

Putting Culture to Work:
Building Community with Youth through Community-Based Theater Practice

by

Heather Ikemire

A Dissertation Presented in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Doctor of Philosophy

Approved November 2010 by the
Graduate Supervisory Committee:

Tamara Underiner, Chair
Thomas Catlaw
Stephani Etheridge Woodson

ARIZONA STATE UNIVERSITY

December 2010

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study is to examine how community-based youth theater ensembles create conditions for youth to practice cultural agency and to develop a sense of themselves as valuable resources in a broader community development process. The researcher employed a qualitative methodology, using a critical and interpretive case study approach which enabled her to document and analyze three community-based youth theaters in New York City: Find Your Light, a playwriting/performance program for youth associated with the NYC shelter system; viBeStages, an all-girl youth ensemble (part of viBe Theater Experience or "viBe"); and Ifetayo Youth Ensemble (IYE), a multi-age ensemble for youth of African descent living in Flatbush and its surrounding neighborhoods (part of Ifetayo Cultural Arts Academy). All three programs are youth-based performing arts ensembles with a mission-driven focus on positive youth development and community building; they are long-term engagements, active in their communities for at least three years; and they are all part of arts organizations that value artistry as their principle means of impacting communities.

All of the young artists involved in these programs participated in a sustained process of creating original performance pieces based on stories relevant to their lives and/or the lives of their communities. This dissertation examines how, through their playmaking processes, they began to identify, critique and experiment with commonly held beliefs about human agency and interaction, to activate and embellish the symbolic systems and repertoires that

make up their communities, and to practice new ways of coming together.

Through their use of artistic practices, the youth developed a sense of themselves as viable shapers of their communities and, in varying degrees, also used other aspects of culture (values, rituals, traditions, aspirations and the arts) to make meaning, contribute, and shape their cultural locations, offering new forms, symbols, structural models and imaginings.

DEDICATION

To Ava, for showing me unexpected possibilities in the everyday.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank the members of my committee: Tamara Underiner, for your unwavering encouragement and commitment to helping me tell this story, and for your wisdom and mentorship as a scholar and human being. You have opened my mind and heart to research and theory in profound ways and I draw inspiration from you every day. Thomas Catlaw, for strengthening my dedication to community building and believing in the power of performance to foster positive social change. You have provided me important resources and insights throughout this journey that have pushed me to ask better questions and think more deeply about this work. Stephani Etheridge Woodson, for being a champion of community-based theater at Arizona State University and providing the knowledge and opportunities for me to learn how to be a better scholar, practitioner and artist within the field. I would also like to thank members of the Theatre for Youth faculty who have helped shape my thinking and guide me as a researcher and practitioner: Roger Bedard, Johnny Saldaña, and Pamela Sterling.

I would also like to thank the American Alliance for Theatre and Education for honoring me as a Winifred Ward scholar in 2006. This award made it possible for me to move to New York City to conduct my field work, build relationships and thoroughly explore the literature on this subject.

I would like to thank my fellow graduate school students who have energized and supported me every step of the way, and reminded me to laugh and be goofy when I needed to most: Lise Kloeppel, Sara Baraldi, Cori McCawley Gordon, Alice Beaver, Lauren Iley-Spear, Betsy Driver, Julia Newby, Deb

Vaughn, Niki Hayes, Phyllis Wong, Jamie Romine-Gabard, Caitlein Ryan and Christina Marin. Thanks also to my many loving and encouraging friends outside of the Theatre for Youth program, in particular Katherine Boc, Mary Stephens, Giuliana Miolo, Alexa Forrester, and Dana Edell.

I would like to thank my family for always believing in me and providing me with the love, support, advice and counsel that made this work possible and allowed me to grow personally and intellectually. I love you Mom, Dad, Bill, Fentriss, Scott, Greg, Jenny, Jen, Beth, Monte, Tracy, Adam, Sarah, Evan, Nate, Andrew, Anna, Seneca and Mason. Thanks to Ava, for teaching me the power of wearing my heart on my sleeve, and for your patience, laughter and bear hugs. And to Paul, thank you for always believing in me, reminding me not to take life too seriously and for walking beside me with a huge heart and gentle nudge.

And finally, thank you to all of the young people, facilitators, parents and community members who shared their thoughts, dreams, hopes, fears and experiences with me during this study. You inspired me to think more deeply about this work and its potential to shape our lives and communities. Thank you for entrusting your stories to me so that others can learn and being inspired.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER	Page
1 INTRODUCTION.....	1
Purpose and Rationale	6
Field-Building: What is Community-Based Youth Theatre?.....	6
Methodology.....	10
Guiding Research Questions.....	11
Research and Evaluation Activities.....	12
The Participants.....	16
Building Relationships; Negotiating Trust.....	16
Organization of the Study.....	27
Theoretical Framework.....	29
2 YOUTH AS CULTURAL AGENTS	34
Community, Development and Youth	34
Youth in New York City.....	37
Performing Self/Performing Community: A New Take.....	42
Creating Conditions for Cultural Agency.....	46
Three Conceptions of Building Community with Youth.....	49
Find Your Light: Building Community as an Act of Intervention.....	50
viBeStages: Building Community as an Act of Celebration	51

CHAPTER	Page
Ifetayo Youth Ensemble: Building Community as an Act of Transfer.....	52
The Cracks that Let the Light In.....	53
3 COMMUNITY BUILDING AS AN ACT OF INTERVENTION	57
About Find Your Light	57
My Research	61
The Participants	61
The Find Your Light Process	64
Why Intervene? Working with Youth Who Have Experienced Trauma	66
Intervention in the Context of Performance Studies	68
Intervention in the Context of Social Services	74
The Dangers of a Deficit Approach	78
Naming the Other	79
Forcing an Agenda	82
Creating Reciprocity	85
Strategies of Intervention: Rehearsing for Change.....	87
Creating a Shared Repertoire of Cultural Experience.....	87
Moving from the Personal to the Social	87
Opening Up the Bottom Drawer.....	88
Giving Testimony.....	91
Forming a Collective Identity	101

CHAPTER	Page
Coaching a Repertoire of Response.....	108
Freeing Up New Possibilities	111
Why Coaching Didn't Always Work	120
Theatricalizing Reality	123
Tensions between Actor and Character	133
Flipping the Script	148
Evaluating Process and Product	152
Concluding Thoughts on Find Your Light.....	155
4 COMMUNITY BUILDING AS AN ACT OF CELEBRATION.....	160
viBeStages: The Core	160
My Research	164
The Participants	165
The viBeStages Process.....	166
Theoretical Framework.....	168
Deconstructing Communities of Identity	168
The Utopian Performative.....	170
Girl Studies and Third Wave Feminism.....	173
Paradigm of Affirmation, Redefinition and Girl Empowerment ..	174
Positioning the Girls as Artists	174
Recruitment	181
Redefining Power from Day One	189
Freedom within Structure.....	193

CHAPTER	Page
“Isn’t the Change Supposed to Be Positive?”	200
viBeStages: “A Moment In and Out of Time”?.....	203
viBe Rituals	205
Roses and Thorns.....	205
The Opening Ritual.....	209
viBing Out.....	210
A Restorative Place	212
“Girls Like Me”: Articulating a Community of Difference	214
“We Have the Perfect Diversity”	214
The Big Talk: Symbolizing the Boundary	232
Articulating Differences.....	242
Two Minutes in the Spotlight.....	242
The viBe Cheer	244
Practicing the Art of How to Combine.....	252
Girl Power	262
Developing an Expanded Repertoire	262
Understanding Differences as Assets.....	263
Seeing Oneself as Part of a Collective	265
Keeping the viBe Alive	267
Reshaping the Boundaries of Being a Teenage Girl	267
Engaging Older Generations of Women	269
A Spectacular Ending	281

CHAPTER	Page
The Problematic Notion of Utopia	282
Utopia’s Potential	285
5 COMMUNITY BUILDING AS AN ACT OF TRANSFER.....	286
About Ifetayo Youth Ensemble.....	287
My Research	289
The Participants	292
The Ifetayo Youth Ensemble Process	293
Theoretical Framework.....	295
The Meaning of Ifetayo.....	295
Kawaida Theory	297
Performing Cultural Memory	299
“This is not a Project. This is a Movement.”	300
Re-Educating Youth to a Cultural Value System.....	305
The Significance of Values	305
Commitment to Practicing the Nguzo Saba	307
Unlearning Bad Habits.....	312
Is Redefinition an Essentialist and Self-Segregating Strategy?	315
Acts of Transfer	317
Mbongi: Practicing How to Combine.....	318
Performing at the “Highest-Level”	329
Contributing to Living Culture	344

CHAPTER	Page
Circles of Influence.....	360
The Risk of Compromising Agency	364
Room to Maneuver: Balancing the Old with the New	365
6 REFLECTIONS.....	369
Thinking beyond Student Voice.....	371
Considering Both Process and Product	375
Effective Practices	379
Using Critical Pedagogy	379
Moving from the Personal to the Social	381
Building Culture Internally	382
Providing Continued Leadership Opportunities.....	383
Suggestions for Further Research	383
WORKS CITED	385
APPENDIX	
A WRITTEN CHILD ASSENT FORM.....	395
B PARENTAL LETTER OF CONSENT FOR MINORS	397
C WRITTEN ASSENT FORM FOR PARTICIPANTS AGES 18-21	399
D LETTER OF CONSENT FOR FACILITATORS/MENTORS OF THE YOUTH ENSEMBLES.....	401
E LETTER OF CONSENT FOR PARENTS/GUARDIANS’ PARTICIPATION.	403

CHAPTER	Page
F LETTER OF CONSENT FOR COMMUNITY MEMBERS AND PAST ENSEMBLE MEMBERS	405
G INTERVIEW QUESTIONS FOR YOUTH PARTICIPANTS	407
H INTERVIEW QUESTIONS FOR PARENTS/GUARDIANS OF YOUTH PARTICIPANTS	412
I INTERVIEW QUESTIONS FOR ADULT FACILITATORS	415
J INTERVIEW QUESTIONS FOR COMMUNITY MEMBERS.....	419
K IRB LETTER OF APPROVAL	422

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Young soldiers march the gritty streets with weary feet and broken dreams in NYC. The ghetto army doesn't need a uniform to show that they belong to the same cavalry. Their stories are their camouflage; this camouflage hides their memories; their memories are their enemies; their enemies: the nightmares that haunt their sleep. The reality of it all is that these young men and women have succeeded in receding their lifelines, and their lifetimes have been packed with white lies and crimes. Time moves fast when you want to shine, but the grime on the streets clogs their minds with anthems of defeat. These seeds of trees that have sprouted weeds and no pesticide can control them. Welcome. Welcome. Welcome to NYC where weed and hypodermic needles litter the streets. Where loud rap rhythms drown out the sounds of teen moms getting beaten. Where baby fathers aren't bothered that their daughters need a daddy, but they'll gladly deny that the child is their seed. Take heed that the words I speak come truly and sadly we have to experience these things. It hurts me to think that the lives of young people just like I get damaged because of your stereotypical philosophies. You come to my city to buy Pepe and Gucci and Versace. And on the way to the mall you stop to stare at the Empire State Building and the Statue of Liberty. You come here for Bill Gates and to see Donald Trump's property. Well come on my block and you'll see misfortune and poverty. I don't mean to be mean and I hope I'm not being insensitive. All I mean to say is that what you see on your TV screens about NYC is not reality. And it's a shame you don't know what is. (Tynela, Youth Against Violence! Performance Festival, 18 June 2006)

This spoken-word piece was my introduction to Tynela and to my first year living in New York City as a researcher. In June 2006, I moved to the city to conduct fieldwork on three community-based youth theatres. I wasn't completely a stranger to this place –or so I thought. My parents grew up in Long Island, and often took me and my brothers to visit the sites, shows and shops that Tynela describes. But by my first weekend as a “resident” of New York City, I realized how gravely unfamiliar this place was to me, and what a huge responsibility I had

to get this story right. I was volunteering for The Youth Against Violence! Performance Festival, hosted by viBe Theater Experience at the HERE Arts Center on Spring Street. Tynela's youth theatre was one of ten groups performing that weekend in a basement black box that was crowded with fellow teen performers and a few community members. After a week driving from Arizona across country to get to New York, I was exhausted. But as Tynela delivered her lines in rapid succession, each "punch" more intense than the one before it, her presence filled the entire performance space with an urgency and energy that jolted me. She was fifteen years old.

About a week later, Tynela joined Find Your Light, one of my study sites, after the director, who also attended the Festival, was struck by what she heard and invited her on board. During an interview the following month, I asked Tynela what inspired her to write and perform this piece. She explained how she'd been studying at Smith College high school summer program the year before and was shocked when other girls, who were predominantly white, responded in awe when she told them she was from New York City. "Oh, New York. Wow!" eyes ogling and mouths exclaiming fantasies of the Empire State Building and the mall (20 July 2006). "I'd be like the mall? And they'd talk about all kinds of things that I'd never even heard of," Tynela laughed. At this point in the interview, she leaned back in her desk chair, paused, and stared back at me shaking her head:

I realized these people didn't really understand where I was coming from and what inner city life was like. They only really

knew the tourist attractions and they didn't understand that behind all the tourist attractions there was actually life going on . . . I didn't mean it to be harsh. But I felt that was the only way to get the point across. . . . if you are going to go to a place, you can't just go to the tourist attractions. You have to actually *experience* the life there.

This study is an examination of my experience working with and listening to the youth in three community-based youth theatres that happen in the “quotation-marked-off” place of New York City, a place that is full of challenges but also possibilities: a live, multiple, and fluid space, performed by the people who make it.¹ As a text, this dissertation already blunts and flattens the nuances of their knowledges and experiences, or at least those parts which are tacit, embodied, and habitual (Conquergood). By describing in detail key strategies in their approaches to community building through play development and focusing on the voices of the youth and adult participants, however, I aim to bring you a little closer to the life here and to the youth who are putting their talents and cultures to use as they build their communities in and through performance.

By tracing the experiences of adolescents, ages thirteen to eighteen, in three community-based youth ensembles in New York City, I argue that community-based youth theater ensembles create conditions for youth to practice

¹ The phrase, “quotation-marked-off-place,” is borrowed from John L. Jackson who uses it to refer to the hypersymbolism and intertextuality associated with knowing a place like Harlem. He writes: “Every application of the name supplies, implies, and applies oversaturated and highly charged assumptions about the neighborhood and its inhabitants” when called to “rhetorical duty” (19).

cultural agency and to develop a sense of themselves as valuable resources in a broader community development process. Beginning in July 2006, I worked as a participant-observer, spending three months each with three different community-based youth theatre ensembles in New York City: Find Your Light, a playwriting/performance program for youth associated with the NYC shelter system; viBeStages, an all-girl youth ensemble (part of viBe Theater Experience or “viBe”); and Ifetayo Youth Ensemble (IYE), a multi-age ensemble for youth of African descent living in Flatbush and its surrounding neighborhoods (part of Ifetayo Cultural Arts Academy). I chose these three ensembles on the basis that they are youth-based performing arts ensembles with a mission-driven focus on positive youth development and community building; they are long-term engagements, active in their communities for at least three years²; and they are all part of arts organizations who value artistry as their principle means of impacting communities.³ All three programs are offered free-of-charge, though they all

² Due to lack of funding and time—on the part of artists, administrators, community members and funders—many community-based theater programs in the United States only run for a short term, or are planned as one-off interventions. Because these programs have been part of their communities for a sustained period of time, they have the potential to offer promising lessons on how to enable youth agency and sustain ongoing community building strategies through the arts.

³ A focus on artistic skill building distinguishes these programs from other theater programs situated principally in educational, social service, or therapeutic settings that use theater as part of their overall delivery model, but not as a primary vehicle for personal or social development. According to Jan Cohen-Cruz, community-based art “consist[s] of both multiple disciplines—aesthetics and something else, such as education, community building, or therapy---and multiple functions, having as goals both efficacy and entertainment,” (Local Acts 97). What distinguishes ensembles like Find Your Light, viBeStages and IYE from

accept youth through auditions. All of the young artists involved in these programs participate in a sustained process of creating original performance pieces based on stories relevant to their lives and/or the lives of their communities. Under the guidance of adult facilitators, they generate material, make decisions about content and theme, write, choreograph, compose and perform. These experiences are meant to be an opportunity for youth to participate directly in a process of decision-making and meaning-making that is empowering for themselves and their communities.⁴ Through their playmaking processes, they begin to identify, critique and experiment with commonly held beliefs about human agency and interaction, to activate and embellish the symbolic systems and repertoires that make up their communities, and to practice new ways of coming together, or combining, that in turn provide the broader community with new forms, symbols, structural models and imaginings.

similar programs being led by education, social service or therapeutic providers is that artistry always falls on the left side of the hyphen for these groups; art making is their priority and “the something else” is what happens through this creative process. The underlying assumption of these three ensembles is that every young person has artistic potential and the ability to create, and that the role of the community-based artist is to draw that creativity out and give it shape (Goldbard 23). Despite any prior experience or interest in the arts, participants are trained in performance techniques, as a way of building muscles, so-to-speak, for putting culture to work in their communities. Citing critical pedagogues Henry A. Giroux and Peter McLaren, community-based theater scholars Tobin Nellhaus and Susan C. Haedicke argue that this focus on performance technique in community-based art “not only offer participants ‘skills that would enable them to understand and intervene in their own history,’ but also to utilize a ‘pedagogy of articulation and risk’, a practice of ‘experimentation and collage’ that encourages making connections and ‘remapping borders’” (18).

⁴ This goal is implied or explicitly stated in the mission statements of all three ensembles.

Purpose and Rationale

Field-Building: What is Community-Based Youth Theater?

The field of community-based theater in the United States is engaged in an ongoing effort to define itself, to evaluate its successes and failures, to theorize its diverse practices and methodologies, and to communicate these frameworks to the broader public (Burnham et al 15; Cleveland 2005). In May 2004, a community arts summit was held by Art in the Public Interest (API) and the Rockefeller Foundation, for leaders in the field “to take a deeper look at the ecology of effectiveness and sustainability for community cultural development” in the United States (Cleveland 2005). In The CAN Report, an executive summary and examination of the gathering, API notes:

Community-based art is in a stage of intense *research* and *development* . . . It is through the recognition and support of [a] new hybrid energy –and through the collection, analysis and dissemination of findings –that a synthesis will emerge, successful existing community-based arts programs will be sustained and replenished, and new collaborative initiatives will arise that are of benefit to the arts and to the community. (7-8)

Since that summit, the Maryland Institute College of Art has partnered with the Nathan Cummings Foundation and CAN to convene community-based artists, practitioners and researchers and document their research, writing and discoveries on the CAN website with the goal of advancing the field of community-based

arts.⁵ Their Community Arts Convening & Research Project is entering its fourth year.⁶

The first challenge to advancing community-based theater as a field is one of definition. The terms used to describe the field range from “grassroots theater” to “community cultural development” to “community arts education” to “community-based theater.” In her essay, “The Ecology of Theater-in-Community: A Field Theory,” community-based artist and scholar Jan Cohen-Cruz acknowledges the ideological tensions inherent in this debate (throwing in another term, theater-in-community, for good measure). On the one hand, all of these terms “converge in a shared principle,” she argues. They “‘arise from or go to a root or source’ rather than impose on high, i.e. they facilitate the self-expression of communities that have a vested interest in a change from the status quo” (15). In theory, this type of theatre emphasizes participation and access; it’s “not just about the play but about the play in its community context,” she explains (5).

But issues of access, participation and social change are themselves debated among practitioners and scholars in the field, or left ambivalent (Brady

⁵ Due to lack of resources, the Community Arts Network website (www.communityarts.net) was closed on September 6, 2010. It has since been archived by the Open Folklore project, a joint effort of the Indiana University Libraries and the American Folklore Society. All materials as they existed on the website in the beginning of September 2010 can be found at <http://wayback.archive-it.org/2077/20100906194747/http://www.communityarts.net/>.

⁶ I was invited to participate as a research fellow in Spring 2008 where some of my initial research findings from this study were shared.

52). As Sara Brady candidly points out, “not all theatre created in a community (however community is defined) will inspire change, provide the best social, political, or environmental alternative to a community in need, or even ever come close to including a whole community” (52). Even a focus on “community” lends itself to misconceptions. Community theater too often suggests “bad theater,” writes Cohen-Cruz, “and the assumption that it is primarily therapeutic, flatly reflective of their lives and of no aesthetic value” (“The Ecology of Theater-in-Community” 16). And then there’s the tricky task of defining community itself, which I take up in more detail later in this introduction. Still we soldier on. While recognizing the difficult negotiations of identity and ethics involved in community-based theater work, Sonja Kuflinec writes: “These community-based productions [still] reinspire my faith in theater’s ability to directly engage and reflect its audience, by integrating local history, concerns, stories, traditions and/or performers” (1). And this ability to engage and reflect a community, in my examination, is an integral part of how these experiences in turn build community on a broader scale.

Within this context of trying to define community-based theater and its value, community-based *youth* theater is further marginalized. When I mention the term, “community-based theater” and then add “with youth” people generally smile and look doubly confused. As someone who has been deeply engaged in community-based theatre as a performer, educator and scholar for more than ten years, I still struggle to communicate concisely what it is I do to those *inside* of the theater world, not to mention those outside of this field. In my research, I use

the term “community-based youth theater” to situate the work in communities of place, identity, or tradition and to designate the work as created and performed *by* youth, who either identify with these communities or *come* to identify with them by virtue of participating in a playmaking process that positions them as part of that community. This positioning can be an opportunity for youth agency when the work understands the boundaries of community and identity as fluid and fractured, and collaborates across these differences.⁷ Social anthropologist Victor Turner defines theatre as a kind of cultural performance that occupies a temporal transition between received past, perceived present and imagined future, and a spatial in-betweenness, apart from everyday life, that allows participants to reflect upon, experiment with, reshape and reassert themselves and their cultural traditions (From Ritual to Theatre; The Ritual Process). In this study, I examine what happens not only when “*the community*” is the primary source of the theatrical material, the performers, and the audience, but also, and perhaps more pressingly, when *youth* are the ones using performance techniques to examine and play with communal belief systems, practices and symbolic repertoires to build community.

A few works are beginning to bridge theories in community development, social change, education, civic dialogue, and cultural policy with practice in

⁷ In her book, Against the Romance of Community, Miranda Joseph argues that “to invoke community is immediately to raise questions of belonging and power.” Focusing on how communities are produced and consumed rather than viewing them as natural or spontaneous, she provides a resource for “imagining, articulating, and constituting . . . active collectivities, that do not depend or insist on closures and oppressions of community or pretend that difference in itself is resistance” (172).

community-based arts (Adams and Goldbard 2001, 2002; Bacon et al; Cleveland 2005; Cohen-Cruz 2005; Hawkes; Kuflinec). In addition, there are several studies that look at the relationship between the arts and positive youth development (Farnum and Schaffer; Gutiérrez and Spencer; Heath and Roach; Worthmann). But I found only one report that specifically summarizes research on the relationship between community-based youth arts programs and community development (Heath and Smyth).

Methodology

For this study, I employed a qualitative methodology, using a critical and interpretive case study approach which enabled me to document and analyze Find Your Light, viBeStages, and Ifetayo Youth Ensemble as models for community-based youth theater that are dedicated both to positive youth development and to community building. This approach also enabled me to make meaning of these ensemble experiences as on-going negotiations of process, value, and identity. According to Glesne and Peshkin, “The openness of qualitative inquiry allows the researcher to approach the inherent complexity of social interaction and to do justice to that complexity, to respect it in its own right” (7). As a qualitative researcher, I recognize Find Your Light, viBeStages and Ifetayo Youth Ensemble as more than producing companies; they are social systems that change as their participants and communities change. Furthermore I recognize that community-based theater, by its very nature, is both a local and specific act. Cohen-Cruz writes: “Community-based artists use their aesthetic tools in concert with a group of people with lived experience of the subject and with whom they work to share

a collective vision” (92). This collective process is grounded in “the belief that cultural meaning, expressions and creativity reside within a community, [and] that the community [artists’] task is to assist people in freeing their imaginations and giving form to their creativity” (Adams and Goldbard qtd. in Cohen-Cruz, Local Acts 2). According to ethnographer Clifford Geertz, culture is a context with its own performance of symbols, social relationships, values, and interpretations (Bodgdan and Biklin 28). He argues that a researcher must participate and observe from within a culture in order “to share in the meanings that the cultural participants take for granted” in ways that allow him/her to depict new understandings for readers and outsiders (qtd. in Bodgdan and Biklin 28). As a participant-observer, I aimed to establish trust-based relationships with youth ensemble members, and to get at a more detailed understanding of their “shared meaning” as youth and as members of broader communities within the geographical boundaries of New York City (28).

Guiding Research Questions

How do community-based youth theater ensembles create conditions for youth to practice cultural agency and develop a sense of themselves as resources in a broader community development process?

- In what ways do these ensembles position youth to act as cultural agents both in terms of using creative practices to think of themselves as viable meaning makers and shapers of their worlds and acting as agents of change within their cultural locations (within the ensemble and/or their broader communities)?

- In what ways are these playmaking processes similar and different in the way they bring out and re-present stories and encourage relationship-building?
- In what ways do the participants seem to register changing beliefs about human agency and interaction as a result of these playmaking processes?
- How do these ensembles build community internally?
- How do these processes function microcosmically to register, challenge and re-imagine broader strategies of community building?

Research and Evaluation Activities

From June 2006 through February 2007, I spent three months as a participant observer in each of the three sites. During this time, I recorded my observations of workshops, production meetings, mentoring sessions, rehearsals, and/or performances. I also kept a journal of my observations and reflections on the process, and recorded how I perceived the young people's learning, self-concept, feelings towards civic responsibility and levels of community engagement. The students were not asked to keep journals, but a few offered their reflections on the process to me in this way. I formally interviewed, in individual and group arrangements, adult facilitators, youth ensemble members (past and present), and local community members who have partnered or participated with these programs. While the interviewees were responding to questions that I chose, the questions were open-ended and allowed participants to share what they wanted to

about their experiences and/or to introduce different turns to the conversation. I videotaped and/or audio recorded these interviews and my observations to analyze them for information on how youth participation in community-based theater affects their identities, perceptions, and belief systems, and how these areas affect their participation in community building.⁸ All of the interviewees represented in this study gave permission to be interviewed and observed; any student or community member declining to participate was excluded from my notes, taping, and this final report per their request. All the names in this dissertation, except for the instructors and administrators, are pseudonyms.

The focus of my research differed slightly from one ensemble to the next based on where each was in their curriculum and rehearsal process at the time of my study, the length and time of their rehearsals, and their permissions. Find Your Light was remounting and making revisions to a production that the ensemble had written and produced during the summer of 2005. I observed a total of twenty rehearsals, totaling more than seventy hours between June and August 2006, plus two performances. While working with viBeStages, I was able to experience the production of a new play from start to finish, as well as attend some of the program's recruitment activities. I observed a total of thirty-eight rehearsals, totaling one hundred and two hours, between October and December 2006, plus two performances. For both Find Your Light and viBeStages I had full access to

⁸ Ifetayo requested that I not videotape my interviews or IYE's rehearsals. They felt the video camera may have been distracting to the ensemble members. I audio recorded all of my IYE interviews and took field notes during rehearsals only.

video record all rehearsals and productions and to interview the youth participants and facilitators.

My observations of the Ifetayo Youth Ensemble, while spread out over fifteen weeks, were more limited because the ensemble rehearses only on Saturdays from seven to nine o'clock in the evening. Between mid-November 2006 and mid-February 2007, I observed a total of fourteen rehearsals, totaling twenty-eight hours, and spent additional time observing the ensemble's training classes in modern dance, African dance and drama when time permitted. I had seen the ensemble's recent production of, The Advocate: Who Is the Mastermind?, in June 2006 before I'd been formally invited to join them as a participant-observer. The ensemble did not perform this piece again during the course of my study, though they did begin to revise it. My account of this performance is based on a digital recording of it taken in June by Ifetayo's staff. I also was not given permission to video tape any of Ifetayo Youth Ensemble's rehearsals. I was therefore able to capture some but not all of the dialogues and exercises that the youth were involved in. But I was not able to capture the level of detail that I was able to during Find Your Light and viBeStages rehearsals. Ifetayo also required that a program elder, facilitator or parent be in the room with me while I was interviewing ensemble members. This decision was in keeping with the organization's policy of full-disclosure for all of its programs. The Ifetayo Youth Ensemble coordinator selected which ensemble members I could interview. I do not feel this arrangement compromised the integrity of what the youth shared with me. However it may have limited the scope of what they shared in some cases.

Since I am interested in these programs in relation to broader community and youth development strategies, I also looked at archival materials (i.e. production reviews, scripts, emails, websites, program books, letters, memos, production notes, marketing materials, newsletters, etc.) to analyze how they represent themselves publicly, and how issues of collaboration, power, and leadership have been negotiated over time, both within the company and within their greater communities.

In order to make sense of Find Your Light, viBeStages and IYE as cultural practices and processes with multiple factors, participants, contexts, emerging relationships, and symbolic/linguistic communication forms, I analyzed and inductively coded all of the data collected throughout my fieldwork experience, using grounded theory as outlined by Strauss and Corbin. I began my analysis by looking at what my data shared in common, and by integrating those codes into larger frameworks. I then compared those frameworks to reveal theories, “grounded in and emergent from the available data” (Saldaña 49). Strauss and Corbin posit that this interpretive approach to research “takes into consideration such influences as conditions, consequences, and contingencies. [Here] a consequence is not the final result defining how change has occurred, but a step in the continuous action/interaction process of participants across time” (Saldaña 49). An open-ended and inductive approach to analysis and coding best enabled me to recognize notions of identity, community, and agency as both fluid and contextual. Beginning in March 2007, I went back through all of my data to make assertions and find supporting and dissenting evidence. I recorded my findings

and my process, attempting to include multiple data sources, such as interviews, observations, written/artistic/civic work by young people, and interpretation.

The Participants

Because the intention of this study is to examine how community-based youth theater experiences in New York City create the conditions for youth to practice cultural agency and develop a sense of themselves as community resources, the focus of my research was mostly on the youths' experience, process and perceptions. To a limited degree, I also investigated the experiences and perceptions of the youths' facilitators, parents, mentors and audience members/patrons to get a better sense of how the ensembles were situated in relation to broader communities and community building strategies. Fifty New York City residents (thirty-six adolescents, ages thirteen to eighteen, and fourteen adults) participated in the study. They lived in both poor and middle class neighborhoods throughout New York's five boroughs, and identified as being from a broad range of races and ethnicities. Specific details about each participant group are explained in subsequent chapters, although as mentioned above, all of the names of the participants in this study, with the exception of the adult facilitators, are pseudonyms.

Building Relationships; Negotiating Trust

There is a negative tendency for student researchers to dip in and out of locations to gather only the knowledge they need to share with a dissertation chair, academic colleagues, and perhaps publishers and policy makers down the line. But often the only one who benefits in these cases is the researcher herself.

Cognizant of this tendency, I approached my research with all three ensembles as a partnership and tried to the best of my abilities to work with each one to determine mutual goals, set boundaries, and realize opportunities for exchange. But still I struggled, and continue to struggle, to negotiate the telling of this story, aware that I maintain “power” as the one who designed the study and interpreted participants’ experiences and responses. I struggle with what it means to be a thirty-three-year-old, white, middle-class woman, raised in suburban Connecticut, writing about New York City teenagers, mostly of color. And at times so did the communities in which I worked. My own story of building relationships and negotiating trust with the participants in this project is a critical factor in my research and how I make meaning of it.

My relationship with each ensemble developed differently, as did our partnerships. I first learned about viBe Theater Experience through Linda Frye-Burnham, who had recently published an article by viBe’s co-founder Dana Edell on the website, Community Arts Network. I sent Dana an email in May 2006 outlining the purpose of my research. After a few phone conversations, we arranged a meeting in New York several weeks later to discuss the project, as well as my possible relationship with the ensemble. Dana was adamant that I participate in the rehearsal process as much as possible. My participation with viBe was the most seamless interaction among the three groups, perhaps because I am a woman and could find points of connection more easily between the girls’ experiences and my own. But throughout the process, Dana and I, along with co-founder Chandra Thomas, continued to have frank conversations about the ethics

involved with observing and recording experiences focused on girls' personal stories, especially when many of these stories are being told by the girls for the first time. "Who is observing whom and from what vantage point? Who is speaking for whom and in whose terms?" were questions psychologist Carol Gilligan raised in her own groundbreaking research on girls' development nearly thirty years ago, and were critical for us to grapple with throughout this process as well.

Also in May 2006, I was introduced to Ifetayo Cultural Arts Academy through a New York City community-based arts organization who received support from the Cricket Island Foundation, which also supported Ifetayo. Still living in Arizona at the time, I emailed Ifetayo's Founding President and Chief Executive Officer Kwayera Archer-Cunningham with an introduction to my research and writing samples, and then arranged a phone meeting where we discussed the project, our philosophies of art-making and community development, and our goals for possibly working together. Kwayera explained in our initial phone conversation, and subsequent meetings, that I would be joining a team of senior researchers that had been examining a number of Ifetayo programs (i.e. its Rites of Passage and Cultural History programs) to help the organization theorize its practice and begin sharing its models with other organizations and communities, nationally and internationally. In a later interview with Kwayera, she explained:

Ifetayo . . . builds community in a very holistic and comprehensive way. And although we may have been doing this in 1989 [the year

she founded the organization], we were not mature enough to pull out all of the details. . . . We were doing it just organically because that's what came natural to us in terms of building community and just supporting each other and having high standards. But as we matured as an organization, we developed the vocabulary and had the resources to sit back and look and say, "Oh, wow. We're really doing this family development. Hey, look, we're doing crisis intervention." . . . Now we're pulling [these benefits] out and we're articulating [them]. And I think by articulating [them] we're able to look at what the program does best in terms of community building.

Although Ifetayo works primarily with communities and researchers of African descent, Kwayera considered partnering with me because of my interest in looking at Ifetayo Youth Ensemble through a community cultural development lens, which could be leveraged to make the case for the development of similar programs in other communities. Still the grounds for my research were based on a shared desire for partnership and mutual exchange of information and ideas.

I was introduced to Find Your Light and its founder, Juliette Avila, when I moved to New York City in June 2006. Find Your Light was one of several youth theater ensembles from New York City that performed during viBe's Youth Against Violence! Performance Festival.⁹ Dana had invited me to volunteer for

⁹ The Youth Against Violence! Performance Festival was held in conjunction with

the festival in order to meet some current and past members of viBe as well as see a viBeStages performance before finalizing our research partnership. Seeing Find Your Light's highly compelling production of Understand To Be Understood during the festival motivated me to approach Juliette about the possibility of working with them as a participant-observer. I met up with Juliette and her assistant, Amanda, shortly after the festival to discuss Find Your Light and my study in more detail. Juliette admitted that Find Your Light was a product of her own 'blood, sweat and tears,' so to speak. She had been working with the same group of teenagers for two summers and was still trying to develop the program into something more structured that would eventually attract funding. She was excited to have me come on board to document the process and offer my reflections, especially given the fact that the ensemble had just been accepted to the New York City Fringe Festival and was expecting greater visibility. We ended our meeting with the decision that I would attend the ensemble's first rehearsal in late June which would enable me to meet the youth and allow them to ask me questions.¹⁰

Negotiating partnerships with viBe, Ifetayo and Find Your Light to a point where these organizations felt comfortable inviting me in as a researcher took

V-Day's 2006 Until the Violence Stops Festival, a two-week festival in New York City designed to bring attention to the issue of violence against women through theater, spoken word and community events. V-Day is a global movement to end violence against women and girls founded by playwright/performer/activist Eve Ensler.

¹⁰ It was also in June that I arranged to attend viBeStages' first rehearsal in September, and to attend an Ifetayo Youth Ensemble rehearsal at the end of October.

time. As noted, when I arrived in New York City in June 2006, I hadn't confirmed my participation with either group, and still hadn't connected with Find Your Light. Both viBe and Ifetayo invited me to volunteer and/or participate in their end-of-year programs to get acquainted with their organizations and communities before agreeing to the study. In addition to seeing performances by viBeStages and Find Your Light that June, I also had the opportunity to attend Ifetayo's Cultural Arts Showcase at Brooklyn Center for the Performing Arts, which drew over 2,500 community members, and to see Ifetayo Youth Ensemble's premiere of The Advocate: Who's the Mastermind?. After I attended these latter performances, Kwayera sent me an initial letter of agreement which outlined the grounds for a possible partnership and the set the tone for our continued negotiation:

In conducting research at Ifetayo, you are not simply entering into a professional alliance, but joining a family of culture workers and community developers. By joining the Ifetayo family/community, you are expected to demonstrate your espousal of its principles through your research practices. The following is a list of guidelines that we would like you to follow as you conduct your research on the Ifetayo Youth Ensemble:

- Ifetayo must have input into your research methodology. This will involve an ongoing process of discussion about your research methods and how to align them with the mission of the mother

organization and the objects of the Ifetayo Youth Ensemble, in particular

- All sessions in which you interview, observe, etc. must remain interactive and participatory. This is to ensure two goals: 1) that participants are not objectified as research items; and 2) that the research process remains a mutually beneficial exchange of ideas. The participants must benefit as much from this process as the researcher.
- All access to the students (rehearsals, performances, workshops, etc.) must be pre-arranged and pre-approved. Unfiltered access to the students could potentially distract or rather undermine the ultimate goals of self-actualization, catharsis, and creative expression
- Finally, in the spirit of mutual exchange and reciprocity, Ifetayo would like to access your findings for our own internal processes of research and documentation, even as we furnish you with appropriate data.

I encourage you to reflect upon the spirit and particularity of this correspondence so that we may continue to negotiate the terms of our partnership. (Personal communication, 2006)

I worked with all three facilitators to establish some initial guidelines and goals for our research relationship, but ultimately we decided the final decision to work

together should be made by the ensemble members themselves. For each site, the next step in the process after talking with the facilitators and seeing the work was to meet with the youth ensembles at a rehearsal, introduce the project, create a forum for the ensemble to ask me questions, and ultimately invite members to decide if these partnerships were something with which they wanted to be involved.

My initial meetings with all of the youth ensemble members set the stage for the development of our research relationship over the next several months. Collectively their questions centered on themes, such as “Who are you?” “Why do you want to work with us?,” “How are we going to be represented?,” “What are you going to do with the research?” To me, these types of questions demonstrated the youths’ acute awareness of how their lives and experiences can be taken out of context in research, and meanings skewed, if the relationship between researcher and participants is not handled with care. I explained my background, but also described how I’d seen their work and was struck with its quality and impact. It was this quality, and the fact that these programs were youth-led, that drew me to want to learn from them as artists; it was not their identity locations as urban youth of color (which came up in several questions). As artists, they will be engaged as co-learners and teachers not “subjects.” Finally, I articulated my hope that this research would be published one day and shared with educators and artists looking to develop similar programs throughout the country, as well as with policy makers who often don’t consider young people’s perspectives when making decisions about their communities and futures. The fact that I was

working with other community-based youth theatre ensembles in New York City was of interest to many of the youth in this study. Figuratively, they became each others' audiences too.

Most of my interaction with the youths' parents, guardians, mentors and communities at large was limited to occasional interactions at rehearsal and a few scheduled interviews. But with Ifetayo, I did have the opportunity to meet with a small group of parents a few weeks into my rehearsal process. Below is a detailed description of this meeting from my field notes. I include a sizable excerpt from the notes to illustrate some of the critical issues involved with me developing a research relationship with the youth and their communities:

Before I introduce myself to parents (there are eight in attendance), Kwayera offers some context for my work and rhetorically asks the group, "Why research and why now?" She tells the parents that she has decided to invite me to work with Ifetayo as a researcher because I came recommended by another community-based arts organization, but also because she recognizes a need for Ifetayo to start getting its model out to others. After a few moments Kwayera consciously takes a breath and then point blank names the elephant in the room: "Heather is a white woman." Letting the obvious tension (but often difficult to publicly name) breathe for a second, Kwayera goes on to say that having a white woman in the room changes things. "It changes the way we do things and how we react and respond to one another," she says. She is saying what I

suspect everyone in this room has wanted to say for the past 15 minutes but was too polite or afraid to say. As she puts breath to these words, however, everyone in the room begins nodding their heads. “For this research relationship to succeed,” Kwayera continues—looking over at me for emphasis---“it must be a partnership that allows Ifetayo access to the research at all points throughout the process.”¹¹

Her brief introduction seems to give parents permission to ask me questions that are deeply rooted, sensitive and charged. But these questions are important to address, not only for ethical reasons but political ones. From what I can ascertain so far, many of the families that participate in Ifetayo have been involved in black political and cultural movements in the past. At first, they are interested to know what the youth asked me during our initial introduction. They then want to know what benefit my research will have for Ifetayo, what kind of access they would have to my videotapes during and after the process; whether Ifetayo could use the videotapes for marketing or other purposes, whether the youth and/or Ifetayo would get proceeds from my book if I ever

¹¹ Ifetayo once formally requested that I summarize some of my initial assertions and pull key moments from my field notes to share with some of their consultants as well. Kwayera also cited some of my initial observations in her article, “Cultural Arts Education as Community Development: An Innovative Model of Healing and Transformation,” published in New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education.

published one. And finally, they want to know who “owns” the information. “Who keeps the university from taking what they need and just leaving?” asked one mother point blank. . . .

Overall the parents seem to support the idea of mutual exchange and see benefits to the research. But they’re clear that they don’t want any private exchanges between me and the youth. A core member, or facilitator, would need to be present during all interviews. Also, they collectively agree that the interview transcripts should go directly through a facilitator or core member before being reviewed by the children themselves. This, they said, was in keeping with the idea in African culture that it is the whole community that comes together to support the child. . . .

After about an hour, Kwayera thanks the parents for asking such critical questions and for articulating them as the core values of Ifetayo. “This needs to go in the dissertation,” she turns to me “We do things a bit differently, but they’re in keeping with the core values and philosophy of the organization.” (Field notes, 12/9/06)

When writing my prospectus for this study, I outlined principles and practices of partnership into my methodology section. But trust is earned through action, not words. While all three ensembles invited me to participate in their rehearsal processes as a researcher, my relationship to them as both insider and outsider had to be continuously negotiated.

Organization of the Study

Unlike top down, structural approaches to community building, this study is rooted in the idea that community development needs to be “created and produced by and with community members” through opportunities that ‘combine significant elements of community access, ownership, authorship, participation and accountability” (Cleveland 6). It also recognizes that building community takes skill and relationship-building, and requires “sites where citizens [can] learn –and practice –the ‘knowledge of how to combine” (Skocpol 462). Through experimentation and play, the youth in Find Your Light, viBeStages, and Ifetayo Youth Ensemble begin to identify and create the open spaces in seemingly closed systems, improvising with the symbolic system of community in which they are embedded. In theory these cultural experiences are designed to produce new symbols and constructions that, according to Victor Turner, ultimately “feed back into the ‘central’ economic and politico-legal domains and arena, supplying them with goals, aspirations, incentives, structural models and *raisons d’etre*” (From Ritual to Theatre 28).

The common threads among these cases enable me to compare and analyze them as a field. But these ensembles also represent individual operating structures and diverse approaches to cultural form and content that affect each ensemble’s approach to playmaking and performance. Their conceptions of how to build community building range from acts of intervention (Find Your Light) to celebration (viBeStages) to transfer (Ifetayo Youth Ensemble) and these in turn

affect how they create the conditions for youth to practice cultural agency towards these larger community building processes.

First I lay some theoretical and definitional foundations for my examination of youth as cultural agents. I define the terms “community,” “development,” “youth” and “agency,” as they relate to my research. I also discuss some of the barriers to participation that youth in this study face in terms of participation in broader community building processes, and relate this issue to how community-based youth theater as a field is responding by using art as a catalyst to enable participants to “put [their] culture to work.” I then discuss how these community-based theater practices are creating the conditions for youth to practice cultural agency, both by using artistic practices to think of themselves as viable contributors to their communities and by acting as agents for change within their cultural locations (including the ensemble and their external communities).

I then introduce the three conceptualizations of community building that my research sites represent and closely examine how these conceptualizations affect their approaches to playmaking and performance. These conceptualizations are central to an understanding of how these programs create the conditions for youth to practice cultural agency and for what purpose. While there are similarities among each of the programs, I found that each site was a legitimate microcosm of a broader community building strategy (intervention, celebration, transfer) and their distinctions were compelling. Each of these sites has something specific to teach us about community-based theater with youth which is why I organized the chapters thematically. However, I recognize the limitation to such

an approach is its potential to narrowly classify each program by these themes and elide similarities among the three programs, as well as variations within each. Intervention, celebration and transfer were elements of all three programs at different times and in similar and different ways. Throughout the dissertation I acknowledge these areas of overlap. However by organizing the chapters thematically I am better able to illustrate how each program uniquely places these different strategies of community building at the *center* of their theories of pedagogy and practice and examine the potential impacts, both positive and negative, of each approach. This organizational structure also enables me to illustrate how each process is informed by broader community building strategies in more complexity and detail. While an examination of how these strategies are “tested” by the youth beyond their playmaking experiences is outside the scope of this study, as a researcher I also can anticipate some of the long-term successes and potential roadblocks of each.

Finally I summarize and conclude the dissertation. First I discuss how this study has re-shaped my own understandings of community-based youth theater and cultural agency. I then describe some of the key practices that, when incorporated, more effectively enabled youth in these programs to develop a sense of themselves as cultural agents with the ability to act as change agents within their internal and external cultural locations.

Theoretical Framework

This study demanded that I take a multidisciplinary approach which draws primarily on critical theory, cultural studies, anthropology, performance studies,

educational theory and arts-based youth development to examine and contextualize how Find Your Light, viBeStages and Ifetayo Youth Ensemble create conditions for youth to practice cultural agency and to develop a sense of themselves as resources in the broader community.

From critical theory, I draw key insights about the power of language and art to shape as well as reflect society. Specifically, I find Michel de Certeau's notions of strategy and tactics useful in exploring the various negotiations the organizations and youth were compelled to make, both internally and externally.

From cultural studies, I make sense of how meanings, values, behaviors, identities and perspectives are produced through various practices, institutions and political, economic and social structures within a given culture, and focus particularly on the connection between artistic practice and social change. I draw specific insight from Doris Sommer's theory of cultural agency which illustrates how systems of social relation and meaning-making can be interrupted, supplemented, and/or transformed through creative practices. Chapter Three is greatly informed by John L. Jackson, whose notion of how identities of race and class are performed and interpreted sheds important light on how urban youth, increasingly constrained by negative stereotypes and oppressive cultural narratives, can use artistic practices to undo racist/classist stereotypes and locate new possibilities for expression and action. Chapter Four's examination of how viBe stages enables teenage girls to come together to make new meaning of girlhood today and transfer those meanings to other girls and older generations of women relies on Miranda Joseph's notion that new forms of feminist identity and

community are possible when women organize through their own particular and situated narratives to articulate active collectivities while remaining cognizant of their own positions as producers of community (xxvi). In Chapter Five, I draw from Paul Gilroy's notion of intercultural and transnational hybridity to trouble the polarization of essentialist and non-essentialist ideals when discussing how Ifetayo uses artistic practice to transfer traditions and values of the African Diaspora to its communities.

From anthropology, I make sense of community as a cultural field with complex symbols and meanings that must be experienced and interpreted. I also draw insights on how culture can be embedded in social memory and practice. Anthony Cohen's theory of the symbolic construction of community greatly informs my understanding of how community members come together to reinforce, shape and transform community and revitalize culture. While Victor Turner's notion of liminality is relevant to my examination of all three sites, I have found it particularly useful in understanding how viBeStages strategies of celebration create a "space apart" where the girls can test out different social roles, experiment with new forms of expression, form connections with girls outside of their regular cliques and regenerate aspects of social structure and normative culture that are limiting. Chapter Five's understanding of community-based youth theater as an act of transfer borrows from Diana Taylor and Paul Connerton's works on embodied practices and performances that sustain and transfer social and cultural memory.

From performance studies, I am able to discuss in more details how embodied practices (like theater and performance) can work to transform the way individuals see themselves as viable shapers of their worlds, and enable communities to change as well as preserve their traditions, values and connections. Chapter Three's understandings of how performance invites subjects of trauma into new ways of knowing that enable them to confront their painful feelings as well as use them to rehearse for action relies heavily on Augusto Boal's Theatre of the Oppressed and Diana Taylor's notions of embodied memory (which draws from Connerton). Chapter Four's examination of how community-based youth theater can materialize a sense of shared utopia for both participants and their audiences through celebration is informed by Jill Dolan's theory of the utopian performative primarily. Chapter Five's understandings of youth community-based theatre as an act of cultural transfer relies heavily on Diana Taylor's notion of the archive and the repertoire, which privileges embodied action (like theatre) as a site for social memory to be activated and passed along.

From education theory, I draw particular insights from the work of critical pedagogue Paulo Freire, whose theory of liberatory education helps unpack the ways in which community-based youth theater can enable youth to understand their own positions as cultural producers of knowledge and their own identities as mobile and tactile.

I situate this work within the context of youth development, a field which has demonstrated the unique capacity of youth to imagine new partnerships, take positive risks and contribute positively to their communities when supported in

their process of individual and social development and given real responsibility,
ownership of projects and leadership opportunities.

CHAPTER 2

YOUTH AS CULTURAL AGENTS

Community, Development and Youth

According to Anthony Cohen, a “community’s reality and efficacy as a symbolic boundary depends on symbolic construction and embellishment” (15). And community development depends on “whether its members are able to infuse its culture with vitality and to construct a symbolic community which provides meaning and identity” (9).¹² In this view, community is a symbolic system and a context for how people make meaning. People feel part of a community when they attach themselves to a common body of symbols, or ways of behaving, even though the meaning they ascribe to these symbols may vary widely based on personal experience and perception. To keep a community vital requires a social process whereby the symbolic system of community can be activated, re-produced and/or transformed allowing its members to affirm their relationships and attachments towards community, or to attribute new ones. “Just as the ‘common form’ of the symbol aggregates the various meanings assigned to it, so the symbolic repertoire of a community aggregates the individualities and other differences found in the community and provides the means for their expression, interpretation, and containment,” writes Cohen (21). At the same time, a community’s internal differences are what supply it with a range of possibility and productive conflict, which allow for both its maintenance and transformation

¹² Cohen’s theory of community draws from contemporary anthropological work on symbolism, meaning and ritual to break from definitions of community rooted in structural terms.

over time (Bhabha, Deleuze and Guattari). While “the symbolic expression and affirmation of boundary heightens people’s awareness of and sensitivity to community,” these boundaries, and the community members who define them (and likewise are defined by them) are always in the process of becoming. This definition of community development locates community as a symbolically constructed system of values, norms, and codes that provide its members a sense of common identity within a bounded whole, but also recognizes that building community is an ongoing negotiation of differences out of which people and places grow individually and socially, not merely as accomplished “facts.” In this view, community is something that needs to be observed and re-iterated through behavior, practices, and social performances.

Studies in youth development indicate that young people are one of the social groups most denied access and participation in community development processes (Blyth and Borden; Heath and Smyth). This situation is particularly true for youth who have been labeled “at-risk” and is typical, in part, because models of “asset-based community development” are still fairly novel.¹³ Historically, the role of governmental agencies has been to analyze communities in an ‘objective’ and systematic way, to arrive at some basic “truths,” and to develop strategies to maintain a state of peaceful equilibrium. But a systematic,

¹³ John P. Kretzmann and John L. McKnight define asset-based community development as a planned effort to engage the “gifts, skills and capacities” of “individuals, associations and institutions” within a community (qtd. in Green and Haines 9). “This focus on the assets of communities, rather than the needs, represents a major shift in how community development [and youth development] practitioners have approached their work in recent years” (Green and Haines 9).

top-down approach to problem-solving and development, more often than not, seeks to restrain, rather than to foster positive social change, and as a result usually has failed to build community in ways that meet a community's economic and cultural needs and/or foster its creativity (Stivers). Within this paradigm of governance, youth are typically "positioned as objects onto which educative, acculturative, and legislative practices are performed," denied self-representation in the public realm and critical engagement in the decision-making processes that directly affect their lives and their communities (Woodson).

When school and civic institutions position youth as objects rather than subjects, policy makers fail to see how they can enhance a community and as a result design programs as interventions, rather than as opportunities meant to enable their potential (Heath and Smyth 27). Shirley Brice Heath and Laura Smyth write that without "repeated and consistent immersion in activities framed within and around pro-social and pro-civic value orientations, [young people] miss out on opportunities to see themselves as agents capable of working for the creation of 'good' for fellow humans, their community, or the society at large" (24). And communities miss out on opportunities "to benefit from the energy, creativity, and commitment of young people" (24). According to Heath and Smyth, youth have a unique capacity to imagine new partnerships, and take risks on ideas that have no precedent or guarantee (24). This high level of energy and commitment also can inspire older generations to re-engage in community life, and to overcome their lack of faith and participation in the democratic process.

Youth in New York City

In New York City, it's difficult to imagine anything moving, shifting, creating shape within the massive structure made up of horizontal and vertical boxes and grids—and even more difficult to see the teenagers who are part of creating this change. Just over eight million people inhabit this place, and the statistics on youth living in some of its poorest neighborhoods appear grim. A 2007 NYC Youth Risk Behavior Study of three “high risk” neighborhoods—the South Bronx, North and Central Brooklyn, and East and Central Harlem in Manhattan—found, for example, that homicide was the leading cause of death among teens, ages 15-19, in these neighborhoods even when homicide rates were decreasing city-wide; that one in ten teens reported not going to school because they felt unsafe; that four in ten (39 – 45%) had been sexually active compared to 29% of teens city-wide.¹⁴ Youth arts scholar Lori Hager argues that federal agencies generate these statistics to define communities for the purposes of investing and redeveloping them, or for targeting services. By designating a neighborhood or a group as a “problem,” they can make it knowable and position it in need of services (195-6). Similarly Chaskin et al. argue: “In the field of community building, policy makers and practitioners either assume that sufficient commonality of circumstance and identity exists within the geographic boundaries of neighborhoods to develop them further as ‘communities,’ or

¹⁴ Health Behaviors among Youth in East and Central Harlem, Bedford-Stuyvesant and Bushwick, and the South Bronx. New York Department of Health and Mental Hygiene, District Public Health Office, 2008. Retrieved August 30, 2010, from http://www.nyc.gov/html/doh/downloads/pdf/report/yrbs_report042008.pdf

deliberately select places to work where this condition appears to exist” (8). But this approach to community development, more often than not, denies local participation and investment. “Because ‘community’ in this case is linked to services, it is frequently a ‘community’ defined by lack of access to resources and services enjoyed by economically more advantaged ‘communities’ or neighborhoods,” argues Hager (18).

This sense of risk and deficiency can divide a community and its “decision-makers,” as well as the community itself. When I asked Tynela what her community would say if it could speak, she replied:

Help me. I think it would say help me because the government, people tend to classify and categorize people based on their surroundings and not everyone is the same. There are people who actually want to succeed but they’re surrounded by all this and they can’t because people look at all the filth and say, “Oh these people don’t want to be anything. These people don’t want to do anything.” But there are a few roses in that bunch who want to bloom and they’re not given the chance to because there’s no light shining on them. (Personal interview)

“What is the light?” I asked. “The light is the opportunity. The light is just the acknowledgment that they exist, that they *do* have lives; that they *do* want to succeed. The light is the hope, basically--and the encouragement.” Tynela’s comments about her own neighborhood in the South Bronx illustrate some of the effects a top-down approach to community development can have on a

community's sense of agency. On the one hand, the "people" who "classify and categorize" are those on the outside looking in—the government or as Tynela explains later on, the "people who are more fortunate." Her comments indicate these are the people with the power to bestow the help, "the hope," and "the encouragement" to communities that may be lacking as a whole, but still contain individual members with the potential to "bloom" if nurtured. While recognizing her own ability (and resilience) here, Tynela still depends on other people's change of perspective and heart as a catalyst for transformation. At the same time, "the people" who "classify and categorize" in this example are also the people *of* the community. By saying that there are "a few roses in [the] bunch who *want* to bloom," Tynela assumes that those around her, for the most part, *do not* want to succeed in the same ways she does, and that the "filth" of *this* place locates her apart from some *other* place that is more desirable. Tynela's comments are indicative of a sense of internalized and horizontal oppression that many of the youth in this study described when talking about their geographic communities as a whole.¹⁵

Learned stereotypes can divide youth from other youth, adults, and their communities to a point where it feels like there's no connection left or reason to stay or re-invest. When asked to what she would preserve in her community if she had the chance, Tynela finally admits: "There's no real sense of community in my

¹⁵ The term horizontal is used "to represent the phenomenon of oppressed people directing rage at being oppressed inward and back on each other, rather than directing it outward" towards the structures and powers that constrain them (Bell 22).

community. It's just a bunch of people living together. . . . It's every man for his own . . . I've never thought of preserving anything in my community. I always think of destroying everything in my community" (personal interview). Similar to Tynela, some of the youth in this study responded to feelings of being boxed in or flattened by stereotypes and learned behaviors by vowing to leave one's community for a "better" place. "[W]hen you're educated you feel like you can go places. I can travel. I don't want to stay in the hood anymore. I want to get out of here. I want to see what life has to offer," explains Goddess, a Find Your Light member from East Harlem, about to start her freshman year at Hunter College (personal interview). Tyrell, a Find Your Light member, also from East Harlem and in his first year at Lehman College in the Bronx, tells me: "My community doesn't hold much class. There's not a lot of prestigiousness behind it. So a lot of people aspire to leave there to better themselves. . . . And the people who are damned to be there are, I would say, the drug users" (personal interview). For others, the stereotypes about them and their communities are silencing. Mercedes, a Find Your Light member who identified with being from East New York, said her community, "would barely speak [if given a chance] because she internalizes everything" (personal interview).

Most of the youth in this study cited stereotypes of despair, deficiency and risk, along with feelings of judgment, shame, and isolation, as the principle

deterrents to their faith and participation in community building.¹⁶ They had a strong sense that people in their immediate surroundings learn and imitate stereotypes, which are in turn cited by others to authenticate and mark differences of race, class, gender and place. “[Youth] have certain stereotypes about what they should and should not be doing because the community sets that in their head,” explained Lisa, a viBeStages member who lived in the Bronx, “They don’t say it out loud but everyone around them gets pregnant or goes to community college or gets a job at McDonald’s . . . So that’s what they think they have to do” (personal interview). Depending on the teenager and the context of the ensemble they were in, the youth in this study acknowledged different sets of stereotypes as repertoires for how to “belong.” At the same time, they noted how these stereotypes are also hailed as signposts to make them feel guilty or alone if they aim to break out of these boxes. “At first, when I was younger, I didn’t care what people thought,” admitted Unique, a viBeStages member who lived with her grandmother in the Chelsea Housing Projects in Manhattan, “I just did whatever. But then, they started saying stuff like, ‘Oh, that’s wrong. That’s wrong. Oh, not that way.’ And then I just started backing up” (personal interview). Over time, communities are conditioned to identify within smaller and smaller boxes and grids. Desiree, a viBe member’s parent from Prospect Heights, Brooklyn, noted, “[S]omething happens over a period of time and [young people’s] behavior changes, necessarily, in order for them to function. And that makes for a divided

¹⁶ Definitions of these terms varied depending on identification, i.e. gender, race, location, situation etc. Legal restrictions like voting were never mentioned by the youth in my interviews with them or during rehearsals.

community” (personal interview). Nichole, a Find Your Light member living in West Harlem, explained:

I sort of get this feeling of hopelessness from even people I don't know. . . Like there's no hope for anything. Me and my friend had a discussion that a lot of times she noticed that people around her, like people in her family and on a larger scale, black people, we like to bring each other down . . . Like we're used to not having so when we see someone else with something, we're like, “Don't think you're better than us because you have that,” or you know what I'm saying? . . . I mean I've had people who've come to me and say, “Don't try to be something that you're not,” or like, “Why are you trying to act this way? (Personal interview)

Performing Self/Performing Community: A New Take

The youth ensemble members' comments about community suggest a link between behavior and identity. In the past, this link has been dangerously spun by some educators and scholars to explain and/or justify racial and socio-economic inequalities, as well as by some communities to mark boundaries of generation, race, class, gender, and place based on behavioral differences. In his book, Harlemworld: Doing Race and Class in Contemporary America, John L. Jackson explains the risks associated with linking behavior and identity but then makes a convincing argument that this linkage is actually the key to undoing racist stereotypes, and locating new, anti-essentialist possibilities. His work begins with an examination of some of the traditional arguments connecting behavior to

identity, including: “The Culture of Poverty,” which makes causal links between socio-economic underachievement and the generational transmission of learned behaviors; “Codes of the Streets,” which refers to a repertoire of behavioral cues self-consciously performed by the inner-city blacks as survival tactics; and “The Culture of Refusal,” which emphasizes how marginalized youth purposefully resist, reject, and refuse the white educational mainstream by underachieving or dropping out. While recognizing the power of behavioral influence, Jackson critiques these traditional arguments on the basis that they assume absolute differences while disappearing systemic causes for poverty and racism, ignoring intragroup diversity, and forging oppositions. At the same time, he borrows from them to locate anti-essentialist possibilities. He writes:

Any time a social group is categorized as such with respect to how that group behaves, this very move opens up space for exceptions to be made and stereotyped behaviors disproved. These exceptions . . . must be explained –usually explained away –but doing so generates the kernels of an irreversible critique of all behaviorally anchored racial [or other identity] categories. (6)

For Jackson, the realization that behavioral differences are contrived and contextual opens the door for all social groupings to contest and re-constitute identities which are based on these stereotypes. Jackson’s study not only illustrates the slippery nature of identity, but also the ways in which class-, race-, and gender-inflected arguments are used by communities to tamper with the boundaries of belonging (190).

In my interviews with youth, I found that even when they thought, felt or acted in ways that demonstrated a devaluation of their group or themselves as members of a community, and cited this behavior (on their own part or on the part of others) as a reason for not participating in a broader community development process, they did not *accept* definitions of themselves or their communities that were hurtful or limiting. Similar to the participants in Jackson's study, the youth ensemble members expressed feelings of being in-between identities, at once seeing themselves and their communities as dangerous, vulnerable, deficient, or at risk and at the same time struggling to make something of themselves, belong, feel at home, and develop their own sense of style and strength. Mercedes tells me that her community of East New York can "barely speak," but seconds later adds it is "fighting to survive." "[East New York] is broken down but still trying to better herself," she explains, "She wants to conform but can't because she's so unique. Everyone wants to associate with it and that makes you something. [She's a] fighter, violent with still something soft. [She has her] own style, own gangs, and [her] own celebrities like Jay Z." Mercedes laughs nervously, "Everyone who lives in New York wants to go away. Everyone who doesn't, wants to come. It's so weird. . . In a way, I kind of want to leave New York to see the world. But I think that wherever I go, I'll always end up back here. . . I feel at home here. It's familiar. It's something that I know, that I'll always belong in New York" (personal interview). Similarly, Tyrell who first describes East Harlem as a place full of "people trying to make it out and people who are damned to be there," also prides himself on that fact that his community builds strength. He notes, "It's not

that I have anything against those who were brought up with a privileged background or who've had an easy life, but I've come to appreciate all the challenges that's presented to me through my community and what it does to help you be strong" (personal interview). Jerome, an eighteen year old Find Your Light member who lives on his own in the Wagner Housing Projects in East Harlem, calls this reality a state of "dueling personalities," a phrase he borrows from his character P Killa in the play, Understand To Be Understood. P Killa is the notorious school bully, but like Mercedes' personified community, he longs for connection, intimacy, and change. In an interview at the start of the Find Your Light rehearsal process, Jerome tells me:

You can care about [something] and do the exact opposite and that's what tears you apart. To want to do, is to make it even worse than what it is. . . P Killa reminds me of that . . . And at times, I'm like, am I P Killa? Cause I remember I have these personalities where it's like... he says that in the play that he has these split personalities where it's like you feel like he want to do this or he want to do that and it's like I have these personalities where, like, I used to be bad. I mean twenty hundred people I used to be and I all changed it up because I wanted it for the better . . . So I feel like P Killa is in me somewhere and at times I feel like just turning into him, cause everybody has these personalities . . . I don't think people can classify you. (Personal interview)

Jerome is aware of the boxes being drawn around him and the way these boxes might condition his actions (i.e. saying this, doing that, roughing people up), but still feels a sense of control over the direction of his life and the life of his community. This tension between Jerome's ability to "[change] it up" when he no longer likes his own behavior and the seemingly external constraints of the structures, rules, labels and policies that "classify" him leads me to a critical point about the relationship of agency and structure as it relates to this study.

Creating Conditions for Cultural Agency

Recognizing that there are few opportunities for youth to participate actively in the public realm, community-based youth arts organizations are using art as a catalyst to position them as key cultural agents with the power to shape and revitalize their communities. Thus, what is of central concern to me in this dissertation is twofold: how the youth use artistic practices to think of themselves as viable shapers of their communities; and how, through the artistic practice, they are also using (or putting into play) other aspects of culture (values, rituals, traditions, aspirations and the arts) to make meaning, contribute, and shape their cultural locations (both within their ensembles and external communities).

The meaning of the word "culture" is slippery. Cultural development expert John Hawkes notes that there are two *inter-related* definitions that stand out from his review of scholarly literature on the word:

—the social production and transmission of identities and meanings, knowledge, beliefs, values, aspirations, memories, purposes, attitudes and understanding;

—the ‘way of life’ of a particular set of humans: customs, faiths and conventions; codes of manners, dress, cuisine, language, arts, science, technology, religion and rituals; norms and regulations of behavior, traditions and institutions. (3)

Hawkes borrows from both these definitions to establish a useful description of culture for public planning purposes which I have also applied in this dissertation.¹⁷ “Culture has three aspects,” he writes, “It encompasses our values and aspirations; the processes and mediums through which we develop, receive and transmit these values and aspirations; and the tangible and intangible manifestations of these values and aspirations in the real world” (4). “To name our shared values [as a community], to change them, to embrace or discard them and to apply them is cultural work,” he says (7).

Underlying all community-based theater practice is the “belief that cultural meaning, expressions and creativity reside within a community” (Goldbard, “Postscript to the Past”). Creativity and cultural richness are assumed; the role of the community-based theater artist(s) is “to assist people in freeing their imaginations and giving form to their creativity” (Goldbard). “Respectfully drawing out the creative and cultural assets of each person, and of communities of people, is a first step to sparking an expansive cultural dialogue,” argues Tom

¹⁷ I borrow from Hawkes here because his definition of culture was developed to be useful to broader community development context. Hawkes argues that culture understood as both inherent values and the means and results of social expression can help policy makers better reflect the values of the communities they serve and enable community members to find their voice and affect the values of those who make policy (6).

Borrupt.¹⁸ In the cases of Find Your Light, viBeStages, and Ifetayo Youth Ensemble, youth experiment with the symbolic systems their original plays represent, constructing their own rituals (both social and performative), their own languages and their own ways of relating that build community internally, as well as throughout ‘generations’ of participants. Through the temporal locations of rehearsal, performance and beyond, theater becomes a new way of knowing, encouraging the bringing forth of what Foucault termed “subjugated knowledges,” those which are “embodied, tacit, intoned, gestured, improvised, coexperienced, covert” -- and often embedded in social memory and practice –

¹⁸ An asset-based approach to art making differs from top-down approaches to arts delivery that view people as generally lacking in culture, talent and “exposure to and proper appreciation of the great works and great artists,” and aim to fill this “void” with “high art” and “expertise” (Borrupt). Still questions of quality and legitimacy are debated within the field of community-based art. Community cultural development scholar, Goldbard calls this the debate between the “slick” and “folksy” approaches to community-based art making. The “slick” approach aims to “demonstrate that the lives and stories of ordinary people can be the basis for skillfully executed and powerful art works.” The assumption here is that polished works of art will be taken more seriously, and have a greater impact. The “folksy” approach, on the other hand, “reject[s] end products [considered] too slickly produced, too aesthetically similar to [the] art world or [its] commercial counterpart.” Adherents to this approach favor a homemade or “folk” aesthetic. Goldbard rejects this dichotomy altogether on the grounds that it invites posturing and polarization: “I see it as a false choice. No one sets out to make bad art. Using whatever means are accessible, most community artists aim to make products of their process-oriented work as good as they can be, judged by the criteria appropriate to the intention” (New Creative Community 55). For the purposes of this study, I am more interested in comparing the nature of *how* these ensembles enable youth to practice cultural agency, and for what purpose, than assessing their artistic “quality” by any pre-prescribed standard. It is understood that all three groups---by valuing artistry and skill building as core to their missions---intend to make good art but more importantly intend to help their participants see, cultivate and use their own creative and cultural assets to affect positive change in themselves and their communities.

allowing them to emerge and interact, thereby forging new communal practices and repertoires (qtd. in Conquergood 146).

For Doris Sommer, one's ability to use creative practices "to pry open room for maneuvering in otherwise constraining systems" is the defining feature of cultural agency (14). Offering an alternative to opposition and critique as responses to oppression, Sommer's theory illustrates how systems of social relation and meaning-making can be interrupted, supplemented, and/or transformed by putting culture to work. In her view, culture is both a vehicle for agency, at the same time that it is re-activated and re-shaped by the cultural agent. This theory builds off of the work of Michel de Certeau, whose extensive examination into "the practice of everyday life" highlights how people, "increasingly constrained," still continue to invent spaces, create new forms, and reappropriate languages, narratives, and products through acts of manipulation, improvisation and stylistic play. De Certeau writes: "Without leaving the place where [we] have no choice but to live and which lays down its law for [us], [we] establish within it a degree of plurality and creativity. By an art of being in between, [we] draw unexpected results from [our] situation," (30). Hawkes writes, "It is through cultural action that we make sense of our existence and the environment we inhabit; find common expressions of our values and needs; and meet the challenges presented by our continued stewardship of the planet" (4).

Three Conceptions of Building Community with Youth

The three programs I researched in this study represented different conceptualizations of building community which affected their approaches to

playmaking and performance, and ultimately how they created the conditions for youth to practice cultural agency and towards what aim.

Find Your Light: Community Building as an Act of Intervention

In Find Your Light, youth are positioned to implicate the adult world for their communities' problems and to articulate an image of future possibilities from their perspective as self-identified survivors of violence and marginalization. Through Find Your Light's play making process, ensemble members are asked to activate and exaggerate a repertoire of stereotypes based on identity locations they feel are constraining them (i.e. being "at risk," "black," "poor," "young," "homeless," etc.), and then as Jerome put it, to "flip-the-script" to reveal the constructed and slippery nature of these identity locations and scenarios, turning the mirror back on the audience, but also on themselves, and inviting everyone to examine and take responsibility for their own part in these constructions. By activating, reflecting upon, and using the symbols, structures of feeling and shared practices that mark habits of internalized subordination they associate with being survivors of violence and marginalization, Find Your Light members begin to recognize social and cultural systems as existing through the interactional activities of individuals and groups who are responsible for both their maintenance (i.e. reproduction) and transformation. Through this process, they also begin to challenge themselves, and the largely white, middle class audiences they write and perform for, to see and experience the hegemony of these systems "as only partial within a decidedly performative matrix."(Jackson 227). The Find Your Light process aims to allow just enough "wiggle room," as Sommers calls it,

for both the youth to envision positive alternatives to violent scenarios in their lives and communities, and for the audience to encounter the youth's proposed "possible worlds" in ways that allow them to carry back their message into "the 'real' socio-political world in ways which may influence subsequent action" (Kershaw 28).

viBeStages: Community Building as an Act of Celebration

viBeStages is an all-girls ensemble program that brings together teenagers from throughout New York City three times a year for a ten-to-twelve week collaborative playmaking/performance process that involves over eighty hours of rehearsal time. During this process, teenage girls are positioned to construct and celebrate a new meaning of girlhood today, and to create a sense of empowerment for other girls, as well as older generations. viBeStages is the core program offered by viBe Theater Experience, whose mission is to empower teenage girls through the collaborative process of creating original performances based on their personal stories and re-imaginings of themselves and their communities. Girls who "graduate" from viBeStages have the opportunity to participate in viBe's solo performance program (viBeSolos), song-making program (viBeSongMakers), among others and/or to audition for viBeStages a second time. In viBeStages, girls are asked to articulate and share their multiple knowledges and experiences as urban teenage girls in a variety of ways: in daily check-ins called Roses and Thorns (where each girl shares something positive and something challenging from their day with the group); writing exercises; and in the process of designing, choreographing and directing a collage-like performance

piece that weaves together and transforms these various knowledges and repertoires into something that becomes a new illustration for what girlhood can mean in America today. The viBeStages process leads participants through the “stages” of producing a play, but also through unpredictable stages of learning to collaborate with other girls to 1) articulate and experiment with the symbolic repertoires of what *they* feel it to mean to be “a girl” and “a woman” in contemporary U.S. society, and 2) combine these various perspectives and imaginings into an original production that enables connections, but also celebrates fractures.

Ifetayo Youth Ensemble: Community Building as an Act of Cultural Transfer

The Ifetayo Youth Ensemble (IYE) is one of seven major programs offered by the nonprofit organization, Ifetayo Cultural Arts Academy which serves more than 700 youth and families each year, primarily in the Flatbush neighborhood and surrounding areas of Brooklyn, New York. Ifetayo’s mission is to “[support] the creative, educational and vocational development of youth and families of African descent, [and enhance their lives] by providing programs in cultural awareness, performing and visual arts, as well as academic instruction, health and wellness, and professional skills development” (www.ifetayo.org). Thirty to forty youth, ages 11 to 24, participate in IYE. They are recommended from other Ifetayo programs or accepted by audition, and expected to represent the “highest level of excellence” within the organization, both in terms of their artistic discipline and their commitment to the Nugzo Saba (the seven principles of Kwanzaa: unity, self-determination, collective work and responsibility,

cooperative economics, purpose, creativity, and faith). Throughout their tenure, which can range from one to more than ten years, ensemble members train rigorously in their principle discipline (African dance, African drumming, modern dance, or acting), and also are encouraged to participate in one of Ifetayo's Rites of Passage programs.¹⁹ These experiences are meant to prepare the ensemble to put their cultural heritage to use in the act of creating original performance pieces that address critical issues in the African community today. As ensemble members, they are positioned to look to the past to cultivate a sense of collective identity and vision, but also to infuse that traditional framework with contemporary artistic styles, practices and social/political issues which keep it vital. In the end, their play scripts and performances become part of a living culture that at once re-teaches and re-stores cultural tradition and memory, while breaking those systems open to embellish and transform them for the future.

The Cracks that Let the Light In

Traditionally, agency tends to be discussed as the opposite to structure, i.e. “[t]hat structure is systematic and patterned, while agency is contingent and random; that structure is constraint, while agency is freedom; that structure is static, while agency is active, that structure is collective, while agency is individual” (Hays 57). The danger of this traditional binary view is that it renders human beings passive in relation to *seemingly* external structural forces (e.g. redevelopment plans, stereotypes, policies, institutions, languages, laws etc.), while attributing any divergences from these patterns to some kind of innate

¹⁹ Sisters in Sisterhood or I am My Brother

individual consciousness. As Sharon Hays points out, both sides leave us wanting: “The assumption that we are mere minions of the system is belied by a history of social change and the idea that humans are in complete control is an ideal of extreme individualists” (62). Opposed to this dichotomy, Hays, like de Certeau and Sommer, argues that human agency is the continuous *use* and *adaptation* of structures to re-iterate and/or disrupt identity, thought, behavior, and action. Within this framework, structure is understood as something human beings create, at the same time that it is creating them (Berger and Luckmann; Butler), and it thereby is both constraining and enabling. Hays writes:

Structures not only limit us, they also lend us our sense of self and the tools for creative and transformative action . . . Without structure there are no rules. Without rules, there is no grounding for, and no direction to, one’s personality, and therefore no possibility for conscious, purposive action . . . agency is made possible by the enabling features of social structures and at the same time is limited within the bounds of structural constraint.

(61)

This argument suggests stereotypes and limitations can be broken, not by destroying the community or leaving it behind, but rather by transforming the way people perform community and ascribe meaning to its practices. In this view, structure and agency are intertwined and in a constant and dynamic relationship with one another. Inherent in this argument is the belief that both social relations (i.e. patterns of roles and relationships, and forms of domination that pinpoint

categories of people according to race, gender, class, education etc.) and culture (systems of knowledge, thought, value, and practice) must be taken into account as structural systems when understanding the possibilities for human agency that emanate from these structures (65-6). Informed by the works of Bourdieu, Foucault and Geertz, Hays argues that “cultural systems not only constrain us to think and behave in certain ways, they simultaneously provide us a range of ways to think and behave at the same time they make human thought and action possible” (69).

Similarly Cohen argues that by understanding community as experiential, interpretive and malleable—rather than as a structural model with a specific form of social organization— we realize how community members “are able to infuse its culture with vitality” (Hamilton 9). In light of Cohen’s conception of community as symbolically constructed, we can understand that “structures do not, in themselves, create meaning for people,” writes literary editor Peter Hamilton (9). In his view, Cohen’s study of community as something people shape and re-shape to give substance to their values and identities is “an effective answer to the question of why so many of the organizations designed to create ‘community’ as palliatives to anomie and alienation are doomed to failure” (9). By recognizing social and cultural structure as existing through the interactional activities of individuals and groups who are responsible for both their maintenance (i.e. reproduction) and transformation, we reveal the hegemony of these systems as partial and therein lays the possibility for agency and community building. “[A]gency operates on many levels of association and belonging, often

providing more than one anchor of identity for each subject,” argues Doris Sommer, “In the contradictions among those anchors is wiggle room to act up” (5).

While the youth in this study were aware of being marginalized within their communities (and within the larger society) because of their age, as well as race, gender, socio-economic status, location etc., they also felt discrepancies and noticed gaps within this system. They at once felt constrained by their communities, and at the same time enabled by the values, desires and behaviors that made up these communities. In my interview with Tyrell, he sees the problems in his community, but also recognizes that these structures and conditions are what create the grounds for his existence and maneuvering: “If I were to change the community in a way I really wouldn’t be who I am today. So in a way, I would leave it all the same and just hope that somebody could come out with a more positive retrospect of what the community is as opposed to steeping down to the stereotypes portrayed and living up to them” (personal interview). Through the course of this study, that “somebody” became Tyrell himself, as well as the other youth in the three community-based youth ensembles I studied. In the process of creating original plays about themselves and their communities, these youth not only practiced new ways of combining, but also *used* their culture to create the cracks that let the light into their communities, revealing variations and possibilities within.

CHAPTER 3

COMMUNITY BUILDING AS AN ACT OF INTERVENTION

All of the artist-educators leading programs in this study applied intervention as a cultural strategy by designating the communities in which their organizations engaged (i.e. teens living in New York City's shelter system, teenage girls, and youth of African descent) and by using art as a way to draw out community stories/repertoires and put them to work towards positive social change. Find Your Light, however, uniquely placed intervention at the center of its theory of pedagogy, playmaking and performance. In this chapter, I will discuss some of the theoretical groundings for this approach, examine why and how it is most operative in Find Your Light's model of community-based youth theater, and discuss its potential impact—positive and negative—on youth participants and their communities.

About Find Your Light

Juliette Avila moved to New York City to start Find Your Light after completing her B.A. in Theatre at University of Colorado-Boulder. “I was just so sick of talking about how this world is in trouble and I wanted to just do something, and do something that I knew how to do,” Juliette explained, “And I thought, well who needs to say something that no one's given them a forum? And I thought of teenagers, first, and then I thought of shelters” (personal interview, 21 July 2006). Juliette created Find Your Light in 2004 as a two month summer playwriting program, launching it in partnership with a social service agency that

had a Tier II shelter at the time.²⁰ According to the agency’s former youth services director, Rob, who helped recruit participants, Find Your Light’s members were “pretty high functioning kids who had come from maybe a really, really bad point to a pretty good point.” Many were prompted to join Find Your Light by Rob’s recommendation, but also by their desire to express themselves as *teenagers*—not necessarily as “shelter kids.” “I don’t think I told them that they would be able to tell *their* stories because I wasn’t exactly sure what they were going to do,” Rob tells me, “they were all pretty much outgoing and wanted to be stars.” In 2005, Juliette joined this initial group with teenagers from a domestic violence shelter in Lower Manhattan, still with the aim of getting them to write a play about their collective experience as “shelter kids.” But despite numerous theater exercises and writing prompts, she found the teenagers were tired of talking and writing about their shelter experiences. Nothing was clicking, explained Juliette. That is until Mercedes had a gun held up to her head after summer school on route to rehearsal. The incident sparked a debate among the nine ensemble members (all of whom attend notoriously violent high schools) over the role of metal detectors in their schools and what they considered the root causes of violence among their peers and communities. As the ensemble shared personal stories of violence witnessed and/or experienced, Juliette was struck by how numb the group seemed—they told stories of girl fights, domestic abuse, and

²⁰ New York State’s Tier II shelter model is designed to return homeless families to permanent housing. The shelters are meant to supply housing search assistance, child care, employment services, independent living planning, and case management services.

friends and family members being murdered almost matter-of-factly, she remarks. At the same time, she had never seen them debate a topic so fervently. When the gun incident happened, the focus of the ensemble shifted. Instead of pushing her own agenda (i.e. getting them to write personal stories about being “homeless”), Juliette began asking the ensemble members what they wanted to *change* in their communities and how they would do it. “That’s when I saw the most passionate side of them come into this work,” Juliette said, “They helped me discover the new direction for Find Your Light. We now write shows that have to do with social change, any issues that they face in their lives” (personal interview, 21 July 2006).

The gun incident and the creative process that ensued became fodder for the group’s original play, Understand To Be Understood. When I began working with Find Your Light in 2006, the ensemble was rewriting this play in preparation for the New York City Fringe Festival, which traditionally draws a white, middle-class audience. This full-length play traces the contentious relationships between the “good” and “bad” crowds at a fictional urban high school, and the escalating tension between P Killa (played by Jerome), the school bully, and Dennis (character written and played by Daryl), a foreign student from Trinidad, who continuously is beaten and taunted for being different. As the story unfolds, we learn that P Killa comes from a broken home and despises Dennis for being a quiet, hardworking student who refuses to fight. We also learn that Dennis, increasingly frustrated with trying to navigate a new set of cultural codes, where respect is gained through violence (as opposed to education), is beginning to

believe that the only way to survive is by fighting back. Despite the daily ritual of passing through metal detectors and rounds of security guards, these two rivals eventually go head-to-head with Dennis stabbing P Killa just as P Killa is coming to apologize and seek reconciliation. At this point in the play, the cast steps out of character one-by-one and directly addresses the audience, bearing witness to violence they either have experienced firsthand or seen in their schools and neighborhoods of East Harlem, the Bronx, and areas of Brooklyn. Through personal story and reflection, the cast questions the efficacy of educational, legal and acculturative systems that, in their opinion, seek to restrain rather than foster human agency by positioning youth and their communities as objects rather than agents. “Violence begets violence, not peace,” remarks Mercedes, “But what really saddens me is the murder of our souls. People tell us we’re failures, so we never strive to be successes. People tell us we’re poor in money, so we can’t see we’re rich in spirit. And everyone stands up and says they’ll be the change. But this cycle is wound so tight around us that we’re numb” (Understand To Be Understood).

Understand To Be Understood was a full-length play with a linear structure that ran about an hour. Group scenes were “interrupted” throughout the play by characters who stepped forward to comment and reflect on the action. During these monologues and spoken word pieces, the characters would point out gaps between their own feelings and experiences and the ways in which others they felt others perceived them. While the costumes (street clothes and hooded sweatshirts) and set were minimal—a rolling metal detector made of plywood and

a couple of tables and chairs that were moved into various configurations—the youths' play was largely directed by Juliette and complemented by professional lighting, fight choreography and sound. These elements helped to give it a polished feel.

My Research

As a researcher, I observed a total of twenty Find Your Light rehearsals, totaling more than seventy hours between June and August 2006, plus two performances at the New York City Fringe Festival. I had full access to video record all rehearsals and productions and to interview the youth participants and adult facilitators. I did not interview any of the youths' parents but I did meet with two of their former case workers.

I analyzed and inductively coded all of the data collected throughout my fieldwork experience using grounded theory. First I made verbatim transcripts of the video-recordings of rehearsals and performances and audio-recordings of my interviews with youth and adults. I then examined those transcripts, along with notes, archival materials, email correspondence, a binder of Juliette's past lesson plans and writing assignments, student writing, the play script, marketing materials and the youths' journals. I discussed any analyses I made while working in the field with Juliette and a few of the youth to cross-check my assumptions.

The Participants

While not everyone in Find Your Light is a direct victim of physical violence, or has committed a violent act, each member belongs to a neighborhood and/or school deemed violent or problematic by federal agencies and the media.

According to Lori Hager, once a particular zip code or group is labeled a “problem,” the people who live there, go to school there, or associate with that place or group are by default identified as “at risk” (19). Ironically, this labeling can in turn be put to use by property developers who reproduce it for their own ends: Doreen Mattingly explains that many times for investors, “the neighborhood’s bad reputation [becomes] a reason it needs to be redeveloped, and teenagers are [marked as] central to the neighborhood’s negative image. Gang violence, truancy, and poorly performing schools are repeatedly cited as some of the neighborhood’s most severe problems” (453). In these situations, there is not only “a growing consciousness of children at risk,” explains Mattingly, “there is also a growing sense of children as *the* risk” (454).

A total of nine Find Your Light ensemble members, between the ages of fourteen and eighteen, participated in this study. Three were young men (Daryl, Jerome, Tyrell) and seven were young women (Denise, Goddess, Jamila, Mercedes, Nichole, Tynela). Denise, one of the young women who had been a member for two years, left after the first rehearsal. Two other original cast members also had left Find Your Light prior to this study. Nichole, Tynela and Jerome were “understudies,” recruited in the summer of 2006 to fill roles vacated by these original ensemble members and authors of the play. They had no association with the shelter system, but had the shared experience of living in notoriously violent NYC neighborhoods. The original Find Your Light members did have some association with New York City’s shelter and/or foster care system, but none were currently in the system at the time of my study. Tyrell,

Goddess, and Jamila were recruited for Find Your Light from a large social service organization in East Harlem, which had a Tier II family shelter the year they joined. Daryl, Mercedes, and Denise had been recruited from a domestic violence shelter in lower Manhattan. The adolescents in Find Your Light identified themselves as African American (8), Antiguan (1), and Trinidadian (1). The youth spent most of their lives in the United States, with the exception of Daryl who moved from Trinidad in high school. They lived in poor or working class sections of Harlem, Brooklyn and Staten Island.

Find Your Light founder Juliette Avila was in her early thirties and identifies as white. Born and raised in Los Angeles, California, she is a first-generation American. Her parents emigrated to the United States as young adults from Ecuador in the 1960s. Avila lived in a working-class/middle class neighborhood in Brooklyn, worked full-time at Pace University, and had a B.F.A. in acting from University of Colorado at Boulder. Find Your Light's stage manager/co-facilitator, Amanda, was in her late twenties and identified as Trinidadian. She also lived in a working class neighborhood in Brooklyn, worked full-time as a high school math teacher, and was completing a master's in education from Pace University.

For a variety of reasons, Juliette and Amanda had limited contact with the ensemble members' parents, and the youth themselves were reticent to involve their families in the rehearsal process (aside from inviting them to

performances).²¹ As a result, I did not interview the parents of ensemble members. I did however interview the two social service workers (Erica and Rob) who recruited the original Find Your Light ensemble from their respective organizations. Erica was in her late twenties, and identified as a white woman. She formerly worked as a case manager at the domestic violence shelter in lower Manhattan. Rob was in his early thirties, and identified as Latino. He formerly worked as youth services coordinator at a large social service organization in East Harlem where half of the original ensemble members were recruited. While neither case manager still worked at these organizations at the time of my study, they continued to volunteer with Find Your Light.

The Find Your Light Process

Find Your Light's play making process created the conditions for youth to practice cultural agency on two levels. On one level, it intervened into the personal lives of the youth ensemble members by asking them to open up about painful memories of trauma (i.e. violence, death of a family member, homelessness etc.) and then experiment with generative ways of using their emotions and stories to communicate in specific and intentional ways that non-intimates can hear. By encouraging the ensemble members to give testimony and bear witness to each others' painful life experiences, Find Your Light also

²¹ FYL members were recruited mostly by their case workers/mentors, Erica and Rob, who had the most direct contact with their parents. In interviews, Juliette and Amanda admit not understanding the parents and their reasons for not being more involved. Erica and Rob noted various reasons, including work, child care and apathy. But they also noted that Find Your Light was valued by the youth as being a space of their own, which could be a reason why the youth did not make an effort, or show a desire, to include their parents in the rehearsal process.

enabled the ensemble to construct their own symbolic repertoire as “survivors” that bonded them together as a temporal community.

Simultaneously, the youth were taught how to use theatrical conventions to create a collective story that potentially could intervene broadly in the community. As explained in the introduction, *Find Your Light* asks the ensemble members to exaggerate stereotypes that they feel are constraining them and then to find ways of calling out the audience (and themselves) on their joint complicity in constructing and maintaining those constructions. These interventions were accomplished through the play via moments of reversal, good old-fashioned Brechtian alienation effect, and scenes that “stop” and play-out re-imagined alternatives in a method similar to Boal’s Forum Theatre.²² They were also accomplished by the nature of the “as/is” of the performance itself which reveals these violent scenarios, and the urban youth that are part of them, “as simultaneously ‘real’ and ‘constructed’” (Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire*

3). According to Diana Taylor, the friction between social actor and constructed self “introduces a generative critical distance . . . [which] more fully allows [the

²² Bertolt Brecht’s “alienation effect” involves the use of dramatic techniques designed to distance the audience from emotional involvement in the play while revealing the constructed nature of the play’s production. Forum Theatre activates scenarios of oppression in ways that emphasizes tensions and differences and engage what Boals calls “spect-actors” in a series of substitutions which function to reconstitute the original narrative. This process begins with actors performing a scenario of oppression as they remember it or “know” it to be. This first performance ends with the antagonists (the oppressors) getting what they want and the protagonists (the oppressed) failing to achieve their needs and desires. After watching the “original” scenario unfold as the actors remember and understand it, the spect-actors reflect on what they saw and felt, and then begin to replace the protagonists to rehearse alternate outcomes.

actor and the audience] to keep both the social actor and the role in view simultaneously, and thus to recognize the areas of resistance and tension” (30). As one audience member said after seeing a Find Your Light show, “It wasn’t this sort of ‘Hey, we’re these self-confident [kids] and we’re putting our hearts into it.’ [It] was like, “Hey we are angry and we are hurt and we are putting that out there.’ . . . I came out of the Find Your Light show like, “Oh, my God. I’ve really touched this other place and they really let me in” (Jacob). “Such ruptures [can] signal a breakdown of the necessary duality of conventions which allows performance to ‘play’ with the audience’s fundamental beliefs, *without* producing immediate rejection,” argues Baz Kershaw (28).

Why Intervene? Working with Youth Who Have Experienced Trauma

Juliette believes that abuse and pain are roots of violence, and that play making can be a critical means of liberating trauma survivors from their own internalized victimization and of doing something generative and transformative with their pain. For Juliette, this belief stemmed from a very personal place.²³ “I have a very mixed up life as far as where I feel like I belong,” she told me. Juliette is a first generation American; her parents both emigrated to the United States

²³ Her belief in the use of pain towards healing and cultural agency was also inspired by Eve Ensler’s playwriting program with murder convicts at the Bedford Hills Correctional Facility, an all women’s prison located in Westchester County, New York. Similar to the Find Your Light approach, Ensler invited women to begin speaking about the circumstances that led them to prison and used creative arts to help them tell *their* stories to the outside world. “[It’s] about asking audience members to re-perceive people in prison and start seeing them as fluid,” explained Ensler, “so that the audience begins to see themselves as fluid as well. So that there aren’t ‘good people’ and ‘bad people,’ but human people in struggle” (Retrieved Feb. 19, 2008, from http://www.pbs.org/pov/pov2003/whatiwant/about_eve.html)

from Ecuador as young adults and suffered a great deal of discrimination. They raised Juliette in an upper-middle class neighborhood in Southern California and feared that white families there would think Juliette was Mexican (because of her dark skin) and consequently mistreat her. To “protect” Juliette, they told her she was white and denied her any knowledge of her South American heritage. Despite her parents’ efforts to hide her race, peers at schools taunted Juliette daily, calling her “wetback,” and “beaner” (Juliette 9 Oct. 2006). “I can [still] feel the pain of that,” Juliette says, “I’ve never really felt like I belong anywhere.” As a teenager, Juliette carried this pain and often bullied others because of it. Theater, she said, became the only outlet for her to voice that pain and claim a sense of positive identity.

For Juliette, shame as a teenager turned to rage and a desire to get back at the people who were abusing her. “Rage serves as a vital self-protective function: it shields the exposed self,” argues Kaufman and Raphael, “At certain times, rage actively keeps everyone away, covering the self. We refuse further contact because rage has shut us in and others out. But at other times rage in response to shame may make us invite or seek direct contact with whoever has humiliated us . . . we often mask our deeper shame with surface rage” (qtd. in hooks, Teaching Community 101). Among the original members of Find Your Light, strong desires to lash out and to shut down were both present. These responses, according to bell hooks, prevent oppressed groups “from taking the needed steps to restore their integrity of being and personal agency” and only serve to reinforce

hierarchies of power (101).²⁴ According to Hardiman and Jackson, these hierarchies are maintained in two ways: 1) through vertical relationships of power which involve the oppressed colluding or acting in opposition to dominant groups; and/or 2) through horizontal hostility which involve the oppressed consciously or unconsciously oppressing other members of the same social group in response to their own internalized oppression (22). “By investing in the notion that they can only be ‘victims’ in relation to those who have over them,” argues hooks, “[the oppressed] lose sight . . . of the possibility that they can intervene and change the perspective of those in power” (73).

Intervention in the Context of Performance Studies

Performance studies theorists such as Augusto Boal (Theatre of the Oppressed; Games), Diana Taylor (“DNA of Performance”) and others argue that theater can invite subjects of oppression into new ways of knowing that enable them not only to confront painful feelings but also to contextualize and use them to fuel their cultural agency.²⁵ For each of these theorists, the emphasis is on

²⁴ hooks goes on to posit that “when assaults on self-esteem in public arenas [e.g. school] are coupled with traumatic abuse in dysfunctional families, . . . children from these troubled backgrounds must work harder to create healthy self-concepts” (96).

²⁵ Other 21st century examples of theater being used as cultural intervention include the Workers Theater’s agit-prop plays, Bertolt Brecht’s Epic Theatre, Augusto Boal’s Theatre for the Oppressed, Guillermo Gomez Peña’s intercultural (anit-essentialist) performances, among others. This diverse body of work draws from a variety of theoretical frameworks, ranging from Marxist and socialist political theories to critical theories/ pedagogies to post-modern/post-colonialist theories, yet is collectively informed as an active response to Antonio Gramsci’s concept of hegemony, and Louis Althusser’s notion of the Repressive State

rehearsing for action, not simply on talking and individual/group catharsis. “When we only name the problem, when we state the complaint without constructive focus on resolution, we take away hope,” argues hooks, “In this way critique can become merely the expression of profound cynicism, which then works to sustain dominant culture (Teaching Community xiv). And hope, according to Boal, requires that people have “a strong desire to end or to make less the extraordinary [oppressive] violence that exists.” “I hear people talking about hope . . . miserable people [who say], ‘You have to hope,’ and I say why should [people] hope if they know that if they don’t fight, if they don’t have the *desire* to fight, nothing is going to happen . . . To have the hope, the blind hope that one day something is going to happen . . . is even worse than no hope. If your desire is active, then you have the right to have hope” (qtd. in Paterson and Weinberg).

For Boal, desire is activated when people can remove the mental and physical blocks keeping them from understanding and feeling their own potential for action (Rainbow of Desire xxi). Inspired by Paulo Freire’s theory of critical pedagogy, Augusto Boal’s Theatre of the Oppressed techniques aim to break down the oppositional binary between the active producers of knowledge (the actors), and the passive receivers (or re-producers) of it (the spectators).²⁶ In TO,

Apparatus (RSA) and Ideological State Apparatus (ISA). While theories that inform the uses of theater as cultural intervention vary, they commonly assume people can be cultural agents capable of resistance, enunciation, self-creation, and social transformation, rather than mere targets of Althusser’s ISAs.

²⁶ The goal of critical pedagogy is to accommodate “the language forms, types of presentation, modes of reasoning, and cultural practices that have meaning for students” (Fitzclarence and Giroux qtd. in Fine 6) and “to elicit interrogation,

there are only “spect-actors,” engaging in the process of creating art and critically reflecting on it. Boal writes: “The Theatre of the Oppressed is a system of physical exercises, aesthetic games, image techniques and special improvisations whose goal is to safeguard, develop and reshape this human vocation [i.e. theater], by turning the practice of theatre into an effective tool for the comprehension of social and personal problems and the search for their solutions.” (Rainbow of Desire 14-15). Through a variety of games and exercises, spect-actors engage in a process of “muscular alienation” (here Boal plays off Brecht’s usage of ‘alienation effect’) that is meant to force a critical awareness of how the body moves in habitual ways and effectively reproduces ideologies and stereotypes through its movement and its relationship to others. He writes: “[W]e must start with the ‘de-mechanisation’, the re-tuning (or de-tuning) of the [social] actor . . . He must relearn to perceive emotions and sensations he has lost the habit of recognizing” (Games 41). During this process, Boal argues that “the most important thing is that the actors become aware of their muscles, of the enormous variety of movements they *could* make” (42). It is his belief that only by

expression, and the exchange of discourse and stories” (81). Critical theorist/pedagogues who have borrowed from Freire advocate for an education based on dialogue, critical reflection, and problem-posing. Within this context, the teacher is no longer the privileged possessor of knowledge, but rather a co-learner and a facilitator; and the student is no longer a passive receptacle for information, but an active participant in the process of cultural production. Instruction and learning is no longer seen as neutral process, but one deeply rooted, and determined by, “contexts of history, power, and ideology” (Giroux and McLaren qtd. in Goodman 24). According to Freire, “domesticating education” is a process of “transferring knowledge;” education for liberation is one of “transforming action” (qtd. in Nieto 44).

becoming critically aware of our role as social actors—and aware of how our worldviews are mnemonically embodied, as well as mentally inscribed—can we begin to question the social construction of our bodies and work towards making them newly expressive and capable of rehearsing plans for change.

In cases of people who have experienced trauma, Diana Taylor (“DNA of Performance”) argues performance’s public and collective focus enables survivors to do something actively with their pain in ways that therapy experiences that focus on individual healing typically do not. According to her, trauma is stored on the body as both visual and kinetic memory. In therapy, survivors tell and re-tell their stories before a witness (the therapist) or group of witness (in group therapy), re-activating that memory to work through it in a new context. Taylor writes:

No memory is possible outside frameworks used by people living in society to determine and retrieve their recollections. Each intervenes in the individual/political/social body at the particular moment and reflects specific fears, anxieties, or values. When the context changes, they change, establishing a new specificity.” (52)

This act of telling and bearing witness in therapeutic situations, notes Taylor, is itself a kind of performance understood in terms of Richard Schechner’s reiterative, or “twice-behaved,” behavior (52). And these reiterative performances can be critical to an individual’s ability to move through the pain and *get to a point* where they act, argues Taylor. Similarly Jan Cohen-Cruz writes: “The political potential of personal story is grounded not in particular subject matter but

rather in the storytelling's capacity to position even the least powerful individual in the proactive subject position . . . The very act of speaking one's story publicly is a move towards subjecthood, towards agency, with political implications" ("Redefining the Private" 103-4). When these personal stories are re-told and re-enacted on stage, Taylor believes victims can move past individual catharsis and healing towards what she calls, "the contestatory, and no less reiterative, phase of performance protest" ("DNA of Performance" 54) where they are using their pain to take up presence in the public sphere.

Recognizing that personal catharsis is a necessary step towards political activism, Juliette makes personal storytelling core to the Find Your Light process. But in the vein of Boal and Taylor, she also uses physical and aesthetic techniques to intentionally demechanize, retune and activate youths' desires to take positive social action, pushing them to intervene in the public sphere to effect change in the broader community. "We do not "fix" our Lighters," Juliette writes on the Find Your Light MySpace page, "We like our teens just the way they are. We are here to offer them insight on the benefits of gaining different perspectives through the arts. We are here to help them find their voice and learn how to use it. We are here to celebrate their poetry and thoughts. We are here to teach them how to be the change" (www.myspace.com/findyourlight). "I don't want [Find Your Light members] to forget the pain because it's always going to be there," Juliette told me in our first interview, "but [I want to help them to] figure out what to *do* with the pain" (21 July 2006).

I asked Erica to describe how Find Your Light was different from other teen programs offered by social service agencies and other community organizations in the city. She replied:

To be up on stage, speaking to a group of people that they may or may not know and to be able to tell their stories and say, ‘This is who I am,’ and be comfortable with that. Only theater can do that. . . . Even in a group counseling setting, you can talk to people, but you don’t have an avenue to stand up and say, . . . ‘Here I am and you’re going to watch me, but I’m going to be okay.’ In a way, [they] give their life to somebody else and that person then leaves the theater and walks away with a different vision of the world.

Find Your Light members responded to the same question in kind:

GODDESS: Find Your Light is basically a place where expression, where you can be yourself, your *whole* self, all of your different personalities, you can bring it here. Say you’re angry. You can take that anger and put it into positive energy. It’s different [from other theater and community programs I’ve done] because all of the other programs were structured, whereas here you make it. You take your feelings and you make it your own and basically that’s the foundation for Find Your Light. (Personal interview).

MERCEDES: Before I came to Find Your Light, I never really talking about everything that’s happened to me to people, but when

I came [here] you always had to talk. Juliette was like, “Let’s talk! Let’s play games!” It used to annoy me in the beginning but it’s funny [now] because it brought us to all come together and made it easier for us to write the play and express our feelings. I think it’s really good for us to get to know other people and get to know that everybody has problems and that it makes you who you are.

(Personal interview).

Intervention in the Context of Social Services

In addition to being informed by theories of intervention from performance studies, Find Your Light also—and more problematically—has borrowed theories of intervention from the youth services field, which historically has taken a deficit approach to youth and community development. Through the greater part of the 1990s, youth services typically targeted “at risk” youth from “problem areas” and intervened to create specific services to prevent delinquent or violent behaviors that it assumed clients already participated in or were predisposed to by nature of their socio-economic status, race or family history. Today the field’s focus has shifted towards an asset-based approach in response to recent resiliency research and long-term evaluations, led by the Center for Youth Development and Policy Research and others, that consistently revealed that a deficit approach was failing to eliminate risk behaviors.²⁷ But according to Erica

²⁷ This research also showed that a majority of youth in high-risk environments were growing up to be healthy, successful adults, despite these “risks,” particularly when caring relationships and support systems in their communities

and Rob, the two social workers that partnered with Juliette to develop Find Your Light, many agencies still tend toward a top-down approach, recognizing clients as targets of services rather than fully expressive human beings.

At first glance, Find Your Light promised to be a unique way for Erica and Rob's clients to escape these classifications. Erica shared that the appeal of Find Your Light was that it invited youth "to vocalize their thoughts without feeling censored" (personal interview). The premise was "This is your time. This is your place," explains Erica, "[as opposed to being] in some stuffy little office with [a therapist] who's like, "What's wrong with you?" or "What are we working on today?" [Find Your Light] was limitless in terms of what it could do. [It was] more free, teen-oriented than counseling," said Erica. In her view, Find Your Light also was an opportunity for the youth "not to feel so responsible for everything." "For once," she explains, "[they felt] someone could take care of [them] instead of feeling like [they] needed to take care of everything [earn an income for the family, help with childcare, etc.]." Similarly Rob believed that Find Your Light represented a creative place for teens to simply be teenagers (personal interview). Youth services at his agency were mostly focused on

enabled them to recognize and develop their strengths. In light of this research, youth services began rethinking programs in the context of the larger community, developing asset-based approaches that focus heavily on supporting youth, providing resources and creating opportunities for them to take on leadership roles and work with adult mentors. Pittman, Karen J. Promoting Youth Development: Strengthening the Role of Youth-Serving and Community Organizations. Washington, DC: Center for Youth Development and Policy Research, Academy for Educational Development, 1991.

afterschool and weekend programs for older elementary and junior high school students. “We had a lot of older kids who had grown out of [those programs] and we were looking to get them involved . . . this was the perfect opportunity for them to develop something,” he noted.

To my initial surprise, however, Juliette’s use of the term “outreach program” to describe Find Your Light was more in line with the youth services field’s more traditional unidirectional service model than newer asset-based approaches that value participants as change agents. The term “outreach” centralizes Juliette’s expertise and knowledge as the facilitator, while unintentionally marginalizing the knowledges and expertise of the youth ensemble members. Troubled by her use of this terminology, I asked Juliette in our first interview to explain what the word meant to her and why she chose to use it:

JULIETTE: I guess because I’m reaching out to a group of people that I see need someone to reach out to them. . . I don’t like using underprivileged. I don’t like “troubled teens.” . . . I don’t like the terminology and the way that these kids are labeled. But it is an outreach program in the sense that, if I hadn’t met them, I don’t know what they would be doing right now. . . [she stops herself] I don’t even know if I want to call it outreach but right now that’s what I do because that’s the lingo [makes the gesture of scare quotes], you know?

HEATHER: Where are you reaching out from?

JULIETTE: . . . I think I'm outreaching from the middle-class, like the upper middle-class and I'd really would like more people to do that because I think when you are raised in those neighborhoods and have that kind of education, although you are not street-wise, I think your knowledge is just as valuable as their knowledge. (21 July 2006).

Earlier in this interview, Juliette added how she “willingly stepped *out* [my italics]” of her life into what she called the “painful and difficult” world of these youth (as she understood it from the news) and also a “beautiful” world (as she romanticizes it) to offers them her knowledge and the chance at advancement into her world. This centering of her experience was mirrored in many of Find Your Light’s promotional materials and communications as well. On Find Your Light’s MySpace profile in Fall 2006, for example, Juliette wrote how she works full-time as a web writer/editor and “then works full-time as someone who is trying to save the urban youth of NYC through this program” (www.myspace.com/findyourlight).²⁸

²⁸ It is important to note that Find Your Light was still in the stages of development and working towards the goal of establishing its 501(c)3 status as a nonprofit organization, which would then make it eligible to apply for grants. The formulation of urban youth as “at risk” and in need of saving is still what

renders the need for many youth arts programs intelligible to funding agencies. I do not believe that Juliette’s use of this language was strategic in this case, however. In many ways, youth arts facilitators have been unreflexively conditioned to reproduce these formulations.

The Dangers of a Deficit Approach

Juliette's positioning as "savior" to this group initially showed signs of everything that can be potentially dangerous when community artists approach communities uninvited, not taking the time to learn about a community and set up reciprocal relationships with participants from the beginning. "Without an intimate understanding of the needs, desires, and beliefs of the group involved, the theater practitioners not only work at a disadvantage but can actually do harm," argues Nellhaus and Haedicke (17). In *Find Your Light*, the potential for harm lay in Juliette's initial desire to do something with the youth ensembles' stories without surveying their needs and wants first. Rob explained that Juliette's initial focus was on the "big picture," which meant producing a show that used the youths' stories of pain to communicate a message that audiences couldn't ignore (personal interview). "Every generation is getting more and more numb and kind of just closed in their own world because everything is at their fingertips," expressed Juliette, "We're forgetting how to be human with each other. So in the arts, I would like to see things like *Find Your Light* . . . where you're struck so hard with truth" (21 July 2006). And for Juliette, that truth was located in people's pain and vulnerability. She reflects in her final interview with me that this desire to show pain and vulnerability on stage can be selfish. These youth, she says, "They have a *story*. I mean for me I'm being selfish. I want to see plays about life [and] reality like that. And I want to find storytellers and help them develop [those] stories."

Naming the Other

In the first couple of years, Juliette assumed that the stories the youth wanted to tell were stories about their lives as “shelter kids,” which in the beginning restrained their sense of agency rather than cultivated it. Her focus on telling stories of shelter life was based on the assumption that Find Your Light members needed a forum to connect with other shelter kids to create a sense of community. “I don’t know why, but I really feel like teenagers who have lived in a shelter have no, they’re losing their sense of family and I want to build that for them,” Juliette explained (21 July 2006). But Juliette’s definition of community here is problematic. First, it assumes Find Your Light members have a shared sense of “lack of community” that will unite them. But Rob contradicted this assumption, noting that his agency had a “very family-like, community-like, this is your home-type” feel that was rooted in place, not circumstance (personal interview). Erica agreed that people who used the services at Rob’s agency “grew up together” (personal interview). “The families lived within the same blocks,” she said, and “probably went to similar schools or schools near each other.” The youth from Rob’s shelter recognized Harlem as their community, she noted, whereas the youth from the domestic violence shelter were coming from different states to escape abuse. “They’re fragmented,” noted Erica, “They’re away from their families [and] have limited support systems.” These youth were largely still trying to feel each other out when they were introduced to the youth from Rob’s

organization. The task of integrating the two groups as a “community” was therefore “very difficult,” in her opinion.

Secondly, the youth did not self-identify as “shelter kids.” In fact, while all but two of the teenagers that Rob referred to Find Your Light in 2004 had lived in the agency’s Tier II shelter *at some point*, none of them was currently living there at the beginning of the program (although they were still receiving other services). And when Juliette combined teenagers from Rob’s agency in East Harlem with teens from a domestic violence shelter downtown, all of the new recruits had found permanent housing by the end of that summer. According to Rob, the initial eight to ten recruits from his agency were prompted to join Find Your Light by his recommendation, but also by their own desire to express themselves as *teenagers*. In fact, the teenagers initially were unaware that they would be positioned by Find Your Light as “shelter kids” or expected to create work based on their experiences as such. When I asked Tyrell and Goddess why they decided to join that first summer, both explained how they wanted to do something while developing new skills. “I had a book of poems that I wanted [Juliette’s] critique on, being I heard that she was into that kind of thing and she critiqued my book of poems and invited me back and from that point on, the rest is history,” explains Tyrell (18 July 2006). Tyrell had no prior experience with the arts, but said it “was something to do. . . It was something new out of my repertoire, so I decided to go for it.” Goddess, on the other hand, did have prior experience in the arts and was looking to get back into it. She’d been a drama

major in junior high school but gave it up in high school to focus on law instead.²⁹

“I thought it was cool because she told us we were going to be able to write our own play and perform it!” she exclaimed (9 Aug. 2006).

Cohen argues that the word community “is only occasioned by the desire or need to express a distinction” from one community to others (12). In other words, we define the boundaries of community when we wish to distinguish ourselves from other social entities, even when the meaning of those boundaries may be perceived differently by people who make them up. In the case of Find Your Light, being “shelter kids” was not a communal boundary that the ensemble could unite around because it was not an identity location that felt generative or positive to them. Juliette identifies the youths’ resistance to it in her final interview with me:

They’re always like, Juliette, why do you have to say that we were in a shelter? And I’m like, ‘Well when you joined me you knew that that was my mission statement. It’s not like that’s brand new to you. That’s what I do. I work with teenagers, like you, that have been in that situation.’ And they’re like, ‘But people will think less about us.’ And I was like, ‘Exactly! That’s why I’m doing this so that they won’t see you as a lesser of a person just because you’ve been in that situation.’ (8 Oct. 2006)

²⁹ While unusual for American high schools, some of New York City’s specialized schools use a college-style system of majors that help determine a students’ electives.

Despite the youths' protests, Juliette continued to describe Find Your Light as "a playwriting/acting outreach program for teens living through New York City's shelter system" in all of the company's publicity materials. Rob approached Juliette about this misnomer in 2005, and then again after reading the description in the program book for the Youth Against Violence Festival the following summer. He suggested including the word "formerly" in the description. In our final interview, Juliette admitted that the mission did not currently describe the participants, yet it was still her goal to focus on teens living in shelters as she worked to develop the program into a nonprofit organization. "[It's just] very hard for me to get my foot in the door to do that," she admitted (personal interview). By framing the youth as shelter kids, Juliette bound them to an identity location that was not self-determined or desirable to them and didn't allow for, or acknowledge, their transformation away from what they saw as a limiting circumstance.

Forcing an Agenda

Juliette's approach to drawing these stories out and putting them to work in rehearsal was to push youth to be outspoken—in essence, to see the beauty in their stories and their pain that *she* saw. But coming from the outside, this approach initially created further distance between her and the ensemble. "I would always say in my head, 'She doesn't know where these kids are coming from. She's gotta maybe not push so much,'" explained Rob, "There were definitely some issues that came up early on like disagreements and stuff where I had conversations with kids like, 'Ease up. Relax. Maybe she doesn't know where

you're coming from. Maybe you want to sit down and talk with her and just tell her something and don't push [back] so hard." "And I'd tell her the same thing," he said, "I'd be like, "You know what. You might want to lay off this kid because ---I wouldn't fully disclose because confidentiality type thing, but just kind of give hints here and there. . . [She'd be like] 'Oh, this kid's not listening to me because he doesn't want to listen.' No, this kid's not listening because so and so were yelling at this person for twenty years in this sort of way" (personal interview).

For Rob, Juliette's position as an outsider to the East Harlem community, and as a non-Black woman, contributed to tensions between the youth and her. "She was coming from a different background, not fully knowing where these kids were coming from," Rob explained, "And in the beginning, I heard some of the kids say, 'Oh, she wants to exploit our lives' . . . It came up a lot because she was asking them to write about their lives, which for them, is not very easy. They've had some rough lives" (personal interview). In my interview with Goddess, she explained how her initial enthusiasm for the program shifted once rehearsals began. "I'm not going to lie," she says, nervously playing with her gold signature necklace. Her momentary glow turned serious:

GODDESS: "At first, I was a little bit skeptical because [Juliette] was basically asking us questions about where we lived and what it was like, and I was more like, "Why do you want to know? Mind your business." . . . She started asking us questions about Harlem and where we lived and wanted us to write poems about it."

HEATHER: And what was your hesitation?

GODDESS: I was like, “Why do you want to know where I live for?” Are you trying to exploit us?

HEATHER: And for you, it was the

GODDESS: I didn’t know her. (Personal interview)

Goddess was not alone in feeling skeptical about Juliette’s intentions for Find Your Light once the rehearsal process began. Her younger cousin, Jamila said she came to Find Your Light because it was something to do, but grew angry at first when Juliette encouraged her to be more outspoken. “I hated the fact that Juliette and everyone pushed me,” she says, “people said it was good, but I was angry about it. . . I don’t like to be pushed. If I’m going to do it, I’m going to do it. If I’m not, I’m not” (personal interview)

Juliette was aware that her outsider status was barrier to her initial relationship with the youth. When describing how she prepared to meet and recruit teenagers from Rob’s agency, Juliette admitted:

I was like “Alright, I have to approach them and I know that I’m totally not from their neighborhood at all, so this is going to be funny. I’ve gotta be cool.” . . . This is the first time I’m entering this world. My neighborhood when I was home [in Southern California] was either White or Hispanic –never Black. . . . So here’s me and [my friend that was helping to coordinate the program], we’re like [deer in the headlights gesture]. We’re not Harlem, not Bronx girls. (personal interview)

Here Juliette assumes the teenagers' belong to an "urban youth culture" which is foreign to her own experience, and largely based on her preconceived notions of Blackness as "cool." These notions are informed by iconographies of place that are produced by history, media, and commercialism. John Jackson argues that Harlem, and I would argue the Bronx as well, have become hypersymbolic places: "Every application of the name supplies, implies, and applies oversaturated and highly charged assumptions about the neighborhood and its inhabitants as either the epitome of racial potentiality or the embodiment of squandered opportunities" (19). Informed by this iconography, Juliette already drew boundaries between her world and "this world" which not only marked distance, but also positioned her as a helper and a voyeur going into the project.

Creating Reciprocity

From my observations and interviews with youth participants, Juliette did gain the youths' trust, but not by approaching Find Your Light members as "shelter kids" or recipients of "help." Find Your Light started to click when Juliette began creating a space for ensemble members to respond to each other freely, and for her to share her stories freely with them as well. Relationships of reciprocity are critical to the success of asset-based approaches to community-based theater. Without establishing relationships of reciprocity, community-artists run the risk of imposing their own aesthetics and ideological agendas on a community, and reinscribing a unidirectional service model of community building which positions them as the point of power.

When Juliette began to respond to the interests and needs of the ensemble members, and include herself in the creative process, she allowed the ensemble to identify and/or produce symbols that enabled them to see themselves as a community and work together as such. The direction of Find Your Light shifted in the summer of 2005 when the ensemble started talking about violence in their neighborhoods and schools. Through that discussion, the youth began to activate the symbolic repertoire of their everyday lives, not some constructed repertoire based on preconceived notions of who Juliette thought they were or who she thought she must be in relationship to them.

I asked Goddess, in her third year with Find Your Light, how Juliette finally won her trust:

GODDESS: When she started sharing experiences from her personal life. When she opened up to us, it allowed me to open up to her.

HEATHER: And it sounds when other people were willing to go there too.

GODDESS Mm. Hm. (Personal interview)

When the conversation shifted away from shelter life and towards youth and violence, Juliette began sharing her own feelings of “homelessness,” pain and anger. Knowledge of these shared emotions allowed the youth to feel less rarefied and to open themselves up to being challenged in ways they had previously resisted. “The thing about youths,” said Tyrell, “they never want to feel like they’re the only one. You put them around a bunch of other youths who

all want to accomplish the same thing are all going through the same trial period, that's when you see everybody know who they are" (personal interview).

The youth (and Juliette) had different cultural backgrounds, lived in different neighborhoods, experienced shelter life differently (or not at all), and identified themselves as having a broad range of emotions. But beginning with the rehearsal following Miriam's gun incident, their dialogue, writing and playmaking enabled them to construct a common body of symbols—from the inside out—that made for a real and efficacious community for cultural intervention.

Strategies of Intervention: Rehearsing for Change

Creating a Shared Repertoire of Cultural Experience

Moving from the Personal to the Social

If the original Find Your Light ensemble was numb to their own experiences of violence, as Juliette observed, this response could have been a result of repetition (having told their stories so many times in therapeutic settings), acceptance (internalized oppression), or resistance. Juliette responded by creating a rehearsal process that would activate what she felt were the ensemble's hidden desires. She intervened first as facilitator to personal experiences into a social context that emphasizes the larger inequities that underlie the personal, generate new ways of knowing, and position the ensemble to intervene more broadly in the culture that shapes them. Suzanne Lacy argues that personal story can distort perspective if not brought into a broader realm that enables tellers to see themselves as a group and to analyze their collective

behavior in light of socio-cultural conditions (Cohen-Cruz, “Redefining the Private,” 110). When people combine their personal experiences, they start making connections between their own experiences and others, building a symbolic repertoire and drawing boundaries around themselves as a group that enables them to operate “as symbols for a culture with political impact,” notes Lacy.³⁰ In *Find Your Light*, the personal, lived experience is purposefully not lost or hidden from view in performance. Its presence within the social narrative is what grounds the group story and allows audiences to see participants (and participants to see themselves and each other) as “both ‘beings’ and ‘symbols’—“real individuals who are often treated generically as representatives of a (maligned) group” (110).

Opening Up the Bottom Drawer

When the direction of *Find Your Light* shifted in its second year from personal storytelling to rehearsing for social change, Juliette still wanted to maintain the “rawness” of *Find Your Light*. “[I want to] preserve the blood, sweat and tears always,” she told me (personal interview). But rawness became less about Juliette intervening to get the ensemble to tell stories *about* their pain and more about providing ways for members to *use* their emotions and stories to positively change aspects of their community (violence, education, poverty etc.) for the future. Even Rob, who continued to criticize Juliette for identifying the

³⁰ Lacy’s philosophy resonates with Boal’s “Cop in the Head” or “Rainbow of Desire” theater-therapy techniques that pluralize singular accounts of oppression to encourage a distanced analysis of the general mechanisms that produce oppression and allow for the interplay of multiple points of reference and possibilities for action in the real world.

ensemble as “youth living in shelters,” admitted that Find Your Light ultimately perceived youth as “untapped resources” like a “rawness that with some guidance and direction can bring a message out” (personal interview).

In much of its marketing materials, Find Your Light prides itself on being an uncensored opportunity for youth to express themselves. But the Find Your Light experience is more than an open forum for youth to say whatever they want for the sake of saying it. It’s about disrupting the status quo and also about healing. Find Your Light recognizes that its youth participants—all of whom have experienced some kind of traumatic loss (i.e. loss of home, loss of family, etc.)—first need to move from a personal place of strength, self-understanding and connection before they can combine to “bring a message out” and sustain it in the community. “When they find their light inside of themselves and it just comes natural, it’s the *first* step towards action,” says Juliette (personal interview, 21 July 2006).

To get to this place of action, the participants have to be able to move beyond surface-level rage in order to take up space with presence and communicate in specific and nuanced ways that non-intimates can hear. Juliette uses the metaphor of opening a chest of drawers to explain this process to the ensemble. She asks the ensemble to think of their bodies as a chest of drawers:

The top drawers [the head] are the easier, more accessible things: frustration, anger, anxiety---those things that you pull out and put in your words when you’re talking. The lower [middle chest] drawers [are] fear, loneliness and vulnerability. [And] there’s one

drawer down there [the gut] that has a specific name for each person [specific to their experience]. (Field notes, 4 Aug. 2006)

For Mercedes, that third drawer was a bond to her younger sister whom she leaned on and protected when they were pulled from their parent's home and sent to live in a foster home. For Daryl, it was the shame of being bullied and knifed when growing up in Trinidad and the loneliness he felt after coming to the United States. For Tyrell, it was the pain of his father's suicide which left him to care for his mother and younger siblings while striving to succeed in school and work. The third drawer was each ensemble member's personal and specific trigger. Social justice education scholar, Pat Griffin, defines triggers as "words or phrases [and I would add memories] that stimulate response because they tap into anger or pain about oppression issues" (69). Griffin explains how people respond to triggers in a variety of ways, some helpful (e.g. confrontation, release, discussion) and others not (e.g. violence, confusion, shock, avoidance). One of the goals of social justice education, in her view, is to help students develop a repertoire of ways to respond to triggers that are socially and psychologically healthy and more effective in changing situational dynamics (78).

In *Find Your Light*, the live enunciation of these triggers in rehearsal became the vehicle through which the ensemble began to generate a structure of feeling that bonded them together as a temporal community. Cultural theorist Raymond Williams uses the term "structure of feeling" "to designate the emotional bonding generated by values and practices shared by a specific group, class, or culture," notes Bruce McConachie (35). McConachie writes that

structures of feeling suggest “both the rich images that spark immediate ‘feelings’ from the participants and witnesses (or audience) and the underlying ‘structures’ that generate those images” (35). As noted earlier, the ensemble did not identify with a shared experience as shelter/foster care youth, nor did they share similar experiences of violence and metal detectors in their schools. Tyrell for example did not have a metal detector in his school and was more invested in examining discrimination as it related to relationships between adult authority figures (teachers and security guards) and youth. Daryl felt schools in New York were safe compared to those in Trinidad and liked having metal detectors at his school (personal interview). Nichole and Tynela, who both attended schools with competitive admissions standards, admitted to never having a direct experience with school violence or academic discrimination (personal interviews). And yet through the Find Your Light process, the ensemble tapped into a collective feeling of pain, anger and disappointment that they generally associated with being minority youth from under-resourced neighborhoods in New York City. In turn, they began to articulate a shared identity as survivors that Juliette reinforced theatrically to fuel their cultural agency as a group.

Giving Testimony

Juliette intentionally starts rehearsals with writing exercises, then moves into monologue/vocal work and finally transitions into collaborative scene work. This process spirals back and repeats over the course of several weeks but the decision to start with writing over physical work is meant to provoke personal testimony (and reflection) that, when witnessed as a group, emphasizes the public

rather than the private repercussions of traumatic violence, loss, et cetera. For Understand To Be Understood, some of Juliette's initial writing prompts included questions about the youths' experiences in shelters and foster care homes and how these experiences made them feel, but also included questions like:

- Who angers, confuses, saddens or disappoints you?
- Who do you want to change and what is it that they should or shouldn't do, be, think or feel?
- What do you want to experience with this person again? What don't you want to experience with them again?

The ensemble was then assigned a monologue exercise that required them to describe themselves alone versus in a group (with family, school friends etc). These writing exercises were initially individual exercises that Juliette would respond to with more personal questions, trying to get them to drill down to specific details about their unique circumstances. "A lot of times [youth] tend to jump over to the spoken word and the importance of vocally finding your voice," explained Juliette, "so I try to take them a few steps back and see the importance of the more internal discovery of themselves with writing" (personal interview). This initial writing was first a private exchange between the youth and Juliette. Mercedes describes this process as a reflexive one where she would go home and read what she wrote and say: "I didn't know I was that angry!" (personal interview).

From these personal writings, the youth were then asked each to develop two monologues in which both of their distinct personas (the public and the

private) address one person (fictional or real). “This character naturally is heavily based upon you and real life events/feelings,” wrote Juliette in her assignment, “Each monologue should be speaking to someone either at school, in your family, or on the street.” The youth were expected to perform these monologues for the entire group two days later or could find someone else in the group to read for them. Their monologues became fodder for the development of their fictional characters in the play script.

In the process of telling and re-telling these stories in rehearsal, the youth not only began to identify their own feelings of pain, anger and disappointment but to realize them as a shared cultural experience among the group. While each ensemble member’s personal experience with trauma was widely different—ranging from taking care of a dying parent to a father’s suicide to domestic violence to a brother’s murder and other life altering instances—as a group, the participants were compelled to identify and interpret certain symbols within each other’s stories that felt shared or familiar. Cohen argues that a group only begins to formulate itself as a “coherent and distinctive” community when it confronts other groups (115). In this case, the youth were formulating themselves as distinct from their imagined audience that might eventually include people in their schools, families and external communities who had not experienced trauma (as well as Juliette who was witnessing their stories as an “outsider” during rehearsals). “The symbolic nature of the opposition,” he posits, “means that people can ‘think themselves into difference’ from other groups (117). Within the context of Find Your Light’s social change mission, the youth were positioned to

look for points of connection that would enable them to combine and disrupt the status quo, so-to-speak. As evidenced in the play script, some of these symbols included home, violence, routine, the New York City public school system, metal detectors, poverty, loss, disconnected authority figures (e.g. teachers, security guards, and parents), and the label “urban youth.”

These symbols emerged through the process of personal storytelling but did not contain inherent meaning. Each ensemble member brought his/her own cultural perspective to them and interpreted them in light of their own individual experiences and purposes (Cohen 98). In our struggle to interpret symbols, “we use our past experience to render stimuli into a form sufficiently familiar that we can attach some sense to them,” Cohen posits (99). But symbolic ambiguity also “give[s] us the capacity to *make* [my italics] meaning,” notes Cohen (15). The Find Your Light community—or “family” as it was referred to by the ensemble—was constructed, and temporarily put to work, by the manipulation of symbols that the ensemble members actively generated and maintained throughout their rehearsal and performance process. “Everyone is different in their own way but . . . [we] all share and hold a special piece of feelings and emotions that, when combined, forms something unimaginable,” said Jerome after the ensemble’s final performance (personal journal). The “unimaginable” for Jerome was the Find Your Light ensemble itself, which he admitted was not united in friendship so much as it was a group of diverse individuals (who in his opinion normally would not unite) coming together for the specific purpose of bringing out a message.

Shifts in the way Mercedes began talking about “home” during Find Your Light is one example of how giving testimony served to bring personal trauma into a shared repertoire of cultural experience. In the play script, Mercedes’ recounts the loss of her home:

Imagine cops running into your house and taking you and your sibling from the only place you’ve called home. Then they place you with strangers, turning your whole childhood fantasy world upside down. From there they place you in a cage of monsters—people you wished never to see again. People who despise you in a place where you are constantly walking on eggshells. Not being able to be me was an experience that’s unforgettable. I couldn’t be me, so I became someone else. Someone usually categorized as a ‘troubled teen.’ (Understand To Be Understood)

In this monologue, the loss of home which occurred when Mercedes was removed from her house and the custody of her mother also was a loss of personal agency that positioned her as an object onto which labels like “troubled teen” could be ascribed. She is acutely aware of the negative impact this stereotype has on her own agency when she writes: “You don’t know anything about my life. I go home and I’m nobody. Nobody has to say it. I’m just another faceless girl in an endless sea of many. Someone else destined for failure” (Understand To Be Understood). Typically Mercedes would deliver her monologue quickly moving from one beat to the next, swinging her arms back in forth fervently as though trying to push

through the memory as rapidly as she could to avoid exposure. There was no point during rehearsals or performance when this story did not feel raw to me.

But through conversations with ensemble members, Mercedes also began translating “home” as a source of strength and solidarity. “The only thing that connects me to these others is my home,” says her character Dominique (Understand To Be Understood). When delivering this line, Mercedes’ tone would soften and her voice would crack. The word, “home,” was delivered with a stillness that would resonate throughout the room as she paused before her next line. In this monologue, the “others” are fellow black youth living in New York City, not necessarily in her geographic neighborhood, but in similar circumstances of struggle. “Home” is no longer only a personal embodied memory of loss but also a symbolic locality to which Mercedes chooses to belong:

When they ask me where I’m from, I don’t say St. Thomas or even America. I say I’m born in and will die for Bedstuy [Bedford-Stuyvesant]. The block I rep to death . . . The place where the most common sounds are incessant gunfire and the cries of children who are now orphans . . . The place where streets are littered with bodies—some riddled with bullets and others riddled with needle holes. But most common are the blank faces of the many who have lost hope, desires, dreams, families and loves to one thing: my block. (Understand to Be Understood).

Mercedes, in fact, no longer lived in Bedford-Stuyvesant (Bed-Stuy), a Brooklyn neighborhood that for decades has been a cultural center for blacks. Reunited with

their mother, she and her sister were living in Staten Island, overall the most suburban of the five New York City boroughs. But the littered streets, “orphans,” violence, drugs, and losses were all symbols (real or exaggerated) that, for Mercedes, constituted the Bed-Stuy she could “rep to death” because she identified with its collective sense of struggle.³¹ This sense of struggle was echoed in the personal testimonies of all of the Find Your Light members, who cited the same or similar symbols to describe the boundaries of their own neighborhoods. It has also been constructed in part by notable natives of Bed-Stuy such as rappers Jay-Z and Biggie Smalls, and the filmmaker Spike Lee, among others. Cohen argues that “people assert community, whether in the form of ethnicity or locality, when they recognize in it the most adequate medium for the expression of their whole selves” (107). Unable to defend her own home, which had been taken from her, Mercedes aligned herself with a shared experience of home as something that is broken but “fighting to better itself.” This sense of home does not replace the former but complements it, providing Mercedes a referent for an identity that formerly felt lost.

When the Find Your Light ensemble read and later performed their personal stories for each other in rehearsal, they were not only constructing a symbolic boundary through narrative, but also generating, recording, and transmitting embodied memories of pain or trauma that similarly bound them as a

³¹ Statistically speaking, crime overall has declined steadily in Bed-Stuy and, beginning in the early 2000s, the neighborhood has become increasingly gentrified. However as Cohen notes, “the vitality of cultures lies in their juxtaposition,” which causes them to exaggerate themselves and each other (115).

temporal community. These memories were transmitted through what Diana Taylor (*The Archive and the Repertoire*; “DNA of Performance”) calls the repertoire (i.e. gestures, orality, movement, etc.). “The physical presence of the body in the live experience of trauma and the interaction and exchange between people in the here and now . . . make a difference in the way knowledge is transmitted and incorporated,” she argues (“DNA of Performance” 55). Unlike discursive practices (or “the archive”), the repertoire (both in terms of verbal or nonverbal expression) transmits embodied actions. Memories of past histories and relationships are “stored in the body, through various mnemonic methods and transmitted ‘live’ in the here and now to a live audience,” Taylor posits (*The Archive and the Repertoire* 24). Furthermore, she notes that during these performances, the audience (or in the case of FYL, the ensemble) “participate[s] in the production and reproduction of knowledge by ‘being there,’ being part of the transmission” (20). The act of giving testimony becomes a live process taking place in real time in the presence of listeners who come to be participants and co-owners of the traumatic event, notes Taylor. In this sense, storytelling brings trauma into “the shared repertoire of cultural experience” (“DNA of Performance” 53).

For Goddess the process of telling and listening to each others’ stories was the essence of Find Your Light, allowing for moments of personal catharsis that cleared the way for them to come together as a group. She describes a particular moment, early in the rehearsal process, to illustrate what she means:

We were all sharing what we was afraid of and stuff that we've been through and we had a circle . . . this was the first year when we were really getting to know each other. We were sitting [together] and crying and at that point it was like [gesture of release] you let go of your inhibitions . . . That was the point that we really let go and started pouring out what was bothering us and shit that we've been through. (Personal interview)

Goddess's sense of catharsis was echoed by Mercedes: "After writing [and sharing] my part, I let a part of me go," said Mercedes, "With my peers, even though we haven't been through the same situations we all have the same feelings about everything" (personal interview).

But is catharsis necessarily a good thing, as an end in itself? In Theatre of the Oppressed, Boal criticized notions of Aristotelian catharsis, or of letting go, for being society's means of purging members of antisocial (or interventionist) behaviors. But even he began to see the potential for catharsis to clear the way for action in his later Rainbow of Desire work which focused more on the therapeutic potential of theatre to transform lives. In Rainbow of Desire, catharsis is defined as the "removal of blocks, not voiding of desires; the desires are clarified and dynamised, not tamed," writes translator Adrian Jackson (xxi). "It's good not to be burdened by so much negativity because you have an outlet for it," Mercedes said in her interview with me, noting that instead of holding onto her aggression she planned to channel her anger into her lines as a way of hooking the audience's attention (20 July 2006).

By giving testimony to personal trauma in rehearsal, the youth have an opportunity to turn their specific experiences outward and make their embodied memories feel live and present. Taylor argues that a person experiences trauma as both visceral and self-reflective. On the self-reflective level, the trauma is turned inward and experienced privately (“DNA of Performance” 54). But in the act of collective telling and witnessing, individual accounts of one person pluralize so that the “oppression of the one is the oppression of all” (Boal, Rainbow of Desire 45).

Similar to Theatre of the Oppressed, the Find Your Light process aims to symbolize each ensemble members’ individual story in order to analyze the society in which these individual cases of oppression occur and to mobilize the group to collective action. By moving beyond personal story to what Boal describes as, “the theatre of the first person plural” (Rainbow of Desire 45). Find Your Light positions youth to see the structures that create oppression as interactional activities that can either be reproduced or transformed by them. And by contextualizing their personal stories within the broader context of civic issues, such as education, family, and concerns for the future, it also provides a discursive space for youth to construct a collective *civic* identity whereby they are challenging (and working within) the system as caring citizens interested in their futures, not as marginal or oppositional youth upset about the here and now. This internal process models a broader strategy for social change that could potentially enable the youth to act as change agents in their external communities.

Forming a Collective Identity: The “Ghetto Army”

The youth’s process of giving testimony during the Find Your Light process led to a discovery and transformation of their collective knowledge about what it means to experience pain, anger, disappointment and other feelings associated with these embodied memories, and served to shift their personal feelings/embodied memories into a social context. “I came here . . . and really started talking to [these] guys and I was like, ‘Wow, they’re not any different than I am. It’s just that their routines are a little different. We all live in New York. We’re all around this stuff but I guess we all have to go through it differently,’” said Tynela (group interview, 28 Aug. 2006). Tynela admitted that when she was first recruited to serve as an understudy, her initial fear was that the ensemble—described as teens from the shelter system—would be “crazy . . . like a bunch of inmates.” In an interview midway through rehearsals, these preconceptions clearly had eroded as she explained her desire to learn from the cast: “I think everyone here has been through a lot and I really want to learn, not how to go through it but how to stay strong [like them]” (personal interview). Mercedes, an original ensemble member, noted how surprised she was in the beginning that many of the other ensemble members had experienced similar, or worse, traumatic experiences to hers in foster care: “I learned that people have it worse than me. [One of our past ensemble member’s] mom is dying of cancer and others lived in shelters. But we still have made it. I learned that all of us are fighters and we’ll make it” (personal interview).

The youths' perception of the ensemble as a group of fighters born of survival was a unifying symbol that emerged in both rehearsals and in the play script. While each ensemble member was in essence giving testimony to his/her own personal story through the production, this collective identity was what bound the group temporarily as a community. There were only three moments of unity represented in the play, all of which centered on the group's identification as a group of fighters born of survival. The first moment was the opening scene. The stage was bare except for a standing metal detector and a keyboard. Each young person walks onto the stage in the shadows of a spotlight, as the opening verses of Saul Williams' "Black Stacey" begins: "I dreamt of being white and/ complimented by you, but the only shiny black thing that you liked was my shoes./ Now, I apologize for bottling up all the little things you said that warped my head and my gut./ . . . Yeah, I became militant too. So it was clear on every level I was blacker than you." They are dressed in hooded sweatshirts, dressed like "gangstas," referencing stereotypes of urban youth as dangerous. The song, "Black Stacey," continues:

Now here's a little/message for you./ All you baller playa's got/
some insecurities too, that you could cover up, bling it up, cash in
and ching ching it up, hope no/ one will bring it up, lock it down
and string it up./Or you can share your essence with us, 'cause
everything about you couldn't be rugged and ruff./ . . . if you dare
to share your heart, we'll nod our heart to/ its beat./ And you
should do that, if nothing else, to prove/ that a player like you

could keep it honest and true. / . . . I plan to have a whole army by the time that I'm through to load their guns with songs they haven't sung.

One by one the youth face out to the audience and then perform a Suzuki "Slow ten tekka ten" walk³² through the detector, lifting their hoods over their heads slowly; their faces almost invisible. Here their militancy is complicit with stereotypes of despair, deficiency and risk cited by the youth, and referent of their internalized oppression. The opening song was chosen by Juliette, but the scene was informed directly by the ensemble's writing and personal testimonies in rehearsals. As the youth walk through the metal detector, they cover up what they feel makes them unique in response to limitations and stereotypes that public institutions, like school, often construct for them (Understand To Be Understood).

The original play mirrored this moment of unity only once at the end. After P Killa dies, the ensemble comes together on stage, this time taking off their hoods and spreading out in a horizontal line facing the audience. They step forward, one by one addressing the audience as either their character or themselves, still standing united but now as unique individuals who have come together as a collective through their shared experience of getting through, and understanding, a traumatic experience. That experience has in turn created an opportunity for critical consciousness and the *potential* for positive action.

³² Suzuki's "Slow ten tekka ten" walk is meant to be performed at a drastically slow speed, challenging the actor's stamina and coordination but reflectively drawing his/her focus to his/her body's moments. This process of raising awareness of the body is akin to Boal's strategies for demechanization.

A third moment of unity was added to the production in 2006 when Tynela joined the cast and introduced her monologue, “The Ghetto Army,” into the play script. Tynela was a replacement for an original cast member and had never lived in a shelter nor did she attend a violent high school. But her monologue echoed many of the same symbolic points of connection that already populated Find Your Light’s repertoire, such as feelings of anger, disappointment and despair and the impulse to define oneself in opposition to dominant culture:

Young soldiers march the gritty streets with weary feet and broken dreams in NYC. The ghetto army doesn’t need a uniform to show that they belong to the same cavalry. Their stories are their camouflage; this camouflage hides their memories; their memories are their enemies; their enemies: the nightmares that haunt their sleep. The reality of it all is that these young men and women have succeeded in receding their lifelines, and their lifetimes have been packed with white lies and crimes. Time moves fast when you want to shine, but the grime on the streets clogs their minds with anthems of defeat. These seeds of trees that have sprouted weeds and no pesticide can control them.

When Tynela first shared this piece in rehearsal, the feeling of shared experience among the ensemble was palpable and continued to be each time she performed it.

Here is an excerpt from my field notes during an early August rehearsal:

[Mercedes mouths the words again as Tynela runs through her monologue for the second time. Goddess is doing the same. Tyrell

stops texting and stares straight at her, captivated. In fact he only “snaps out it” when he hears the sounds of the other cast members onstage marching. Jerome is also captivated, marking the beat with his hand. He is so caught up in the rhythm of the piece that he nearly misses his entrance. Stopping the action, Juliette asks]:

JULIETTE: What does the phrase “Ghetto Army” mean to you?

JAMILA: Drug dealers. Crack heads.

GODDESS: Black kids struggling. Every day is a struggle. Every day is a fight. [Everyone nods.]

TYNELA: Yeah, basically. (2 Aug. 2006)

The group’s collective identification as fighters was interpreted in the light of each ensemble members’ own experience and purpose, and as a symbol also offered a degree of versatility. In the beginning of the play this identification represented a rejection of society, but by the end came to signify intervention for the purpose of positive social change.

Juliette worked with Jamila to choreograph Tynela’s monologue as a militant step routine among the female ensemble members, furthering drawing emphasis to this symbolism. Stepping is a popular performance tradition that has origins in a combination of military close-order and exhibition drill, and later became popular among African-American sororities and fraternities. It has received little formal study and is largely passed down by word of mouth and body (Fine 39). Scholar Elizabeth C. Fine writes: “This popular performance event, and ritual, involves various forms of dancing, singing, chanting, speaking,

and draws from African-American folk traditions and communication patterns as well as from material from popular culture”(39). Incorporating step enabled the ensemble to further locate points of connection and shared knowledge through the “interpretative and dramatic realms of rhythm, gesture and movement” (Gaunt 5). In her book, The Games Black Girls Play, Kyra D. Gaunt argues that through “kinetic-orality”—or embodied musical practices, gestures and formulas like step—African Americans encode, reproduce and transmit a background of relatedness to one another, uncovering what she calls “a ‘somatic historiography’ of black musical style that captures the social memory of community in new ways” (4).³³

In rehearsals for this monologue, there was an undeniable sense of solidarity and belonging among the girls when they stepped. It also was one of the few times that Juliette fully handed over the blocking to the ensemble, admitting from the outset that she didn’t grow up stepping and didn’t have an embodied knowledge of how to do it “authentically.” While the girls had varying degrees of experience with it themselves, it was a common physical vocabulary for all of them. Jamila, the most skilled in it, took on the responsibility of coaching the other girls under Juliette’s direction. These rehearsals were the only times that I saw Jamila fully focused, energetic and engaged (field notes, 19 July 2006). If a girl missed a step, she would make them start from the beginning, calling “action”

³³ Gaunt bases her argument on an examination of how black music styles are incorporated into the earliest games that African American girls learn (e.g. hand-clapping games, cheers and double-dutch) and how these games in effect reflect and inspire black popular music-making.

and counting out “five, six, seven, eight,” in a military voice. Each of these rehearsals for the girls was a practice of learning how to combine their variations of musical style, personality and personal experience into a collective performance. The challenge was at first compounded by the fact that both Tynela and Jamila were outsiders to the group, and still not fully trusted to understand the ensemble’s real life stories. Juliette was clear with the original ensemble that summer that the understudies were being invited to help them put on *their* show (field notes, 28 June 2006). But some feared that the new members could never give testimony to an original cast member’s story and authentically transfer its meaning to the audience. “When this is your real story and it comes from your heart, nobody can act that out,” noted Denise (field notes 28 June 2006). But step rehearsals seemed to be one of the few times in the process when I actively saw the group renegotiating its boundaries as a community to make room for Tynela and Jamila. This is another example of how Find Your Light’s internal process relates to a broader strategy of community building. In this case, cultural performance is used to transfer and adapt social codes and memories that cut across individual differences to communicate a sense of solidarity, as well as mark a broader community movement.

The step routine demanded uniformity of voice and movement, but it also called into being an embodied discourse of black musical expression that all of the girls could inhabit. It gave them a physical vocabulary through which to understand and communicate with each other. If someone was “off step,” they

stomped harder until whoever was struggling found their way back. In July, I wrote this in my field notes:

Juliette turns off the lights and all you can hear is the sound of marching feet and Juget's voice, building in strength and intensity. The beats fill the room until you feel surrounded. It's as if you are at once being attacked by this army and at the same time being made part of it (field notes, 19 July 2006).

During my last interview with the ensemble, Goddess remarked that Tynela's piece was one of the most memorable moments of the production for her. "Every time I would get something new out of it and I would fuck up my stepping because I was listening to what she was saying" (group interview, 28 Aug. 2006).

Coaching a Repertoire of Response

Beyond helping the ensemble create a shared symbolic repertoire, Juliette also helped individual members develop new ways of responding to triggers that were inhibiting their cultural agency in terms of their personal ability to perceive themselves as viable shapers of their communities. As noted earlier, the live enunciation of personal triggers in rehearsal became the vehicle through which the ensemble began to generate a structure of feeling that bound them together as a temporary community. But these triggers did not always provoke responses that were socially and psychologically healthy in changing situational dynamics. Recurring violence in many of the ensemble members' lives and neighborhoods was often met with anger, avoidance or shutting down on their part.

This was evident every time I watched Jamila perform her monologue about her brother's murder at the age of thirteen by a drive-by shooting. In the monologue, she asserts she is "pissed" but feels she can't do anything about it. She raced through her lines every time she told the story, swinging her arms rapidly back and forth and looking away, similar to the way Mercedes delivered her monologue about being taken from her home. She was usually tongue-tied halfway through her piece and nearly out of breath, more focused on getting through the monologue than communicating a purposeful message. I'd seen her perform the same monologue during the Youth Against Violence! Performance Festival, where her voice carried the lines fully and with conviction. But during rehearsals, her voice was monotone and barely audible on most days. During a late July rehearsal, three weeks before Find Your Light's opening performance at the Fringe Festival, Juliette stopped Jamila and asked her how she felt. Jamila said she had nothing to say.

JULIETTE: I need you to stop hiding behind that statement and tell me what you feel.

JAMILA: I don't want to share anything.

JULIETTE: You're going to have to break through that.

JAMILA: I don't like sharing my feelings. I don't know how. It always comes out the wrong way. (field notes, 25 July 2006)

At the age of fourteen, Jamila was overweight and suffered from diabetes. It was hard to know if her sluggishness was because she was checking out or not feeling well, or both. There were certainly moments throughout rehearsal where she was

very playful but most days she seemed to be carrying the burden of the world on her shoulders. Like many of the Find Your Light members, Jamila had little trouble performing anger. But in moments like this, when she was being asked to connect with a personal moment of pain, or her “bottom drawer” as Juliette called it, she would shut down completely. Not because she *couldn't* feel, but because she didn't know *how* to express her feelings in ways that felt generative or received by others even at the urging of her fellow ensemble members. Jamila's cousin, Goddess, would stand beside Jamila during her monologue at times, holding down her arms from swinging in order to help her focus her energy. She and Juliette, as well as the other ensemble members, were always encouraging Jamila. But in addition to encouragement, Jamila needed “tools” and practice to learn how to commit emotionally to the telling of her story in a public way.

As noted earlier, community-based theater practice assumes creativity and cultural richness in all of its participants and actively works to draw those personal stories and skills out as means of contributing to a larger community dialogue. But as Jamila's story shows, community members, whether in a theater program like Jamila or in the context of a larger community building process, may have the desire to share their stories and assets but initially may not know how to do so without sustained coaching and mentorship. In Jamila's case, cultural agency in terms of her personal ability to use creative practice to think of herself as a positive contributor to community was not something that she could just will herself to do but rather was something that had to be learned and practiced.

Freeing Up New Possibilities for Personal Voice and Action

A critical way Find Your Light intervenes in the lives of ensemble members like Jamila and provides those tools is by rehearsing with each ensemble member's personal triggers to de-mechanize his/her personal and habitual reactions to pain and coach an expanded repertoire of individual response that they can hopefully draw upon in situations beyond the Find Your Light experience.³⁴ This process begins with one-on-one monologue work and then translates into larger group scenes. While not directly inspired by Boal, the process is similar to his focus on the de-mechanization of the body in *Theatre of the Oppressed* (Games, 41). Boal writes:

[T]o control the means of theatrical production man must, first of all, control his own body, making it more expressive. Then he will be able to practice theatrical forms in which by stages he frees himself from his condition of spectator and takes on that of actor, in which he ceases to be an object and becomes a subject (Theatre of the Oppressed 125).

Through a variety of games and exercises, Boal takes what he calls, "spect-actors," through a process of "muscular alienation" that is meant to force a critical awareness of how the body moves in habitual ways and effectively reproduces

³⁴ Vocal training during the Find Your Light process was intended to further develop and support the ensemble's repertoire of response and help the group intentionally communicate their messages in ways that would intervene with the audience's fundamental beliefs about youth and violence, akin to J.L.Austin's "speech acts." Unfortunately, this training was completely lost on the actors whose first exposure to it came only one month prior to their performance.

ideologies and stereotypes through its movement and its relationship to others. He writes that social change “must start with the ‘de-mechanisation’, the re-tuning (or de-tuning) of the [social] actor . . . He must relearn to perceive emotions and sensations he has lost the habit of recognizing” (Games 41). During this process, Boal argues that “the most important thing is that the actors become aware of their muscles, of the enormous variety of movements they *could* make” (42). It is his belief that only by becoming critically aware of our role as social actors—and aware of how our worldviews are mnemonically embodied, as well as mentally inscribed—can we begin to question the social construction of our bodies and work towards making them newly expressive and capable of rehearsing plans for change. Through a series of muscular, emotional, sensory, and imaginative exercises, Boal aims “to reconnect memory, emotion, and imagination” as generative forces (161). He writes: “We want to experience phenomena, but above all we want to know the laws which govern these phenomena. And that is the role of art –not only to show how the world is, but also why it is thus and how it can be transformed” (47).

Juliette used the ensembles’ personal triggers as a strategy towards de-mechanization but with mixed results. Time and time again, she would get an ensemble member to experiment with a range of feelings and responses only to see them falling into old habits at the next rehearsal. This is most clearly illustrated in her rehearsal with Tyrell two weeks prior to the Fringe Festival. Tyrell, like his character Jean in the play, is a confident, articulate and “poetic high school student” who is friends with the tough crowd but also knows when to

call it quits. In real life, Tyrell's 'coolness' often masks a deeper pain and anger connected to his father's suicide and his responsibility for raising his siblings while his mother worked to support them. His monologue comes at a moment in the play when the students are getting reprimanded by their English teacher, Mr. Armstrong, for scoring low on their final test. Mr. Armstrong— a caricature-like representation of a white teacher completely disconnected from the realities of his students— is losing control of the class and lamenting the fact that he has received a Ph.D. only to “teach culture to a bunch of uncultured children” (Understand To Be Understood). But he takes a moment to tell Jean—one of the few students who scored well on the test—that he misjudged him: “You’re not really who I expected you to be.”

There is a long pause before Tyrell begins. He stands center stage, his hand to his chin, and then drops both arms to his sides, swinging them nervously. “I’m just trying to let it boil up,” he tells Juliette after a minute or so. He pauses for another thirty seconds, raising his hand back to his chin, then dropping it down suddenly and finally moving downstage to address the audience (and reveal the personal story that informs this moment in the play):

Wow, I really can’t believe this. Does *anybody* think I could do good? I had to be a real idiot to believe they were any different. I gotta deal with bullshit at home and now my place of peace? Yeah it’s crazy to believe school is a place of peace for me, but when you’re at a home such as mines school is a saving grace. At school it’s like I feel strong and powerful, I control me and my actions, no

one is passing judgment or know what life is really like for me. However I'm looking at these teachers everyday who, in the big run when you think about it, are going to be my guidance through life with all the lessons I've learned from them. I felt special that day they invited me to have lunch with them, it's like they looked at me as one of their equals. But the remarks like Mr. Armstrong just made and a little while back Mr. Williams and the other five at lunch, nearly shot down my motivation completely. "Oh Jean, man when I first saw you with your hat tilted to the side and that cocky, arrogant smile . . . I thought you was just another soon-to-be flirt in my class with no respect for authority and was going to be constantly late or not hand in any work. However I was wrong. I like the young man that you are." At that moment I wanted to spit in his food and just start kicking all their asses for misleading me to believe they perceived me as different. From that day on it was like it didn't matter whether I was at home or in school; society would always perceive me as a nobody first and see me as a somebody later. (Field notes, 4 Aug. 2006)

Throughout his monologue, Tyrell projects well but performs with little nuance or openness. Like many of the ensemble members, his first run through of the day feels uniformly angry, righteous and proud. Tyrell was aware of how he had been habituated to respond in this fashion. In an earlier interview with me, he admitted that in order to bring their script to life, so to speak, "everyone had to get out of

their shells” (18 July 2006). “To send a message out,” he said, “everybody has to overcome their fear of looking silly on stage and being out of their own character and in tune with a deeper character.” But understanding habits and changing them are not one and the same.

The Fringe Festival was only two weeks away and Juliette was still working with Tyrell to connect with his bottom drawer and practice new ways of responding to moments when he feels disregarded based on others’ false assumptions and negative stereotypes.

JULIETTE: How did that feel?

TYRELL: Awkward

JULIETTE: How did it feel when that got said that day? Let’s go through it. . . .

TYRELL: I succumb to it. I never think about it.

JULIETTE: In this monologue, you’re not accepting it. In this monologue, you’re thinking about it.

TYRELL: If I was to allow myself to think about it and let it bother me there would be a whole lot of movement.

JULIETTE: Okay, I’m fine with that . . .

Tyrell begins the monologue again, this time starting out much softer and with a subtle, more thoughtful tone to his delivery. But he quickly reassumes a righteous, disassociated tone about a quarter of the way through. His body doesn’t move much at all. Juliette quickly interrupts him, noting that the last line of his monologue sums up the show in her opinion.

JULIETTE: You have to feel this monologue and that line has to go out of your mouth and just ‘bam’, from your bottom drawer, it just has to fly out and just [hits the palm with her fist, indicating the impact she wants it to make on the audience].

Tyrell takes a very long pause and then begins again, this time with a remarkably different softness and stillness in his delivery, as though he is feeling everything again for the first time: the weight of the teacher’s words, the loss of his idealism.

As an observer who was participating in all rehearsals, had interviewed Tyrell and begun to understand the ways that he (and the other ensemble members) had learned to mask their disappointment and pain, as well as their desires and dreams, with anger and in some cases apathy, I felt myself understanding in a more personal way the crime Tyrell’s role models committed through their language and assumptions. At the time of this study, Tyrell was enrolled in Lehman College, still balancing school, rehearsal, a part-time job and family responsibilities. As he noted in his monologue, high school had been his “place of peace” and he had looked to his teachers as life-long mentors. Tyrell was more than someone who “made it” against the odds; he was setting the bar in my opinion and had enormous potential to contribute to his community as well as inspire his teachers and peers. Tyrell’s instinct during this incident was to “spit in [the teachers] food and start kicking their asses,” but something restrained him. I can’t help thinking about other motivated youth like Tyrell who have just as much to offer their communities but *didn’t* restrain their impulses and whose actions are then cited as “proof” by those with more power (e.g. teachers, principals, bosses,

the media) that black urban youth are violent or don't care about school. What are the vehicles for those youth to tell their side of the story? Without the tools and opportunities, do they give up or keep going without thinking that they can be agents of change?

Tyrell's voice cracks when he starts to speak the teacher's words. "Ah!" breaking his concentration, "sorry."

JULIETTE: That's okay. What you're tapping into is a lot. I've never seen you break and really feel that pain. I know it's going to take a lot. I know what your life has been like . . . I know you've had a really tough time [her voice cracks] and you're saying it in this monologue.

TYRELL: I haven't cried in like six years. I don't even know what it feels like anymore.

In this rehearsal, it is evident that Tyrell began not only to allow himself to explore different emotions in response to Juliette's coaching but also to acknowledge that he had been habituated not to feel them at all, and therefore not to use them in a generative way. This acknowledgement was a critical step towards his ability to think of himself as someone who can shape, rather than simply accept, the conditions of his community and individual life. But when Tyrell rehearsed this monologue again five days later, he was outwardly focused, angry and monotone. "On Friday, you were having a *conversation* with us," said Juliette to him, "But now you've lost that feeling" (field notes, 9 Aug. 2006). Without Juliette's encouragement, it is unclear whether the youth would continue

to experiment with new ways of interacting and communicating beyond the Find Your Light experience.

Most ensemble members, like Tyrell, were just beginning to think critically about triggers and practice different ways of responding even though this was the second summer that they had performed Understand To Be Understood, and the third summer together working as a group. Like Tyrell it often took an actor three or four runs of her monologue before she would begin expressing a range of feelings despite the fact she'd gone through the same process only days earlier. On numerous occasions, I wrote in my field notes that it felt like a tautly drawn thread connected Juliette and each ensemble member during monologue work, providing them a lifeline of energy and support. When coaching monologues, she was always standing right off to the side, pacing a bit or squatting down ready to spring up at any moment to offer encouragement or push the actor to commit fully to the next beat. She was on a precipice with them, aware that if her energy slipped, they too would fall. Jamila admitted that Juliette's physical proximity onstage and high expectations were what enabled her to open up and strive to get her message across during performances:

I kept thinking I was going to fall or I was going to forget my lines. And every rehearsal, I would look at Juliette in the booth [at the back of the theater] . . . and she would be doing this [imitates Juliette with her hand over her mouth and nose, elbow resting on a ledge, staring out intensely]. And I was like, I can't see her face so I can't tell if she's happy with the performance or not. So I kept

doing it harder and harder and then, I don't know. [Breathes out heavily]. (group interview, 28 Aug. 2006)

Jamila's admission that she worked harder and harder to communicate in a new way to ensure that *Juliette* was happy suggests that her testimony was still a personal testimony and had not yet crossed over into the space of performance protest where she felt ownership of and responsibility to the ensemble's collective story and message, or fully accepted her story as symbolic of a larger societal issue.

Understanding that Jamila, like most of the Find Your Light members were new to performance and in many cases telling their stories publicly for the first (or second) time, Juliette's intent as a facilitator was to be their safety net (emotionally, energetically and logistically) throughout the entire production process. During previous summers and during the performance of Understand To Be Understood at the Youth Against Violence! Performance Festival, she stayed backstage with the youth during their shows to offer emotional support, encouragement and reminders about when to enter the stage, for example. The ensemble was used to Juliette literally being right by their side. But the unintended effect of Juliette always taking responsibility for making sure the story was told with commitment and clarity, and that the youth stuck to their blocking, was that it created a sense of dependency on her. Conditions of ownership in community-based youth theater can be created when facilitators gradually shift these responsibilities to the youth and require them to become accountable to each

other early on in the process, as well as to their imagined audiences to whom they are trying to engage or affect in some purposefully way.

However during the summer of 2006, Juliette's primary focus was still on using artistic practices internally to create the conditions for youth to realize themselves as individual subjects with the power to shape and re-shape the conditions of their lives. It did not focus as much time on fostering the youths "political revelations" about their personal stories, as Suzanne Lacy calls them (qtd. in Cruz, "Redefining the Private" 111), or using aspects of their culture to take action in the community. Helping the youth to understand how to operate not only in terms of their personal narrative but also "as symbols for a culture with political impact" may have shifted Jamila's focus from pleasing Juliette to communicating the broader socio-political message of the play to her audience (110). But given the limited rehearsal time she had leading up to the Fringe Festival and understanding where the youth were coming from, Juliette may have been right to adopt the approach she did: focusing more on fostering their cultural agency by teaching them "tools" for communicating and acting in generative ways rather than focusing on developing them as cultural agents ready to take action in their communities (although that was still Juliette's ultimate goal). While the two strategies can happen simultaneously, Juliette chose to work on a personal level with the youth first and gradually move towards action externally.

Why Coaching Didn't Always Work

Still Juliette's efforts to intervene personally were not always successful, as was evidenced by the shifting nature of the youths' abilities (or willingness) to

sustain an expanded repertoire of personal response from one rehearsal to the next. I feel this was in part because Juliette was still concentrated on using these triggers to help the youth get their message *out*, rather than promoting a process of dialogue, critical reflection and problem posing. The latter process could have helped the young people analyze their personal trauma within a social context within their group, and practice (if only in the imaginary context of rehearsals) speaking across discourses to negotiate with those in power. They could thereby have worked on building strategic and supportive partnerships and engaging civically with an eye toward long-term social change.

Critical theorists like Henry Giroux and others (i.e. Augusto Boal; Paulo Freire; and bell hooks) have all developed methodologies of resistance which promote education and civic participation as liberatory practices. The main goal of critical pedagogy and practice is to accommodate “the language forms, types of presentation, modes of reasoning, and cultural practices that have meaning for students” (Fitzclarence and Giroux qtd. in Fine, 6) but *also* “to elicit interrogation . . . and the exchange of discourse” (81) that enables ensemble members to “uncover and understand the way a person’s life experiences and larger community circumstances influence ideas and behavior” and move past these quick judgments and habituated responses (Wiley 131). Find Your Light did not critically engage with the public, adults, or various cross-section groups with whom they wished to intervene to address misperceptions, look at root causes of social problems, or examine how these root causes not only affected them, but also the broader civic society in which they are a part. Nor did Juliette build time

into rehearsals for critical praxis because so much of her energy was focused on producing a great production for the Fringe Festival in a short amount of time.

Another reason why Juliette's use of personal triggers became an unsustainable way to expand the actors' repertoires of response was that she didn't take into account the shifting nature of adolescent identity. "The process of committing oneself to an identity has been understood by American social scientists as central to adolescence," writes adolescent psychologist Niobe Way. "Adolescents resolve the question, "Who am I?" by actively exploring alternatives and making personal commitments to the domains of occupations, values, beliefs, and sexual activities and orientations" (3). This process is both fluid and contextual, Way notes, and can be quickly restricted or enabled by evolving economic, political, cultural, environmental, school, family, and neighborhood conditions which in turn affect how adolescents make meaning of themselves and of their environment. Goddess, Tyrell and Daryl all admitted during their personal interviews that they didn't feel as connected to their characters in the play as they had the summer before. While Juliette was open to the youth making revisions to their monologues for the remount of Understand To Be Understood in 2006, the play structure and concepts for production were fairly set from the beginning, and time was not specifically set aside in rehearsals for revisions. What Juliette sometimes interpreted as the youths' resistance or unwillingness to "open up" during rehearsals, may simply have been disinterest in telling a story that answered the question, "Who am I?," the year prior, but missed the mark for some that summer. In terms of community-based youth theatre

programs using artistic practices to help youth think of themselves as change agents and create change in their cultural locations, the youths' connection to and desire to tell the story is as important as the story being told.

Theatricalizing Reality

Employing performance strategies akin to agitprop and Brechtian alienation effect was a third way Find Your Light intervened, in this case for the purpose of drawing the youth and audience's attention to the constructed nature of teens "at risk." Unlike other models of community-based youth theater where adults facilitate and mentor youth but expect them to make most of the aesthetic decisions, Juliette served as a traditional director throughout most of the process, shaping the final script and blocking the actors in all of their scenes with the exception of the step routine. As Tyrell said numerous times to me: "We provided her with the colors [i.e. stories] and she did the painting." This approach was a departure from the previous two summers in which Juliette focused mostly on the writing process and allowed the youth to simply present monologues and scenes as they liked. In her final interview with me after Understand To Be Understood closed, Juliette explained, "In previous summers it's always been very straight up because we didn't have time to put a visual finesse on it" (personal interview). According to Rob, the "visual finesse" and frame (i.e. violence in schools) that Juliette gave to the piece made the youths' stories more accessible to a broader audience of non-intimates (personal interview). It also raised the stakes. "It was definitely a lot more stressful, professional-type process for Juliette and for everyone involved," Rob noted, "It was an actual production now. It wasn't like

let's do this for co-workers, family members, and friends. We're actually trying to get people [to respond]."

Juliette's approach to getting people (i.e. white, middle-class audiences) to respond critically was to exaggerate stereotypes of poor urban youth of color that the ensemble cited as damaging, and then build in theatrical moments of reflexivity that would not only contradict those dominant images but force a moment of crisis for the audience. An excess of representation has the potential to enunciate difference as a means of opposing the status quo, as seen in agitprop theater, or of making room for cultural exchange, reinterpretation, and dialogue, as seen in the postmodern approach of performance artist Guillermo Gomez-Pena and others. During an early July rehearsal, Juliette explains to the cast, "I want you guys to ruin the stereotypes for the people coming to this show so they can see you as real people. Yes, there is violence [in your neighborhoods], but why? Why does it happen and why does it continue to happen? We want people to leave thinking, "What can we do to help?" (Field notes, 11 July 2006).

Bounded by an objectifying discourse, adolescents—especially those deemed "at-risk"—lose their own power to signify, to negate, and to establish their own oppositional discourse. Within this paradigm, their identities remain epistemological objects, readily mastered by those in power. And yet, this very act of containment reveals the presence of an underlying belief in youth as subjects. Implicit in the rhetoric of "teens at risk" is the notion of adolescence as a site of desire and fear that *needs* to be controlled by dominant society. These desires and fears are products of misunderstandings and strategies of control. But

in their attempt to distance and fix youth as an easily manipulated category, they also are signs of dominant society's dialectical relationship with them. By acknowledging these anxieties, those with decision-making power must acknowledge the fact that adolescents, as Others, have the power to affect culture as much as culture has the power to affect them.

Post-colonialist theorist, Homi Bhabha argues that “it is the very nature of this partial or anomalous presence [of the Other] which highlights the instability and split nature of its construction” (235). To this end, Bhabha argues that social change can only come about when perceived differences are enunciated, not ignored. He posits that, through enunciation, the Other reveals itself as an agent of articulation with the “power to signify, construct, and know,” thereby unmasking “the structure of meaning and reference as an ambivalent process.” According to Bhabha, this process of enunciation—what he calls, the “Third Space”—is “the cutting edge of translation and negotiation, the in-between space that carries the burden of the meaning of culture” (38). By positioning youth in what Victor Turner describes as a transitional or “liminal” space between normative structure and symbolic play, *Find Your Light*—and *viBeStages* and *IYE*—become these “third spaces” of enunciation through which cultural meanings can be experimented with and shaped by the participants.

In rehearsals, Juliette constructed a binary between the youth and broader society, trying to get the ensemble to mobilize and play up stereotypes of poor, black urban youth as violent and apathetic that their audiences would have likely been conditioned to buy into. According to Paul Connerton, culture “lives” in our

unconscious memories as a system of classification which we access in three ways: through cognitive processes (i.e. semantics, and verbal/visual cues), personal processes, and habitual processes (72). By at first re-presenting, and emphasizing, cultural narratives about urban youth who don't care about their futures and therefore seem destined for failure and/or violent outcomes, Juliette assumes she will activate audiences' deeply embedded prejudices—in most cases without them even knowing it. Religion scholar Roger G. Betsworth defines “cultural narrative”:

Through narrative, cultural communities communicate, perpetuate, and develop knowledge about and attitudes toward life . . . a cultural narrative is not directly told. The culture itself seems to be telling the cultural narrative . . . We come to awareness as human beings in the midst of communities where language, metaphors, and stories already articulate, clarify, and establish our sense of self and world (15).

Similarly Connerton argues that certain cultural codes and the cultural narratives they reference continue to be remembered and played out in society in a seemingly facile and perfunctory way *because* they are already embedded in the systems that inform who we are in the midst of our becoming.

The culture narrative that Juliette exaggerated with the intention of exposing its construction was “Poor Urban Youth as Dangerous Members of Society.” As Juliette noted numerous times in rehearsals, the story of poor urban youth, usually of color, that fall inevitably into violence or despair is pervasive in

popular culture. It also is pervasive within the discourse of adolescent psychology (Way) and urban redevelopment (Valentine), where teens are often considerable dangerous threats to “public space.”³⁵ In Understand To Be Understood, Juliette builds on this popular discourse, and the youths’ writing, by representing the public school where the story takes place as a maximum security prison, designed to protect the adult teachers and other “good” students from potentially violent, poor, students of color. “Do you know how many people I know who teach in your schools and are scared of you? Let’s scare them,” says Juliette to the cast before they take their places during a mid-July rehearsal (Field notes, 12 July 2006). What Juliette aimed to do by exaggerating youth stereotypes and then “flipping the script” to reveal their construction was effective from my point of view as an adult audience member who has studied theater. But it was not always understood or well received by the youth who lacked representational authority through much of the staging and conceptual phases of the production process and feared that her direction was reinforcing a negative cultural narrative.

At the beginning of the production, Tyrell and Tynela’s characters share stories of their typical mornings before school while the rest of the cast is

³⁵ Urban geographer Gill Valentine argues that while there is increased public concern about the welfare of children and youth, there is also increased popular concern about the “violence and unruliness of older children in public places.” She examines how public space has been constructed as “naturally” adult space that is being “disrupted by teenagers, who are provoking anxieties among adults concerning their continued ability to regulate the activities of the young and therefore maintain their spatial hegemony” (<http://bellwether.metapress.com/content/j8071774465255w1/>). Valentine questions whether the streets can be called public if their maintenance requires the exclusion of older youth.

illuminated behind a large scrim upstage, moving slowly down a security line. Their silhouettes appear larger than life, as they tediously remove jewelry, shoes, cell phones, backpacks and other objects to be patted down and frisked by a security guard wielding a baton. The movement is choreographed to look like a machine systematically reducing their presence on stage.

Once inside we get a glimpse of the “reality” of Dangerous Urban Youth as it is popularly conceived. Students who seemingly don’t care about their grades, and consequently their futures, enter their classroom talking loudly, cursing, throwing paper airplanes, ignoring their teacher. And later in the cafeteria, a scene inspired by Juliette’s recollection of classic prison movies like One Flew Over the Cuckoos Nest and Papillon, we see a clear divide between the “good” students and the “dangerous” students who steal focus and dominate the space. The dangerous students are students from low-income neighborhoods, “shelter kids,” etc. These students are gambling, doing drugs on the sly, gossiping on their cell phones, and disrupting the peace while the “good” kids are dancing, talking, and trying to study.

It’s in the cafeteria that character P Killa instigates the fight with Dennis that in turn ends P Killa’s life. There are no adult characters in this scene. No one is protecting Dennis from the seemingly “natural law” of urban youth turning violent at the flip of a switch. The fight scene between Dennis and P Killa’s gang that Juliette choreographs with the help of a professional fight choreographer is highly stylized but gruesomely violent and calculated. Dennis is surrounded by the faceless hooded figures from the opening scene who march around him like

predators stalking their prey only to finally bear down on his head with pillowcases full of rocks and soda cans. As the final climactic moment in the play, this scene at first seems to indicate that no matter how many protections we build against them, these youth cannot be saved from themselves nor stopped from harming other “innocents.”

Juliette’s direction holds out a carrot stick out to audiences inviting them to follow down deeply ingrained pathways of cultural assumption only then to trap them in their steps, turning the mirror around to force a moment of critical rupture. Throughout the production, she uses performance techniques akin to Brechtian alienation effect and Boal’s Forum Theatre to stimulate this process of reflexivity. Breaking the fourth wall, the youths’ monologues interrupt group scenes where the personal experiences of poor, urban youth of color are reduced to exaggerated stereotypes. These monologues are delivered directly to the audience without any theatrical effects and typically alone with rest of the cast frozen or having left the stage. The monologues themselves are tied to the characters in the play but each has its unique style and tone, reflective of the actor who wrote it and their unique experience. The youth are at once actors in the world and fictional characters playing roles. Understand To Be Understood draws attention to this doubleness by positioning the youths’ monologues throughout the play as personal commentary on the larger group scenes—which include brutal fight scenes, youth gossiping and youth disrespecting authority described in more detail in the next section—which flatten their personal and nuanced experiences

as individual youth into the Poor Urban Youth as Dangerous Members of Society narrative.

The clearest example of how Understand To Be Understood created a visible separation between the actors and their constructed and exaggerated characters occurs at the end of the play when the full cast “testifies” individually as witnesses to P Killa’s murder and the cycle of violence it represents. One by one each actor steps forward as their character, or themselves, and speaks directly to the audience, as “judge,” sharing their responses to the incident which collectively ranged from surprise, anger, numbness, activism, and remorse. They cast also asks the audience questions they’ve been asking each other in rehearsals over the course of the play’s development. Questions like:

- Do metal detectors know when someone is going to give up?
- Why do we have to go through this bullshit if we’re not really protected?
- Should I bring a weapon to school to protect myself?
- We see only what’s right in front of us: murder, death, survival, wealth. So how can we fight something that we cannot see (the murder of our souls)?
- Is this all that I’m meant to see in this world? Am I somewhat abnormal for not having any emotional reaction to what just took place? Or am I like an animal who simply adapts to his environment?

- Why do I feel empty inside? Why the hell did I let it get this far? (Understand To Be Understood)

The play ends with P Killa insisting to the audience that everything they saw in the play was real: “I’m not here to preach to you all cuz you’ve all heard it before. My friends and I just wanted to give you some type of visual of it all. I hope we all learned something today. You must listen and understand before being understood.” The actors then say their real names and the names of the high schools they attend (or attended when they wrote the play), leaving the audience with a strong impression of the as/is of their performance that momentarily keeps them from fitting the youths’ experiences back into the Poor Urban Youth as Dangerous Members of Society narrative. According to Taylor, the friction between social actor and constructed self “introduces a generative critical distance . . . [which] more fully allows [the spect-actor] to keep both the social actor and the role in view simultaneously, and thus to recognize the areas of resistance and tension” (The Archive and the Repertoire 30). “No longer are you only seeing these kids tell their story through the play . . . you can [now] envision, ‘wow, these kids actually see this stuff every day . . . a stabbing, a gunshot, a beating . . . it leaves your imagination wanting to know more about the individual kids,” said Billy, a artist-teacher who stepped in to play the role of the teacher in the play (personal interview).

Find Your Light members never had an actual conversation off stage with their audiences or with those adults in the play whom they identify as having power over them, namely their parents, teachers, school administrators and the

security personnel at their schools. But Juliette did craft a scene in collaboration with the ensemble that enabled the youth to imagine how they *might* intervene by opening up a dialogue with those in power rather than resisting them. Nichole's character, Ebony, is late for school and getting reprimanded for it by the security guard on duty. Ebony is a hard working student living in a shelter who makes honor roll every semester. But all the security guard sees is another student who "ain't nothing" and "ain't ever gonna be." At first Ebony tries to resist by going through the metal detector without taking off her sneakers, jewelry and other effects. But this only serves to escalate the situation and results in extra security being called in. Trying to keep her composure, Ebony switches tactics, and asks the security guard why she said that Ebony will never amount to anything. "Do you know how many times people tell me that and all I'm trying to do is the right thing?," she says, "I love school. There's a world out there. And I'm tryin' so hard to learn how to be a part of it, I really want to make it out there, but people like you keep tellin' me that I'm not. And I just want to know why" (Understand To Be Understood). Ebony's honesty makes the security guard soften and opens up room for Ebony to share her story and in turn for the security guard to share her history of losing a brother to violence and losing her dream of becoming a cop due to poor health. At the end of the scene, the two are about to shake hands when the lighting switches and the audience realizes the entire conversation was imagined not real.

Similar to Boal's Forum Theatre which was conceived as a rehearsal for revolution, this scene was written and staged to help ensemble members and their

audiences “unlearn” oppressive scenarios similar to it by enunciating tensions and illuminating possible solutions. Boal writes: “Theatre is conflict, struggle, movement, transformation, not simply the exhibition of states of mind. It is a verb, not an adjective. To act is to produce action” (Games 50). Rather than accepting these scenarios as the status quo, Find Your Light confronts them publicly with the hope of heightening audiences’ awareness of these ethical engagements and planting seeds of change. As I explain in more detail in the next section, the youth did not identify with the Dangerous Urban Youth narrative that played out in the play script and there was visible friction between how they represented themselves in their monologues—in which they talked about taking care of family members, striving to make something of themselves, desiring connection with others, etc.—and how they were represented in larger group scenes as violent and disrespectful youth.

Tensions between Actor and Character

While the ensemble was proud of their script and its message, they battled with Juliette over how their lives were represented on stage beyond their monologues. The youths’ monologues were entirely written by them. But Juliette ultimately shaped the rest of the play script and incorporated their monologues as commentary on various scenes. The youth felt ownership over their monologues because they were moments when they felt like they were telling their own personal stories, even though they were playing a fictional character. But the youth consistently objected to having to play out, and exaggerate, the stereotypes coded within the Poor Urban Youth as Dangerous Members of Society narrative

which most of the rest of the play script represented and felt uncomfortable re-enacting violence on stage. The beginning of their discomfort was evident from the ensemble's second rehearsal (field notes, 11 July 2006) when Juliette revealed her school as prison metaphor and began staging the cafeteria scene. Juliette begins by asking the ensemble to show her what a cafeteria is like. "What we would personally be doing or what the characters would be doing?" asks Tyrell, aware that the piece was a combination of true story and fictionalized or semi-fictionalized accounts of their community identity. Before Juliette can answer, Tynela's mom, who was observing one of Tynela's first rehearsals with Find Your Light to understand the program better, chimes in, "Sometimes they fight," anticipating the answer she thought Juliette wanted to hear. Juliette immediately affirms this response and then asks the ensemble if teens also do drugs in the cafeteria. Jerome who had been sitting down quietly across the room shouts out, "Hell, no!" But Juliette doesn't acknowledge the response, and instead continues to provoke the responses she desires. Under his breath, Jerome whispers, "Don't make it seem like..." This thought is cut off short as the group begins to debate what happens and does not happen in their schools.³⁶

This is when Juliette intervenes and explains *her* vision for the play, which is out of step with what the ensemble members have been saying their schools are actually like. For example, Juliette at one point asks the girls what

³⁶ On the first rehearsal, Jerome was very interested to know if my study was going to be a "good" portrayal or something that told everyone how "bad these kids are." He was anxious about the latter, cognizant that this is how he and his peers are typically portrayed in popular media, the news, etc.

they do when a fight breaks out at school. “I know Mercedes gets in close,” says Juliette based on stories Mercedes has shared with the group in the past. But Jamila immediately admits that she simply finds a security guard and reports it. “I honestly do,” she says unabashed, but knowing this probably isn’t the coolest thing to say. “So there’s no circle thing that happens?” says Juliette, obviously not getting the response she wants. The ensemble is quiet, staring blankly at her. Juliette shares that when she was their age, she used to get up close. “Any ladies with me on this?” she asks, sounding a little desperate. No one responds. Finally, one of the understudies that had to leave the production due to another commitment, tells her, “No circle forms until the fight breaks out. Cause people are *always* arguing, so if they are arguing it’s like “Ah, whatever.” She gestures with her hand, as if brushing away the incident as inconsequential. Juliette frustrated with what she perceives is lack of input, finally tells the actors what to do in the cafeteria (e.g. gambling, doing drugs, etc.) even though these activities contradict what the youth said was their reality.

A week later in rehearsals, more youth begin to resist to Juliette’s staging of the cafeteria scene (among others). Juliette is trying to get Goddess to imitate a scene akin to many in Hollywood prison films in which the inmates, aware that they are being watched by authorities, find sneaky ways to defy the authorities (field notes, 25 July 2006). In this scene, she wants Goddess to turn her back to the security guard standing in the corner and hold up a makeup mirror to keep watch while her friends use their cell phones and listen to music, all against

school rules. As Juliette moves Goddess into her position on stage, Goddess objects.

GODDESS: “That’s awkward. Why am I doing that?”

JULIETTE: Because they want to use their phones and you’re the person who watches . . .

GODDESS [interrupting]: Oh, come on!

JAMILA: We don’t care who sees.

JULIETTE: Yeah, I’m adding some detail and feel to this. This is in every prison movie. [Sighing] Listen, this is just something I’m doing visually. I know you don’t do this in school.

Juliette and the ensemble go back and forth like this for a few more minutes until Juliette finally takes Goddess’ place to show her how the staging will look.

Goddess is still unconvinced: “I don’t think they’ll get what I’m doing.”

In moments like this one, the ensemble is fighting for a level of authenticity which conflicts with Juliette’s theatrical vision. Juliette gets noticeably frustrated in these moments, interpreting the ensemble’s actions as resistance rather than as a desire to represent their individual “realities.” “I definitely think that ownership of their stories and lives was an issue for them,” said Rob when I asked him about tensions in rehearsals, “Perhaps, they have more courage to express it more [this year], but some of them, from the beginning, were very vocal about “This is how I experience life. Why are you trying to change it this way?” (personal interview).

While certainly some of the original ensemble members did go to “notoriously” violent schools like John F. Kennedy High School in the Bronx and Wadleigh High School, most of the ensemble members did not go to these schools. As Rob said in my interview with him, these were teens that had come from a really bad place in terms of their family’s circumstances to a really good place where they were striving hard to succeed. Similar to their reaction to being labeled “shelter kids,” the youth wanted to distance themselves from negative stereotypes in performance rather than embody them at the risk of reinscribing these stereotypes. In addition often what Juliette imagines these environments to be is disconnected from the youths’ own, more nuanced, experiences of them. To my knowledge she had never been to these schools herself but trusted the youths’ stories about them, and their mythology. While the ensemble admitted that many of their schools were bad (i.e. poor attendance, fighting, low grades, etc.), during rehearsals many like Jerome fear that Juliette’s direction would only further society’s negative assumptions about them—despite her explanations of how her direction was working to deconstruct them.

The cast also put up a great deal of resistance to Juliette’s direction when they were asked to re-present acts of violence—albeit fictional—on stage. There were three fights scenes in the play that were professional choreographed. They are the only moments of physical contact in the play. The first is a “girl fight” between Mercedes’ character Dominique, a tough but popular girl who is ashamed of getting good grades; and Goddess’ character, Charlene, a bookish teen who longs to be popular. The second is the climactic beating of Daryl’s

character, Dennis, by P Killa and his gang. And the third scene is the final scene when Dennis stabs and kills P Killa.

The fight between the characters Charlene and Dominique occurs towards the beginning of the play when the two girls are waiting in line to pass through security. After slinging insults back and forth about who is prettier, smarter and more popular, the two girls fall into a physical altercation that involves hair pulling and a final blow to Dominique's stomach. In most rehearsals the girls have a difficult time getting through the blocking without breaking up laughing. Repeatedly, Goddess stopped the scene saying it feels "awkward." She did this on numerous occasions in other scenes, typically when the blocking doesn't jive with how she would normally behave. Each time this happens before her fight scene, Juliette coached her to tap into feelings of frustration that will help her embody the moment. Goddess in turn superficially tried to psyche herself up, jumping up and down, saying, "Alright, alright," as if she is getting ready for a boxing match.

In one rehearsal, Juliette stops the action and asks the ensemble if girls are like guys when they fight (field notes, 24 July 2006). All of a sudden, the boys, not the girls, are in an uproar, visibly excited to be the first ones to get the first words out and "tell it like it is."

DARYL: Girls are more crazy! Girls are more crazy!

JEROME: The first thing they do is try to embarrass each other and pull her shirt off.

DARYL: Yeah and pull their hair.

The volume goes way up in the room as the male ensemble members imitate *their* version of a typical “girl fight.” The girls, to my surprise, never say a word about what a girl fight actually looks or feels like, despite the fact that most of them have either witnessed or instigated fights in the past. Still the boys’ descriptions are what Juliette uses to embellish the choreography even further.

Goddess and Mercedes are not strangers to fighting. Mercedes admitted in rehearsals and in my interviews with her that she used to take her anger out on others by instigating fights with other girls. And Goddess, while never involved in fight herself (according to her), lost her best friend to gang violence during rehearsals for this play. Still both girls had a difficult time performing violence on stage. For Mercedes, violence was something she was trying to get away from and also something that she disassociated from her Find Your Light Experience, which she said had made her a nicer person and more creative. In a rehearsal with the fight choreographer she accidentally hit Mercedes in the face, sending her to the ground (field notes, 1 August 2006). Her peers responded by running around the room laughing, but Goddess looked emotionally distressed, shaking her head with her hand over her mouth, apologizing repeatedly to Mercedes. From that rehearsal on, she continued to apologize to Mercedes every time they set up for that scene, thereby creating a buffer between her “real” herself and this fictionalized scenario.

The group fight scenes with Dennis and P Killa provoked a similar distancing response from the ensemble during the same rehearsal. In the first scene, Dennis is slugged, dragged, scratched, pulled and kneed in the face and

finally slammed by a bag of full soda cans. In the second, Dennis revenges P Killa by stabbing him to death. As the fight choreographer is working with the cast, he stops himself and asks the cast if his choreography, informed by Juliette's direction, is too violent. The ensemble laughs self-consciously but Juliette immediately says "no." In an effort to get the cast to embody their "gangsta" roles more fully in the scene, Juliette and the choreographer line them up against a wall, put in a CD, and ask them to imitate "gangster killers." "It's like you're in a rap video but you're walking in slow motion," explains the choreographer, who is trying to get them to slow down and commit to their movements, making them more deliberate. "I want what you're doing to become more and more exaggerated, like a cartoon," he says. The ensemble, aware of the stereotypes they are mimicking, fights to hold back laughter.

When the choreographer gets to the second scene where P Killa gets stabbed, he interrupts the ensemble again, frustrated that they're playing the scene so melodramatically. P Killa falls to the ground grabbing his side with a smirk on his face and the rest of the ensemble fakes shock. You can hear giggles under their breaths. The youth are mimicking the violence rather than committing fully to its "truthful" exaggeration. "You people have seen stuff like this right?" asks the choreographer. Everyone cracks up laughing.

TYRELL [facetiously]: I haven't before (runs off laughing)

GODDESS: Oh, shit!

FIGHT CHOREOGRAPHER: Have any of you seen anyone shot or stabbed?

[All but the understudies, Nichole and Tynela, say “yes.”]

GODDESS: My reaction is to run away.

JAMILIA: My reaction is “Oh, shit!” [and runs away too, mocking hysteria]

FIGHT CHOREOGRAPHER: Well, I need to believe your reaction.

I know you guys can do this. Whether its shock or a breath or a scream, I need you to believe.

In a subsequent rehearsal, Juliette is still fighting with the cast to take the P Killa murder scene seriously. “It’s not grabbing me,” Juliette says abruptly stopping them, “Whatever you guys were doing, it’s not working.” “It’s falling apart,” says her assistant. Juliette urges them not to be afraid of embodying violence in the play. She wants to scare the audience, she says, and this scene should be brutal. She asked those ensemble members who have been fights, namely Mercedes, Jerome and Daryl (who was actually stabbed at school in Trinidad), to draw directly from their experiences. But the ensemble continues to look uncomfortable and goof off.

While some of the youth discussed times they’d been in fights, in trouble at school or with the law even, they were uncomfortable playing these roles in the play because these behaviors were associated with identities the youth wanted to shed not re-enact publicly. In some ways, this disconnect goes back to the roots of the program itself when Juliette was trying to fit the youth neatly into categories as shelter youth without understanding the multiple identity locations the each occupied and the shifting nature of those locations. What the original ensemble

members³⁷ said they wanted to achieve through writing and performing Understand To Be Understood was often at odds with what Juliette urged within her vision of the production. The youths' views fell into three general categories: 1) to get audiences to understand adolescents better for their strengths and potential as diverse individuals rather than stereotyping them negatively as "urban youth"; 2) to implicate the audience and get them to understand how they play a role in constructing and perpetuating these false assumptions; 3) to meet friends.

JEROME: I want the audience to leave with an understanding. . . . You don't know unless you've been through it . . . Youth need to know that they need to go to school . . . They need an education. They need to graduate. They need responsibilities. . . . [A]nd people who don't know what kids are going through, it's like listen. Listen to *me* [my emphasis] speak. (Personal interview)

MERCEDES: It's really the adults that we want to make a change. They have more say than us in society. No matter how irresponsible. You know we could be more responsible than them, but because they're over our age they're considered a bigger part in society. [We want] anyone who is willing to listen [to] go and fight for us. (Personal interview)

³⁷ I was unable to interview Jamila due to absences

GODDESS: I want [long pause] everyone who look at Harlem and thinks we're just a bunch of good for nothing black people, or who look at teens in school and think we're just a bunch of loud mouth kids who really don't care, to see that you cannot classify us all as one because we're different. Some of us really do want to make something of ourselves. They're going to see *me*. (Personal interview)

TYRELL: I don't care what kind of audience it is, whether its grown-ups or teenagers, they're all going to get the same message . . . the message is important to me, but on a selfish level I enjoy performing my character. . . . I want to perform my character, that's all. (Field notes, 28 June 2006)

DARYL: I just wanted to meet friends. When I came, I didn't really have that much friends. . . . Me, I don't really think school is all that violent cause [long pause] where I came from [Trinidad] when you was not in class it was violent. [Comparatively, school in Trinidad was a safe haven for Daryl.] (Personal interview).

What struck me about these responses is that the youth all cite a desire to get out "the message," but end with reference to their own personal desire to be heard, to be seen, to shine or to connect with others. Even Mercedes said that while she felt someone else could take her words and perform them, they couldn't understand

the message the same way: “I don’t think anyone but the writer can ever understand [puts her hand to her chest, her voice shaking] how close the part is to their heart, especially when you are writing about true life experiences”(personal interview). When I asked Erica what she thought Find Your Light was about for the youth, she confirmed: “I think more than connecting communities, it’s about their own individual process. Learning about themselves and [realizing] other people are out there” (personal interview).

By giving personal testimony of their experiences and performing their monologues for each other in rehearsals, the youth *did* begin to activate a symbolic repertoire that formed their collective identity as a group of fighters born of survival and enabled the youth to begin to see their own stories as part of a whole painful condition in society. However by not making the script development process more broadly democratic and interactive, Juliette did not enable the youth to analyze and reflect on the symbolic repertoire they’d articulated to get beyond quick judgments and narrow interpretations of their audience or to experiment and practice with how *they* wanted to practice putting their culture to work in ways that would build community internally as well as intervene in the broader community. In addition, all of the original ensemble members were new to theater and specific time was not dedicated to devising scene work or teaching (versus telling) the ensemble how theater techniques can be used to intervene. As a result, the ensemble interpreted Juliette’s direction as potentially damaging to them rather than an opportunity for them to help audiences realize the constructed nature of negative stereotypes and the cultural

narrative of the Poor Urban Youth as a Dangerous Member of Society, or to learn themselves how to use various creative techniques to put their culture to work toward positive social change.

The tension between the original cast members and Juliette escalated ten days before the first performance when Goddess, frustrated that she was not being allowed to ad lib dialogue in a classroom scene, declared she was going to take back control of her show.

JULIETTE: Don't say too much Goddess. It's not in the script.

GODDESS [turned away from Juliette, not making eye contact]:

Yes it is. I added that.

JULIETTE [unbelieving]: It's in our script now?

GODDESS: It is. I put it there.

JULIETTE: Just cut it shorter. We've already added a lot of lines to the show.

[Goddess pauses, still turned away. Then she quickly brings her hands to her head and brings her elbows down hard on the desk in front of her.]

GODDESS: No. I'm going to take control of my show.

JULIETTE: Excuse me? Say it to me again and look at me when you say it.

GODDESS [turning slowly around, saying it again only this time quieter]: I'm going to take control of my show.

TYRELL [to Goddess]: I've got your back.

GODDESS: Man, I don't want to do this anymore. (Field notes, 2 Aug. 2006)

Later in my interview with Goddess, I asked her what was frustrating her during that rehearsal. To my surprise, she didn't bring up the issue of representational authority. Instead she told me that while she was excited to be in the Fringe Festival this year and to be "making it [the production] *big*," it was hard to sometimes rehearse so hard, especially when there was no longer as much time to share and debrief about their personal experiences and daily lives as there used to be in summers past (9 Aug. 2006). "Being honest, you really don't have the patience to do scenes over and over again. You come in and you're tired and your personal life isn't really going right, so you come here and you still have that pent up frustration and you just, "blah," let it out," she said. I asked her if she felt like she had a say in the vision of the play and how it was staged. "Um, not really," she replied, "well, in a way we wrote it so I guess in a way we are responsible for the way it turned out. . . . I don't feel like it's the same play [as last year] . . . We've added stuff. We've put more meaning into it," she tells me. "Like last year when I did it, I really didn't see or make the connections of why certain scenes were the way they were. But this year, I see it. It's like I know why the security guards switch places. They give you the perspective of the student and the perspective of the security guard. I never made that connection [brings her finger tips together] before [laughs self-consciously]."

Goddess felt responsible "in a way" for how creative practices were used to expose the construction of dangerous stereotypes in the final production, and

seemed to respect Juliette's aesthetic choices on an analytical level, but her partial sense of ownership over the process and the final product also left her frustrated and resistant. In the weeks that followed her intervention in rehearsal, Goddess went on to revise her monologue, adding a more Black Power aesthetic to it. Her last minute revision and decision to speak up indicate that Goddess was beginning to see herself as a cultural agent both in terms of thinking of herself as able to contribute positively and change her environment, but also using her art form to introduce new meanings and perspective into the play script that reflected her shifting sense of self. She began to understand her identity as performative and fluid, and also something she could control. But her interview and actions also reveal how Juliette's own politics and interventionist, social change aesthetic pushed the ensemble towards a means of empowerment that the ensemble did not fully understand, or perhaps even want.³⁸ Wiley and Feiner note that the script development and rehearsals are not "merely means to an end—entertaining and meaningful performance—but the lifeblood of the transformative experience and the locus of authenticity and authority in community-based theater" (133). By not enabling the actors to collaborate as a group in script development or to make their own artistic decisions about how to stage something, Juliette limits the

³⁸ There were numerous instances in rehearsals when Juliette dictated or emphasized the direction of a conversation based on her own opinions or beliefs, which set her up as an authority figure even if this wasn't her intention.

youths' opportunities to *practice* intervention as a strategy for positive social change in ways that they felt they could control.

Flipping the Script: Find Your Light's Impact on the Community

I know I've had a powerful theatre experience when I walk out of a show and somehow the world feels different. At its best, theatre helps me see the world through another person's eyes and better understand their perspective. When I left *Understand To Be Understood* from Find Your Light, a theatre outreach program for teens living in New York City's shelter system, I felt like an ice cold glass of water had just been thrown in my face. I walked through Greenwich Village afterwards with a heightened awareness of all underprivileged young people I pass on the streets every day. It seems impossible not to be shaken by the experience of this show. (Jacobs, nytheatre.com review, 17 Aug. 2006)

Understand To Be Understood garnered positive reviews from nytheatre.com, a leading nonprofit web resource for New York City theater, as well as many of the audience members who came up to the ensemble after performances, that seemed to indicate that the production was successful at creating a moment of rupture. Among those we could identify, the audience included some of the youths' teachers, a few of their parents and siblings, and friends of Juliette, Chris, Erica and mine who came out to show their support. School administrators did not attend the show, despite Juliette's invitations, and few of the ensemble's peers came. Because we did not survey audiences, my

evaluation of their response to the play is based on my interviews with Juliette and the ensemble.

In part due to the fact that Juliette worked with largely the same cast for two consecutive summers to write and stage the production, in part because Juliette took on more of a traditional directorial role leading up to the Fringe performance, and in part because the cast already had a “run through” performance at the Youth Against Violence! Performance Festival which was enthusiastically received by their peers, the final production of Understand To Be Understood was extremely well rehearsed and polished. The youth knew their lines perfectly; the lighting effects were carefully orchestrated; and in the presence of a live audience, the youth committed fully to every scene. “The audience gives us a certain energy that you know you can’t feel when you’re just rehearsing when it’s just us,” admitted Jamila (Find Your Light group interview). “I really feel like we all got the energy in the right way,” explained Jerome, “We all expressed it out there. Like, ‘Yeah, feel it!’ [claps his hands triumphantly]” (Find Your Light group interview).

The youth were struck by all of the questions people would ask them after the play. “I liked it [the production] because [the audience] had questions and they wanted answers,” Goddess said, “It’s just the whole fact that our play aroused questions...They wanted to know if it was real. They were like, “Is that real? Did that really happen?” I was like “Yes, Everything you seen tonight was real on some level” (Find Your Light group interview). Mercedes tells me that the audience was shocked. “Because on the last day, a couple of people came to me

and they were all like, “Did that really happen?” How do you deal with it?” People were asking all sorts of questions like, “I never heard this before or I never knew about this” (Find Your Light group interview).

The ensemble also was seduced by the audience’s immediate applause, standing ovations and emotional response after all of their performances. In interviews with me, they registered their own emotional responses to these audience reactions. Mercedes remembers how she couldn’t believe it when Juliette told her that her friends cried after their performance in 2005: “I was like, “Really? People came to see our play and cried?” For many of the Find You Light ensemble members, the fact that their play garnered an emotional response meant that it was a really good play. “In the end, after we performed it, it was like ‘Wow, that was a really good play’,” Mercedes tells me. And Daryl says, “I’m most proud when I do a show and afterwards people come up and say, ‘I really felt what you guys wrote.’ Or ‘I loved that. I was crying’.” “When we speak it out, we understand it,” explains Jerome, referencing his performance of Understand To Be Understood at the Youth Against Violence! Performance Festival, “like it’s with them [the audience], they feel it. It’s a presence of learning [and they’re] growing with it now.” Tyrell tells me that when people come up to him and say they enjoyed his performance and when other directors try to recruit him for plays (which happened), he gets the sense that he had a strong performance and can write strong messages. “That’s when I feel I’ve accomplished what I set out,” he tells me. As is evident in these responses, the

youth felt validated for and most proud of their process when the audience responded favorably to a performance.

The nytheatre.com review validated their sense of themselves as viable shapers of their world even further. “I feel really good that my message is *really* getting heard,” says Goddess when asked how she felt about the positive review, “That my voice is getting out there for those who don’t have the courage or who can’t [speak for themselves]. Not just me, but also my cast members” (field notes, 22 August 2006).

After the production was over, Goddess again affirms her belief in the power of the production to intervene:

GODDESS: It was a freakin’ reality check!

HEATHER: So you feel you accomplished something

GODDESS: Yeah, I feel like I did. Our message was about the life of teens . . .

JAMILA [interrupting]: and a teen getting beat up on stage. You can’t get no better than that. (Find Your Light group interview)

I am struck at this moment in our final group interview at how easily Goddess and Jamila forget how they resisted the production’s embellished stereotypes about the “life of teens” and the re-enactment of teen violence. In their minds, it were these hard hitting images—the same ones of urban youth that populate movies, news headlines and hip-hop lyrics that show how “dangerous” life is for these teens—that elicited the audience’s curiosity and emotional response. For me, the Find Your Light process opened up questions about how we evaluate community-

based youth theater, a field which largely privileges the “authenticity” of the voices on stage but often doesn’t look closer at the process which shapes those voices and their representation.

Evaluating Process and Product

I myself feel torn as to how to “evaluate” Find Your Light in terms of process versus product as it relates to community-based theater practice. On the one hand, Juliette carefully sculpted a play script and staged it in ways that she felt would have the greatest theatrical impact and effect, in terms of intervention of thought and values, on NYC Fringe Festival audiences. But her tendency to direct rather than facilitate these processes raises an important question about representational authority which is core to the study of community-based theater. In the summer of 2006 Juliette came to rehearsals with pre-planned strategies in mind and presented youth a final play script that had been assembled by her, even though it incorporated the youths’ monologues and elements of their original writings. My observations indicate that this approach limited the degree to which the ensemble members came together to renegotiate their community identity and practice putting culture to work towards intervening in the status quo.

In their article, “Making a Scene: Representational Authority and a Community-Centered Process of Script Development,” community-based youth theater artists Laura Wiley and David Feiner argue that behind the term “representational authority” are two interrelated questions: “who has the power to represent whom? And who should have the right to represent whom?” When you recognize the role of representation in the definition of culture these questions

become vital, they say (122). Speaking to their own work with Albany Park Theatre Project, a community-based youth theater ensemble in Chicago, Wiley and Feiner argue that when representational authority is shared between adult mentors and young people throughout the dramaturgical process (e.g. conceiving, scripting and staging the play) it “fosters interactions within which a sense of shared culture [is] created.” As young people “negotiate their playmaking, they are also negotiating and renegotiating community identity and culture.” (125). Without fully including the youth in *Find Your Light*’s dramaturgical process, Juliette missed opportunities to strength the ensemble’s internal sense of community as well as hone their skills in understanding better how to combine with others to shape culture and intervene more broadly.

On the other hand, in my view, Understand To Be Understood was one of the most powerful and thought-provoking productions to watch as an audience member of the three sites I studied. Juliette’s strengths as a playwright and director helped to pull together the youths’ experiences into a collective story that was not only told clearly and concisely and with absolute commitment on the part of the ensemble, but also, from a theatrical standpoint, powerfully illustrated the constructed nature of the Dangerous Urban Youth narrative (from my point of view as a middle-class white audience member). While the youth struggled to understand Juliette’s use of theatrical conventions during rehearsal, they all told me in their interviews that they felt their own stories were being told as part of it. As Tyrell said numerous times, “We provided her with the colors [i.e. stories] and she did the painting.” There was never a moment watching the play that I didn’t

believe that the ensemble was speaking from their experience. If Juliette had built in more rehearsal time for critical reflection about the constructed nature of stereotypes and enabled the youth to participate more in figuring out how to deconstruct those stereotypes through staging, much of the resistance she got from the youth may have been assuaged.

In the end, the youth were immensely proud of their production and believed in its potential to intervene, as well as their role as re-shapers of the status quo. Their ultimate disappointment with the production was not about their lack of representational authority, but rather their Fringe Festival audiences. Juliette had built up in rehearsals the idea that the audience would include people (e.g. school principals and administrators, teachers, parents, even a Broadway producer) who had the power and desire to receive their message and make a difference. In my final group interview with the ensemble, Goddess was passionately disappointed that the production that received an award during the Fringe Festival awards ceremony, in which no awards were given to Understand To Be Understood, was an avante garde comedy about a tea cup and a poodle. “Our play was about the life of *teens!*,” she remarked defiantly, “and they would rather give an award to a tea cup and a poodle (shakes her head).” The youths’ conviction and pride in the fact that they created a product that was professional-feeling and had the *potential* to affect their external community, had the “right” people been present to listen, is critical to their sense of themselves as viable contributors to culture and must be weighed alongside questions of voice and representational authority.

Concluding Thoughts on Find Your Light

What always struck me as remarkable when working with Find Your Light is that the youth showed up. Even when they pushed back fiercely in one rehearsal, they showed up to the next rehearsal with no apologies and often with even more conviction. Some traveled more than an hour from Harlem on the subway to get there four to five nights a week, while balancing part-time summer jobs and family responsibilities. The fact that Juliette did not have the interest or support of many of their parents made this even more remarkable to me. After their run at the Fringe Festival, however, none of them wanted to continue with Understand To Be Understood. Juliette had an invitation from a professor at Columbia University's Teachers College for Find Your Light to perform as part of a lecture that fall and other high school teachers were encouraging the ensemble to tour the production throughout the district. When Juliette brought these opportunities up to the group, the original members unanimously declined even in the glow of their positive reviews. Many of them were exhausted from the summer and some were beginning college that fall. But given that the tour represented the possibility of actually getting their message out to teachers and school administrators, an audience that was implicated in the play and that the youth had wanted to affect, I was surprised that they didn't jump at the opportunity.

It wasn't until I analyzed the final brush up rehearsal at the end of the run that I understood their hesitations to continue with a tour. Juliette called the group together into a circle and asked everyone to hold hands and make eye contact

(field notes, 22 Aug. 2006). She told them how proud she was of them for what they'd accomplished and how much she loved them. And she also told them that this was their last rehearsal together as an ensemble. Acknowledging the journey they'd been on for the past three years and the new directions the original members were moving in, she told them they were all "graduating" from Find Your Light. Getting choked up, but hiding it with a nervous smile, Goddess quickly responded, "That's fucked up. Why?!" "Because I need to go work with other kids who need to go through your journey," replied Juliette. Goddess was the only one verbalizing her shock, but Tyrell's face told the same story. He stared straight at Juliette without moving. Juliette explained that they all had the tools to do this in college, or wherever their lives took them, and that one day when Find Your Light became a nonprofit organization she wanted them back to help her develop it. "I'm going to be in it," said Goddess defiantly, tears welling up in her eyes. Tyrell told her he's just going to show up next year. "I want to be in it. I don't care. I'm going to be in it. You're not going to have no other choice," said Goddess, "there's no graduating." Juliette tried to explain that in order for Find Your Light to grow, she needs to give other youth the experience that they've had. "You guys are going to fly . . . these last three performances are me flying with you halfway and then I'm going to watch you fly the rest of the way, alright?," said Juliette, "You're going to be fine. You're going to a great college and you're going to find things." "But not acting," Goddess mumbles. "You're going to act," said Juliette firmly and encouragingly. Juliette then proceeded around the circle saying each person's name and thanking them for

joining the Find Your Light family. As Julietta was acknowledging each person, Goddess started to cry, covering her face. The group moved in closer with their arms tightly around each other. The moment was solemn and pointed.

This moment revealed two critical points about the Find Your Light process. My first realization was that the Find Your Light experience had positively intervened in the lives of the ensemble members who wanted to stay in Find Your Light because it opened them up to new ways of being in the world and to new ways of feeling and responding to situations that promoted a sense of connectivity. But I also realized that this personal work was not yet done for many of them. As I comb over my field notes and interviews, looking for the evidence of why the youth stay in Find Your Light, I find it's because of the space it provided them to play, share their stories, and be emotional and be celebrated for their behaviors and feelings within the boundaries of the community they and their peers were creating internally. "Theatre pushes the bar on the level of comfort [pushes his hands against an imaginary wall]. It takes a person with a lot of courage to stand up in front of people they don't know [blows out air]. It makes you feel prepared that you can stand out in the world and say, I am who I am, you know?," said Jerome (personal interview). I think I'm misquoted or misunderstood when I say I don't care who is in the crowd," Tyrell said during the brush-up rehearsal, "Once you become comfortable playing the character and being in tune with that persona and not caring who's in the audience [. . .] I think that's half the battle right there...just being allowed to let go [and] feel like I'm a lot of different things" (field notes, 22 Aug. 2006).

The youth resisted Juliette's direction when she was preparing for the Fringe Festival in part because she was taking away the time they had had in previous summers to simply talk with one another and to write down their experiences and emotions in free writes every day. By insisting on polished production that would intervene publicly, Juliette sacrificed much of the relationship-building and healing work that had been core to the Find Your Light process from its inception. Youth arts programs that set high-expectations, involve positive risks, and work towards a clearly defined goal (like a performance) are most effective at engaging youth and sustaining their involvement over time (Heath & Smyth; Worthmann). However in the case of Find Your Light where the original ensemble members had all experienced trauma in their lives, and were at various points of working through that trauma personally, I believe that many of the youth still needed, and desired, more emphasis on the *process* of giving testimony and practicing how to combine internally as a community of peers. By rushing to produce a polished end product in short amount of time, Juliette not only compromised the youths' representational authority. She also compromised their opportunities to share their experiences (both past and present) and shifts in perspective, as well to critically reflect on these experiences/perspectives in ways that could have helped them not only maintain their community of support but also understand the power structures they sought to transform in their everyday lives. "Putting people's voices on stage does not necessarily give people power over the institutional and symbolic contexts in which their voices are heard. It is too tempting to assume we

are challenging authority by incorporating other voices,” argues Mattingly (456-7). It is only through what Paulo Freire calls “praxis,” a recurrent cycle of reflection and action that youth can begin to see themselves as social and political beings with the tools to intervene intentionally as change agents in the broader community structures which constrain them. The youth declined the tour in the end because it would have been a rushed attempt to remount the show for a new audience leaving little creative time in rehearsals to share new stories and experiences and to continue to bond as an internal Find Your Light community.

CHAPTER 4

COMMUNITY BUILDING AS AN ACT OF CELEBRATION

Community-based theater also can be predicated on the goal of bringing together people as an act of community celebration and healing that can lead to transformation. Community arts scholar Arlene Goldbard writes that these projects are often about “participants discovering and claiming their own ethnic, gender and class identities [for example] as a way to recast themselves as makers of history rather than its passive objects” (New Creative Community 72). In this chapter, I examine the ways in which community building as an act of celebration is operative in viBe Theater Experiences’ all-girl viBeStages program, the theories that inform this approach, and how this approach created the conditions for youth to practice building community internally as an ensemble, as well as among generations of “viBe girls” and older women in their lives.

viBeStages: The Core

viBeStages is the core, introductory program offered by viBe Theater Experience, “a non-profit performing arts/ education organization that empowers teenage girls through the creation and production of original performances” (www.vibetheater.org). Three times a year (summer, fall, and spring) six to ten girls come together for a ten to twelve week, eighty- to one hundred-hour, collaborative process that culminates in the creation of free, public performances based on girls’ personal stories and re-imaginings of themselves and their communities. During their rehearsal period, the girls meet three afternoons a week on average. Through creative writing prompts that ask girls to explore different

genres of writing (such as poetry, monologues, songs and scenes) and collaborative devising work that challenges the girls to incorporate each others' writing as they co-direct, as well as communicate their stories using various artistic disciplines (e.g. acting, singing, dancing, and songwriting), viBeStages leads participants through the "stages" of producing a play. But the process also enables them to practice shaping cultural definitions of girlhood by inviting them to share their personal stories of life as an urban teenage girl, which allows them to make connections but also celebrate differences. After girls complete viBeStages, they are eligible to participate in viBe Theater Experience's other programs, or to audition for viBeStages a second time.³⁹ "What is philosophically the center of viBeStages is the center of all the other [viBe] programs," said Joan, a viBe board member. "It's all about empowerment and all about expression from the terms of the artists who are making the work. They're making it on their own terms and in their own way" (personal interview). During this process, teenage girls are positioned to construct and celebrate a new meaning of girlhood today,

³⁹ At the time of this study, viBe was actively running six programs, including viBeStages. The other programs included viBeSongMakers, a music/song creation program; viBeSolos, a solo performance program; viBeGirlsInCharge, a leadership program that enables alumnae to produce a show on their own; viBeCreations, a program specifically created for pregnant and parenting teenage girls; and viBeApprentice, a job training program. Girls Life Adventure, an arts-based life skills program presented in partnership with the literary program, Girls Write Now, was also offered but anyone could participate. viBe programs continue to evolve in response to viBe alumnae's interests and needs. For example, in 2010 they developed the program, viBeGirlsRadio, in partnership with a local radio station. The program features a serialized radio program, on-air interviews with viBe alumnae and music created by viBeSongmakers.

and to practice how to create a sense of empowerment for other girls, as well as form community with older generations of women.

Dana and Chandra, now in their early thirties, developed the idea for viBeStages, and ultimately for viBe Theater Experience, after creating and facilitating a one-time theater education curriculum with eight high school girls in West Harlem in 2002. They were completing their M.F.As in directing and acting respectively at Columbia University, and originally had no intention of founding a community-based youth theater organization. Similar to Juliette, Dana and Chandra had a specific idea of the scope and direction of the project, only to have it transformed by the participants themselves. “We had a whole curriculum, a day-by-day, hour-by-hour, minute-by-minute curriculum. We were very prepared, but we were not prepared for how awesome [these girls] were,” admits Dana (Edell and Thomas). Dana and Chandra thought the project might end in a staged reading, but the girls insisted on a full-fledged performance of their monologues and scenes. “They made it very clear to us that they were doing a show,” Chandra confirmed, “We were really figuring this out on the ground. But the one thing that was then, and is very consistent now is that it is always about the girls’ voices.” “And performing them,” adds Dana. In my first interview with Dana and Chandra, I asked them, “Why girls?”

DANA: Because there are few places where [teenage] girls can be really creative and feel free to say and do anything without the pressure of boys, without boys being right there . . . Something

magical happens when girls start trusting other girls and start relating to other girls in the same space.

CHANDRA: We're constantly told we're not supposed to get together as female and *do* something.

DANA: Something positive. (Personal interview)

And while Dana and Chandra admit that often in the rehearsal process there are ideological and personal tensions among the girls, the paradigm they set up for viBeStages is one of affirmation and celebration—not of unity, but of differences. Girls are asked to articulate and share their multiple knowledges and experiences as urban teenage girls in daily check-ins called Roses and Thorns, and through the production of an original, hour-long, performance piece. This play follows a linear structure but is created in a collage-like fashion and is interspersed with individually performed pieces (monologues, songs, poems, spoken word, etc.) that may or may not be linked to the fictional story of the play. Each girl contributes her own monologues and scenes to this uncensored dramatic text, along with text that is produced in collaboration with others. The play also incorporates songs, movements, cheers, design concepts and staging that is created individually and in groups. The final production weaves together and transforms the ensemble's various knowledges and repertoires as teenage girls into something that becomes a new illustration for what girlhood can mean in America today. "viBe does not censor you. viBe does not tell you what to think or to write," says Keisha, who has participated in viBe Theater Experience for four years, "viBe says, "Write whatever you feel . . . Do whatever you want. Words. Movement. Action. That's

what it's all about" (personal interview). When I asked a viBe board member, Joan, what makes viBe different from other youth arts programs in New York City, she replied: "The way they work from the girls instead of their preconceived notion of what girls need . . . every idea is a good idea is one of their ground rules" (personal interview). "It's about 'You are really good. You are really important. And your story is important. You can do it because you're a viBe girl,'" said a long-time viBe collaborator (Jeff).

My Research

While working with viBeStages as a participant-researcher, I was able to experience the production of a new play from start to finish, as well as attend some of the program's recruitment activities. I observed and participated in all thirty-eight rehearsals, totaling one hundred and two hours over ten weeks, between October and December 2006, plus two performances. I joined all of the warm-up activities and check-ins and check-outs at the beginnings and ends of rehearsals and facilitated an entire rehearsal that examined power structures using Theatre of the Oppressed. When new techniques were learned, such as learning how to build a song, I learned the technique too but then would step out of the circle once the girls began to pair up or work in groups to begin using the technique to devise original work on their own. Even then, I was rarely observing the girls from afar, but rather circulating the room, sitting with the girls as they devised or helping to provide side-coaching if invited. As was the case with *Find Your Light*, I had full access to video record all rehearsals and productions and to

interview the youth participants and facilitators, as well as a few of the girls' parents/guardians.

I analyzed and inductively coded all of the data collected throughout my fieldwork experience using grounded theory. During the program, I made notes and observations in a journal both during rehearsals and afterwards. When the program ended, I transcribed verbatim the video-recordings of rehearsals and performances and audio-recordings of my interviews with youth and adults after the program had ended. I then examined those transcripts, along with my observer's comments, archival materials, email correspondence, the girls' Creative Containers, student writing, the play script, and marketing materials. The viBeStages ensemble members did not keep journals. It was decided between me and the facilitators that it would be too cumbersome to write more in addition to the large amount writing the girls were already required to do for the program. Analyses made while working in the field, I discussed with Dana and a few of the youth to cross-check my assumptions.

The Participants

A total of eleven adolescent girls affiliated with viBeStages participated in my study. Anie, Celia, Essence, Julietta, Keisha, Lisa, Melissa, Saria, and Unique were all viBeStages ensemble members in Fall 2006. Yasmine was a viBeStages alumna, and was directing her own viBe Theater Experience show through the viBe leadership program, Girls In Charge. Christina had never participated as an artist in any of viBe's programs, but volunteered to stage manage and assist with other programs that her friends participated in. The viBeStages members

identified themselves as African American (2), Hispanic (2), Puerto Rican (3), and West African (2). All were born and raised in New York City. Unique was legally deaf, but wore hearing aids, could read lips and spoke moderately well. The ensemble members lived in economically diverse neighborhoods (ranging from poor to middle class) in Manhattan, Brooklyn and the Bronx.

viBe's co-founders Dana Edell and Chandra Thomas were in their early thirties and late twenties respectively at the time of this study. Dana identifies as a white woman and lived in a working/middle-class neighborhood in Brooklyn; Chandra identifies as being of African descent and lived in a working-class neighborhood in Harlem. Dana was pursuing a Ph.D. in Educational Theatre at New York University and Chandra was pursuing a full-time acting career.

A total of five community members associated with viBe participated in the study. I interviewed Keisha's mother, Desiree; Julietta's mother, Sandra, and Unique's grandmother, Alice. I also interviewed Joan, a viBe board member, and Jeff, a faithful audience member and youth theater director in New York City.

The viBeStages Process

In fall 2006, viBeStages created the play, Resurrecting WILDflowers, which loosely tells the story of eight teenage girls, all of whom are drawn back to the site of their burned down elementary school after receiving mysterious letters and flowers from their "inner child." While all of the characters have developed distinct personalities and identity locations as teenagers, they share the common experience of having buried something that was once important to them. At the end of the play, they each literally and figuratively unearth items that symbolize

the different challenges, dreams, talents, and memories they've "lost" and have had to uncover in order to move on and become "strong, beautiful, powerful entities" (Resurrecting WILDflowers). Within this single scenario, multiple narratives are being told concurrently, ranging from stories about homosexuality, physical disability, religion, peer pressure, and eating disorders, among others. Most if not all of these stories come directly from the girls' lives, but Dana notes: "We really push [the girls] to not to just stand onstage and say this is what happened to me two weeks ago, but to find a creative vessel for what that story is and a reason for why that story needs to be heard, in a way that audiences can listen to it" (Edell and Thomas). The focus is not on telling the generic "story" of urban girlhood today, she says, but on, "How are you going to tell it differently than how you've heard it? Why is it important that *you* are telling this story and that this audience is hearing *you* tell the story?" viBeStages' only rules are 1) that you make your own rules and 2) you honor whatever theatrical conventions you've created. For this reason—even though every viBeStages playmaking process follows the same curriculum—the experiences, and the final plays that result, are as diverse as the individual girls who participate. Throughout these experiences, viBe girls are using, combining and juxtaposing symbolic systems and repertoires they associate with being a "girl" and articulating a temporary alliance that enables them, in the act of performance, to transfer these new imaginings to other girls and older generations of women.

Theoretical Framework

Deconstructing Communities of Identity

History is full of examples of people coming together based on a shared identity locations to articulate, celebrate and mobilize themselves as a group for the purposes of healing, transformation and social change. The civil rights movement, feminist movement and gay rights movement are just a few of these identity-political movements. In her book, Against the Romance of Community, Miranda Joseph examines and deconstructs the notion of knowable, unified and organic communities based on identity, arguing instead that these communities are constituted through the performativity of production rather than natural and spontaneous occurrences.⁴⁰ “While identity is often named as the bond among community members,” she writes, “it is a false name in that communal participants are not identical” (viii). Joseph traces examples of how invocations of community-as-unity have been used to naturalize and deploy collectivities for political reasons, while erasing “difference, hierarchy, and oppression within the invoked group” (xxiv). She cites feminist scholars Bidy Martin and Chandra Mohanty who write: “It is the moment at which groups are conceived as agents, as social actors, as desiring subjects, that unity in the sense of coherent group identity, commonality and shared experience become difficult” (qtd. in Joseph,

⁴⁰ By “performativity of production” Joseph is referring to how practices of modernity such as identity politics, the nation-state, emancipatory movements, and capitalism especially, depend on and generate community (xxx).

xxvi). Through this lens, community-as-unity is examined as totalizing fiction which has potentially repressive effects.

As an alternative, Joseph argues for alternative formulations of community as “communities of difference” (xxvi). Citing Donna Haraway, Joseph argues new forms of feminist identity and community become imaginable when women organize through “partial and particular—‘situated’—narratives, rather than grand universalizing narratives” (xxvi). A communities of difference approach conceives of collective action based on affinity rather than identity (Haraway cited in Joseph xxxi). Within this paradigm, potential for transformation lies in people’s abilities to “articulate active collectivities” while remaining cognizant of their own positions as producers of community and of their own identities as mobile and tactical. Joseph poses that by understanding community as something that is produced and consumed, rather than natural and organic, opportunities open up “to build movements based on the connections we do have, rather than yearning for lost or impossible utopias” (xxxii).

Similarly, performance theorist José Estaban Muñoz argues that an examination of affect is a better way to talk about affiliations and identifications among traditionally oppressed groups rather than conceive of these groups’ identity locations as whole and fixed. Drawing from Raymond Williams, Muñoz argues that these “communities” do not come together based on identity but instead by a politics of affect that is based on shared vibes, rhythms, and structures of feeling that assemble points of connection and solidarity. Performance is an opportunity for oppressed “identity” groups to assert and

celebrate affective difference, posits Muñoz, and transfer “specific dealings and rhythms’ to their audiences that “may not be recognizable or identifiable in relation to already available grids of classification (68).

The Utopian Performative

Some community-based theater scholars (Brady; Miller and Román) have critiqued celebration as a community building strategy because it is utopian, and therefore falsely unifying and sentimental in ways that render participants and community audiences passive. The viBeStages process does indeed position youth to practice articulating and transferring “what-if” imaginings of girlhood.⁴¹ And yet, there are theorists who find *positive* value in thinking through how certain performances that perform affect, as Muñoz describes, can materialize a sense of shared utopia for its participants and audiences. In her article “Performance, Utopia, and the ‘Utopian Performative,’” feminist theatre scholar Jill Dolan argues that utopian performances can suggest: “[A] common future, one that’s more just and equitable, one in which we can all participate more equally, with more chances to live fully and contribute to the making of culture” (455). Rather than conceiving of utopia as an end goal, Dolan articulates utopia as a momentary affect that in turn adds to or rejuvenates a community in its constant process of defining itself. “I’m not interested in constructing utopia,” notes Dolan, “My concern here is with how utopia can be imagined or experienced affectively,

⁴¹ Bruce McConachie writes, “No performance by itself can alter the routines of everyday life, but community-based theater can provide ‘what if’ images of potential community, sparking the kind of imaginative work that must precede substantial changes in customary habits” (38).

through feelings, in small, incremental moments that performance can provide” (460) both through its liveness and its content. Dolan differentiates her conception of utopia from a static ideal or consensus achieved by limiting choice. She cites performances by feminist artists that clearly articulate and confront oppression as examples of what she calls the “utopian performative,” which refers to the power of narrative to make something happen rather than simply transmit knowledge (478). Dolan is interested in how performances can generate what Rolan Schaer calls “a space apart” where an ideal future can be enacted not making it so “but [inspiring] perhaps other more local ‘doings’ that sketch out the potential in those feignings” (457). The “utopian performative” in *viBeStages* points to how a mostly internal process of community building through celebration and affect not only has the potential to enable the young women involved to think of themselves positively as change agents that are coming together, but also has the potential to affect and inspire the broader community that experiences their work.

Dolan acknowledges that her concept of the “utopian performative” is akin to anthropologist Victor Turner’s notion of *communitas*. In his *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure*, Turner asserts that “*communitas*,” or spontaneous social bonding, can occur momentarily in performances when a sense of liminality—of being in a transitional “space” between normative structure and symbolic play—is experienced. In liminality, “the characteristics of the ritual subject (the ‘passenger’) are ambiguous,” writes Turner, “[she/he] passes through a cultural realm that has few or none of the attributes of the past or coming state” (94). According to Turner, it is within that liminal space that

symbolic and affective boundaries connecting person-to-person are thrown into play, allowing people to combine in innovative ways and stretch and manipulate the symbolic boundaries of community. For Turner, these periods of transition and transformation are fleeting. The new imaginings and feelings these experiences generate do not exist on their own but are in turn incorporated and consolidated into existed structures: “There is a dialectic here, for the immediacy of *communitas* gives way to the mediacy of structure, while, in rites of passage [rituals], men [and women] are released from structure into *communitas* only to return to structure revitalized by their experience of *communitas*” (129). In *viBe*, this happens for both the girls who are using artistic practices to experiment with their personal identities and identity as a group, but also for their audiences who theoretically experience the affect of their performances which is then incorporated (or released) in their everyday lives.

John Fletcher, who was dramaturg for the community-based Cornerstone Theater Company, argues that the utopian performative in community-based theater practice can “recuperate a sense of coalitional identity in the absence of absolute foundations” if it recognizes individual differences, reveals fractures, and foregrounds questions that remind participants and their audiences about productive uncertainties and the constructed nature of its communal boundaries (193). In this sense, community-based theater programs like *viBeStages* that explore identity politics can at once provide the personal and communal rejuvenation of Turner’s *communitas* at the same time that they wrestle with disagreements and acknowledge community building as under “constant revision”

(201). In other words, the new meanings of girlhood that the participants in one ten-to-twelve week viBeStages program begin to create and articulate are fluid and contextual and part of an ongoing process of dialogue and re-shaping.

Girl Studies and Third Wave Feminism

viBe Theater Experience has been greatly informed by the emerging field of “Girls’ Studies,” as well as theories emerging in and around the study of “third wave” feminism. Unlike the “First” and “Second” waves of feminism which largely privileged the experiences of white middle- or upper-class women, “third wave” feminism takes a poststructuralist approach articulating differences, conflicts and alliances between women of different races, genders, sexualities, classes, etc. as well as paying attention to the constructed nature of gender itself. At the same time, recent research (Harris 2004; Leadbeater and Way 1996, 2007) is beginning to transform commonly held assumptions about urban girls rooted in negative stereotypes and outdated models of adolescent psychology which marginalize or fail to include girls’ voices. New attention also has been paid to the interest, desires, needs and *agency* of girls in popular literature, with publications like Ophelia Speaks (1999); Odd Girl Out (2002); The Curse of the Good Girl (2009); and Full Frontal Feminism: A Young Woman’s Guide to Why Feminism Matters (2007), Jessica Valenti’s book which argues for a fresh take on 21st Century feminism constructed by and for young women. Both of these emerging fields of study inform viBeStages’ approach to building a community-of-difference with adolescent girls.

Paradigm of Affirmation, Redefinition and Girl Empowerment

[viBe's] really about empowerment . . . it's about 'You are really good. You are really important. And your story is important. You can do it because you're a viBe girl' . . . it's got an element of affirmation: 'You're a viBe girl. You can do it!' (Jeff)

Positioning the Girls as Artists: "You're a viBe Girl. You can do it!"

Unlike Find Your Light which focuses on unlocking what Juliette feels is a "lost" or buried power of creativity and inspiration, viBeStages intentionally focuses on building the girls' skills as artists by training them in different genres of writing and performance. "It's through building the girls as artists and helping them develop a creative voice that they have the *tools* to say what they want to say. And then, when they say it, it can become a political act . . . the fact that they are speaking authentically and saying things that need to be heard by their community," explains Dana (personal interview).

The viBeStages rehearsal process is structured in three parts that encompass skill-building, devising, playwriting, rehearsing and performing. For the first five weeks of the fall 2006 viBeStages program, the girls were introduced to multiple styles of writing (poetry, monologue, narrative, dialogue, song and rant) and asked to write extensively while experimenting with these styles both through individual free writes, writing in pairs and constructing poems and scenes as a whole group. They also are invited to bring in writing of their own from outside of rehearsals. Dana estimates that within the first six weeks of rehearsal, the girls accumulate more than one hundred pages of writing (Edell, "Say It How

It Is” 111). Simultaneously, the girls are asked to translate their written words into various artistic forms (movement, gesture, song, cheers, etc.) as well as translate embodied expressions into writing. By introducing the girls to different writing and performance styles and then asking them to use those styles in small assignments, viBeStages helps them build a common creative vocabulary which is also a new language of expression. Most of the girls have never had any prior theater or artistic training.

These styles of writing and performing are not “taught” via what critical pedagogue Paulo Freire calls “the banking method of education” whereby a fixed body of knowledge is deposited by a teacher into the “passive” minds of her students. There is no desire to train the girls vocally or physically towards some type of “mastery of craft,” so to speak. The focus is on introducing the girls to a variety of writing and performance styles, showing them how these styles *can* be used, and then inviting them to experiment and play with those styles to create a style of expression that draws on their own assets and shared experiences as a group. Dana and Chandra facilitate this process of discovery by providing information and resources, asking questions, and challenging the girls to find new and different ways of expressing themselves. But they ultimately allow the girls to make their own decisions about *what* to create and *how* to create it. From the very first week, the girls are positioned as playwrights, directors, designers, actors, composers and choreographers who must work together to accomplish short compositions “assignments” (develop a dialogue, monologue, song, poetic duet, etc.) and share and critique them as a group.

The second stage is the development of the play, which Chandra describes as “the bridge from the previous section where they’re using the writing and performance styles they’ve learned and start to craft and create a play that tells a story that they all have agreed to tell” (Edell and Thomas). In Fall 2006, this stage of the process occurred over the course of three weeks, though technically the play also drew on work and ideas the girls developed in small assignments during the first stage of rehearsals. The third stage is formally rehearsing and performing the play. The Resurrecting WILDflowers play script was finalized two weeks before performances, but the girls continued to make minor refinements up until curtain time.

Throughout all three stages, the girls are considered the experts; Dana and Chandra are there to help them connect the dots or locate new ones and support them on their journey. Empowerment in viBeStages is always defined within a context of mutual support and understanding. No girl is expected to go it alone nor is it believed that one can be empowered without the support of others. Before any task is approached in rehearsal (composing a song, choreographing a group dance, physicalizing a written phrase), Dana and Chandra first ask the girls how *they* would like to begin. And when something is shared in rehearsal (a song, poem, dance etc.), they start by asking the girls what they think, rarely offering an opinion of their own unless they feel the piece or discussion that follows it is harmful or detrimental (i.e. racist, sexist, judgmental etc.) to an individual or to the group as a whole.

As is evident by the breakdown of time allotted to each stage, the emphasis of viBeStages is on skill-building and learning how to combine, as opposed to creating a polished “product” at the end. That is not to say that audience is not important to this experience. Dana boldly states, “We want to make people listen to these girls. And the way to do that is to make their stories gorgeous and epic and beautiful and give the audience a performance” (Edell, personal interview). But the viBeStages program focuses intensively on process and then pulls the play together very quickly at the end. They’re able to do this, in part, because the play itself is modular and based on a horizontal narrative structure where no one girl is the lead. While the girls decide on an overarching narrative for the play script, the play is ultimately a collage made up of individual pieces (songs, monologues, dances, cheers, etc.) that relate but do not necessarily depend on each other. This allows for flexibility and last minute decision-making in the event that a piece is not quite ready for performance, if someone is absent from many rehearsals, or if a girl simply needs an “out” from performing something she suddenly doesn’t want or feel ready to share publicly beyond the group. It’s also misleading to say that the devising and rehearsing start four or more weeks in. While they may not be aware of it, the girls are beginning to create their play from the first rehearsal on as they work on small writing and performance “composition” assignments which eventually make their way into the final play script.

While all of the performances are presented in a professional theater space and accompanied by professional sound and lighting designs, the aesthetic is

amateur. “It’s not like a rarefied theatrical event,” describes board member Joan, “that sense of enthusiasm and roughness, that it’s a little messy around the edges, has been there throughout and will [probably] always be there [for viBe].” In her view, “that’s part of where some of the enthusiasm and excitement comes from.” Similar to Joan, audiences often site a viBeStage’s production’s sense of authenticity and honesty as its most powerful and memorable aspects. viBe is not looking for trained artists to participate. “We tend to rely on the authentic power of girls performing stories that are closest to them,” says Dana, making the point that many of those stories are in fact fictional (Edell, “Say It How It Is” 279). But she also admits that “even when the content of the stories that the girls are telling is fascinating and powerful, their lack of performance training and abilities can deflate the necessary energy and technique required for a truly spectacular production” from the point of view of non-intimates (280).

By inviting viBeStages alumnae to audition for the program again or to graduate into other viBe programs, however, Dana and Chandra provide avenues for the girls to continue to hone and expand their artistic skills. They also signal to the girls whose first point of entry into viBe Theater Experience is viBeStages, that the work of building a community and making meaning of girlhood is ongoing and ever-changing. By participating in viBeStages, they are being initiated into a new culture; they are becoming a “viBe Girl” which is itself a symbol that carries a gloss of commonality though also open to many interpretations. Dana and Chandra describe viBeStages as a kind of boot camp or initiation rite into the language and culture of viBe (see *Rituals* for more on this

point). While the viBeStages rehearsal process is made up of “three stages,” the program itself is the first stage of a girl’s journey towards learning how to use artistic practices to contribute positively to their cultural locations. As viBe has grown as an organization, Dana and Chandra have remained committed to their belief that participating in viBeStages is a necessary first step to participation in viBe’s other programs. “That’s something that we really want to keep at the core—because [viBeStages] is an experience,” said Chandra, “there are so many things that we communicate in those [ten] weeks” (Edell and Thomas). Building skills as an artist and learning how to collaborate with others is at the heart of what viBeStages communicates, but so is learning the “viBe language” and culture, notes Dana (Edell and Thomas). This language consists of games, rituals, and perennial elements of viBeStages shows that every girl in viBe Theater Experience learns and, in some cases, continues to practice in other programs. It is also a constantly expanding vocabulary, Dana stresses, as new girls come in and alumnae develop and introduce new skills and ideas.

viBe alumnae have an open invitation to all viBeStages rehearsals and girls are always stopping by to offer encouragement and advice *as artists*. I asked Joan why she felt the girls stopped by so frequently, she said “They feel like they can come back in some other [capacity] because they recognize that [viBeStages] opened up something for them and they want to see what’s happening with the other girls that are having that opportunity themselves.” “I always felt part of viBe,” noted Keisha, “After viBeStages, Dana would call me up and say, ‘Hey, we’ve got a viBeStages show. The girls are here. They’re rehearsing. Do you

want to stop by? Do you want to help?’ and I’d always want to be there and I always felt welcome” (personal interview). Consistently the alumna’s message to the girls in viBeStages fall 2006 was to keep leaning on each other and keep working hard because the payoff is worth it both in terms of what you produce, the relationships you form and what you learn about yourself. “You realize all that hard work you put into it is what you get out of it. . . It makes you realize what you can do” said one alumna (field notes, 22 Sept. 2006). Another alumna told the girls that she just keeps coming back to viBe because each time she finds that she pushes herself in new ways (field notes, 22 Sept. 2006). Keisha who was in viBeStages for the second time but had also participated in viBeSolos twice, said that she returned to viBeStages “to learn different viBe things” (personal interview). When I asked her what she hoped to learn this time, she said: “Precision...making your statement clear, making your movements clear, that’s the way things need to be so people can clearly see what you’re voicing, what you’re showing . . . if our movements aren’t clear then people won’t see what we’re trying to show them.” Vibe alumnae also come back to work with other girls. Yasmine, a senior in high school who had been in viBeStages, viBeSongMakers and led a production of her own through viBeGirlsInCharge was considering doing viBeStages in the spring because she wanted to see how a different group of girls could communicate how girls’ voices should be heard in a new way. “You always get different things when you work with different people,” she said, “Depending on the group, the show can come out completely different. . . . I’ll have different poems . . . I may want to send a different message out”

(personal interview). viBe is an open invitation to continue artistic training as a teenager and building community across “generations” of viBe Girls (I discuss this in greater detail later in this chapter). The presence of viBe alumnae throughout the process, and the fact that other viBe programs are running concurrently with viBeStages, signals that the girls are part of something much larger than a ten week intensive and signals an ongoing and fluid process of defining oneself as a agent with the ability to participate positively in building community and shaping culture.

Recruitment

Dana and Chandra engage in city-wide recruitment efforts to let high school girls know about the opportunity to audition for viBeStages. Typically two to three weeks out from each viBeStages experience, Dana and Chandra pitch the program to girls in classes and at school assemblies at several public high schools throughout the city where they know teachers, principals and guidance counselors or where viBe alumnae attend school. Ideally, tryouts are held the same day, either after school or at another location. Since viBe’s founding in 2002, Dana and Chandra also have collaborated with a variety of community-based organizations such as Planned Parenthood, Girls Write Now (a writing program for teenage girls), and other organizations that work with adolescent girls and recommend youth to the program. By bringing girls together to create a play that celebrates their differences as urban teenage girls, viBe “enable[s] linkages between [girls] who are not ‘the same’ as each other, but are also not the same as themselves, whose subjectivities, ideologies, and relations are ‘mobile,’ ‘tactical,’

and ‘oppositional’ through a process of interpellation” (Sandoval qtd. in Joseph xxvii). In fact, creating a community of difference is a one of the primary reasons viBe auditions girls for viBeStages. While viBe rarely turns girls away (Dana and Chandra often find other ways of involving them or put them on a waiting list and consider them for the next viBeStages program), Chandra admits viBeStages only works when the ensemble is made up of a real mix of girls: “girls who are the straight forward leaders, girls who are straight forward followers, girls who come in with different arts forms..., girls who are excited about learning different art forms, [girls from] different high schools, different neighborhoods, different boroughs” (Edell and Thomas). This diversity of participants, who are then mentored in a process of creating something collectively, is itself an example of utopia which suggests a more equitable present (and future) where all girls and all teenagers have equal opportunities to create culture and be recognized for their assets.

When Dana and Chandra pitch viBe, they always bring viBe girls with them both literally and figuratively. If viBe alumnae are in the class or program, Dana and Chandra may recruit them at the start to talk about their experience with viBe as “experts.”⁴² But even when a viBe girl isn’t physically present, their “girl power” is brought into the room by playing a song or two off of one of

⁴² Every time Dana and Chandra introduce a viBe alumni to other teenage girls, they refer to them as “experts.” Whenever possible, it’s the girls’ voices and perspectives they privilege.

viBeSongmaker's publicly released, and professionally produced, CDs.⁴³ I went along with Dana to speak to an English class at Washington Irving High School one Friday afternoon in September. The following is an excerpt from her pitch:

We are the only all girls theater group in New York City. We create totally original theater. All of ViBe's programs are free and we are looking for girls to participate. This is a chance for you to meet and work with girls from all over the city. Don't worry if you've never created a show before, we teach you. We help you figure out what you want to say and how you want to say it. . . . If you've ever written a song, monologue, or a poem or *thought of* writing a song, monologue, or poem, then you should come to tryouts . . . And [enthusiastically] if you've *never* done it, then you should *absolutely* do it [emphasizes that they often work with girls who are shy]. (Field notes, 20 Sept. 2006).

The viBe pitch is an open invitation for girls to tell their *stories* the way they want to share them, or in a way they maybe never imagined, in the company of other girls who also want to share and be heard.

After the pitch, Dana mentioned that by participating in viBe, you then have the opportunity to participate in viBe's other programs, like viBeSongMakers. She hands out two SongMakers' CDs, *HOTFIRE! Finally Someone Hears Us* and *6figures: Press PLAY for the Truth*. Both CDs feature

⁴³ viBeSongMakers CDs are sold online and have found their way into independent record stores in the East Village, Brooklyn, Paris, radio stations and print media (<http://vibetheater.org/2010/programs/vibeSongMakers>).

photos of viBe girls, all girls of color, in professional photo shoots held throughout the city. The covers are also adorned with graffiti-like elements that give the program a young, urban feel. Dana goes around signing people up for tryouts and handing out applications, which include the following questions: “Have you ever been involved in the arts (performing, writing poetry, singing, dancing)?”, “What do you do in your free time?” “Why do you want to be part of an all-girls group?” “What do you feel you can gain and contribute to other young women in viBe?” She also hands out a hot pink flyer, about ¼ of an 8 ½ x 11 torn sheet of printer paper, that features photos of five viBeStages alumnae, contact information and the following pitch:

Calling for high-school girls with a PASSION for
-acting!
-singing!
-DANCING!
-writing!

Wanna write songs/poetry/plays?
Wanna act, sing, dance, perform?
Wanna meet creative girls from all over NYC?
Wanna create an original show where you can Say It How It Is?
Wanna be part of an ALL-GIRLS theater company?
Join viBE! (viBeStages Program Book, Sept. 2006)

The flyer’s exclamation points beckon a sense of excitement, momentum and positivity while the questions at the bottom of the page set a context for what the girls can expect: creative license, connection, and the often too rare opportunity to speak out uncensored about what matters to you as a teenage girl in New York City. viBe alumnae—of all shapes and sizes, but mostly girls of color—appear on all of viBe’s marketing materials, which are trimmed to just the right size for

girls to squeeze into a pair of jeans or a mini pocket book. Recognizing that almost all of the girls I've seen on viBe's flyers and on its website are girls of color, I ask Dana how she and Chandra select girls for viBeStages. Dana tells me that they don't discriminate based on girls' race, ability or place of residence (any girl in New York's five boroughs can tryout). But they do give priority to girls who do not already have access to performance opportunities through their schools.⁴⁴

Even when viBe girls aren't physically present, their presence is felt everywhere when Dana and Chandra are recruiting other girls. But perhaps the most effective of viBe's recruitment strategies is its peer-to-peer recruitment activities. In the weeks leading up to viBeStages tryouts, Dana and Chandra invite viBe alumnae to hand out flyers to their friends, talk to their classes and teachers about viBe, invite friends to other performances and, if they wish, recruit girls in the spaces where teenage girls hang out (e.g. the mall, movie theater, McDonald's etc). There is never any obligation for alumnae to help recruit girls for tryouts nor is recruitment formerly promoted by Dana and Chandra. But alumnae who have expressed a desire to stay involved in viBe and help it grow, and who remember being recruited by peers themselves, often end up volunteering when they get an email from Dana and Chandra saying the next viBeStages is coming up.

⁴⁴ When alumnae were recruiting other girls at the mall and other places, I observed them making the viBe "pitch" to a few Caucasian girls who said they weren't interested. Because its mostly girls of color on the flyers and doing peer-to-peer recruitment, it's hard to know if Caucasian girls feel like they would belong in viBe even when they too have limited access to arts education in their schools.

It was a beautiful, sunny Saturday on September 16, 2006 when I joined Dana and two viBe alumnae at Manhattan Mall at W. 34th Street and Sixth Avenue in Manhattan to recruit girls for viBe. Dana and the “viBe girls” are all wearing pink shirts with the viBe logo (a dynamic, white silhouette of a young woman whose chin lifts upward and hair flows freely behind her with the word ‘viBe’ in hot pink radiating between her locks). Dana refers to the alumnae with us as her “superstar recruiters.” They are both high school girls of color.

The first “superstar recruiter” is in her second year of high school, full of energy and smiling ear to ear. She had just completed viBeStages the summer before and seemed eager to join viBe Songmakers the coming year. As we wait to get started, she closes her eyes and sings one of the songs (written and sung by another viBe alumna) off of the last viBeSongMakers CD, obviously having listened to it numerous times. The second “superstar” is a senior in high school and very professional looking with her hair pulled neatly back in a headband. I’d seen her twice before: once at the Youth Against Violence Festival which viBe produced (and Find Your Light performed in) and once at the viBe office where she was helping to transcribe writing from the viBeStages summer program as part of a viBe internship (now a job training program called viBeApprentice). Dana hands the girls hot pink flyers with hand drawn stars and squiggles announcing tryouts, a stack of applications, and a sign-up sheet and explains how the recruitment process works. Dana and I then role play with the girls, pretending to be young teenage girls asking them questions. The girls smile and speak quickly and enthusiastically about how much fun it is to be part of an all-

girl theater group and how you get to meet other people and be part of other viBe programs. The younger girl admits how creating your own script feels scary at first but assures us that Dana and Chandra help you out along the way. The older alumna had recruited girls over the summer and volunteered to take the lead in approaching girls. They take off to the food court as Dana and I trail behind, out of the way but close enough if they have questions.

While it was a slow day at the mall that Saturday, the girls worked on recruitment for two solid hours, making their pitch, in their own words, to teenage girls at major retail stores on Sixth Avenue such as Old Navy and Quick Silver, and later McDonald's. About an hour into recruitment, Dana invited them to continue on their own with the charge of bringing four new girls to tryouts that coming Friday.

By involving viBe alumnae in the recruitment effort across the city, featuring them on all of viBe's marketing materials and bringing their creative work (e.g. their songs, writing, visual artwork etc.) into the spaces of recruitment, Dana and Chandra center the viBe experience on girls from the very start and also communicate a message of girl empowerment, acceptance, and affirmation. Essence tells me that she tried out for viBeStages after a few of her friends had participated: "When I saw [them], I was like, 'I want to get along. I want to be like that too,' she tells me (personal interview). Her friends encouraged her, telling her: "It's a good way for you to get stuff off your chest and basically get yourself out there to other people our age or get to know girls our age from different places." Keisha, now in her senior year in high school, first did

viBeStages as a freshman. “They came to my school . . . [and when] I learned a little more about what viBe was, I was like, “Wow, that’s really cool. Cause before that, I wrote a lot of things but I never thought I could actually do something with it—act, be up stage, do anything like that. But then I did. I was introduced to viBe” (personal interview). Even for Julietta who was a student at the highly competitive LaGuardia Performing Arts High School, and a bit of an anomaly for viBe because she *did* have access to theater education elsewhere, said she joined viBe because she thought it would enable her to express herself freely in ways that formal arts education programs, and her school program, did not:

My mom got this email [about viBeStages from the Board of Education] and it was right after I . . . didn’t get into the school musical . . . we [also] have this program at school, New Music Singers, where we compose our own music and we have people who can help us bring it together. But the thing is, . . . if you don’t have a lead role [in that program’s productions] than nobody is going to know who you are. It doesn’t matter so much that people know who I am but know what I have to say. And with viBe I feel like I can say what I want. I can get all of these things out of my chest that I can’t do with people who are giving me these *things* [at school]. (personal interview).

The desire to (and expectation that they could) speak out, uncensored, was a universal reason for joining viBeStages among the eight girls in this study. Other reasons include getting over being shy; meeting other girls who “also like to

perform,” “who aren’t afraid to be silly,” and are “like me”; having fun, and being able to write and act on stage.

Redefining Power from Day One

When I arrive early on the first day of rehearsal at a small rented studio space in downtown Manhattan, Dana and Chandra are assembling a stack of brightly colored three-ring binders, which they call “viBe Creative Containers,” with hot pink, yellow, blue and purple colored pages (field notes, 4 Oct. 2006). I learn quickly that every material and exercise in viBe, despite what it is or where a method originates, is viBe branded. Teenage girls walk in tentatively weighed down by heavy backpacks they’ve carried from school. Their eyes scan the room for something or someone familiar and smile when they see Dana and Chandra or a girl they recognize from tryouts. Dana and Chandra call out their first name enthusiastically and run over to welcome them, “It’s so great to see you!” “I’m so glad you’re here!” After the girls drop their backpacks on the floor, Dana and Chandra immediately enlist their help with the assembly of their rehearsal materials. By engaging them right away in administrative tasks, they set up the expectation that responsibilities are shared between the youth and adult mentors. Two viBe alumni have dropped by to lend a hand and support the girls on their first day. Their presence signals that the girls are becoming part of an alliance that extends beyond this one program—if you want it to. viBeSongMakers’ *HOTFIRE* CD is playing in the background and the viBe alumnae start singing along, reciting the lyrics by heart.

Once all of the folders are assembled, Chandra calls together everyone into a small circle of chairs and welcomes them officially. She starts by asking everyone for a quick introduction: name, year in school, school they attend, former experience with the arts and the neighborhood they live in. As the girls offer these simple markers of their identity, the group collectively takes initial stock of its diversity for the first time and begins to make connections based on basic similarities. Within a few minutes Dana and Chandra quickly get everyone on their feet for a series of warm-ups. They start by asking the girls to shake out every limb of their body to the count of ten as fast as they can and then launch them into a series of super-fast jumping jacks. The girls are looking back and forth and laughing, not quite sure what is going on but reveling in how different it feels to just act silly. The series progresses into tongue twisters and simple vocal exercises and ends in some stretching and a mnemonic word-association exercise designed to help everyone learn each other's names. Community-based theater director, Michael Rohd describes warm-ups as having a three-fold purpose:

To get a group of people playing together in a safe space, to energize that space, and to create a sense of comfort in the collective doing of specific and structured activities. The goal is to demechanize the body and mind and to engage responses that are fresh and utterly in the moment. . . . It's all about creating moments where participation is impossible to resist, moving forward into the process you have set up, and having fun along the way. (4)

Over the next four weeks, Dana and Chandra introduce a repertoire of warm-ups that repeat over the course of the viBeStages process. The warm-ups are specifically referred to as “games,” taking them out of the realm of professional theater study and into the realm of childhood imagination and play when definitions and meaning are yet to be cemented (Edell, “Say It How It Is” 117). The girls learn to anticipate these games as a bridge from their “real lives,” which are chaotic and pulling them in a million directions, to the collective work of creating and rehearsing a new play.

After warm-ups on the day of orientation, the girls sit back into a tight circle in the center of the room and start flipping through their Creative Containers as Dana and Chandra outline the experience and their responsibilities.

Each three-ring binder contains:

- a calendar of all rehearsals and locations (which vary week to week between a midtown and downtown studio space)
- maps and directions to each rehearsal space
- a series of colored pages with samples of different genres of writing, some of which has been published by professional authors and others that has been written by viBe alumnae from past productions and programs
- A “viBeGirl Agreement” which identifies them as a “viBeGirl” and holds them accountable for their participation in this process:
As a viBeGirl in the viBeStages program, I ____ agree to: arrive to rehearsals/performances/fieldtrips on time [if I’m experiencing an

unavoidable delay, I will call or text!] I will come to rehearsals/performances prepared and ready to work. I will respect everyone in the rehearsal space, including myself! I will say YES to new things! I will behave professionally and respectfully as an ambassador of viBe in rehearsal, recording and performance venues. I will use every opportunity to express, inspire, achieve and collaborate!

- A resources sheet with information on community-based organizations that can offer information, advice and guidance in areas such as sex, eating disorders, violence prevention, depression and other prominent teen-related issues.
- Blank pages of paper for the girls to fill up with writing in the weeks to come

Significantly the three-ring binders can be opened to accommodate additional pages (Edell, “Say It How It Is” 119). Dana and Chandra invite the girls to email or hand them writing in any form and at any time of day. They also introduce a variety of writing exercises to the girls at each rehearsal, predominantly for the first four weeks. Everything the girls write is typed exactly as it’s written and printed on colorful paper, three-hole punched, and distributed to all of the girls in the ensemble at the next day’s rehearsal. Chandra explains: “We want you to write freely in whatever language or style you want to write in. If you feel like you want to use profanity, or you need to use the nicest language possible, or you want to use a language that’s not English, however you want to accomplish what

you want to accomplish, do that” (field notes, 7 Oct. 2006).⁴⁵ By encouraging girls to write uncensored and “publishing” the girls’ writing, unedited, for inclusion in everyone’s Creative Container, viBeStages legitimizes the girls’ words, thoughts, feelings and imaginings as teenage girls who have their own collective styles of expression and sends a message that every voice counts since these writings will become the basis of the final play script. This framework also enables the girls to recognize shared symbols of girlhood and differences of perspective among the group, as well as with teenage girls from past viBe programs whose work is also “published” in the containers. As the written work accumulates over the next three months, it is both a literal and figurative expansion of the symbolic boundaries of what girlhood can mean. That body of symbols is then shaped into an articulation of community that the group collectively commits to in production.

Freedom within Structure

Before closing out the first full day of rehearsal, Dana and Chandra also discuss viBe’s framework. They explain that each day of rehearsal, they will give the girls small assignments that may center on writing, movement, composition of a scene, etc. and sometimes assign “ingredients,” or elements that should be included in the written or physical composition such as objects, sounds, physical actions, text, theatrical conventions, etc. This approach is inspired by Anne Bogart’s composition technique for creating new work. Bogart is the artistic

⁴⁵ Because viBe wants the girls to write as freely as possible, the girls always have the option to circle or put a note around something they’ve written and ask that it not be typed up and distributed to the group.

director of SITI Company and runs the graduate directing program at Columbia University where Dana and Chandra both received their M.F.A. degrees. Bogart describes composition as “a method for generating, defining and developing the theater vocabulary that will be used for any given piece” (12). The list of ingredients “is the raw material of the theater language,” she says. Drawing from this concept, Chandra tells the girls up front: “One of the things you’ll discover really quickly is that “the rules” are just a framework [in viBe] and what you do with them is what you’re doing with them. We just give you a frame; that’s how we work. And you just do what you have to do to make that frame something meaningful to you cause everyone’s different” (field notes, 7 Oct. 2006). Each of these frameworks, as Chandra describes, contain words, actions, objects, senses, and other “prompts” that can be widely interpreted by the girls as they begin to build their own unique play about their collective experience as teenage girls in New York City.

Starting on the second day of rehearsal, the girls are given writing prompts such as: “New York, NY, I love you but...,” “The Perfect Moment,” “I’m an artist because...” and “In 10 years, I will see, I will smell, I will hear, I will feel, I will taste...” These prompts begin activating a symbolic repertoire of girlhood that allows for multiple interpretations as the girls share their writing and combine pieces into scenes, group poems, and other written genres. In the first three weeks, the girls also are asked to respond to songs, smells, physical objects and tastes as inspiration for writing, creating songs or choreographing movement that begins to

shape a new language for expression and for making meaning of themselves and the world around them.

In one activity called “Goddesses and Empresses,” the girls work in pairs with one girl leading another girl, blind-folded, on a sensory journey around the rehearsal space (field notes, 18 Oct. 2006). Neither girl can use their voice to communicate. As they get comfortable walking through the space and playing with various levels in the room, the girl who is leading starts introducing sensory elements such as honey, a feather boa, the smell of vanilla extract, the taste of chocolate, etc. to her partner. After fifteen minutes or so, everyone finds their way back to a group circle, takes off their blindfolds, and begins free writing about their experience as either a Goddess or Empress, terms that Dana and Chandra invented to signify equal but different women of power. After the first free-write, the girls switch roles. During the second “journey,” I observed a remarkable shift in the room. The first time they did the exercise, the pairs walked tentatively, kept to themselves in the room and simply explored a stimulus and moved on. But during the second round of exploration, the pairs began to riff off of each other and make bolder choices. Keisha starts swinging Saria around in circle and another girl starts waltzing. Someone starts a stomp routine and it ripples throughout the room as other girls start making percussion sounds with their bodies. New sensory objects are introduced and used in imaginative ways. A piece of gauze becomes a headscarf or a mask. The girls improvise with and interpret the stimuli they’re given, taking elements in new directions. When a piece of silk fabric is placed over Essence’s head, for example, she allows it to

transform her into a gypsy as she shakes her chest and glides through the space. By engaging multiple ways of knowing and interpreting one's environment through sensorial exercises like this one and *then* asking the girls to immediately incorporate their responses in writing, viBeStage's flips the hierarchy of play making on its head, putting sounds, movements, gestures, etc. on equal footing with the written and spoken word and enabling the girls' multiple knowledges to emerge.

Some of the writing that comes out of these exercises inspires the "ingredients" for subsequent physical and vocal compositions. Other times, "ingredients" are assigned to the ensemble such as elements "required" for a group poem the end of the first week:

- A taste of victory
- Two smells of survival (the theme for this viBeStages Fall 2006)
- A sound of conflict
- Two metaphors
- The first phrase: "We are survivors because. . ." (field notes, 14 Oct. 2006)

"These ingredients," writes Bogart, "are to a Composition what single words are to a paragraph or essay. The creator makes meaning through their arrangement" (13).

At the core of Bogart's practice is the philosophy that the context of new work is what makes it what it is. This philosophy is shared by viBeStages. It's not

about mastering “virtuosic technique” or striving to replicate a given social message, says Bogart. The focus instead is more local and specific to a particular time, place and orientation of people coming together. It’s about “internal decisions, structures, rules and problems” (4). The writing, movement, song and other manifestations that emerge from a process of problem-solving, combining ideas, experimenting and asking questions become “the art.” In other words, the art comes together when people interact and begin attaching meaning to things (e.g. words, actions, ways of relating, etc.) as well as embodying knowledge in new or reinforced ways. The meanings they attach to the “ingredients” are informed by their specific experiences and backgrounds. But a transaction of meanings also occurs that is responsive to the circumstances of the interaction and the framework (artistic and social) within which individuals are brought together, as well as the circumstances between that framework and the broader society. This process of making “art” is akin to Cohen’s concept of building community, which he describes as the interaction of symbols and the formation of symbolic boundaries that occurs when people desire or need to express their distinction as a group. In terms of agency, this notion illustrates that one’s ability to act and make meaning is not opposed to the structures within their cultural locations but rather enabled by them at the same time that those structures are also being re-shaped through artistic practice.

Having only one viBe rule which is that you make your own rules and create your own definitions within the context of a “safe space” is creatively messy but can be extremely empowering. “We have freedom and creativity, “

noted Julietta, “they give us guidance and direction . . . They don’t tell us what to do but they help us out in the process” (personal interview). In my interview with Keisha, she told me that one of the things she loves most about viBe is that “it helps [her] *say* exactly what [she] means but *also* understand for [*herself*] exactly what [she] means.” I asked her to explain further and she described how viBeStages’ prompts (e.g. writing and songmaking) and open process of inquiry around what various words, symbols, genres, etc. mean or could mean enabled her to begin to realize her own creative agency and to work through out how to use it in positive ways:

It helps me say what I mean to say because they don’t censor me . . . Last week, I was talking with Chandra [after a writing prompt which asked her to describe her background] . . . and I was like, “I don’t really know how to describe my background. I don’t really know where I’m from. I don’t really, like, identify with my background. Like I don’t ‘rep a flag’ or anything like that. And she talked me through it. She’s like, “You can create . . .,” I guess this is how she said it, “Describe a background.” And automatically, I went to background as a nationality. But she said, “What is *your* background? Where are *you* from? The person that you that you are now, *transitioning*. Take it deeper. Who has helped you become that person? That could be your background.” So [viBe] take[s] regular meanings in society and they say, “Create it into your own. Define it for yourself.” Or when we were in the

room last week and she said, “What do you think a melody is?” And said like, “Well, I don’t know what the technical thing is.” She said, “No. This is your definition. What do you think? What is melody to you?” So I guess viBe gives us, gives me, the ability to take things into my own hands, I guess. And they help me work through it.

At various times the girls described this way of learning as significantly different than the way they learn in their classes at school and other contexts in their lives. “It seems like society’s rules don’t matter at viBe. It’s like, “Just break free,” said Keisha (personal interview). “At viBe, if I want to be funny, they don’t take any [points] off,” describes Unique explaining how in school she gets marks of her grade if she tries to be goofy or if your answers don’t match the only “right” one (personal interview). Even Julietta who attended LaGuardia, a prestigious performing arts high school in Manhattan, admitted: “Going to a school like LaGuardia, you expect everything to be strict, not strict, but not to be playing games with your craft. There’s a certain way to do things . . . [and] there’s so much pressure on me from all these other places” (personal interview). When I asked her how viBe’s process was different and how it made her feel, she gave the following example: “I find that when I write, I try to do something different with my writing. And it’s harder. It’s a challenge for me. Before it wasn’t a challenge. I would have something. It would just come out. But now I’m working to do something that I want to do.” Julietta went on to describe how she was inspired by the different styles and approaches that other girls brought to the composition

which were challenging her to communicate differently through different artistic genres and interpretations of them. “I love the way [Keisha and Essence] write because it’s so different. It’s unique. I write more like of a poetic and vague type of way, if you read some of my writings. They’re up front and to your face. There’s no hidden meaning,” she said, “And it’s hard for me to write like that . . . but it’s so inspiring. If I can write in more than one way and talk in different ways . . . it would be so good to have different perspectives and different angles on things rather than being so narrow-minded and saying one thing and talking one way.”

By allowing the girls to freely create without censorship and to create and experiment with their own rules as a group is a form of utopia which also illustrates how some of viBe’s internal processes relate to broader strategies of community building.

“Isn’t the Change Supposed to Be Positive?”

The sense that “playing games with your craft,” as Julietta called it, was building towards something positive that they were constructing and learning to construct in real time was nearly universal among the group. In my group interview with the girls at the end of the process, Essence and Keisha said:

ESSENCE: We work collectively on this. In school, when I do play it’s separate. It’s like, “You messed up.” Or, “You have to fix that.” But us, it’s like ‘You messed up? Okay, I’m going to help you.’ In school everyone is trying to bring you down, but here everybody is working together in order to . . .

KEISHA [jumping in]: bring you up

ESSENCE: Exactly. And that's what I like about viBe. It's everything positive. Even if there's a bit of negative energy, it goes right back up.

Dana and Chandra set up an expectation of positivity from week one when they ask the girls to agree to “saying yes” to new things, including new ways of relating, accepting differences, integrating and building on ideas, and defining boundaries. As they give the girls prompts, they continuously remind them that their job is to transform these symbols into something that is meaningful, special and specific to *their* experience as individuals and as a group.

One week into rehearsals, the girls are asked to come up with their “power word” that will get them collectively through the day (field notes, 14 Oct. 2006). Some of the words that the girls come up with are: will, inspiration, motivation, love, encourage, vivacious, and finally “vibracious.” Chandra goes with the last one, “We’re going to be vibracious today,” she says and instructs them to collectively spell out vibracious with their bodies. “What does vibraciousness look like? Feel like? Sound like?” Chandra chooses vibracious because it has the word ‘vibe’ in it but also because the girls made it up. During another exercise two weeks later, girls are asked to look at a piece of writing and circle their “power phrase” and then have six minutes to translate that phrase into two eight-counts of movement. These are first steps in a three month process where they begin to develop their own language (both written and embodied) and rituals to

express themselves as well as take up space with the intentionality to activate and shape their cultural locations.

The idea of course is not for everything to be happy-go-lucky or to sugarcoat things, but rather to think about and experiment with how structures, scenarios, and ways of relating and producing knowledge *could* be different. The girls are free to express themselves and create a story about anything they like in whatever form or combination of forms they want to tell it in. The topics they choose to explore cover a wide range from the superficial to the serious. In Resurrecting WILDflowers, for example, the girls addressed popularity, homosexuality, sexual molestation, betrayal, eating disorders and loss of innocence to name just a few. In the limited rehearsal time they have with the girls, Dana and Chandra encourage them to clearly and specifically define the story they want to tell and explain how it is different than any other story about that topic told by a teenage girl. “How do you or your story change? What are you trying to reveal? How would you do it?” When ideas bubble up in rehearsals, Dana and Chandra always respond with “yes” even when the idea doesn’t relate to the play structure or plot that’s begun to take shape. They say “do it your way” when a girl can’t quite catch a beat in a movement game. There is no presupposed message or structure to match. The focus is on learning how to integrate and adapt ideas and finding creative ways to make the pieces fit together by association, no matter how diverse the group.

viBeStages: “A Moment In and Out of Time”?

viBeStages’ paradigm of acceptance and empowerment works at odds against a network of classifications that normally locate the girls in society. To emphasize and further demarcate the space of viBeStages rehearsals as separate and “more special” than the everyday, Dana and Chandra only allow “viBe Girls” into rehearsals (in other words those who have already been initiated into viBe’s culture) and consistently begin and end rehearsals with rituals that “seal the space and time of the rehearsal period and contain its structure within these boundaries” (Clement and Kristeva qtd. in Edell, 120). The effect is that viBeStages rehearsals take on a liminal character whereby the girls sense that they can test out different social roles and personalities, experiment with new forms of expression and meaning-making, form friendships and connections with girls outside of their regular cliques and regenerate aspects of social structure and normative culture that are limiting.

Social anthropologist Victor Turner notes that within a ritual process, the intervening “liminal” period is the space wherein the subjects of the ritual are symbolically “detached” from social structure and cast into a phase of symbolic ambiguity that is dialectically opposed to, but not isolated from, “everyday” life. In this “moment in and out of time,” Turner argues that ritual subjects have a heightened awareness of a “generalized social bond,” or *communitas*, that has “simultaneously yet to be fragmented into a multiplicity of structural ties” past the liminal phase (The Ritual Process 96). The liminal phase is not static or sustainable in other words. That which is generated or transformed within this

transitional phase is quickly re-aggregated or reincorporated into social structure. But for an immediate moment of liminality, and *in the moment*, Turner believed that people could experience *communitas* and its aspect of potentiality:

[Communitas] is often in the subjunctive mood. Relations between total beings are generative of symbols and metaphors and comparisons; art and religion are their products rather than legal and political structures . . . In [the] productions [of artists and prophets] we may catch glimpses of that unused evolutionary potential in mankind which has not yet been externalized and fixed in structure. (127-28)

As Cohen notes, subjects cannot simply shed their cultural markers and “step socially naked into neutral space” (98). Even within liminal-like experiences, like *viBeStages*, they are viewing and interpreting relations and symbols from their own cultural points of view and finding different meanings for them. However I do think that experiences, like the ones Turner describes, can invite, encourage and support people through a process where they are questioning and playing with meanings, interacting and combining in different ways, role-playing and experimenting—always with the knowledge that they have never fully left “real life.” While Cohen critiques Turner’s assertion that *communitas* can strip away social impedimenta, he agrees that rituals can be efficacious to community building in that its participants “return” with a heightened awareness and sensitivity towards community and with new examples of how boundaries could be re-drawn or re-affirmed.

viBe Rituals

From the first day, rituals are established to open and close viBeStages rehearsals. These rituals are practiced consistently throughout the ten week program, and repeated in viBe's other programs as well, making them recognizable from one viBeStages group to another and also throughout the "viBe Girl" community. "[Adolescent] girls in particular connect with the process of creating and maintaining rituals," argues Edell citing developmental research that suggests that experiencing competing impulses to fit into groups and establish themselves as individuals ("Say It How It Is" 121). "The viBe rituals celebrate and provide space for both impulses," notes Edell. These rituals are not only recognizable from one viBeStages group to the next, but also are incorporated into viBe's other programs allowing for bonding and continuity between viBe alum and newer participants and between viBe ensemble members and generations of viBe audiences.

Roses and Thorns

Girls start rehearsals together by checking in with each other about their days (sharing how they feel, what happened to them since the last rehearsal, what challenges they're working on, what they're looking forward to, etc.). This check-in ritual is called "Roses and Thorns," and is a popular activity in a variety of settings including camps, afterschool programs and team-building programs. It is also reminiscent of second wave feminism's focus on the personal as political (Hanisch). The girls, and the staff, sit in a circle on the floor of the rehearsal space and each share something positive about themselves (a rose) as well as a

challenge that they're experiencing (a thorn). When introducing the ritual, Chandra stresses how "bad" or negative things in their lives can also be thought of as challenges that they're working through. This simple shift in language immediately orients the girls to positive framework in which nothing is considered static or immovable. In the first rehearsal, Dana and Chandra introduce the activity with an actual rose, asking the girls what they think of when they touch the petals ("warmth," "happiness") and the thorns ("prickly," "pain," "heartbreak," "struggle") (field notes, 7 Oct. 2006). They point out that both of these states of being co-exist for all of us all the time and stress the importance of that dialectic for our survival. By forcing the girls to share something that's both positive and challenging about their daily experience as teenage girls, the exercise calls into balance a diverse body of symbols within the group which start to shape the symbolic repertoire of girlhood for this group.

This ritual has various purposes. Similar to storytelling in Find Your Light, Roses and Thorns enables the girls to share their personal stories publicly and to acknowledge, and bring into the room, the joy and weight that those stories carry. Hearing each other's stories, the girls begin to realize that they are not the only ones with a similar problem, desire, or achievement. "We speak open with each other because we feel that this is a safe space for us to talk about things," said Anie (personal interview). She says she can talk about her gay friend and his boyfriend openly here but never outside of viBe. "I can just say it," she tells me, "But other people I can't tell because technically I'm not supposed to tell anybody. But I can tell [viBe Girls] because they don't know him and they won't

judge him because most likely they have friends in the same predicament and they're in the same situation." What the girls often think are personal, isolated, experiences come to be understood as social, and socially constructed, ones. These stories, while particular to them, begin to reference broad themes (betrayal, loss, heartache, fear, jealousy, etc.) that constitute and give reality to the ensemble's boundaries as a community of teenage girls. As the weeks progress, the topics, feelings, and issues etc. that surface through *Roses and Thorns* aggregate into what is felt as a common body of symbols which allow for multiple meanings to emerge. What the girls' stories actually hold in common, in terms of their particulars, may not be very substantial. Cohen writes:

[community building] is a matter of feeling . . . although [a community] recognize[s] important differences among themselves, they also suppose themselves to be more like each other than like the members of other communities. This is precisely because, although the meanings they attach to the symbols may differ, they share the symbols. (20-21)

But through *Roses and Thorns*, and within the context of a girl empowerment program, the girls generate a symbolic repertoire that unites them in their opposition, both to each other and to those 'outside' of viBe.

Roses and Thorns also is a way for Dana and Chandra as facilitators to get to know the girls on a deeper level and to better understand the relationship between the stories that they are choosing to tell in the play and their own lives. The stories and the characters in a viBeStages show are intentionally fictionalized.

This is because Dana and Chandra want the girls to find what they call “a creative vessel” for what the story represents and why it needs to be heard by an audience. Fictionalization also introduces a degree of critical distance between the actress and the character that can open up room for reflection, allow her to more freely play with and express possibilities for what could be, and also provide a small degree of “protection” for girls who want to share something personal on stage but don’t necessarily want it attributed to their own experience. In truth however, Dana estimates that approximately 90% of the girls who say they’re creating a character are really playing themselves on stage, or some manifestation of who they would like to be (Edell and Thomas). In Resurrecting WILDflowers, all of the character descriptions the girls wrote for themselves mirrored the ways they defined themselves in *Roses and Thorns* (and interviews with me) and the stories that they incorporated into the production were all shared at one time, and often repeatedly, during this ritual.

Understanding where the girls’ stories are coming from in “real life” enables Dana and Chandra to help the girls craft a production that is specific but also one that poses questions similar to those that the girls are asking each other during *Roses and Thorns*, or that Dana and Chandra are asking them to consider in response to the stories they hear. It also helps them better support the girls through their creative process. By knowing that a girl is struggling in school or with her parents, that a breakup happened or a betrayal, or that she’s recently witnessed an act of violence or suffered a loss, for example, allows the facilitators to better meet the girls where they are at during the play development process.

They can draw on that knowledge to push the girls to go deeper with their exploration of an issue or to express concern if they feel the story she wants to tell might be dangerous or harmful to herself or others. In her own investigation of how viBe can sometimes perpetuate cultural narratives that are damaging to women, Dana explains that while viBe teaching artists do not censor the girls or edit or cut their writing, “when dealing with situations where girls are writing about actual lived experiences, it is important for the staff to responsibly give solid and critical feedback to the young writer about how the script she has written might be experienced by her audience” and “attempt to understand why she wants and needs to tell this specific story” (Edell, *“Say It How It Is”* 217). By giving critical feedback, viBe teaching artists can help girls resist reproducing negative stereotypes of women and narratives that silence or render them passive. They can also try to help girls’ understand the possible effects her story may have on audiences which often include close family and friends. Empowerment in viBe is not about fostering a false sense of autonomy. The viBe process stresses the role of others’ support and mentorship in the development of a person and a collective.

The Opening Ritual

After *Roses and Thorns*, the girls stand up and prepare to make the transition into the work of playmaking. This transition is marked by viBe’s Opening Ritual which each viBeStages ensemble creates on its own and is unique to that group. Dana and Chandra ask the girls to respond to the idea of “opening” with physical gestures and sounds. The subjects of this study came up with a

ritual that began with everyone turning a door knob, pushing open a door, lifting up a window pane and then flying out in a grand sweeping gesture that involved waving their hands like sparklers. Each day they, the staff and I performed this ritual in a tight circle making eye contact as we welcomed each other into rehearsal.

viBing Out

Rehearsals end where they began, with everyone back in a tight circle in the middle of the room. The girls and staff hold hands and make eye contact with each person. Once a connection is established, one girl begins by squeezing the hand next to her and passing the “pulse” around the group as eye contact is maintained. After the pulse is passed around the circle a couple of times, everyone squeezes each others’ hands a bit tighter and rushes into the middle, shouting “Power viBe!” There is typically a release of breath, laughter and sighs before the girls peel away back to their backpacks and ipods and exit the rehearsal space.

This exercise, also a favorite ice-breaker in afterschool and team building settings, carries special significance within the context of viBe Theater Experience, whose name itself signals a current of energy that is vital and empowering to human life. In fact, before viBe Theater Experience was incorporated, it was called PuLSe (Performers Using Life for Self Expression). Keisha’s mother Desiree remarked: “I always perceive the viBe as a vibration. Perhaps that’s my age kind of taking me back to the seventies [laughs], but it is. You walk into even a rehearsal and there is a feeling in the room of connection, of strength, and just excitement. Dana and Chandra bring a level of energy to a

rehearsal, never mind an event, that is extraordinary. And the kids literally kind of breathe it in and it's part of them. So [it's] almost like they're linked together" (personal interview).⁴⁶ Like a melody to a song, the energy that passes through the group during the "viBe out" is the foundation and recurring theme of their community building. No matter what conflicts come up during rehearsal or new creations or relationships formed, they come back to this recognition of *communitas*, or common human bond and connection as women. Keisha tells me:

It seems like society's rules don't matter at viBe. It's like, "Just break free." And I guess, I didn't exactly expect that at viBe because I guess being a freshman in high school that's all that matters—what other people think, what society thinks, and how you're supposed to act and whether you're picture perfect. And it's like you step into viBe and you go into rehearsal and they're like, "What's your roses and thorns?" and "Let's break free and let's do silly dances and exercises and stretch out." Everything for me in viBe is symbolic. The warm-ups is like, they're like, "Let's warm up. Let's break free." And to me, it's saying, "Let's shed the street. Let's shed society. Let's shed all the things we might care about outside of viBe. Let's just vibe. Let's vibe with each other.

⁴⁶ The mothers of viBe girls are only formerly invited to participate in one viBeStages rehearsal, discussed later in this chapter. However many of the mothers, especially of girls who have been involved with more than one viBe program, get to know Dana and Chandra and the internal community and culture of viBe well via performances throughout the year, interactions at special events and get together outside of viBe, etc.

Let's get to know each other. Let's get comfortable. Let's be ourselves, whatever that may be." (Personal interview)

A Restorative Place

By establishing consistent and repetitive rituals that encourage the girls' personal and embodied knowledges about girlhood to emerge and interact throughout the ten week viBeStages process and also from one ensemble to another, Dana and Chandra create a recognizable "viBe culture." "I think a big thing that we do in viBeStages, that's crucial for our other programs, is really setting up the viBe rituals," noted Dana in an early interview, "[It's] a specific viBe language that suddenly all of the girls [know]" (Edell and Thomas). Chandra agreed, noting in the same interview: "A girl can come back after four years and know that she can just walk into a [viBeStages rehearsal] because she can know how to viBe-out! . . . That vocabulary is constantly expanding too. Each year, something new gets added in. But it's just so dynamic to have a girl stop in before rehearsal and she knows." "She knows what we're doing that day," Dana says finishing Chandra's sentence. Chandra nods her head: "She knows. She understands it. And she knows how she can be part of that process."

For many of the girls, the boundaries of this culture, which they help to create, often feel remarkably different than those that signify the culture of their schools, neighborhoods, homes, etc.—sites where the rules of engagement are dictated for them. Marked by these recognizable boundaries, viBeStages becomes a kind of figurative "place" where many of the girls return to heal, rejuvenate and continue to build skills. Unique's grandmother Alice couldn't get over how much

more confident Unique was after only ten weeks in viBeStages. Unique, born with significant hearing loss, auditioned for viBeStages because she wanted to get over her shyness and act. Through viBeStages, she gained the confidence to not only tell deeply guarded secrets about a former molestation and acts of discrimination based on her disability, but she also performed the entire show using her speaking voice (sign language is her primary mode of communication in everyday life). “There was a sort of healing process that came from confidence,” Alice said, which was the outcome of viBe’s model of affirmation and celebration. There was the sense that “I can do it. I’m not ashamed. I know who I am. I’m not ashamed of the condition of my life and I can accept myself where I am,” noted Alice (personal interview). Similarly Keisha explains how viBe restores her sense of herself as a whole person coming together with other whole people. “I’m very worried that somebody is always judging me,” Keisha admits to me late in an interview, “So when I realized there were people like me, who don’t really care about what other people was going on, or who just care about their well being and care what they have to say, not really caring about the outside, for there to be a place where I can go, a safe haven, a utopia—viBe is my utopia. It’s like, there’s no judgment. I don’t feel that in school or in my neighborhood.” “It’s a necessary avenue for any young girl, whether it’s a big city or a small town, to have a place where they feel safe and empowered,” said her mother Desiree, “And if they don’t feel safe yet or empowered yet, they know there’s a place where they can go where that can happen” (personal interview). Essence, who was going through viBeStages for the first time, told me that for her “viBe [was] a new beginning”

(personal interview). In her interview with me, she acknowledged that the energy and creative freedom she felt during viBeStages was largely due to the fact that none of the other girls knew her. While certainly her style of dress and physicality carried significance as markers of her personality (Essence was highly outgoing, vocal and curvaceous girl with tight curly hair that she highlighted with bright pink streaks), her social position and story could be ambiguous in viBeStages. The liminal character of the viBeStages process enabled her to tell different stories and try out new roles. “It’s like [there are] two different stages,” she explains, “It’s like in reality, I’m at stage 10,005 and at viBe, I’m at stage two. [laughs] It’s two different worlds.”

“Girls like Me”: Articulating a Community of Difference

“We Have the Perfect Diversity”

Through activities in rehearsals, interviews and personal writing, the girls in the Fall 2006 viBeStages described themselves in a variety of ways that included, I am a “lesbian,” “a devote Christian,” “hearing-impaired,” “eco-friendly,” “bi-sexual,” “shy,” “bitchy,” “paranoid,” “a virgin,” “an actress,” “a writer,” and the list goes on. All of the girls identified as being girls of color, defining themselves specifically as African-American, Puerto Rican, West African, and Hispanic. All were born and raised in New York City though none of them knew each other before starting viBeStages. “The girls are very different,” noted Keisha about a month into rehearsals, “We all come from different walks of life, different ages, different nationalities, different opinions . . . Maybe we have some similarities in our style of dress but as soon as we open our mouths, you can

see the difference immediately” (personal interview). In this section, I examine how the viBeStages process works to activate a collective community of teenage girls while also celebrating their own diverse and mobile identities as individuals.

The first “stage” of viBeStages is designed to enable the girls to practice building community based on the connections they *do* have as opposed to some false ideal or grand universalizing narrative, as well as to raise their awareness of their own individual positions and capabilities as cultural agents within the group as well as individuals. It is clear from observing the girls throughout the first five weeks however that while they express a feeling of *communitas*, they do not yet know *how* to combine as a group. On the one hand, their sense of themselves as a community stems from a mutual desire to differentiate themselves from what they perceive as a false representation of teenage girlhood portrayed by popular media. As a bridge activity to the girls’ first attempts at writing scenes, Dana and Chandra lead them through a Values Clarification exercise that is designed to get them thinking about the importance of incorporating different perspectives into scenes and about how to represent those collective opinions into one “image” that doesn’t lose its specificity (field notes, 1 Nov. 2006).

The rehearsal space is divided into three areas along a spectrum: Agree, Unsure, Disagree. Chandra reads specific statements that touch upon topics and issues that the girls in viBeStages programs have raised in this round and previous years. The statements are open to interpretation. As each is read, the girls must make a choice as to how they feel about the statement. One of the statements that Chandra reads is “T.V. and magazines do a good job of portraying teenage girls in

healthy and positive ways.” Up to this point, the girls had been fairly spread out across the spectrum, unafraid to make bold choices, and voice their opinions about where they stood on issues such as voting, abortion, junk food in schools, the war and Iraq and parents’ restrictions, even if they were standing in the minority. But after this statement about popular media’s representations of teenage girls, the girls all sprinted over to Disagree without a blink and started feverishly discussing how “unreal” media’s portrayal of teen girls has become:

ESSENCE: You have to have blonde hair and blue eyes and labels.

LISA: The tan too.

SARIA: They’re not real.

LISA: They’re not real. No one has perfect teeth and perfect skin.

CELIA: Nobody is that skinny.

CHANDRA: So you think the typical media image of teenage girls is what?

ESSENCE: Labels and . . .

LISA: It’s fake.

CHANDRA: What does she look like?

ANIE: She’s super skinny.

ESSENCE: She has a little dog and a Louis Vuitton bag.

SARIA: Everything’s labels.

CELIA: Perfect teeth, straight blonde hair and blue eyes...

CHANDRA: And you think the *typical* teenage girl is like?

ALL: Us. Yeah, us.

SARIA: We have the perfect diversity.

The girls are all huddled together, some leaning on others, arms around shoulders, hands on hips. Their energy and proximity to one another make it seem like they are a common entity, masking the fact they have been moving along the spectrum in other instances with widely divergent views. In this moment, all of those similar and different values and opinions coexist under their shared identification as a community of difference. This is a boundary that they construct in opposition to a falsely perpetuated homogeneity or “status quo” (a white, upper-class norm).

But learning how to articulate an active collectivity takes more time. When girls are asked to write on their own in rehearsals, pens fly feverishly across notebooks telling stories that sparkle with stories that are specific and personal. But when asked to come together in the first few weeks to create a mutual piece, they stumble finding it difficult to maintain specificity, energy and connection and often falling into stereotypes that gloss over their situated narratives.

A week into rehearsals, the girls are asked to pull out any piece of writing that they’ve created thus far and share it with the group. Here is some of what they shared:

SARIA (reading from her “Perfect Moment” free write): The perfect moment is the highest floor in the room & shade in the room & the smell of vanilla with a nice cool breeze of relaxation . . . The perfect moment when it’s just me and my friends having a good time smiling. A perfect moment me & my

boyfriend chillin at a restaurant just having a marvelous conversation or when he tells me he loves me & explains why every time.

JULIETTA (also reading from her “Perfect Moment” free write):

The perfect moment, is never really perfect. Imperfections are what make us perfect. They uniquely set us apart from one another, this giving us reason to live. There have been a few perfect moments, some of them are so far back consequently I can't remember them. The one that keeps popping into my head is this. I was with this guy. We've established we've had feeling for each other however it was surpassing complicated. So we kept it as friends. He and I had the most craziest, delightful, funniest almost simply wonderful days. We almost always have a good time when we hang out, but that day especially stuck out in my mind. As we were walking in the rain, he just randomly interrupts the conversation and he says: “You're perfect.” And I say, “No, I'm not” listing my many flaws and him, being the clever person he is, says: well correct me if I'm wrong but isn't it a wise person once told me our imperfections are what make us perfect? . . .

ANIE (reading a new poem):

1. Why do you have sex?
2. because it feels good

3. because you lose weight
4. because you want to fit in
5. because he told you to
6. because you love him
7. because you wanted to
8. because you wanted to feel good
9. because you were pressured
10. because you were forced to
11. because you want money
12. because you want attention
13. because you want him to care
14. because you want him to stay
15. because you want to feel good and free
16. why do you have sex?

TASIA (reading a new poem titled, “The way God made me”):

I appear to be
Just like you
“normal”
good body
good height
perfect teeth
pretty face
a good dresser
great personality
but wait . . .
as they say,
no two personas are the same
no two people are alike
each person is different
because that’s how God made us
I have a hearing loss
‘cause that’s how God made me
I have a small vision problem
‘cause that’s the way God made me
I have the voice that I have
‘cause this is the voice God gave me
I have a speech problem I live with everyday
‘cause God loves me so much

He made me this way
unique
you don't have to like me
you don't have to accept me
I'm not asking so
please don't feel sorry for me
Just know that
I'm me for a reason
'cause that's the way God made
Me. (Field notes, 14 Oct. 2006)

As is evident in these samples, what the girls choose to write about, how they write, and what stories they feel are important to share publicly is vastly different, deeply personal, and often immediately responsive to how they are feeling that day.

Their next challenge in this early rehearsal was to get into pairs to write a poem together based on the writing they shared. They had to choose a theme for their Poetic Duet, three “hot words,” or “power words,” and at least two, untouched phrases from something they both shared. In any exercise when the girls are asked to combine their writing, the instruction that a few phrases from each girls' piece remain “untouched” is given. This is to ensure personal ownership of phrases or images that matter most to the girls will remain intact within the collective whole. As the girls pair off, Chandra plays a viBeSongMakers CD in the background and Dana goes around to each pair telling them that they also need to find the physical embodiment of those three words, using voice, space, the objects in the room, and each other. “It's more interesting if you use each other to integrate these pieces,” Dana notes, “You have lots of freedom today. Make sure each word has a spectacular physical gesture!” The

pairs are given only ten minutes to craft their piece and physicalize it. The girls struggle to figure out where to start and how to interpret the instructions together. Celia and Anie jump to their feet after a minute and start making broad, melodramatic and showy gestures. They can't stop giggling and jump in and out of the playing space making sweeping entrances and exits. After two minutes, they run off to the bathroom. Saria and Unique also get up on their feet almost immediately but seem more intent on working through how they're going to block the piece. Lisa and Julietta stay seated on the floor for almost the whole time trying to work out how to combine the writing and vocalize it. When Chandra calls out "60 seconds until show time" they jump up in a panic trying to work out what they've discussed but only Julietta really gets to practice the movements which she is largely directing.

The three aggregate themes for the short pieces were "What is Love?" "MisEducation is One of the Many Struggles in Life," and "Life's Ups and Downs." As the girls performed, their movements were stilted and disconnected from each other. Hardly any levels were introduced or moments of interaction. The girls largely performed the piece next to each other, reading from their papers and giggling when they make their gestures which are mostly generic and stereotypical. A girl falls to the floor holding her heart to represent heartbreak. Another opens a book to represent learning. The passionate, focused and jubilant energy the girls had when writing and reading their personal stories fades.

It is apparent from this early exercise that the act of combining is a learning process. Small practice exercises like the Poetic Duets lead to larger

assignments that eventually become building blocks of the viBeStages show. The Poetic Duet, for example, is a practice run for the eventual assignment of creating an all group poem that is dynamized (“brought to life”) with movement, sound and physical gesture. By asking the girls to give feedback not only on the writing but on how it was represented, Dana and Chandra also get them thinking how imagery and movement are also primary modes of communicating their story. There is the old saying, “pictures speak a thousand words.” In other words, images cross cultural and language barriers where discursive practices cannot. By asking the girls to find movements and ways of relating together to represent their words, viBeStages is encouraging a “new” language and way of understanding the world. Augusto Boal argues that imagery can “short circuit[s] the censorship of the brain” (xx). As a result, the ensemble members wind up creating images that visually expose society’s ‘hidden’ codes and rituals that have been working undercover to privilege some, while marginalizing (and disappearing) others.

Instead of prescribing a way that the girls should interact or showing them examples of other artists’ movements, gestural work or aesthetics to get them to “perform” better, Dana and Chandra enable the girls to discover their own means of representation and interaction through a “pedagogy of questions” (Freire and Faundez).⁴⁷ After the Poetic Duets, Dana and Chandra facilitated the following discussion:

⁴⁷ Fundamental to Paulo Freire’s concept of liberatory education is the notion that teaching is not about the transference of knowledge but rather about creating opportunities for students to construct and produce knowledge. Through

DANA: If you could make a statement as an audience member what draws you in based on the three pieces you experienced?

JULIETTA: I think it works best when you capture someone's attention by doing something that will grab their eye.

DANA: What things were similar?

LISA: They all talked about love.

[The group collectively acknowledges this, remarking how weird it is that they didn't talk about this theme before they started]

CHANDRA: If you had four hours and lights, costume, and music, how would you spectacularize your duet?

SARIA: Work on the movement

ANIE: Props . . . I would want a dictionary

JULIETTA: a guy and an alarm clock

LISA: a father and a husband

SARIA: a fake gun. Miseducation is one of the many struggles of life.

Through this process, Dana and Chandra begin to help the girls recognize similar values, norms and codes within their particular stories as social markers of girlhood. They also position the girls to think about what the most effective display of these social markers might be to get an audience to listen and see them.

questioning and problem-posing, the facilitator positions herself as a co-learner who is also in the act of discovery and construction.

Through small, early exercises like the Poetic Duet, the girls begin to consider modes of expression beyond the written word that they can use to activate their story about girlhood. As the weeks progress, they have structured opportunities to practice these various modes of expression (movement, dialogue, dance, etc.), as well as how to combine and create their own diverse individual styles. The girls are always encouraged to build on their own assets, rhythms and definitions (which are of course influenced by others) in these rehearsals, rather than replicate what they think an artistic style or form should be.

At the end of the first four weeks, the girls are introduced to songwriting as mode of expression and storytelling. This rehearsal is another example, further into the process, of how viBeStages encourages the girls to create their own collective language of expression to stimulate new discoveries and encourage improvisation based on their situated knowledges (field notes, 30 Oct. 2006). We circle up, shoulder to shoulder into a very tight arrangement. Once eye contact is established in the group, Chandra instructs us to allow a moment of breath into our bodies. She continues softly: “Now someone is going to start a sound and we’re going to see if we can build on that sound, whatever that means to you now.” Saria starts clucking with her tongue, snapping ensues and some screaming and stomping and clapping, but the group is fairly off tune and disjointed. The beat sounds more like something coming out of a game machine than a chorus. After a few seconds, we’re all “in it” but it sounds so horrible that we end up cracking up. Chandra starts us off again, this time asking someone to begin with a vocal sound. Julietta, the self-identified singer in the group, hits a medium to

high pitch, “ah” sound. Lisa tries to harmonize, but it is horribly out of tune. Unique holds her hand to her brow and shakes her head. Julietta starts going through variations of the note, but no one seems able to catch on. For a minute, Julietta gives up the note just as Dana had started keeping an even tempo with her feet. The group falls apart a bit laughing, but Dana continues to keep the beat. Slowly the group begins to refocus and find a beat again, building off Dana. Julietta’s voice croons like bird keeping a melody, which is offset by clapping, dancing, lower beats, stopping and a managerie of riffs. Chandra takes it up and back down again. Everyone breaks into smiles and claps.

CHANDRA: “So sound or song is what we’re going to be playing with today. And what we consider song might be what you consider song or may not be what you consider song. . . What do you think of when you hear song? When I say we’re going to write songs today, what do you think of?”

SARIA: It’s not what you say but the way it makes you feel.

UNIQUE: Poetry to music.

KEISHA: Melody.

CHANDRA: What’s a melody?

KEISHA: I don’t know the exact definition . . .

CHANDRA: Your definition

KEISHA: A melody. It’s a rhythm or a beat, . . . you know how something has a certain kind of melody? Like a sweet melody or a

soft melody or a hard melody? [Her voice falling into its own swoon or rhythm]. It's the way that it sounds.

JULIETTA: It's the foundation for the song [does a wave with one hand that drives forward], that it's constant and you build on.

KEISHA: It's that technicality with freedom of expression....[smiles]

Before Chandra tells the girls that they are going to create a song, she allows them to do it first and then calls their attention to the fact that what defines "a song" is open to interpretation. The girls brainstorm all of the different types of "song" and realize that these forms (rap, classical, pop, spoken word, etc.) all tell a story and have a rhythm.

Chandra next asks the girls to huddle around a CD player to listen to some of the songs that the girls in viBeSongMakers have produced, emphasizing that all of these girls have also gone through viBeStages. She plays three songs: a ballad, an electronic hip-hop-type song with a strong chorus and a song spoken to a beat. After hearing the songs, the girls all say that they can relate but Chandra points out that each is talking about a very personal experience: the loss of a best friend, a molestation and a quest for healing. The girls discuss that what they relate to are the songs' tempos and their choruses which are written as metaphors, each of which produce a particular mood.

Their next challenge is to come up with their own song that deals with the theme, "Get a Grip," which the girls identified as common theme among stories shared during that day's Rose and Thorns. Chandra encourages them to use the

specifics of what they shared in *Roses and Thorns* as it relates to the theme “Get a Grip” as a way of giving the audience a better perspective of what is happening not only in the world of teenage girls but also in their own experiences.

CHANDRA: So where do we start on this “Get a Grip” song?

What is the main thing you want to say?

KEISHA: What kind of song do we want?

JULIETTA: Up tempo, maybe, or just starting slow and the moving faster, maybe. I don’t know what direction, maybe anger, like you want to say something to whomever you’re trying to say it to. You want to get the point across.

LISA speaks up, timidly: I’m not comfortable with hip-hop. I can’t do hip-hop, so I just feel weird writing hip-hop.

UNIQUE: Never say never.

ANIE: I hate slow songs.

JULIETTA: We need to do something that combines all the different styles . . .

DANA: We need to stop worrying about labels and just start writing.

JULIETTA: Exactly. Forget about the genre of what it is. Just let it be what it is.

[Julietta rests her head on her palms, elbows on knees. Room is quiet for a few moments as everyone thinks].

JULIETTA [timidly but with some encouragement]: I have the last line: “Drink from reality and take a sip. I think it’s time that you get a grip.”

CHANDRA: So we got the last line. What do you want this song to say? Julietta, you were saying in the circle, that you wanted a song “that wakes people up?”

JULIETTA [speaking more confidently and loudly]: Yeah, something that finally gets through their heads. That they don’t hear [spreads her hands and arms out as though disseminating] but they listen [draws her hands back to her]. Because there is a very fine line between hearing and because they can hear something and it goes in one ear and out the other. But listening is when you absorb it and take it in and actually learn it and grow from that.

CHANDRA: So what kind of images do we need to have in this chorus to make sure those things happen? The fact that things are bigger than what you’re just seeing in front of you. The idea that to listen, to really listen, not just hear the sounds, but listen in a way that’s different than the ears . . .

KEISHA: The words that I’m saying are deafening because you’re not hearing me. It’s like I’m speaking to you –I’m speaking louder, talking slower –but you’re not listening...

[Dana encourages the girls to think of a chorus that rhymes with some of the words Keira just threw out there –Saria, Keisha and Julietta are the only ones tossing ideas out at this point]

CHANDRA: What are some words that come to mind, Celia, that focus on this idea that people need to get a grip, that folks are not listening, the small petty versus the bigger ideas?

[By encouraging Celia to think about this she subtly encourages her to join the discussion]

CELIA: “Time is short.”

JULIETTA: “Time is precious.”

SARIA: “If you don’t take action, you will realize things begin to slip.”

JULIETTA [extending her arm, with a more hopeful voice]: “Open your eyes. . . Ignorance is bliss.”

KEISHA: I wrote a poem once where I said I wished ignorance and bliss could co-exist, I don’t know. Something like that.

SARIA: Ignorance isn’t always bliss, but things seem to coexist. I don’t know. I’m trying to rhyme.

CELIA: Vanity is when you’re full of yourself, right? Or even vanity. People don’t care about anything about themselves.

JULIETTA: Vanity consumes you . . .

KEISHA: Oh wait, “Vanity can consume you if ...

CELIA: “Vanity can consume you. It’s your time to sink or swim”?

SARIA: “Fly or die.”

JULIETTA: “Or die trying.”

The conversation reminds me of our experience building the song together at the beginning of rehearsal. At first, it feels stuck and awkward. Everyone is self aware and hesitant to contribute. The beat is off. But once Julietta and Keira began discussing the need to make people listen, and gave the song a purpose, others begin to add on to the poem, either through rhyme or by interpreting the theme based on their personal history.

It was evident, however, that not everyone in the ensemble was inspired by the theme “Get a Grip” or felt comfortable sharing their ideas. Essence and Melissa were absent, but Unique and Anie never spoke up during this exercise. Chandra asks who is particularly inspired by the “Get a Grip” song and Julietta and Saria immediately raise their hands. “Maybe not “Get a Grip” . . . maybe something else that goes with it. Now we’ve thrown in ignorance, family, time...” “Can we throw in attention too, cause some people do things for attention.”

Chandra asks Julietta and Saria to take what the group has written and to expand on it. She then invites the rest of the ensemble to create different songs that either come from *Roses and Thorns*, are based on themes that start to populate the “Get a Grip” song, or are “just burning away at your soul.” These songs are shared at the end of rehearsal and become part of the girls’ Creative Containers and fodder for the final play script. They range from a soulful ballad to spoken word to a

song that is simply read with a dark and deeply angry tone. By allowing the girls to break off in this way, Chandra enables all of their voices to be heard and styles to surface.

viBeStages rehearsals move either from the particular to the collective, as illustrated in the Poetic Duet rehearsal, or from the collective to the particular, as shown in the song-making rehearsal. Both directions encourage the girls to maintain the specificity of their personal experiences while combining, expanding upon and using their own stories and styles of expression to shape a collective story. By doing so, viBeStages starts to infuse new vitality into seemingly predictable symbolic codes of everyday teen life (e.g. falling in love, losing a friend, discovering your sexuality, breaking rules). “[Our play] comes from real life situations [which] may be small to certain people [but] to [us] it’s a big deal. And if you expand on it, it could change how the world views your situation and what they get out it,” Essence explains (personal interview).

It’s important to note that while the girls discuss the architecture of creating narrative scenes (after the Values Clarification experience), these first four weeks of rehearsal mostly have the girls using poetic forms to combine their writing and performance styles, which are dynamized with sound, movement, etc. The actual construct of the narrative arc of the play doesn’t happen until after this stage of experimenting with writing and performance styles and learning how to combine. At one point in rehearsal, Dana explains how poetry has the power to “saturate” and “compress” their varied experiences into one “bouquet” (field notes, 29 Nov. 2006). This philosophy is influenced by theater artists Augusto

Boal, Anne Bogart and Liz Lerman, all of whom differently address the power of using combinations of physical gesture, word play and turns of phrase to open up ways of making meaning of symbols, ways of relating, issues, topics and themes. Poetry, song and poetic movement are effective ways of articulating a community of difference by the very fact that they are imprecise. They open up meanings and directions at the same time that they link experiences and actions. In the construction of the final play script, these poetic interludes serve as bridges and connectors between situated narratives that are not only different in terms of their content but also are differently told by the girls who create them. Audience members are asked to hold both “realities” in their view simultaneously.

The Big Talk: Symbolizing the Boundary of Community

Before play development officially begins, Dana and Chandra set aside two rehearsals for what they call, “The Big Talk.” During these days, the girls must decide what they want their play to be about. Each girl is asked to bring in three of their favorite pieces of writing, plus a new piece that describes at least two things they want the play to be about. They also need to choose two pieces that another girl wrote. Before the girls come to rehearsal, they are asked to consider three questions: 1) What do you want the play to *say*; 2) What do you want it to be *about*; and 3) What are three important issues to you?

The girls enter the rehearsal on the first day of the Big Talk in eager anticipation of getting the play “started” (field notes, 6 Nov. 2006). On the floor are five pieces of poster board titled: Existing Writing, Possible Titles, Content [e.g. what they want to say], Form [styles of expression, how they want to say it]

and Just Because. The girls' first task is to comb through their Creative Containers of existing writing and ideas and begin creating lists of what they want to include in the play script. Under form they can include one of the genres that they've already explored over the past four weeks or make one up. "Like a rap-a-ballet," says Chandra smiling. As the girls begin nominating each others' pieces for inclusion, as well as their own, Dana and Chandra keep reminding them to focus on why they like these pieces and what they're collectively trying to say, as well as to locate recurring themes. The girls are also reminded that there are no rules except that they need to find a narrative arc that allows them to connect all of their characters.

viBe alumnae have been invited to the Big Talk to talk about what kinds of "containers" or play structures they've come up with during their viBeStages experiences in the past. The two examples given both take place in a secluded location (e.g. a teen lounge and an elevator) and also contain a crisis or conflict, the girls acknowledge. Keisha tentatively asserts: "Part of me feels that we *shouldn't* all be secluded, we shouldn't all be together." "Maybe we should try to get to know each other like the process that we're going through to get to know each other now," Julietta chimes in immediately, "We're all learning about each other and discovering different things about each other, which could be the surprises like our flaws and also our relationships . . . it could be open."

This is the spark that eventually fuels the development of Resurrecting WILDflowers. But it takes the girls two days of intense brainstorming and

negotiation to find the structure of their play. On the Content board, the girls have written a broad variety of themes:

Flaws

What Makes Us (Teenagers)

Homosexuals

Love, Relationships, Friends, Family

Transitions in Life

Changes, Sex [Sex is starred]

Appearances and Self-Loving

Rebirth of Ourselves in the Face of Adversity

Pressure

Pressure for Having Sex

Scribbled in the margins are examples of writings that exemplify these themes. Their challenge is to find a way to create a play structure that allows all of these varied experiences to co-exist and collide with one another. Dana and Chandra purposely press them to find a structure first before deciding which stories will be included or what message they want to convey. They are asking the girls to aggregate their personal stories into broader symbols but also inviting them to select out those experiences which they feel are most important to share as representatives of the whole.

In order for the girls to want to invest in the creation of their collective story as a community, the story itself must be highly symbolized in order to accommodate all of their diverse experiences without compromising their

individuality. When it comes to building communities of identity, Cohen notes that the formation of community as a symbolic boundary can be motivated much like a social movement. Communities are motivated to assert their boundaries when they feel they are under threat or being silenced, argues Cohen: “They do so because [and when] their members recognize their own voices within [the community], and because they feel the message of this vocal assemblage . . . to be informed directly by their own experiences and mentalities” (109). When the participants feel they can invest in the collective building of a community, Cohen notes that “the gloss of commonality which [that collective story or identity] paints over its diverse components [can give] to each of them an additional referent for their [individual] identities” (109).

With that said not all of the girls had equal input into the development of the Resurrecting WILDflowers play structure. Strong, leadership personalities rose to the surface and in many ways dictated the course of the discussion. Juliette’s facility with language and her previous theater experience often made her a self-conscious leader in the group. In interviews with her and her mother, I learned how she was uncomfortable in this role but felt pressured to take the lead when other girls wouldn’t offer ideas in the beginning of the process and later came to depend on her. I wonder if this situation would have played out similarly if the ensemble did not include anyone with extensive theater training. During the Big Talk, Julietta kept referring to the experience the girls were having in viBeStages—the act of trying to discover what they all had in common—as a metaphor for the play. And eventually she came up with the idea that all of the

girls' inner-children would be trying to get in touch with their outer selves through mysterious letters:

JULIETTA: Yeah, our subconscious is meeting our conscious.

[The girls, excited by this idea, start talking about different movies that remind them of this.]

DANA [cutting in]: Okay, okay, let's write our show. Who cares what Hollywood did.

[Saria points out that a lot of them started with something from their pasts, but the group could take it deeper and all be children.]

ANIE: Or we could meet in déjà vu

KEISHA [latches on to this stream of thought and articulates her vision for the opening scene]: Each girl comes in one at a time with a letter and then each girl is like, "I know you." You've seen them before.

JULIETTA: And the signatures, we don't recognize them because it's us in our child form so we can't really read them.

ANIE [more as a cheerleader than a contributor]: That's so cool.

We're so smart.

DANA: Keep going. What happens?

[Someone suggests that they all knew each other from childhood.]

JULIETTA: We're long lost friends!

KEISHA [whispering]: That's so cheesy [slightly joking]

JULIETTA: I know.

KEISHA [covering up]: But I like it though.

SARIA: We're all drawn together because we've survived some tragedy. Different things, but something tragic to us, whatever tragic means to us.

DANA: What's specific about that day?

KEISHA: Maybe we don't all have to know all of us. Maybe I just know Julietta and . . .

JULIETTA: We've been to this place before but we don't recognize it to the end.

ANIE: An elementary school, I don't know . . . yeah a building, a burnt out building.

[Chandra comes over and sits next to the group and asks them to summarize what they've come up with so far.]

JULIETTA: So we were talking about little Keisha and we all came up with the inner child and our inner child sends a letter to each of us but we don't know it's our inner child . . .

MELISSA [referencing an earlier conversation]: Unique came up with that we should all have a letter and all meet in the same place.

JULIETTA: And I came up with the inner child part and we started building from that. And so and then we thought that we all have a repressed memory that we're trying to figure out and we're all connected somehow but we don't know how exactly and the place that we're in resembles the day and the actual day that it's

happening, Keisha and some other people said it could be the actual day the tragedy happened or it could be like the year after we first met.

CHANDRA: How are the girls connected?

[All the girls start talking at the same time but Keisha cuts through explaining a Déjà vu moment where they realize they know each other from the past. Keisha immediately imagines the first scene where they all show up with their letters, reading the words aloud and then one at a time another girl enters the stage, each of them asking the other “What are you doing here?” as the next girl begins reading her letter.]

DANA: So what does it build towards?

CHANDRA: So what’s the major event that happens? What’s changing in this play?

KEISHA: “We’ve all lost something that we need to recover.”

(Field notes, 6 Nov. 2006)

Unique, Anie and Lisa have little input into this conversation which results in the structure of their play; and Essence was absent the day of the Big Talk. Because the girls are all looking down at sheets of paper on the floor and talking all at once, Unique is largely unable to read their lips or hear what they are saying. Lisa admits later that she doesn’t want the play to be about sad or painful things which she feels are stereotypical of teenage girls, but that she felt like she couldn’t speak up because all of the other girls wanted to talk about their “tragedies.” On the

second day of the Big Talk where the girls refined their ideas and came up with a title for their play, Lisa was late and would barely make eye contact with anyone the whole afternoon.

Community-based theater scholar Sara Brady argues that collaborative art making can have an unintentional effect of boiling differences into simple dichotomies and stereotypes or of cloaking them entirely in a rhetoric of celebration and healing. She writes: “Often connection with community voices is a connection with the dominant ones, with the community leaders. The cast is made up often of the “active, involved people” (71). The way viBeStages is structured forces girls into being actively involved.⁴⁸ However as shown in the example of the Big Talk, this was not always the case when it came down to a selection process where the girls had to make major decisions about play structure, content and theme that ultimately informed the dominant markers of their symbolic boundary as a community. When I brought this up with Dana in my final interview with her she said: “It’s a myth to assume that collaboration is always equal on everybody’s part. That if you have eight people, they’re going to each give twelve percent. That’s not what collaboration is. It’s more consensus” (Edell, personal interview). And it would take years not months for everyone to agree, she noted.

⁴⁸ Beyond creating the major narrative of the play, the girls were required to work together to create and perform poetic compositions, and a group dance, poem and song that related loosely to their characters and dialogues in the play but also were widely open to interpretation and different embodied variations.

Learning to negotiate differences and represent them democratically in a collective performance is not necessarily something that a group of untrained collaborators and artists can be expected to do well in ten weeks. viBeStages is kept to ten weeks because that production schedule enables Dana and Chandra to serve three groups of girls throughout the year.⁴⁹ But the program is also intentionally situated within the context of a long-term process of building skills and shaping community which viBe's other programs are set up to sustain for girls until they are eighteen. Part of the experience of viBeStages as a core program and as an "initiation rite" into viBe's other programs is working through how accomplish a "good show," or cultural product, at the end. Dana explains:

We have a lot of programs that accomplish different things. But the big thing [for viBeStages] is they need to feel like they accomplished a good show. . . . It's such a frantic rush to get a script together that we don't take the time to really look at *what* they're writing and the content of it and the meaning of all of it. It's just like, "Okay great. Write that. That's in the play." "Okay, you're going to write that scene? Boom. That's in the play." . . . The viBeStages shows are really about [openly] *exploring* who they are [or who they wish they could be]. So we let them do that [unrestricted] because it needs to be about them being able to say the things that they want to say. (Edell, personal interview)

⁴⁹ Demonstration that a program serves a significant number of persons is often a requirement of grant programs as well.

A “good show” for viBeStages is about enabling the girls to realize that they can create something that has resonance and people can respond to. Similar to Find Your Light, the final performance for the youth is about realizing the potential of their role as cultural agents while allowing communities, accustomed to seeing youth only in terms of their deficiencies, their needs, and their risks, to recognize youth also for their enormous potential as community resources. Dana notes further that:

There are people who expect it’s going to be a teeny little children’s theatre production that’s going to be sketches looped together like a high school talent show. . . . It’s a full length show. It has different standards than a professional production but those girls are pouring their hearts out and I’ve had so many friends who come from the professional theater world in New York and say, ‘That’s the best theatre I’ve seen in New York because it’s so real . . . It actually looks like they wanted to be onstage’ [or] ‘It’s been so long since I’ve felt like everybody on that stage felt like they had not only earned the right to be there but really wanted to be there.’ We get that response a lot. It’s more than having fun . . . it’s that hunger . . . it feels like they have to be there and have to say these things as part of being a teenager and feeling like what you have to say is the most important thing in the world. And when [they’re] on stage, it is. (Edell, personal interview).

Articulating Differences

To offset the tendency of viBeStages' short collaboration process to flatten the individual differences, nuances, experiences and stylings within a group which are vital to their sense of cultural agency and to community building, Dana and Chandra have built elements into the viBeStages production which accentuate the ensemble's differences and individuality.

Two Minutes in the Spotlight

The first main element is called "Two Minutes in the Spotlight." Each girl in the ensemble has two minutes within the hour-long play to say whatever they'd like, however they'd like, as either their character or themselves. They also have the option of staging the other girls in their Two Minutes—this is yet another way of reinforcing the idea that individual empowerment relies on the support of others. While most of the show is collectively created, the girls' individual Two Minutes allows them to celebrate their own unique story, perspective and style, whether it's congruent with the larger play structure or not. Dana introduced the Two Minutes in the Spotlight element to the girls during the Big Talk:

There's no star. But because the show is developed collaboratively as a group, each girl gets her own two minutes where you're director. So that's your chance to do whatever you want. You can sing a song, you can do a dance, you can do a monologue. You can do anything. The only rule is that you have to create it yourself. It has to be your words. Also it does not mean that you're alone on stage for two minutes and everybody else leaves the stage and

you're alone. You're the director of those two minutes, which means you can say, 'Hey, I'm going to do this really cool monologue and I want everyone else to be moving in slow motion while I'm doing the monologue.' . . . So if you feel like there's something that you really want to get out that doesn't fit in with the rest of the play, this is your chance to get it out. (Edell and Thomas)

The Two Minutes are designed to protect any girl who might feel the play's larger narrative is not representative of what she wants to say. Sometimes a girl's Two Minutes is very different in texture, feel and content than the rest of the production which is "fictional." The girls in Resurrecting WILDflowers performed a range of stories, in various and nuanced forms, that included asking a friend for forgiveness, accepting a disability, seeking revenge against men who violate you, trying to distance oneself from friends who turn on you, loving oneself, demanding change through education, fulfilling a wish that you in turn hoped someone would fulfill for you, and saying goodbye to a friend who died. For a general audience member, it could be difficult to know that a Two Minutes was happening in Resurrecting WILDflowers because the production was already a collage of genres and included characters that closely resembled the girls in real life. But for viBe alumnae who know to look for the girls' Two Minutes in the Spotlight or for family and friends who can recognize the girls' personal stories apart from the larger narrative, the experience could be different. It has the potential to draw focus to the constructed nature of the actors' roles in the play, as

well as allow intimates to recognize similarities and differences between the girls' personal stories in this show with those of viBe Girls in previous productions who previously have shared their Two Minutes in the Spotlight.

The viBe Cheer

The second element in a viBeStages production that celebrates the girls' differences within a collective is the viBe cheer. Similar to the moment at the end of Find Your Light's production of Understand To Be Understood when the ensemble says their real name and the school that they attend, the viBe cheers serve as a kind of curtain call in viBeStages productions that reveal the constructed nature of the production itself and position the girls as its makers. Unlike the interventionist ending of Understand To Be Understood however, the viBe cheers have the effect of a heightened celebration. There are a few "ingredients" which brand viBe cheers and make them recognizable as a celebratory viBe ritual in every viBeStages production. Each girl must include her name and one art form (dance, step, song, acting etc.), another strategy to position the girls as artists. Parts of the cheer must rhyme, if not all of it. The girls must come up with a unique rhythm for the cheer and it must be at least five lines. Once the girls have created their cheer, they direct the other ensemble members on how to accompany them. The cheers are performed with everyone on stage, usually in a circle or a row behind the individual. While one girl performs her unique cheer, the rest of the ensemble supports her with a synchronized beat and percussive choreography that may include thigh-slapping, foot-stopping, or clapping gestures for example.

The viBe cheers are introduced and assigned to the girls one week into the program but the ensemble doesn't rehearse them as a group until a few days before opening night, giving them a fresh and "spontaneous" feel. As with all introductions to viBe's "ingredients," Dana and Chandra contextualize the viBe cheers in viBeStages by asking viBe alumnae to perform their cheers from a previous show (Celia, a viBe alumna who was doing viBeStages for the second time, performed her cheer for our group) and by playing recorded cheers by viBeSongMakers. The first tracks on both viBeSongMakers CDs that had been produced by Fall 2006 featured cheers that blended rap, rhyme, spoken word, and singing set to music or an electronic beat. Again this practice reinforces a shared language and culture between generations of "viBe Girls." The original idea of using cheers in place of a regular curtain call where girls would simply say their name to introduce themselves came from the girls in viBeStages' third production. "The girls really wanted to do it and it was such a fabulous, exciting part of ending the show that we just made it part of viBe because it's so much fun. It has become part of the rituals of viBe," explained Dana. "It's part of the currency of alums to each other. Of 'Oh, I remember your cheer!' They all remember their cheers. They all learn each others' cheers. It becomes a fun game of like the cheer they made for their show two years ago was different than the cheers they're making now. . . . The cheers have gotten so much more intricate since the first show" (Edell, personal interview). "You almost wait for the moment of the viBe rap [in every play]," says Jeff, long-time viBeStages theatergoer and youth theatre director, "it has become the touch point. It's that

rhythm. Every girl that does this will have her [five] lines . . . And the girls in the audience kind of know when it's happening, so it really says to me there's a continuity . . . and of course, the lyrics are about claiming ownership of yourself and of who you are as part of this structure" (personal interview).

The practice of cheering is linked to the stepping which, as described in the previous chapter, developed out of black fraternities and sororities throughout much of the twentieth century. African-American studies and ethnomusicologist Kyra D. Gaunt, who has studied the history of cheering, writes:

[Historically cheering] involves creating in-body formulas that represent the unique identity of each group, by sampling and re-composing aspects of black vernacular style and expression as well as moment of popular recorded song from gospel to hip-hop, from preaching to playing Dozens. Competing groups try outdo one another by choreographing a funky routine of embodied percussive beats and chants, collectively enacted by the group that names the individual members, while also signifying their unique group identity (i.e., individuality within collectivity). . . . The fun of performing cheers is the synchronization of voiced chants and the uniformity of embodiment, signaling a team or group effort, even while many cheers internally feature antagonistic narratives of self-assertion within the group, often through call-and-response structures. All of this becomes apparent in the act of naming the

self, and claiming to share a group identity that is black and female. (76-80)

Gaunt argues that for black girls in African American contexts embodied games like cheers generate and pass on rhythms, gestures and movements that are encoded with knowledges of femininity and masculinity and become “a path to learning [and expressing] ethnic group and gender identity” (4). She notes that it is not the embodied form (i.e. the cheer) that carries a black music aesthetic or social meaning that if practiced by girls from other ethnic groups would precipitate the same effect. Rather what matters in her view are the specific social memories and meanings that are passed down from one generation of African-Americans to another and play a significant role in the social construction and knowledge of being specifically African-American.⁵⁰ Gaunt’s argument that some culturally specific artistic practices have specific resonance and meaning making power for particular ethnic/identity groups tracks with Diana Taylor’s notions of “acts of cultural transfer” and is an example of how the use of these practices in programs like viBe can bridge with an external process of building community if the participants and their audiences share this cultural identity.

Gaunt’s study of the history of cheers and the work that they do in terms of transferring cultural meaning within a specific ethnic group raises questions about how cheers are used in viBeStages because not all of the girls are African-

⁵⁰ Gaunt references Gayatri Spivak’s notion of “strategic essentialism” to make the case for centering her study of the work that “the games that black girls play” in the transference of historical and cultural meanings within the African-American context. Spivak argued that a type of temporary solidarity among identity groups is often needed for the purposes of social action.

American, nor do they always identify as being of color. While the cheers in viBeStages reference an African-American context, Dana and Chandra specifically ask the girls to interpret and play with the form in their own ways. The only consistent ingredient is rhyme and beat. While many of the rhythms and stylings echo and cite African-American step routines, they tend to feel more like a collage of styles than a synchronized step or cheer routine. The manipulation of the form in viBeStages retains codes of femininity—the cheers are recognizable as games that are reminiscent of girlhood—but do not necessarily transfer social meanings specific to being African-American as Gaunt suggests. As such they restrain meanings while still allowing girls to bend and improvise with their rhythms, movements and codes. They also position the girls to use the artistic form to experiment with shaping culture more broadly by producing and improvising \with beats and rhymes that resemble contemporary hip-hop aesthetics and other commercial forms of popular song which dominate the popular teen music culture in New York City and are typically produced by men.⁵¹

⁵¹ In her analysis of cheers and other “games that black girls play” (i.e. double-dutch and hand-clapping games), Gaunt also argues that the rhythms produced by these games are largely equivalent to, and largely inform, those found in the music produced by the mostly male-dominated rap and hip-hop industries. Gaunt argues that just before adolescence, girls stop playing these games and primarily become the consumers (listeners and dancers) of music rather than its producers (92).

The following viBe cheers from Resurrecting WILDflowers are examples of how the girls manipulate the form to articulate their individual differences while at the same time claiming a shared group identity as teenage girls:

LISA

[spoken softly and danced with swaying and circular motions]

Hey, my name is [Lisa]
Nothing rhymes with my name
So I'm just going to play this game
When I smile, you see I'm bubbly
Just look at me, you know I'm lovely
I like to make tasty sweet treats
And dressing you in fashionable pleats
You know this play will be inspiring
'cause you know me in it will make it juicy
In this play I'm Phoebe and I'm so unique. . . .

JULIETTA⁵²

I don't do [J] to the [U] to the [L] to the [IETTA]
I do it in a different electric way
my friends call me [Julietta]
Cause I'm sweet like candy
Everyone sees me as this shy quiet lil girl
[sings the next line with the girls echoing parts of her song as chorus line behind her]

But my larger than life voice will rock your world
I can outdo the boys on anything I put my mind to
Run fast, clever comebacks, eat more than they do
Thankful for everything I have from the lord above
When you think of me now, I remember my name means love

KEIRA

[skips out of formation in a playful, girlish way with everyone following her in a circle]

My name is [Kiera] + I'm a cool girl
I don't do the cheer thing but
imma rock your world
when it comes to writing I do my thing

⁵² All of the girls' names have been changed to the pseudonyms I'm using for them in this study so some of the lines do not rhyme with their names as they did in the actual production.

ALL
Oh yea, Oh yea
she does her thing

KIESHA
*[skipping, cutting through the circle, and then lining up in a diagonal with everyone behind her striking “old school” hip-hop poses]*⁵³

ppl like to judge me but I
don't really care both guys +
girls they love to share
I'm cute, I'm sassy, I'm kinda fly
2 nite I'm Zahyria don't ask me why

ANIE
Yes U know my face
I can make u disappear w/o a trace

ALL
We wanna hear u sing

ANIE
u wanna her me sing?
[singing this next line]
my voice comes out of the lips of an angel
Devilish smile
Sassy style
Rock ur world
My life u'll taste
the boys they'll chase
u can't erase
My name is [Anie]

ALL
Her name is [Anie]

ANIE
And I play George⁵⁴

⁵³“ Old school hip hop “references early commercially recorded hip hop music from the late 70s to the mid-80s (ending around 1984 with the launch of Run-D.M.C), and is generally characterized by simple rapping techniques.”
<http://www.hiphopgalaxy.com/Old-school-rap-hip-hop-2091.html>

⁵⁴ Anie chose to play her friend George in the play who in real life was struggling

As each girl steps forward for her cheer, the beat behind her shifts to match her tone and style but never drops out. The uniformity of the ensemble's echoes and rhythmic embodiment of the beat signify a shared identity as a group that both informs, and is given form by, the variations of the individual performing in the center. Throughout the cheers, each girl transfers energy to the others in a mutual exchange of support and affirmation. As Chandra explains to the girls in rehearsal: "You're actually bringing some kind of energy to the person [in the center and] she's asking you to help her out" (field notes, 17 Dec. 2006). None of the cheers in Resurrecting WILDflowers came 'naturally' to the girls, nor did learning each others' styles of movement and rhymes. When I brought this up to Dana in our final interview, she called the cheers "a microcosm of a viBe show" (Edell, personal interview). The cheers require the girls to incorporate many different elements and knowledges and to depend on one another in order to communicate who they are as a collective and what they want to say in a concise, dynamic and exciting way.

Because the cheers typically come at the end of the show (though not always) and are upbeat, they reinforce a sense of celebration and closure that seals the boundary of the community of girls while acknowledging that all of these various styles, ways of interacting and differences co-exist within it and are what give it its vitality. The image that is created at the end of the show is creatively

to get his family to accept his homosexuality while relying on Anie and her family as a safe haven. In Resurrecting WILDflowers, much of Anie's writing fulfills a fantasy of what she wishes George would say to her in thanks and recognition.

messy. The cheers don't blend aesthetically but rather shimmy beside each other as distinct units that are supported by a sustained but fluctuating rhythm, or vibe. There is a feeling of common bond that results from the energy the girls give to one another in their cheers and in celebration of accomplishing the production. But the cheers do not allow you, as an audience member, to conflate the girls' differences into an image of community-as-unity as Joseph describes. In this way, the cheers are not only a microcosm of the show, as Dana calls them, but possibly also of the world as it could be, a utopian (per)formation of the way an individual's "style of use" interacts with the normative code (the beat) which in turn adapts itself to her as opposed to sticking rigidly to its own prerogative.⁵⁵

Practicing the Art of How to Combine

The final play script for Resurrecting WILDflowers loosely tells the story of eight teenage girls, all of whom are drawn back to the site of their burned down elementary school after receiving mysterious letters and flowers from their "inner child." The play's characters divide out into the popular "Hairspray Girls" (Saria, Essence, Melissa and Keira) and a less popular menagerie of girls that includes someone who is hard of hearing (Unique), someone who is socially awkward and defines herself as a hippie (Lisa), a gay boy (Anie) and his best friend and confidant (Julietta). While all of the characters have developed distinct personalities and identity locations as teenagers, they share the common

⁵⁵ In The Practice of Everyday Life, Michel de Certeau defines a "style of use" as a way of being or operating that comes to be when an individual's style, or "peculiar processing of the symbolic" manifests itself in actual fact within a system of normative codes (100).

experience of having buried something that was once important to them. They realize that in order to make themselves whole, they need to realize their connection. By figuring out that mystery, they then are able to locate and unearth items that symbolize their different “lost” or forgotten challenges, dreams, talents, and memories and move on to become “strong, beautiful, powerful entities” (Resurrecting WILDflowers).

Interestingly Dana and Chandra don’t ask the girls what the larger message of their play is until the end of the play development phase and three weeks before the performance. None of the girls could answer right away and when they did they said it was a metaphor for the viBeStages process and how they, as individuals, had to figure out how *they* were all connected in order to create something together (this idea, however, was really the “brainchild” of Julietta during the Big Talk). The viBeStages rehearsal process requires that the girls work together to produce a “good show” that communicates all of their stories of girlhood in ways that their audiences can hear but the girls themselves, including Keisha who was an alumna, were most passionate and committed about how this play would serve as a vehicle for them to tell their *own* individual stories as represented by their Two Minutes in the Spotlight. Unlike the youth in Find Your Light whose express goal was to disrupt the status represented by their audiences, the girls in viBeStages never spoke about their audience as a unified whole but rather about communicating these stories to specific individuals (lovers, friends, parents, teachers). Nor did they speak about getting a unified message across. They did acknowledge a feeling of *communitas* and attributed it

to the fact that they were all dealing with similar types of situations associated with being a teenage girl and wanted to voice their experiences publicly. “We all have something to say and we want to share it with everybody,” said Julietta in the middle of explaining how different she felt her story was from the other girls’, “We know what hurt is. We know what betrayal is.”

The viBeStages process is the process of practicing how to combine as a collective. It’s the experience of learning how to create a “bouquet” that articulates itself as a whole while allowing for individual maneuverings, improvisations, and interpretations of experience. During the development stage of Resurrecting WILDflowers, Julietta emerged as the primary script writer largely because she had formal arts training and could see ahead to how things might be put together in narrative form. Anie and Saria also helped contribute most of the dialogues in the play and were both self-identified writers. As a result, these three characters were the most developed in the play. Essence dominated discussions in the beginning of the process but in the end wasn’t really there often. Both Keisha and Melissa were absent for over a week during the play development phase. Keisha was applying to colleges and making college visits. Melissa cited family obligations. Unique admitted to me in her interview that she was struggling to keep up with the commitment of producing dramatic text for viBeStages while also managing her school work. And Lisa largely retreated from the collaborative scene work after her disagreement with the girls during the Big Talk. We mostly heard from these girls during poetic interludes, group compositions, and their Two Minutes and cheers.

Acknowledging the many barriers to teen participation (school, family obligations, etc.) in community-based theater programs like viBeStages, Dana notes: “It becomes a lot to assume that they’re [all] going to go home and write a bunch of scenes.” (Edell, personal interview). And she adds, “The truth is they’re not all writers in that way. They all have different skills that they’re bringing to the table and some of them are more performance.” Looking back on the process, there were many poignant pieces that the girls all wrote during the first four weeks of rehearsals that never made it into the show. As facilitators, Dana and Chandra walk a fine line between mediating conversations and making decisions to move the process along. Dana admits: “We could take forever with this play. We could have worked on this for another year. But the truth is we had a deadline. We had a performance. We had to have a script. So you have to push them to make decisions” (Edell, personal interview).

But just as there are elements within the production designed purposefully to articulate the girls’ differences, Dana and Chandra also intentionally build in elements that enable them to negotiate how to actively articulate and celebrate themselves as a collective. The three additional requirements of every viBeStages production are all compositions: a group poem, group song, and a group dance. The following dialogue is from the girl’s first Group Poem rehearsal, two weeks after the Big Talk and about a month past the Poetic Duet assignment illustrated

earlier in this chapter.⁵⁶ I've included a sizeable portion of this dialogue from my field notes to demonstrate how these group compositions enable the girls to practice how to combine through an aesthetic that allows for innumerable adaptations and improvisations and the insinuation of countless differences within its framework.

The girls' challenge during this rehearsal was to create a group poem focused on the concept of blossoming based on a list of ingredients that included: a moment of growth, a natural catastrophe, a bouquet of flowers, everyone must speak, a spiral, a line that is signed, a line that is whispered, a line that is sung, 10 seconds of high speed, five seconds of slow motion, an 'x,' , sunshine and rain (field notes, 17 Nov. 2006). The girls were also asked to write a poem about a flower they felt best represented them. Unique started off the collaboration by suggesting that they all begin by looking at the poems they've written and compare them. Julietta agreed and asked each of the girls to share what flower they had chosen to write about. The girls share their flowers and Julietta writes in a blank for Keisha who is absent that day. Unique volunteers to teach everyone sign language.

JULIETTA: So what's the idea we want to communicate with the poem? [long pause; Julietta has immediately established herself as the facilitator]

⁵⁶ The Poetic Duet exercise was the girls' first attempt at composing and dynamizing a poem together and is meant to introduce the girls' to some of the skills they'll need to compose a poem as a whole ensemble.

SARIA: Changing

JULIETTA [still leading at this point]: Yes, evolving and resurrecting in some ways. So looking down at the old notes we used to have...this [play] went from more survivor type to changing. [Let's] go through it more softly. Because flowers represent gentleness. So instead of more harsh writing, more like vagueness, poetic. . . [Dana looks surprised by Julietta's quick move to a certain type of writing but doesn't say anything.]

LISA: Each girl should have a flower that they represent pressed and dried up in their letters.

[Lisa's idea is immediately accepted by the group.]

ANIE: Where am I supposed to find an orchid?

JULIETTA: We'll find it. Also we need to have something in unison [pauses, waiting for a response then sighs when no one speaks up right away] I have something. [She shares a few lines from a poem she prepared outside of rehearsal] We are all those wildflowers. We will continue to be those wildflowers.

Resurrecting each spring.

DANA [interjecting]: You have four minutes . . . you need to start writing and stop assigning. Maybe start sharing lines so you know how they connect together.

[After a long awkward pause, Julietta is about to share another piece she's written when the group's dynamic shifts. Having read

through what they've written, the girls start freely offering lines from their poems. Celia, who is taking notes, quickly tries to keep up.]

SARIA: The soil of the dirt to the music of the words of others make me strong and strengthens my soul.

LISA: Forget me not, please. Always remember my love for every little thing. . . your true love will always be cherished.

SARIA: My seeds will be left wherever the path of life takes me.

UNIQUE: In real life I'm not such a rose I'm human.

JULIETTA: I have found a beauty in my imperfections, that which is not overcome by a lifetime of many.

[Dana cuts in and asks them all to highlight the one line from their poems that they want to incorporate into the group poem if it's not the one they've already read and encourages them up on their feet to begin staging it].

Julietta shares a ritual from her mom's childhood where everyone sits on a circle, links their pinkies together and sways back and forth to a song. The girls make eye contact with each other and without speaking, rise up to signify "blossoming," still holding pinkies but spreading further apart. It's hard to tell who initiated this idea since it seemed to develop organically from the previous movement. Lisa next suggests they spin out across the room, spreading out as their unique flowers and striking a pose that represents what that flower means to them. She demonstrates by floating away arms up in the air like a gypsy at a Grateful Dead

concert. The girls immediately go with her idea even though her movements are remarkably different from their own styles of movement. Julietta, feeling the time crunch, proposes that everyone take responsibility for one of the remaining ingredients. Unique decides she'd like to teach everyone the "one line in sign language" and have everyone perform it in unison. The girls struggle with learning the signs as Unique goes around to each of them adjusting their hands and encouraging them to keep trying. Saria next volunteers to sing her line. Anie looks over at her surprised: "I've never heard you sing!" Saria, shrugging, "I sing, but I'm shy."

Because the girls did not have to fit neatly inside a narrative structure that they may or may not have felt attached to, they more actively participated in the construction of this piece (and the other group compositions) than the dialogues which supported the larger narrative structure of the play. Julietta was still largely moving this composition forward, but in this instance she was facilitating more than leading. Once the rest of the girls felt that space had been created for them to all share equally, they did so enthusiastically in a way that didn't happen during dialogue writing. Because their lines were symbolic of their character journey, they could exist alongside each other without compromising the cohesiveness of the composition itself—another example of a utopian performative. The composition allowed each of them to say what they felt they needed to say about their characters that had specific meaning to them and to draw on their assets and strengths in dynamizing their words. But the final piece itself was a collage open to numerous possibilities of interpretation and meaning-making. The Group

Poem, and the other compositions (Group Dance and Group Song) focus on aggregating ideas rather than selecting some over others. When I asked Dana if there was a moment during rehearsals that encapsulated what she and Chandra were trying to achieve with viBE, she mentioned this Group Poem rehearsal:

They all had very equal parts in it. And that was pretty exciting to watch. To look at how nobody was really in charge. There were just a lot of ideas bouncing around. And the story that was being told was a very collective story. It was the climax of all of their characters. So it wasn't like it was about one girl. It was really about them as a group. I feel those are the moments in viBeStages that make me feel really excited about it. That they're really working together and creating something that's a collective experience, that's bigger than them individually. (Edell, personal interview)

Group compositions, like this one, allow the girls in viBeStages the wiggle room to play with language and practice ways of using various performance styles to articulate their individual desires and interests alongside of others. When I asked Saria what she felt was different about viBeStages from other programs in her school or community, she replied:

With viBe you can express yourself in any way necessary. Any way that satisfies you. You can act it out. You don't even have to say anything, you can just act it out. And the powerful meaning can be sent through. It can be the same meaning but people see it

from different points of views. And it's powerful to them in their own meaning and you've expressed what you wanted to express and you let other people know about it and made them more aware about it, even if they do know about it. (personal interview)

The process of layering more symbolic group compositions into a narrative structure that holds the play together like glue opens up the possibilities for multiple new meanings to be considered jointly on top of more literal meanings of girlhood.

In my group interview with the ensemble after the play, Anie and Keisha spoke about how the “surreal style” of their show gave them a sense of freedom or play that enabled them to say what they wanted to say:

ANIE: Other shows [I've been in] were more like, like I never had fun doing them because people were so serious . . . they were putting so much pressure on us, so it sucked.

KEISHA: Like what Essence wants to do [referring to professional theater training]. Like the tone of, “You have to do this.” For me, it loses something. In other shows, there isn't room for like “oops” and then the crowd laughing [referring to a few mistakes she made in the show]. Because the crowd won't laugh and they'll be like, “Ooh, you messed up!”

ANIE: Pressure, it kills you and makes you feel like you can't say certain things. . . . But when people say, “You can be however you

want,”. . . It’s like, “Okay, there you go!” You can be free.

(viBeStages group interview)

Girl Power

The viBeStages process not only enables the girls to articulate their experiences of being a teenage girl in New York City but it affects how they make meaning of those experiences and of girlhood itself. By accepting and celebrating the many manifestations of being a teenage girl, viBeStages allows girls to experiment and improvise with the stories they want to tell and how they want to tell them. “[Before viBe] I would write about the things I write about now, but now I have so much more to say,” admitted Saria at the end of the process. Through experimentation and reminders to strive for specificity while also making connections, the girls in viBeStages begin to realize infinitesimal possibilities for how they can construct meaning and participate in the making of culture.

Developing an Expanded Repertoire

Many of the girls acknowledged changes in the types of stories they began to tell. “[Before viBeStages], most of my poetry had to rhyme and it was always about stuff like clothes and school and boys,” said alumna Yasmine, “But [now] most of my poetry is about how I feel and what’s going on in *my* life” (personal interview). “My vocabulary is changing,” said Unique, “I use big words. When I’m talking to my friends, they’re like, “What happened to you? Who are you?” My vocabulary is changing” (personal interview). While she was in viBeStages, Unique’s teacher actually questioned whether or not she plagiarized something

she wrote for a class assignment because it was so articulate and carried such a strong message. Unique: “My teacher’s like, ‘You did not write this.’ And I was like ‘Oh, yes I did!’” And then she’s like, ‘This is not how you write.’” I asked Unique what she was writing about. She said, “Teenager stuff. Stuff that teenage girls go through like life and death, violence and stuff. Before it would just be, ‘Oh, I went to the store to. . . , like unimportant stuff.” When I asked Julietta’s mother, Sandra, if she noticed any changes in Julietta after viBeStages, the first thing Sandra told me was that Julietta had put more of herself in her writing whereas before “she used to write about outside things” (personal interview). She explains: “I saw the more sensual part of her. The more grown-up part of her through her writing. . . it was [pause] very romantic in a very articulate way and very adult-like. And I’ve never seen that type of writing from her.”

Understanding Differences as Assets

The viBeStages process enables girls to consider their differences as assets. And it shows them that by *intentionally* using their assets to articulate those differences as well as transform them into new possibilities, perspectives and roles, they in turn can strengthen their community. “Everybody wants to be different but everybody’s really being the same because the media is, you know, showing these images and everyone is brainwashed by those images making it be like we have to be this way,” Anie said, “When in reality, we don’t. We deserve to be how we want to be. We can be different” (personal interview). Yasmine told me that the thing that was most critical for her to communicate in viBeStages was not only that girls wanted to be heard but also that they are always changing

and sometimes confused. As a symbol, community can have the effect of flattening the individual experiences that give meaning to its boundaries. But by giving girls the tools to try out different styles of expression as well as providing the opportunity for them to introduce their own ways of interacting within this framework, viBeStages allows the performance of girlhood to be malleable and intentionally positions the girls to shape it grounded within the constraints of their own experiences. “Theatre in viBe is about different ways of expression. . . . viBe shows you, you need the action. You need the movement. You need the space. You need the lights. You need the levels. You need the props. To show people [that] in real world . . . it’s like the stuff is there but people take it for granted. They don’t really see it,” Keisha remarks, “Whereas, in [viBeStages] this is a show and I’m putting on a play for you and showing you exactly. I’m giving it to you right here and right now in this moment and so take everything that I’m doing and take it as if I’m doing *on purpose*. I’m doing this on purpose to show you exactly what I mean” (personal interview). viBeStages teaches the girls to recognize the “ingredients” in the culture around them and then to practice intentionally using these elements to re-activate and re-shape their culture. “To me, we’re all somebody’s painting,” said Anie about her viBeStages experience, “We’re a live picture. Like in a movie to me. Except that it’s an improv movie . . . instead of having a script we make our own words and we don’t know what is going to happen next. . . . We’re meant to be something, but it’s not a complete destiny. We have some choices” (personal interview).

Seeing Oneself as Part of a Collective

Perhaps the most significant part of the viBeStages experience in the context of this study, and the reason why Dana and Chandra feel it is critical to produce a full length play at the end of only ten weeks, is that it requires girls to practice how to connect with other girls who are different from them in order to collectively empower them to see themselves as agents of change who can viably shape their cultural locations. The girls in viBeStages fall 2006 began the process because they had an individual story they wanted to tell. In the first phase of rehearsals when they were all generating a lot of writing, the girls would eagerly show up to the next rehearsal specifically asking if Dana and Chandra had received or printed their pieces for everyone's Creative Container. Each girl was meticulously tracking their own writing but when it came to the Big Talk, many of them were unaware of what the other girls were writing, even when those pieces had been performed in previous rehearsals. Similarly two weeks into rehearsals, the girls were asked to write and perform monologues and work together to brainstorm how to transform them into scenes. I found it remarkable at the time that most of the girls positioned themselves in isolation. With the exception of Unique who chose to specifically address a teacher who discriminated against her, the girls were either talking to themselves (reading a letter they wish they could send, reading a diary entry, writing an email, performing an internal monologue) or at a distance (e.g. talking to someone over the phone) from the person they were trying to communicate with in their

monologues. What these girls were saying and how they imagined they would say it was still very much an internal process and an act that they conceived of doing alone.

But towards the middle and end of the process, the girls began to realize that they depended on each other not only for the play to work, but for them to feel comfortable and supported in what they were saying. Melissa, for example, decided towards the end of the process that she wanted to use her Two Minutes to say a final farewell to a friend that had died but she would only do it if the other girls were around her on stage. Keisha explained that for her, viBeStages is about group collaboration:

We're going to do this together. That's what I love about viBeStages. There's a whole support group behind you and whatever you have to do. Everybody is going to be scared before they get up on the show or nervous or whatever, so the girls in this show with you, they're going to support you. So even though these are our individual shows, somebody from the group or all of us from the group are going to be on the stage with you, conveying your message. And it's going to turn into something that's not just about you. They're going to feel it the way you feel it. Which is the important thing because you're feeling it the way I'm feeling it and we've got to show the audience and we have to make the audience feel it the way we feel it. So it doesn't just become, even though they are personal issue to one of us and it may not affect us

directly, it affects the people on stage with us because they're going to help *me* show what *I* need to show. Or *I'm* going to help *them* show what *they* need to show and then it's going to be *our* issue. And then our issue is going to become the audience's issue because we're going to make them see what needs to be seen. And we're going to make them hear what we need them to hear.

(Personal interview)

Even Julietta who weeks after the Big Talk announced in a moment of frustration, "I'm doing this for me," acknowledged that it was the ensemble's interaction as a group that also helped shape her sense of cultural agency. "We all come from different communities but we're bringing from what we have from each of those different communities and we come together to form our own," she said, "And it's just, communities are what make us. It builds us" (personal interview).

Keeping the viBe Alive: Transferring a New Meaning of Girlhood Today Reshaping the Boundaries of Being a Teenage Girl

For viBe alumnae and for audiences who return to see more than one viBeStages show, the experience of watching this collective performance can continue to expand the boundaries of what it means to be a teenage girl. viBeStages is a highly structured model that requires girls to work with various structural elements that repeat from one viBeStages group to the next. As explained in this chapter, each ensemble must create a group poem, a group song, a group dance, a viBe cheer and their own Two Minutes in the Spotlight. These structural forms remain the same from one production to the next and are

recognizable to the audience. But the “ingredients” that the girls must include in them vary. They are determined in response to the theme of each play, the girls’ situated narratives and the symbolic repertoire they generate through their specific ten-week collaboration. As structures, the forms can be compared over time. As Dana noted, the viBe alumnae are always looking to see what a girl says in her Two Minutes or what she does with her cheer. Similar topics or styles of performance may be produced from year to year or program to program, but the girls from program to program are infusing these forms with new meanings and using them to serve their own symbolic purposes.

“I think [the viBe shows] have common links, but because it’s new girls each time or a different mix of girls, I think it comes out totally different,” explained Christina, a teenage girl who has been attending viBe shows for several years, “There’s common links like parent problems or my mom doesn’t accept me or my boyfriend isn’t nice to me. But it’s always told in different ways. So even though you can say, “Oh, I’ve heard that before,” the stories are so different” (personal interview). I asked her why she keeps coming back to all of the viBe shows and she said:

Well, it’s kind of like I want to see how the story’s going to be told this time [long pause] and maybe there’ll be something new, instead of the old, ‘I’m having problems with my parents or my boyfriend.’ Maybe there’ll be something new. From the first time I saw viBe, I feel like it has gotten deeper and more specific [Pause]

Like now, [it's] even more real. It's gotten more real . . . I just have this passion for it, this passion for watching it. (Personal interview)

Engaging Older Generations of Women

In addition to opening up meanings for other teenage girls, as well as general audience members, viBeStages also intentionally positions the ensemble members to transfer new meanings of girlhood to older generations of women in their lives. A month before the performance, Dana and Chandra set aside a Saturday rehearsal for what they call the “Important Women Rehearsal.” Each girl is encouraged to invite one “important woman” from their lives into viBeStages “cultural space” on this day. It can be a mother, grandmother, aunt, teacher, etc. Throughout most of the rehearsal, the girls work in partnership with their guest to create poetic duets similar to the ones they created their first week of viBeStages. The girls and their guest then split into two “camps” and each group must write a collective document that gives the other group advice (e.g. the girls give advice to the women on what teenage girls need and the women give advice to the girls from the perspective of being an older woman).

For the first part of this rehearsal, the girls are positioned as the experts (field notes, 18 Nov. 2006). Their role is to help the older women learn their new “viBe language.” Each pair is instructed to face each other and, within sixty seconds, think of many memories of the other person as they can. This part of the exercise is difficult for many of the girls unaccustomed perhaps with being in control of the gaze. Saria’s mom tries to get Saria to look at her for nearly thirty seconds before Saria finally turns her gaze to her mother. She is smiling self-

consciously. You can hear stifled giggles all around the room. After a minute, everyone is instructed to pick one memory and write a poem that starts with the phrase, “I remember when you...” and includes all five senses. The girls immediately start telling their mothers that a poem in viBe can mean whatever they want. Melissa is the first one to finish her poem. She looks over to her mom who is stalling. “It doesn’t matter. You can write anything you want,” she says encouragingly, “You can write a story. You can write a scene. A poem.” As Melissa talks, her mother begins to finally scribble down words, pausing here and there to think. After everyone is finished, they are instructed to circle five words in their poems and combine those words with their partner’s selections to create a poetic duet that they then need to dynamize using five gestures and three spatial levels. Dana asks the group, “Does everyone know what a gesture is?” The women all look confused. Julietta answers eagerly, “A movement that you make towards another person.” The girls smile and nod at each other, enjoying that they are “in the know,” so to speak.

As I look around the room at the girls and women practicing their duets, there is a lightness and ease to their interactions which wasn’t there when they arrived at the beginning of rehearsal. Melissa and her mom first mark their gestures from where they are sitting. Halfway through her mom folds over laughing, self-consciously as if to say, “I have no idea what we’re doing but this is super fun.” Melissa pops up and begins to mark both of their parts and then collapses on the couch giggling too, then pops back up, pulling her mom off the couch with her. She starts to lightly coach her mother through the gestures which

are exaggerated and silly. When they finally get through their composition, Melissa's mom embraces her and they laugh. As Dana comes around to see if any of the groups need help, Melissa asks if they have to start with "I remember . . ." Dana reminds her, "You can do it anyway you want." "That's not helping," laughs Melissa's mom, "I keep telling her, 'You have to direct me!'" She turns to Melissa coyly and smiles.

The poems that the pairs created together capture the lightness of the interactions I observed around the room. Words like "happy," "laughing," "grow," "stretching," "touch," "spectacular perfection," "sweet smiles," "infinity," and "graceful butterfly" were chosen to represent the pairs memories together. All of the pairs seemed to choose words that represented both their carefree memories, perhaps of years past, as well as more recent memories of growth and independence. I also found it compelling that all of the poetic duets began with the girls standing close to their important woman but ended with variations of the important woman and the girls standing apart from one another. Saria and her mom start off looking at each other and hugging, saying "Happy," "Help," "Touch," and "Grow," But Saria quickly falls to the ground, punctuating the word "stress," and holding her head. Instead of choreographing a moment where her mother comes to her aid, Saria instead positions herself behind her mother in a line. They both lift up their arms to the ceiling in an expression that seems to reference the popular gesture of the Black Power Movement. "Chocolate. Smooth," they say in unison. Julietta and her mom walk confidently up in front of the group and stand next side-by-side, softly looking at each other and

whispering, “Beautiful anticipation.” But on their next phrase, “spectacular perfection,” they glide apart. “Sweet smiles,” says her mom curtsying and extending her arms to her daughter. Julietta still in her own space, spins freely. “Graceful butterfly,” she says as though she has emerged from her cocoon and is spreading her wings for the first time. “Infinity,” she says circling down to the ground and back up again, “Love,” hugging herself.

An interesting shift of energy happened in the room when the girls and women then split apart to come up with advice for the other group. The girls immediately and passionately start swapping stories about their moms, nodding and repeating, “Exactly, exactly!” as they finish each other sentences desperate to make their case as girls and daughters to each other. I overhear them repeating emphatic phrases like, “I’m always telling her...,” “She doesn’t even know about them...,” “They think it’s the end of the world...” Meanwhile, on the other side of the room, the mom’s voices escalate and dip as they decide what they can and cannot allow their daughters to overhear. At one point I look over and Melissa’s mom is making a gesture of stuffing something into a container, “You’ve got to keep them...,” she says lowering her voice to a whisper. In my interview with Julietta’s mom at the end of the viBeStages program, she reflected on the moment when the two side finally exchanged advice:

I can see how we all share similar situations with our daughters . . .
three or four of them say, ‘Yeah, you don’t trust me. You don’t trust me when I go out. You don’t think we’re doing the right thing. But we know what we’re doing.’ And our reaction is: ‘It’s

not that we don't trust you. We care for you. And we're afraid that if you're there for too long at a certain place at a certain time with certain people, something might happen.' So you can see the relationship between mother and daughter, it's a normal one no matter where you come from, no matter who you are, no matter how old you are. It's always going to be that way. And you know, I look back at myself and my mom and I had the same situation. Mom didn't want me to go out after five o'clock, after dark. Or you know we only played in the park on Saturdays, not on Sundays or on weekdays because those were school days. And it was a form of protecting us, but I didn't understand that. Now I do. I do understand it. (Sandra, personal interview)

Julietta's mom references a cultural scenario which she assumes is prescribed (i.e. "it's always going to be that way") that positions teenage girls "at risk" and in need of "protection" by mothers who know better but can't explain why. Contrary to this position, the girls delivered this final phrase of advice to the women: "We are young independent women. We are trendsetters who follow the beat of our own drum. Still biding by the rule. You helped us plan our seeds and give us the TLC to let us grow. We need room to dispense ourselves around the world." While the girls define themselves as independent in this statement, they also acknowledge that their identities are largely informed by the "seeds" that their mothers provided for them and that root them in a history. In addition, they acknowledge that they are still "biding by the rule" or the constraints of their

culture. By asking for “room to dispense,” they are not conceiving of agency as free will so much as the ability to maneuver within those constraints as a means of making their own cultural contributions.

After the girls and their mothers exchanged advice, they were all asked to free write beginning with the phrase, “Being a woman means . . . “ Below are the lines that they read and recited to each other:⁵⁷

LISA: Being a woman, fun, thrilling, exciting. While the boys sit and watch . . . we go shopping and get our hair done and by the time we get home, they can’t touch our glamorous selves.

SANDRA [Julietta’s mom]: Being a woman means being strong for others. Always remember to be strong. Reach for the stars. Be independent and take charge of your life and be the woman that symbolizes success.

JULIETTA: Being a woman means upholding perseverance. Hold on to your heart, sacrificing not for what means most to you but who means most to you.

MELISSA: Being a woman means having to deal with things that men don’t have to. Having to be strong and supportive of your children and anyone you might come in contact with. Being a woman means having a level head so people can depend on you.

⁵⁷ Unique’s line is not included here because it was inaudible. Keira and Essence were absent from this rehearsal.

MELISSA'S MOM: Being a woman means strength. Being means offering your love, expressing yourself, your confidence, enjoying laughter, supporting those you love and support emotionally and mentally.

ANIE: Being a woman means constantly fighting off stereotypes, constantly being only a body part in men's eyes, in the eyes of the beholder. Having to work harder because we're never viewed as smart as men in society.

SARIA'S MOM: Being a woman means loving yourself, expressing yourself, being responsible.

SARIA: Being a woman means being independent. Things never seem as bad as they was . . . taking advantage of the world around you . . .

What strikes me about these statements is that the girls and their mothers both make meaning of womanhood as self-reliance (in terms of strength, self-love and success), independence and the support of others. None of their statements includes mention of being supported, valued or cared for by others or of feeling listened to or loved back. The scenario is one of a woman restrained. She grows up protected only to learn how to be strong to in turn protect and support others. As Julietta's mom mentioned to me in her interview, there is unconscious sense that this scenario is "normal" and that it is "always going to be this way" (Sandra, personal interview).

Performance theorist Diana Taylor defines scenarios as “meaning-making paradigms that structure social environments, behaviors, and potential outcomes” (The Archive and the Repertoire 28). Not only are these scenarios passed on through texts (narratives told from one generation to the next within a culture) but also are embodied as cultural memories, “as gestures, attitudes, and tones not reducible to language,” argues Taylor (28). Generally, these embodied practices are enacted without reference to the conscious will (Connerton 111). In other words, their formalization and repetition normalize them to a degree by which they are no longer questioned. The codes and rules that make up an embodied memory are chosen and classified at some point, because a society or community found it culturally strategic to repeat them. Once formalized into bodily practices, these codes and rules are not easily criticized, evaluated, or un-learned. However like all embodied practices, and as illustrated in this study, there is room for variation. Taylor posits:

All scenarios have localized meaning, though many attempt to pass as universally valid. Actions and behaviors arising from the setup [the framework of the scenario] might be predictable, a seemingly natural consequence of the assumptions, values, goals, power relations, presumed audience, and epistemic grids established by the setup itself. But they are, ultimately, flexible and open to change. Social actors may be assigned roles deemed static and inflexible by some. Nonetheless, the irreconcilable friction

between the social actors and the roles allows for degrees of critical detachment and cultural agency. (28-29)

The strategies that viBeStages employs throughout its rehearsal process are first steps in helping the viBe Girls, their female teen audience members and older generations of women “unlearn” sexist scenarios and offer them a chance to become their own producers of knowledge. To illustrate this point, I will briefly describe how Julietta’s re-activation of the woman restrained scenario in Resurrecting WILDflowers not only allowed her to recognize areas of resistance and tension and begin to adapt it, but also to transfer these new trajectories of meaning to her mother who was forced to situate herself in relationship to the scenario as an audience member.

Laetta, Julietta’s character in Resurrecting WILDflowers was a fictional manifestation of how Julietta behaved and described herself in real life. Laetta is the caregiver among the girls in the play. She shelters her friend George (played by Anie) whose family kicks him out because he’s gay. She encourages Lisa’s character, Phoebe, who is socially awkward and treated like an outcast to keep playing basketball even though her parents say she should give it up. She allows the popular girls to push her around because she doesn’t want to create a conflict. Halfway through the play, however, Julietta wrote a scene where she *does* confront one of the popular girls, Zahryia (played by Keisha) who attempts to shut her up by telling her to stop making stupid comments. Seemingly out of nowhere, Julietta delivers the following lines with a level of intensity and pitch that she

never exhibited in rehearsals signifying a desire to express other parts of her agency and sense of self which she usually doesn't express:

My comments are NOT stupid. I'm sick of letting you and everyone push me around! I don't want to create drama, I want to be a good person, take care of everyone else. But when do I get to take care of ME? When do I get to sit back, relax, and stop being everyone's MOTHER? [Julietta's entire body is clenched as she punctuates this last word with scream]. Yes I put it on myself, I know that, but if I didn't, who'll be there to do it? Who? I just wanted to help. I just wanted to be a friend. I guess I'm not very good at it? (Resurrecting WILDflowers)

This moment quickly transitioned into a sensual poem that Julietta wrote, and performed with Essence, in which she wonders what it is to be loved, to make love and to create. The poem ends with the following lines: "we are artists/painting on the once blank canvas/we are dancers/gliding on the seams of love/we are musicians/humming love's syncopated harmony/crescendo to our unified melody" (Resurrecting WILDflowers). Julietta movements become relaxed and circular, giving the feeling of regeneration. I found it compelling that she juxtaposed her identification with being a mother/caretaker with an identification of artistry and sensuality. While both are generative identifications, the latter does not imply a mandate to support others in their growth and creativity.

Through the production of Resurrecting WILDflowers, Julietta recounted a scenario of restraint that she often cited in *Roses and Thorns* throughout the ten weeks. But in the process of creating the show, she also began to wrestle with the constructed nature of that scenario.

As an audience member, Julietta's mother, Sandra, must situate herself in relationship to this scenario as well as the various trajectories that Julietta introduces within it (Taylor 32). In my interview with Julietta's mother after Resurrecting WILDflowers, I asked Sandra what struck her about the production and she said it reminded her of her own teenage years. I asked her to tell me specifically what messages about girlhood it conveyed and she replied, "They go through what we go through but at different times." She paused as though considering it for the first time, "and maybe in different ways." After a longer pause she added:

She reminded me of me, how I loved to dance and how I loved to twirl. But I never had that opportunity. I never had the chance to do what *I* wanted to do. But it's okay because [Julietta] through her I see me. I see the love that I had when I was little, whether it was acting or dancing or singing. And I was so happy that I was able to give her that. And that's what she reminded me of. And also what was striking, that I wanted to say, was her dancing. I've never seen her dancing that way. Never. I love to dance. And she reminded me of me there too.

Not only did this experience seem to allow Julietta's mom to recognize the areas of tension between the scenario of restraint and her own sense of cultural agency, but she told me she also felt viBeStages changed her relationship with her daughter. It made her want to share more experiences of her own childhood with Julietta and she felt Julietta in turn was "opening up" to her and trusting her more with her stories.

Other women in the girls' lives shared similar reflections with me about how viBe affected the way they understood scenarios of restraint and the potential for women and girls to reshape that scenario. Unique's grandmother and guardian, Deborah, told me, "viBe revitalized certain things [for me] that these things do happen. We expressed them in this way. And if they are occurring, what can you do about it or what would you want to do about it?" (personal interview). For Keisha's mother, Desiree, viBe gave off the message that "if you empower women, if you get them to feel less powerless, they will have the ability to stand up and say, 'This is me and I'm okay with me.'" (personal interview). She explained how viBe shows you: "If you can accept yourself who you are and not see flaws all the time, then perhaps you can be less concerned about eating disorders, and cosmetic surgery . . . things that you don't need to do. Or staying in abusive relationships. If you feel like you're okay and you can . . . love yourself, those things won't happen in your life. Or if they do happen, you'll know how to get out of them. You'll look for a way to get out. And that's critical because women don't do that today and it starts when they're very young." Desiree admitted to me that Keisha and her were very close and already told each

other a lot about situations in their lives. But Desiree felt that when Keisha told her stories in a viBe show, they're told in different way than they way she communicated them to her in everyday life. "Every time she makes me cry," said Desiree, "And that's every time she does a show, almost every time. I don't cry easily, which she would probably tell you. But when I've seen her put herself through the changes that she goes through on stage, I cry. And I think that's because I believe her. And it's not just her. The other girls have done it too. You feel what they're saying" (personal interview).

A Spectacular Ending

The final requirement of all viBeStages productions, which is introduced to the girls during the Big Talk, is a Spectacular Ending. Of course like all elements of the viBeStages process, this phrase is open to the girls' interpretation. But within the context of viBe's model of affirmation, "a spectacular ending" almost always lends itself to a feeling of grand celebration and positivity as it relates to the community-of-difference the girls have constructed and activated throughout the ten week rehearsal process. At the end of Resurrecting WILDflowers, the girls each reclaim positive characteristics of their identities which they felt they'd lost in the transition into adolescence and come together for a soul-stirring, upbeat group song about not only being survivors but "a complete soul striver(s)" who will make the most out of their collective circumstances despite the odds, especially in the company of people who care about them and *want* to be in their lives (implying that they will ignore those who may cause them pain by not caring or being supportive).

The Problematic Notion of Utopia

As outlined in this chapter, there are many ways that celebrating a community-of-difference can be an effective strategy for enabling teenage girls to practice cultural agency. However, there are also dangers to viBeStage's model of "saying YES," of affirming all of the girls' stories and maneuverings and aggregating those into the symbolic boundary of girlhood that each ensemble celebrates confidently at the end. viBeStages "spectacular endings" have the potential to leave audiences feeling that all of the girls in the production are leaders who don't need their help or support. When I interviewed Jeff, for example, he told me that despite the fact that he knows many of the viBe girls are attending failing schools, living in under-resourced neighborhoods, struggling with difficult family situations, etc. and despite that fact that he has met many of them and helped them rehearse their Two Minutes and other scenes, he always leaves a viBeStages show feeling that the girls are confident and okay. "When I see these girls, I'm like "Wow, I don't have to worry about them,"" he says, "Not that I don't have to worry about them, but I'm like, "Wow, I feel really good, like these girls are going to take control of their lives." . . . And the energy that you get from these girls, all of these girls in the room, is like, "If they can be this confident here, and they can really take control of this space, which they do, they can do it anywhere."

The combination of a spectacular ending to a viBeStages show coupled with the girls' ebullient cheers—which articulate their differences but also force them into a posture of confidence and positivity—often erase moments in the play

where the girls are revealing deeply seated insecurities and fears and *asking* their audiences for help and support. The trajectory of Keisha's character in Resurrecting WILDflowers is an example of this kind of erasure. Throughout the play, Keisha's character Zahyria is characterized as outwardly confident and tough. But in her dialogues with others, she reveals deep seated fears (bordering on paranoia) that everyone is judging her or about to turn on her. In her interview with me, Keisha admits that she suffers from similar fears in her own life which can be paralyzing. "Even though I want to know people and know their lives, I'm very, very paranoid about what people think about me," she said, "I'm very, very worried that somebody is always judging me." This feeling was compounded in fall 2006 by the fact that Keisha was just coming out as gay to her friends after leaving a three-year relationship with a boy. In her Two Minutes in the Spotlight, Keisha wrote a piece to her old best friend in which she begs for forgiveness for wrongdoings she felt she had committed during their friendship. Within the piece she confesses that the reason she's never said "I'm sorry" is because she is afraid of recognizing the possible end of their friendship and the rejection that comes with it. Keisha's fear of being judged in real life and in the play keeps her from saying the things she wants to say and taking action. But during her cheer at the end of the play, she dismisses this struggle. Skipping joyfully and freely around the stage, she assumes a position of heightened confidence performing lines like "I'm a cool girl," "I do my thing," and "people like to judge me but I don't really care" (Resurrecting WILDflowers).

The spectacular ending also can cover up ways in which the play reinscribes oppressive scenarios, negative stereotypes and simple dichotomies that sometimes go unchecked under viBe's rule of "no censorship." In Resurrecting WILDflowers, the characters were boiled down into the simple dichotomy of the popular "Hairspray Girls," who on the surface seemed only interested in hair, makeup, boys and clothes and the loosely affiliated unpopular kids who were outcasts in the eyes of the popular girls because of their sexual orientation, bookishness, sexual experience et cetera. The characters' roles in the play mirrored the cliques I imagine these girls roughly fall into in real life. But this framework was dictated to them by one or two of the more outspoken girls in the ensemble. Unlike Find Your Light which intentionally exaggerated a similar dichotomy but then used theatrical techniques to interrogate it, the Fall 2006 viBeStages ensemble represented the dichotomy as though it were a normal system of classification which held the fate of these teenage girl characters. How this dichotomy is constructed, how it gives power to some and not to others, and why it continues to be perpetuated was never interrogated in the play. At the end of the production, the girls came to a head in their group dance only to spontaneously realize that fighting wouldn't solve their problems and that they need to accept each other and themselves. It was an easy out which felt more like an after-school special than the result of a ten-week intensive and messy process of learning how to combine and create something with others who are different from you. More structured time for the girls to revise their work and reflect on their own and each others' writing may have enabled the girls to better analyze

the power structures and stereotypes that they were re-producing and to understand the implications those structures have on their own cultural agency.

Utopia's Potential to Sketch Out a More Equitable Future

As noted earlier in this chapter, celebration as a community building strategy runs the risk of being falsely unifying and sentimental in ways that render the participants and audiences passive. But the emphasis in viBe is on adding to, transforming, and fracturing these conventions, on expanding the boundaries of what these rhetorics and conventions can mean at this particular time and place. In this sense, I feel it has the potential as a utopian performative to inspire local actions and shifts in perspective, as Jill Dolan suggests, “that sketch out the potential in [the] feigning” of a more equitable future (457). The ten-week viBeStages process is a *first step* towards teaching teenage girls how to make their stories personal and specific and how to multiply and combine their diverse knowledges of girlhood in ways that are positively dissonant as well as unifying. It's a messy and imperfect process. But as Joseph notes, the very act of articulating and celebrating a community of difference can “generate the strongest of passions,” not passivities, and can “make it possible to build movements based on the connections we do have, rather than yearning for lost or impossible utopias” (xxxix).

CHAPTER 5

COMMUNITY BUILDING AS AN ACT OF TRANSFER

Find Your Light involves acts of transfer in the transmission of traumatic memory. viBeStages positions its ensemble members to transfer new meanings of girlhood to generations of viBe girls and older generations of women. But Ifetayo Cultural Arts Academy (Ifetayo) intentionally incorporates systems of transfer into the Ifetayo Youth Ensemble program as strategies for building and promoting a collective cultural identity among the ensemble members and their families that is based in a African value system and ethnic tradition. My discussion of cultural agency in this chapter shifts from analyzing how young people use artistic practices to think of themselves as viable shapers of community (which is primarily the focus of Find Your Light and viBeStages) to more directly considering how Ifetayo as an intergenerational culturally-*based* program enables youth to learn African values and traditions through the arts and in turn use these practices to reinforce (and teach) those cultural values more broadly as well as ensure as “the next generation” that their cultural traditions and stories remain active and relevant.

Similar to viBe, these strategies are also incorporated in various ways in Ifetayo’s other programs and within its leadership creating a sense of shared culture within the organization as well. In this chapter, I examine the theoretical foundations for building community as an act of transfer both within performance studies, as well as African studies; discuss how it is operative with the Ifetayo Youth Ensemble, and consider how this strategy enables youth of African descent

not only to receive cultural memories rooted in conceptions of the African Diaspora but also to practice incorporating new practices and ways of relating into traditional frameworks that have the potential of keeping those traditions and values vital and relevant for themselves and future generations.

About Ifetayo Youth Ensemble

The history of Ifetayo Youth Ensemble (IYE) traces back to 1989 when Kwayera Archer-Cunningham (a.k.a. Sister Kwayera), a former Jubilation Dance Company member,⁵⁸ offered a six-week series of free modern dance classes to fifty young women in Flatbush, Brooklyn. From that original group, ten girls were chosen to receive full scholarships and begin intensive training, and informal rites of passage work, forming the basis for what is today IYE.⁵⁹ In 2006, IYE had grown to include thirty-four young women and men, ages eleven to twenty-four, and is just one of seven programs offered by the now incorporated, Ifetayo Cultural Arts Academy, whose mission is to “[support] the creative, educational and vocational development of youth and families of African descent, [and enhance their lives] by providing programs in cultural awareness, performing and visual arts, as well as academic instruction, health and wellness, and professional skills development” (www.ifetayo.org). Ifetayo’s other programs include:

⁵⁸ Jubilation Dance Company is now called Deeply Rooted Dance Theater and is one of Chicago's premier contemporary dance ensembles steeped in the African-American aesthetic (<http://www.deeplyrootedproductions.org/>)

⁵⁹ Ifetayo Youth Ensemble is now co-educational. The first male member joined in 1998 and the ensemble became fully co-ed in 2002. Today the percentage of young men and women is about equal, largely due to the inclusion of African drumming as a core discipline within the Ensemble. The Ensemble at the time of this study only had one male dancer.

Ifetayo's Cultural Arts Program (CAP), which offers year-long sequential arts instruction for ages two to adult; Sisters in Sisterhood, a two-year minimum rites of passage program for girls ages eight to twenty-one; I Am My Brother , a rites of passage program for boys ages eight to twenty one; the Marcus Garvey Cultural Heritage Program, a year-round program which includes classes, workshops and international cultural exchanges providing historical information about the cultures of African descendents; the Financial Education Institute/Individual Development Accounts Program, a financial literacy program fully integrated into the rites of passage programs; and Arts in Education, a arts residency program that serves elementary school children in public schools in Brooklyn's Crown Heights and Flatbush neighborhoods.

IYE members, who are recommended from other Ifetayo programs or accepted by audition, are meant to represent the "highest level of excellence" within the organization, both in terms of their artistic discipline and their commitment to the Nugzo Saba (the seven principles of Kwanzaa: unity, self-determination, collective work and responsibility, cooperative economics, purpose, creativity, and faith). Throughout their tenure, which can range from one to more than ten years, ensemble members train rigorously in their principle discipline (African dance, African drumming, modern dance, or acting), and also are expected to participate in one of Ifetayo's Rites of Passage programs as a way to work on personal development as a complement to their work as cultural organizers or activists. These experiences are meant to prepare the ensemble to put their cultural heritage to use in the act of creating original performance pieces

that address critical issues in the African community today. As ensemble members, they are positioned to look to the past to cultivate a sense of collective identity and vision, but also to infuse that traditional framework with contemporary artistic styles, practices and social/political issues which keep it vital. In the end, their play scripts and performances become part of a living culture that at once re-teaches and re-stores cultural tradition and memory, while breaking those systems open to embellish and transform them for the future. “In the African tradition arts and culture are a way of life,” argues Kwayera, “that’s why our tagline is ‘Join the spirit of *living* culture and building community.’ [The arts] are how we express ourselves, how we heal ourselves, how we bring everyone together and create healthy systems for community building and family development. It’s a part of regaining our tradition and our values as people who really have been cut off from that” (Archer-Cunningham, personal interview).

My Research

As stated in the introduction, my research activities with IYE, while spread out over fifteen weeks, were more limited than in Find Your Light and viBeStages because IYE rehearses only on Saturdays from seven to nine o’clock in the evening. Between mid-November 2006 and mid-February 2007, I observed a total of fourteen rehearsals, totaling twenty-eight hours, and spent additional time observing the ensemble’s training classes in modern dance, African dance and drama before rehearsal when time permitted. I had seen the ensemble’s recent production of, The Advocate: Who Is the Mastermind?, in June 2006 before I’d been formally invited to join them as researcher. The ensemble did not

perform this piece again during the course of my study, though they did begin to revise it. My account of this performance is based on a digital recording of it taken in June by Ifetayo's staff. I also was not given permission to video tape any of Ifetayo Youth Ensemble's rehearsals. I was therefore able to capture some but not all of the dialogues and exercises that the youth were involved in. But I was not able to capture the level of detail that I was able to during Find Your Light and viBeStages rehearsals. Ifetayo also required that a program elder, facilitator or parent be in the room with me while I was interviewing ensemble members. This decision was in keeping with the organization's policy of full-disclosure for all of its programs. The Ifetayo Youth Ensemble coordinator selected which ensemble members I could interview. While I don't think this arrangement compromised the integrity of what the youth shared with me, it may have limited what they felt they could say in the presence of an adult-mentor. I interviewed two of the adult facilitators of the program but did not formally interview any parents or community members.

While in Find Your Light and viBeStages rehearsals I was actively encouraged to participate in group check-ins and warm-ups and to side-coach when necessary, my role as a researcher with Find Your Light was strictly as an observer and interviewer upon the organization's request. This decision was due in part to the fact that the ensemble's "check-ins" were based in an African tradition called Mbongi (which I describe in further detail below) that helped the youth foster relationship-building and trust and to practice full disclosure within the internal Ifetayo community of which I was not a member. At the same time,

not being able to freely associate with the youth hindered my abilities to understand them beyond their interactions in rehearsals and formal interviews with me, and likewise made it difficult for them to get to know and trust me better as a researcher as well as a person.

I analyzed and inductively coded all of the data collected throughout my fieldwork experience using grounded theory. I examined by notes from each rehearsal which included as much verbatim dialogue as I could capture as well as my own observations and comments, archival materials and videos of past productions, email correspondence, a digital recording of The Advocate: Who is the Mastermind? and marketing materials. The ensemble members did not keep journals and I did not have a copy of the play script for *The Advocate*. Analyses made during my fieldwork were cross-checked in interviews with the adult facilitators only.

Because of the shorter rehearsal hours observed, supervised interviews with youth and timing of my research (in the sense that it did not fully enable me to observe the production of a new play or remount of one from their repertoire), I was limited in what I could learn from the rehearsal process in comparison to Find Your Light and viBeStages. My understanding of IYE's process is based as much on my interviews with adult facilitators and ensemble members, and on my analysis of archival materials, press clippings and writing done by IYE members and Ifetayo's staff, as it is on my observations of rehearsals, which I could not analyze with the same level of detail and complexity as the other sites due to the fact that all of my observations were recorded by hand.

The Participants

While Ifetayo Youth Ensemble at the time of my study was made up of youth ages eleven to twenty-four, the focus of my examination was on members between the ages of thirteen and twenty-one. A total of fifteen adolescents participated in my study from Ifetayo Youth Ensemble, seven were young women (Aisha, Dara, Nadira, Mariama, Amara, Naja, and Layla) and eight were young men (Dia, Fela, Tyler, Jafari, Chaka, Hasani, Jared and Chike). All of the youth identified as being of African descent. They lived in poor to middle class sections of Flatbush and its surrounding neighborhoods in Brooklyn.

Ifetayo Cultural Arts Academy's Founding President and Chief Executive Officer, Kwayera Archer-Cunningham was in her early forties and identified as being of African descent. Raised in Springfield Gardens and Jamaica, Kwayera continued to live in Brooklyn with her husband and three children (all of whom participated in Ifetayo's programs). Before starting Ifetayo in 1989 (when she was twenty-four years old), she danced professionally with companies such as Bernice Johnson Dance Company, the Royal African Ballet, Jubilation Dance Company. She also was a graduate of Columbia Business School's Institute for Not-For-Profit Management, an executive education program.

Chiriqui Cooper, Ifetayo Youth Ensemble's program coordinator, was an alumnus of the program and identified as being of African descent. In her early

twenties, she continued to live in Brooklyn and was completing an undergraduate degree in physical education. She was the mother of a toddler at the time of this study.

The Ifetayo Youth Ensemble Process

IYE members come together on Saturdays throughout the school year to train in their artistic discipline or IYE “major” (African dance, African drumming, modern dance or acting), and then rehearse as a whole group for two hours in the evening.⁶⁰ Some of them are at Ifetayo on Saturdays from 9:00am, when classes in the Cultural Arts Program begin, to 9:00pm when IYE rehearsals end. At the time of this study, all of Ifetayo’s Saturday classes and rehearsals were held at P.S. 249 (The Caton School), a public elementary school just south of Prospect Park in the Flatbush neighborhood of Brooklyn, New York. Most IYE members also participated in either Sisters in Sisterhood or I Am My Brother one weekday evening throughout the school year as well.

Their classes, which are part of the Cultural Arts Program and also include youth who are not in IYE, are taught by master teachers from around the world. On its website, Ifetayo promotes the fact that IYE members have worked with renowned African artists such as jazz trumpet player Donald Byrd, choreographers Bebe Miller and Abdel Salaam; former Alvin Ailey principal

⁶⁰ Ifetayo offers a broad range of arts classes including hip hop, visual arts, martial arts, ballet, contemporary music and other disciplines which IYE members also take classes in throughout the day on Saturdays. But they must major in African drum (either Djimbe or Conga drum), African dance, modern dance or drama as part of their IYE requirements.

dancer Sarita Allen, and others.⁶¹ IYE rehearsals are student-led but facilitated by IYE coordinator, Chiriqui Ifetayo Cooper who is originally from Kingston, Jamaica but “grew up” in Ifetayo since she started taking classes when she was four years old. She is an Ifetayo Cultural Arts Academy founding member, Rites of Passage alumna, and was a former hip hop instructor for the Cultural Arts Program. At the time of this study, she had been with Ifetayo for more than eighteen years. Her mother, Faybiene, had worked with IYE for fourteen years, formerly as a teacher and co-director, and at the time of this study as a program elder and one of Ifetayo’s “Mbongi Core Members.” Ifetayo had six core members, each of whom had been working with the organization for at least seven years. These members were able to facilitate circle meetings, called Mbongi, and serve as youth and family mentors.⁶² Faybiene was one of IYE’s original acting teachers. The ensemble used to perform her scripts which were presented as part of the Cultural Arts Programs’ end-of-the-year showcase. But since their 2004 production of Tag: It’s Not a Game, the ensemble has been writing and producing their own plays comprising drama, dance, poetry, comedy and other genres that are responsive to their life experiences, research and reflections on community. Tag addressed the HIV/AIDS epidemic and its impact on Black and Latino communities in Brooklyn.

In 2006-07, the ensemble was reshaping Tag and the second play in its repertoire called, The Advocate: Who’s the Mastermind?. The ensemble had

⁶¹ <http://www.ifetayo.org/programs/iye.asp>

⁶² Mbongi is described in greater detail later in this chapter.

researched and developed The Advocate in 2005-06 and in June 2006 had performed to nearly sold-out audiences in the 320-seat, state-of-the art, Kumble Theater for Performing Arts at Long Island University. In its program book, Ifetayo describes The Advocate as recounting “the untold story of the calculated incarceration of African peoples historically for the purpose of acquiring wealth and building major industrial enterprises.” The ensemble’s work on The Advocate is a good illustration of its creative process and cultural strategy. The play is an interrogation of the Prison Industrial Complex that connects “the present day exploitation of human labor” in prisons to a historical narrative which traces “the imprisonment of African peoples for the purpose of acquiring wealth and building major industrial enterprises” back to slavery (The Advocate brochure). Using an episodic play structure that incorporates drama, African and modern dance, song and spoken word poetry, the ensemble recounts a scenario of exploitation and imprisonment, but also begins to interrupt and reshape it by embodying a re-commitment to African tradition and values, and systems of practice, which they hope will transfer to their audiences and enable healing and shifts in these patterns of abuse.

Theoretical Framework

The Meaning of Ifetayo

The word “Ifetayo” is a West African Yoruba word that means “love brings happiness,” and is the foundation of the organization’s model for comprehensive community building which uses African arts and culture as its core strategy for enhancing the spiritual, psychological, emotional, educational

and recreational dimensions of the lives of youth and their families (Archer-Cunningham, "Cultural Arts Education" 26). IYE is more than just an arts program with a relationship between teacher and student. The youth have to participate in Rites of Passage programs designed to help them transition successfully through adolescence to adulthood. These programs offer practical information about health and sexuality, build awareness of the youths' cultural heritage, help youth make connections with a local and international communities of men and women, and address global issues of race and gender as they relate to people of African descent from a historical and contemporary perspective. The youth's families also are expected to be partners in the youths' development and are encouraged to learn about the African cultural history and value system that grounds Ifetayo's work. In addition to the youth, families and instructors working in collaboration, there is a high value placed within the organization on paying tribute to and learning from the wisdom of elders in the Ifetayo community. In an article on Ifetayo's model of healing and transformation, Kwayera writes: "Communities of the African Diaspora have always valued the contributions that every member of the community contributes toward its success" (Archer-Cunningham, "Cultural Arts Education" 26). She explains further that through an ethos of unity and love and commitment to a shared system of values, codified in the Nguzo Saba, Ifetayo can address "the marginalization and disconnectedness that can come from one's inability to see oneself in the dominant community. Nothing in [the youths'] environment references their heritage or reinforces the

essence of who they are. The African perspective that permeates Ifetayo's arts programs begins to remedy this" (26).

Kawaida Theory

Kwayera confirmed with me that the philosophical framework for this holistic approach to community building is rooted in Kawaida theory, a cultural nationalist philosophy developed by African American author and political activist Maulana Karenga that posits that "the key challenge in Black people's life is the challenge of culture, and that what Africans must do is to discover and bring forth the best of their culture, both ancient and current, and use it as a foundation to bring into being new models of human excellence" and possibility (Karenga 3-4). Culture in Karenga's view was a "holistic composite of a particular groups' thoughts and practices rather than simple a people's art and folkways" (Brown 11). "Everything we do, think, or learn is somehow interpreted as cultural expression," wrote Karenga in his manifesto The Quotable Karenga. Influenced by anthropological and ethnographic studies of Africa in the mid-1960s and early 1970s, Karenga defined culture as a complete value system and also the ways in which Africans maintain as well as shape that value system through practice (11). Karenga was influenced by 19th century Black Nationalist Marcus Garvey and 20th century black power leader Malcolm X who spoke out about how histories of enslavement had left black people with a sense of psychological and cultural deficit.⁶³ Karenga and his organization US, which was founded in 1965, rejected

⁶³ Malcolm X, in the "Statement of the Organization of Afro-American Unity,"

government and the law as avenues for change. “We say that unless blacks create a culture of their own, they will always be marginal men in America,” US stated, “disrespected, rejected, brutalized and forced into positions of protest: vocal and physical, non-violent and violent (qtd. in Brown, 31).

Karenga argued that the African Diaspora’s “cultural anchor” is tradition (16). But the focus of Kawaida is not on preserving cultural tradition as a rarefied object but rather on a process of “select[ing], preserv[ing] and build[ing] on the best of what [Africans] have achieved and produced” (Karenga, Kwanzaa 16). In this way tradition is a dynamic resource, not a static reference or repository of meaning. Karenga argues that only through praxis can the African community keep its tradition from “becoming a stagnant, sterile convention or empty historical reference” (16). To him, community building throughout the Diaspora depends on a dialectical process of defining a value system, practicing those values and, through that practice, continually redefining values so that “tradition becomes and remains a lived, living and constantly expanded and enriched experience” (16). This philosophy and approach to community building directly informs Ifetayo’s process and mission and is reflected publicly in the organization’s tagline, “Join the spirit of living culture.”

Kawaida theory positions young people with the special responsibility of keeping cultural tradition alive and vital. “They are key to the cultural *survival* and *development* of the community,” writes Karenga, “It is they who . . . are the

says: “We must recapture our heritage and identity if we are ever to liberate ourselves from the bond of White supremacy. We must launch a cultural revolution to unbrainwash an entire people” (qtd. in Brown, 23).

‘heirs and custodians’ of our cultural legacy as a people. This dual function as heirs and custodians means that they not only inherit African culture—its narrative and achievements, its views and values—but must assume responsibility for its *preservation* and *expansion*” (Kwanzaa 77).

Performing Cultural Memory

As noted in the previous chapter, social anthropologist Paul Connerton argues in his book, How Societies Remember, that culture “lives in our unconscious memories as a system of classification. In addition to linguistic and verbal mediums, one of the ways in which social and cultural codes/messages are learned, stored, and transmitted is through the body. In this sense, Connerton explains, “the past is, as it were, sedimented in the body” (72) and through the body’s repeated activity, it is articulated in the present. Performance theorist Diana Taylor argues that the continuance of embodied memory, or what she calls the repertoire, requires presence. In other words, “people participate in the production and reproduction of knowledge by ‘being there,’ being part of the transmission” (The Archive and the Repertoire 20). And due to its liveness, the repertoire allows room for variation where the archive (or written narrative) does not. Repeated performances of a traditional African dance, for example, might maintain the codes and structures of the “original” piece, but will differ slightly based on who is performing, who they are performing for, and when they perform. In this sense, “the repertoire both keeps and transforms choreographies of meaning” (20). In this chapter, I draw on Connerton and Taylor’s theories of cultural memory and acts of transfer to analyze how Ifetayo positions youth to

learn, use and practice adding to a traditional African cultural repertoire to build a collective identity, purpose and direction as members of the African Diaspora.

“This is not a Project. This is a Movement.”

The parents of every young person who is new to Ifetayo’s programs are required to attend an orientation to the program. As explained in chapter one, I was invited to the orientation for parents of new IYE members in early December 2006 to discuss my research and allow the parents to ask me questions.⁶⁴ During the orientation, Chiriqui gave the parents a brief history of Ifetayo and an explanation of its mission and teaching philosophy. She explained that Ifetayo “is a way for Africans and Latinos to become stronger on their own. There’s a lot of pain and frustration around that level of self-reliance. My job is to help our youth work on their bad habits” (field notes, 9 Dec. 2006).⁶⁵ The rehearsals follow Mbongi format, a traditional Congolese learning circle and indigenous system of governance which involves collective problem-solving and consensus building and expects each member of the circle to be truthful and accountable for their

⁶⁴ The orientation was held in December after auditions for the ensemble for that year were complete.

⁶⁵ Chiriqui includes Latinos in her description because the year prior the Ensemble had one Latino member who was accepted on the basis that she aligned with the organizations values and social change mission. The organization as a whole does not discriminate based on race. But its orientation towards restoring African culture and values tends to attract primarily youth and families who identify as being from African descent, namely African Americans as well as newly immigrated families from the Caribbean, Africa and South America.

actions.⁶⁶ Chiriqui admits that this format can at first be uncomfortable for youth who are not used to being on the “frontlines,” in terms of being truthful and accountable, but she stresses, “If no one addresses their bad habits, they grow like a cancer. The Youth Ensemble is supposed to be the highest performers and individuals [within the organization]. We teach them that the arts are connected to everything you do outside” (field notes, 9 Dec. 2006). IYE depends on the parents to be transparent with them as well if something is going on at home or in the community. She explains the importance of their Rites of Passage programs and how these work to complement the cultural organizing that happens in IYE.

She next asks the parents to explain why *they’re* here. Unlike Find Your Light and viBeStages, the youth in IYE primarily join Ifetayo or audition for the ensemble because they’ve had older siblings who have been involved and/or their parents want them to do it. Of the seven IYE youth I interviewed, all of them found out about Ifetayo through their parents or extended family members. Some of the family members who got them involved were close friends of Kwayera’s or one of Ifetayo’s core members, some learned about it from friends in the Brooklyn area or African community or from other family members who had their children involved, and others received an email or flyer from the organization. Here are some of the reasons that the parents at orientation gave for getting their

⁶⁶ Learning circles have always been a part of Ifetayo’s programs but they named as *mbongi* after Dr. K. Kia Buneski Fu-Kiau, a Congolese native and member of Ifetayo’s Council of Elders, offered research to the organization which he’s published in his book, Mbongi: An African Traditional Political Institution (2007).

children involved and for wanting their families to be part of the Ifetayo community:

PARENT ONE: My daughter has been performing since she could walk and also performs with other cultural groups. I hope her participation [in IYE] will open her up to some other conversations and help with her social and emotional adjustments.

PARENT TWO: I wish I knew about Ifetayo when [my son] was two or three. He's now seventeen. I'm glad we have Ifetayo because he needs that [pause] He's been fighting with his own intentions." Later in the discussion, she discusses the positive impact that the book, Post-Traumatic Slavery Syndrome, has had on her life and then turns to the whole group: "This environment inspires me to be a better African and come out to the world and face these fears."

PARENT THREE explains how her daughter is twelve and in the second year of the Sisters in Sisterhood program. This is her first year in IYE. The mother explains how she used to take African dance classes herself as a child: "I wish I had kind of kept the connection . . . but I'm back!"

[. . .]

[The next two parents are friends and both saw IYE perform as part of the Cultural Arts Program's end-of-the-year showcase.

Their daughters had been taking classes with another organization

since they were in elementary school but the mothers were impressed with IYE's high level of artistry and wanted a change. Neither of their daughters knew about Ifetayo's mission when they auditioned but made a decision to accept their positions in the ensemble after learning more about the organization through its website. Neither the youth nor their parents identified formerly as activists or Africans.]

[The next parent is a father who explains that he and his wife have been trying to raise their son "in a specific way to be a responsible adult and serve the community." "Ifetayo is itself a miracle and the mission and vision of Ifetayo as it stands in the community is to fulfill some of the pieces that other organizations haven't filled, particularly the focus on Rites of Passage," he says holding back his emotions. He notes that without the proper training to represent their community and its integrity, young people are lost. "Rites helps us know what is expected of us in our community so that we can move forward from colonization to rectify our community and claim what is our own."]

[. . .]

[Kwayera joins the orientation halfway through this discussion to provide some more context for IYE's work, but in listening to the parents she can hardly hold back from interrupting. She is holding her head down, sucking in her breath and balling her fist. She

finally explodes, smiling, nodding and enthusiastically affirming all that the parents are saying and tells them she must share her own most recent story for “being here.” She explains how her daughter goes to a predominantly white high school where “they still assign books like, To Kill A Mockingbird, Huck Finn, and Come Tell It On the Mountain.” Her daughter’s teacher who is also White, “as if most of ‘our’ children’s teachers are,” was handing out study guides and, as an aside, tells the class, “we have to remember that the word ‘nigger’ wasn’t always used negatively.” At this point in her story, Kwayera pauses and her eyes widen in disbelief. “My daughter knew something was off, but surrounded by all these kids and her teacher she can only laugh like, ‘You have got to be kidding me?!’” Kwayera explains that it almost got out to the news stations, but finally the school agreed to be consulted by one of Kwayera’s friends that does race work in the schools. The teacher wrote a formal apology to Kwayera. Kwayera notes that her daughter knew to stand up for herself because she is grounded in Ifetayo and “how we as Africans use arts and culture to transform community, tapping into something from our past to give us strength to build our future.” She turns to me and says, “This is not a project, this is a movement.”] (Field notes, 9 Dec. 2006)

Re-Educating Youth to a Cultural Value System

As illustrated by the stories that parents of new ensembles shared in IYE orientation, not all young people or their families come to Ifetayo with an African mindset or value system. But most families do come *desiring* that for their children or for themselves as a way to celebrate their heritage, be part of positive social change, to heal, or to help their children or other family members who are struggling emotionally, psychologically, behaviorally, or academically.⁶⁷

The Significance of Values

This desire relates again to Kawaiida theory. Karenga felt that for blacks to build identity, purpose and direction as a community, a complete re-education of values was required (Brown 53). This position was based on his belief that blacks “are a community of struggle and [their] values should reflect and lend support to this struggle” (43). Values for Karenga are defined as commitments and priorities which determine human possibility. “Values produce and sustain thought and practice which either diminish or enhance human possibilities,” he writes, “In other words, what you define as important and put first in your life determines human possibilities” (Kwanzaa 36). For him, values and practice have a reciprocal relationship. Values shape your actions and your actions in turn shape and reshape your values. “For practice is central to African ethics,” he said, “and all claims to ethical living and commitment to moral principles are tested and

⁶⁷ More than half of the 42 original IYE cast members of The Advocate in 2006 had African names, a sign that their parents were either immigrants of the Caribbean or countries of the African Diaspora, or had some orientation to an African mindset prior to sending their children to Ifetayo.

proved or disproved in relation to others. Relations then are the hinge on which morality turns, the ground on which it rises or falls” (45).

He chose the name, Karenga, which means keeper of tradition (Kareng’ a), and self-consciously created a mythology of African history and cultural values which he selected and interpreted from a synthesis of continental African cultural traditions, namely First Fruit Celebrations (Brown 23). These celebrations were not ethnically specific but had core common aspects such as gathering of people, reverence for the creator and creation, commemoration of the past, recommitment to cultural ideals and celebration of the good that were considered fundamental to building family, community and culture (Karenga, Kwanzaa, 18). This system of values was codified by Karenga in 1966 as the Nguzo Saba (Kwanzaa was created as a holiday to introduce and reinforce these seven principles). The Nguzo Saba are the vehicles through which all of Ifetayo’s programs are delivered. They include: Umoja (unity), the belief in both strategic solidarity as well as the belief that individual identity is dependent on community interaction; Kujichagulia (self-determination), defining who you are as opposed to allowing others (those in power) to define you; Ujima (collective work and responsibility), “a commitment to active and informed togetherness on matters of common interest,” Ujamaa (cooperative economics), a commitment to shared social wealth and the process to achieve it; Nia (purpose), a personal and social commitment to “building, developing and defending” the African community, its culture and history; Kuumba (creativity), a commitment to being creative with your actions so as not

only to restore the community but also enhance it; and Imani (faith), a commitment to practice all of these values as a way of growing personally and as a community.

Commitment to Practicing the Nguzo Saba

No matter what their point of entry or the intention for being in Ifetayo, all young people are expected to practice the Nguzo Saba as part of their artistic training and participation in Ifetayo's other programs. Kwayera notes that while Ifetayo markets its programs to a broad community through its website and direct mail postcards and brochures, more than ninety percent of families who participate in IYE programs have heard of them by word-of-mouth and are familiar with or desire this value system for their family. Some youth like Chiriqui start classes in the Cultural Arts Program as toddlers, or as adolescents, and eventually graduate from Rites of Passage and IYE in their early twenties. Others audition directly for IYE and are accepted based on their artistic skills as well as their commitment to positive social change.

For those who decide to audition based on an email or flyer, the expectation to commit to a cultural value system could be a rude awakening. In large font at the top of these promotional pieces are the lines: "The Ifetayo Youth Ensemble is holding Open Auditions for Youth Ages 11-24. Do you have a talent? Can you Act, Dance, or Drum?" The communication then lists the audition dates and times for African drumming, acting, modern dance and African dance in a ten point font and the items you are expected to bring: a picture resume, a monologue for the acting audition and a dance piece for the modern dance

audition. In the same small font size above these audition times is the line, “Learn how to use your talents with the Ifetayo Youth Ensemble to make a change in your community today!” The line is sandwiched under the Caton School address, easy to miss if you weren’t reading closely (email communication). This flyer gets youth to audition for the program based on their interests in the arts and on their talents. But the flyer’s lack of emphasis on Ifetayo’s mission of helping youth become agents of change suggests that only after the youth “are in the door” does the organization address how it hones these artistic practices to help youth build and promote the culture and community of the African Diaspora.

They want a large pool of talented youth to draw from but the primary criteria that Chiriqui looks for when auditioning youth for IYE is that “they’re committed and they want to change their environment,” she said (Cooper, personal interview). At one point, I asked Kwayera how open IYE was to youth of other ethnicities after seeing a Latina woman in her early twenties in the original cast of The Advocate that June. Kwayera admitted that while the organization is building a community of people of African descent and from the Caribbean, their focus is primarily on a value system. “We can talk about African issues, black issues, all day long but if someone walks in the door and can align with our value system, that’s it. That is the bottom core line,” she said (Archer-Cunningham, personal interview).

There are two tiers to IYE. If someone auditions who is committed but whose artistic skills need honing, they are accepted as an apprentice. An IYE apprentice can train with IYE and request another audition or be acknowledged

for their growth within the same year and accepted in by the ensemble itself. The apprentices are still part of all of the ensemble's decision-making processes but have to pay for their Cultural Arts Program classes. A full member of IYE has their class tuition waived. According to Chiriqui, most of IYE members have a prior relationship with one of Ifetayo's other programs, whereas those who simply audition for IYE from the outside tend to be accepted as apprentices first and later as full members. Still there is little to no context for what "outsiders" can expect in terms of their commitment until they arrive at the Caton School for their audition. At which point, they may see flyers that read, "I can. I'm African," taped to cinder block walls and a Community Information Board with information on upcoming African holidays, Parent Mbongi workshops, tributes to Ifetayo's Council of Elders or core members, and newspaper clippings that raise awareness about African achievements or acts of discrimination. These were materials that often populated the lobby of the Caton School during the winter of 2006-07.

During rehearsals in November, Chiriqui told the ensemble that she had been disappointed in the youth who had auditioned for IYE that fall (with the exception of the four newest members). "I'm not interested in inviting new members in that aren't committed and just want to dance. They need to be able to answer the following questions: Are you committed? Are you interested in making a change in your environment? Are you going to be able to keep up? It takes real heart to be in these classes because people are going to be pushing and pushing and pushing you beyond your physical limitations" (field notes, 18 Nov. 2006). Chiriqui implies that while the organization sends out flyers, it is the

ensemble's responsibility to find new recruits that can meet this commitment and be serious about cultural organizing. After one of the IYE members asked Chiriqui why the flyers and emails didn't more explicitly state that they were looking for talented artists in *African* dance and drum, she explained that youth coming in don't have that level of consciousness yet. She explains that the line "Does your kids have talent? Love to act? Sing? Dance?" is a "marketing thing . . . a way to draw people in to be educated." She explains further that the belief in the "hood" is that everyone wants a ticket to be famous. "This flyer draws them in on that dream," she acknowledges. They don't specify African traditions, said Chiriqui, because "there's a lot of sensitivity around ignorance" (field notes, 18 Nov. 2006).

When Chiriqui notes that most youth "do not have that level of consciousness yet," she is referring to the ways in which people color in the United States collude with a system of oppression. Her statement indicates a view that racial oppression, regardless of class, is integrally connected with the core values that shape social, political and economic systems and that in turn affect the way communities of color conceive of their abilities, or inabilities, to act. Social justice educators Rita Hardiman and Baily W. Jackson write:

People who have been socialized in an oppressive environment, and who accept the dominant group's ideology about their group, have learned to accept a definition of themselves that is hurtful and limiting. They think, feel and act in ways that demonstrate the devaluation of their group and of themselves as members of that

group . . . The [most] insidious form of collusion is unconscious, not knowing that one is collaborating with one's own dehumanization" (21).

But conscious collusion with dominant paradigms occurs too. For example, when a young person goes along with a friend's racist joke even though he/she doesn't agree, accepts the use of the word 'nigger' in a classroom because his/her teacher assigned the book where the word is dominantly featured or intentionally doesn't share their interests in art forms that aren't popular within the dominant culture. IYE member Tyler calls this type of collusion "peer pressure" and said it was the number one thing that gets in the way of young black people building community in his neighborhood: "Everyone wants to be the same, dress the same. Okay like if I were to tell someone I do African drumming, they would look at me like I was crazy or something or they would think I'm joking. . . it's like they don't like things that they don't know about. They'd [most likely] judge" (personal interview). Tyler cited rising levels of gang violence and a pervasive sense of negativity as things he most wanted to change about his community. As suggested by the parents' comments at orientation and my interviews with IYE members, Ifetayo, similar to viBeStages and Find Your Light, provides young people (and in this case their families) a sense of acknowledgment and affirmation that is decidedly different than what they feel they're getting from dominant institutions (e.g. their schools, jobs, etc.) and the environments in which they live. "Community transformation is achieved by first establishing a safe place where [youth and adults] believe they have something to contribute," writes Kwayera,

“ensuring that coming together with a body of people who have a common identity is paramount. This has proven to serve as an opening to nurturing change agents for self-expression, ongoing healing, and connecting with community” (Archer-Cunningham, “Cultural Arts Education” 28-29).

For youth that haven’t come up through the ranks of Ifetayo into IYE, Ifetayo’s marketing efforts for the Youth Ensemble aim to draw them in on their artistic talent and their desire to do something with it. But these youth may not share the sense of “common identity” Kwayera refers to and defines as a commitment to Ifetayo’s value system (personal interview). None of the seven girls that I saw audition in late-October could answer Chiriqui’s questions about their relationship to social activism (as defined within the context of a collective commitment to black culture) (field notes, 28 Oct. 2006). One girl felt she might be a social activist because she stays after school to help her teacher clean her classroom but Chiriqui dismissed her example as incongruent with the type of commitment to change that she was talking about. Most of the girls explained that they were hip-hop dancers and newer to African and modern dance.⁶⁸

Unlearning Bad Habits

No matter what their points of entry, once young people join an Ifetayo program they are positioned to develop a collective cultural identity while at the

⁶⁸ One of the girls in IYE asked in rehearsal later that evening why hip-hop wasn’t one of the core disciplines of IYE. Chiriqui mentioned that the ensemble didn’t have enough discipline or commitment yet to warrant this popular dance style. It’s not enough for the youth to want to do a style, they need to be committed to understanding where it comes from and how their practice of it contributes positively to the restoration of African culture.

same time positioned to “unlearn” the sense of internalized subordination and “bad habits” that come with being socialized in an oppressive dominant culture. “Many forms of habitual skilled remembering illustrate a keeping of the past in mind that, without ever adverting to its historical origin, nevertheless re-enacts the past in our present conduct,” writes Connerton (72). While we tend to think of habits as skills (e.g. swimming or walking), Connerton notes, we can better appreciate and grasp “the peculiar place and force of habit” in our lives by thinking about bad habits (93). Connerton writes:

For what we can observe clearly in the case of bad habits is the hold they exert over us, the way in which they impel us toward certain courses of action. These habits entail an inherent tendency to act in a certain way, an impulsion strong enough to lead us habitually to do things which we tell ourselves we would prefer not to do, and to act in ways that belie or override our conscious decisions and formal resolutions. (93)

As Chiriqui noted during the parent orientation, Ifetayo’s believes that if no one addresses the bad habits that result from internalized subordination they can “grow like cancer,” escalating a sense of frustration, anger, isolation and despair in communities of color. Through the practice of arts and culture, Ifetayo aims not only to raise young people’s awareness of their habits of mind and body, but also to redefine themselves and internalize this new definition of self and collective agency into all aspects of their lives.

Hardiman and Jackson have outlined five phases of social identity development, an adaptation of black identity development theory, that I think are helpful as a conceptual framework for understanding part of the Ifetayo process.⁶⁹ They describe phase one and two as “no social consciousness” and “acceptance,” which for oppressed groups roughly describes a process of internalizing accepted messages about inferiority. Phases three through five are a movement from resistance of oppressive messages and habits to redefinition of self as independent of an oppressive system to internalization of that new identity into all aspects of everyday life. Similar to Find Your Light, Ifetayo in many ways intervenes in the lives of the youth it serves by compelling youth to acknowledge and question the cumulative experiences of oppression in their lives and begin to resist them. Through the practice of arts and culture which are informed by an African value system, they simultaneously position youth to redefine themselves and also internalize new definitions of themselves by re-tuning both the physical body and the formation of a new symbolic framework. Hardiman and Jackson write:

In the Redefinition stage targeted people are primarily concerned with defining themselves in terms that are independent of the perceived strengths and/or weaknesses of the [dominant culture] . . . it is at this juncture that [oppressed groups] shift their attention and energy away from a concern with their interactions

⁶⁹ Jackson, Bailey W. “Black Identity Development.” Urban Social and Educational Issues. Eds. L. Golubschick and B. Persky. Dubuque, IA: Kendall/Hung, 1976.

with [dominant culture] toward a primary contact with members of their own social group who are at the same stage of consciousness.

(27)

Is Redefinition an Essentialist and Self-Segregating Strategy?

While Redefinition, as defined by Hardiman and Jackson, can lead to a sense of empowerment, communities in this phase of development are often critiqued for being essentialist and self-segregating. Such critiques are taken up by sociologist and African-American studies scholar Paul Gilroy in his book, The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness. Gilroy argues that nationalist paradigms for developing identities based on cultural history fail when confronted with post-modern theories of hybridity, intertextuality, and the intermixture of ideas that comes from the interaction of different cultures. Gilroy writes: “The usually mystical ‘Afrocentrism’ which animates this position perceives no problem in the internal differentiation of black cultures. And fragmentation in the cultural output of Africans at home and abroad is only apparent rather than real and cannot forestall the power of the underlying racial aesthetic and its political correlates” (100). But Gilroy also critiques the postmodern perspective of Afrocentricity, calling it “a casual and arrogant deconstruction of blackness” which ignores “the appeal of [a] powerful, populist affirmation of black culture” (100) and overlooks the lingering effects of institutionalized racism (101). The opposition between these two schools of thought is an obstacle to critical theorizing, says Gilroy. Like Gayatri Spivak, Gilroy confounds any simplistic dichotomy between modernism and black

nationalism, developing an alternative “anti-anti-essentialism” perspective that recovers the idea that blackness has real material meaning as a cultural category and that the Diaspora is “still indispensable for focusing on the political and ethical dynamics of the unfinished history of blacks in the modern world” even though it is overtly idealist (80). For Gilroy, the dangers of idealism are obvious but less problematic when you conceive of African traditions within “histories of borrowing, displacement, transformation, and continued reinscription” rather than an unchanging rootedness or core (102). In defense of this view, Gilroy points to how “new traditions have been invited in the jaws of modern experience and new conception of modernity produced in the long shadow of our enduring traditions—the African ones and the ones forged from the slave experience which the black vernacular so powerfully and actively remembers” (103). Ifetayo’s tagline, “Join the spirit of *living* [my italics] culture” echoes this perspective.

The tension between these theories is not only working itself out in scholarship but on the ground as well. Youth in IYE, for example, are mentored by multiple generations of black people from both the United States and abroad, all of whom come to the work with their own histories and perspectives and whose theories on black cultural identity development play out in various ways in rehearsals and classes. Some of these teachers, mentors and scholars were born and raised in Africa or the Caribbean, for example, others were active members of the Civil Rights and Black Power Movements, and so on. In the past several years, Ifetayo has been working with several scholars and community leaders to determine the trans-historical locus of what it has come to define as the “core

values of African and Diaspora communities”(Archer-Cunningham, personal interview). Kwayera writes that these compounded values now “serve as the ethical basis of all organizational programming and broader community development” (Archer-Cunningham, “Cultural Arts Education” 30). But she also acknowledges that through the guidance of Ifetayo’s diverse body of instructors, youth are “exposed to a panoply of artistic, cultural, and intellectual traditions” (34). While Ifetayo has developed intentional strategies to build a collective cultural identity for youth and their families, these practices leave room for maneuvering for new meanings and practices to be incorporated. The process of youth and community building therefore remains fluid. It is a creative process of negotiation between the self and the social milieu that acknowledges identity as historically constructed, looks to the past for foundation and inspiration, and then builds on it.

Acts of Transfer

While African history and values of African and Diaspora traditions are taught to youth in many of Ifetayo’s programs, including its Rites of Passage programs which IYE members are expected to participate in, in this chapter I focus on how a sense of collective culture was transferred to IYE members and to their audiences through bodily practices and new ways of relating and how, in turn, the youth are positioned to practice putting their culture to work. These “tools,” as Kwayera calls them in her interview with me, incorporate tradition but

also leave open the “wobble room” for IYE members to contribute their own stories, perspectives, aesthetics and practices that help keep the culture vital.

Mbongi: Practicing How to Combine

Similar to youth in viBeStages, IYE members begin and end every rehearsal in a ritual circle which Ifetayo has come to recognize and call, “Mbongi.” Kwayera explains:

Mbongi is a Kongolese word that means “learning place.” It is a principle derived from the ancient empire of the Kongo but represents an archetype that is present in various societies throughout the world . . . Mbongi is a succinct articulation of the idea that within every community there must a dynamic, mutually constitutive, and ethically responsible relations between the individual and the group. *Mu kanda, babo longa ye longa*: within the community everybody has the right to teach and to be taught. (Archer-Cunningham, “Cultural Arts Education” 31)

In Mbongi, everyone’s contributions matter. While a teacher, mentor or scholar may be recognized as an expert in their discipline, the youth (and/or community members) who participate in the circle are valued for their individual insights, experiences and contributions which are given equal weight within the collective experience of learning and decision-making. “Participants are encouraged to be confident about communicating their sentiments to peers, teachers, mentors, elders and other authority figures,” says Kwayera (Archer-Cunningham, “Cultural Arts Education” 31). In IYE which is a multi-age ensemble, a thirteen year-old

and a twenty-four year-old are equally respected in the circle for their opinions in group decision-making, learning and peer-to-peer mentoring, for example. In addition, anyone within the Ifetayo community (i.e. staff, youth, family members, community members) can call “Mbongi” at any moment during a class, meeting, rehearsal, etc. to address an issue of concern. “In calling the Mbongi, individual insights and grievances become not only communal knowledge but part of the collective experience and the ongoing process of individual and communal transformation,” notes Kwayera (31-32).

Coming together in circle formation is common within the field of community-based theater as a way to break down hierarchies between facilitators and community participants, encourage open sharing of ideas and stories, and foster democratic decision-making. Circles are used informally in Find Your Light and more intentionally as rituals in viBeStages. While Ifetayo had been using circle formations for meetings and in its artistic programs for some time, the organization had only recently aligned it with African tradition since working with a member of its Council of Elders who identified the practice as Mbongi (Archer-Cunningham, personal interview). Kwayera explained that as a former dancer with Jubilation Dance Company, she’d learned Mbongi (though they didn’t call it that) from her teachers and they had learned it from their dance teachers, and so on. If a conflict arose within Jubilation, for example, the entire company would all sit in circle until they worked it out together even if they were about to go on stage at a major venue. “That was Mbongi and we didn’t know,” noted Kwayera (Archer-Cunningham, personal interview). By codifying the

learning circle as an African system, or “technology” as Kwayera often referred to it, Ifetayo can use it intentionally as a technique for bringing people together, building, organizing and healing in ways that further engender pride and strengthen cultural identity. Mbongi is incorporated in all of Ifetayo’s programs, and therefore, similar to the rituals within viBe Theater Experience, becomes part of the Ifetayo culture and begins to build community through generations of participants. It is also the formation that Ifetayo uses to govern the organization and call community members together to decide organizational and programmatic policies, address grievances and learn from one another more broadly.

Through Mbongi, IYE members are positioned as legitimate contributors to the aesthetic, programmatic, and paradigmatic direction of the program and larger organization. The repeated practice of forming the circle and engaging with peers, teachers and elders in this way also begins to re-habituate them to new modes of articulating, reflecting upon, sharing, and combining their experiences and perspectives. Coupled with this formation, Ifetayo, as an organization, has a policy of full-disclosure both within its programs and between youth, their families and their instructors. At IYE rehearsals, youth are expected to be honest with themselves and each other about their actions and intentions. Youth are allowed three absences, beyond which they must have a written excuse from their parents and must address the ensemble in Mbongi as to why they are missing rehearsal. They are told that everything that is said in Mbongi stays in the circle, unless the teacher or coordinator feels it is pressing (i.e. negatively affecting the individual or the community’s ability to develop). In those cases, information is

shared with the young person's parents as well as the organizations' core members and elders. The reverse is also true. If Ifetayo's elders and instructors learn something from the youths' parents that they feel is destructive (according to the community's core values), it will be addressed with all of the IYE members in Mbongi during rehearsals. "[T]his culture of open exchange serves simultaneously to protect the participants in making the entire community aware of impending perils [and] to empower these same participants to be agents and authors of their own individual and community interventions," argues Kwayera (Archer-Cunningham, "Cultural Arts Education" 32).

During my research, I observed youth being asked to explain to the ensemble why they'd disrespected a parent's request not to hang out at certain places or why they'd skipped school or failed a class, for example.⁷⁰ While the youth were often hesitant to address these trespasses to the group, they eventually did. The circle typically listened to their peers without offering much of a response, although in cases where they could relate, a dialogue would ensue. There was once a fairly lengthy dialogue about what constitutes "skipping class," for example, and why many of them had done it (field notes, 18 Nov. 2006). Chiriqui would continuously remind members that everything they did in their lives would come back to full circle, and encourage them not to wait until she

⁷⁰ Youth are expected to maintain a high grade point average or "the equivalent in effort" to remain in the ensemble. If their grades drop, they are put on probation for three months and not allowed to participate in performances. IYE interns must maintain a B or better grade point average. All members must submit copies of their report cards at the beginning of the program and end of the year (Ifetayo Cultural Arts Parent & Student Handbook).

heard it through the grapevine. “If you do something, you have to stand up. If you do something, you own it,” she said (field notes, 18 Nov. 2006). For Ifetayo, open communication between youth and adults is critical to youth empowerment and further reinforces culture and promotes community support. While Ifetayo aligns itself with Karenga’s belief that young people are “key to the cultural survival and development of community,” it believes that “guidance and modeling must come from the elders in the community, starting with parents” (Archer-Cunningham, “Cultural Arts Education” 28). This approach is strikingly different from that taken by Find Your Light, viBeStages and other community-based youth arts programs that privilege the youth’s voice within their process, arguing that youth need a space of their own in order to develop fully as cultural agents.

Mbongi is called into formation at the beginning of all IYE rehearsals by either Chiriqui or one of IYE’s five interns, members who have been elected by their peers as leaders based on their commitment and work in IYE.⁷¹ Circles typically begin with meditation which focuses on breathing and centering the body. Once the ensemble is all together, Chiriqui or Faybiene, IYE’s mentor, will call out “Ago” (May I have your attention?) and the youth respond, “Ame” (Yes, you may have my attention). This call and response can go back and forth one or two times before the ensemble answers in unison, implying “Umoja” or unity. This simple call to attention is also a way of inviting everyone in the circle to

⁷¹ These are paid internships. Each intern is given the opportunity to learn about different aspects of Ifetayo’s organizational management. Once they graduate from IYE and Rites, they can then be considered for administrative and teaching positions within the organization (Archer-Cunningham, personal interview).

transition from focusing on their own breath and centering work to focusing on the energy of the group and attuning themselves to each other.

To illustrate how the practice of Mbongi holds the youth accountable to community while at the same time positioning them to shape its direction, I have included a full excerpt from my field notes during a rehearsal in early December 2006. At this point, the ensemble had spent approximately a month (five Saturday rehearsals) reshaping pieces from their repertoire and training the newest members, while also honing the skills of veteran members. Within the month, the members had been repeatedly reprimanded for lack of discipline and commitment, including lateness, lack of focus and not always showing that they were pushing themselves to their highest level of artistic capability. The following Mbongi, held at the beginning of rehearsal, went longer than ones I observed on other days. It was a response, in part, to a growing sense of crisis on the part of Chiriqui and the youths' other instructors that the level of commitment shown by IYE members was waning in comparison to years past:

One issue I would like to get to right away is the energy I'm getting from some of the Youth Ensemble members," says Chiriqui. She tells them that she is in the process of considering who needs to be spoken to and evaluating who can and cannot take criticism which she implies is all part of the process of being a member. "I [also] need to consider my time, my goals and what I assume you're all here for . . . You're supposed to be the elite of Ifetayo. It's my duty to make sure I'm upholding my

integrity . . . But losing the Youth Ensemble tradition is really big . . . I have my own home to balance and I find when I come here I give all of myself and get nothing back. I feel [drained] at the end.” She tells them that she understands they have homework, but “everyone has to be in Rites. At least there I know that you’re learning to hold yourself respectfully . . . learning how to become full human beings and how to articulate yourself.”

Chiriqui starts calling off a list of names of people whom she feels are “in question.” She explains that if your name is called and you are a member, you go down to apprentice. If you are already an apprentice, you will go under close observation, and if you still are not performing to level, you will have a meeting with the core members. “If I have to take the group down from forty-four to twelve, I will.” Twelve was the original number of ensemble members when IYE was founded. “This is New York City and there’s a lot of talent here for something like this. . . . You have to ask yourself why you’re here and what it is that you came for.” She explains that at every rehearsal, she’s going to observe those on the list and report back to their other teachers. She reminds them that she is in constant communication with their teachers and knows about some of the kids’ lateness and low energy in their other classes.

Next she tells them that there are several ensemble members that they haven't seen for weeks, including a male IYE member in his twenties who has begun to dance professionally with a company in Connecticut that makes it difficult for him to make it to IYE rehearsals. Chiriqui brings the issue of this member's absenteeism to the attention of the whole ensemble and asks them to talk through what they want to do about it: "For those of you who feel [this member] has disrespected this circle, please raise your hand." Nine youth raise their hands. "Those of you who don't have an opinion?" Four hands go up. "Those of you who think we should embrace [him]?" The rest of the group raises their hands.

MARIAMA: Is your decision going to be based on this?

CHIRIQUI: No it's not [but] it's going to have some weight. . . .

If I'm part of an ensemble, why can one person show up so sporadically and expect to be embraced, perform, and then disappear again? If that's the way it's going to be for one person, why isn't it going to be that for everyone?

MIRIAMA [supporting this position]: We have to be aware of how our circle can be destroyed and not just vote for someone based on ability or our friendship for someone.

Chiriqui asks the others who want him to stay to speak up.

Comments included:

- “When he’s here he does a lot of stuff.”
- “I want him to stay because he’s one of the only male dancers we have and he’s really good.”
- Let’s think of [him] as a father who’s always absent but when he’s here he helps out a lot and gives a lot of money, and then goes away again.”

A young girl tries to say something, but the others have trouble hearing her. Chiriqui tells them to back off: “She has a small voice now but if you give her some focus and attention . . .” The girl tries to speak again, but is still timid. “Speak up, sweetheart,” says Chiriqui. The girl begins to speak louder and with more confidence. She admits that the male member in question makes people feel bad sometimes if they mess up or aren’t at the level he’s at. Someone else seconds this, noting that he often points out others’ mistakes in rehearsal, whispering to other people, but acts like he never makes mistakes himself.

“He’s not reliable, so just don’t rely on him,” another member pipes in. His implication is that they should keep him in Ensemble and that perhaps he is simply going through something. “When he’s here, people use him like a crutch and then when he’s not here, people say, ‘He’s not reliable,’” he point outs. Chiriqui asks the young man to clarify his values. He tries to, but basically says the same thing. Chiriqui responds, “So you’re saying as an

ensemble, we should lose our power to hold others accountable. At what point do you take responsibility and decide? When are people “in” and when are they “out”?”

A young girl notes that if anyone else in the ensemble were behaving the way he is they’d probably be picked out. “Why should he be treated any differently?”

“Mbongi should be a place of empowerment and truthfulness . . . We should be learning to empower people in a positive way. There shouldn’t be anything negative here,” said the same young man that was defending the member.

Another young woman notes that she understands the predicament the member is in, but still feels like his allegiances should be here.

At this point, Chiriqui takes the vote again and everyone agrees to dismiss the ensemble member. (Field notes, 2 Dec. 2006)

This IYE member was a highly-trained dancer who had recently performed an African dance solo at the Cultural Arts Showcase that June which sent an auditorium of nearly 1,000 community members to its feet. The fact that the ensemble asked him to leave implies that its commitment to building this community and what it stands for is more important than artistic talent. Throughout this conversation, Chiriqui makes her own opinions transparent and challenges the ensemble with questions that reference Ifetayo’s value system.

When Chiriqui says “losing the IYE tradition is really big,” she is reminding the youth of their position as keepers of tradition, which in the context of Ifetayo’s mission adds real gravity to their decision. While not all of the youth spoke up, those that did—whether they were thirteen or twenty—did so with conviction. They addressed one another directly, allowing for time for each other to finish their thoughts completely and for each thought to be considered. The overall tone of the Mbongi was serious and critical.

At the end of this rehearsal, Chiriqui’s mother brought everyone back into Mbongi and acknowledged the members for their positive shift in energy and their contributions that day. But she also told them that as program elder she had heard and seen language and behavior at Ifetayo and elsewhere that was unacceptable for IYE members and reminded them not to forget whose shoulders they stand on. One girl notes that she will make a more conscious effort to give the kind of energy that Chiriqui and Ifetayo’s faculty are asking of them. Chiriqui and her mother nod and note that it is important for all of the youth to hold up their legacy.

While in some respects, Mbongi bears close resemblance to similar formations used by Find Your Light and viBeStages to negotiate conflicts within groups or to make decisions about play development, when the practice is set in the context of Ifetayo it demonstrates a specific ideological function. Connerton argues that rituals that claim an ancestry “do not simply imply continuity with the past by virtue of their high degree of formality and fixity; rather they have as one of their defining features the explicit claim to be commemorating such continuity”

(48). In his view, rituals play a significant role in shaping communal memory by nature of the fact that their *form* specifies a relationship of performativity among its participants that bears the weight of repetition, despite the fact that each has to be invented at some point and can involve a degree of variance over time in terms of significance, and content (57). “Bodily practices of a culturally specific kind entail a combination of cognitive and habit-memory,” writes Connerton, “The appropriate performance of the movements contained in the repertoire of the group not only reminds the performers of systems of classification which the group holds to be important; it requires the exercise of habit-memory” (88). By re-enacting Mbongi in IYE and Ifetayo’s other programs, youth are commemorating the past while at the same time incorporating a system of relating which reinforces the values of Umoja (unity), Kujichagule (self-determination), and Ujima (collective work and responsibility) and can be transferred to others within Ifetayo and the broader community.⁷²

Performing at the “Highest-Level”

Within Ifetayo, the IYE members are expected to perform at the “highest-level” and to be ambassadors for the organization. IYE is the only program within the organization that creates original performance pieces and tours these performances to schools, community centers, public spaces, etc. with the goal of transferring the values and practices of Ifetayo’s collective culture and the ensemble’s research on socio-political issues that affect black communities

⁷² IYE, for example, was preparing to give workshops in Mbongi for fifth graders in early 2007 and also incorporated the form in The Advocate and during post-show dialogues which involved audience members.

through its performances. As mentioned earlier, all IYE members train in their core discipline outside of IYE. They take classes in the Cultural Arts Program with fellow IYE members as well as youth “coming up” through the organization, and then combine their artistic skills in the creation of new work during rehearsals. Within these classes and rehearsals, a high level of professionalism is expected from IYE members.

Kwayera notes that this expectation stems from her own training in Jubilation Dance Company: “Our standards were often not compared to those around us. If some company rehearsed for three hours and people were off the music that was not okay for us. We set a standard that was much higher and often not even out there where you could compare to. We looked at the best and then said we wanted to go higher. We set the standard and the marker” (Archer-Cunningham, personal interview). Kwayera also explained that while dancing with Jubilation, the company was expected to understand how the organization operated and how to sustain it. She said that in Jubilation, “the mission [was understood] as a living energy” that each member learned to apply outside of rehearsals not only through their artistic training, which builds strength, discipline and a common system of values, but also through understanding the systems of management that sustained the organization.⁷³

According to Kwayera, the focus of IYE’s training in 2006-07 was on building IYE “to be strong enough to regenerate [an understanding of collective

⁷³ Kwayera emphasized in her interview with me that every single dancer who left Jubilation during her tenure is now running their own organization.

identity and how to build it through systems, like Mbongi, and strength training as young people come in,” thereby creating the internal sustainability which is essential to sustaining any broader community impact (Archer-Cunningham, personal interview). According to Chiriqui, the strength of IYE’s collective commitment had shifted since the program began eighteen years earlier. The youth’s artistic technique was not as high and comparably there was a lack of focus, discipline and commitment (Cooper, personal interview). In a 2003 personal essay on her own “Ifetayo Experience,” she writes:

At such a young age, I was exposed to Sister Kwayera’s boot camp. I was trained during her years of highest expectations. This doesn’t mean that she doesn’t push her girls now, but her expectations now are what she can see as your individual peak. Back then her expectations were where the group had to be almost identical in strength in order to fly. You sometimes would be mad if the next girl wasn’t tired yet because you would have no reason to be tired either . . . these girls weren’t just people I danced with, but were my sisters in pain and triumph. . . . No one was allowed half stepping. Because this became a second family, we went through the trying times of trying to keep that family together.

This was the tradition that Chiriqui was trying to get IYE back to. Both she and Kwayera admitted that many of the youngest and newest members didn’t have the artistic technique yet but they had shown a level of commitment. “They have the heart and passion and desire, but they now need the skill set to be able to apply a

lot of what Chiriqui is [asking],” noted Kwayera (Archer-Cunningham, personal interview). The only way Kwayera conceived that IYE could get back to its original level of professionalism was to require additional classes and longer hours of training which they hadn’t found a way to build into the program, since it had grown so much in size. She explains that in the past, IYE would have four or five hours of training in one discipline on Saturdays or sometimes other days which helped them gain a high level of technical proficiency. This was in addition to their Rites of Passage work. This high-level artistic and discipline training is directly linked to the organization’s larger goals of being able to transfer values and practices effectively in performance and through example of its ensemble members in day-to-day life to a larger community of youth and families of African-descent.

When I joined IYE as a researcher, there were thirty-four members, compared to forty-two the year before, and many of them were younger members or new recruits. At the audition, Chiriqui told the new recruits that Ifetayo was “fine tuning,” the ensemble by “bringing in fine individuals” who had a passion and desire for social change (field notes, 28 Oct. 2006). She asked them to be “trendsetters” if they were accepted: “If you notice someone else with low energy than you need to set the bar. Just because the alum are alum, doesn’t meant you can’t set the bar.” At the same time, Chiriqui expected IYE alum to teach the new recruits how to align with the mission and values of the organization. During a mid-November rehearsal, one week after the new recruits (four of them) had joined IYE, Chiriqui reprimanded the ensemble for not taking the initiative as

“activists” (field notes, 11 Nov. 2006). She was running late that day due to an Ifetayo meeting and none of the youth had taken initiative to begin Mbongi and many of them were missing their monologue and script assignments which had been assigned the week prior. “Your mission is not a game. Your purpose is not a game,” Chiriqui told them, “There are new people coming in. This is your home. Teach them how you want them to use your furniture.”

Unlike Find Your Light and viBeStages, which follow a paradigm of intervention and celebration respectively, but then enable youth to practice activating their own symbolic repertoire and combining their own practices to create a temporal community, IYE expects its members first to adapt to the value system, and systems of relating, that Ifetayo has created and defined, and then find the wiggle room within that culture as a way of keeping it vital and sustained. This is true for both the new recruits and the youngest members since IYE is a multi-age ensemble that includes youth ages eleven to twenty-four. When Chiriqui calls Ifetayo the youths’ “home,” she is referring to a sense of collective bond and common culture that is learned and defined as separate from mass culture. Like viBe, Ifetayo creates this sense of organizational and programmatic culture by giving its participants a new language and way of relating through rituals that are learned and passed down from generation to generation of participants. But Ifetayo is different than viBe in the sense that Ifetayo’s youth participants are positioned within a boundary of community that has already been clearly defined and are given a specific intention and a message for their work that relates back to the organization’s mission to extend this collective cultural

identity more broadly. In other words, the process is not focused on creating an Ifetayo youth culture but rather on creating the conditions for youth to learn how to transfer an African cultural system, which Ifetayo has codified, to a larger local, national and global community of people of African descent. Kwayera notes that this mission is carried out as Ifetayo works to achieve five primary objectives:

1. Develop cultural awareness and self-esteem by exposing families to traditional African artistic forms and their evolution into contemporary cultures.
2. Give families and communities of African descent the tools to become self-sufficient and transcend challenges that are perpetuated across generations.
3. Support families and communities of African descent to reach their optimal potential by attaining harmonious balance among the mind, body and spirit and through proper nutrition, exercise and cultural awareness.
4. Create leaders for local neighborhoods and international communities.
5. Develop, document and disseminate a comprehensive, African-centered approach to youth and community development.

(Archer-Cunningham, "Cultural Arts Education" 36).

Naja, who was twelve and in her second year with IYE and tenth year with Ifetayo, told me that she was working hard to get up the level of an IYE alumna

which means successfully completing Sisters in Sisterhood and proving her commitment and responsibility as both an artist and activist in service to her community (personal interview). I asked Naja to define her community and she said that *Ifetayo* was her community:

Ifetayo is my community because we have our elders who help bring Ifetayo together. We have the younger kids who are the future of Ifetayo and who help keep Ifetayo to go on and to keep it going on. I think it's my community because [pause] I think it's like my home. Because my regular home community, it's me and the people that live where I live. Ifetayo is like another home or family. It's the people at Ifetayo that I trust, that I have respect for.

When I spoke to Amara, one of the new teenage recruits to IYE that fall, she said that it can be very “nerve-wracking” as a new ensemble member at first because so many of the ensemble members, especially those who start classes in the Cultural Arts Program at a young age, had known each other for a long time and “were already cool with each other and understood things about each other and stuff” (personal interview). As a new member, she said there was the sense that she had to prove herself and prove that she belonged in IYE. According to Amara, the primary thing that helped her learn the culture of IYE was the amount of time she spent with the other youth and Ifetayo faculty in classes, rehearsals and Rites of Passage meetings. The intensity of the experience and time spent in collaboration “helps us learn not only about ourselves,” said Amara, “but [also] about those around us.” She went on to explain that by observing the others, she

began to recognize certain positive “traits” or values like honesty and self-discipline that she shared.

When I first started observing IYE classes and rehearsals, I was somewhat shocked by the program’s level of intensity and discipline compared to Find Your Light and viBeStages, which set high expectation but let the youth largely lead the process and establish their own rules of engagement. The IYE members were continually reminded that they were not in an after-school program but rather a pre-professional ensemble with a serious social change mission. “If you are not ready to work at that high level, this is not the right place for you,” said Chiriqui (field notes, 25 Nov. 2006). If they laughed, she would remind them that by laughing they were condoning disrespect and causing the ensemble to fall apart. If they lost focus, they were told that it was their legacy they were dismissing.

In early December, for example, the youth were sharing new pieces (personal writing, research, monologues, spoken word poetry, etc.) and dances they were learning in their CAP classes for inclusion in the remount of TAG: It’s Not a Game (field notes, 2 Dec. 2006). After a few spoken word pieces written by two IYE members were shared, some of the girls who are taking hip hop were asked to perform a piece that they’d shared in rehearsals a few weeks ago and were rehearsing in their class. The girls were eager to share the piece which they had clearly spent time rehearsing either in class or on their own. Chiriqui acknowledged their improvement. The movement was more precise and energized; they brought energy and presence to the stage. When pieces are not up to par, Chiriqui usually asks the group to immediately sit down or cuts the piece

off halfway, signaling that by not coming prepared or rehearsed is disrespectful to her and the group. But in this case, the youth were focused and had improved. Chiriqui invited them to perform again and the rest of the ensemble was captivated, shouting out their “props” at the end of the dance. As the dance culminated, two of the male members strutted onto the stage, smiling, and faced off with the girls. Each group took turns proving their chops to the other in a light and jovial way. It was the first, and one of only a few, moments of lightness I observed during rehearsals.

Next the African dance majors (which are also all girls) were asked to share the dance they’d been learning in class. Immediately, the tone of the rehearsal shifted. Unlike hip hop, African dance is an IYE major and was also the original basis of IYE. The stake always felt higher for African drum and dance. Chiriqui pulled her chair up to the front of the stage to get a better view. As the girls got ready to dance, their focus was all over the place. They were talking and trying to figure out where to go, some were fixing their hair. As the girls took a few minutes to get ready, Chiriqui’s mother, who had been standing in the back of the auditorium, walked briskly down to the edge of the stage and stood by Chiriqui without saying a word. Her presence immediately got the girls’ attention. They hushed each other urgently. The dancers began the dance but, within a minute, Chiriqui stepped onto the stage and ushered them off. The girls looked startled. She hit her palm with her other fist, as she firmly called out:

I’m not laughing! This is your art form and you’re dissing it. This was given to me and I give everything to the people who gave it to

me. Dancers, do you see the whole world on stage or do you just see you all? . . . Ladies, if I don't see fire on your feet when you come out here, we're going to have a problem. . . . People die to pass on this cultural information to you. The modern dancers have been dancing for three hours today. You've been on stage for two minutes and are out of breath.

The dancers are asked to come back up and run through the piece again. They leave the stage exhausted, breathing heavily. Chiriqui is standing back on her chair with her thumbs down to both the dancers and the drummers. She tells the drummers that they need to be able to perform on their own: "Brother Mohammed is your teacher, not your crutch." She stresses the need for them to take what they've learned in class and apply it in rehearsals. But she also emphasizes that the freedom to play with the form only comes when they are ready. "I gave you two opportunities to be really free today," said Chiriqui, "First when I let you come into the circle to share what you wrote and second, when I let two people dance on stage (referring to the boys who came up after the hip hop dance). It wasn't a good dance and it wasn't your time. You take energy away when it's not your time." At this point Chiriqui's mother, the program elder and a constant reminder of the generations for whom the group is accountable, stepped forward to address the whole ensemble. She urged them to respect the seriousness of the organization's mission of upholding the arts and traditions of their African ancestors to inspire social change. She also asked them take stock of the new people coming into the ensemble (i.e. the future of IYE). Together, she and

Chiriqui were clear that it was the youths' responsibility to not only set the bar but continually remember that the instruments they play, and the dances they dance, have a history. Losing an instrument or not performing a dance to one's utmost ability is a deep sign of disrespect, they noted. Chiriqui's mother noted that the ensemble's work as young African men and women learning their traditions and values was just beginning and to take this journey seriously. At this moment, Chiriqui's two year old son, who is standing amidst a collection of drums in front of the stage, picked up a drum stick and began beating a simple, but strong and consistent, rhythm on a drum that stands nearly as tall as him.

After this rehearsal, the youth stopped rehearsing Tag or new material that the youth were bringing in and begin a month-long "boot camp" that Chiriqui designed to recondition the ensemble. The youth would come to these rehearsals, after training in their classes for two, highly intense hours, and put on their sweats and begin drills. Exercises included multiple sets of crunches, jumping jacks, leg lifts, push-ups and other strength building exercises as well as ten to fifteen laps around the gymnasium at a full jog. The youth were expected to go out with no more than sixty seconds of rest between exercises for the full two hours of IYE rehearsals. "The reason this exercise is so important to me is once your core is strengthened, you will be too," explained Chiriqui. "When you put something in—mind, body, and spirit—you'll work harder because you've invested so much" (field notes, 6 Jan. 2006).

When I talked with the youth about the high level of expectations in IYE rehearsals, I expected them all to complain whole-heartedly. As an observer, I

often thought to myself that there would be no way I could have made it through one of these rehearsals even as a fit adult. Much to my surprise, however, the youth talked about how they felt this high level of discipline transformed them, even while admitting that it was extremely difficult and not always fun. The following are excerpts from personal interviews:

AMARA: As a youth ensemble member, I know that at times we try different exercises and at first I'm not used to it. It's hard for me and I feel pain. So one of my responsibilities is to go home and practice and maybe do it once or twice a week, other than Saturdays, where I can do the routines to help me get stronger so that it will become easier. . . . I remember one Saturday in modern class we were doing this one exercise that I wasn't used to and I kind of broke down and cried. And I really wanted to stop and give up. But the teacher was like, 'It's okay [Amara], just let it out.' And I kind of just like released all the burden and just did it. And afterwards, I felt really proud of myself because if they wouldn't have pushed me, I probably would have just gave up and stopped. And then I wouldn't have grown stronger and realized that I really could do it.

NAJA: [IYE's] not really hard but it's more advanced. You have to put yourself in another role. You have to show an example and you

have to be more responsible for what you're doing.

MARIAMA: It's a lot of pressure that is put on you. And when you have young brothers and sisters looking up to you, it's like 'Wow, I've been here for a long, long, long time and they're looking up to me so they can know what to do when I'm not here.' And outside [of rehearsals] it takes a lot of time. I'll admit sometimes I don't want to be here. But you have to realize it's not only for everyone else and making the community better. It's for you understanding who you are and making sure that you're comfortable because in order to teach all this stuff you have to understand who you are.

HASANI: [IYE] has its ups and downs. It's not all the time fun. It can sometimes be stressful. And sometimes you can get annoyed with some of the other people in Youth Ensemble . . . but you have to work through it . . . Find a way to just solve the problems so we can get on and be productive with what we're doing. . . . It takes a level of discipline and maturity. That is going on in the Youth Ensemble, that's really developed [for me] and I can say for my peers also.

CHIKE: Without discipline nothin' going nowhere . . . eventually I want to have something like the Youth Ensemble. I want to be able to contribute to my community and put something out there that I can say is mine. That I can say, "I started that. I started the movement." I meant in ten years, this if it hasn't already made a big impact on a lot of people's lives in ten years, it's going to make a big impact on the whole of New York. . . . there's fruits in this because this right here is teaching. As much as I hate school, I respect this because it's teaching.

By pushing youth to their highest levels of excellence in IYE, Ifetayo aims to develop strong discipline, structure and relationships of respect for others, as well as for the arts and African culture. Kwayera explained that from the organization's start, which began with IYE, this expectation was her personal commitment to people of African descent "that didn't really necessarily expect or know that they could demand and require [a high level of excellence] because all too often the services that they were offered were substandard" (Archer-Cunningham, personal interview). By pushing them beyond their limits, the youth know what they are capable of, she explained. In a personal essay on her Ifetayo experience, a graduate of IYE wrote in 2003:

Every Saturday I tried to get out of class but to no avail. No matter what excuse I made [Sister Kwayera] saw right through it. I spent countless Fridays hoping that she would be too busy to teach class on Saturday. But as the years continued, I became stronger and I

began to look forward to modern dance classes. That came later on, a lot later. In the beginning, classes were rigorous and tedious, from one thousand jumping jacks to the leg lifts to the leaning against the wall in a split for what felt like hours. I didn't know it at the time but Sister Kwayera was training me for life. She may have told me but I didn't hear her then. I realize now that once I got myself to commit to class, I could commit and complete anything. ("Ifetayo")

Kwayera's belief and the belief of Ifetayo is that only when you know what you are capable of individually and as a group, and have developed a level of integrity, honesty and authenticity through this process, have you earned the right to hold your broader community accountable and to transfer a system of cultural values and traditions, as well as new cultural imaginings, through performances.

During an African dance class prior to rehearsal one evening, I watched IYE members struggling to learn the choreography exactly (field notes, 11 Nov. 2006). They were becoming increasingly frustrated with themselves and each other for missing breaks in the drumming or particular moments in the dance. The instructor kept pushing them not to stop dancing but to begin to look for their own variations, explaining that the dance was just a framework for them to build on. "As artists, you have to take from everyone, even a little child. Everyone has something to give. You take what we're giving you [as master teachers and elders] and then you do what you need to do with it," she told them as they kept dancing, sweat beading up on their brows. She then called them into a circle,

making eye contact with everyone and smiling. “I push you because I love you. Because I love every one of you,” she said softly. “As teachers, we learn from our students, just as the students learn from the teachers,” the African drum instructor added. The focus of high expectations is on mutual respect and reciprocity. It is always stressed that, as youth, IYE members have a responsibility to learn their heritage and uphold their legacy. But the onus is not only to preserve the culture, but also to develop the strength and proficiency to expand it.

Contributing to Living Culture

The vehicle through which IYE members transfer cultural knowledge/tradition as well as information about contemporary issues affecting black communities to the broader Brooklyn community is through their productions.⁷⁴ While IYE has been performing publicly since its founding in 1989, it had only been producing full-length plays that the youth were responsible for creating themselves since its 2004 production of Tag: It’s Not a Game. Up until that point, IYE performed as part of the Cultural Arts Program’s June Showcase or at special events. Their pieces were written largely by Chiriqui’s mother who defines herself as “a writer and artist seeking to creatively challenge the social and political status quo” (Tag program book). These early pieces were

⁷⁴ Unlike Find Your Light and viBeStages, eligible IYE members receive stipends for select performances which they are encourage to put into bank accounts and/or use for school and/or college tuition. Eligibility is based on maintaining a ‘B’ grade point average and/or equivalent, don’t exceed three excused absences per program year and demonstrate a commitment to the program in terms of their responsibility and conduct (Ifetayo Cultural Arts Parent & Student Handbook).

largely didactic representations of African history that emphasized a continued legacy and collective movement towards unity and collective healing through reconnection with African traditions, values and culture. Titles of the Cultural Arts Showcase and IYE performances throughout the 1990s and early 2000s included Journey Home with Me (1991), Our Legacy from Alkebu-Lan to Buffalo Soldier (1992), Our Story (2000), Homage (2001), and others that reference a grand narrative of African advancement, briefly interrupted by slavery and colonialism. The tone of these early pieces was remarkably different than that of Tag and The Advocate, which the youth helped to write, based on research as well as their own personal stories. The current process involves youth coming together in Mbongi with their adult mentor to decide upon an issue of relevance to their community, which they then receive research about and/or research themselves. They collectively discuss the issue and create short vignettes that include dance, spoken word, step, monologues and scenes to address it from the cultural-political standpoint of youth and families of African-descent. But up until 2004, IYE's production were written and directed almost entirely by elders. Here are two excerpts from the 1991 production of Journey Home with Me that illustrate the early tone and content of IYE's performances:

[Performed by nine girls of mixed ages]:

Journey with me
To a cultural place
Try to remember
The circle of love.
Help us remember as we travel together
The long road home.
Travel the sea one last time

To a place we call
The African mind

[Performed by one girl who looks under the age of ten. Her tone is strong and defiant]:

Don't push me
Respect me.
Protect me.
I'm God's inspiration.
Create the foundation.
I am the African child.

The youth performing these pieces were committed as artists but clearly not speaking in their own voice. They were positioned more like messengers than cultural agents.

Ifetayo's approach to IYE's productions became more democratic and youth-centered with Tag, and even more so with their 2006 production of The Advocate: Who is the Mastermind?, Tag is a compilation of drama, dance, poetry, comedy and other artistic styles that addresses the HIV/AIDS epidemic in Flatbush. At the time that it was produced, fifteen percent of the children and nearly twelve percent of the adolescents diagnosed with AIDS in New York City were living in Flatbush, Brooklyn, Ifetayo's home base. In a January 2004 article in the Brooklyn Family newspaper, former IYE member Perdella Jean Baptiste briefly describes the rehearsal process: "We gather around with our notebooks and we speak about AIDS awareness, *receive* [my italics] information and give feedback. In that circle we speak about different issues, like how the AIDS epidemic has affected us personally."⁷⁵ Beginning with Tag, IYE members were paired with "research specialist" and mentor, Marilyn Worrel-Idaka, who

⁷⁵ A copy of this article in Ifetayo's archives but did not list the specific date of publication.

provided the ensemble with most of their data about the AIDS epidemic and how it was affecting communities of color. IYE worked for a year on the development of the play script. While some of the members, like Baptiste, shared and incorporated personal stories about how the AIDS epidemic had affected their families, others noted they didn't relate personally to the issue at all. Mariama, for example, was ten or eleven at the time and told me in her interview that throughout much of the rehearsal process she had trouble understanding the play's message which was largely shaped by the adult facilitators and older youth during Mbongi:

There were a lot of older kids and it made me think on a more mature level because a lot of my peers who did audition for the Ensemble didn't get in and when I get in, I would sit in –I thought it was long hours –with all of these older kids and I was like, “Ah, okay, I can't really relate to you but if that's how I'm supposed to think, that's how I'll think.” And I *thought* that's how I was supposed to think because everyone else in the Youth Ensemble was thinking that way. . . . We [the young IYE members] weren't just *aware* of what was going on. And it wasn't that it was too mature for us, we just weren't interested in that, I guess. . . . We did a skit in drama and we were talking about how we shouldn't kiss people and how a lot of people were being affected by it. It didn't really affect me but it was just like, “Okay this is what I'm going to have to deal with when I get older and this is how I'm going to

have to live my life because I'm a part of this Youth Ensemble." . . . It took me a while to actually think like that because it wasn't a part of my reality. Like I wasn't, I didn't understand what that was. And [pause] it was just overwhelming sometimes to be in a room with older kids that were talking about stuff that you really didn't understand sometimes [and] thought was gross. . . . I think that a lot of the older kids can teach the younger kids, but sometimes I felt kind of lost at times because I was like, "Wait am I sounding too much like a little kid?" Or "Am I being old enough or mature enough?" . . . After like the first year –it got comfortable because you know where you fit in and you understood that not everything that was being spoken about you had to relate to. You just understood it. (personal interview)

While Tag was a departure from earlier IYE productions that were written for them, The Advocate positioned youth to deliver a "message" that was largely constructed for them by the organization's core members and adult teachers. The youth were expected to align to this message despite their full understanding of how it applied to their personal lives. In the program book for Tag, IYE explains the purpose of their productions:

We believe that presenting educational HIV/AIDS information in an entertaining manner helps our target audiences (middle school/high school age students) to retain the information. Furthermore, it compels the audience to confront their

misconceptions about HIV/AIDS and to evaluate the soundness of their current attitudes and behaviors. Ultimately this leads to a redefinition of values such that risky sexual and drug-related behavior is reduced.

Despite the inclusion of works written by IYE youth and their involvement in the direction of the play script, Tag's focus on *compelling* an audience to *retain* information and on *leading* them toward a redefinition of values which are prescribed is akin to what critical pedagogue Paulo Freire's describes as the "banking method of education." This method of education leaves little room for learners to disagree, disrupt, reshape or add variation to the information and scenario that is being "deposited," or in this case re-presented.

In 2006-07, the ensemble was reshaping Tag and the second play in its repertoire called, The Advocate: Who's the Mastermind? . The ensemble's work on remounting The Advocate for a tour to local schools and community centers in 2007 illustrates how IYE's creative process and cultural strategy shifted to provide youth more cultural agency in terms of the ability to use creative practices in rehearsals to shape their story. As summarized earlier in this chapter, the play is an interrogation of the Prison Industrial Complex that connects "the present day exploitation of human labor" in prisons to a historical narrative which traces "the imprisonment of African peoples for the purpose of acquiring wealth and building major industrial enterprises" back to slavery (The Advocate brochure). Using an episodic play structure that incorporates drama, African and modern dance, song and spoken word poetry, the ensemble recounts a scenario of black exploitation

and imprisonment that stems back to the days in which Africans were captured from their native villages and sold into slavery to make America rich, through to modern day images of black youth being targeted by police and imprisoned as a form institutional racism. The play looks to the past to make sense of the future and forge a connection in the mind of the audience that in both instances, past and present, black people have been used as raw material for profit-making. Although all prisoners provide free labor, this situation has particular resonance for prisoners of African descent whose ancestors were slaves.⁷⁶ But the play also begins to interrupt and reshape this scenario of black exploitation and imprisonment by embodying a re-commitment to African tradition and values, and systems of practice, which they hope will transfer to their audiences and enable healing and shifts in these patterns of abuse. Unlike many African institutions that discuss slavery as something that is done to you as a victim, noted Chiriqui, The Advocate aimed to address the things black people do to themselves. “How do we correct our behavior in a way that it’s true to our own values which will keep us out of the plan for us to be in jails, locked up as free labor which is this whole slavery thing again? How do we get out of that?,” she remarked (Cooper, personal interview). Within the scenario of imprisonment that The Advocate articulates, the youth enact the embodied memory of a healthy African culture, rooted in the value systems and repertoires of its ancestors (which Karenga codified) and transfer that knowledge and memory to their audiences in

⁷⁶ In her 1997 speech, “The Prison Industrial Complex,” social activist Angela Davis says, “Colored bodies constitute the main human raw material in this vast experiment to disappear the major social problems of our time.”

the act of live performance, thereby illustrating a way of shifting paradigms, so to speak. “You need a connection,” says Chike, “Somewhere along the line two paths join and people . . . have to accept their culture and their past . . . they [can] come here for growth and feel it’s a normal thing and its acceptable and know that. Like you [can] wear it like its new clothes” (personal interview).

Ensemble members noted that they came up with The Advocate the previous year after Chiriqui, an IYE co-coordinator at the time, called them to Mbongi and asked them to discuss what they felt was the most pressing issue facing the community at the time. Once the topic was decided, ensemble members were expected to research the issue and related statistics, and then begin developing scenes. But Jared admits: “I didn’t thoroughly understand where it was going in the beginning . . . it was simply like, ‘Okay we’re going to do a scene about police brutality. Then we’re going to do a school scene.’ There was no storyline . . . it was just events in history with no in-betweens, sequential threads of sorts” (personal interview). Naja agreed: “It was sort of a confusion about how the scenes connect to each other . . . I knew what they [the older ensemble members] were doing but I didn’t get it, like how I was supposed to connect with it even though you come from the past to the future and you go back to [the past]” (personal interview). In further interviews with ensemble members, I learned that much of the research for the original play script was *given* to the ensemble by adult facilitators as it had been for Tag. From that research the youth were expect to begin creating short scenes. Some of the scenes referenced historic moments in black history and others were inspired directly by the experiences of

members like Hasani whose real life experience of being jumped by a couple of youth from his neighborhood came to represent the self-destruction of black-on-black crime in the play. But Jared admitted there was no structure tying these disparate scenes together in the beginning of their play development process (personal interview). In order to pull the script together, IYE members and four IYE faculty (Safahri Ra, the director; Faybiene, IYE's mentor; Chiriqui, co-coordinator at the time; and Tunu Thom, also co-coordinator) had a retreat at Kwayera's house where they outlined the narrative of the play based on scenes and ideas generated in rehearsals. This core group then brought the outline back to the Youth Ensemble for their feedback and input. Jared admits that through that conversation, IYE members ended up completely rearranging the outline into a narrative that they felt would make more sense to their audience. But IYE spent only about two months putting together the play script and then spent the rest of the year rehearsing it, he noted, indicating that more of their emphasis was on honing the product than negotiating the development of the play itself.

The research that the youth were given as fodder for scene development largely focused on historical moments, such as the height of the Black Panther Party, that were part of the adults' own cultural/political history. But in many of my interviews with the ensemble, the youth ensemble members said they did not always connect personally with this historic material at first, or understand what impact it still had on their lives and communities today. Many of the newer members hadn't even seen or been introduced to The Advocate, let alone its subject matter. "We could have gotten better if we could have got more into it,"

said Aisha, one of the younger members (field notes, 3 Feb. 2007). “It was really good but seemed weak in terms of storyline. It felt like a timeline where things were loosely tied together,” said a young male member (field notes, 3 Feb. 2007). Tony remarked: “I haven’t like experience most of the things [in the play] first hand, but I know people who have gone through things. . . . So I know the experience through third person that’s been sort of regurgitated to people” (personal interview). Chike also expressed a sense that much of the message and its history was being fed to him in a way that made him want to disconnect:

Like you hear revolutionaries and all of that and a lot of time, like in my age group, we don’t want to hear none of that . . . the memory of it is tired. You remember it as a great thing but you don’t remember the whole identity of it. You don’t remember the feeling of it because we didn’t live that time . . . [to get that feeling back] we need the spirit of the past and like something new . . . keep the things from the past; we need to know what was back then so we can see what’s now. But the play needs more things from this time in order to get through [to the people].” (Personal interview).

Hearing this charge, Chiriqui started rehearsals in the winter by asking the ensemble to begin reflecting on their own experiences, adding new material, rewriting the script, and reblocking sections of the play in ways that resonated with them, and incorporated more of their stories and favored artistic styles (i.e. hip hop, step, spoken word, beatboxing etc.):

I'm having them reflect on their own lives . . . they don't know how much they've been involved in the Prison Industrial Complex because [that term] doesn't click with them. You start telling them about juvey and police stopping you on the street or security guards in school . . . They're like, "Oh, okay," and then we talk about it. . . they're adding more of their experiences [now] . . . I have ideas but I'm thinking in a way where they can say their pieces . . . and there's [more] spoken word in the production. And there's [more] rap . . . you don't have to go into the whole history of hip hop but hip hop is here as a platform for youth in the ghettos to speak. . . Hip hop was something that people were attracted to because it was revolutionary [and this ties back to the work of the Panthers]. (Cooper, personal interview)

Chiriqui initiated this new approach in early February as the ensemble prepared to tour the production to local schools. "I want you to really understand what you're doing," she told the group who was gathered in Mbongi. "How many of you have ever been stopped by the police? Stand up," she said (field notes, 3 Feb. 2007).

Fourteen youth stood up, all of them older IYE members. She asked them to go to the corner of the gymnasium and start writing about their experiences. The group quickly moved over to the corner and began sharing stories with each other, locating commonalities between them. After about ten minutes, they broke off to write down their experiences individually. Addressing the remaining members, most of whom are in middle school with the exception of four, Chiriqui asked, "I

want you to think of all the stereotypes you have of a jail or of a reform house upstate, since one of you are over there [indicated the corner] or have been inside a jail or precinct. Write three words that come to mind when I tell you you are in prison.” After this brief exercise, Chiriqui opened up a dialogue with the group about what the Prison Industrial Complex means to them and how it might relate to their lives. She then chose four members to work on a self-reflection piece where they were asked to collectively address, through dialogue and movement, how they would hold themselves accountable for a scenario of imprisonment. The remaining youth were asked to perform a “youth court” scene in which they will serve as jurors, judges and attorneys, making decisions about the older youths’ cases.⁷⁷ Chiriqui reminded them: “Mbongi was the original court. You have the elders and the community there to judge. The elders are the ones who teach the children how to play all of these parts.” But for the broader community, who don’t yet have a system, like Mbongi, for self-reflection and communal accountability, The Advocate becomes their mirror, said Chiriqui.⁷⁸

⁷⁷ In New York State, “Youth courts train local teenagers to serve as jurors, judges and attorneys, handling real-life cases involving their peers. The goal of youth court is to use positive peer pressure to ensure that young people who have committed minor offenses pay back the community and receive the help they need to avoid further involvement in the justice system. The Center for Court Innovation operates five youth courts and supports more than eighty youth courts throughout New York State through training, publications and consulting.” Retrieved August 31, 2010, from <http://www.courtinnovation.org/index.cfm?fuseaction=Page.ViewPage&PageID=581¤tTopTier2=true>

⁷⁸ One of the other goals of reshaping The Advocate was to transfer an understanding of how Mbongi can be used within families and everyday

As I walked around the gymnasium between the youth working on the self-reflection scene and those working on the youth court scene, I noticed the youth in both groups debating what would make the scenes authentic and how to represent them in their own ways. The self-reflection group, made up mostly of dance majors, began by writing dialogue for both a “bad” character and a “good” character which they self-consciously knew were stereotypes, smiling and giggling as they said these descriptors out loud. Finally, one of the older boys, and a self-identified writer, corrected them, “Not [“bad”] but the victim. Tell them the bigger story. Tell them what happened. You’re trying to get money to get a good education.” The group decided that they were going to tell two different stories which at first seem like they’re being told by two different characters, the “good” and the “bad,” but were really about the same person who was trapped by a difficult scenario. In the end, the girls decided to choreograph the scene as “choreographed chaos” between the bad and the good character while the boy wrote the dialogue.

In the group creating the youth court scene, a debate ensued over whether or not they should speak the way they normally do or in formal English. The case they were “trying” in this scene involved a young male who was arrested for jumping over a turnstile in the subway and taking a swing at a police officer. Hasani played the defendant on the stand. He mumbled short answers to a lawyer’s questions. Naja interrupted him: “You have to speak proper.” Hasani

situations to empower people of African descent and thereby resist behaviors that imprison others.

kept talking but Naja interrupted again, telling him that he had to speak properly. Hasani grew increasingly frustrated, “I do not speak like that! Do you speak like this [imitating a British accent]?” Mariama cut in, “Sister Chiriqui didn’t tell him how to present himself.” Hasani started again, “I was pulled over by this dude [referring to the cop played by Jared] over there.” Mariama interrupted again: “Wait, if you’re in court you have to give them the details of what happened or they have the power to convict you and throw you in jail.” Hasani repeated almost verbatim what he said before ignoring Miriama and Naja’s requests to construct reality rather than represent his own experience with the courts. Naja interrupted again, insisting that he explain that the cop didn’t present himself as an officer of the law and that’s why he swung at him. Mariama joined in, “We need to teach them [our audience].” In this fashion, the youth continued to negotiate how the scene would play out. In the end, they decided that as each of the IYE members’ cases were heard in the court, the “jury” of youth would make suggestions about what they felt the defendant could have done differently to avoid trouble with the law, thereby representing a diversion of the scenario of imprisonment from their point of view. This approach is akin to Boal’s Forum Theatre approach described in chapter three.

According to Chiriqui, scenes like this where the youth were working out and representing how to avoid behaviors that lead to these negative situation were missing from the first production of The Advocate. Chiriqui hoped that by enabling the youth to include dialogues in the play that represented their alternatives rooted in Ifetayo’s value system, she could better help them

“understand the past-present of what they were saying” and practicing on stage (Cooper, personal interview). Histories of Black activism, like the Black Panther Party (also represented in the play), fell flat with many of the youth, said Chiriqui. These histories were largely known to them through the archive. But by allowing the youth to practice and articulate their own values in the creation of new scenes like the courtroom scene, and then helping them draw connections between their own practices and histories of black activism, Chiriqui positioned the youth to see their role as cultural agents within a broader social and historical movement.

In my interviews with some of the youth, they remarked—without me asking them—that they felt more in control of how the play was taking shape since Chiriqui allowed them to come up with more of their own material and incorporate it into the play. “I feel like a lot of the things are going in our direction [now],” notes Mariama, “we split up into groups and we’re able to come up with our own pieces and it feels comfortable.” “The Advocate seems to be recreating itself now . . . The Advocate seems to be taking on other things, different types of issues, or making clearer the issues that were already there and making them more profound and making it more effective,” said Jared. “It’s showing action and different dances and movement and through lines that *we* put together,” said Naja, “Even though we had an instructor . . . it’s all our ideas because the Youth Ensemble means our ensemble. I see the “youth” as the youth of the community and what we are doing to or what we see that could be changed.” Mariama noted in her interview that she was eager to share a piece in the play about her experience of *not* fully understanding the Prison Industrial

Complex. By including a new monologue from this perspective, she hoped to show other youth that you can still have their own unique perspectives and life experiences but align with Ifetayo's value system and vision:

Some people like me are not going to fully understand every little detail of what is going on, but if I do write my piece and I share it, people [in middle schools and high schools] are going to be like, "Oh so, I kind of get where this girl is coming from and I don't always have to know what goes on in the Prison Industrial System, but I also have all these other people who are telling me their stories and how it goes back to history.' I think when everyone [in the play] is different, realities are added to this play, whether you're acting out a character or whether you're writing from personal experience, [the perspectives] are going to be very diverse. If I was watching it, I would have a lot to think about and would want to do more research.

By asking ensemble members first to make sense of the complex social structures, codes and behaviors embedded within the scenario of imprisonment of African people, and then enabling them to discuss their own feelings, practice their own contemporary artistic stylings, and combine those stories and practices with the cultural narratives and repertoires of their ancestors, Cooper locates ensemble members within this historical narrative of oppression but also empowers them to articulate the gaps and create variations. Just as traces from a cultural tradition get reproduced and reshaped through the embodied act of creating an original

performance, these performances once witnessed and/or recorded are in turn added to the community's cultural archive and living culture. All of the performances are recorded and available for sale to the public. These productions also become part of IYE's repertoire, which Ifetayo draws on for workshops and performances at local schools and community centers.

Circles of Influence

More than half of IYE members have been participating in Ifetayo's programs for more than ten years. From a very young age, they are taught how African arts and cultural practices, and the values those practices incorporate, can be used to empower them in all aspects of their lives. The staff at Ifetayo reinforced numerous times that, in African tradition, arts and culture are a way of life. They're not something separate that people choose to go to or do in their free time. "It's part of how we express ourselves; how we heal ourselves; how we bring everybody together and create those healthy systems for community building and family development," said Kwayera (Archer-Cunningham, personal interview). With this perspective at its core, Ifetayo uses the arts as a central vehicle for helping youth and their families "regain" their traditions and values as people of African descent, as well as practice creating new possibilities and opportunities for social justice that are not reliant on dominant culture.

One of the reasons Ifetayo has such a success rate at retaining youth, I believe, is that it also uses programs like IYE to draw in and educate parents and families to the same practices and value systems that are being transferred to the youth. It's significant that when a young person joins any of Ifetayo's programs,

they and their parents receive a “Parent & Student Handbook” which states that Ifetayo’s educational approach is to focus “on each child as an individual, within a larger community of parents, grandparents, family members and friends” (31). Within this handbook are parent/student agreements that the youth and their families must sign before participating in Rites of Passage (which Chiriqui required of all IYE youth in fall 2006). By signing those documents, the parents agree to “support, guide and encourage” their child through his/her personal development and understanding of African culture. Youth must agree to a “code of behavior” which includes respecting their elders by listening to them while they speak and respecting their “parents, grandparents and extended family by speaking positively about and with them” (30). Parents are required to attend an orientation for all programs their children participate in, are financially responsible for selling at least ten tickets to Ifetayo’s Cultural Arts Program showcase at the end of the year, and are encouraged to sell these tickets to their family members, friends, neighbors and teachers.⁷⁹ When you walk into the Caton School, there is a board sponsored by Ifetayo’s Parent Council where youth and families can write their ideas and suggestions for improving programs on cut out

⁷⁹ This requirement stems back to the principle of Ujamaa, or cooperative economics, which stresses the need for self-reliance in building, strengthening and controlling the economics of one’s own community. Kwayera did not take a single foundation or government grant for the first five to seven years of its existence. “[M]y teachers told me for the first five to seven years, you don’t take any money because, like the development of the psychological mind [of a] one to five year old, you will be growing [your organization] in a dependent state. So although we take funding now, for the first five to seven years, Ifetayo took no funding,” she explained (Archer-Cunningham, personal interview). During that time, Ifetayo was supported solely by donations from parents and families and through community-sponsored fundraisers and bake sales.

paper light bulbs and tack them up for consideration. On its website, Ifetayo has a password protected “Family Center” where it posts updates, progress notes and class information as well as information for parents and the Ifetayo community. And the organization also offers workshops for parents and families on Mbongi, African culture and financial literacy among other things.

By engaging parents and families in these ways, Ifetayo creates circles of influence that reinforce the development of an “Ifetayo culture” which extend between the organization and the home. I asked Jared, for example, what he looked forward to in his experience with IYE and he told me that he most looked forward to collaborating with his family to create something for Kwanzaa (personal interview). He said that since his mother and sister are both involved with Ifetayo’s programs, they have something they “can all relate to . . . so it can be something that [they] can use as a basis to do things at home.” “[If] something’s going on at Ifetayo, some event, some performance of sorts and say that we’re all contributing members of this performance, it’s something we could at home collaborate on and let the creative juices flow and then the different members of the family could come up with new things that we know that has a contribution from different members,” said Jared enthusiastically, “It can be more like a family project type of thing. For example, Ifetayo’s having a Kwanzaa show where we’re supposed to come up with ideas of what we’re supposed to do. So I would go home and there would be four members at home that would go to Ifetayo, so they would be like, “Okay what are we going to do?” We would collaborate, come up with it, and create something as a whole.”

Ifetayo's goal is to extend this circle of influence beyond youth and families in Brooklyn to communities (primarily of color) nationally and globally (interview with Kwayera). The organization is working actively with scholars and researchers to try to codify and articulate its systems of transfer for broader communities to understand. But the organization believes that for African communities, their primary audience, these systems do not need to necessarily be pulled out and named so much as experienced and felt. This position is akin to Jose Estaban Muñoz's theory of building communities based on a politics of affect that creates points of connection and solidarity, similar to Raymond Williams' structures of feeling. "I think that African communities really just organically understand [what Ifetayo is about]," said Kwayera, "because it's just one of those things that organically that they feel . . . a cellular memory" (Archer-Cunningham, personal interview). This sentiment also was echoed by a few of the youth I spoke with during my interviews. When I asked Jared how he felt Ifetayo had affected the way that he related to his family and community, he said: "[S]ome of it is on a subconscious level. I can't just pull up these things and say this is what Ifetayo has done to me because it's been instilled. It's just second nature. I don't really have to implement it at will, it's just comes." Chike noted that he sometimes feels embarrassed that he knows so much more about "his culture" than his other black friends who "don't feel what [he] feels." Again, he hoped that if more youth, like his friends, came to Ifetayo that they would "feel it's a normal thing and it's acceptable and know that. Like you would wear it like its new clothes." These comments point to how Ifetayo's systems of transfer (e.g.

Mbongi, artistic practices rooted in a specific value system, etc.) create the conditions for youth ensemble members to practice constructing, transmitting and sustaining cultural memory through their performance. Connerton argues that “incorporating practices depend on their particular mnemonic effect on two distinctive features: their mode of existence and their mode of acquisition. They do not exist “objectively”, independently of their being performed. And they are acquired in such a way as not to require explicit reflection on their performance” (102). While the youth are educated about African values and cultural traditions in Rites of Passage and other programs, many of Ifetayo’s systems of transfer do not require that teachers constantly reference this value system. Rather the value system is incorporated into the practice itself and transferred to the youth through their use of it.

The Risk of Compromising Agency

One of the potential dangers of community-building as an act of transfer within the context of Ifetayo is the risk of pushing youth to use their artistic practice only to create work that pleases Ifetayo staff, elders and parents. While all facilitators of community-based youth theater programs bring with them a belief system that they communicate either overtly or covertly (through their style of dress, life choices, etc.), the facilitators at Ifetayo intentionally express their particular cultural and political positions to the youth as a way of reinforcing a system of values rooted in African tradition. On the one hand, this orientation can help youth make sense of themselves within a deeper historical context. “A tree can’t stand without its roots,” said Jared, “That’s the kind of thing Ifetayo gives.

You can have some kind of identity but it would be somewhat shallow if you don't know your history, your background, where you came from, what your ancestors were going through to get you here and [how they] give you the opportunity to do what you do for other people" (personal interview). On the other hand, it can be coercive. Mariama noted for example that in the beginning of her IYE experience Faybiene and IYE's research specialist were enabling the older ensemble members to come up with their own material but telling younger members, like her, what to perform (personal interview). "I wasn't really coming up with anything," she said, "I was using the pieces that my acting teacher gave me. And when you have somebody giving stuff to you, you're not really expressing yourself and you're not really, it doesn't really feel like a youth ensemble because it's like [pause] it shouldn't be called a youth ensemble if that's how it's going to be because you should always –if it's going to be a youth ensemble –you should always have the youth do what *they* want to do."

Room to Maneuver: Balancing the Old with the New

Positioning youth to look to the past to develop a sense of collective cultural identity while at the same time giving them the tools to shape that tradition was a balancing act for IYE during my study. Many of the youth I spoke with mentioned that they felt a greater sense of cultural agency as ensemble members once Chiriqui became their coordinator. Chiriqui had grown up in Ifetayo and understood the importance of connecting African history and tradition to the youths' own contemporary experiences, allowing the youth to introduce their own artistic forms and stories into a framework that enabled her to help them

connect those practices to African history and values. Her decision to start the remount of The Advocate by listening the youth and enabling them to incorporate more of their own material versus having them replicate a timeline of African-American history was informed in response to the youth but also by her own experience traveling to Africa as an IYE member. In her interview with me, she discussed a trip she took to Ghana with the Sisters in Sisterhood program during high school. During that trip, she was surprised to learn that the bonds that she anticipated having with native Africans were not there. She remarked:

[I]n America we call ourselves Africans, or African-Americans, and when you go to the actual continent the realization is that they don't consider themselves a part of the African people here. They're Africans. They're from Africa. And we're Americans. And in another extreme, myself I would be considered a white person because of my complexion. For me, it was a rude awakening only because in my community, my immediate community, we treat each other as African people and because of the way society treats anyone of color, we're like 'We're a group.' To go there where we feel we might have belonged—which I believe we do but because of so many indoctrinations on complexion and what is better . . . [there's] this separation where we came from there to here [and there] is this void. Going there, I actually got to see it for myself. I never experienced that before and it helped me to understand better what the mission really is—

that it's not just about being proud to be African [and] not thinking that my history begins with slavery—that it's more about, “How do we get *beyond* slavery and how we built civilizations together and also looking at what our downfalls are.” . . . So being able to acknowledge the things that we *have* to strengthen and change — not that we just go back to what it originally was because obviously there's some breakdown that we have to fix. (Cooper, personal interview)

Instead of positioning the youth to get back to an imaginary utopia, Chiriqui began to enable them to use their artistic skills, and the cultural knowledge that was being transferred to them through the arts and systems like Mbongi, to create possibilities and opportunities for people of African descent that was of their own imagining through informed by the constraints of Ifetayo's cultural framework. Miriama noted that Ifetayo had taught her that she didn't always have to compare herself and what she did to mainstream culture (personal interview). But she also noted that she was beginning to learn that she didn't need to see herself as the same as her fellow IYE members either. “None of us are really the same,” she remarked, “Some of us might dress the same, but if you actually look at us, none of us are the same. We all have different morals and values. We all live different lifestyles. And to know that we don't always have to be the same to get a message across to people that, in one way or another are like us, then that's how you can be you . . . if people are supportive of what you do and how you express yourself, then that's how you can be different.” Similar to viBeStages, by allowing youth to

articulate these differences with a collective, IYE created room for the youth to begin to maneuver and shape their culture and traditions.

CHAPTER 6

REFLECTIONS: KEEPING THE VIBE ALIVE, THE LIGHT ON, AND THE SPIRIT GOING⁸⁰

It has been four years since I last worked with Find Your Light, viBeStages and Ifetayo Youth Ensemble as a researcher, and two years since I've lived in New York City. While I continue to stay in close contact with Kwayera and Dana, I've lost touch with Juliette. Find Your Light has been on a hiatus since 2006. This is not a reflection, in my opinion, of the quality of their program, but instead was largely due to lack of funding and time. Unlike the other two programs, Find Your Light was not part of a larger nonprofit organization that could help sustain its operations with additional administrative and board support.

In my new position as communications and marketing director for the National Guild for Community Arts Education (National Guild), the national service organization for community-based arts education organizations and programs, I connect regularly with arts education leaders that teach theater, and other artistic disciplines, to people of all ages, backgrounds and abilities. In this position, I continue to examine what makes community-based youth theater experiences effective and sustainable. While many of the organizations within the National Guild's network of more than 400 organizational members do an exceptional job providing sequential instruction in theater arts, few of them focus particularly on a sustained process of creating original plays with teens which

⁸⁰ I draw on the names and taglines of the three programs I worked with to discuss how to sustain young people's involvement as cultural agents through community-based theater practice.

enable them to practice cultural agency in the ways described in this study. In an April 2008 needs assessment survey of 395 of the National Guild's constituent organizations, 100 percent identified the need for training and information on effective arts programs for teens as a top priority. In response to this survey, the Guild launched a multi-year Engaging Adolescents Initiative (EAI) in 2009 to increase teen participation by 1) enhancing the effectiveness and scope of existing programs and 2) catalyzing the development of new programs. I am providing research and guidance for this Initiative, based on this study, along with Kwayera who now serves on the National Guild's board of trustees and on the advisory group for the EAI. Dana also has been involved in the Initiative. She presented on viBe Theater Experience during EAI's first training institute in March 2010 at Jazz at Lincoln Center.

My research for this dissertation actively informs my consultancy for the Initiative. Through this study, I've discerned several effective practices for engaging and sustaining adolescents' involvement in community-based theater programs and for creating the conditions that enable them to develop a sense of themselves as cultural agents with the potential to contribute enormously to their communities. These findings and the work and perspectives of arts education leaders and youth development experts across the country is helping to shape the development of the National Guild's guide book and training institutes on how to successfully engage adolescents in community arts education programs. I detail effective practices as seen through my work with Find Your Light, viBeStages and IYE later in this chapter.

Thinking beyond Student Voice

My research also has expanded the way that I evaluate community-based youth theater's potential to create the conditions for youth to develop a sense of themselves as cultural agents and contribute more broadly to a larger community-building process. Approaching this study, I was of the mind that effective youth development programs should be student-centered and privilege the process of enabling student voice above all else. This bias was based on my prior study of Paulo Freire's theory of critical pedagogy and Augusto Boal's Theatre of the Oppressed, as well as much of the literature on youth development that puts an emphasis on giving youth a sense of ownership and responsibility by enabling them to generate their own material for projects and lead decision-making processes about content and theme. As a theater educator myself, I have always subscribed to the philosophy that my role was a co-learner and facilitator rather than an instructor. I believed that my primary responsibility was to draw out my students' voices through creative practice and enable them to see themselves as positive contributors to community, even if the quality of the product they produced was meaningful only to them. This personal philosophy at first got in the way of me being able to sit comfortably with Find Your Light and IYE. Both these organizations had a strong, disciplined (and disciplining) vision that put a lot of pressure on the youth to create polished performances that were heavily directed and shaped by adult facilitators. They challenged my notions of representational authority and youth empowerment in different ways. viBeStage's

youth-led approach and no-censorship rule more closely aligned with my own, prior understanding of effective community-based youth theater practice and therefore wasn't as much of a struggle for me to analyze initially. But what I learned from my research was that privileging youth voice above all else initially blinded me to many of the ways that Find Your Light and IYE were powerfully contributing to the youth's sense of personal agency as well as their abilities to effect a larger community building process through their performances and acts of transfer. Through my analysis of viBe, I also am left with questions about how privileging voice above all else can potentially lead to problematic notions of utopia that complicate the relationship between how a program's internal playmaking process relates to a larger strategy of community building.

While met with resistance in different ways, a strong, disciplined and disciplining vision in both Find Your Light and IYE set high expectations for the youth in terms of their attendance, proficiency in craft (even when youth were just being introduced to artistic practice) and commitment to producing a polished, professional-looking performance with the potential to impact community more broadly. While Find Your Light did not have the same kind of formal attendance policy in place as IYE did, Find Your Light ensemble members almost always showed up for rehearsals and performances on time. They wanted to be there. When I interviewed youth in both programs, I fully expected them to complain about the high level of discipline and how it was infringing upon their abilities to fully express themselves. But I was wrong. Instead, they discussed how the program's strong, disciplined vision helped strengthen their personal sense of

themselves as change agents in their communities (which typically viewed them in terms of their deficits and risks) and enabled them to bring out a stronger message through their plays which they believed had the potential to impact their audiences.

The youth in Find Your Light discussed how Juliette had taken their stories and turned them into a masterpiece of sorts which they felt represented their collective power to intervene even if the dialogue didn't all come from them nor did the vision. "[Juliette] took all of our writing and turned it into a play with a strong message. We provided her with the colors and she did the painting," said Tyrell. When I questioned him about this, trying to get at what I assumed would be his "true" disappointment about not having full decision-making power over script development, he completely denied my assumptions. "I definitely feel we had creative choice in that process. There's not a lick in that play that wasn't us," he repeated more than once to me in his personal interview. Tyrell's conviction that his individual voice was being heard as part of the final play script and production was shared by the other Find Your Light members. I didn't believe them at first. When Goddess interrupted rehearsals challenging Juliette's direction and declaring that she was going to take back control of her show, I thought, "Okay, here we go. The group's feelings about lack of representational authority in the process will come out." But I was wrong again. Goddess was incredibly proud of what Juliette helped them accomplish that summer and mentioned in her interview that she only hoped that the rigor would be balanced by time to debrief and share their personal stories on a more continuous basis. Find Your Light's

anger that their play was not taken more seriously by the Fringe Festival, which gave an award to a play about a poodle over their play with a hard-hitting message about violence in schools, speaks to the ensemble's sense of ownership and pride over what they were able to accomplish as a group even if much of the narrative was based on their dialogues but not written or directed by them aside from their monologues. While Juliette's control over script development and staging could have been more democratic or explained to the youth more clearly, in the end it served to enhance their collective voices for the purpose of inspiring change, especially given the limited time they had to remount the production in the fall of 2006. The production was received positively by audience members and reviewers not because it was a cute play done by youth but because it was a high quality performance with a hard-hitting but poignant message that defied your expectations of what they could do; perhaps more importantly, it made you want to learn and hear more from the youth as artists with the power to show the world differently.

Similarly when I talked with the youth in IYE, whose program was much more structured in terms of discipline than Find Your Light, they noted that being held accountable to the highest of expectations through rigorous discipline of their mind, body and spirit is what ultimately transformed their sense of personal agency as well as ability to use culture to make meaning and contribute to the building of their cultural community more broadly, even if rehearsals were not always fun or didn't offer them the freedom to say whatever they wanted or create openly. While youth voice was important in IYE (just as it was in Find Your

Light), it wasn't privileged above all else. The youth were positioned in the program as part of an intergenerational community that they were accountable to. They were also expected to learn traditions and a system of cultural values from their elders through rigorous artistic training as well as through Mbongi and their Rites of Passage programs. These values and traditions were expected to feed back to the external community in an overt way with the youth in the position of cultural ambassadors. Positioned as part of an intergenerational community, the youth developed a stronger sense of themselves as agents within a cultural location which strongly informed their sense of personal agency as well as responsibility and commitment to building and shaping that community.

While enabling student voice is important to community-based youth theatre work, so too is developing young people's passions, commitments and pride as potential change agents in their communities. How these goals are achieved is based on the participants involved and the larger community it hopes to affect. For viBeStages, a student-centered approach (with a creatively messy cultural product in the end) worked within its strategy of celebration to empower girls to want to tell their stories and begin to create an internal viBe culture in particular. But I don't believe the same approach would have engaged the youth in Find Your Light and IYE the same way, nor have had as powerful of an effect on the communities they were addressing.

Considering Both Process and Product

I've also learned is that both the product and the process have to be jointly considered when we evaluate these programs. If part of the mission of the

program is to link its internal process to a broader strategy of community building, in addition to developing the youth's sense of personal agency (which I believe has to happen first or at least in conjunction with a larger community goal), then what the ensemble produces as a cultural product must resonate with its audiences, in the case of this study as intervention, celebration or cultural transfer.

In viBeStages, a creatively messy final product worked because the audience for the most part was made up of the girls' intimates who were familiar with their individual styles of expression and looking to celebrate their "authenticity" however messy or confusing it was at times. Utopian performatives throughout the production functioned to inspire a "what if" imagining of teenage girls working together as empowered leaders that had potential to mobilize local shifts in perspective and meaning. However, as noted, viBe's philosophy of affirmation and celebratory approach also ran the risk of covering up the girls' need for support, brushing over conflicts and differences that did exist among the ensemble, and potentially reinscribing oppressive stereotypes unchecked because of viBe's no-censorship rule.

It is important to note that notions of "utopia" functioned in all three sites. All of the sites brought together youth who may not have typically worked together under any other circumstances and created the conditions for them to combine in innovative ways that created and shaped the symbolic boundaries of their internal communities, if not also their external cultural locations. All three sites also used cultural practices (e.g. stepping in Find Your Light, cheers in

viBeStages and African dance in IYI) to transfer and adapt social codes and memories that cut across individual differences to communicate a sense of solidarity, as well as mark a broader community movement, at different moments in their performances. But a utopian performative was incorporated more strategically in viBeStages process which encouraged the girls to create freely and to use artistic practices to experiment with their own rules in a space apart from society. This approach enabled cultural agency in terms of how it developed the girls' collective sense of themselves as viable shapers of their world more than it actually positioned them to act as agents of change in their external communities.

Find Your Light's process was similarly focused on using artistic practices to enable ensemble members to see themselves as positive contributors to their communities and to practice how to build community internally, but it was also more overtly trying to affect its audiences through its production. Find Your Light's audience was made up of non-intimates whom the program was trying to inspire to change. In order for these non-intimates to hear their collective story and take it seriously enough to act, the performance had to be clear and intentional in its message and delivery. The professional quality of this performance was important for the ensemble to be able to assert affective difference and transfer meanings to its audiences that "may not [have] be recognizable or identifiable in relation to [their] already available grids of classification," as José Estaban Muñoz suggests (68). Unfortunately, I don't believe the Fringe Festival was the right venue for the youth to reach their imagined audience (i.e. teachers, administrators, people with the power to change

school and civic policies) and this in turn led to some of the youth's disappointment and lack of interest in continuing touring the production beyond that summer.

Among the three sites, IYE is the strongest example of work that links internal processes of community building to a broader community building movement. Because IYE toured its productions to public schools and cultural centers, as well as presented them large public venues, their audiences ranged from community members in Brooklyn (mostly African-Americans), who shared their cultural values, to those who didn't identify as being of African descent or have knowledge of African values and traditions at all. As one of the primary vehicles through which Ifetayo's cultural values, traditions and practices were transferred publicly to both these audiences as means of education, reinforcement and inspiration, IYE's performances were expected to reflect the discipline and high level of artistic rigor that the youth experienced internally as well as to use cultural practices to teach the culture of the African Diaspora and mobilize both intimates and non-intimates to Ifetayo. The facilitators of the program were always trying to balance privileging student voice and individual style with training youth to understand, communicate and use the historically situated cultural narratives, practices and stylings of past generations. As I articulated earlier, the danger to this approach in terms of youth agency was the risk it posed of putting youth in a position to use creative practices only to please the adults who so strongly articulated their own perspectives, goals and values as part of Ifetayo's internal cultural location.

Effective Practices

Each of the programs I observed represented individual operating structures and diverse approaches to cultural form and content. The scope of this diversity and individuality is characteristic of community-based arts work and “ensure[s] the practice stays relevant, flexible and engaged” (Moynihan and Horton 207). At the same time, the three study sites’ shared focus on positive youth development and community building enable me to compare and analyze them as a field and “to discern theoretical relevance from what is repeatedly present, notably absent, and/or newly introduced in the data” (Strauss and Corbin qtd. in Saldaña 49).

My research shows that when Find Your Light, viBeStages and Ifetayo Youth Ensemble incorporated the following practices, youth participants felt a greater sense of ownership of their programs and artistic work, felt more connected and committed to each other and to the well-being of their communities (both within the program and the broader communities of which they were a part), better understood the many ways in which their cultures shaped and were shaped by them, and felt more confident in their potential to put culture to work to further their personal development and continue to make new connections and build community more broadly. These practices included:

Using Critical Pedagogy

According to Freire, “domesticating education” is a process of “transferring knowledge;” education for liberation is one of “transforming action”

(qtd. in Nieto 44). When the facilitators of the three programs I studied positioned themselves as co-learners and engaged in a “pedagogy of questions”⁸¹ that stimulated praxis, the youth not only felt a greater responsibility and ownership over their work but also began to understand their own positions as cultural producers of knowledge and their own identities as mobile and tactile. At the same time, the facilitators were better able to respond during the program to the interest and needs of their participants, as well as to barriers to the youths’ participation (e.g. family and work responsibilities, problems at home and school, etc.). When the pendulum swung towards a unidirectional “banking method of education,” the youths’ representational authority was comprised and in some cases, the youth disengaged or even resisted.

Critical pedagogy also better enables the youth to help set the guidelines for engagement and for defining or understanding what “safe space” means within the context of the program. It is important to set clear guidelines and rules for engagement in the beginning. Issues such as attendance, confidentiality, language, and the process of sharing feedback on each others’ work should be discussed, for example. Students and facilitators should also agree on the consequences breaking the “rules.”

All three programs met the youth where they were in their development artistically and personally, but also set clear goals, high artistic standards and expectations regarding related skills (i.e. decision-making, critical thinking, leadership, etc.). When responsibility for developing the play, and the program,

⁸¹ Freire and Faundez

was distributed amongst the teen ensemble members, the teens felt a great sense of ownership and trust in their abilities to lead and to put their culture to work both within and beyond the scope of the program itself.

Moving from the Personal to the Social

While all three approaches to community building positioned youth to make a broader social impact, they focused first on individual storytelling and expression. From those shared personal experiences and practices, ensemble members started making connections between their own experiences and others, as well as locating differences and gaps, and began building a symbolic repertoire that articulated an active collectivity, which was symbolically positioned to intervene, or transfer new imaginings of community to their audiences.

Each program had established specific and intentional practices that gave the youth an opportunity to share outside of the more formal process of developing a play. Before the summer of 2006, Find Your Light started each rehearsal with individual free writes and ended with circle discussions.

viBeStages started every rehearsal with Roses and Thorns, a ritual which enabled the girls to share both the achievements and challenges in their lives. And IYE started and ended every rehearsal with Mbongi, which positioned the youth to hold themselves and each other accountable and to counsel each other and make decisions about personal and family matters, as well as to discuss matters concerning play development.

When these “check-in”/”check-out” practices were sustained throughout the course of the rehearsal process (and in the case of viBe and Ifetayo into other

programs as well), there was a consistent dialectic between the personal and social. This dialectic supplied the ensembles' internal repertoire with a range of possibilities and productive differences that kept the process of building community vital and tactical. It also helped the youth begin to understand their personal experiences as political and to recognize social and cultural systems as existing through the interactional activities of individuals and groups who are responsible for both their maintenance (i.e. reproduction) and transformation. And perhaps, most importantly, these sustained practices also balanced the youths' sense of structured work time and time for free association and play. It also helped them feel consistently supported in their personal development. This was critical because not only are these programs asking the youth to learn new skills but also to take positive risks by engaging in new modes of self-expression at a critical juncture in their identity development.

Building Culture Internally

To varying degrees, each of these programs constructed rituals, codes, languages, norms and ways of relating that were specific to their programs and that formed an internal culture that was easily recognizable to the participants, as well as to alumnae in the cases of viBe and IYE. By building culture internally, the programs established themselves as "places" set apart from the youths' everyday spaces of school, home, therapy, etc. Many of the youth spoke about "coming back" to these programs to learn additional artistic, cultural and life skills, work through situations in their lives, connect and/or take further action

socially. In this way, the programs were positioned as restorative sites for practicing and honing one's cultural agency.

Providing Continued Leadership Opportunities

Many of the benefits of the community-based youth theater programs in this study accrue over time as the youth develop their artistic skills, learn how to combine in new ways and begin to take positive risks. Not only did these programs aim to support the youth in their *process* of individual and social development, but in the cases of viBeStages and IYE—which were part of larger organizations—also gave the youth real opportunities for “working their way up” as well as laterally within the organization and program. Through these opportunities, the youth gain greater responsibility for the artistic, educative, administrative and, in the case of IYE, even governance elements of the program and organization. Alumnae of viBeStages and IYE, for example, also became spokespersons for the programs, which in turn helps to ensure their sustainability.

Suggestions for Further Research

This study examines how three approaches to community-building through community-based youth theater practice created conditions for youth to practice cultural agency and develop a sense of themselves as resources in a broader community development process. Because of the varied nature of where each ensemble was in their rehearsal process and their relationships to the youths' communities, parents, etc., the focus of my research was mostly on the youths' experience and process. I did not focus as much on how this process and the plays themselves were received by the youths' broader communities nor did I fully

examine their effect on communities' perceptions of the youth. I also did not follow-up with the youth after the programs ended to find out if the youth were continuing to practice putting their culture to work to build their communities beyond the scope of the programs themselves.

How youth participants in community-based youth theater programs, that have a mission-driven focus on positive youth development and community building, go on to act as agents of change in a broader development process beyond the program is an area for further research. More research is needed also to understand how these programs enable communities accustomed to seeing youth only in terms of their deficiencies, their needs, and their risks to recognize in youth also their enormous potential as community resources. In addition research that focuses on the affects of these programs on communities over time would help us better understand how these experiences work to help keep community vital.

WORKS CITED

- Adams, Don and Arlene Goldbard. *Community, Culture and Globalization*. NY, NY: The Rockefeller Foundation, 2002.
- . *Creative Community: The Art of Cultural Development*. NY: The Rockefeller Foundation, 2001.
- Alice. Personal interview. 6 Jan. 2007.
- Amara. Personal interview. 3 Feb. 2007.
- Anie. Personal interview. 1 Nov. 2006.
- Archer-Cunningham, Kwayera. "Cultural Arts Education as Community Development: An Innovative Model of Healing and Transformation." New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education. 2007.116 (2007): 25-36.
- . Personal interview. 29 Jan. 2006.
- Austin, J.L. How To Do Things With Words. 2nd ed. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 2005.
- Avila, Juliette. Personal interview. 21 July 2006.
- . Personal interview. 8 Oct. 2006.
- Bell, Lee Anne. "Theoretical Foundations for Social Justice Education." Teaching for Diversity and Social Justice: A Sourcebook. Ed. Maurianne Adams, Lee Anne Bell and Pat Griffin. New York: Routledge, 1997.
- Berger, Peter L. and Thomas Luckmann. The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge. New York: Anchor Books, 1966.
- Betsworth, R. G. Social Ethics: An Examination of American Moral Traditions. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox P, 1990.
- Bhabha, Homi K. The Location of Culture. London: Routledge, 1994.
- Billy. Personal interview. 28 Aug. 2006.
- Blyth, Dale A., and Lynn M. Borden. Stimulating Research, Promoting Youth Development. Final Report of the National Youth Development Research Response Initiative, 2003.

- Boal, Augusto. Games for Actors and Non-Actors. 1st ed. Trans. Adrian Jackson. London: Routledge, 1992.
- . The Rainbow of Desire: The Boal Method of Theatre and Therapy. Trans. Adrian Jackson. London: Routledge, 1995.
- . Theatre of the Oppressed. Trans. Charles A. and Maria-Odilia Leal McBride. New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1985.
- Bogart, Anne and Tina Landau. The Viewpoints Book: A Practical Guide to Composition. New York: Theatre Communications Group, 2005.
- Bogdan, Robert C. and Sari Knopp Biklin. Qualitative Research for Education: An Introduction to Theories and Methods. New York: Allyn and Bacon, 2003.
- Borrupt, Tom. "Toward Asset-Based Community Cultural Development: A Journey Through the Disparate Worlds of Community Building." Community Arts Network. Retrieved August 30, 2010, from http://www.communityarts.net/readingroom/archivefiles/2003/04/toward_assetbas.php
- Bourdieu, Pierre. The Logic of Practice. Stanford, CA: Stanford UP, 1980.
- Brady, Sara. "Welded to the Ladle: Steelbound and Non-Radicality in Community-Based Theatre." TDR 44.3 (2000): 51-74.
- Brown, Scot. Fighting for US: Maulana Karenga, The US Organization, and Black Cultural Nationalism. New York: New York UP, 2003.
- Burnham, Linda Frye, Steven Durland, and Maryo Gard Ewell. "The State of the Field of Community Cultural Development: Something New Emerges." A Report from the Community Arts Network Gathering, May 2004. Saxapahaw, NC: Art in the Public Interest, 2004. <http://www.communityarts.net>
- Butler, Judith P. Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity. London: Routledge, 2006.
- Chaskin, Robert J., Prudence Brown, Sudhir Venkatesh, and Avis Vidal. Building Community Capacity. Hawthorne, NY: Aldine de Gruyter, 2001.
- Chike. Personal interview. 17 Feb. 2007.
- Christina. Personal interview. 2 Dec. 2006.

- Cleveland, William. "Mapping the Field: Arts-Based Community Development." May 2002. Community Arts Network. Retrieved May 23, 2005, from http://communityarts.net/readingroom/archivefiles/2002/05/mapping_the_fie.php
- Cohen, Anthony P. The Symbolic Construction of Community. London: Routledge, 1989.
- Cohen-Cruz, Jan. "The Ecology of Theater-in-Community." Performing Communities. By Robert H. Leonard and Ann Kilkelly. Ed. Linda Frye Burnham. A project of the Community Arts Network. Oakland, CA: New Village Press, 2006.
- . Local Acts: Community-based Performance in the United States. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers UP, 2005.
- . "Redefining the private: From persona storytelling to political act." The Boal Companion: Dialogues on theatre and cultural politics. Eds. Jan Cohen-Cruz and Mady Schutzman. New York: Routledge, 1996.
- Connerton, Paul. How Societies Remember. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1989.
- Conquergood, Dwight. "Performance Studies: Interventions and Radical Research." TDR 46.2 (2002): 145-156.
- Cooper, Chiriqui. "Ifetayo Experience." Personal essay. 2003.
- . Personal interview. 23 Feb. 2006.
- Daryl. Personal interview. 18 July 2006.
- Davis, Angela. "The Prison Industrial Complex." Western Washington University. 16 Apr. 2007. Retrieved Sept. 18, 2010, from http://www.archive.org/details/Angela_Davis_-_Prison_Industrial_Complex
- de Certeau, Michel. The Practice of Everyday Life. Trans. Steven Rendell. Berkeley, CA: U of California P, 1984.
- Deleuze, Gilles and Felix Guattari. Anti-oedipus: capitalism and schizophrenia. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1983.
- Derrida, Jacques. Of Grammatology. Trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins UP, 1974.

- Desiree. Personal interview. 22 Nov. 2006.
- Dolan, Jill. "Performance, Utopia and the 'Utopian Performative.'" Theatre Journal 53 (2001): 455-479
- Edell, Dana. "'Say It How It Is': Urban Teenage Girls Challenge and Perpetuate Cultural Narratives Through Writing and Performing Theater." Diss. New York U, 2010.
- Edell, Dana. Personal interview. 28 Jan. 2007.
- Edell, Dana and Chandra Thomas. Personal interview. 18 Oct. 2006.
- Erica. Personal interview. 11 Aug. 2006.
- Essence. Personal interview. 7 Nov. 2006.
- Farnum, Marlene and Rebecca Schaffer. YouthARTS Handbook: Arts Programs for Youth at Risk. Ed. Kim Carlson. Washington, DC: Americans for the Arts, 1998.
- Find Your Light group interview. 28 Aug. 2006.
- Fine, Elizabeth C. Soulstepping: African American Step Shows. Urbana, IL: U of Illinois P, 2002.
- Fine, Michelle. Framing Dropouts: Notes on the Politics of an Urban Public High School. Albany, NY: State U of New York P, 1991.
- Fletcher, John. "Identity and Agonism: Tim Miller, Cornerstone, and the Politics of Community-Based Theatre." Theatre Topics 13.2 (2003): 189-203.
- Foucault, Michel. Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972-1977. Ed. Colin Gordon. New York: Pantheon, 1980.
- Freire, Paulo. Pedagogy of the Oppressed. New York: Continuum, 1970.
- Freire, Paulo and Antonio Faundez. Learning to Question: A Pedagogy of Liberation. Trans. Tony Coates. New York: Continuum, 1989.
- Gaunt, Kyra D. The Games Black Girls Play: Learning the Ropes from Double-Dutch to Hip-Hop. New York: New York UP, 1998.
- Geertz, Clifford. The Interpretation of Cultures. New York: Basic, 1973.

- Gilbert, Helen and Joanne Tompkins. Post-Colonial Drama: Theory, practice, politics. London: Routledge, 1996.
- Gilligan, Carol. In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women's Development. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1982.
- Gilroy, Paul. The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1993.
- Giroux, Henry A. Border Crossing: Cultural Workers and the Politics of Education. New York: Routledge, 1992.
- Glesne, Corrine and Alan Peshkin. Becoming Qualitative Researchers: An Introduction. New York: Longman Publishing Group, 1992.
- Goddess. Personal interview. 9 Aug. 2006.
- Goldbard, Arlene. "Postscript to the Past: Notes Toward a History of Community Arts." Community Arts Network. Retrieved August 30, 2010, from http://www.communityarts.net/readingroom/archivefiles/1999/12/postscript_to_t.php
- Goldbard, Arlene. New Creative Community: The Art of Cultural Development. Oakland: New Village Press, 2006.
- Goodman, Greg S. Alternatives in Education: Critical Pedagogy for Disaffected Youth. New York: Peter Lang, 1999.
- Green, Gary Paul, and Anna Haines. Asset Building & Community Development. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2002.
- Griffin, Pat. "Introductory Module for the Single Issue Courses." Teaching for Diversity and Social Justice: A Sourcebook. Ed. Maurianne Adams, Lee Anne Bell and Pat Griffin. New York: Routledge, 1997.
- Gutiérrez, Lorraine M. and Michael S. Spencer. Excellence on Stage and In Life: The Mosaic Model for Youth Development through the Arts. Mosaic Youth Theater of Detroit. Retrieved August 30, 2010, from <http://www.mosaicdetroit.org/mosaic-model.pdf>
- Hager, Lori L. "Constructing community: Youth arts and drama, federal funding policy, and social services." Diss. Arizona State U, 2003.

- Hardiman, Rita and Bailey W. Jackson. "Conceptual Foundations for Social Justice Courses." Teaching for Diversity and Social Justice: A Sourcebook. Ed. Maurianne Adams, Lee Anne Bell and Pat Griffin. New York: Routledge, 1997.
- Harris, Anita, Ed. All About the Girl: Culture, Power and Identity. New York: Routledge, 2004.
- Hasani. Personal interview. 17 Feb. 2007.
- Hawkes, Jon. The Fourth Pillar of Sustainability: culture's essential role in public planning. Victoria, Australia: Common Ground Publishing, 2001.
- Hays, Sharon. "Structure and Agency and the Sticky Problem of Culture." Sociological Theory 12:1 (1994): 57 – 72.
- Heath, Shirley Brice, and Andrea Roach. "Imaginative Actuality: Learning in the Arts during the Nonschool Hours." Champions of Change: The Impact of the Arts on Learning. Ed. E.B. Fiske. The Arts Education Partnerships and the President's Committee on the Arts and the Humanities, 1999.
- Heath, Shirley Brice, and Laura Smyth. ArtShow: Youth and Community Development. Washington, D.C.: Partners for Livable Communities, 1999.
- hooks, bell. Teaching Community: A Pedagogy of Hope. New York: Routledge, 2003.
- . Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom. New York: Routledge, 1994.
- "Ifetayo." Personal essay. 2003.
- Ifetayo Cultural Arts Parent & Student Handbook. 2006-2007.
- Jackson, Jr., John L. Harlemworld: Doing Race and Class in Contemporary Black America. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2001.
- Jacobs, Jason. "Understand To Be Understood." Rev. of Understand To Be Understood. nytheatre.com 17 August 2006. Retrieved August 30, 2010 from <http://www.nytheatre.com/nytheatre/archshow.php?key=919>

- Jared. Personal interview. 24 Feb. 2007.
- Jeff. Personal interview. 13 Dec. 2006.
- Jerome. Personal interview. 19 July 2006.
- Joan. Personal interview. 20 Nov. 2006.
- Joseph, Miranda. Against the Romance of Community. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 2002.
- Journey Home with Me. By Ifetayo Cultural Arts. Videocassette. 1991.
- Julietta. Personal interview. 1 Nov. 2006.
- Karenga, Maulana. Kwanzaa: A Celebration of Family, Community and Culture. Los Angeles: U of Sankore P, 1998.
- . "The Quotable Karenga." Eds. Clyde Halisi and James Mtume. *The US Organization, 1967*. Retrieved August 31, 2010, from <http://www.piratepundit.com/quotablekarenga.pdf>
- Keisha. Personal interview. 4 Nov. 2006.
- Kershaw, Baz. The Politics of Performance: Radical Theatre as Cultural Intervention. New York: Routledge, 1992.
- Kuftinec, Sonja. Staging America: Cornerstone and Community-based Theater. Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois UP, 2003.
- Leadbeater, Bonnie J. Ross and Niobe Way. Urban Girls: Resisting Stereotypes, Creating Identities. New York: New York UP, 1996.
- . *Urban Girls Revisited: Building Strengths*. New York: New York UP, 2007.
- Mariama. Personal interview. 3 Feb. 2007.
- Mattingly, Doreen. "Place, teenagers, and representations: lessons from a community theatre project." Social and Cultural Geography 2.4 (2001): 445-459.
- McConachie, Bruce. "Approaching the 'Structure of Feeling' in Grassroots Theater." Performing Democracy: International Perspectives on Urban Community-Based Performance. Ed. Susan C. Haedicke and Tobin Nellhaus. Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 2001.

- Melissa. Personal interview. 18 Nov. 2006.
- Mercedes. Personal interview. 20 July 2006.
- Miller, Tim and David Roman. "Preaching to the Converted." Theatre Journal 47 (1995): 169-88.
- Muñoz , José Estaban. "Feeling Brown: Ethnicity and Affect in Richardo Bracho's The Sweetest Hangover (and Other STDs)." Theatre Journal 52 (2000): 67-79.
- Naja. Personal interview. 17 Feb. 2007.
- Nellhaus, Tobin and Susan C. Haedicke. Introduction. Performing Democracy: International Perspectives on Urban Community-Based Performance. Ed. Susan C. Haedicke and Tobin Nellhaus. Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 2001.
- Nichole. Personal interview. 26 July 2006.
- Nieto, Sonia. Language, Culture, and Teaching: Critical Perspectives for a New Century. Mahway, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associate, Inc., 2002.
- Paterson, Douglas L. and Mark Weinberg. "We All Are Theater: An Interview With Augusto Boal." Sept. 2002. Retrieved 18 Sept. 2010, from http://www.communityarts.net/readingroom/archivefiles/2002/09/we_all_are_thea.php
- Rob. Personal interview. 4 Oct. 2006.
- Rohd, Michael. Theatre for Community, Conflict & Dialogue: The Hope is Vital Training Manual. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1998.
- Saldaña, Johnny. Longitudinal Qualitative Research: Analyzing Change through Time. Oklahoma City, OK: AltaMira Press, 2003.
- Saria. Personal interview. 4 Nov. 2006.
- Sandra. Personal interview. Jan. 2007.
- Skocpol, Theda. "Advocates without Members: The Recent Transformation of American Civic Life." Civic Engagement in American Democracy. Eds. Theda Skocpol and Morris P. Fiorina. Washington, DC: Brookings Institution P, 1999.

- Sommer, Doris. "Introduction: Wiggle Room." Cultural Agency in the Americas. Ed. Doris Sommer. Durham, NC: Duke UP, 2006. 1-28.
- State, Bert O. The Pleasure of Play. Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP, 1994.
- Stivers, Camilla. Bureau Men, Settlement Women: Constructing Public Administration in the Progressive Era. Lawrence, KS: UP of Kansas, 2000.
- Tag: It's Not a Game. Program book. 2004.
- Taylor, Diana. The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas. Durham, NC: Duke UP, 2003.
- . "DNA of Performance: Political Hauntology." Cultural Agency in the Americas. Ed. Doris Sommer. Durham, NC: Duke UP, 2006. 52-81.
- The Advocate: Who Is the Mastermind? Brochure. January 2007.
- Turner, Victor. From Ritual to Theatre: The Human Seriousness of Play. New York: PAJ Publications, 1982.
- . The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure. New York: Aldine De Gruyter, 1969.
- Tyler. Personal interview. 3 Feb. 2006.
- Tynela. Personal interview. 20 July 2006.
- Tyrell. Personal interview. 18 July 2006.
- Understand To Be Understood. By Find Your Light. Dir. Juliette Avila. 2006.
- Unique. Personal interview. 28 Oct. 2006.
- Valentine, Gill. "Children should be seen and not heard? The role of children in public space." Urban Geography 17.3 (1996): 205-220.
- Yasmine. Personal interview. 15 Dec. 2006.
- viBeStages group interview. 22 Dec. 2006.
- viBeStages Recruitment Flyer. Sept. 2006.

- Way, Niobe. Introduction. Urban Girls: Resisting Stereotypes, Creating Identities. Ed. Bonnie J. Ross Leadbeater and Niobe Way. New York: New York UP, 1996.
- Wiley, Laura, and David Feiner. "Making a Scene: Representational Authority and a Community-Centered Process of Script Development." Performing Democracy: International Perspectives on Urban Community-Based Performance. Ed. Susan C. Haedicke and Tobin Nellhaus. Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 2001: 121-42.
- William, Saul. "Black Stacey." Saul Williams. Fader, 2004.
- Woodson, Stephani Etheridge. "Thinking with, Thinking Through: Performance Studies and Community-Based Theatre and Performance Collaborations with Youth." Working Draft.
- Worthmann, Christopher. "Just Playing the Part": Engaging Adolescents in Drama & Literacy. New York: Teachers College P, 2002.

APPENDIX A
WRITTEN CHILD ASSENT FORM

Nurturing Youth, Building Community: A Multi-Case Study of Three Community-Based Youth Theater Programs in New York City

I have been informed that my parent(s) and/or legal guardian(s) have given permission for me to participate in a study concerning my participation in the [Name of Youth Ensemble here]. This study will look at how my participation in [Name of Youth Ensemble] may affect my perceptions, beliefs, and sense of identity, and in turn how it may affect my ability to participate positively in my community. I understand that this study is looking at three different youth ensembles in New York City and their affects on youth and community development.

I understand that my participation in this study will cover ten weeks [indicate specific dates of program length here]. During this time, I will be interviewed individually and in groups. I also will be observed and videotaped during workshops, rehearsals, productions meetings, mentoring sessions, and performances. In addition, I may be asked to reflect on my creative and personal process through journal writing. I understand that anything I say “off the record” will be kept confidential, unless the researcher feels that I am sharing information that could be potentially harmful to myself or others.

I understand that I will have the chance to read through what the researcher writes about me to check for accuracy. If I disagree with what is written or want to clarify or elaborate on something, I have the opportunity to make changes.

I understand that my privacy will take first priority and that the researcher will use a pseudonym for me when taking notes and writing up her final report. I also understand that the results of the study may be published, but my name will not be used in the reports. I have been informed that all videotapes, audiotapes and student journals will be stored in a secure location during the study, and destroyed when the study is over along with any other written documents that identify me or jeopardize my confidentiality.

My participation in this project is voluntary and I have been told that I may stop my participation in this study at any time. If I choose not to participate or my parents choose not to have me participate, this decision will not affect my treatment or involvement in this program in any way.

Signature

Printed Name

Date

If you have any questions about your rights as a subject/participant in this research, or if you feel you have been placed at risk, you can contact the Chair of the Human Subjects Institutional Review Board, through the ASU Research Compliance Office, at (480) 965-6788.

APPENDIX B

PARENTAL LETTER OF CONSENT FOR MINORS

Nurturing Youth, Building Community: A Multi-Case Study of Three Community-Based Youth Theater Programs in New York City

Dear Parent or legal guardian:

I am Ph.D. Candidate in Theatre for Youth, working under the direction of Professor Tamara Underiner in the School of Theatre and Film in the Herberger College of Fine Arts at Arizona State University. I am conducting a research study to document, analyze and compare how young people's involvement in community-based theater affect their perceptions, beliefs and senses of identity, and in turn their capacity to contribute to a broader process of community building. In order to study the relationship between community-based youth theater, positive youth development and community development, I will be doing a multi-case study of three programs in New York City, including [Name of the ensemble here].

I am inviting your child's participation in this study, which will cover ten weeks. During this time, I will be interviewing youth participants, observing and videotaping workshops, productions meetings, mentoring sessions, rehearsals and performances, as well as asking youth participants to reflect on their creative and personal process through journal writing. Your child's participation in this study is voluntary. If you choose not to have your child participate or to withdraw your child from the study at any time, there will be no penalty (i.e. it will not affect your child's treatment or involvement in the arts education program in any way). Likewise, if your child chooses not to participate or to withdraw from the study at any time, there will be no penalty.

Your child's privacy will take first priority and I will use a pseudonym for him/her when taking notes and writing up her final report. The results of the research study may be published, but your child's name will not be used in the reports. All videotapes, audiotapes, student journals and field notes will be stored in a secure location during the study, and destroyed when the study is over along with any other written documents that identify your child or jeopardize his/her confidentiality.

Although there may be no direct benefit to your child, the possible benefit of your child's participation come from seeing their words, ideas, and experiences articulated and reflected back to them, which I hope will serve to validate their voices as young people and as civic participants.

If you have any questions concerning the research study or your child's participation in this study, please call me at (480) 313-1933.

Sincerely,

Heather Stickeler

By signing below, you are giving consent for your child _____ to participate in the above study and to be videotaped.

Signature

Printed Name

Date

If you have any questions about you or your child's rights as a subject/participant in this research, or if you feel you or your child have been placed at risk, you can contact the Chair of the Human Subjects Institutional Review Board, through the ASU Research Compliance Office, at (480) 965-6788.

APPENDIX C

WRITTEN ASSENT FORM FOR PARTICIPANTS AGES 18-21

Nurturing Youth, Building Community: A Multi-Case Study of Three Community-Based Youth Theater Programs in New York City

I agree to participate in a research study concerning my participation in the [Name of Youth Ensemble here]. This study will look at how my participation in [Name of Youth Ensemble] may affect my perceptions, beliefs, and sense of identity, and in turn how it may affect my ability to participate positively in my community. I understand that this study is looking at three different youth ensembles in New York City and their affects on youth and community development.

I understand that my participation in this study will cover ten weeks [indicate specific dates of program length here]. During this time, I will be interviewed individually and in groups. I also will be observed and videotaped during workshops, rehearsals, productions meetings, mentoring sessions, and performances. In addition, I may be asked to reflect on my creative and personal process through journal writing. I understand that anything I say “off the record” will be kept confidential, unless the researcher feels that I am sharing information that could be potentially harmful to myself or others.

I understand that I will have the chance to read through what the researcher writes about me to check for accuracy. If I disagree with what is written or want to clarify or elaborate on something, I have the opportunity to make changes.

I understand that my privacy will take first priority and that the researcher will use a pseudonym for me when taking notes and writing up her final report. I also understand that the results of the study may be published, but my name will not be used in the reports. I have been informed that all videotapes, audiotapes, field notes and student journals will be stored in a secure location during the study, and destroyed when the study is over along with any other written documents that identify me or jeopardize my confidentiality.

My participation in this project is voluntary and I have been told that I may stop my participation in this study at any time. If I choose not to participate or my parents choose not to have me participate, this decision will not affect my treatment or involvement in this program in any way.

Signature

Printed Name

Date

If you have any questions about your rights as a subject/participant in this research, or if you feel you have been placed at risk, you can contact the Chair of the Human Subjects Institutional Review Board, through the ASU Research Compliance Office, at (480) 965-6788.

APPENDIX D

LETTER OF CONSENT FOR FACILITATORS/MENTORS OF THE YOUTH
ENSEMBLES

Nurturing Youth, Building Community: A Multi-Case Study of Three Community-Based Youth Theater Programs in New York City

Dear [Name of Participant]:

I am Ph.D. Candidate in Theatre for Youth, working under the direction of Professor Tamara Underiner in the School of Theatre and Film in the Herberger College of Fine Arts at Arizona State University. I am conducting a research study to document, analyze and compare how young people's involvement in community-based theater affect their perceptions, beliefs and senses of identity, and in turn their capacity to contribute to a broader process of community building. In order to study the relationship between community-based youth theater, positive youth development and community development, I will be doing a multi-case study of three programs in New York City, including [Name of the ensemble here]. During this time, I will be interviewing youth participants, observing and videotaping workshops, productions meetings, mentoring sessions, rehearsals and performances, as well as asking youth participants to reflect on their creative and personal process through journal writing.

I am inviting your participation in this study. I would like to interview you as a facilitator/mentor of [Name of Ensemble] in the beginning, middle, and end of your project cycle. Each of these interviews will last approximately one to two hours and will be audiotaped and/or videotaped. Anything you say "off the record" will be kept confidential, unless I feel that you are sharing information that could be potentially harmful to yourself or others. You will have the chance to read through the transcript of your interview to check for accuracy. If you disagree with what is transcribed or want to clarify or elaborate on something, you will have the opportunity to make changes.

The results of the study may be published, but your name will not be used in the reports. All audiotapes, videotapes, journals and field notes will be stored in a secure location during the study, and destroyed when the study is over, along with any other written documents that identify you or jeopardize your confidentiality.

Your participation in this study is voluntary. If you choose to withdraw from the study at any time, there will be no penalty.

If you have any questions concerning the research study, please call me at (480) 313-1933.

Sincerely,

Heather Stickeler

By signing below, you are giving consent to participate in the above study and to be videotaped.

Signature

Printed Name

Date

If you have any questions about you or your child's rights as a subject/participant in this research, or if you feel you or your child have been placed at risk, you can contact the Chair of the Human Subjects Institutional Review Board, through the ASU Research Compliance Office, at (480) 965-6788.

APPENDIX E

LETTER OF CONSENT FOR PARENTS/GUARDIANS' PARTICIPATION

Nurturing Youth, Building Community: A Multi-Case Study of Three
Community-Based Youth Theater Programs in New York City

Dear [Name of Parent]:

I am Ph.D. Candidate in Theatre for Youth, working under the direction of Professor Tamara Underiner in the School of Theatre and Film in the Herberger College of Fine Arts at Arizona State University. I am conducting a research study to document, analyze and compare how young people's involvement in community-based theater affect their perceptions, beliefs and senses of identity, and in turn their capacity to contribute to a broader process of community building. In order to study the relationship between community-based youth theater, positive youth development and community development, I will be doing a multi-case study of three programs in New York City, including [Name of Program]. During this time, I will be interviewing youth participants, observing and videotaping workshops, productions meetings, mentoring sessions, rehearsals and performances, as well as asking youth participants to reflect on their creative and personal process through journal writing.

I am inviting your participation in this study. I would like to interview you as a parent or guardian of one of the youth participants involved in [Name of Program]. I am interested in interviewing in the beginning of the ensemble's creative process and at the end. Each of these interviews will last approximately one to two hours and will be audiotaped and/or videotaped. Anything you say "off the record" will be kept confidential, unless I feel that you are sharing information that could be potentially harmful to yourself or others. You will have the chance to read through the transcript of your interview to check for accuracy. If you disagree with what is transcribed or want to clarify or elaborate on something, you will have the opportunity to make changes.

Your privacy will take first priority; I will use a pseudonym for you when transcribing the interview, taking notes and writing up my final report. The results of the study may be published, but your name will not be used in the reports. All audiotapes and videotapes will be stored in a secure location during the study, and destroyed when the study is over, along with any other written documents that identify you or jeopardize your confidentiality.

Your participation in this study is voluntary. If you choose to withdraw from the study at any time, there will be no penalty.

If you have any questions concerning the research study, please call me at (480) 313-1933.

Sincerely,

Heather Stickeler

By signing below, you are giving consent to participate in the above study and to be videotaped.

Signature

Printed Name

Date

If you have any questions about you or your child's rights as a subject/participant in this research, or if you feel you or your child have been placed at risk, you can contact the Chair of the Human Subjects Institutional Review Board, through the ASU Research Compliance Office, at (480) 965-6788.

APPENDIX F

LETTER OF CONSENT
FOR COMMUNITY MEMBERS AND PAST ENSEMBLE MEMBERS

Nurturing Youth, Building Community: A Multi-Case Study of Three
Community-Based Youth Theater Programs in New York City

Dear [Name]:

I am Ph.D. Candidate in Theatre for Youth, working under the direction of Professor Tamara Underiner in the School of Theatre and Film in the Herberger College of Fine Arts at Arizona State University. I am conducting a research study to document, analyze and compare how young people's involvement in community-based theater affect their perceptions, beliefs and senses of identity, and in turn their capacity to contribute to a broader process of community building. In order to study the relationship between community-based youth theater, positive youth development and community development, I will be doing a multi-case study of three programs in New York City, including [Name of Program]. During this time, I will be interviewing youth participants, observing and videotaping workshops, productions meetings, mentoring sessions, rehearsals and performances, as well as asking youth participants to reflect on their creative and personal process through journal writing.

I am inviting your participation in this study. I would like to interview you as a community member who has worked with [Name of Program]. The interview will last approximately one to two hours and will be audiotaped and/or videotaped. Anything you say "off the record" will be kept confidential, unless I feel that you are sharing information that could be potentially harmful to yourself or others. You will have the chance to read through the transcript of your interview to check for accuracy. If you disagree with what is transcribed or want to clarify or elaborate on something, you will have the opportunity to make changes.

Your privacy will take first priority; I will use a pseudonym for you when transcribing the interview, taking notes and writing up my final report. The results of the study may be published, but your name will not be used in the reports. All audiotapes and videotapes will be stored in a secure location during the study, and destroyed when the study is over, along with any other written documents that identify you or jeopardize your confidentiality.

Your participation in this study is voluntary. If you choose to withdraw from the study at any time, there will be no penalty.

If you have any questions concerning the research study, please call me at (480) 313-1933.

Sincerely,

Heather Stickeler

By signing below, you are giving consent to participate in the above study and to be videotaped.

Signature Printed Name Date

If you have any questions about you or your child's rights as a subject/participant in this research, or if you feel you or your child have been placed at risk, you can contact the Chair of the Human Subjects Institutional Review Board, through the ASU Research Compliance Office, at (480) 965-6788.

APPENDIX G

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS FOR YOUTH PARTICIPANTS

Initial Interview Questions for Youth Ensemble Members

About Community

1. What does the word “community” mean to you?
2. What community do you most identify with?
3. When were you first aware of yourself as a member of this community?
4. How would you describe this community as if it were a person (physical and psychological characteristics)?
5. When you think of your community, what do you see, touch, taste, hear and smell?
6. If your community could speak, what would it say?
7. What are some of the biggest issues facing your community today?
8. What are some of the biggest issues facing youth in your community today?
9. What do you want to preserve in your community?
10. What do you want to create in your community?
11. What do you want to change in your community?
12. Tell me about a time when you felt proud as a member of this community.
13. Tell me about a time when you felt frustrated as a member of this community.
14. What beliefs do you think your community has of young people?
15. Where do you think these beliefs come from?
16. Tell me about a time when you felt that you were treated differently by your community because of your age.
17. In your opinion, what is a young person’s biggest challenge in participating in the development of your community?
18. What would it (or does it) take for young people to participate fully in the life of your community?

About Individual Capacities

1. What do you love most about being a young person in New York City?
2. What do you find most challenging about being a young person in New York City?
3. How do you feel your race, education, gender, and class affect your experience as a young person in New York? On the table, I have some cards with these different categories written on them. (The cards will include the words: education, race, gender, class, neighborhood, family, religion). I am interested in knowing how you feel these categories have affected your experience as a young person in New York. Feel free to respond to some of them or all of them, whatever strikes you.
4. If you had to describe yourself to a friend or peer, what would you tell him/her? Would you describe yourself differently if you were talking to an adult or community member?

5. When you think of your skills, what things do you think you do best?
(These may be skills you've learned in school, at home, in the community, at work or simply qualities you feel you possess).
6. What skills would you most like to learn?
7. What skills would you most like to teach to your friends, teachers, parents, and community?
8. Have you ever participated in or organized any community activities? If so, explain. If not, why?
9. If you could contribute something meaningful to your community, what would it be?

About the Ensemble Experience

1. Why did you decide to audition for this ensemble?
2. What is your prior experience with the arts?
3. What are you most excited about?
4. What are you most nervous about?
5. What do you hope to get out of this experience?
6. What new skills do you hope to learn?
7. How would you describe this ensemble and/or organization to a friend? to a parent?
8. What effect do you think this ensemble will have on your community?

Interview Questions for Youth Ensemble Members during their Creative Process

1. How would you describe the ensemble's creative process up to this point?
2. How do you see your role in this process?
3. What interests you most about the work?
4. What feels the most challenging?
5. In what ways do you feel supported?
6. What is the underlying attitude of this ensemble toward young people?
7. What do you think the group is trying to achieve by creating this original performance piece?
8. How do you think the ensemble will contribute or is contributing to your community?
9. During research and devising, what was it like to hear everyone's personal stories about the issue you are addressing in your work?
 - What new information did you receive during the storytelling and interview phases of the project?
 - What new information did you receive during the devising process?
 - What, if anything, surprised you about how you or others chose to communicate these stories through sound, movement, imagery and dialogue?
 - How are these creative decisions made?
 - What thoughts and questions came up for you during researching and devising?

- Did anything make you feel uncomfortable?
 - How were the stories similar and how were they different?
 - How did the stories challenge some of your own stereotypes or what information contradicted what you had previously thought?
10. In what ways do you feel theatre will help you communicate these perspectives and feelings to the public?
 11. Who do you hope will see your work? What questions or thoughts do you want them to walk away with?
 12. If you could communicate one thing to your audience through this performance, what would it be?
 13. In what ways is this experience shaping the way you feel about yourself, your peers, your community, and the performing arts?
 14. Tell me about a time during this process when you felt proud of your abilities.
 15. Tell me about a time during this process when you have felt limited in your abilities.

Final Interview Questions for Youth Ensemble Members

1. How did you feel about the different aspects of the creative process – gathering stories, interviewing, developing a script, collaborating on the performance piece, and the performances themselves?
2. How do you feel about your contribution to the group effort?
3. Did you discover any new personal strengths or weakness during the process?
4. How did you feel about the collaborative effort/spirit of your fellow ensemble members and of your adult facilitators?
5. What surprised you?
6. What do you feel you learned?
7. What do you want to find out more about as a result of your participation in the ensemble?
8. If you could change anything about this experience, what would it be?
9. In what ways, if any, has this experience helped you participate more fully in the life of your community?
10. How has your participation in the ensemble affected your relationships with peers, family, mentors, and adult community members?
11. What advice would you give to new ensemble members?
12. What questions or ideas did this process raise for you?
13. In what ways, if any, have your thoughts on what it means to be a young person expanded or changed throughout the course of this project?
14. In what ways, if any, have your thoughts on what it means to be a community member expanded or changed throughout the course of this project?
15. How did your participation in this ensemble compare to your experience in other activities such as school, family, church, or civic activities?

16. In what ways, if any, has this ensemble affected the way *the community* sees young people or itself?
17. The following questions are ones that I asked you in the beginning of this process. I am interested in knowing how your responses to these questions may have changed over the course of the past few months:
 - a. What does the word “community” mean to you?
 - b. What community do you most identify with?
 - c. How would you describe this community as if it were a person (physical and psychological characteristics)?
 - d. When you think of your community, what do you see, touch, taste, hear and smell?
 - e. If your community could speak, what would it say?
 - f. What are some of the biggest issues facing your community today?
 - g. What do you want to preserve in your community?
 - h. What do you want to create in your community?
 - i. What do you want to change in your community?

APPENDIX H
INTERVIEW QUESTIONS FOR PARENTS/GUARDIANS OF YOUTH
PARTICIPANTS

Initial Interview Questions for Parents/Guardians of Youth Participants

About Community

1. What does the word “community” mean to you?
2. What community do you most identify with?
3. When were you first aware of yourself as a member of this community?
4. How would you describe this community as if it were a person (physical and psychological characteristics)?
5. When you think of your community, what do you see, touch, taste, hear and smell?
6. If your community could speak, what would it say?
7. What are some of the biggest issues facing your community today?
8. What are some of the biggest issues facing youth in your community today?
9. What does it mean to “develop” a community?
10. What do you want to preserve in your community?
11. What do you want to create in your community?
12. What do you want to change in your community?
13. What beliefs do you think your community has of young people?
14. Where do you think these beliefs come from?
15. In your opinion, what is a young person’s biggest challenge in participating in the development of your community?
16. What would it (or does it) take for young people to participate fully in the life of your community?

About Individual Capacity

1. How would you describe your child?
2. When you think of your child’s skills, what things do you think they do best? (These may be skills you’ve learned in school, at home, in the community, at work or simply qualities you feel you possess).
3. What issues (personal, social, and/or political) are important to them?
4. If your child was to contribute something meaningful to your community through their involvement in this ensemble, what would you want it to be?

About the Ensemble Experience

1. How would you describe [Name of Ensemble] to a friend?
2. What did you know about this organization prior to your child’s involvement?
3. In your opinion, what are the organization’s core values and beliefs?
4. Why did your child audition for this ensemble?
5. What do you think he/she is most excited about?
6. What do you think he/she is most nervous about?
7. What do you hope your child will get out of this experience?

8. What new skills do you hope they will learn?

9. In what ways, if any, do you expect or wish to be involved?

Final Interview Questions

1. What was your child's experience with the ensemble?
2. What stories about the experience, if any, did s/he share with you at home?
3. In what ways, if any, were you involved in the process?
4. In what ways, if any, do you feel your child's participation in this ensemble has affected their perception of themselves, their peers, and their community?
5. In what ways, if any, do you feel your child's participation in this ensemble has shaped and/or changed his/her relationships with others?
6. What new skills, if any, do you feel s/he has gained?
7. What do you feel s/he enjoyed the most about the process?
8. What do you feel was most challenging for him/her?
9. In what ways, if any, has this experience helped your child express themselves?
10. In what ways, if any, has this experience helped your child participate in the life of your community?
11. How did your child's participation in this ensemble compare to their participation in other activities such as school, family, church, or civic activities?
12. How has your child's participation in the ensemble affected the way *you* perceive him or her as a young person? How has it affected the way you perceive him or her as a community member?
13. For those parents who see the final performance(s):
 - a. What struck you most about the final performance?
 - b. What thoughts, feelings or questions did it raise for you?
 - c. What about the performance, if anything, made you feel uncomfortable?
 - d. How did the performance challenge some of your own stereotypes of young people, their issues and their abilities?
 - e. In what ways, if any, did the performance shape the way you think about your community and yourself in new or different ways?
 - f. In what ways, if any, did the performance shape the way you think about theatre in new or different ways?

APPENDIX I

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS FOR ADULT FACILITATORS

Initial Questions for Adult Facilitators

About Community

1. What does the word “community” mean to you?
2. What community do you most identify with?
3. When were you first aware of yourself as a member of this community?
4. How would you describe this community as if it were a person (physical and psychological characteristics)?
5. When you think of your community, what do you see, touch, taste, hear and smell?
6. If your community could speak, what would it say?
7. What are some of the biggest issues facing your community today?
8. What are some of the biggest issues facing youth in your community today?
9. What does it mean to “develop” a community?
10. What do you want to preserve in your community?
11. What do you want to create in your community?
12. What do you want to change in your community?
13. What beliefs do you think your community has of young people?
14. Where do you think these beliefs come from?
15. What can/do young people uniquely contribute to the well-being and vitality of a community?
16. In your opinion, what is a young person’s biggest challenge in participating in the development of their communities?
17. What would it (or does it) take for young people to participate fully in the life of their communities?

About the Ensemble

1. What were the original reasons for forming a community-based youth ensemble?
2. How have your goals changed as your youth participants, adult mentors, and communities have changed?
3. What artistic processes and structures do you employ (and/or have you employed) to meet these goals?
4. How do you see your role in this process?
5. How are youth recruited? What qualities are you looking for during recruitment?
6. How are topics/issues chosen? How are content and creative decisions made?
7. If you disagree with the way a young person is choosing to represent herself/himself or someone else’s story, how do you approach him/her?
8. In what ways do you invite participation from the community before, during, and/or after the creative process?
9. What values and beliefs inform these processes and how do these intersect with the values and beliefs of the overall organization, and of the larger community context?

10. What does it mean for youth ensemble members to be a part of these programs?
11. How would you describe your audience? What questions or ideas do you hope the audience takes away from performances?
12. How do you feel community residents perceive your organization and the ensemble's work?
13. In what ways do you feel this program enables young people to develop agency and a sense of civic identity? Can you share a few stories that illustrate these points?
14. How do you help ensure that the youth ensemble members see themselves as learners and community builders?
15. In what ways do you encourage young people to stay engaged after their participation in the ensemble is over?
16. What extended influences, if any, does your organization have on its participants and communities? What trends or characteristics are instrumental to that sustainability?
17. How do you measure the efficacy and value of your efforts both civically and aesthetically?
18. What challenges do you face in evaluating the work?
19. In what ways are you accountable for the ethical and political issues a project raises?

Interview Questions for Adult Facilitators during the Creative Process

1. How would you describe the ensemble's creative process up to this point?
2. How would you describe your role in the process?
3. What do you feel most excited about?
4. What feels the most challenging?
5. How do you feel you are building trust and allowing the young people to take responsibility?
6. What has surprised you about the youth's participation?
7. In what ways do you feel supported?
8. What do you think the group is trying to achieve by creating this original performance piece?
9. How do you think this ensemble will contribute or is contributing to your community?
10. What new information did you receive about the youth, the community or the issue(s) during the storytelling and interview phases of the project?
11. What new information did you receive during the devising process?
12. What surprises and/or excites you about how the youth ensemble members are choosing to communicate these stories/ideas through sound, movement, imagery and dialogue?
13. How are these creative decisions being negotiated?
14. What thoughts and questions are coming up for you?
15. Is anything making you feel uncomfortable? Why?

16. How are the stories shared by the youth and the community challenging some of your own stereotypes? What information contradicts what you had previously thought about the community, the youth, and the issue(s)?
17. In what ways do you feel theatre is helping the youth communicate their perspectives and feelings?
18. Who do you hope the community will see these young people and their work? What questions or thoughts do you want them to walk away with?
19. If you could communicate one thing to your audience through this performance, what would it be?

Final Questions for Adult Facilitators

1. How did you feel about the different aspects of the creative process – gathering stories, interviewing, developing a script, collaborating on the performance piece, and the performances themselves?
2. How would you describe your audience for this project?
3. What questions or ideas do you feel they took away from the experience? What questions or ideas do you feel they contributed, if any?
4. In what ways did the project engage multiple perspectives on the issue/topic?
5. Do you feel you met your goals for the project? Why or why not?
6. In what ways were issues of power, leadership, and representation negotiated throughout the process and within a broader community context?
7. In what ways, if any, do you feel this experience helped the youth ensemble members participate more fully in the life of their communities?
8. How has their participation in the ensemble affected their relationships with peers, family, mentors, and adult community members?
9. In what ways, if any, has this process affected the way the young participants see themselves as youth and as community members?
10. In what ways, if any, has the ensemble affected the way *the community* sees young people and itself?
11. How will you continue and the youth ensemble members continue to engage with the community now that the project is over?
12. Looking back on the project, what moments do you feel get to the essence of what you are aiming to achieve with this ensemble?
13. If you could change anything about this experience, what would it be?
14. In your opinion, what was the value of this work in its overall social context?

APPENDIX J

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS FOR COMMUNITY MEMBERS

Interview Questions for Community Members

About Community

1. What does the word “community” mean to you?
2. What community do you most identify with?
3. When were you first aware of yourself as a member of this community?
4. How would you describe this community as if it were a person (physical and psychological characteristics)?
5. When you think of your community, what do you see, touch, taste, hear and smell?
6. If your community could speak, what would it say?
7. What are some of the biggest issues facing your community today?
8. What are some of the biggest issues facing youth in your community today?
9. What does it mean to “develop” a community?
10. What do you want to preserve in your community?
11. What do you want to create in your community?
12. What do you want to change in your community?
13. What beliefs do you think your community has of young people?
14. Where do you think these beliefs come from?
15. What can/do young people uniquely contribute to the well-being and vitality of a community?
16. In your opinion, what is a young person’s biggest challenge in participating in the development of their communities?
17. What would it (or does it) take for young people to participate fully in the life of their communities?
18. In what ways, if any, do you currently interact with young people in your community?

About the Ensemble

1. How did you find out about [Name of Ensemble]?
2. How would you describe this organization to a friend? What do you feel they are trying to achieve with their work?
3. In what ways are you currently involved with the organization, or in what ways have you been involved with the organization in the past?
4. For those community members who see the final performance(s):
 - a. What struck you most about the final performance?
 - b. What thoughts, feelings or questions did it raise for you?
 - c. What about the performance, if anything, made you feel uncomfortable?
 - d. How did the performance challenge some of your own stereotypes of young people, their issues and their abilities?
 - e. In what ways, if any, did the performance shape the way you think about your community and yourself in new or different ways?
 - f. In what ways, if any, did the performance shape the way you think about theatre in new or different ways?

5. What value, if any, do you feel this ensemble has to the community?
6. How can these young people continue to participate positively in the community? What factors are needed to sustain their participation?

APPENDIX K
IRB LETTER OF APPROVAL

To: Tamara Underiner

From: Albert Kagan, Chair
Institutional Review Board

Date: 06/05/2006

Committee Action: **Expedited Approval**

Approval Date: 06/05/2006

Review Type: Expedited F6 F7

IRB Protocol #: 0605000891

Study Title: Nurturing Youth, Building Community: A Multi-Case Study of Three
Community-Based Youth Theater Programs in New York City

Expiration Date: 06/04/2007

The above-referenced protocol was approved following expedited review by the Institutional Review Board.

It is the Principal Investigator's responsibility to obtain review and continued approval before the expiration date. You may not continue any research activity beyond the expiration date without approval by the Institutional Review Board.

Adverse Reactions: If any untoward incidents or severe reactions should develop as a result of this study, you are required to notify the Institutional Review Board immediately. If necessary a member of the IRB will be assigned to look into the matter. If the problem is serious, approval may be withdrawn pending IRB review.

Amendments: If you wish to change any aspect of this study, such as the procedures, the consent forms, or the investigators, please communicate your requested changes to the Institutional Review Board. The new procedure is not to be initiated until the IRB approval has been given.

Please retain a copy of this letter with your approved protocol.

