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Fostering connection without collapse: attuning to the third Space in participatory performance practice

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ABSTRACT

A notable problem in participatory theatre concerns how facilitators foster connection between participants while preserving individual distinctiveness. To address this problem, this paper draws on existing literature and examples from my doctoral research to argue that concepts of 'third space' provide a critical framework for recognizing and engaging participants' differences in ways that neither create separation nor collapse difference into sameness, while sustaining meaningful connection. In my discussion, I differentiate between two interrelated forms of third space: the 'personal third' and the 'intersubjective third'. I consider how attending to others' 'personal thirds' might enhance facilitators' capacity to engage sensitively and responsively with individual differences, and how recognizing the 'intersubjective third space' that emerges between people during interaction might help to foster connection across those differences. Foregrounding these considerations, I propose that concepts of 'third space' offer a valuable vocabulary for recognizing and navigating the relational complexities of participatory theatre practice.

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space

Many theatre makers and facilitators working in participatory theatre contexts¹ will find themselves engaging directly with individuals whose characteristics and lived experiences they do not share. In such cases, it is imperative to consider how these differences are navigated to avoid misrepresenting, mishearing, or invalidating participants. In recent years, numerous practices involving others' stories and experiences have been criticized as insensitive, exploitative, voyeuristic, or as 'speaking for' those they sought to represent.² These critiques foreground the risks involved in working across positions of difference, and highlight the need for approaches that attend to the conditions under which collaboration can occur ethically and effectively.

This concern forms the basis of my doctoral research, which explores how facilitators might practice effectively across positions of difference. In this context, Linda Alcoff's proposition that we might avoid speaking 'for' others by seeking, instead, to speak 'with' them has proven most informative.³ Practices that work 'with' others, I suggest, rely on two interrelated commitments: first, developing approaches that attend to individual differences, engaging participants as distinct subjects with unique needs and experiences; second, cultivating conditions that allow participants to connect without collapsing their differences into assumed sameness. The former echoes Sheila Preston's advocacy that participant 'groups' must be recognized as individuals constituted by difference rather than a homogeneous whole.⁴ The latter acknowledges that participatory practice depends on relational connections through which collaboration becomes possible. A fundamental research problem, therefore, concerns how practitioners might negotiate the tension between these commitments, attending to individual distinctiveness while fostering connection. In this paper, I present third space theory as a framework for navigating this tension.

What is a third space?

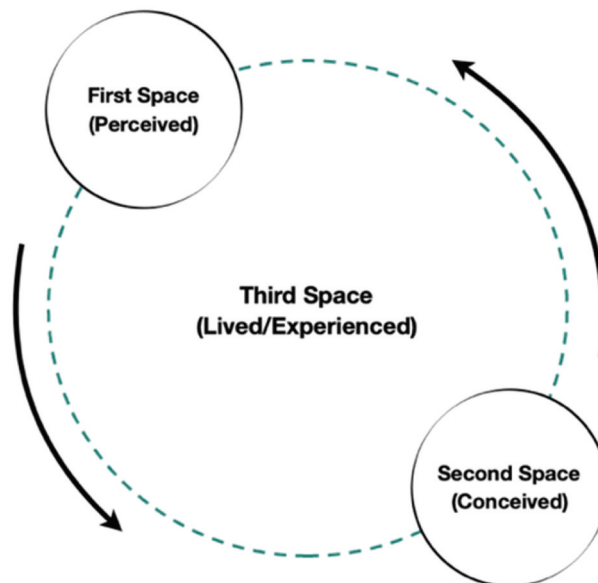
The notion of 'third space' is variously used to describe phenomena that emerge between otherwise fixed binaries. In spatial theory, Henri Lefebvre used the term to conceptualize social space in triadic terms as

perceived, conceived, and lived.⁵ Building on Lefebvre, Edward Soja theorized third space as a hybrid realm where material, imagined, and symbolic dimensions converge (particularly in spaces shaped by marginalized groups).⁶ In postcolonial studies, Homi Bhabha similarly used the term to describe a site of cultural hybridity, in which dominant and marginalized knowledges are negotiated.⁷ Moreover, in psychoanalysis, it has been used by D.W. Winnicott to capture an intermediate zone of experience,⁸ and later by Jessica Benjamin to describe the space that emerges between individuals' subjectivities as they interact.⁹

In theatre studies, more specifically, third space has been used to describe interdisciplinary convergence (e.g., between art and science or therapy)¹⁰ and has also been referenced in relation to actor training.¹¹ However, it is not applied explicitly to articulate the relational dynamics of participatory theatre practice. In this paper, I address this gap, using third space as a vocabulary for understanding and describing the dynamics of participatory practices, particularly those working across positions of difference. To this end, drawing on existing literature alongside anecdotes from my doctoral research, I mobilize 'third space' to capture two experiential domains that emerge during a theatre practice. The first appears at an individual level, as what I term the 'personal third', drawing on Lefebvre's spatial triad.¹² This 'personal third' denotes the space of lived experience arising from the interaction between an individual's perception (their awareness of their sensory, material environment) and conception (their interpretations, memories and beliefs).¹³ The second arises at an intersubjective level, as the 'intersubjective third', a term Benjamin uses to describe the shared experiential space generated through interaction.¹⁴ I suggest that these two forms of third space provide a conceptual framework for considering how participatory theatre facilitators¹⁵ might acknowledge, respect, and value difference while simultaneously fostering connection. The following discussion presents my rationale.

The personal third space: experiencing individually

According to Lefebvre, a person's understanding of the world is a product of their perceptions and conceptions, which combine to create their lived experience.¹⁶ In other words, what we perceive from the physical world and what we conceive internally combine to create our understanding and experience of reality. This experience, situated between the physical and internal, may be construed as existing in a third space (see Figure 1). Let us consider a person's experience of a place, for example. Their construction of this place would be a product of its physical nature, what it looks, smells, or sounds like, etc. ('first space'), combined with their internal interpretation of the events and/or relationships associated with it, their thoughts, beliefs, etc. ('second space'), to form their lived experience of it ('third space').¹⁷



An illustration of the personal third space as it emerges between the perceived and conceived.

Importantly, because this process of construction occurs individually, the same environment will be perceived and interpreted differently by individual people. For theatre facilitators, this has two key implications. First, it necessitates recognition that our experiences will always differ from those of others. Second, it highlights that, during any workshop, a multiplicity of experiences will unfold simultaneously.¹⁸ Hence, though facilitators may experience an environment in a particular way, we cannot assume that others in the same space will share the same experience as the facilitators or each other.

Recognizing the personal third becomes particularly necessary when it comes to sensitive and trauma-informed approaches.¹⁹ What people have experienced in their lives will inevitably enter the creative space; i.e., their actions, interactions and interpretations will be influenced by what they have lived. Consequently, any action or event can have different meanings for individuals in the same space. One example taken from my doctoral research illustrates this.²⁰ During a refugee youth theatre workshop I observed, individuals discussed which language they wanted to use in the performance. Most said English. The practitioner (Oliver) appeared concerned that participants felt pressured to speak English because they were in the UK. He expressed frustration that many English people do not attempt to learn other languages and that they believe English is 'the best language'. During this discussion, Jameela (a participant) began to cry. She explained that she had left her home country because her culture and people had oppressed her. She did not want to speak her native language; she wanted to speak English because the UK was where she felt she belonged. We can see in this example how Oliver's decisions were influenced by his own experiences, frustrations and desires. He equated speaking one's native language with pride and affirmation of identity and thus encouraged it. However, contrastingly, Jameela equated her native language with experiences of oppression, pain and suffering. Oliver and Jameela interpreted this concept and the discussion differently based on their own lived experiences in their personal thirds.

As implied above, the personal third has further implications for how individuals sense and experience the practice space itself. Throughout a workshop or rehearsal, participants will engage in separate processes of construction, independently perceiving within the first space, conceiving within the second, and, in turn, experiencing within the third. Thus, as facilitators, we cannot assume that everybody present feels comfortable in the space we have created, simply because we feel comfortable in it ourselves. There can be disjunctures between people's experiences if they have different dispositional outlooks and perceptions of the world.²¹ If one person perceives or conceives the workshop differently from another, they will experience it differently in their third space. For example, there may be an indistinct noise that facilitators cannot hear but that is perceived by a participant, or there may be a word said that means nothing to the facilitator but holds significant weight for another person. One workshop I observed during my doctoral research exemplifies this. This workshop took place in winter, and the space lacked central heating. The room was cold, so Lindsay and Kate (the facilitators) brought portable heaters to the session. At the end, Craig (a neurodivergent participant) approached Lindsay to explain that, while they warmed up the room, he found the heaters incredibly distracting. He said that their humming and the sensation of air blowing from them made him uncomfortable. In this example, the action the facilitators took to create comfort for participants produced discomfort for Craig. This is not to say that they acted inappropriately. Indeed, others in the room found the heaters comforting. Rather, I aim to highlight why we need to remain aware of the potential for others to interpret the practice environment or our actions differently, and to develop the capacity to respond to this.

Considering the examples discussed, we can see how the personal third can impact creative spaces and relationships and how an awareness of this dimension might help us conduct more inclusive practices. To work effectively with others, we must recognize that our personal third space differs from others' and respect their experiences as equally important to our own. Moreover, when we recognize ourselves as different from others, we further reaffirm our position as an individual part of a larger relational whole, a connected group, community or society.²² Considering this, I now explore how third space theory might further inform how we foster connection between individuals in the theatre space, without collapsing their differences.

The intersubjective third space: experiencing collectively

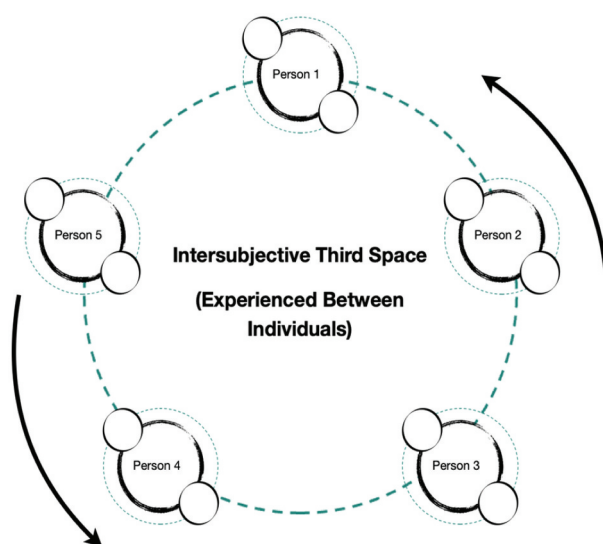
In psychoanalytic literature, the intersubjective third space refers to an experiential field arising between interacting subjects.²³ The concept appears in discussions of various relationships, including those between

infant and caregiver, analyst and patient, and individuals engaged in play.²⁴ It represents a dimension where individuals connect while maintaining recognition of each other's differences, thus preventing a collapse into homogeneity.²⁵ Consequently, it offers a framework for considering how we might foster connection while remaining attentive to individual distinctiveness.²⁶

Given that creativity itself is considered to exist within a third space,²⁷ individuals undertaking creative practices, whether explicitly recognized or not, will often find themselves working in this dimension. It emerges when we share stories, thoughts and ideas, and engage in interactive activities, especially those involving sensing and feeling with others. Whenever we 'circle up', discuss or devise, or when a 'check-in' takes place, and everybody is asked to share how they are feeling with the group, we can all be construed as entering the intersubjective third space as we listen and share mutually. In these moments, we can say that each person continues to perceive and conceive within their own personal third, yet a further experiential third dimension opens up between them (Figure 2). Importantly, commentators have argued that this dimension does not erase separateness; rather, it is constituted by it.²⁸ The threads of each person's subjectivity are woven together into an experiential tapestry such that, without the presence of distinct threads, no collective fabric could exist.²⁹

While the intersubjective third space has been referenced in actor training and community arts interventions,³⁰ it has not yet been theorized in relation to participatory theatre practice. Thus, there is limited insight into what thirdness might look like in these settings. However, Lynn Froggett's account of a similar practice, a one-to-one poetry workshop in a restorative youth justice setting, may provide some informative insight.³¹ At one point during this workshop, Froggett observes that the practitioner and participant fall into bodily attunement: their interaction takes on a synchronicity, 'something of a dance'.³² This moment, for her, signals the emergence of an affective field between them: an intersubjective third space.³³ Froggett contrasts this attuned state with moments when the pair interrupt, irritate, or trip over one another; when their words and rhythms jar rather than resonate.³⁴ It seems then that the third space in artistic practices emerges when individuals are attuned and synchronized, when there is an intercorporeal connection between self and other, as distinct 'minded-bodies'.³⁵ This may occur as stories are shared, as heaviness or lightness is collectively felt, or as participants sense and respond to each other in improvisation. It is, therefore, visible in moments of sharing, listening and/or devising where voices and bodies seem to flow and respond in rhythm. While Froggett's account is useful in beginning to conceptualize how the third space might emerge in a creative setting, it is primarily grounded in dyadic interaction and does not yet fully account for how thirdness might operate in group-based participatory performance contexts.

To explore this further, I draw on an experience from my doctoral research as a participant observer in the refugee youth theatre project discussed earlier. At the beginning of one particular script development workshop, the group sat together as Oliver, the practitioner, posed the question, 'Who here has ever felt like



An illustration of the intersubjective third space as it emerges between people in a theatre practice setting.

they have had to try really hard to fit in?’ as a creative stimulus. Individuals responded by sharing their experiences. As the discussion developed, what began as a structured turn-taking exercise evolved into a more organic conversation. Contributions became increasingly fluid and intuitive as participants started responding to one another: agreeing, disagreeing, or adding reflections. As the collective exchange continued, a distinct shift in the atmosphere of the room became apparent. In my fieldnotes, I recorded my own felt experience as a participant observer in this moment:

As dinner was brought in, there was noise in the room: shuffling and the loud crackle of takeaway bags. I found it frustrating when these sounds pulled me out of my focus because I was so invested in what was being shared, I wanted to keep listening. Whenever my attention drifted toward these sounds, I felt momentarily removed from the ‘sharing zone’ we had entered.

What is significant here is not the presence of the distractions I record, but the way in which they reveal an affective and intersubjective dimension in which I had become absorbed. The ‘sharing zone’ I describe points to a relational field produced through collective listening, and felt as distinct from the immediate material environment. The discussion had generated a space of mutual presence and attention that could be moved in and out of; a space that could be described as an intersubjective third.

Moreover, significantly, within this space, connection seemed to emerge through recognition of individual differences. Those present bonded over the knowledge that everyone’s experience was distinct despite being similar. This was expressed by one participant, Anastasia, at the end of the discussion, who shared how remarkable she found it that everyone in the room had experienced the same broader circumstances, yet differently: ‘we are all refugees and asylum seekers . . . but with very different journeys’. This understanding was something that she felt had brought the group together. Her comments indicate a connection based not on sharing the same situation, but on recognizing how differently that situation had been lived by different people; on understanding that everyone present was similarly different.

The dynamics I observed in this workshop not only suggest the presence of the intersubjective third, indicating how it might emerge in a group theatre setting, but also highlight its significance as a mode of collective experience that allows communication across and connection through difference. By bringing together multiple subjectivities and lived experiences, the intersubjective third acts as an experiential gestalt: a shared whole that exceeds the sum of its individual parts. Within this space, the relationship fostered between people acquires a force that is not reducible to individual contributions alone. Therefore, it carries not only potential for heightened or exceptional experience, but also for transformation. Significantly, this potential is identified by Homi Bhabha in his conceptualization of third space as a site of cultural encounter in which meaning is negotiated rather than simply transmitted.³⁶ Bhabha’s work significantly positions the third space not simply as a way to navigate positions of power on a personal level, but also on a wider, socio-political level. As a space of hybridity, in which multiple voices are heard, the third space not only combines perspectives, it allows ‘othered’ knowledge to enter into dominant discourse and estrange the basis of its authority.³⁷ Because the third space is neither one position nor the other, the terms and territories of all positions can be contested and interrogated.³⁸ This means that the perceived truth held by each position can be challenged towards negotiation, reflection and transformation. Drawing on this understanding, I suggest that the intersubjective third in performance contexts can operate similarly, enabling individuals to negotiate difference relationally and experientially throughout the creative process.

Conclusion

To summarize, a notable problem in participatory practice concerns how facilitators can work across positions of difference without misrepresenting, mishearing, or speaking ‘for’ participants. One way of addressing this involves the idea of working ‘with’ others³⁹; however, this requires negotiating a core tension: attending to individual distinctiveness while simultaneously fostering connection. In this paper, therefore, I introduce notions of third space as a way of providing a conceptual vocabulary for navigating this tension. Thus, the ‘personal third’ captures the subjective way each participant experiences and interprets a creative space, while the ‘intersubjective third’ captures the shared, affective field that emerges when these individual experiences intersect. Together, these provide a framework for discussing how connection can be cultivated without collapsing difference into assumed sameness; an

imperative Preston emphasizes in her advocations for critical pedagogy.⁴⁰ They also contribute a framework for critical practice, prompting facilitators to consider how their decisions and interactions shape both individual experience and collective engagement, and provide a foundation for further research into how third spaces might be intentionally engaged to foster conditions for working ‘with’ others across positions of difference (i.e., conditions that may mitigate the risks of invalidation, misrecognition, or misrepresentation).⁴¹

I would conclude that when we understand and attune to the personal and intersubjective thirds, and remain receptive to how they interact, we can develop practices that do not collapse difference in the pursuit of connection, but instead recognize difference as the very condition that makes connection possible.

Notes

1. I use the term ‘participatory’ in this paper to refer to forms of theatre practice (including applied theatre workshops, socially-engaged practices, and collaborative devising processes) in which the individuals or communities with which the artistic work or practice is concerned actively participate in the creative process.
2. See Clark Baim, *Staging the Personal: A Guide to Safe and Ethical Practice* (2020), p. 6; Tom Cornford, ‘The Racist Case for Diversity?’, *Contemporary Theatre Review*, 28, 4 (2019), pp. 553–6; and Bree Hadley, Morgan Batch, and Michael Whelan, ‘The Entitled Ally: Authorship, Consultation, and the “Right” to Stage Autistic People’s Stories’, *Disability and Society* (2020), pp. 1–20.
3. Linda Alcoff, ‘The Problem of Speaking for Others’, *Cultural Critique*, 20 (1991), pp. 5–32.
4. Sheila Preston, *Applied Theatre: Facilitation: Pedagogies, Practices, Resilience* (London: Bloomsbury Methuen Drama, 2016), p. 27.
5. See Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, trans. by Donald Nicholson-Smith (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991).
6. See Edward W. Soja, *Third Space: Journeys to Los Angeles and Other Real-and-Imagined Places* (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1996).
7. See Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994); and Nagendra Bahadur Bhandari, ‘Homi K. Bhabha’s Third Space Theory and Cultural Identity Today: A Critical Review’, *Prithvi Academic Journal*, 5, 1 (2022), pp. 171–8.
8. See D. W. Winnicott, *Playing and Reality* (New York: Basic Books, 1971).
9. See Jessica Benjamin, ‘Beyond Doer and Done To: An Intersubjective View of Thirdness’, *Psychoanalytic Quarterly*, 73, (2004), pp. 5–46; and Jessica Benjamin, *Beyond Doer and Done To: Recognition Theory, Intersubjectivity and the Third* (London: Routledge, 2018).
10. See Roanna Mitchell, ‘Not not doing therapy: Performer training and the “third” space’, *Theatre, Dance and Performance Training*, 13, 2 (2022), pp. 222–37; and Lizzie Muller, Lynn Froggett and Jill Bennett, ‘Emergent Knowledge in the Third Space of Art-Science’, *Leonardo*, 53, 3 (2020), pp. 321–6.
11. See Christina Kapadocha, ‘Towards Witnessed Thirdness in Actor Training and Performance’, *Theatre, Dance and Performance Training*, 9, 2 (2018), pp. 203–16.
12. See Lefebvre.
13. See Lefebvre.
14. See Benjamin, ‘Beyond Doer and Done To’; and Benjamin, *Beyond Doer and Done To*.
15. Throughout this paper, I use the term ‘facilitator’ because it is how most practitioners in the field describe themselves. I acknowledge that this term can carry problematic connotations; see for example, Tim Prentki, *Applied Theatre: Development* (London: Bloomsbury Methuen Drama, 2015). However, it felt appropriate here to mirror the terminology most commonly used in practice.
16. See Lefebvre.
17. See Lefebvre.
18. See Emma Whettingsteel, ‘The Brown Paper Roll: A Third Space Approach to Participatory Design Research’, in Laura Harper, ed., *Proceedings of the Annual Design Research Conference 2019: Real/Material/Ethereal* (Melbourne: Monash University, 2020), pp. 675–91.
19. See Jimmy Chrismon and Adam W. Carter, *Trauma – Informed Practices for 9–12 Theatre Education* (London: Routledge, 2025); and Janice Carello and Phyllis Thompson, *Trauma-Informed Pedagogies: A Guide for Responding to Crisis and Inequality in Higher Education* (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2022).
20. The anecdotal extracts I use in this paper are taken from ethnographic fieldnotes gathered as part of my doctoral research, University of Kent, 2026 (reviewed and accepted by the Central Research Ethics Advisory Group at the University of Kent). The names of individuals have been changed for the purposes of anonymity.
21. See Damian E. M. Milton, ‘On the Ontological Status of Autism: The “Double Empathy Problem”’, *Disability & Society*, 27, 6 (2012), pp. 883–87.
22. See Benjamin, *Beyond Doer and Done To*; Wei Zhang and Min Li, ‘Can We Recognize Each Other? Benjamin’s Intersubjective Recognition Theory and Its Contributions’ (Spring 2025). Available at: https://doi.org/10.31234/osf.io/q2ym3_v1, accessed 20 February 2026.

23. See Benjamin, 'Beyond Doer and Done To'; Jessica Benjamin, 'Intersubjectivity', in Anthony Elliott and Jeffrey Prager, eds., *The Routledge Handbook of Psychoanalysis in the Social Sciences and Humanities* (London: Routledge, 2016), pp. 149–68; and Jessica Benjamin, 'Two-Way Streets: Recognition of Difference and the Intersubjective Third', *Differences*, 17, 1 (2006), pp. 116–46; Benjamin, *Beyond Doer and Done To*.
24. See Winnicott; Thomas H. Ogden, 'Ontological Psychoanalysis or "What Do You Want to Be When You Grow Up?"', *The Psychoanalytic Quarterly*, 88, 4 (2019), pp. 661–84; and Pete King and Susannah Temple, 'Transactional Analysis and the Ludic Third (TALT): A Model of Functionally Fluent Reflective Play Practice', *Transactional Analysis Journal*, 48, 3 (2018), pp. 258–71.
25. See Benjamin, 'Beyond Doer and Done To'; and Benjamin, 'Two-Way Streets'.
26. Preston, p. 27.
27. See Winnicott.
28. See Benjamin, 'Beyond Doer and Done To'; Wei Zhang and Min Li, 'Can We Recognize Each Other?'.
29. See Benjamin, 'Beyond Doer and Done To'; Zhang and Li.
30. See Lynn Froggett, 'Artistic Output as Intersubjective Third', in Simon Clarke, Helmut Hahn and Paul Hoggett, eds., *Object Relations and Social Relations: The Implications of the Relational Turn in Psychoanalysis* (London: Karnac Books, 2008), pp. 87–111; Mitchell; and Kapadocha.
31. See Froggett.
32. See Froggett.
33. See Froggett.
34. See Froggett.
35. Shogo Tanaka, 'Intercorporeality as a Theory of Social Cognition', *Theory & Psychology*, 25, 4 (2015), pp. 455–72.
36. See Bhabha; and Bhandari.
37. See Bhabha; and Bhandari.
38. See Bhabha; and Bhandari.
39. Alcoff.
40. Preston, p. 27.
41. Alcoff.

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Data availability statement

The data analysed during this study are not publicly available, as they form part of ongoing doctoral research that has not yet been published.