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# Stage as Street: Representation at the Juncture of the Arts and Justice

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# Chapter 7

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## Stage as Street

### Representation at the Juncture of the Arts and Justice

*E. Gabriel Dattatreyan & [Daniel Stageman](#)*

Arts educators working with court-involved youth face a set of complex and imbricated challenges. First, how do we gain the interest of the young people we would have participate in what we imagine are collaborative and mutually generative projects? Second, how do we mediate representational tensions when the project is not solely therapeutic but has a broader public pedagogical purpose—to disrupt the simplistic and pathologizing discourses of poverty and violence that so often capture young men and women of color in the United States? (Bourgois, 2002; Noguera, 2008). Third, and not least, how do we navigate the institutional settings where our arts programs are situated, given that the institutions might have overlapping and divergent interests in promoting the arts and arts education?

In this chapter we explore these questions by providing a retrospective account of our collective experiences in a theater program housed at Journeys, a large alternative to incarceration program (ATIP) located in a northeastern city. The two authors of this piece, now graduate students, Dattatreyan a joint doctoral candidate in anthropology and education at the University of Pennsylvania and Stageman a doctoral candidate in Criminal Justice at The City University of New York Graduate Center/John Jay College, approach this chapter as an excavation into our shared experiences as arts educators who for a brief period had the opportunity to work together to organize and create what in hindsight (several years have passed since this project took place) each of us consider a significant chapter in our journeys as teachers and, subsequently, as academics. Indeed, the work we did in Journeys was, for both of us, the culmination of many years of pedagogical and curricular explora-

tion—and the impetus for us to think about how we might contribute to various policy, practice, and theory debates as scholars in the academy.

In addition to our ethnographically grounded observations originating from our experiences as staff members at Journeys and as founders of the theater initiative, we turn to the perspectives of the youth actor participants of the program, who, through interview data, journal entries,<sup>1</sup> and dialogic excerpts from the two original plays, provide rich context to our analysis. Ultimately, the exploration of our collective experiences is, in large part, to articulate and elucidate the pitfalls and possibilities of representation at the interstices of arts and justice work, specifically focusing on improvisational theater techniques we utilized to create vivid accounts of how “status” and “goal” unfold in the street and on the stage (Johnstone, 1981).

On the one hand these stage techniques, deployed during the production and rehearsal of the original plays developed by the company, create the possibility for self-revealing dialogic engagements set in the context of “street.” Actors are free to act, express, and explore alternatives that their day-to-day realities inhibit, or even forcefully reject. They do so even as they come to recognize the twin concepts of *status* and *goal*, improvisational terms used in short and long form improvisation to describe the positionality and possibilities for each actor in relation to her onstage partners; the concepts that, in effect, delimit the grounds for exploration (Boal, 1992). Using interview excerpts taken from our youth participants, we, in part, analyze how the performative repertoires of the youth who participated in the program produced the street as stage, creating what Taylor (2003) refers to as “a constant state of againness,” where the embodied past is reformulated in the present theatrical moment. We suggest that staging these performances afforded the young people in the program an opportunity to reflect on their self-representational strategies in the street, offering the possibility for new repertoires to arise.

Yet, theater and the stagecraft that makes it a world unto itself is not complete unless there is an audience—a group to witness the telling of tales. The audience was both internal to the organization, comprised of staff members, the families and friends of participants and staff, and various staff at the courts, including judges; and an external audience. To engage this larger external audience we marketed the plays in collaboration

with a small theater company, as one of the broader goals of this project was to incite dialogue with the public regarding the complicated economic, social, and political structures that fashioned the quixotic yet quotidian dramas. To facilitate audience engagement we developed a talk-back format, where the company, (i.e., the youth actors, directors, producers, writers, and key members of Journeys staff) formed a panel that facilitated post-performance discussion. Realizing the stage as street allegory, if left undisturbed, leaves too much interpretative room for the reinscription of normative assumptions about the communities and the young people depicted, the talk-backs were designed to create dialogic encounters that once again opened the possibility for disclosure rather than the closure that a narrative, whether written or performed, inherently suggests.

What we didn't account for, and what becomes clear only in retrospect, is that in devising the plays precisely to strategically re-present (Spivak, 1988) youth lives in the margins, we would create tensions within the organization, as the plays' narratives tested the boundaries of what could be representative of the organization itself. Moreover, in encouraging youth participants to express unconventional or surprising narratives we challenged our own moral and ethical frameworks for possibility even as we confronted institutional limits. Using interview data from youth participants, transcripts from our audience feedback sessions,<sup>2</sup> and excerpts from the plays themselves, we will show the complicated nature of representation and reception when, for a brief period, the stage becomes street, and audiences are invited to purvey the lives of others—under the auspices of an organization designed to mediate the relationship between the state and the youth whom they serve.

### **The Paradox of Bureaucracy and Innovation— an Organizational Snapshot**

*The afternoons are particularly chaotic. The hallway, stretching approximately 75 yards in length with offices on either side, are filled with youth participants as they stream from one office to another or wait for their respective appointments on the wooden benches, which vaguely look like church pews. There they wait, languorously draped across the wooden benches, for meetings with staff members who expressly state they keep their participants waiting as long as they can so that they are not 'on the street.' And as they pass time participants speak to each other about their court cases, their neighborhoods, their friends, their experiences*

*in prison, and occasionally get into heated debates about who the best rapper of all time is—the cacophony of their voices making it difficult to follow, except in bits and pieces, any one conversation. From time to time a staff person walks through the halls and tells the participants to take off their hats, their voices stern and commanding. The young men with hats on roll their eyes and slowly take off their caps. On occasion, I sit on a bench and participate in their conversations. At first, it gets really quiet, particularly if the participants don't know me from the classes I teach. After a while, I am often included—though usually through provocative questioning. “Yo, G, isn't Tupac the best rapper of all time?” Or “yo G, you ever been to jail?”*

*Dattatreyan, Field notes*

*Sitting in my office behind the GED classroom...I had an ideal position from which to eavesdrop on the young clients killing time and shooting the breeze on “the bench.” Akin to the waiting room in a probation office, this was an old-school church pew of darkly stained oak set against the wall of the office's main hallway. Here young men (and a few young women) regularly violated the conditions of their release by associating with known felons—each other, in other words—and I, whether I wanted to or not, often heard the minute details of their conversations. Most of these conversations were pretty banal, reflective of the universal boredom of vital young people forced to sit still. Sometimes conversationalists spun out their shared anger at wasted time and the anticipation of case management appointments in which they would be scolded yet again for failing to take part in activities that were spectacularly irrelevant to the things they valued in life. Invariably, however, these conversations turned to a single item of shared experience: [jail].*

*(Stageman, 2010, p. 441-2)*

The “Theater Initiative” (henceforth, TI), a project whose duration lasted about one and one-half years, was part of a larger, more enduring alternative to incarceration program that serves individuals of varying ages who are involved in the criminal justice system. The parent organization's historic programmatic remit was and is to provide an intermediary set of sentencing options for judges who are reluctant to assign jail time for certain nonviolent offenses, but have few other options afforded to them within state sentencing strictures. However, the persistent arguments justifying ATIPs, like this one, have not centered around the affordances such programs have provided judges, nor the corollary argument that ATIPs create the possibility for a more just sentencing that focuses on rehabilitation, but rather around their economic benefits. Indeed, ATIPs are argued to cost a fraction of what it would take to house a

single person in jail for an equivalent time (e.g., ATI Coalition, 2003; Patchin & Keveles, 2004). Over the course of the years we worked in ATIPs, we heard this economic argument time and time again from senior staff members who either served as the organization's interface with the city and state government, or who worked in the funding department.

This economic justification in some ways mitigates or at least diverts counterarguments that portray incarceration alternatives as a soft or lenient crime prevention strategy, with little or no deterrent value. However, to ensure that the state continues to fund ATIP programs, and that judges continue to sentence offenders to them without fear of political reprisal, ATIP programs have had to create bureaucratic procedures to surveil participants, such that there is enumerated evidence for their programmatic success or failure. Such data collection justifies these programs' continued existence as true alternatives to incarceration in disciplinary (and even deterrent) terms, and thus becomes a primary focus for ATIP staffing patterns, programmatic priorities, and client narratives—a point to which we will return in just a moment.

Structurally, the organization has various divisions that serve different target populations. The subdivision where we, the primary initiators of the theater project, were based focused solely on youthful offenders, between the ages of 16 and 21, who were charged with felony offenses. Program participants are typically recommended as good potential clients by sympathetic judges in the court system, or are targeted by the outreach efforts of the organization's court staff. The characteristics of a putatively good candidate for participation are both explicitly defined within the program strictures, as well as, to some degree, subjectively determined by program staff. The primary explicit criteria that our program model employed were that our prospective participants' felony charges were neither violent nor sexual in nature, and that the charge be a first offence.

The program operates utilizing a "case management" approach, where each intake is assigned a "case manager"—a counselor cum individual program administrator of sorts—whose primary remit is to shepherd clients through their 6 month "sentence" in the program. All of the youth participants, with the assistance of the case manager, develop a comprehensive plan with educational, health, and employment aspects. This plan is determined partially through conversation and partially

through assessment. Assessments are standardized for all participants: each intake has to take an educational assessment exam, the outcome of which is translated to grade level equivalents in reading and writing. In addition, participants are drug tested immediately after intake, and a regular but randomized monitoring schedule is initiated. What becomes interesting, indeed critical, when trying to understand the youth participants' involvement with the theater program (as well as other in-house arts and education and job readiness initiatives developed by staff), are how these regimented, numerative, bureaucratic assessments often determined the duration and depth of individual participation in the more therapeutic, educational, and creative aspects of the larger program. In many cases, these quantitative assessments take precedence over all other qualitative assessments when a youth participant had to appear in court. While the program has dedicated writers who create a qualitatively driven *narrative of progress* for each participant, often, regardless of how favorably the narrative might read, if urinalysis scores indicate continued use of illegal substances (which consists, in an overwhelming majority of cases, exclusively of marijuana use), then the participant is in danger of being remanded—sent back to the county jail—or, in cases where the participant consistently reports high positive scores, the possibility of assignment to an in-patient treatment center threatens to extract the participant from all other aspects of her programmatic plan.

However, the qualitatively grounded *narrative of progress* has a different role to play within the program, particularly in how the relationships between staff and youth participants are mediated. We suggest that this narrative of progress functions as a disciplinary device in and of itself, as it pushes participants into a self-production and self-representation that fixates on the future, on the salvatory aspects of education, and on normative notions of self-actualization. There are only a few spaces within the program where youth are allowed to express their narratives of regret, narratives of failure, narratives of pain, or simply narratives that revealed their complicated and enduring relationships with the community in which they live. Indeed, these unsanctioned narratives (what we call *narratives of endurance* following Povinelli's (2011) description of endurance as the possibilities afforded those left in the margins of the liberal state) are primarily relegated to the mental health division, where a small staff of art therapists and clinicians works

with program participants to self-consciously explore these potentially explosive and complex histories within the private confines of confidential counseling sessions.

### Introducing the Theater Program

*Stageman and I sat across from each other in my office. It was early summer, 2006 and the first time we were meeting. He was dressed for the occasion, wearing a button-down white shirt, a tie, and slacks. I, in contrast, wore jeans and a t-shirt, to mark myself as different from the court staff or case management staff, who were required to wear business casual attire. Stageman was interviewing for the teaching job vacancy left open after Mitchell, a teacher who taught in the program for over ten years, left the organization. I led with what I thought were the basic questions—was he comfortable/did he have experience working with young men and women from the marginalized communities of the city? Could he teach basic math, science, history, and writing? More importantly, what other interests did he have? What could he bring to the table that he was passionate about—that he felt could contribute to an education department that I envisioned would offer a variety of arts and academic classes, aside from the GED and literacy offerings, that were driven by the teachers interests and passions? He began to tell me about his background in improvisational theater.*

*Dattatreyan, Recollections*

**Objective 1:** *Provide a safe creative space for clients to share their personal narratives and collaborate in the process of making meaning: It is one of our primary assumptions that a client must be the author of his own personal narrative if he is to effect positive personal change. [...] This program will give clients the opportunity not only to grapple with the process of advancing personal narrative, but also with the process of guiding that narrative into a positive relationship with community ideals.*

*TI Program, original proposal, 2007*

TI was conceptualized and developed by the two authors as a means to bridge the wide gulf between confidential, therapeutic confessionals, and the valorization of sanctioned narratives of success. Indeed, the program was meant to create an innovative space where youth could explore their past narratives while claiming a self-fashioning process that validated self-generated possibilities for the future. Further, the necessarily dialogic feature of the theater program was a departure from the more therapeutic construct of expert-patient dialogue, insofar as this dialogue took place, during our devising and rehearsal sessions, be-

tween participants and in front of other participants and staff. Moreover, because the program was outward facing, it forced whatever processual unfolding occurred for participants and staff into a dialogue with an “audience,” a critical point we will return to in later sections of this chapter. The conceptual process described in short above began, as the vignette suggests, during Stageman’s interview for a teaching position at Journeys. In the months that followed, Stageman and Dattatreyan would work closely to develop the vision and the specifics for this venture, and eventually presented it as a written proposal to senior management—who in turn successfully solicited a division of the state department of corrections for significant funding to support the venture within three short months.

The notion of innovation, or the development of experimental programmatic ventures, however, was not new to the organization. There had been many attempts to create new programming over the course of the organization’s history; some experienced relatively sustainable success, others faltered soon after they began. For instance, the program division where the theater initiative was housed had a rich history of creating pilot educative programs that exposed participants to the arts and the outdoors. At the time Dattatreyan joined the organization (in early 2003), most of these initiatives had fallen by the wayside, the victims of funding restrictions and lack of organizational will. The fact that these innovations occurred in the first place was in no small part because of the management style of the program’s divisional director, who had been in place for over 20 years and was very open to letting staff develop, design, and implement new programs. Because of the nature of our work and our relationship to the courts, only certain departments within the program had the latitude to innovate. For example, case management, because their positions required them to interface directly with the courts, didn’t have much room for changing the systems they implemented. Nor did the drug reporting team, who essentially were mandated to collect, process, and report the drug scores of all participants. This left only two areas for creative programming: education, and workforce development. It is significant that in most of the formal interviews and informal conversations held with youth participants as a part of Vasudevan’s longitudinal study of Journeys’ programs, participant narratives center around their experiences with the workforce devel-

opment program and their time in the education space, particularly in the arts education projects that were initiated during our tenure in the organization.

Innovations within these two areas, education and workforce development, were usually driven by individuals who brought previously developed ideas and expertise to bear on current programming. The new innovations that germinated in the program were overwhelmingly the products of individual inspiration, rather than collaborative generation between or across departments. This is significant for two reasons: first, because any project birthed through the efforts of one or a few people within a larger organizational framework is often sustainable only as long as those individuals remain with the organization; and second, that the support for the programming, because it is developed in relative isolation and is accorded legitimacy through the auspices of the director of the division, had the potential to create discord across the various other departments, most significantly between those who are responsible for ensuring that the numerative assessments of participants are in compliance and those who are attempting some sort programmatic innovation.

As we developed this project, we were quite aware of these limitations and strove to create a model that attempted to bridge these issues as well as other related issues regarding participant buy-in. For instance, we realized that case management would have to be convinced of how the theater program helped participants to author a narrative of success. To this end we “sold” the idea of participation as a form of job readiness, and devised a stipend system to attach monetary rewards for participation. In essence this was a two-pronged strategy, as we knew, partially from our own experience in the organization, and partially through prior experiences with youth work, that a stipend would attract and keep the interests of participants as well as be a sufficient incentive for case managers to buy into the merits of the program as a disciplining experience for future work or educational involvement. However, this strategy created unforeseen consequences. For example, because we offered a stipend, the job readiness program, which placed participants in internships and provided stipends, initially viewed the theater program as an initiative in direct competition with their already established programming. These types of political negotiations between and within departments, we argue, are tied to the tension inherent in the representation of the young

people we served. In the subsequent sections we will discuss how improvisation and theater games allowed youth participants the space to explore narrative, fall out of corporal convention, and create community with one and another as well as with staff. We will then discuss the two plays produced under the auspices of the program and contrast how they were devised, and ultimately, whether they were received as legible narratives of progress.

### Representation, Workshops, and Character Development

*The room is cool, in contrast to the city streets where the early summer heat slowly bakes the asphalt. The walls are covered in mirrors—there is a piano in one corner, a set of sheet music stands in the other. It smells of pizza as TI participants have ritualized a slice just before rehearsal on the afternoons we meet away from the program site at a theater space we have rented. With pizza- and soda-filled stomachs we gather in a circle to begin to play warm-up games. At first there are a few audible complaints. Their bodies are slouched, their movements sluggish. I can't see their eyes. Then, as we begin to play they slowly begin to smile. We are all looking at each other and laughing as we pronounce ridiculous words or throw around imaginary balls.*

*Dattatreyan, Recollections*

*[S]omething I did not predict accurately in my preparations for the project was the degree to which participants would take risks and allow themselves to be vulnerable during improvisations. From the very first class... every participant showed, to varying degrees, a real willingness to explore the possibilities contained within an improv framework. They were essentially fearless about risks as diverse as following other performers' physical lead (an improv which culminated in one performer pantomiming smashing the other's head into an arcade game ended in laughter, rather than injury or physical conflict) to exploring gender roles (a [male] participant took on a clearly—and playfully—feminine role while wearing an apparently female mask during mask work). This hoped-for bravery eliminated an entire area of expected work for me as a facilitator—and opened up a number of unexpected possibilities as the process progressed.*

*Stageman, Fieldnotes*

In almost all the conversations we had with the theater program's former participants, they suggested that the games we played in the workshops were among the most memorable activities. These games utilized a repertoire of vocal, kinesthetic and auditory exercises to facilitate a

multisensory reorientation meant to break the regular patterns of movement and oral communication. Traditionally, theater games are used to stretch the actors' communicative repertoire before the beginning of rehearsal. These theater games, sometimes referred to by participants with names which tend toward the absurd ("Zip, Zap, Zop" for example), epitomized the unconventional sociality of the theater program, and perhaps of the theater itself, as a conceptual space for rethinking the relationship between self and world, along with the underlying pretext of *play* as a means to delve into the complicated and often difficult stories that the youth brought into the theater space. The theater games offered these young people a chance to shed, if just for a moment, the postures of the street—often characterized by specific and highly stylized expressions of masculinity—and just play. Moreover, it offered them a chance to do this within a circle of their peers, all of whom were asked to shed norms and play games as well. Yet, shedding norms wasn't always easy.

Often, in our workshop sessions the young men (our participants were mostly male) would initially resist the games. Contorting their bodies into often ridiculous positions or annunciating gibberish "words" seemed ridiculous to them, and belied the consistently guarded and tough veneers they represented through their stances, clothing choices, and verbal repertoires. Still, the process of shedding norms, either in these often quite comical games, or in the more serious improvisational exercises (which we will get to in more detail in a moment) created an opportunity for participants to break away from the "selves" they felt constrained to portray in their daily lives. Take RJ's comment for example:

You know, I'm a humble person. Um, I feel that, I feel that, it's hard, I feel that I don't always portray who I am. I feel like, you know, being a man and being in Brooklyn, I have to not portray something different, but I have to show a different side because I don't want to be taken advantage of. RJ

RJ clearly expresses that being a young man in Brooklyn forces him to represent a personhood that does not reflect who he really is. RJ portrays himself as a "humble person" who is not able to reveal his humility; or as he says later in this interview, that he is a "fun person." However, while the games offered a chance for youth participants to

break from convention, the games alone would not have been enough for participants like RJ to find opportunities for new means of representation that allowed them to be “humble” and “fun” within the context of street. This possibility—of breaking from conventions within a particular context, even if the context was itself a recreation or representation—required improvisation. Still, the work with participants’ bodies as a means to develop physical awareness was clearly important as a first step. JC makes this evident, noting:

Body language is hard. That’s, that’s like the hardest one, body language. JC

JC, in this interview, brings our attention to the inherent difficulty of consciously attuning oneself to habituated body language, to change the established, largely unconscious patterns of movement and carriage. Yet once invested, many of the participants found this physical reorientation uniquely liberating, whether in games or in the process of devising and playing a character:

I don’t know like, it’s just cool like, acting like another person. Putting, really putting your whole self, like getting out of your body and jumping into that body. It’s just, it’s cool. CR

Like I stepped into a new world. I knew that I wasn’t JC no more. I came in [as the *Brazil* character] T. Like, I came in like, “oh how can I say this line” or “which way can I do this” and “how can I perform”, you know—so it took me out of my own, all my troubles. I just left everything behind and I just became a new person, you know. JC

Despite such self-professed shifts from accustomed physicality and changes in self-perception, the introduction of narrative improvisation exercises seemed to quickly return participants to a default set of choices, defined and constrained by the hypermasculine (Morgan, 2009) representational expectations of urban youth “street” culture:

Setting an improvisation in a public space, with protagonists who have little or no established previous relationship, will often lead to an improv that is brief, the action consisting of surface-level posturing that leads one character or another to employ simulated violence, or even walk offstage announcing his intention to “go to my car and grab the ratchet [gun].” (Vasudevan et al., 2011, p. 58)

In order to prevent narrative improvisations from defaulting to a violent conclusion, we used a number of strategies, perhaps the most successful of which was to establish for each scene's protagonists a mutual relationship (often in the form of a family bond or other intimate connection) that precluded violence as an acceptable means to resolve conflict. The result was often deep and compulsively watchable improvised scenes, in which two or more participant-protagonists worked their ways toward compromise on what were seemingly mutually exclusive short-term goals, often making use of ingenious shifts and subversions of the power dynamics they might otherwise have taken for granted.

### **(Re)scripting Narrative: Contrasting Tales, Differential Reception**

*There was an air of tension as two participants were facing off in an improvisational exercise that began quite simply by assigning each actor a status and goal—older brother, younger brother, privacy and money. The rest of us watched to see how they would resolve the conflict, which centered around whether the older brother, who was expecting his girlfriend to come over, could convince his little brother to leave the apartment without “lending” him any money.*

*Dattatreyan, Fieldnotes*

*This became especially problematic when attendance issues forced [TI Project Writer in Residence] Todd [Pate] and I into making executive decisions on the logical or compelling course of the narrative. One example is the scene in Bird's Eye View in which Slim Bag and Big Baby make the decision not to carry out a “hit” on David. This is a scene that Todd and I felt was thematically essential; however, due to the poorly timed absence of one of the principals, it was not possible to work through it in improvisations before it was scripted.*

*Perhaps for this reason, and perhaps, moreover, because it didn't “feel right” according to the ... “code of the streets,” the scene was not well-received upon its first reading. We asked the participants to work with it for a time despite their misgivings; it was clear, however, that they continued to have trouble committing to the scene until they first performed it in front of an audience (at an invited rehearsal for [Journeys] staff...).*

*Stageman, Fieldnotes*

The richness and depth of the improvisations made it possible for TI's directors—along with the constant attention and guidance of our writer-in-residence—to use them as the basic building blocks of our collective composition process, a creative approach commonly referred to as *thea-*

*ter devising* or *devised theater*. In this style of composition the entire company is actively engaged in writing a full-length narrative play or performance, and credit for the writing is shared. In practical terms, this meant numerous sessions dedicated to improvisation, out of which characters were gradually drawn, discussed, and defined; and a consecutive process by which each improvised scene, once concluded to the company's satisfaction, was set down on paper by our writer, who in turn brought into the rehearsal room a variety of logical and mutually interesting premises for follow-up scenes, etc. This process continued, successively building one scene upon the last, until the company came to a consensus that the play was complete; at which point it would be written down in its entirety, and subsequently rehearsed like any traditional written play until its two-week performance run.

Our success with precluding violence as a default conflict resolution strategy on a scene-by-scene basis did not, however, prevent it from becoming a constant reference point, theme, and foreboding offstage presence in either of the plays that TI eventually produced; on the contrary, the "code of the street" (as eloquently defined by Elijah Anderson in his 1999 book of that name), as well as the integral and inescapable role of violence within it, became overarching themes for both plays, weaving inextricably through the "official" themes ("honor," and "desire," in turn) that we assigned and returned to repeatedly in our company conversations throughout both rehearsal periods. In the climactic scene of our first play—*Bird's Eye View*—for instance, two caricatured drug dealers (wearing grotesque theatrical masks designed by the participants themselves and carrying the monikers "Slim Bag" and "Big Baby") approach the sleeping protagonist, David, with the intention of murdering him for quitting his position as a drug salesman for their organization:

*(BIG BABY holds his "gun" to DAVID's head. He hesitates.)*

SLIM BAG

Maurice...

BIG BABY

Shut up, Lawrence.

*(Takes off his mask, hands it to SLIM BAG.)*

Hold that, Lawrence.

*(BIG BABY holds his "gun" to DAVID's head. He is about to shoot[...])*

BIG BABY

Lawrence?

SLIM BAG

It's David, Maurice. That's David sitting there.

BIG BABY

Yeah, known him for a long time.

SLIM BAG

A long time, man. A long time.

*(BIG BABY puts the gun away.)*

Yo, man let's go.

*(Lawrence and Maurice run off as DAVID seems to awaken. He opens his eyes briefly, then settles back into sleep.)*

*(Bird's Eye View, 2008, p. 41-42)*

Here, it is important to note that, while this scene as a whole arose organically in the course of the devising process, Slim Bag and Big Baby's culminating decision not to shoot David—arguably a *deus ex machina* of the most obvious sort—was the single aspect of the plot that was imposed from the top down by the program directors (and authors of this piece). This was not an easy decision—nor was it well-received by the participants—but ultimately we felt compelled by our roles as Journeys employees to reflect the roundly positive nature of the organization's preferred narratives in the plot and themes of the play itself. This led to a very traditional (and, by all indications, very satisfying) experience of catharsis for members of the *Bird's Eye View* audience; the performing company, however, continued to struggle with it even through the concluding audience “talkbacks” after the play's official performance:

**Audience Questioner [AQ]:** Because you didn't ... crack on [kill] the person ... Does that make him soft?

**TW:** Just cause they didn't shoot me, does that make him soft? No, that makes him, that makes him smart because, I don't know somebody told me that some people con—how do you say?

**AQ:** Convicted.

**TW:** Cool. Basically he's thinking about the consequences before you act.

**AQ:** So why y'all call him soft?

**TW:** Not that we call him soft, we just saying that, that's his real person. His real person is not a... gangster. But, when he put on that role... he is.

[...]

**EF:** It's not the fact that you're not sure that he's soft, it's the fact that....wait, hold on, hold on. Just cause you shoot him, you're not soft, but—just cause you did not shoot him, you're not soft, but if you shoot him, does that make you tough? Like...you're still that one person and like, doing what you do don't make you like no better than nobody else. So just, just think of what you gotta do and whatever you gotta do, you gotta do it at the right time, but just think about it. Yeah.

*Bird's Eye View* Audience Talkback, 5 August, 2009

*Bird's Eye View* was—both in organizational terms, and in the traditional measures of the theater—a tremendous success. We sold out all six of our official performances in a small (50-seat) theater venue, with an audience that included almost the entire Journeys staff; drew numerous compliments for our performers, our writers, and ourselves; and began a number of interesting conversations within Journeys organization and between individual members of staff about arts programming, the TI program itself, and a number of issues of creativity and personal circumstances related to the youth we served.

To the extent that this final scene—and the audience catharsis that was its ultimate result—represented the colonization of Journeys clients' honest and unmediated personal narratives by an organizationally sanctioned narrative of progress, this success was compromised for the *Bird's Eye View* company: a promotional success for Journeys, certainly, and a professional success for us as its directors, but in some important respects a betrayal of the complex characters participants created in the course of the devising process—as well as the process itself. These characters—David, Uncle Jesse, J-Dub, Slim Bag and Big Baby—ranged from absurdly comic and often genuinely hilarious street archetypes, to flawed and deeply human reflections of the creators' fears, wishes, and experiences, often within the same character. Allowing these characters to engage in goal-oriented mutual struggles in the realistic urban setting with which our participants were familiar—to pursue *status* as defined by the code of the street, alongside such universal goals as security, comfort, reproduction, family integrity and love—ironically resulted in the scene of David's shooting as all but inevitable; he was, in effect, painted into a corner by the limited choices available to him in his pursuit of such broadly relatable, even admirable, goals. The fact that highlighting

this lack of options for its clients, mired as they are in poverty, the criminal justice system, and a web of failed urban institutions, was unacceptable to Journeys and the narratives of progress that justify its institutional mission, was obvious. Journeys essentially justifies its own existence as a positive choice—an option to break the habitus associated with criminality and a “street” value system—so that any portrayal of its clients as constrained by circumstance to criminality and the habitus of the street undermines its role as an entrée into the American meritocracy. Though it is unlikely we would have explained our decision this way at the time, we realized that such a portrayal was anathema to the organization for which we worked, that had provided the material support and institutional framework with which *Bird’s Eye View* was created; we knew that we could not let Slim Bag and Big Baby kill David.

In retrospect, TI’s follow-up to *Bird’s Eye View*—a somber, kitchen-sink drama entitled *Brazil*—follows logically as a reaction to the narrative compromises surrounding its sister play; it was also the final script that TI produced in the course of its brief existence. From its conception, it was clear that *Brazil* would pose more challenges to institutional ideology: built around the core theme of *desire* (where the thematic glue of *Bird’s Eye View* was *honor*), *Brazil* was bound to engage in narratives of longing, regret, and endurance, rather than institutionally palatable narratives of redemption or progress. And so it did:

The next day I was hanging out on a rooftop with my homies. Everybody was on their phones. I pulled mine out...I had a message...from my mom. She was pissed off, said she paid the damn bill, and said not ever to ask her for nothing ever again. Said that I was nothing but a gang banger now, that I can get what I need from them now. Then, she said, “I am beginning to hate you, Kevin.” I stayed out there on that roof top and listened to that message over and over...

‘*Kez the Don*,’ second monologue, (*Brazil*, 2008, p. 15)

Well, basically some of the things is true. Like, I did run up my [cell phone] bill to \$500. [laughter] and my mom did said I was [mumbled, inaudible] Certain things like is true but like I could relate a lot of it like but I ain’t suicidal or I don’t really do that cutting the wrist type thing but yeah I really had fun with this play.

K, *Brazil* Audience Talkback, 18 December 2008

Despite K’s profession to having had “fun” with *Brazil*, every aspect of the play—from the narrative, to the process that created it and placed

it onstage, to its reception by audiences and the institutional structures of Journeys—involved considerable struggle. The play dramatizes the responses of a half-dozen interwoven characters to a stabbing that takes place offstage before the story begins; each character spends his time onstage searching for something—revenge, a lost child, a connection, escape—that, by the action’s conclusion, they have come little, if any, closer to finding. They question their own motives and those of others, they express their fear and grief and rage, they make human attempts to give and receive comfort; but there is no satisfying conclusion, no comforting arc of success or redemption, no *catharsis*.

Indeed, *fun* is perhaps K’s concession to the language and expectations of the dominant cultural audience (including a fair few members of Journeys staff), expectations that, in his multitude of experiences of dominant cultural institutional environments, from school to jail to ATIP itself, he has internalized, at least to the extent of knowing how and when to perform them. The reality of K’s experience in creating and rehearsing *Brazil* is much more complex and emotionally fraught:

While Dan was directing K on how to approach and interact with C as a character on stage I saw that he [K] was getting a bit frustrated from being guided throughout the practice of the scene.

EF, 11.10.08 Journal Entry

[W]hen I see the participants reading through this script and acting out these scenes, I see the potential. But then after a while if certain participants are not being active, I start to see them become anxious and go onto basing their attention elsewhere. [...]

I’m not sure why some participants choose to miss out on days of class. I see and realize that this is their way of getting through this rehearsing process...

EF, 11.10.08 Journal Entry

[T]he way that K carried himself today ... [w]hen he first arrived and went through the first couple of monologues was just fine. Then he took a bathroom break, which took a little too long. Dan had to ask me to leave the room and go find him. He was angry and all uptight for unthinkable reasons. It was his turn to do his monologue and he was up on stage. We all saw the difference in his act. After and during the run-through he simply kept saying “This shit is washed” meaning that he thought the whole idea was now boring and he had some type of problem with it. He didn’t say what was wrong but his negative energy was uncalled for, I believe.

EF, 11.24.08 Journal Entry

K's experience of the composition and rehearsal processes of *Brazil* was typical in many respects, an experience of personal and collective struggle and endurance that reflected the play's narrative to an almost uncanny degree. Within this struggle, however, were the same moments of human connection, comfort, and joy that were portrayed so powerfully onstage:

We went out to eat to celebrate our new President Barack Obama. There was some great conversation going on about some good "Gangster" movies. After that conversation ended for some reason impersonations began to take place in the restaurant. The participants started to do impersonations of the staff at [Journeys] also that of Dan and Todd. My goodness they were good and pretty funny. On that note we all stepped foot out of the restaurant to start heading to the train to go home, and who other than C came up with idea of singing. At first I was away from the group of participants while they began to sing. Then I jumped in and told them instead of all singing all awkwardly that instead they should harmonize. It was funny because everyone other than me and B knows how to sing and everyone singing together sounded so weird. It was hilarious. We sung old school songs, For ex: Boyz II Men—It's So Hard To Say Goodbye & Shai—If I Ever Fall In Love. We sung all the way until we got to the trains then everyone went their separate ways. We had a good time.

EF, 11.05.08 Journal Entry

These were necessary and sustaining moments in the face of a creative process marked by the frequent loss of pivotal participants, rampant absenteeism, the failure to achieve practical and necessary goals of stagecraft (such as memorization or consistent blocking), and, not least, institutional resistance. For, unlike *Bird's Eye View*, *Journeys'* celebrated themes of transformation, redemption, and progress were, even if here and there present within the narrative and the creative process of *Brazil*, by no means the defining features of either. K's progress—his redemption—came when he showed up at the theater a few hours before our first official performance, after days incommunicado, after missing a dozen rehearsals, after being removed from TI, his biography deleted from the playbill. Yet he joined his fellows onstage to portray the character he originated; like the others, reading his lines off of scripts placed artfully around the stage on music stands.

Comparatively sparsely attended, these performances ended with chaotic talkbacks, in which audience questioners and performers alike struggled to dialogue about the experience just shared, often using lan-

guage (like K's "fun") much better suited to reaffirming narratives of progress than unpacking narratives of endurance:

**AQ:** I want to know what—what you learned from this experience and what will you take away from this that you can apply to your life?

**C:** Say no to drugs.

**Dan:** [laughs]

**C:** I could say that you know since I've been through a lot in my life you know I could you know just do, stay out of trouble, well, and do what I gotta do like if I could do this, I could make it anywhere, so why not you know take it—

Brazil Audience Talkback, 18 December 2008

In her response, C seems to recognize the themes of struggle and endurance, as well as the difficulty of encapsulating these struggles as a dominant-culturally acceptable "learning experience" containing a "life lesson." No doubt she had similar difficulties explaining the play and the difficult processes that produced it to her case manager; this may be part of the reason why Journeys staff were so little in evidence at *Brazil's* final performances. The contrast between the receptions of *Bird's Eye View* and *Brazil*—the differing levels of support from Journeys staff, and the responses of general audiences alike—beg the question of where institutional space for young people's narratives of pain, loss, struggle, and endurance can be found—or created? What happens to these narratives when institutional support is reserved for institutionally approved narratives of redemption, progress, success?

## Conclusion

The stories came. Those stories came to life. It, it's... wait how do you say? The stories were... put into, put into place. They were presented....

– EF

In this chapter we have highlighted how the TI we developed strove to use theatrical tools to allow youth participants to explore social possibilities and their own corporally embedded historical narratives even as they brushed against their limits—limits partially delineated within the context(s) of the specific improvisations produced through the theater techniques we explored; limits that highlighted the contingencies of so-

cial interaction. However, as we have noted, the limits of what could be included in the narrative were also policed by the expectations of the NGO and the larger audience who came to the performances.

These expectations, in turn, are couched in a larger discourse concerning what can be included within what Povinelli (2011) calls late liberalism. For Povinelli (2011) late liberalism describes our current historical moment, where, as a result of postcolonial social movements (i.e., the Civil Rights movement in the U.S., the anti-apartheid movement in South Africa, etc.) economically and socially marginalized populations have been recognized as an uncomfortable reminder of liberalism's boundaries. Moten and Harney (2011) have argued that in this context NGOs, like Journeys that we have described in this chapter, function as the experimental arms of governance. They suggest that the NGO's role is to bring to those who are outside the liberal project what they are said to lack: *interests*. The notion of interests, of course, is intrinsically value laden and situated in notions of temporality that presume progress. Indeed, Povinelli argues (2011) one of the critical features of late liberalism is that marginalized populations continue to be imagined as the "waiting rooms of history" (Chakrabarty, 2002), and NGOs, as experimental arms of governance, are charged with the remit of bringing these populations into the folds of historical time. As we have shown in this chapter, participants in Journeys are encouraged to display their interests by adopting a particular narrative strategy that harkens to the future and prominently displays education as salvatory. The sanctioned narratives of progress, we argue, index how Journeys imagines its role in the rehabilitation of youthful "offenders" as well as how youth imagine they must perform themselves in order to successfully graduate from the program and complete their court-mandated sentencing.

It is no surprise, then, that stories that fall outside of what can be considered legible to liberalism's interests—narratives that compromise the organizational goals of Journeys—are primarily relegated to the mental health department. Povinelli (2011) suggests that it is precisely this species of narrative that serves as the remainder and the reminder of difference, the uncomfortable and not so easily confined tales that test the moral, ethical, and social borders of possibility. Povinelli (2011), describing her confrontation with difference explains, "I continue to feel the shores of liquefaction lapping at my breast each time I am con-

fronted by these competing claims; the terror and liquefaction doesn't kill me, nor do they lead to a simple distribution of master and slave" (37). In this interpretation, discomfort stands as the prerequisite for possibility, and the precursor to change; it is a state of inquiry to be embraced.

As educators working at the edges of the criminal justice system we are constantly confronted by the competing claims of our students. These competing claims are born of their experiences in their communities and with the institutions who seek to regulate their lives—i.e., schools, the prison, the courts, and so on (Foucault, 2010). When we give them pride of place in the educational endeavor these stories not only reveal systemic injustice but, as importantly, illuminate the ways in which the youthful narrators of these stories endure and create meaning in their day-to-day lives. These youthful stories, if taken seriously, force us to question how we, as educators, have to come to the moral, ethical, and social positions we hold. It also forces all involved to take an unflinching look at the uneven conditions of possibility in our current historical moment.

Arguably, the key point in Povinelli's confessional above is the recognition that any easily delivered cathartic script, any simple story that seemingly ameliorates discomfort in difference, simply papers over discomfort as a possibility and thus forecloses on the possibility of education as a deeply relational and thus political endeavor. However, as we have shown throughout this chapter, these stories, when emanating from within an institutional framework, not only confront what Povinelli suggests are personal ethical and social limits of the liberal subject as educator, but challenge the mandated agendas of liberal state institutions.

As a result, educational projects such as the Theater Initiative become exercises in confrontation at the personal and institutional level. The friction this doubling generates, in the most optimistic of readings, produces tremendous possibilities for dialogue and exchange across a diverse field of actors. Indeed, TI introduced new representational possibilities within and without the organization. For instance, TI created a window into which a larger public could participate in a dialogue with the participants of the program—a possibility previously unexplored in this ATIP's long history, as it contradicts the confidentiality that the or-

ganization guarantees its clients. However, the productive friction we have described also undoubtedly has its political costs, and in our experience with TI, definitely took its toll on our ability to maintain and balance confrontation on two fronts.

The limits to personal and structural change make themselves evident when the stories made possible through TI end in the irrational rationality of catharsis, as the concluding scene of *Bird's Eye View* demonstrates. The type of catharsis exemplified by Big Baby's and Slim Bag's decision to spare David neuters the possibility of telling stories that inhabit the outer limits of what we consider acceptable within liberal worlds. Moreover, it limits the possibility to imagine any sort of change as a relational endeavor. In other words, catharsis produces spectators and actors, students and teachers, each of whom encounter unspoken strictures regarding the possibilities of representation. [Boal \(1994\)](#), in a dialogue with two anthropologists, Schechner and Taussig, argues against public pedagogies that ultimately proscribe a closed and singular reading that absolves the audience of questioning their own positionality. Moreover, these types of performances release the "actors" from recognizing limits that are delineated by context.

I am against Aristotelian catharsis because what is purified is the desire to change society-not, as they say in many books, pity and fear. No, pity and fear is the relation the spectator has with the protagonist. Fear because someone like you is destroyed; pity because the protagonist is a deserving person who fails. So what Aristotelian catharsis tries to do is eliminate the drive that the protagonist, and the spectator, have to change society. (Boal, Schechner, and Taussig, 1994, p. 32)

By contrast, the devising process, the resultant narrative, and the talkbacks that followed performances of *Brazil* stand as examples of both the chaos and constructive dialogue that can arise from the intention to eschew traditional catharsis. Witness Kez the Don, in his final scene, as he struggles (within the confines of a county jail clinic) to process the consequences of stabbing a friend in an act of drunken anger:

**Kez the Don:**

All this shit's very tiring. It's like I've been speeding since it went down. And it looks like I'm about to run right into a brick wall. [...]

*(He struggles to go on.)*

My whole life I felt like I never belonged anywhere. Even with my homies, I never really felt like I was in the circle. I always felt...unplugged...from everything. And everything passes me by so fast. I'm tired, man. Real tired.

*(He sits quietly for a while. He looks at his wrists, then holds them up.)*

I told myself I was gonna do this to buy me some time. Now, I'm starting to think that actually doing it wouldn't have been so bad. That's fucked up, isn't it?...

I just want...calm, you know. I want everything to slow down...and be calm. If I ever get out I'm going as far away from everything and everyone I know as soon as I can. If I make it out of here alive...I'll be on my way to Brazil.[...] I just want to lay on the beach and hear the waves roll in. Peace, you know? I hold on to that dream of Brazil. But right now I don't know how I'm going to stay alive.

*(He struggles to finish.)*

I just wanna stay alive.

'Kez the Don,' third monologue, (*Brazil*, 2008, p. 42-43)

In his final appearance, Kez is narcissistic, self-absorbed, suicidal, sad, struggling to stay alive and escape a fate brought about by his own decisions—and the constraints within which those decisions were bound. Actors, audience, writers, directors, ATIs and the web of institutions in which they are enmeshed—all share in the responsibility for Kez's fate, along with Kez himself:

**S:** One of the, one of the things about the play in general that I got, um, was the unfortunate reality that young people such as y'all selves, this is really a reality. Like, it's not like this is something so far-fetched, where it should be far-fetched but this is a reality. You know, even the moral rules and the codes the kids gotta live by when they [in jail], you know it's, it's almost, it's like "Wow, man." And like how do you put something together like that? And it speaks to the culture and so what happened was y'all captured the culture, um, of, unfortunately y'all captured it in our community, you know, and the problems y'all, y'all pin-

pointed the problems, you know. And it takes some people getting PhDs for that, y'all just put it out there.

Brazil Audience Talkback, 18 December 2008

Here, in stark contrast to Aristotelian catharsis, is Povinelli's deeply emotional distillation of "terror and liquifaction"—a challenge at once personal and universal, and a chaos that threatens institutional stability by challenging the narratives upon which institutions are built. Following the lead of the talkback commentator above, it is telling that both Dattatreyan and Stageman, in the wake of TI's successes and failures, turned to the academy—to "getting PhDs for that." In the face of chaos and possibility, tried and trodden institutional paths and the salvatory promise of education return the late liberal project to balance, and restore clinical distance to competing narratives of pain, struggle, and endurance. Against such acknowledgment of our personal and professional limitations, the authors hold out a sincere hope in the dialogic and dialectic possibilities of the memories and echoes that remain.

### Notes

- 1 The participant journal entries utilized in this chapter are written by a participant/actor who transitioned into a staff role in the second cycle of the program. They are designated by EF, his initials.
- 2 Interview data and talkbacks were collected as part of the parallel documentation of the Theater Initiative conducted through the Education In-Between Project.

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