

# Authoring New Narratives with Youth at the Intersection of the Arts and Justice

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## ABSTRACT

*A theater project situated within an Alternative to Incarceration Program (ATIP), the Insight Project provided a venue for youth to engage in storytelling and dramatic performance, and allowed for those stories to find diverse and interested audiences. For the young men and women involved, authoring occurred at multiple instances and in multiple ways, and through the engagement of multiple cultural artifacts. Traditional scripts about youth, justice, and education were rewritten, not only through the writing of two plays, but also within the various types of authoring that were ongoing, performed, and embodied throughout the Insight Project. In this article, we discuss the various types of authoring that occurred within the theater project and we embed multimedia performance excerpts in order to elucidate six sites of authoring enacted by the participants at critical moments of the process: improvisation; focused storytelling sessions; composing scripts; rehearsals; performances; and talk-backs.*

## INTRODUCTION

Narratives are well-documented, cross-cultural phenomena and are means through which human beings make sense of the world, themselves, and each other (Ochs & Capps, 1996). Beyond merely the verbal telling of tales, we author ourselves through the engagement of cultural artifacts, both objects and symbols, which have been collectively ascribed with meaning (Holland, et al., 1998): a grandmother's shawl that covers a nightstand and serves as a constant reminder of the stories she shared with a curious grandchild; the intricate handshake that two young men share when they greet one another; a symbol emblazoned on a tee shirt that evokes nods of familiarity amongst strangers. For the youth involved with the Insight Project (Figure 1), a theater project situated within the Alternative to Incarceration Program (ATIP)<sup>1</sup>, authoring occurred at multiple instances and in multiple ways and through the engagement of multiple cultural artifacts. Participation in the project entailed the exploration of new communicative terrain—the stage, as well as the life histories of familiar and unfamiliar characters—and new communicative practices, such as public performance and improvisation. As a result of this multidimensional authoring experience, the participants formed

new social bonds with each other and performed new cultural identities. Traditional scripts about youth, justice, and education were rewritten, not only through the writing of two plays, but also within the various types of authoring that were ongoing, performed, and embodied throughout the Insight Project.

In this article, we explore the ways in which, through participation in a theater project and the use of dramatic devices, the young men and women in this project authored themselves. To do so, we conceptualize authoring in several ways. First, we explore the ways in which storytelling allowed participants to perform different characters as they shared narrative accounts throughout the project. Secondly, we look at the ways in which participants took on different roles in the project, both official (e.g., actors, interns) and unofficial (e.g., piano player). And thirdly, we draw on the lens of authoring to look across the various spaces in which and modalities through which meaning was made (Vasudevan, 2006, 2008). For the young men and women who participated in this project, authoring occurred not only during structured activities and interactions, but was also embedded in their involvement in this space. Throughout this article, we will discuss the various types of authoring that occurred within the theater project

— e.g., characters that were developed, identities and roles that were assumed, texts that were written, and stories that were performed. In addition, we embed performance excerpts into our article in order to elucidate six sites of authoring enacted by the participants at critical moments of the process: improvisation; focused storytelling sessions; composing scripts; rehearsals; performances; and talk-backs.

## ARTS AND EDUCATION

The arts have the ability to inspire the as yet uninspired or render visible the unseen. Consider the following examples of art-full, multimodal possibility: a story that is crafted out of an unexpected verbal exchange; a landscape painted to visually represent the feeling of home; or a photo essay of a quiet life that is made loud through image. As Maxine Greene (2000) has suggested, expression through the arts opens up spaces of possibility, particularly for youth, to engage and nurture the work of the imagination and enact their “deliberative agency” in the ways in which they (re) write themselves (Dimitriadis & Weis, 2001). Within the spaces of education, the arts can foreground creativity and cultivate a more complex understanding of relationships between learners



Figure 1. Covers of the two Insight Project productions

and their environments than currently evident in schools and even after-school programs (Gadsden, 2008).

The arts – such as painting, photography, theater, musical performance – provide spaces for students to push beyond normal classroom competencies and expectations, and to demonstrate their expertise using talents and knowledge gained through personal experience. For students whose schooling experiences have been fraught with challenges, arts programs have the potential to recast problematic labels such as “academic deficiencies” through the lenses of dignity, self worth, and confidence (Leard & Lashua, 2006). Given the invitation for creative engagement, youth develop “a sense that they are controlling their own representation, that they are in control of their own cultural identity, and are creatively shaping and molding language, style, and self into something new” (Dimitriadis & Carlson, 2003, p. 21). The educative benefits of participation in the arts are not solely localized to students or youth, and when approached pedagogically through a lens of collegi-

ality and collaboration can transform the experiences of the adults in the setting as well (Soep & Chavez, 2005).

Incorporating arts in education gives students the opportunity to discuss issues that may be ignored or silenced in other conversations (that often privilege verbal modes of communication) as well as new venues in which to be heard. Leard and Lashua (2006) stress the importance of listening to young people and providing them with space for discussion. By swapping characters, situations, goals, and personalities, theater projects in particular have the ability to “provided real life contexts for learning as the outcome of diverse struggles rather than as the passive reception of information” (Giroux, 2000, p. 127). The collaborative nature of a theater project allows teachers, researchers, and students to enter into new relationships, support and challenge existing power dynamics, and explore new spaces of identity formation (Fisher, 2008; Gallagher, 2007; Leard & Lashua, 2006). Along with the dialogue that develops out of an educational engagement with

the arts, the dialogues that develop between and about characters “helps these young playwrights consider the multiple voices and perspectives of the people in the stories they share” (Fisher, 2008, p.97). Theater projects can enable hesitant and less verbally inclined participants to engage in sophisticated social analysis that moves beyond the constraints of solely written or spoken modes of communication, and in doing so provide opportunities for youth to assume new roles, rewrite their narratives, and be seen as competent narrators of their lives as we witnessed in the project discussed here.

## RESEARCH CONTEXT AND METHODS

Masks hung on nails along the walls of the hallway, and gently placed on wide bookshelves... images of adolescents grinning at baseball games... rules about clothing and accessories written in marker on a sheet of white paper, taped to the window of the computer lab... brightly painted canvases with images that reach out and grab your attention...



Figure 2. Images of artifacts that line the main hallway of ATIP

A painting by a teacher at ATIP (left); a display indicating three levels of educational class (Literacy Lab, Pre-GED, GED), and student work (right)

These and other artifacts (Figure 2) filled the main hallway of the main suite of ATIP, which is located on the sixth floor of a multi-story building filled with legal offices, social service organizations, and courtrooms; offices and classrooms open into this main channel of interaction and activity. Two metal detectors and matching x-ray machines mark the visitor entrance, which the youth participants use to enter the building and make their way, via elevator, to the sixth floor. It is not uncommon to see young men re-adjusting their belts once they are within the program walls. It is within the concrete walls and surveillance-laden environs that ATIP exists.

ATIP is one of several incarceration alternatives available for court-involved youth in the New York City, ages 17 to 23, and has a legacy of youth advocacy and innovation reaching back over 40 years. The youth population at ATIP mimics the trends of overrepresentation of minority youth in jails and detention facilities around the country. Approximately 55% of the youth are identified as African American, 40% are identified as Latino, and the remaining 5% are identified as having other ethnic and racial backgrounds. The program uses a case management

approach to orchestrate its wide array of services. The Insight Project is one of several programs that are available for youth participants at ATIP, including an employment and internship program, academically-focused GED and college preparatory classes, drug and alcohol treatment, counseling, and arts and media electives. The latter is a program strand that has enjoyed an organizational presence in a variety of ways throughout ATIP's history in the form of dramatic performances and painting and mixed media classes.

The Insight Project was born out of a collaborative desire between two teachers, Dan and Gabriel, to provide a venue for youth to engage in storytelling and dramatic performance, and also for those stories to find diverse and interested audiences. With financial support garnered from an external grant and internal institutional funds, these two teachers piloted this theater initiative in the spring of 2008. In that initial cycle, twenty participants were recruited for auditions with the help of case managers and other staff. Interested youth were asked to prepare a piece to perform for a panel of three to four staff members, including the project facilitators. Some recited poems or performed song lyrics, and several oth-

ers who had not prepared something in advance were asked by the panel to dramatically retell a story in response to one of a few prompts. In addition, each person who auditioned was also asked to perform a dramatic and interpretive reading of a short piece of text selected by Dan. After each audition, the panel offered praise and critical feedback about the performance. Following the audition process, the Insight Project was launched with sixteen participants, five of whom completed both phases of the project. All of the youth who participated in all cycles of Insight self-identified as Black, African American, Hispanic, or Latino.

During the first phase, participants learned basic acting techniques, such as short and long-form improvisation, and the use of masks and other artifacts. They incorporated these techniques into skits they performed at a showcase scheduled at the end of the first three weeks. For many of the young men in this cycle of Insight, the showcase was their first public performance. In the audience for this performance were many of the program staff members, including case managers and teachers, as well as a number of ATIP participants. From this first phase, six participants moved onto the second phase of the project during which they collaborated with their teachers and Todd Pate<sup>2</sup>, a playwright to devise and compose a full-length script that evolved out of the improvised skits. At the end of the ten weeks of the second phase, five remaining participants performed a co-authored play, *Bird's Eye View*, for three nights at a professional theater located in New York City's theater district in front of a packed audience each night. Following each performance, the actors participated in a "talk back" with the audience, for which they sat on stage and engaged in reflective dialogue in response to audience questions and feedback. Shortly after this inaugural offering of Insight, a second cycle was initiated. Thirteen youth participated in the second cycle, and again five completed the process and performed the play on stage; one of the remaining five participants (which included two young women), Eric (one of the authors of this piece), had also

participated in the first cycle and assumed an additional role as intern in the second cycle. We discuss his augmented role in the methods section below. For a period of fourteen months during 2008-2009, thirty ATIP participants were involved with the Insight Project, during which time they produced two plays, held a total of twelve performances, and shared their stories with over 500 audience members.

*Bird's Eye View* is a story that focuses on the character of David, a young man whose family circumstances have put him in an unfortunate predicament, because of which he must make a difficult decision that comes with significant consequences. This play is characterized by family ties, social allegiances, cultural assumptions, humor, and the proverbial fork-in-the-road decisions that we all confront. The story follows a linear progression through David's life after he returns from serving a one-year sentence in a state prison and learns that his girlfriend is pregnant. *Brazil* is a pastiche of imagery and narrative in which multiple stories of desire converge through dialogue, monologues, and musings, similar to the popular film *Crash*. This play contrasts with *Bird's Eye View* in content as well as structure; however, the interconnected narratives retained the tenor of family bonds, difficult personal decisions, and the desire to re-imagine new possibilities for the future.

These productions and the lived experience of the theater project posed a series of compelling stories for us to document. We approached this research as a participatory project that involved teachers, youth, and researchers whose roles – in the project as well as the documentation of the project – evolved over time. In this way, the living and documentation of the project shared a dialectic relationship.

### Methods of Documentation

The documentation of this project was informed by standard ethnographic methods (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 1995), and by principles of performance ethnography (Denzin, 2003), in order to effectively document the authoring that was embodied by the In-

sight participants in a variety of ways. The principal researcher (Lalitha) and two graduate research assistants (Kristine and Melissa Reburiano) participated in various stages of documentation, and whenever possible each assumed a role within the project—e.g., as a critical audience member during rehearsals, helping to produce programs for the performances, etc. The following data were collected: participant observation field notes, multiple audio recorded interviews with project participants, participant surveys (for the first cycle), audience surveys, audio recordings of the talk-backs, and a variety of artifacts including video of unscripted moments of group singing and audio recordings of group dinner conversations. The interviews and talk-backs were transcribed and coded for emerging patterns and then analyzed for themes. We deductively identified instances of authoring based on our theoretical framing of the concept; we also explored the data inductively to attend to the emic concepts surrounding the participants' sense-making about Insight. Field notes and surveys were similarly coded for emergent patterns and the team of researchers and teachers met together regularly to reflect on the process and to iteratively analyze and discuss emerging themes, as well. Together, these data were used to develop portraits of Insight participants and to craft a narrative about the broader impact of the project on ATIP, and the various audiences. Collectively, these accounts comprise a set of narratives about the types of authoring that emerged within the project space.

This documentation continued in the second cycle and, in addition, involved one of the initial project participants (Eric) as a project intern and research assistant. Both he and the remaining teacher (Dan) along with the researcher (Lalitha), contributed to a project blog where reflective notes about each session were posted on a regular basis. A similar process of identifying patterns and thematic strands was applied to the research blog, with one notable difference: Eric was also involved in this cycle of analysis. In this article, we draw on these sources of data and our multilayered narratives

to explore instances of authoring that occurred across key moments of the Insight Project trajectory. We have identified six interrelated dimensions of the Insight Project. The experiences of improvisation, focused storytelling, composing scenes and scripts, rehearsals, performing for multiple audiences, and talkbacks comprise the interrelated nature of the Insight Project. We focus on each key moment of Insight through the lens of authoring, and consider the multiple ways in which authoring occurred across these dimensions.

We framed our inquiry along the following questions: What are the sites of authoring within Insight? How do Insight participants author themselves into and within this storytelling space? What narrative practices do they engage when authoring themselves? What narratives are authored and produced? Here, we address the first two questions as we present and perform a multi-faceted account of authoring within the Insight Project.

### MULTIPLE SITES OF AUTHORING

There are six interrelated dimensions to the Insight Project, and within each are opportunities for authoring. Our framing of authoring builds on an understanding of the self as a site of authoring (Holland, Lachiotte Jr., Skinner, & Cain, 1998), to include a perspective of the self as both the canvas for and the instrument of authoring. In what follows, we look across the six dimensions to present instances of authoring and narrative production within improvisation, storytelling, the composing of scenes and scripts, rehearsals, performances, and talkbacks. We present our perspectives through a collection of coauthored voices, artifacts, and (recorded) performances.

### Improvisation

Improvisation was the core tool of the Insight Project's work. In this article, we use this term interchangeably with the term "improv," which was the preferred colloquialism within the Insight Project. The improv was both a noun and a verb; that is, improv functioned as spaces and also as practices of authoring that served

multiple purposes. The engagement of improvs in the project discussed here was framed theoretically by the work of Boal (2002) and Johnstone (1981), both of whom encourage the use of improvisation as a technique to foster spontaneity and creativity toward meaningful dramatic performance.

Initially, improvs were important for allowing participants to enter into the realm of theater in relatively non-threatening ways. Participants are familiarized with a number of improvisational forms in the initial three weeks of classes that begin each Insight cycle, with considerable time dedicated to what we have come to call 'long form' improv. 'Long form' improv is characterized by a realistic scenario in which two or more protagonists work to solve a problem – essentially, to achieve their individual goals within a situation of conflict. They can be humorous, dramatic, or equal parts of each. They can, at times, be intolerably boring. This form is the primary method of collective composition that participants utilize during the 'devising' segment of the project cycle, which occurs during the second phase of each cycle.

Thus, 'long form' improvisations are essential to the Insight Project not simply for their creative value, but also as simulations of real life problem solving and decision-making, and the potential for discovering new modes of conflict resolution. Both in this respect, and as entertainment, long form improvs either work or they don't. We have identified a set of parameters for improvisations that work which are useful, engaging, entertaining, that produce that unique frisson in the audience that can only come from watching actors discover something new and finding joy in it. These parameters, however, cannot be set down in advance of an improv session as predetermined rules; rather, they must be built in to the content of each improvisation on an individual basis.

1. *Set relationships that preclude easy recourse to violence.* While this is a useful parameter when facilitating improvisations with any group, it is especially important for ATIP clients, many of whom are

deeply invested in 'the code of the street,' (Anderson, 1999) which prescribes violence as the ultimate solution to intractable conflicts between rivals or strangers. 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]." While such resolutions will occasionally draw laughs from the audience, and produce some moments of physical comedy, they require little creative thinking, and rarely reach the depth and complexity that long form improvs seek. As such, setting improvisations in intimate spaces (a shared home, for instance) and with protagonists who are intimates (siblings, best friends, 'homies' [members of the same 'set,' or local subdivision of a gang]) generally precludes violence, increasing the likelihood that the problem solving will take place through dialogue and negotiation.

2. *Assign the protagonists goals that initially seem mutually exclusive.* This precludes the easy solution, an improvisational pitfall that is in many respects the opposite of the violent resolution, but produces largely the same effect: a brief improv, with predictable, surface-level dialogue that leads to a quick agreement and leaves the protagonists with nowhere to go but offstage. While perhaps not as visibly negative as the violent ending, it is rarely a useful learning experience for the participants or entertaining for the audience. If, on the other hand, the facilitator presents the protagonists with a problem that is seemingly intractable (or nearly so), they are forced to dig deep

to find the tools to help them reach their goals, to create new dimensions for their relationships, to 'feel each other out,' and discover where 'give and take' are possible. Given the intimate spaces and relationships discussed above, a problem regarding living arrangements can often accomplish this goal: the sister, who owns the apartment, is getting married, and her fiancé is moving in. She needs her brother, who recently lost his job and home and is sleeping on her couch, to move out. The brother, of course, has nowhere else to go, but brother and fiancé do not get along. Often, as a facilitator, one can serve the improvisation by momentarily halting the action and adding new layers to the conflict as the scene develops.

3. *Give the protagonists the opportunity to subvert obvious status/power dynamics.* Power and status are levers of conflict resolution. It is not uncommon for young people to have fairly simplistic notions about the nature of power and status. Among the youth at ATIP, this simplified view sometimes was seen at extreme levels. Many ATIP participants have served significant sentences in juvenile institutions; most entered the program directly from a pre-trial stay (of varying length) at Rikers Island (New York's single, mammoth city jail). In many of these facilities, the social reality (often reinforced by institutional culture) is an intensely stratified hierarchy based on individual physical prowess, verbal combativeness, posturing, and frequent recourse to violence. ATIP is widely seen by new participants as an extension of this environment, and while an individual's view will likely evolve throughout the six months of his sentence, even after the threat of violence has been removed, he still has to move through pub-

lic spaces where the constant influx of new clients can necessitate ongoing posturing. This posturing does not disappear when a client takes the stage. Because of the explicit presence of an audience of peers, a familiar swagger in both physicality and language was still somewhat evident when the young men initially joined the theater project. The process for productively subverting this posturing (and preventing an improv from becoming the proverbial ‘pissing contest’) can be accomplished by presenting one protagonist with some variety of visible weakness (illness, injury, penury are all viable), but access to one or more ‘invisible’ tools of power (guilt, pity, moral right, etc.). Successful use of these tools will surprise participants and audience alike – and it is this surprise that is the hallmark of a successful, engaging, educational, and entertaining improvisation.

While none of these parameters guarantees productive improv work, they certainly make it much more like-

ly. They are also far less specific to the needs of a young offender population than they might seem initially. The nervousness and excitement of taking the stage and the pressures of an audience tend to have a similar effect on individuals from diverse backgrounds and with varied life experiences: an overreliance on physical comedy or clowning; a hesitance to take onstage actions and decisions beyond a surface depth; a reliance on stereotypical posturing and simplistic notions of power or status. Applying these parameters can turn what might otherwise be an entertaining diversion into a learning experience and an indispensable creative tool.

During the Ethnography in Education Research Forum (2009), two Insight Participants, Eric and Chris performed the following scenes, which were guided by varying parameters given to the actors by Dan. These improvs illustrate the parameters laid out above. We include the audio from these scenes, and accompanying transcripts, below.

[Click here for the transcript and audio for Improv 1: Short Form](#)

[Click here for transcript and audio for Improv 2: Long Form](#)

As these examples suggest, improv functioned as spaces that provide multiple opportunities for authoring in different ways. The long-form improv afforded time and space to tease out relationships between emergent characters, and, perhaps more importantly, the potential narratives that the scenarios presented. The first scenario, in which two alpha males are vying to get into a club, more easily lends itself to a physical altercation, with little room to maneuver further. In the second improv, featuring two brothers and their tensions around money, there is more energy and possibility for how the story can proceed as opposed to the first scenario. Such authoring situations were not only illustrative of powerful teaching moments, but also laid the groundwork for more complex relationships and narrative building that was necessary to compose scenes and scripts.

## Storytelling

In addition to building from improvs to develop characters and storylines, each cycle of Insight included a focused storytelling session, which gave rise to many of the scenes that appeared in the final scripts. The theme for the first cycle emerged as “honor” and included an activity where Dan asked participants to think about “codes/rules you live by.” Those initial codes evolved into a story about David, a young man who, when he learns that his girlfriend is pregnant and that he and his increasingly mentally unstable uncle may be evicted unless they pay back due rent, resorts to dealing drugs. The story does not follow an obvious trajectory, but rather illustrates a tale of negotiation, difficult choices, and family.

The theme for the second cycle was “desire” and was explored through collective visualization of that word. To illustrate this authoring site, we describe the threads of stories that emerged within a single storytelling session focused on “desire,” in which participants were seated in a circle in one of the classrooms at ATIP, shared personal stories, and practiced active listening, which, for some, led to self-revelations. During this focused storytelling session, Dan asked par-

### Performance Interlude 1

**Bird’s Eye View – Scene 4: Developing the character arc for Slim Bag and Big Baby, who show David the ropes of hustling on their corner.**

[Click here for Bird’s Eye View, Scene 4](#)

**Brazil, Scene 6: In this scene between T and C-Roc, we see that C-Roc has alienated himself to the extent that he doesn’t receive any family visitors; only those who want something from him. With T, there also exists genuine friendship; however, the “inmate culture” leads C-Roc to be skeptical of T’s motives. Yet they are friends.**

(Note: The audio differs slightly from the printed script, as actors regularly improvised lines, while still staying true to the spirit of scene and maintaining storyline authenticity. The audio clip inserted here is from one of the two scenes from *Brazil* that were performed during the presentation at the Ethnography Forum 2009, and which feature Eric and Chris. In this scene, Chris plays C-Roc, Eric plays T, and Gabriel plays Marcus.)

[Click here for transcript and audio of Brazil, Scene 6](#)

ticipants to visualize a magical box that contained whatever they desired most in the world. The process began with each person describing what they ‘saw’ in the box. Dan pressed their initial descriptions by asking them questions in order to broaden the inquiry. As participants shared their visualizations, the others in the group also responded and engaged the objects in the imagined box through additional questions and comments. Participants’ responses to this visualization prompt ultimately became the core ideas in *Brazil*.

For Kareem, the box held Brazil, the country, where he imagined a life free from his current sources of stress and instead focused on enjoyment and partying. Kareem portrayed the character Kez the Don in *Brazil* and as Kez he delivers a monologue about being a gang leader who desires a life of solitude that was free from the pressures he felt from various parts of his life; much of Kareem’s dialogue in this scene was directly influenced by his narration during the visualization session. After Kareem shared, Dan probed his response by asking what it would take for Brazil to become a reality. Before he could answer, Terrence, another participant, expressed a desire for “quiet,” and wanting to wake up to a peaceful setting one morning. Todd, in his role as the playwright and active participant and co-facilitator of the Insight Project, connected this desire for quiet with Kareem’s description of an idealized life in Brazil, and extended an initially social purpose (e.g., partying) to include a more internal desire for escape. For Ted, in the box was his mother who abandoned him in infancy. He was told by his father that she was dead, and only recently did he learn that she might possibly still be alive. This relationship and personal experience gave rise to the character of Shelley in *Brazil*, a recovering drug addict who was searching for her son, Max, after many years of being apart from him. Unlike *Birds Eye View*, which drew more on the improvis and contained several moments of humor throughout the narrative, *Brazil* was full of stories that were deeply connected to the participants’ identities and histories were not as generative

of humorous interpretation. Out of these initial visualizations and collective storytelling moments emerged the main ideas that would serve as the connective tissue across each play. In the next section, we describe the process of moving from a session like this to how scenes and eventually a script were composed in this project.

### Composing Scenes and Scripts

The Insight Project writing process was collaborative and iterative in nature, and was initiated during the initial improvis and focused storytelling session in which characters and the broad strokes of a storyline began to develop. The movement from improvising ideas and dialogue to drafting lines to acting out scenes to composing pieces of the script remained fluid for most of the process. Todd shared drafts of the in-progress scripts with the actors and other facilitators and incorporated their feedback as they “tried on” the lines in character in order to revise the script. At several points along the way, Eric, Jay, Clarence, and the other participants inserted opinions, crafted storylines, suggested and created characters, and assessed the authenticity of the stories that the group was striving to communicate.

For most of the Insight participants, acting was an unfamiliar terrain. To ease the transition into public perfor-

mance, Dan and Gabriel employed a variety of dramatic techniques and pedagogical scaffolds throughout the process. During improvisations and character play, participants’ home and community lives and interests were engaged through the framing of prompts that invited them to draw on personal experiences, make connections with one another, and display expertise about their own lived narratives. These improvis continued into the second phase of the Insight process and also included props such as masks (Figure 3) that allowed some youth to feel more comfortable when performing in front of others for the first time.

When asked about this performance device during one of the talkbacks, Clarence, one of the participants, who played a “masked” character in *Bird’s Eye View*, said that the masks “helped [the actors] to hide the person on the inside and bring out more the character” they were playing (Talkback, 07.29.08).

This same young man also benefited from having a space to showcase some of his playful talents. In *Bird’s Eye View*, he played Slim Bag, a drug dealer who has staked territory with his partner in the drug selling game, Big Baby. Clarence displayed great comedic facility and humor during the initial *Birds Eye View* improvis. He did not merely read lines that were drafted on the printed page; he *became* Slim Bag and



Figure 3. Insight participants served as the models for the mask molds, which they also helped to craft out of modeling clay.

crafted a character with great physical agility, enviable comic timing, and emotional depth. These proclivities were incorporated into the character he began to cultivate during improvisations and ultimately performed on stage. Thus, Clarence's character, Slim Bag/Lawrence, was the one to flip around on the ground, occasionally break out into dance, and provide much of the comic relief for a play laden with heavy tropes.

Another outcome of this dynamic composing space was the addition of a musical dimension to the character of Big Baby/Maurice, developed and portrayed by Eric, who had performed and written songs for a hip hop group with whom he had performed in years past. As Big Baby, Eric has a rhyming scene with Jay, another participant

who wrote and performed music and who shared this background with the facilitators during his musical audition for *Insight*. This exchange received loud applause each time the scene was performed, and gave the actors a chance to demonstrate their expertise in the practices of rhyming and rapping. In addition, by incorporating artistic performances into the dramatic repertoires of these characters, the script added depth to characters who might otherwise be dismissed as one-dimensional archetypes (e.g., "mid-level hustler" or "newly paroled").

Both of these scenes include salient elements that the participants were aiming to convey about their own lived experiences to the audience. Slim Bag, Big Baby, and Kez

each express doubt and reflexivity as they consider past actions and future decisions. The crafting of the script and individual characters' decisions were the subject of ongoing discussion, which included questions about how closely they reflected the lived experiences and choices of the *Insight* participants. As we describe next, it was during the rehearsals that these scenes and identities became further refined through critical and collective dialogue.

## Rehearsals

Rehearsals were an integral part of the authoring that occurred within *Insight*. Beginning with the first phase, where the larger group of participants learned acting techniques, the concept of rehearsal opened up opportunities for collective and critical reflection on the acting form as well as the content being storied. Participants, with guidance from their facilitators, used this space to bring characters to life. They tried on voices and postures, and explored motivations by reacting to one another or in response to questions by Dan, Gabriel, or Eric (in his capacity as co-facilitator in the second and third cycle) who sometimes interrupted rehearsal performances to ask questions intended to evoke reflections, "What are you [as your character] thinking right now? What has your character just experienced?"

Rehearsals were also spaces where teaching artists became more involved with the project, and offered feedback about the delivery of lines and blocking scenes. These interactions were not solely about dramatic performance and techniques. Todd Pate, a playwright and actor, was a teaching artist who was intimately involved in the crafting of the script. He attended every devising session and participated as an actor, audience, and critical listener who would return to subsequent rehearsals with pages of dialogue written down. These scenes would be based on the improvisations and character discussions that had occurred previously. The young men and women, whose words and stories were depicted in the pages Todd scripted, assumed new ownership over these characters in the re-

## Performance Interlude 2

**Bird's Eye View, Scene 6.** In this scene, near the end of the play, Slim Bag and Big Baby (more specifically, their alter egos Lawrence and Maurice) face a difficult decision: whether or not to carry out direct orders from J-Dub. The MC provides some additional framing in the middle of the scene.



[Click here for Bird's Eye View, Scene 6.](#)

**Brazil, Scene 10.** In the monologue that Kez delivers near the end of the play, he reflects on recent events and a desire for the future. **Note:** This performance was recorded during the presentation at the *Ethnography Forum 2009*. In it, Eric plays the role of Kez, a character he played during the opening performance on December 16, 2008. During that debut performance of *Brazil*, Eric played three different characters to fill in for a missing cast member. Of the experience, Eric noted the following on the research blog: The first night I got the chance to play the three separate roles of Max, T, and Kez the Don. What a rush!! I had a bunch of running around to do. Transitioning from scene to scene. I was running up and down stairs, in and out of doors, and from costume to costume. BUT I LOVED IT!! (Blog entry, 12.18.2008)

[Click here for transcript and audio for Brazil, Scene 10.](#)

hearsal space. As they read their words in printed form, the youth considered realities different from their own. They questioned whether their characters would use certain language or make certain decisions—whether or not to retaliate after an attack, how to handle unexpected family changes, etc. Using critical dialogue while blocking (staging) scenes, Dan would push the actors to consider their characters' histories, kinship networks, intentions, and allegiances. Rehearsals, therefore, became spaces for the youth to re-imagine the script they would perform on stage, as well as spaces within which to rehearse and re-script their own life narratives.

In his research blog, Eric described the rehearsals and the devising process as the key experiences that helped “to secure a connection” between the participants and the process. Listening and being heard, and subsequently, having the opportunity to try on and critically perform various roles were consistent dimensions of the rehearsal space. Chris, for example, had a visceral reaction to his costume during an early dress rehearsal for *Brazil*. The character he was portraying, C-Roc, was facing life in prison and although Chris, himself, had not been incarcerated in a state prison, the bright orange jumpsuit evoked feelings of disgust and a renewed conviction to “stay out of there!” Chris’s portrayal of C-Roc—the hesitant timbre of his voice, hunched posture—was filled with solemnity, which mirrored the Chris’s own ambivalence about his past and the future he faced. This somber attitude contrasted significantly with the playful side of Chris that emerged during rehearsals as he and several of the other participants would break into song together. Like Chris, other participants also used rehearsals to experiment with the characters they had scripted. And, in explicit and also in subtle ways, the young men and women of Insight revealed various aspects of their multiple selves within this collectively constructed space.

### Performances

Whereas the rehearsal space provided opportunities for youth to write themselves into the script and the In-

sight project in different ways, the engagement with audiences at various performances presented youth with the opportunities of becoming known to multiple publics. In this section, we focus on the performances that followed the initial showcase at the end of the first three weeks of each cycle. Thus, we understand performances metaphorically—as embodied enactments of identities acts of learning (Hubard, 2007) that are constantly occurring and shifting—and also as situated events that involve known and unknown audiences. Throughout the Insight Project, the notion of “audience” was a consistent presence to which, both, facilitators and participants, alike, continued to refer. During early devising stages of improvisation or composing scenes and scripts, the upcoming performances and accompanying (possible) audiences were considered as ideas and imaginings moved into drafts of the script.

For most of the Insight participants, performing in front of an audience of strangers posed both a possibility and a threat. The possibility lay in developing and succeeding at a new craft, and being seen as competent and successful. Reflecting on his performance as C-Roc in *Brazil*, Chris described his state of mind this way, “I felt like I really, I could do it, like if that was something that I really wanted to do and I put my mind to it and I could do it” (Interview, 1.29.09). Chris was initially reluctant to participate in the Insight Project, and had to be convinced to audition by his case manager. Although he liked to “try new things,” he was skeptical of joining a venture with which he was not entirely familiar. Ultimately, Chris viewed his involvement in Insight through the prism of possibility, a feeling that was mediated in large part by the accolades he received about his performance across multiple venues. However, his early hesitations about joining the group were characteristic of participants’ reactions to feeling vulnerable in unfamiliar contexts and situations. While the stories that anchor *Bird’s Eye View* and *Brazil* were not unfamiliar to the youth, the medium of performance – orchestrated delivery versus a lived enactment – caused some initial concerns. In the

days and hours leading up to the public performances, their questions and concerns ranged from the practical to epistemological: Would they remember their lines? How would their peers and family members receive them as actors? Had they established all of the necessary scene transitions and blocking? What did it mean to share these stories with a diverse audience? Could they do this? What could they gain by performing? What would they lose? Were they the storytellers? The storied? The translators? And what (actions) would come of this storytelling?

There were several public performances embedded within each cycle of the Insight Project and they varied in audience make-up and purpose. Some performances were scheduled for the Insight participants to get feedback during the script writing process. The ongoing development of the script and many of the other sites of authoring focused on the experiences and contributions of Insight participants, and thus were relatively free from the input of people outside of the Insight process. In addition to the showcases that concluded the first phase of each cycle, the group held open rehearsals for select audiences including ATIP staff and younger adolescents (ages 9-16) from nearby alternative to detention (ATD) programs. These performances were opportunities for actors and facilitators to share their in-process script, try out ideas and solicit feedback (in the form of an audience survey and talk-backs) in order to refine storylines and script for subsequent performances. For the ATIP staff members, the open rehearsal afforded an opportunity to see the youth, who usually occupy classrooms or offices in their assigned roles as “student” or “client,” cast in a different light. The open rehearsal for *Bird’s Eye View*, for instance, took place on stage at the same building where the final performances were held later. Framed by a professional stage in a downtown setting, and performing scenes with passion and commitment, the youth began to be seen by the adults with whom they interacted daily as actors and as *engaged* participants. This kind of re-authoring by the youth also gave teachers and case man-

agers a better appreciation for the impact of the Insight Project on the lives of participants. One of the key modes of engagement with audiences was the talkback, which is described next.

## Talkbacks

The process of performing for multiple audiences was routinely followed up with a semi-structured talkback in which the entire cast (and occasionally the facilitators and teaching artists) sat on stage and responded to questions from the audience. This process builds on the ongoing forms of call and response that were embedded throughout the improv, during which some audience were always present. Talkbacks, however, added an important element to the overall Insight experience: that of interacting with not only known, but also unknown audiences. As sites of authoring, talkbacks allowed interaction between Insight participants and audiences; allowed the participants/actors to assume authority over the broader process as they engaged the questions and feedback from the audience; and offered a space where the young could author identities as actors and writers.

The talkback was a unique space where participants interacted with predominantly unknown audiences not as characters, but as themselves. This was especially significant for youth who previously had little experience with this type of performance, and whose lives continue to be storied by others. In the space of the talkbacks they were able to portray themselves outside of the stereotypes and familiar expectations of posturing that followed them across contexts. In addition to reflecting on their experience and responding to the questions offered by the audience, participants continued to share stories and explore a variety of themes.

During one talkback, the participants collectively explored a question about knowing the “difference between right and wrong,” by pushing each other to consider in greater depth “what it means to be soft” (Talkback, 7.29.2008). Both instances surrounding the concept of “soft” focused on the role of the masks and the characters of Slim Bag and Big Baby, par-

ticularly in the scene where they decide to run away instead of shooting their childhood friend, David. What did the mask allow these characters to be? What happened when they removed their masks and connected with each other and David using their given names? In this interpretive role, the participants guided the audience through an interactive dialogue that offered a re-reading and situated understanding of the stories and characters that they had just performed.

Questions from the audience varied. The following is a sampling of the questions, which are included here to suggest the diversity of positionalities that Insight participants were called upon to assume: Would you feel comfortable doing this play in front of your friends or your peers in your neighborhood? What was [the writing process] like for you? How do you plan to use your experience here in your real life? Where did the masks’ personalities come from? How did you guys like working together? Considering the things you [have gone] through in your lifetime before you reached this point, would you ever have thought you would be up on this stage right now? The questions from the audiences also allowed the youth to understand how their performances were being “read” and which aspects of the story and characters resonated with the audiences. In these ways, talkbacks were a manifestation of the original desire Dan and Gabriel had for this work: to make the stories of youth at ATIP accessible to audiences who may be either unfamiliar with or have a glossed understanding of court-involved youth. As they sat together on the stage and engaged in dialogue with known and unknown faces in the crowds facing them, facilitators and youth participants wove a new tale of justice that was made possible through the arts.

## CREATING SOCIALLY JUST SPACES THROUGH THE ARTS

The arts in education are not, nor should they be approached as a panacea for the many challenges faced by schools. Urban schools, in particular, must contend with highly overcrowded classrooms, under-resourced build-

ings, teacher shortages, and the persistent presence of high-stakes testing culture that threatens to extinguish the creative fire of too many teachers. As schools and other educational institutions continue to experience fiscal constraints and are forced to make tough choices about what kind of educational programming to keep or eliminate, too often the arts are marginalized as secondary (Gadsden, 2008), whereas, the possibilities for critical dialogue, self reflection, and discursive freedom that arts allow are perhaps most urgent in what Gallagher (2007) calls “dangerous times” in which measurable outcomes are privileged in educational discourses. The Insight Project was more than an arts-based initiative which allowed participants to compose and perform stories for audiences. Insight was a space of profound reflection, ongoing critical dialogue, and collaboration. These qualities are not unique to Insight or to arts-inspired spaces, alone. What appears more possible within such spaces, however, are opportunities to foreground the “critical capacities” (Kinloch, 2009, p. 334) of youth that may be overlooked, dismissed, or squeezed out of routine curricular planning in schools.

Clay masks that were handcrafted and used to support character development, spontaneous musical performances, and an article of clothing that evoked broader commitments to one’s personal journey—were all artifacts that aided the multifaceted performances described above. The young men and women of Insight, whose institutional labels framed them within the problematic discourses of risk and remediation, were invited to author themselves in ways that may not have been welcome in other social spaces through which they moved, including schools, homes, and community contexts. Through their storytelling, they claimed identities beyond familiar dyads—“urban” and “youth”, “black” and “latino”, “incarcerated” and “drop-out”—while simultaneously complicating the meanings about these terms. They invited the audience members with whom they engaged to appreciate them and their storied performances as nuanced, critical, intentional,

and worthy of thoughtful reflection.

Whereas institutions of education and justice are often characterized as sites of oppression, there are hopeful and generative possibilities for imaginative education within the institutional walls (c.f., Medina & Campano, 2006; Wissman, 2009). For some youth, like Eric and Chris, ATIP and Insight presented a chance to re-author themselves outside of the (sometimes limiting) expectations of their home and community affiliations, as well as those of schools and the criminal justice system. "Playmaking" (Fisher, 2008) and performance with youth is work that is simultaneously delicate and robust, as spaces of vulnerability give way to re-imagined and possible selves. Fisher, Purcell, and May (2009) underscore the collaborative nature of such endeavors and argue that "creating free spaces and fostering a discourse of 'second chances' in the context of institutions focused on discipline and oftentimes rigidity requires many voices" (p. 340). Similarly, our experience with the Insight Project leads us to advocate for a practice of education that sees value in the arts, is grounded in an ethos of collectivity, and motivated by the goal of seeking and creating socially just spaces where the multiple selves that youth embody can be expressed, represented, and performed in meaningful ways.

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Boston Public System. She holds a Masters of Arts in Professional Writing from Carnegie Mellon University. **Eric Fernandez** was born and raised in Manhattan, New York. In his young life, he has overcome many obstacles and has transformed his educational trajectory to include a life as a writer, blogger, and actor. Through his work with youth at an alternative to detention program, Eric is inspired to pursue his goal of becoming an essayist and adolescent counselor. He maintains close friendships with his teachers and mentors, and hopes to continue working with younger adolescents to help them re-imagine their futures and "learn through different angles."

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## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup>All names of participants and organizations, with the exception of the authors, are pseudonyms.

<sup>2</sup>Not a pseudonym.

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