of the will of the 'true' people. These morally exclusionary, totalising and static populist rhetorics are hence profoundly anti-democratic. Thus, from Müller's critique of populism, we are prompted to focus on the pluralistic, contestative and processional nature of democracy. Müller concludes his book by stating that populist ideologies can be countered by engaging them in political debate—by talking with populists, not talking like them—and by critical consideration of the current failings and moral questions of liberal democracy (Müller, 2016: 103). In the following section, therefore, I focus on theatre education's claims towards democratic pluralism, contestation and processionalism, and how this might support counter-populist critical debate via an analysis of the theatre education approach of ensemble pedagogy.

Theatre and drama education as a democratic endeavour

Theatre and drama education has a long-held focus on democratic and socially just practice (Neelands, 2009a; Nicholson, 2011; Gallagher, 2015; Finneran & Freebody, 2016; Freebody *et al.*, 2018). In this article, the theatre education notion of ensemble pedagogy is utilised as a 'bridging metaphor' (Neelands, 2009a) through which to discuss some of the claims towards democratic and socially just practice made within this field. In the following sections I map the theoretical genesis of ensemble pedagogy and consider how this theatre education practice can be seen as offering a counterweight to the anti-democratic rhetorics of populism.

Briefly, ensemble pedagogy can be understood as a reading of theatre and drama education which sees within its collaborative, egalitarian and performative nature potential for the enactment of democracy. Its use as a specific term grew out of the University of Warwick's partnership with the Royal Shakespeare Company (RSC) under the artistic directorship of Michael Boyd in 2005–2010 (Monk *et al.*, 2011; Winston, 2015) in which an artistic focus on the benefits of ensemble theatre as an aesthetic practice (Equity & Directors Guild of Great Britain, 2004; Boyd, 2009) were blended with collaborative readings of theatre and drama education pedagogy (Neelands, 2009a,b; Enciso *et al.*, 2011; Monk *et al.*, 2011; Neelands & O'Hanlon, 2011; Pigkou-Repousi, 2012). Shakespeare scholar Jonathan Bate describes in

interview how theoretical notions of ensemble informed educational practice in the partnership:

Our idea was that the effective classroom bears analogy to the effective rehearsal room; that the rehearsal room is a learning experience; that in some senses the director is like a teacher. . . who brings on a class, the acting company, through collaborative work, through asking questions, playing games, through trust, through exploring ideas together and respecting different opinions. (Quoted in Winston, 2015: 11)

Boyd saw a direct relationship between ensemble and democracy, musing: ‘Can an ensemble. . . act in some sense as a. . . better version of the real world on an achievable scale which celebrates the virtues of collaboration?’ (Equity & Directors Guild of Great Britain, 2004). The concept of the theatre education space as a scaled-down democratic ideal has a long and rich genesis in the field, often explored through the anthropology and performance studies concept of ‘communitas’: a sense of togetherness generated through social rituals such as drama, which removes hierarchies and creates direct, immediate and equalitarian interpersonal bonds (Turner, 1982). This sense of communitas is often understood as having the potential to create temporary social utopias (Dolan, 2006; Hunka, 2015) or ‘third spaces’ (Etheridge Woodson, 2015; Thomson & Hall, 2015), which open opportunities for social hope and social change.

This perspective, grounded as it is in overlapping notions of egalitarian participation and collaboration through creative practice, clearly resonates with the three core democratic values Müller sets out in his critique of populism. In their discussion of the values of ensemble pedagogy, Enciso *et al.* (2011: 222) recognise valuing ‘connections and mutual respect’ within ‘contradiction and uncertainty’ and seeking ‘multiple interpretations and perspectives’ as core elements. Neelands (2009a) defines this as the core ensemble pedagogic practice of ‘uncrowning’ the power of the teacher. These are essentially pluralistic commitments, as they recognise not only the legitimacy of the students’ autonomy alongside the teachers’, but the multiple positionalities and connections inherent in that distribution of power. Moreover within this, in-role performance work is seen as further diversifying the range of positionalities within the room (Neelands, 2010; Gallagher & Jacobson, 2018). As Tam describes in her research on ‘uncrowning’ in Chinese primary drama classrooms (Tam, 2010, 2016), the ‘uncrowned’ teacher is open to the students’ contributions via the inclusion of multiple ‘languages’, for example: the use of slang to the teacher during in-role exercises; the ‘unbounding’ of the body via physical contact and free use of the classroom space. Tam argues that the act of ‘uncrowning’ the drama classroom creates ‘an open and unfinished space for languages, knowledges and cultures of the teacher and students to collide and intersect with one another, producing new hybrid forms’ (Tam, 2010: 187); a pluralistic and inclusive intention diametrically opposed to the exclusionary anti-democratic stance of populism.

In recognising the plurality of participants and their contributions, ensemble pedagogy seeks to create spaces for genuine debate and contestation, the second core element of democracy which Müller identifies as antagonistic to populism. Pigkou-Repousi (2012) in particular has emphasised that the collective nature of ensemble pedagogy should be considered in dynamic ‘argumentative’ terms. Neelands (2016)

cites Sennett's notion of dialogic empathy as central here. Sennett defines dialogic empathy firstly by distinguishing between *dialectic* interaction, in which he sees the aim is to reach a mutual understanding and *dialogic* interaction, in which he argues that there is no intention to reach a common ground, but rather for the speaker to become more aware of both themselves and others. Sennett (2012) similarly distinguishes between the quality of *sympathy* as the 'emotional reward' of dialectic, while *empathy* is a more distanced experience of 'seeing' the other without losing your own positionality. Sennett argues that dialogic empathy engenders a 'subjunctive mood' which opens up 'an intermediate mutual space. . . in which strangers dwell with one another' (Sennett, 2012: 23). The notion of dialogic empathy thus offers a description of the discursive means by which ensemble pedagogy seeks to embody the contestative nature of democracy. In this, for Neelands (2016: 33): 'Empathy breeds togetherness in argument rather than conflict between strangers who cannot imagine each other.'

This notion of empathetic contestation can be seen in *Tapestry*, a theatre in education piece designed by Birmingham-based company The Play House to meet the requirements of the UK's Prevent strategy (Winston & Strand, 2013). In Winston and Strand's analysis of the piece, they note how the variety of theatre in education performance and workshop conventions utilised narration, role-switching, forum theatre interventions from the audience, and ambiguous endings facilitating engaged and empathetic debate from student participants on the piece's high-stakes questions of religious fundamentalism, nationalism, radicalisation and terrorism. They utilised Sennett's dialogic empathy to define the 'charm' and 'liveliness' through which these aesthetic conventions created a sense of what Rajendran terms 'post-colonial convivialities', 'in which "the processes of cohabitation and interaction" among different cultural groups make "multiculture an ordinary feature of social life"' (Rajendran, 2016: 444). In this way, it is possible to see how the collaborative and creative basis of ensemble pedagogy can offer a space in which participants can experience the democratic process of contestation through the enactment of dialogic empathy.

Finally, ensemble pedagogy is underpinned by constructivist educational theory which understands knowledge as processional and unfinished, drawing on critical pedagogy theory (Freire, 1998, 2000), notions of active and experiential education (Dewey, 1916) and social-constructivist understandings of knowledge (Vygotsky, 1978; Bruner, 1986; Greene, 1987). This represents a processional epistemological alternative to the static nature of populism. Specifically, Neelands connects this to Freire's notion of a 'pedagogy of hope' as a transformative catalyst to action (Freire, 2000). This understanding of hope as a processional quality connects to pragmatist notions of social hope (Green, 2008); a commitment to a better world based not on generalised optimism, but the dynamic and action-focused pragmatist concept of meliorism: 'the idea that at least there is a sufficient basis of goodness in life and its conditions so that by thought and earnest effort we may constantly make better things' (Nolan & Stitzlein, 2011: 3). Gallagher and colleagues, in their recent work exploring hope in theatre and drama education contexts, demonstrate how collaborative and socially engaged youth theatres can become sites for generating such social hope (Gallagher *et al.*, 2018; Turner-King, 2018). While Cox's study of theatre-making with and for refugees explores how figurative or literal processions explore the

positionality of refugees in their new communities, as in the 2015 performance *Refugee Tales*—a Chaucerian walking performance festival. Cox describes how the plural, processional aesthetics create ‘a space in which the language of welcome is the prevailing discourse, a political carnival in which the act of listening is a common resource’ (Cox, 2017: 488). Within the theatre education model of ensemble pedagogy, therefore, democratic processionalism can be defined as the enactment of social hope, driven by empathetic discourse which recognises participants’ pluralised and dynamic identities.

To summarise, ensemble pedagogy offers a counterweight to the anti-democratic rhetorics of populism on three fronts: the commitment to teacher ‘uncrowning’ and to valuing plural student voices; the investment in establishing dialogic empathy as a model for fruitful contestation; and its commitment to a generative, processional social hope.

The Study: Shakespeare Schools Foundation festival as a ‘playful ensemble’

This understanding of ensemble, and similar collaborative theatre education pedagogies, as a democratic enactment of social hope was developed via my doctoral study of UK schools participating in the SSF theatre education festival performance project. The festival gives schools the opportunity to perform edited Shakespeare texts under professional conditions in their local theatres. They achieve this by providing training and resources for participating schools and by hosting performance days in local theatres (Shakespeare Schools Foundation, 2018). In 2014 I undertook an ethnographic study of one class’s participation in the project. I was particularly interested in exploring how SSF’s instruction to teachers to create a ‘playful ensemble’ (Shakespeare Schools Festival, 2014) with their casts was enacted within a mainstream UK secondary school. As research into the delivery of participatory arts projects in schools suggests, this is a complex and discursive process (Galton, 2010; Thomson *et al.*, 2010, 2012) which can encounter resistance (Araki-Metcalf, 2008; Stinson, 2009), rejection (Adams, 2010) or ‘domestication’ of the arts project in line with existing school processes and values (Neelands, 2004; Kitchen, 2015).

The study consisted of tri-weekly observations of rehearsal sessions over a total of 19 weeks in 2014. Data was generated primarily via field notes, alongside interviews with the participating teachers and corresponding focus groups with the full cohort of student participants. The class was a Key Stage 4 (ages 14–16) mixed-year-group 1-year intensive GCSE drama class at an inclusive secondary school in inner London, consisting of nine students. The GCSE students were later joined by two sixth form students from the same school to supplement the casting. This was the sixth year the school had taken part in the SSF festival project, and the second year of undertaking it within the intensive GCSE course. The teacher/director had run the project before. The play was *Titus Andronicus*.

In the remainder of this article, I will focus on how the theme of ‘family’ became central to my analysis and explore the potential of this reading of ensemble pedagogy practice to offer a more nuanced and critical lens on the approach, drawing on feminist and critical race pedagogy. I argue that this provides a more directly politicised, but also more specific and accessible understanding of how such collaborative theatre

education pedagogies can specifically respond to the anti-democratic threats of populism.

Ensemble as family, teaching as mothering

The notion of family was initially an *in-vivo* code (Merriam & Grenier, 2019: 329) drawn from participants' interviews and focus groups. From this, it became a key theme of analysis, drawing on Gallagher's recent work utilising the metaphor of 'family' to describe the enactment of care and community in the drama classroom (Gallagher, 2016). In the final focus groups and interview of the study, both students and teacher referenced the concept of family in reflecting on their experience of the project (pseudonyms are used throughout):

- Saguna: *It's like a family* (laughs), *it really is.* (Focus Group 3.1, 27 November 2014)
 Jennifer: *... and do you think you work with Grace any differently now, after having done the rehearsal process together?*
 Jocelyn: *Yeah, I was thinking like, we're treated like family.* (Focus Group 3.2, 27 November 2014)
 Grace: *That's been a godsend really, I think the process of doing it as a mixed year group, um, group of young people has brought them together, they're a little community. ... they're a little family.* (Teacher interview 3, 27 November 2014)

During the rehearsal process itself, family was a reoccurring motif—with frequent references to participants' own families and familial roles and in the sense of the class as a 'family'. This was often led by mixed-race, British, female teacher Grace's identity as a new mother. Grace was consistently engaged in her students' family lives, for example inquiring after student Jocelyn's expectant mother and offering to pass on baby clothes. Likewise, Grace regularly spoke of her restless nights with her son, and the logistical challenges of childcare. The students half-jokingly offered to babysit, and Grace's childcare arrangements were part of the shared planning of theatre trips for SSF training and performance days. Her mothering and caring were thus highly visible elements of the classroom: Grace blended her new identity as a mother with her positionality as an educator, like the teacher in Gallagher's case study she 'uses the personal, biographical details of her life to understand herself as a teacher and her students, her "family"' (Gallagher, 2016: 6). This was clearly a consistent part of Grace's approach as a teacher. Past students of Grace's dropped by the school theatre space during after-school rehearsals, where Grace asked about their lives, careers and families. Grace's son, I learn, is looked after by a past student of hers, who qualified as a childminder after herself becoming a teenage mother.

In this way, the pedagogy of 'mothering' can be read as deeply connected to the family as a model of educational relations. Recognising the history of nationalist and far-right attempts to co-opt ideas of 'motherhood' to their own anti-democratic ends (McClintock, 1995; Orr, 2015), I emphasise here that what is pedagogically significant is not the biological fact of Grace as a female parent, but her decision to enact her teaching role as an embedded and relational aspect of her lived presence within the community. The pedagogic act of 'mothering' is, therefore, as I will explore more

fully below, a counter-hegemonic enactment of civic care within the classroom which can be undertaken by teachers of any gender, regardless of their actual parenting status.

There is a history within feminist and critical race pedagogy scholarship of exploring the educational work of ‘othermothers’ (Henry, 1992; Gallagher, 2015): female educators, typically of Afro-Caribbean origin, who work within a ‘cultural tradition of mothering other people’s children as an emancipatory practice’ (Gallagher, 2016). This reading of teaching as ‘mothering’ within the classroom is therefore applicable here because it demonstrates the politically engaging, inclusive and emancipatory potential of care-led teaching which is alive to diverse students’ familial and community experiences. As Low and Martin (2019: 429) have argued, the experience and lens of motherhood shines a light on ‘precisely what needs to be unpacked [in neoliberal education institutions] in order to make space for collective resistance’. Within this case study, Grace’s construction of her role as a teacher with and through her personal and local identities can be read as a feminist resistance to the institutional models of school care and control (Yosso, 2005; Noddings, 2013; Gallagher, 2016; Tronto, 2017). This reading chimes with further research which explores the pedagogic potential within the ‘familial capital’—the extended models of community, family and caring—which urban student populations and students of colour frequently bring to the classroom (Yosso, 2005; Nelson, 2011; Sennett, 2012).

This body of theory and research chimes with a recent ‘care’ turn within education more broadly (Baines, 2013; Vincent, 2016), and theatre and drama education in particular (Rabin, 2009; Gallagher, 2015; Gallagher *et al.*, 2018, 2020; Grove O’Grady, 2020; Thomson & Fisher, 2020). Within this focus, the affective and interpersonal elements of educational practice and their social and emancipatory implications are forefronted. The processes of teaching as ‘mothering’ and the recognising and valuing of ‘familial capital’ lend nuance and socio-political weight to this ‘care’ turn within theatre and drama education. This offers a reading of ensemble and collaborative practices which specifically draws on and stands in solidarity with the lived activism of feminist and critical race educational theory to offer pluralistic alternatives to the binary and ‘deficit’ readings of class, culture and race as often enacted in educational contexts (Yosso, 2005; Blackledge, 2009; Norton & Toohey, 2011). This pluralistic, local and relational reframing of classroom discourse can be understood as a rhetorical counterweight to populist notions of a homogeneous populace built on the stark exclusion of those considered ‘corrupt elites’ and ‘enemies of the people’.

Within this case study, Grace blurs the boundaries of institutional, public and private lives via making her own wider and familial identities visible in the classroom, enquiring after students’ family members and opening her classroom to past students/community members. This contextualised and relational pedagogy blends with the collaborative and creative work of the SSF rehearsal process to foster a sense of civic caring amongst the students.

This pluralistic and relational enactment of ‘familial capital’ was explicitly drawn on by Grace and the students in navigating classroom debate, facilitating the contestative discourses which, as Müller argues, are central to democracy (Müller, 2016). A key example of this can be seen in the extract below, in the ways Grace validates students’ multiple religious positionalities through a mix of teasing, solidarity and

discussion scaffolding; prompting an exchange of dialogic empathy (Sennett, 2012). There were five practicing Muslim students in the group, all observing the fast of Ramadan during the summer term, at the beginning of the rehearsal process. This was often a topic of conversation amongst the fasting students. On one occasion, the students were gathering up their belongings after the session, the Muslim students commiserating with each other on the hardships of fasting. One student, Amar, joins in provocatively by asking Grace if there is anything to eat in the drama department office. She responds with shock and Amar comments 'I ain't fasting, I ain't religious', prompting the following exchange:

Shalini: *Being religious isn't fasting, it's...*

Amar: *Shut up Shalini!*

Grace: *Don't say shut up.*

Amar: *She acts like a proper Muslim.*

Shalini: *What's a proper Muslim?*

Amar: *It ain't you.*

Grace: (a gasp of surprise and interest, causing other students to turn) *You know Shalini, it's a good debate, and it's a good question to ask him.*

Nami: *What?*

Grace: *What's a proper Muslim?*

[The group now stop packing up and stand around Grace, offering overlapping responses]

Arthur: *There's no such thing as a proper Muslim really.*

Nami: *There ain't no proper Muslims...*

...

Shalini: *But then there's some things you have to do...* (Transcription of video extract, 3 July 2014)

From there other students, both practicing Muslims and otherwise, continue the discussion: Amar reasserting his religious credentials by sharing where he prays, other students responding in recognition 'My uncle goes there'; and from there back to the challenges of fasting. Elinor, of white British origin, asks the West Asian girls 'Is it hard?' They respond readily, continuing the discussion as they leave the classroom. When asked about the exchange after the session, Grace reflected that she felt this was a common result of participating in drama sessions: the students felt they could share and 'be' more of themselves within the lessons. This certainly seems reflected in the exchange above, with both the Muslim and non-Muslim students alike debating and inquiring into religious practices. However, it is also significant in this instance that Grace extends and legitimises the discussion by repeating the key provocation of what constitutes a 'proper' Muslim to the group at large. In this way, she empowers the students to embody and explore their own broader identities in the classroom space, which the students in turn ground in local community and familial practices, with references to local mosques and prayer centres. This is postcolonial conviviality (Rajendran, 2016) enacted: the use of empathetic discourse to lean into complex debates of religious identity demonstrates the democratic potential of this relational, care-led approach (Winston & Strand, 2013; Gallagher, 2015; Turner-King, 2018).

This debate took place soon after the so-called ‘trojan horse’ affair broke in the UK news, consisting of now overturned, dropped or dismissed claims of an Islamist conspiracy to take control of a group of schools in Birmingham (Shackle, 2017). Working in a diverse London school with a large Muslim population, Grace discussed in interview the heightened context she felt this had created for her work in terms of increased scrutiny and the threat of no-notice Ofsted inspections. And yet, she steers the above discussion not by a reliance on institutional regulations or generalised principles of inclusivity, but by dealing ‘with things as a family might—with each other, directly. . . emotion on display’ (Gallagher, 2016: 17). This offers a more nuanced model of democratic plurality within ensemble pedagogy’s commitment to uncrowning—power is decentralised and identities are valued because of the mutual interest and care the groups hold for each other.

Family: interpreting rehearsal text and enacting civic care

Family was also invoked in the theatrical rehearsal process, creating a further discursive layer in which the participants’ plural and locally contextualised identities were mutually informing and informed by engagement with the *Titus Andronicus* script. Grace joked that Aaron and Tamora’s baby could be played by her own son, and immediately the students embedded this into their rehearsal conversations, referring to the infant as ‘the baby Carl’ throughout. Similarly, while watching a sequence in the film *Titus* (Taymor, 1999) during rehearsal in which Aaron and Tamora’s illegitimate infant is revealed with the characters horrified by his blackness, Jocelyn—a student of Afro-Caribbean and white mixed heritage—declares the baby should be ‘whiter’ as he was mixed race. Grace counters this with a reflection on her own dark skin tone, despite having white parents, and a discussion follows amongst the group about differences in skin tone across black, mixed race and Asian ethnic origins, the students referring to their own perspectives and experience. In this way, the pluralised and relational ‘familial’ discourse modelled by Grace allows the students to identify and explore the issue of race within the play in ways ‘live’ and relevant to their experiences. This can be read as an explicitly critical and feminist pedagogy in which a cared commitment to treating social issues as ‘in the room’ functions as a democratic and anti-populist endeavour using ‘the experience in the room as the point of departure for historicized structural analysis of power and positionality’ (Rohrer, 2018: 585).

Beyond the active, collaborative interpretation of the performance text, the most significant enactment of familial civic caring within this ethnography was around a brief romantic relationship between two of the cast members. Amar, self-styled class clown and Muslim of West-Asian descent and Tabitha, the youngest member of the group and of white Eastern European heritage began dating in the second term of the project. When they approached Grace following an after-school rehearsal to seek her advice on revealing the relationship to Amar’s culturally conservative parents, she—consistent with her enactment of teaching as an act of motherly civic care—listens carefully before inviting the insight of an ex-student of West Asian Muslim heritage who is also present. In this, she draws on the localised ‘familial’ capital of her student body. Furthermore, when it comes to light that Tabitha is experiencing racially

motivated bullying due to the relationship, Grace flags this up with the group during rehearsals, explicitly requesting their support of Tabitha ‘because of the way we’re working together... (and because Tabitha is) the youngest member of our group’. Gallagher observes that a ‘plea to care for your siblings can also be read as a plea for democracy in the classroom and the fundamental understanding that we exist as a collective and must find a way to do so democratically’ (Gallagher, 2016: 24). Thus, Grace’s call for the ensemble’s care of Tabitha is an enactment of social justice; contextualised and personalised within the class’s relationships and identities. Grace does not approach this issue of bullying from an institutional position of school policy, or from generalised narratives on racial equality and justice, but via an invocation of ensemble processes: ‘because of the way we’re working together’ and from a perspective of care for a vulnerable member of their group. The students’ responses are immediate and warm, with overlapping calls of: ‘*We’ve got your back!*’ ‘*Drama gang!*’ (Field Note extract, 9 October 2014).

It was perhaps because of this shared investment that the breakdown of the relationship, in the final weeks of rehearsal, seemed to affect not only the couple themselves, but the ensemble as a whole. Established patterns of interaction and care were broken, rehearsals became for a time tense and terse. However, demonstrating the democratic capacity for processional contestation possible within this pedagogic approach, through a series of acts of civic caring, informed by their ‘familial’ relations. For example, sixth-form students Carli and Fred as ‘older siblings’ calming and advising Amar during one fraught after-school rehearsal or class member Jocelyn undertaking to act as an intermediary between the pair during the week of the performance, positioning herself as a buffer in post-show group hugs and defusing dressing room atmospheres with jokes. In this, the students’ mutual sense of familial care allows them to continue dialogic empathetic discourse (i.e. ‘togetherness in argument rather than conflict between strangers who cannot imagine each other’; Neelands, 2016: 33).

This collection of jocular classroom debates and their informal text analysis/navigation of adolescent social dramas may seem lacking in consequence. But as I have argued here, these interactions together form a picture of pluralistic, contested, processional civic care—in short, family as a democratic metaphor for a mode of educational discourse. When these participants speak in interview of feeling part of a ‘family’, I argue that this goes beyond a sense of informality or closeness and describes the care-led ways Grace facilitated this ensemble pedagogy project. Her ‘mothering’ pedagogy created a space which valued participants’ plural identity positionalities and the knowledges they brought to the classroom; which trusted the participants to navigate their own contestation of issues; and which empowered the group to processionally navigate the democratic question of how to co-exist productively and peacefully. Framing this analysis of ensemble pedagogy work through the feminist and critical race theory lens of mothering and family offers a refocusing of ensemble pedagogy away from more structural theatre-civic models such as the Athenian *polis* (McGrath, 2001; Neelands, 2009a) which, as Neelands has highlighted, is an historical example steeped in patriarchy (Neelands, 2009a:186) to more care-led models. The responsiveness and relationality of a ‘care perspective’ on civic imaginings holds opportunities unavailable in more formal and universalised ‘justice perspectives’ (Porter, 1996;

Noddings, 2013). This familial pedagogy diverges from the ‘communitas’ model of ensemble theatre and drama education work in that it does not aim for a temporary transcendent democratic ideal but invites us to lean into enacting democracy in intimate, localised and generative ways in our wider lives. As Winston and Strand have observed, this holds specific implications for disrupting extreme political and moral perspectives such as populism via this pedagogic framework, arguing that ‘the politics of terror are closely associated with the feelings of the [masculine] sublime’, while theatre education practice can embody ‘something more female. . . hinting at togetherness, mutuality and joint enterprise’ (Winston & Strand, 2013: 70).

This is not to suggest that a civic care-led model of the classroom as family is without issue or limitation. While familial educational spaces may open up opportunities for mutually engaged and locally contextualised civic care, the relational model of ‘family’ holds an inherent, tacit logic which, as Gallagher observes, may ‘have the effect of stifling challenge to authority, as the hierarchy of the family is left unquestioned’ (Gallagher, 2016: 18). Within this study, for example, there was an undeniable tendency for the caring relations during the project to settle along gendered lines, with the female students positioned as ‘good’—‘*Men don’t deal with things the way women do, we’re the stronger of the species*’ comments Grace at one point. The female students are thus required to police the behaviour of more wayward (i.e. male) members of the cast, for example being tasked with monitoring the use of mobile phones during rehearsal. It is worth therefore restating Neelands’ cautionary message that ‘Drama. . . by itself does nothing. . . It is only what we do with drama that makes the difference’ (Neelands, 2009b: 13). This pedagogic model of a dialogic, empathetic, socially hopeful and civically caring ensemble ‘family’ is offered not as an education intervention to be reproduced but as an invitation for teachers to explore its possibilities with their students through their own personalised and contextualised ways, as Grace did so deftly within this study.

Conclusion

In this article I have argued after Müller that the current global rise of populism is a fundamental threat to democracy. This is due to the ideology’s exclusionary, morally totalist and politically static nature. In considering how theatre education pedagogy could counter these anti-democratic rhetorics of populist ideology, I have discussed how the theatre education approach of ensemble pedagogy has been positioned by scholars and practitioners in the field as a democratic endeavour. Through a presentation of one strand of analysis of an ethnographic study of one UK secondary school class participating in the ensemble-based SSF festival project, I have focused on a reading of ensemble pedagogy as ‘family’ in which teaching as ‘mothering’ through the enactment of caring can be read as a feminist pedagogy which values students’ diverse identities and the ‘familial capital’ they bring to the classroom. I have charted how—within the study—this extended to active and socially engaged interpretation of the performance text by treating social issues and literary themes as ‘in the room’, and processional navigation of social dilemmas and conflict via the enactment of civic care. This familial model of the civic caring potential within theatre education pedagogies therefore offers a compelling counter to the exclusionary, totalising and static

rhetorical principles on which populism flourishes. In particular, this points towards the potential of such pedagogic approaches to develop in learners the socially hopeful capacity to talk productively *with* populists (Müller, 2016) and hence engage in the messy but essential plural, contestive and processional discourses required for a robust democracy.

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The primary research cited in this paper was given ethical approval from the University of Warwick and carried out in line with the British Educational Research Association's ethical guidelines.

Conflict of interest

There is no conflict of interest identified in the publication of this paper.

Data availability

Primary research data are not available for sharnig.

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