

Aesthetic Distance Reconsidered: A Performance-Theory Framework for Process-Drama with Traumatized Youth in Marginalized Communities

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Abstract

Marginalized youth frequently experience systemic violence and psychological distress that keeps their nervous systems in constant defense modes. Conventional trauma therapies often rely on direct autobiographical reenactment. This approach carries a high risk of re-traumatizing vulnerable individuals by blurring the boundaries between fiction and reality. Process-drama offers a culturally sensitive and resource-efficient alternative that avoids the need for expensive clinical infrastructure. However, aesthetic distance theories and process-drama pedagogy have historically developed as isolated academic fields. The specific potential of process-drama conventions to create safe, metaphor-based boundaries for traumatized adolescents remains theoretically underdeveloped, and existing role theory models lack practical mapping to these specific theatrical conventions.

This study addresses this gap by adopting an interpretivist paradigm and utilizing a systematic theoretical synthesis. A thematic analysis was conducted on 200 peer-reviewed articles sourced from academic databases including JSTOR, Sage, Wiley, and Springer Nature.

The research introduces the Resonant Aesthetic Distance Model (RADM), a three-part performance-theory framework. The model first reconceptualizes aesthetic distance as a dynamic balance continuously modulated between under-distance (the risk of re-traumatization) and over-distance (emotional detachment). Second, it operationalizes specific safety conventions to maintain this balance. Techniques like masking, freeze-frames, thought-tracking, and teacher-in-role establish a dual consciousness through metaphor and myth, deliberately avoiding direct personal exposure. Third, the framework integrates role theory to help youth expand their behavioral repertoires beyond victimhood into new positions of authority, protection, and expertise. The entire methodology is grounded in Ihsanic principles and strict reciprocity, positioning the facilitator as a co-learner rather than a clinical authority.

Keywords: Process-drama, aesthetic distance, role theory, trauma-informed practice, marginalized youth, Resonant Aesthetic Distance Model.