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# "They are only going to steal your cars." : An ethnodrama about teaching in the Chicago Public Schools

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*They are Only Going to Steal Your Cars:*

*An Inquiry Theatre Production*

Charles Vanover, Rose Lawrence, & Gene Deerman

This symposium is organized around an approach to ethnodramatic performance I describe as Inquiry Theater. Verbatim transcriptions from narrative interviews are performed in an interactive setting that uses collaborative structures intended to improve professional practice (See Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009; MacDonald, Mohr, Dichter, & MacDonald, 2007). The goal of the performance is to help audience members understand the social forces that shape their lives and to build community and connection (Denzin, 2003).

Inquiry Theater pieces have the same basic structure. A facilitator frames the data and the social issues to be addressed; audience members sit in groups and examine some of data that will be performed later in the show; actors take their places; and the ethnodrama begins. No judgments are rendered; no claims are made; audience members are asked to use the performance to deepen their inquiry, and experience the data as a work of art (Saldaña, 2011).

*'They are Only Going to Steal Your Cars.'*

*Charles Vanover & Rose Lawrence*

The heart of this ethnodrama is a brief dialogue voiced by an African-American, National Board Certified teacher, where she shares the advice the African American principal in her previous school gave her about her classroom's many special needs students:

"It's one of those schools where, like, if your heart is not in it, your kids are going to feel it. And then, she also gets awesome teachers, but our principal knows how to make them go away! Like I did. I stayed there for two years, and it was just like, you have to believe in your kids. You know, you have to believe. But if you don't believe, and if you tell your teachers, 'Don't worry about it, because they are only going to steal your cars.' Then."

Our performance uses verbatim transcriptions to communicate the poetry and commitment (Denzin, 2001; Hankins, 1998) of life in school.

*Creating Stories, Leading Analysis, Guiding Performance*

*Charles Vanover*

One summer, I asked 7 experienced, NBPTS certified teachers from the Chicago Teacher's Union Quest Center and a comparison group of 5 beginning teachers to speak about the students' they cared for and lessons they were proud in a series of face-to-face, narrative interviews. I wished to learn about the joys and hardships that shape teachers' labor and to inquire into the skill and commitment that shapes life at school (Vanover, 2009). In the years since those sessions, I have worked with researchers, graduate students, directors, and performers to deepen

my knowledge of the worlds evoked by the interviews. As, quite literally, the legal guardian of the narratives, during the talkback I will discuss how *'They are Only Going to Steal Your Cars'* evokes (Bagley, 2008; Eisner, 2001) the hundreds of stories shared in the interviews and communicates the heart, craft, and suffering that—as Ladson-Billings (1994) and Steedman (1992), emphasize—are woven deep into the fabric of schoolwork.

*Responding to Inquiry Theater*  
*Rose Lawrence and Gene Deerman*

One of the powers of narrative as a form of representation is it allows interview participants to share the lessons they have learned from experience and the personal truths that guide their lives in a form others may connect to and learn from (Benner, Tanner, & Chelsea, 1996; Brunner, 1986). We view race and class as socially constructed systems and will discuss *'They are Only Going to Steal Your Cars'* as an example of individual agency and courage within the larger social forces that shape life in the City of Chicago and its public schools (Lipman & Haines, 2007). The performance provides an opportunity to enter imaginatively into the life of an African American woman and discuss the dignity, integrity, and passion for change (Collins, 1999) that shapes her work with children of color.

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