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Setting the Stage for Black Choice: Theatre of the Oppressed as Container for Resistance, Black Joy

Quenna L. Barrett¹

This reflective essay utilizes examples of a Theatre of the Oppressed-based program with high school teens on Chicago's South Side to illustrate how those teens use the program to express black joy as a resistance to: 1) the negative and incomplete narrative that is often told about black teens, and 2) the issues and conversations of race, police, and violence that are often experienced and ever-present. It also illustrates how those same teens, and myself as a facilitator, struggle with finding solutions to such issues in our TO work.

“And yet, black joy remains...‘Undead, unchained, and fearless.’” (Broderick Greer)

The characters: Sixteen teens, fourteen to eighteen years old. Strangers, at first. Three of them are guys, quiet, observant; the rest, opinionated and proud, and shy and soft-spoken, young women.

Setting: Chicago's South Side, present-day. Summer time Chi. A Theatre of the Oppressed-based program for high school teens that has had no other choice but to happen at the intersection of race, police, and violence.

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You've heard stories about this place, Chicago's South Side. Tales of gun-ridden streets, murders, and deaths on the hour. On his campaign trail, President Trump referred to it as a "horror show" (NBC). But that's not the Chicago my teens, the characters in this narrative, see. Yes, they want to talk about violence, recognizing the proximity to their lives, but also yearn to yell the counter narrative, the truer tale. The one that exudes black joy. That highlights spaces like Young Chicago Authors² for cultivating talent, Rebuild Foundation³ and Arts + Public Life³ for celebrating Black art and space, and black, queer-led freedom fighters like the Black Youth Project 100,⁴ Assata's Daughters,⁵ and the #LetUsBreathe Collective⁶ for resisting state violence. This is the Chicago they see, love. My students come ready to debunk myths of a war-torn city, to analyze community violence that does happen but knowing there are larger systems surrounding it, and to examine state-sanctioned violence and what it means, feels, and looks like to be a black body in 2016, era of Rekia Boyds and Eric Garners and Mya Halls and Mike Browns and Sandra Blands and Trayvon Martins; era of live, mass consumption of black death.

This is the backdrop on which my students' work is founded. It has no other choice but to exist at the intersection of race, police, and violence because they are major components of their lived experience. In this reflective essay, documented with photographs of their process,⁷ I seek to highlight some of the ways in which a Theatre of the Oppressed (TO)-based practice allows them to understand, liberate, and practice being their true selves claiming their true stories, to uplift joy and resist the things being told about them but not by them. It illustrates the power and magic of the tools in the hands of the community utilizing them, and specifically how black teens turn the space we create using them into a space that is their own,

² Black artist-led nonprofit. See rebuild-foundation.org.

³ Initiative that makes creative connections of the south side of Chicago. See arts.uchicago.edu/artsandpubliclife.

⁴ National, black, queer feminist and youth led organization. See byp100.org.

⁵ Intergenerational, grassroots collective. See assatasdaughters.org.

⁶ Artist-led activist collective. See letusbreathecollective.com.

⁷ All participants and parents have given consent for use of photographs.

and that how when they have *choice*, it becomes a site for not only their anger, fear, and frustration, but triumphantly for their exploration, freedom, and joy. As Boal said, “theatre should be happiness, it should help us learn about ourselves and our times. We should know the world we live in, the better to change it” (xxxi). These teens know much about the world we live in, much more than what gets shown. They express joy as armor against the violence of the incomplete narrative, one step towards changing it. They choose to turn trauma into triumph, to perform the exuberance of young, black life amid young, black death. This narrative also lifts up a challenge I have had in this work in navigating personal, activists beliefs, as well as the questions the teens ask, questions of this world that are seemingly unanswerable and grapple with problems unfixable. Although TO provides us accountable, creative, open, and enjoyable space for dialoguing and devising change-seeking work about the aforementioned issues, I posit that it cannot solve them.



Fig. 1. Tableau image, 2014. Photo Credit: Arts + Public Life

In summer 2014, I founded the Community Actors Program (CAP), located at the University of Chicago’s Arts Incubator and offered in partnership with After School Matters. In CAP, I pair TO with performance technique to unlock teens’ stories and their ability to tell them. Over six weeks, they play TO games, learn basic performance skills, and devise and perform their own play for a community audience. They become both performative and social actors. Each summer, the group is different, with a few teens carrying over from one year to the next. Even with a new group, there are some things that remain

consistent: The teens range in age from 14 to 18 and are predominately black. The neighborhood in which we work, and where many of them are from, is considered low-income. They attend various public high schools around the city, some of them more resourced than others.



Fig. 2. Analyzing Scenes, 2014. Photo Credit: Arts + Public Life

I am a black woman who went to the same high school as many of them. I used to live in this neighborhood, around the corner from the building where programs take place. My church is still down the block. Brent Blair, who was my Applied Theatre Master's program director at University of Southern California, calls this "praxis of proximity," a necessary component of carrying out this work. I am an actress, a teaching artist, an administrator, an organizer in the movement for black lives. I got into the business of theatre because when I was a little girl, I thought I would marry a white man. I, again, am a black woman. I recently said this to colleagues when trying to describe, in one minute, why and how I came to do the work I do. I teared up when I said it because I realized how as a young, black girl I never saw myself, the way I truly was, or my full experience reflected back to me on TV, in movies or in books. Perhaps I wasn't watching or reading the right things. Perhaps they weren't available or accessible to me. Whatever the case, once I discovered acting it came quite easily to me that I would not only pursue performing, but that I would also use theatre as a way for more brown girls to be able to see themselves.

I stumbled into TO as a college theatre major seeking alternatives to the un-urgent and inaccessible work my peers were producing. While they were pondering what were to me non-issues,

people at home were dying. Derrion Albert had been beaten with wood scraps. My 16-year-old sister was pregnant without resources. I had entered college fresh upon the heels of my aunt Kleo's murder. I knew there had to be more. In community-based theatre courses, I came to realize the power that theatre had in the hands of the maker, and that too often the maker was only observing the story from afar rather than the maker and the "subject" being one and the same. I realized that brown girls, and boys, could use it as a tool to be the makers and tellers of their stories, that they could use it to change their stories. I believe I am able to have conversations about race and police violence and offer these story-changing tools with my particular students because we are as proximate as "teacher" and "student" can be. The strategies and approaches I use might look differently if I were not a brown body attuned to and ready to affirm their experiences. I don't need to have experienced what they have in order to validate them, but when many of them have never had a Black or African diasporic history class, my relatable blackness becomes a superpower and entry point for engagement.



Fig. 3. Colombian Hypnosis, 2014. Photo Credit: Arts + Public Life

In CAP, I focus our first weeks on intentionally building brave⁸ and comfortable space with my students, enabling us to go deep with each other over the course of our program. In addition to "re-tuning or

⁸ I am actively resisting the phrase "safe space" here as fellow artists/activists and #LetUsBreathe co-founders Kristiana Colon and Damon Williams have articulated: "the notion of total safety in any space is harmful and illusory" (Colon). A brave space

(de-tuning)” (Boal 41) our learned behaviors, setting this foundation builds the group’s trust, sets accountability measures, establishes our space as theirs, and tells them that it is one where they can broach discussions where otherwise they may not be able to. It allows us to practice Freire’s notion of a co-intentional education: “Teachers and students (leadership and people), co-intent on reality, are both Subjects, not only in the task of unveiling that reality, and thereby coming to know it critically, but in the task of re-creating that knowledge. As they attain this knowledge of reality through common reflection and action, they discover themselves as permanent re-creators” (56).

Together, we design our collective educational experience. The first two weeks of the program are front-loaded with community building games and both performance and TO skill building. We might practice both vocal projection and learn about Image Theatre on the same day. We begin always in circle with a visual and verbal check-in, move to a game that gets our voices and bodies moving (Cat and Mouse and Cabana, People, Storm are favorites for the latter), and then to the focus of the day, which might be character or plot development, facilitation training, staging and directing, or some combination of the above. Towards the beginning of the third week, teens begin to explore the stories they want to tell. We, of course, have already been exploring this through various TO techniques, particularly Image Theatre, but now they begin to formalize it. Teens determine the subject of their play as well as how it will be made. One of the early lessons is a workshop in project management wherein they layout all of the things that need to happen and by when to complete our show on time. They begin to set the schedule, and to hold each other accountable in following through. They also know they have space to shift that process to have new conversations when and how they want to have them.

instead acknowledges that we are constantly working against our inherited and often harmful biases and are willing to work “lovingly and bravely” through conflict (Colon).

This past summer, we had a program the day after Alton Sterling's and Philando Castile's deaths at the hands of police in Louisiana and Minnesota respectively, both viral and one captured live that popped up on all our Facebook feeds. The students wanted to debrief about these deaths and discuss their own lives in relation. Because we rooted ourselves as a community first, they knew that our space was one in which the conversation would be welcomed. They knew they could express their candid feelings and diverse opinions without retribution or judgment from me, or each other. Before we ended our check-in, one student said he wanted to have a conversation about the deaths and the rest of the group was on board, so we stayed in our circle and did just that instead of following our agenda for the moment.

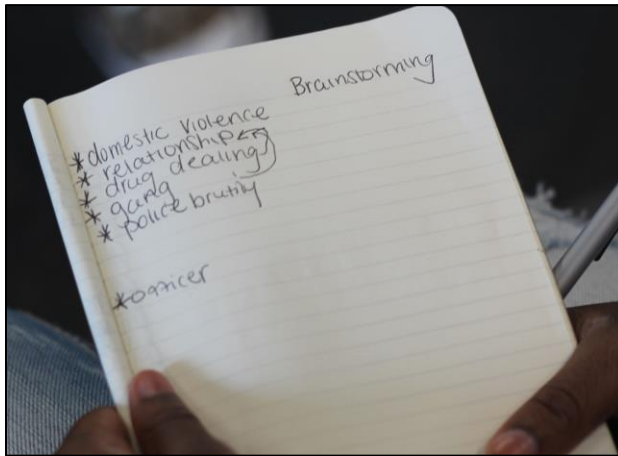


Fig. 4. Brainstorming play themes, 2016. Photo Credit: Mary Blair.

As you might imagine, my program is not purely TO. Teens enter with different goals. Some are interested in theatre as a way to develop confidence and challenge comfort. In addition to the games, we practice performance skills that teens want to develop but may not otherwise have access to. We clown and improv. They write their own monologues and break down monologues and two- or three-person scenes written by others. One important opportunity of TO in the context of race is that the material can be curated to be both culturally appropriate and culturally relevant. By engaging with works that are for and about them, written by people who look like them, my students can imagine themselves as character and creator. This aids tremendously when they are writing and performing their own material within TO work. I recently moderated a panel discussion on culturally relevant youth arts programming, and the question of

youth using curse words came up. What emerged as evident was the absence of and young people's desire for content that is culturally relevant. Their utilization of curse words is a small step of resistance in a world that tells them their language, their dress, their being is improper—translation: is wrong—translation: doesn't matter. My students often even reject performing written text in favor of creating their own scenes about their lived experiences. TO reminds them they can completely control their narrative, asserts their presence, and validates in real time their real experiences. In their plays, they incorporate and celebrate the music and essence of their time. They choose popular songs, often rap and hip hop, that echo the themes of the play to move us from scene-to-scene. Kendrick Lamar, in particular, has been played in at least two of the three summers.



Fig. 5. The “Schmoney” Dance, 2014.
Photo Credit: Arts + Public Life

In summer 2014, the play illustrated issues the teens faced such as peer pressure, familial alcohol abuse, and gang involvement and pressure. At the end of the play, inspired by real life and despite the bleak paths that the characters' lives seem to be taking, the protagonists of each scenario find solace in a community art center. They discover comfort and belonging in the center and with each other, and choose this option instead of continuing down the rabbit hole we too often see. This show ended with all of the teens celebrating these choices, celebrating each other. We see them light up with joy and they begin to dance the “Nay-Nay” and the “Schmoney” dance, popularized by Bobby Shmurda, among others. The 2015 play's locker room scene, before one teen comes out to her friends and teammates, begins with all the girls

sharing a moment of choreography to “Hit the Quan.” The audience knows these dances and songs, too. They join in vocally, sway in their seats, especially the younger youth. The teens are quite adept at incorporating comedy and laughter into situations of vulnerability, like starting a scene in which a teen girl comes out to her friends who are talking about another queer girl in the school with humor and a dance that everyone recognizes, and it draws in their audiences (who often express that they don’t know how to have such difficult conversations), offers them points of engagement, and keeps them there.

The 2015 play, entitled “The CAP Chronicles,” examined issues including sexuality discrimination, gang violence, teen pregnancy, and police brutality. The main setting is a community youth center, which they named “That CAP Center,” where an adult ally asks them about their days, and they relay stories of the aforementioned issues through a flashback motif. They draw from the culture that surrounds them. In one moment when a young man is trying to approach a young woman he’s into, he holds up a picture of Beyonce and Jay-Z and states the familiar phrase, “This could be us, but you playing.” There is a best friend who’s completely self-absorbed, and while she is supposedly listening to her friend relay her problems, she is snapping selfies and likely texting them or posting on Instagram or Snapchat. They make meme real life.



Fig. 6. Boy approaches girl with Beyonce meme, 2015. Photo Credit: Mark Blanchard

In addition to facilitating community building among the teens and with their audiences, the TO techniques lend themselves to identifying conflicts, reducing harm, and providing necessary and often

otherwise unavailable space for youth to process conflict and violence they experience daily, including state violence. Young black youth take and make their own power through this work. One unanticipated side effect of our practice has been intra-community conflict resolution. By rehearsing how we address larger systems of injustice, my students have found that they could use similar tactics to problem-solve community conflicts. Once, we were improvising a scene around gang violence and a student I will call “Marcus,” a teen who was often a quiet observer and had previously shared a little of his history of gang involvement, became activated and uncharacteristically vocal. He inserted his thoughts on the scene, passionate about what we were getting wrong and why—that the group’s first try was over-exaggerated and reproduced stereotypes without presenting larger framing and situating the character as a young person who had needs to be met. Marcus jumped in and played the scene out as, he asserted, it would actually happen. He eventually discovered an alternative to the violence that had been repeatedly suggested. At that point, he publicly realized and decided that the alternative was a viable option, in real life. I wonder how many shootings might be avoided if people had space to rehearse other viable options. I could see a marked difference in Marcus’s engagement from that point forward. Every time I have offered a TO-based opportunity since, Marcus is there.



Fig. 7. Group Presentations, 2014. Photo Credit: Arts + Public Life

While police and gang violence come up nearly every summer, each group is adamant about not only showing “the negative” about what it means to grow up black in Chicago. “We don’t want to just show violence! Yeah, that happens, but it’s not the only thing that happens,” they proclaim. Their listed goals are:

To show the truth.

To bring out something positive about Chicago.

To express how teens feel about Chicago and what good can come out of it.

To bring a positive message and show issues teens go through.



Fig. 8. Police brutality scene, 2015. Photo Credit: Mark Blanchard

They know loss and pain and trauma. They not only live it, but have it consistently regurgitated back to them. In our writing sessions, they disclose stories of shot siblings or cousins, fathers who were never there. But they also write about friendship and love, they write letters to their future selves.

“Dear future Myanna,

I want you to not stress about these boys they not shit. Stay true to yourself don’t give up on your dreams and don’t let anything or no one get in your way. You are beautiful, smart, and can do anything you want.”

They don’t sugarcoat, and they know what they want. In their plays, the teens present ideas for solutions and counter-narratives to many of the issues they raise: peer pressure, homophobia, self-esteem, substance abuse, even gang violence. In everything they do, I guide them to present scenes as realistically

as possible, the characters within them as human. Numerous times teens have brought up stories in which young black people have violent police encounters. We discuss when devising and include in our play the context surrounding officers, not isolating them as “bad” individuals or presenting them as flat characters, but rather viewing them as part of an intentionally unjust system. When it comes to putting these scenes in our plays, we have yet to figure out how to present a solution to the root problems. Some stories we can imagine control over; stopping state-sanctioned violence on black bodies is harder to rehearse. We talk about it, we play it through, but we never quite reach a resolution. We seek and use our plays to open up space for dialogue with our larger community and once open, they actively engage. But the conversation around police brutality remains a question: how can we stop this?



Fig. 9. Police playing with gun, 2016. Photo Credit: Sara Pooley

Near the end of “The CAP Chronicles,” a flashback relives the killing of the community center owner’s son by police after purchasing medicine for her from a street dealer. In the present, the teens grapple with how to shed light on and interrupt their plight. This play doesn’t end with a happy or proposed resolution. Rather the teens leave each other, and their witnesses, voicing and proposing potential solutions:

“This is the reason why I made this community center. I wanted teens to feel like they could come to me to talk about their issues and change things in the world that happen on an everyday basis. Does anybody think they have an idea or way to change

something?” Emphatic as she is passionate, the adult tries to steer their collective grief to productivity.

“Do you know what we should do? We need to start a riot. Oh my God, that would work!”

“Let’s think about that one for a while,” responds the adult character. “Anything else?” she prompts.

“We could have a small protest.”

“What about a petition?”

“A petition?” Other girls in the group lean over their chairs to ensure she receives their side eye.

“Well, I think we should we should vote. You know, get the real black man in there, not Obama...”

“Or we can go around the community and tell everybody we got programs in here. This (is) a good little center.”

“No. What we need to do is first stop killing each other. That’s the number one step we need to take. Then after that we—”

She is cut off by her peers’ eye-rolls and teeth-smacks, dissent and cries of “girl please”; they know that “black-on-black crime” is a myth. The play ends as they transition off stage, still in uproar over this comment, and the adult ally and the homeless young woman share a final moment. The epilogue is lines of statistics regarding homeless, queer, and parenting youth.

They name all the tactics I have seen used in grassroots organizing, but still they don’t seem adequate. TO doesn’t have the answers. It has tools to aid in processing the trauma, continuing the conversation, examining the context, and presenting the story as complex and interconnected. One unique opportunity

with TO is the ability to bring all stakeholders of an issue together for collective problem-solving. But this is not without its own challenges. As a TO practitioner invested in social justice, this is the seductive, sweet spot—to not only talk and present work about change, but to actualize it. I want community leaders, policy makers, and policemen in the room when my students are performing. I want them trying out solutions with us. But as an activist with prison-abolitionist organizations, how do I reconcile wanting perpetrator systems of state violence to be in the room, to witness as that violence is represented, to have an active part in a community solution? Where is the room in this politic that holds space for working with the systems that we do have, until we break them down?



Fig. 10. Family mourns police murder, 2016. Photo Credit: Sara Pooley

Living in the age of and taking part in the Movement for Black Lives, I have found new ways of interpreting the TO techniques and applying them even more concretely to the lives of youth in highly-policed cities. TO inherently offers a container and outlet for students who are already yearning to respond to these issues. It aids in fostering trust. It enables us to practice new ways of being in relationship. It helps us imagine and implement alternatives to violence. It allows us to be and see ourselves, to protest the way others see and talk about us. While we may not easily solve race-based state violence, by engaging in these questions through TO we are actively embodying hope and resistance, and thus already on the journey towards changing our narratives. Teens offer up their black bodies as a site to examine these issues with community members witnessing, recalling their own such experiences. But my teens never

want to present the story, whether it be gangs or police brutality, the way they are seen traditionally via mass media. They choose to portray the context surrounding those issues. And in between and within those stories, they reflect the joy of being a black teenager. They incorporate music, dances, and style that affirms them. Their characters tell jokes, proclaim love. We see the butterflies of new relationships, the journey in maintaining old ones. They illustrate how youth resist violence every day by doing things as simple as joining art programs, or talking through problems with adults they trust. They choose to highlight agency. They choose. When they have no other choice but to engage the intersection of race, police, and violence in our program, they inherently have no other choice but to be hope, to be resistance, to be resilience. They choose.

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