CREATING DESTINY: YOUTH, ARTS, AND SOCIAL CHANGE

A DISSERTATION
SUBMITTED TO THE SCHOOL OF EDUCATION
AND THE COMMITTEE ON GRADUATE STUDIES
OF STANFORD UNIVERSITY
IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

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August 2011
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Abstract

In this ethnographic study, I examine the work of a company of youth artists who create art to create social change. I explore how they define social change, and how they make it through a process of creating and performing an original work of hip hop, modern dance, and theater. The company is the Destiny Arts Youth Performance Company in Oakland, CA, which brings together 15 to 20 young people each year to work with the company’s adult co-directors to create an original performance for social change. The company members are high-school-aged and diverse with regard to race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, and socio-economic background. Its work is part of a larger tradition of programs in which artists “apply” the tools and processes of the arts to social problems (McCammon, 2007).

Through inductive analysis of field data that I collected documenting the company’s ten-month process, I surfaced a theory of social change embedded in the company’s work. The company posits social change as a process of changing relationships—that is, changing how we relate to ourselves, to one another, and to the world around us. This process requires understanding how our ways of relating are shaped by social structures and our positions within them; imagining new possibilities for these relationships that would exist in the world in which we want to live; and then transforming our relationships to embody these possibilities. Transforming our relationships in this way, the company suggests, is a means to create the world we have imagined. In this study, I elaborate this theory and its potential to complement more traditional notions of social change, which focus on changing social structures more directly. Such theories rely on the imposition of social structures to align human activity
with principles of equality and social justice. By contrast, the company focuses on how social change created among small groups can radiate outward to effect change in communities and to shift social structures.

Through fieldnote, interview, and photographic data that I gathered in the role of participant observer, I describe what dance and writing offer the company as media for social change during their creative process. I also explore the impact of the company performance through audience focus group and survey data. My analyses elaborate the concept of third space in the arts and the ways in which it functions to facilitate social change at an individual, interpersonal, group, and community level. They also illuminate the importance of cross-cultural collaborations among youth to creating social change.
Acknowledgements

I have been blessed throughout the journey that culminates in this dissertation, by an extraordinary community of family, friends, teachers, and colleagues. They have inspired, guided, supported, and challenged me in ways that have shaped who I am and made it possible for me to reach this point in my path. I am especially grateful to my mother, father, and sister, who have been behind me at every step and have inspired me to ask the questions about art and social change that I explore in this dissertation. Their unconditional love has been one of my greatest resources.

I have benefited greatly from the intellectual generosity and guidance of my colleagues. I am particularly indebted to Dick Deasy for initiating me into the field of arts education research and mentoring me along my path. Our conversations over the years have enriched my thinking and life. I am also thankful for the network of colleagues whom I met while working with Dick at the Arts Education Partnership. Their practice and research keeps the field of arts education pushing its boundaries. I owe a special thank you to Gail Burnaford for her thoughtful comments on a draft of this dissertation. Also to Elisa Callow for her mentorship and friendship.

My advisor, Milbrey McLaughlin, has been instrumental to this dissertation and to my development as a researcher. She has been an extraordinary guide through the terrains of youth and community development and qualitative research. I am particularly thankful for her coaching through the research design and data analysis phases of my study and for her thoughtful reading of many drafts, which helped me to deepen my thinking and refine my writing. The other members of my committee have also shaped
my dissertation and education in invaluable ways. Harry Elam helped me to develop my thinking about artistic practice and its potential as a medium for social change. His close reading of drafts and counsel throughout the final stages of my research were indispensable. Monica McDermott taught me ethnographic methods and guided me through the challenges of conducting fieldwork as a participant observer. Her unfailing support and wise advice were critical to the depth and quality of the data I gathered. Samy H. Alim’s careful reading of and response to my dissertation in its final stages pushed my thinking and helped me to refine my ideas.

The process of completing a dissertation comes with many ups and downs, or as my fellow doctoral student Heather Hebard and I came to refer to it, an “embedded curriculum,” through which one has the opportunity to learn much about oneself and about life. I am grateful to her and to Riki and Bandy for their love and support during this process and for helping me to embrace it with a sense of adventure, humility, and camaraderie. Without them and our many hours spent working and talking over “lunch dessert,” this process would not have been the same. I would also like to extend a sincere thank you to the coffee shops that hosted these “jam sessions,” provided me sustenance and scenery, and allowed me to overstay my welcome during my years as a student and writer. Especially Café Trieste in Oakland, Café Tryst in Washington, DC, and the Bird’s Nest in Chiang Mai.

I offer a humble and heartfelt thanks to the other support systems that I have been so lucky to have in this process and in my life, especially the Stevenson-Axtell-Woolsey-Taft extended family, my fellow teachers and students of kickboxing and TRX, energy
class, and Belvie and Dedan whose floating house gave me a home and fount of inspiration as I wrote this dissertation.

Finally, I will be eternally grateful to Sarah Crowell, Simón Hanukai, the eighteen members of the Destiny Arts Youth Performance Company who created and performed Unconditional, their families, and the staff and artists of the Destiny Arts Center. I can never repay their profound generosity in teaching me about their process of creating art and social change and about their lives. I have, however, done my best to honor their gift by conveying, in this dissertation, what I learned from them with integrity so that others might build on their work.
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Chapter 1: Creating Social Change

**Tomorrow is Today**

tomorrow is today
mind foggy like overcast
with questions that lead me to ask
what’s to become of my generation?

tomorrow is approaching fast and
i’m still askin’
what do we do now?

i was born into a world
where turf wars and wars overseas
is why thick scarlet covers bodies
where safety equals knives and guns
and silver bullets is why we bury loved ones

i was born into ghettos
where halters and mini skirts
strut Pablo in stilettos
a 9 to 5 isn’t enough
so our brothers, cousins, friends
start sellin’ that illegal stuff
do business with fiends
while young minds possess the thug mentality
embarking on a journey of violence and fatality

i was born into a place where the odds are against me
young woman of color
born and raised in the Town
same ol’ same ol’ hopelessness sun up to sun down
expectations of not getting far
cuz of who you are
who i am
i’m a walking time bomb i suppose
cuz there are those who wait to see me fall
wait to prove a stereotype
or become another statistic
still, i stay optimistic

cuz see, i have visions that are bigger
“you must be the change you wish to see in the world”
Gandhi said
and that phrase keeps replaying
replaying
relaying in my head
i don’t want to be stuck in a world of negativity
or surrounded by those involved with criminal activity
change starts with me
change starts with us
we are the ones we are waiting for
now more than ever before
tomorrow is today
tomorrow is today
tomorrow is today

- Rhummanee Hang,
Destiny Arts Youth Performance Company alumna

Introduction to the Study

What does it mean for social change to start with you? What do you do if ‘we are the ones we’ve been waiting for’? How do you participate in creating the social world in which you want to live? A world that is just, healthy, and vibrant. How do you make social change? This study follows a group of high-school-aged performing artists who begin a journey together with these questions. It examines how the group conceives and creates social change and the implications of its work for others who would participate in making such change. It also explores how the performing arts—in particular hip hop dance, theater, modern dance, and spoken word—function as media for creating and changing our personal and social lives.

The group is the Destiny Arts Youth Performance Company (from here on ‘the company’), a community arts project in Oakland, California in which young people collaborate together over a ten-month period to create and perform an original work of art
as a means to make social change. “Work in the arts,” Eisner (2002) says, “is not only a way of creating performances and products; it is a way of creating our lives by expanding our consciousness, shaping our dispositions, satisfying our quest for meaning, establishing contact with others, and sharing culture” (p. 3). In making social change, the company draws on these and other capacities of the arts for shaping and expressing our social lives. The company’s work sits in the context of a larger field of traditions in which artists “apply” the tools and processes of the arts to social problems—activities often grouped into the sub-genres of devised, political, and community performance (McCammon, 2007). The company is comprised of young people from around the San Francisco Bay Area and is co-directed by dancer Sarah Crowell and actor Simón Hanukai. This ethnographic study describes and analyzes the company’s ten-month process—from the auditions that assembled company members through the group’s creation and performance of an original work of art for social change.

**Theoretical Framework**

Simply put, social change is change in the social environment. What constitutes this environment and how you change it, however, are not simple matters at all. Social movement scholars generally focus either on individuals as the locus of social change or on institutions and other social structures (McAdam & Snow, 1997). This dichotomy is also common in the field of applied performance in which practices fall generally into two camps—“pro-social theatres that seek to ameliorate the psychological harm [to individuals] caused by social and economic injustices,” and “political theatres seeking to directly challenge the causes and class interests, which underpin these same injustices” (Neelands, 2007, p. 306). Despite their separate attention, however, the arenas of the
individual and social structural are intimately linked. As Bandura (2004) says, “Social structures embody rules, resources, and social sanctions designed to organize, guide, and regulate human affairs,” and at the same time “are created, implemented, and altered by human activity” (p. 82). “Personal agency and social structure,” therefore, “operate as interdependent determinants in an integrated causal structure rather than as a disembodied duality,” and the locus of social change is neither the one nor the other, but a “dynamic interplay” between the two (Bandura, 2004, p. 82). It is this interplay that the company members explore and seek to change through their work together.

For the company, the interplay between the personal and social structural lives in relationships—our relationships to one another, to ourselves, and to the world around us—and these relationships are the locus of social change. By changing these relationships with an awareness of how they are shaped by social structures, the company believes, they can create new possibilities for interaction within these social structures and, in so doing, alter them. As Sarah, company co-director, puts it, social change “is about transformation of the way that we relate together because it’s social, social change.” “We have set ways of relating and ways that society has molded us into thinking about ourselves and each other,” she says, “and to me then, social change is allowing for a shift and transformation to happen on all levels of relationship.”

Changing relationships, Sarah says, “starts one-on-one and then goes group and then goes community and then to larger and larger communities.” It is a process that scales radially as change in relationships at the one-on-one level creates new possibilities for relationships at the group level, which in turn create new possibilities for relationships at the community level. The company process is designed to support social change that
scales in this way extending from a hub of intensive interaction among company
members at the one-on-one and group levels to the surrounding community.

To facilitate change in relationships at the one-on-one level, Sarah and Simón
facilitate opportunities for company members to go one-on-one with each other to learn
about each other’s lives, experiences, and beliefs and to deepen their relationships with
one another. These opportunities come in the form of dance, writing, and theater
activities; discussions about participants’ lives and the social issues that affect them; and
icebreaker and trust building exercises. The company is diverse with regard to race,
ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, and socio-economic background and these one-on-
one interactions, says Sarah, give the company opportunities to explore, “the way that we
look at each other around our differences—differences in race, ethnicity, gender, sexual
orientation, socioeconomic background—how do we connect to each other, how do we
talk to each other, how do we get to know one another?” “If we can break down the
walls,” she says, “where we’re stuck in particular ways of relating to each other, then I
think that’s when transformation happens.” The stories that the company members share
as they go “one-on-one” with each other also become the primary material for the group’s
performance.

For the company members, there is another important way that they create change
at the one-on-one level of relationship. In rehearsals, they say, they have opportunities to
go one-on-one with themselves to develop their self-awareness and voice. The performers
identify these opportunities, not only as an essential component of the social change
process, but its foundation. As company member Dharma says, “To make change, it takes
more energy than most people think. In order to change something you must first change
yourself.” In company rehearsals, dance and writing are the primary vehicles for this process of personal change. Their experiences going one-on-one with each other strengthen company members’ abilities and inclinations to go one-on-one with themselves—their experiences of having their assumptions about others challenged by things they learn through interaction with them often spark them to look inward to examine assumptions and beliefs they hold about themselves and their own lives.

As they get to know themselves and each other better, the company members forge stronger and more understanding social relationships leading to a sense of cohesion and unconditional support at the group level. This sense of group—described by company members in family-like and ensemble-like terms—is in many ways both the sum of changes made at the one-on-one level and the crucible within which these more micro-level processes take place. As the web of relationships that constitutes the group gets stronger, company members feel safer and freer to take the risks required to go deeply one-on-one with themselves and each other. They also mobilize as a collective capable of action—action in the form of performance.

The company extends the impact of the social change created within the group to the community level by two primary means. First, as individuals, company members create change by relating to others and their surroundings with new capacities developed through the company process—capacities for social tolerance, openness, and understanding among others—that alter the possibilities for social life in the settings and among the people with whom they walk. Second, as a collective, they take action through their culminating performance to inspire audience members to expand their awareness of
social issues that affect their lives and social interactions, and to change how they understand and relate to themselves, others, and the world around them.

**Site Selection and Research Design**

When I set out to identify a site for this research, I was looking for a performance company with a reputation for excellence with regard to both its artistry and efficacy in creating social change. I was interested in examining what each of these components might offer to the other when attended to with equal weight, rather than an instance where one was engaged in the service of the other. The latter is a common practice in the field of applied performance (Heddon & Milling, 2006). The other criterion that I had for a research site, was that it be a project that engaged youth artists. A growing body of research exploring the role community programs play in young people’s lives has charted important territory in understanding the qualities of program settings that foster young people’s positive development (Eccles & Gootman, 2002; Heath & Soep, 1998; McLaughlin, 2000). Although many such programs offer young people leadership, sports, and arts activities through which they have opportunities and resources to positively affect their communities, few if any studies have examined how young people wield these resources to change the world around them, and when they do, what effects they have. I saw the opportunity with this study to contribute to youth development research an analysis of the mechanisms through which youth in community arts programs engage collaboratively to change their lives and communities, and to extend youth development research to better address concern about youth disengagement (Ginwright & Cammarota, 2002; Cook-Sather, 2002; Atkins & Hart, 2003; West, 2004).
In spring 2006, to identify possible research sites, I asked Bay Area artists and educators for recommendations of local youth art and social change programs that they felt met my criteria of excellence with regard to both artistry and social change practice. Every single person among the dozen that I spoke with directed me to the company. The company is part of the Destiny (or De-Escalation Skills Training In Non-violence for Youth) Arts Center—a violence prevention, arts, and martial arts center dedicated to ending prejudice, violence, and isolation in the lives of young people. Destiny has been serving young people in the California East Bay for over 20 years offering arts, leadership, and martial arts classes to youth ages three to 18 at studio space in North Oakland, and running after school programs in over 40 area public schools.

I met with Sarah and Simón to discuss the possibility of doing research about the company. In our first meeting, Sarah said two things that suggested to me that I had found the right research site. First, she said, if I was going to do the research, I would need to be at and participate in every rehearsal. The company’s work is a process, she said. It unfolds over time and you never know when the ‘ah-hah moments’ in the process will take place. If I wasn’t there for everything, she said, I could easily miss these moments and not understand how key moments I did catch were connected. Participation was necessary she said, because having spectators is disruptive to social and artistic processes that required trust and connection—if I didn’t participate in the company process I could compromise the company as well as my understanding of its work. Second, she said, she and Simón could only give me a provisional yes; they would have to see what the company members thought of me before making a firm commitment to the research. This latter provision was especially important, Sarah and I agreed, because I
was white and the company would be mostly youth of color. Destiny had had experience with researchers—mostly white women like myself—coming to the center to conduct research. This, Sarah said, had frequently involved a researcher dropping in on classes or rehearsals at the center on limited occasions, watching activities from a distance (like ‘a fly on the wall’), gathering data, leaving, and then not returning or sharing what they had learned. This formula had several problems with it. The relative privilege that the researchers had by virtue of their race and affiliation with often prestigious institutions afforded this relationship a colonial flavor as researchers took information to support their own projects without reciprocation to center staff and participants. The methods of these researchers also raised important questions in Sarah’s mind about the quality of the data and interpretations they would be generating. These questions largely had to do with her concerns about whether a researcher could gather meaningful data about a social context that they had effectively isolated themselves from by virtue of their irregular and disengaged presence, and the limited data points they had for understanding complex processes that unfold over time. Sarah’s requirements spoke to her respect for the authority of youth in the company. This indicated to me that as a research site, the company was likely to present me the opportunity I was seeking to explore how youth create change through the arts, rather than how they participate in an adult director’s effort to create change through the arts. Her requirements also spoke to her awareness of the company’s work as a process that unfolds over time and to the relevance of race, privilege, and power among other social forces to this process. This awareness, and her candidness in discussing it with me, along with the company’s reputation for pre-
professional artistic quality suggested to me that the company process would also allow me to examine the interconnection of artistic and social change processes.

In September 2006, the company work and my research began with auditions. As they did each fall, Sarah and Simón invited youth ages 13-18 from around the East Bay to the auditions by word of mouth and by means of a flyer, which they circulated at local schools and youth organizations and distributed via email to Destiny’s network of students, educators, and youth workers. The flyer included logistical information about the auditions along with the statement:

We are looking for talented teens to work with a PRE-PROFESSIONAL DANCE/MARTIAL ARTS/THEATER COMPANY. Must have experience with hip-hop, modern dance and/or martial arts and be willing to SPEAK OUT ON ISSUES EFFECTING THE LIVES OF YOUNG PEOPLE. You will be working with a DIVERSE group of youth to create an ORIGINAL PERFORMANCE to be performed all around the BAY AREA and beyond!!!


Sarah and Simón led the auditions in a group format. Participants learned a hip hop combination and modern dance combination on the spot and then performed them in small groups for Sarah and Simón and a panel of audition judges made up of company alumni and Destiny Arts Center dance and theater instructors. Sarah and Simón then gave them passages of monologues from the prior year’s company performance, which they reviewed and delivered before the judges and other auditioners. The auditions ended with an opportunity for those who wished to, to present pre-prepared audition materials that demonstrated their skill in dance, theater, singing, or spoken word.
Before the auditions got started, Sarah shared with the group that she and Simón were looking not only for company members with artistic skill, but individuals who would contribute to the company by supporting one another and taking risks in learning and creating art and social change. “We are watching you from the moment you sat down,” she said to the group, “How well are you paying attention? Are you on point? Are you giving your full energy? All these things are important with the heart blended together. To me, that’s the best combination you can have as a performer if your heart is present and you are also disciplined and you have a command of technique.” “That’s our goal for this group,” she explained, “that once you get in, we can build you as a performer and also as a human being. Sometimes they don’t mix, but we’re trying to make that mix in here.” Her comments established from the beginning that the company was about excellence in both artistic and social domains.

After auditions, Sarah and Simón conferred with the panel of judges and made decisions about who to include in the company attending to artistic skill; presence, including factors like energy, attention, support for others, and risk-taking; and group chemistry. They also ensured that the company as much as possible reflected Oakland’s racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic diversity. They called all participants to let them know the outcome of their audition. For youth who did not make it, they gave feedback and encouragement to take classes at Destiny Art Center and come back to auditions the following year. In the end, they selected 16 full company members and two guest artists, who would join occasional rehearsals and participate in performances as singers only. Of these 18, ten had taken classes at the Destiny Arts Center and had some exposure to the center’s philosophy, which Sarah articulated as blending “art and heart.”
The company began rehearsals the following Monday meeting two afternoons a week. Each meeting began with an hour and a half hip hop class, taught for the first half of the process by Traci Bartlow and the second half by Rashidi Omari, both local dancers and choreographers. After a 15-minute break, they rehearsed with Sarah and Simón for an additional hour and 45 minutes. These rehearsal periods included additional training in hip hop dance as well as in modern dance and theater. They also provided the company members opportunities to get to know one another, explore together personal and social issues that mattered to them, develop a shared vision for change, and create and rehearse an original performance. On a third afternoon each week, interested company members came together for a three-hour scriptwriting session to work on the script for their performance—writing new material and extending material created in rehearsal sessions.

Two months into rehearsals, the company took a two-day retreat at the Montalvo Arts Center, designed to help facilitate company cohesion and give company members an intensive, uninterrupted block of time to create material for the show.

In March, six months out from auditions, the company premiered its original performance, *Unconditional*, at the Malonga Casquelourde Center for the Arts in downtown Oakland. The week prior to opening night, the company had tech rehearsals at the Malonga every evening to finalize staging and lighting and sound design. *Unconditional* ran for two weeks with a total of eight performances. In the months following this run, the company met to debrief its process and toured excerpts from the show, performing at local schools, community organizations, and conferences.
Data Collection

I attended virtually every rehearsal, performance, and scriptwriting session over the course of the company’s ten-month process. I let the company know that I had heard that they did excellent work in both the arts and social change and that I wanted to learn as much as I could from them about how they do what they do. I told them that I would also be there to support their process in any way I could. As a participant observer, I joined in icebreaker activities and trust games, drove carpools, helped with costumes, typed up the written material that company members created during rehearsals for use in script development, and did a host of other tasks that required ‘an extra set of hands.’ The fact that I was willing to engage fully and consistently and take risks alongside the company members in discussing our lives and our relationships to a range of social issues helped me to be a real and comfortable member of the company community. A few weeks into the rehearsal process, Sarah saw me picking up after rehearsal and taking out the trash. “You’re a Destiny girl now,” she said smiling, and then added that the company members seemed to like me. That informal moment served as my okay to continue on with the research.

Going forward, in many instances, the company members took on the role of my teacher and helped me to understand their process and their perspectives on what was happening, how, and what it meant to them. I continued to be an extra set of helping hands, actively looking for ways to support their work. A few months into the process one of the company members, a fourteen year-old young man named Morgan, who you will meet in the coming narrative pointed out that I had also taken on another role in the company. He said that I was there to listen. He said that he noticed company members
would take turns sitting in the empty chair next to me in down moments during rehearsal to talk, particularly if there was something they needed to get off their mind. I didn’t counsel and they didn’t seem to want me too. I just listened. Their teaching me and my listening to them on their own terms, in addition to lending a hand with more concrete rehearsal tasks, was the foundation for our reciprocal exchange.

Because of the necessity that I be present, not just physically, but mentally and emotionally in the rehearsal studio, I did not bring a laptop or formal note pad to rehearsals. I felt that these would distance me from the group. I tried to jot as many notes as I could during portions of the rehearsal when company members were also writing (Lofland, Snow, Anderson, & Lofland, 2006), using the stock of scrap paper they used or writing in an artist’s sketchbook that I carried with me. I jotted more notes on the BART train leaving rehearsal and typed up and fleshed out my notes at home. A couple of months into the process, the company performed one of the dance numbers it was working on at an environmental conference. I brought my camera to take pictures of them performing. This was a natural moment to introduce a camera into our relationship. Company members were used to having photos taken at performances and they were comfortable enough with me to take my camera, look at the pictures I had taken, and use the camera to take pictures of one another. After this moment, I was able to take pictures at rehearsals without distancing or isolating myself from company interactions. In the following narrative I use some of these photographs to make visible key moments in the company process. For the reasons I’ve just described, there are no pictures from the first two months I was with the company.
In addition to documenting the process with field notes and photographs, I also conducted semi-structured interviews with all of the company members and with Sarah and Simón at two points in time, one in winter in roughly the middle of the process, and the other in late spring after the company’s run of Unconditional. My data collection and analysis processes were reflexive—my initial analysis of the first round interviews helping to shape the questions I asked in the second round. In the spring, I also conducted interviews with their family members; hip hop instructor, Rashidi Omari, who choreographed two of the company’s dance numbers for Unconditional, and company alumni. I coupled family interviews with audience member focus groups and an audience survey to get outside perspective on the impact of the company’s work. I administered the audience survey (N=839) at five of the company’s eight performances including two ‘fieldtrip shows’ where the audience members were almost entirely middle and high school students. Across these five performances, Destiny estimates that there were approximately 1,200 audience members. The company urged that I do my focus groups with youth audience members, as they believed this was their most important constituency. In response to their advice, I conducted four focus groups with students from local high schools who attended the performance as part of a school fieldtrip. I set up the focus groups with assistance from their teachers, whom I asked to select four to six students they felt, as much as possible, reflected the diversity of their class—both in terms of demographics and in terms of the response they had to Unconditional.

**Data Analysis and Validity**

I coded all qualitative data in NVivo following a modified grounded theory approach in which I open-coded all data; examined codes for their relationships to one
another; clustered codes to create a smaller number of axial codes; and then focus coded the material that fell under each (Emerson, 1995; Titscher, Meyer, Wodak, & Vetter, 2000). I analyzed survey data in SPSS. My data analysis surfaced the theory of social change implicit in the company’s work that is outlined above and detailed in the following chapters.

To ensure the validity of my analyses, I triangulated among field note, interview, focus group, survey, and record data. I also discussed these data and emerging findings with colleagues in education and arts research throughout the study and did a member check with Sarah at the close of the research to confirm the accuracy of my data and analysis. I also continued to participate in the company community lending a helping hand to four more companies—in particular, helping at rehearsals when needed, and providing an extra set of hands for key moments in the company process like the company retreat, tech week, and the run of final performances. Having the advantage of watching the company process repeat multiple times—with some of the same company members and some new ones—was crucial in helping me develop and confirm the validity of my findings as it allowed me to see patterns of activity that repeated consistently in the company process irrespective of the particulars of a given company or the show that they were working on.

**Organization of Chapters**

The following chapters describe the mechanisms through which company members created social change at the one-on-one level (both with self and others), the group level, and the community level, and the context and conditions that the company created to support this work. Each chapter also describes the ways in which the
company’s collaborative artistic process and process of creating social change relate with
and reinforce each other at each step in the company’s journey.

1 Poem written by Destiny Arts Youth Performance Company member Rhumannee Hung for the
company’s original production Tomorrow is Today, April 2004.

2 The phrase, “We are the ones we’ve been waiting for” is often attributed to a Hopi prayer (see, for
every example, http://www.spiritofmaat.com/messages/oct28/hopi.htm downloaded August 1, 2011) or to poet
June Jordan. Alice Walker, President Barack Obama, and other public figures have used the phrase to draw
attention to the responsibility that individuals share for their personal and collective welfare.
Cast of Characters: The Company

One of the company members, fourteen-year-old Arianna, challenged me to write up the findings of this study in a way that embodied the company’s work. “What you have to do,” she said, “is when you’re writing it… try and think of it as a show. You know, how we put on a show. ‘Cause what you’re trying to do is get your message across through your dissertation.” She broke it down: “Incorporate as many people that you think have that light, have that special thing that you want to share with other people. Try to incorporate them as much as you can ‘cause it helps when it’s like… when you’re attached, when you’re in it.” “It’s got to be from your heart,” she said. “Put pictures in. …Put stuff that means something without the actual words.” I have humbly tried to embrace Arianna’s advice.

In the following text you will meet Arianna, the 17 other youth artists with whom she collaborated to create Unconditional, and their co-directors Sarah Crowell and Simón Hanukai. In so much as this document functions like a performance, they are its cast of characters. In the next few pages, before their story begins, they will introduce themselves to you by way of short biographies they wrote to help you picture what their lives were like while they were working on Unconditional. Now five years after they began that work, they wrote these biographies reflecting back to that time. They also wrote current biographies giving you a sense of what they are up to now, what’s next for them, and how they feel their experiences in the company affected them. You will find these in an afterword.
Back then, I lived in Oakland CA in a rough neighborhood, but I always tended to stay out of trouble. I lived with a friend from company. Her grandmother took me in when I had no one. I was really grateful for her family. I went to Oakland High School where I was in a dance production and first heard about the "Destiny Arts" auditions. I spent most of my time there once I got in – always dancing, always happy. If you really knew me then, you would have known that I had more talents than just dancing – but of all my talents only two made me really able to relax and free my mind – and dancing was one of them. When people ask me what my ethnic background is I tell them black Puerto Rican and Dutch.

During the year that we created and performed the *Unconditional* show I was living with my grandparents in Oakland California. The street I lived on was a very nice suburban block, but if I walked simply around the corner I was right back in an urban neighborhood. My house was up on the top of a hill but on the other side of my street and the down fall of the same hill I was on 82nd headed towards Macarthur one of the most infamous corners in ‘Deep’ East Oakland. I was fortunate enough to attend a private Catholic high school named Holy Names High School. Located in the Oakland hills close to Montclair. The majority of my time was spent in North Oakland because of Destiny Arts Center and the people I had become closes to. My sister Nee-Nee was the person who I was closes to and hung around most, but she had not been as fortunate as me in terms of neighborhood and education. Back then I did not yet fully know who I was but I was motivated by change and the possibility that I could have a hand in something better. I used Destiny Arts Center and DAYPAC as my outlet. When people ask me what my ethnic background is I say I am an African American young woman.

Back when I was in the company working on *Unconditional*, I was living in a group home in East Oakland. I had just gotten out of jail for something I wasn’t proud of. The group home was not in a very good area. There were lots of murders and all that craziness. I remember coming home late a lot and not feeling safe. I remember having a great time dancing at Destiny and having a role in the show. It was important to me. I spent most of my time at Destiny. I went to Skyline High School and I would leave school at exactly 3:05 and catch the bus straight to Destiny and I’d be sitting in Sarah’s face in the Destiny office and she’d be like, “Why are you so early?” If you really knew me back then, you would have known that I was very passionate about being a dancer, and that’s what I was thinking about – becoming the best dancer I could be. When people ask me what my ethnic background is, I say I’m African American with a little Black Foot Native American from my grandmother.
DHARMA

If you really knew me back when I was in company, you would have known that I never stuck to one thing for very long. I was living on the East side of Lake Merritt in Oakland with my mom, step dad, 18 year-old sister, and 3 year-old brother. I was soon to be 15 years old, and if I remember correctly, I was in the midst of a drastic change in lifestyle, and I was developing a strict sense of moral standing. I had been a part of the Destiny Arts family on and off taking classes at Destiny since I was 3 or 4 and that year was my first year to work with company, which, while I looked forward to being in Company after many years of idolizing them, I was reluctant to take on such a full-fledged commitment due to the transitions I spoke of earlier. I was a freshman at Oakland School for the Arts and, as it often happens at that time, I was beginning to establish myself as the person I am today. So I was going through an intense state of moral conflict, which I projected through my actions. I was also developing very strong political views heading in the direction of Anarcho-Syndicalism. All of these things caused me to question everything I was participating in at the time. Outside of school and company, I soon found myself eagerly participating in the Bay Area punk scene, attending shows mostly and discovering new music. I remember telling you (Lauren) of all my crazy new adventures in a world so new and wonderful to me and I was very excited to work with company and share my experiences in *Unconditional*. When people ask me what my ethnic background is, I say it doesn't matter.

IMELDA

During the making of *Unconditional*, I was a freshman at MetWest High School, a small alternative high school in Oakland. It was a very rough time in my life. As I was starting my high school career, as well as starting my first out of three years at Destiny Arts Center, I also experienced my first injustice as the daughter of two undocumented Latino parents. When people ask me what my ethnic background is, I don't just say I am Latina. I express that I am from two beautiful and vibrant Latin American countries – Mexico and Guatemala. But sadly, having two parents who were born in foreign countries brought over me a great depression that affected me during my first year in the company. My Guatemalan father was sentenced to deportation right before *Unconditional*. As a 14 year-old with two undocumented parents, our only solution was to leave the United States with my father. I was furious, angry, depressed that I, a U.S. citizen was being stripped away from my rights! But, I had no choice – I was a minor and could not stay here in the U.S without my parents. Thankfully, Sarah and Simón (the co-directors of the company at the time) suggested that I take my anger out by revealing my story in *Unconditional*. I was hesitant at first to expose my personal life to the greater community, but I am glad that I did it because it brought awareness about this issue that affects so many different groups of people.
JAVIER

While I was working on Unconditional, I was a sophomore in high school living with my mom. I lived in East Oakland, in a neighborhood formerly known as "Stone City" (Stoner City, Crack City) in the 80's. This particular part of Oakland I lived in was pretty calm, I lived at the borderline of San Leandro and Oakland so most of the dirt happened more towards the inner city. I went to Lionel Wilson College Preparatory Academy (LWCPA or Wilson Prep), a pretty good school with pretty good teachers who care, smack dab in the middle of the Sobrante Park, which at one point was a very dangerous neighborhood. If I wasn't at school, I was probably either in a dance studio or somewhere teaching or performing. I would cut school in order to go dance. If anyone really knew me back then they would have known that dance was the only way for me to stay calm and grounded in the midst of violence and death surrounding Oakland at that time. During that era, youth violence was reaching an all-time high, and youth were being killed and forming new gangs every other day. The silence of death is an all too familiar sound in Oakland. When people ask me what my ethnic background is, I say Mestizo (a mixture of cultures and races).

KASH

Back then, I had just moved to East Oakland (on 82nd and Olive Street) in June of 2006. I was living with my dad at first, who had become remarried and was back and forth between me and them. I was living in a house he was fixing up but didn’t really live in. There was a park down the street where drug dealers and older crack heads would spend their daytime. Sometimes you would see children running around and guys playing basketball. Grocery stores were far away so if you wanted a snack it was potato chips or donuts from the liquor store. I spent my last year of high school at Castlemont High. This school was supposedly the school that was the most dangerous, violent, drug abusing youth but after going there for a year I realized it differently. They were youth with no parents, bad role models, lacking motivation, and poor. I never got into one fight, argument, felt threatened, etc. because from day one I announced myself as a dancer and musician. People would attack people who had no hobbies. I’m not sure why. I remember school lunch tasting sooo bad but I had no money and so I would even steal extra food in my backpack to eat later at night when I couldn’t sleep. Others would eat a whole lunch from two dollars at a corner store, some Doritos or Cheetos with a soda. Not much good food around to eat. Most of my time was spent either at the youth center next door to my high school at the time or at the park down the street from my school. I figured those were two places I could go and meet people in my community without feeling like I’m putting myself in danger. If you really knew me back then, you would have known that I was always stretching or moving even without music; I lived close because they would always see me walking places; I was even more confident than I looked or acted. When people ask me what my ethnic background is, I say I’m black (American, of African dissent via Slavery), Irish, German, and Native American.
**KIM**

I lived in Oakland, right by Lake Merritt, off of Lakeshore, with my Mom and my brother and would stay at my Dad's house on weekends who lived off of Park Boulevard in Oakland about 15 minutes from my Mom's house. My parents are divorced. My neighborhood was a beautiful tree-lined neighborhood with a fair amount of families with young kids. Quiet for the most part and safe. Many families have lived there for many, many years. I commuted to Lick-Wilmerding High School in San Francisco everyday via BART. It is a private high school with about 400 students in total near Balboa Park. I spent a lot of my time in San Francisco in high school because all my friends lived there, but some time at other friends’ houses in the East Bay as well. If you knew me back then… you would have known that I loved to act, dance, play lacrosse, and play the drums. I played in a jazz band for two years in high school. You would have seen me as very laid back, quiet, almost reserved. When people ask me what my ethnic background is I say… half white and half Asian. If they inquire further I say a quarter Japanese, a quarter Korean and half white. If inquired further I say quarter Japanese, quarter Korean and a quarter German and Welsh.

**KRIZIA**

During my freshman year of high school, I was introduced to Destiny Arts Center. Being a participant in this organization for four years provided me with the opportunity to impact the community through performances and workshops that conveyed a message of non-violence and social justice. While my friends were dropping out of school, getting pregnant and getting into gangs, Destiny Arts Center gave me the strength and knowledge to fight against these negative influences. In high school I started to experience new things that led me to the discovery of new interests. I discovered a passion for dance that had made me extremely proud of myself and gave me much more confidence in my work and my abilities. During my junior year I gained experience tutoring first and second grade students with their homework and subjects such as Math, English, Writing, and Reading. The experience I gained working with young children made me want to become a teacher.

**LENA**

During *Unconditional*, I was living in Oakland California with my mother and grandmother. Our house borders the Temescal and Rockridge neighborhoods, and it’s only about a five-minute drive to Destiny Arts Center. I was an eighth grader attending Julia Morgan School for Girls. Most of my time was spent dancing and doing schoolwork. It was a tough year for me socially and I was struggling intensely with body image issues so a lot of my spare time was dedicated to making sure I was healthy enough physically and emotionally to keep dancing. If anyone really knew me back then they’d have known that I was coping with anorexia and dance was the only thing that inspired me to get healthier in the beginning. I tried to hide this from everyone, even my family at Destiny Arts, but it was pretty obvious. It was also a pretty rough time for me in terms of being really uncomfortable and curious about my identity and being adopted. When people ask me about my ethnic background, I usually say biracial or black and white even though I know there's some more stuff I don't really know about. If people want to know the specifics, all I can say is Ukrainian and North/East African.
MACIO

My full name is Dalmacio Madrid Payomo, but everyone just calls me Macio. I lived in the Temescal area of Oakland with my grandparents, my mom and dad, my three sisters, and my uncle. Growing up my family moved around from place to place but we always seemed to end up at my grandma's house, that's why I've always called it home. Temescal is considered one of the "better" parts of Oakland, but I've seen my fair share of craziness go down here. Since the age of ten I've was home schooled. Catholic private school just wasn't my thing. If you really knew me back then... you would have known that I was really confused about everything and didn't know what I wanted to do later in life. When people ask me what background I am... I'm assuming they mean to ask me what my ethnicity is, so I tell them I'm half Filipino and half Mexican.

MIRANDA

I grew up in Oakland California, where I lived with my mom, dad and sister. I went to Berkeley High School and spent most of my time in school and at Destiny Arts Center. After school ended I would immediately go to Destiny with my sister Navarra. When I wasn't at school or dancing, taking martial arts classes or in rehearsal I would hang out with some of my friends. If you really knew me back then, you would have known that I loved to go mountain biking with my dad and sister and my dog. When people ask what my ethnic background is, I say, “Why do you want to know?”

MORGAN

When I was doing Unconditional at Destiny I was a freshman at Millennium High School, which is an alternative learning high school that I went to due to my lack of motivation in academics. I lived with my mother in Berkeley right by Ashby BART station. My neighborhood was safe. At that point most of my time was spent at Destiny because that’s when I was an assistant teacher for the 7-12 hip hop class. Back then I was still standing very much in my sister's shadow and felt it. Most of my eccentricities could have been me attempting to break from people seeing me as my sister’s baby brother. I also was a little bit of a rebel without a cause; I always felt I needed to fight off anything that I saw holes in. When people ask me what background I am, I ask them to rephrase their question.
NAVARRA

I live in Oakland California with my mom, dad and my sister. I come from a great family who I absolutely adore! I went to Berkeley High School. When I was at Destiny I put a lot of energy into everything that I did. I found it really difficult to balance Destiny and my schoolwork but managed to pull it off. If the reader knew me back then they would probably say that I am an extremely hard worker and that I laugh a lot.

NEENEE

I was living in Berkeley on Harmon Street. It was a pretty cool neighborhood — lots of kids, lots of people. The water was off for part of that year. My mom couldn’t afford to pay water bill and I had to go to my grandma’s to shower. I was doing Destiny, which was hecka fun. Hanging out a lot with Arianna. I was taking classes at Shaw Anderson Ballet. If you really knew me back then, you would have known that Destiny was like my home. It was really really important to me; it was all I had and my mom. I was really worried about my mom back then. When people ask me what my ethnic background is, I say African American.

ROSE

During the time of Unconditional I was in my first year of high school at the Campolindo in Moraga, California. The epitome of a suburban institution, almost everything about Campolindo contrasted with my home life in Oakland, CA where I lived with my parents and younger sister. Thinking back, my freshman year had me split between my life out in Moraga, struggling to find a footing in a community where I felt on the outside, and my life at home and at Destiny Arts Center. I really disliked the social aspect of freshman year. I found myself struggling with my understanding of who I was, where I fit in, and constantly debated whether trying to change to fit into the suburban community my high school was located in was worth it. Ultimately I decided it wasn’t, deciding to rely on Destiny Arts Center instead. Destiny existed as the polar opposite of Campolindo for me. It was the one place outside of my house where I felt no social pressures and could be myself and feel at ease with it. Around the time of Unconditional especially, I was in a state of transition, having decided to transfer out of Campolindo and into Berkeley High. Part of me felt guilty for transferring for preaching diversity and tolerance while simultaneously being unable to practice tolerance for those I was going to school with. Yet I was also really excited to transfer to an educational institution that was in an urban setting and was almost the stark opposite of Campolindo. Most of this year was feeling a little lost, seeking multiple spaces in which I could feel comfortable, evaluating and re-evaluating my personal identity, which ultimately lead to this being a year of transition and shifting. When people ask me what my ethnic background is, I say, ‘Chinese American.’
**SARAH**

At the time of co-creating the show *Unconditional* with the students of the Destiny Arts Youth Performance Company, I was living in Oakland with roommates, very close to Destiny Arts Center. I have always lived close to Destiny because I hate to commute and I also like to live in the neighborhood where I am serving young people and their families. It keeps me in touch with the community that I serve and that’s important to me. My partner at the time was a Spanish teacher who worked at a private elementary school in Oakland. We never lived together so I was in constant back-and-forth-between-homes mode, which was somewhat unsettling. I spent my free time doing a lot of cycling, which she inspired.

If you really knew me back then, you would have known that I had been working with Destiny Arts Center for 15 years and that I was juggling the position of Executive Director and Artistic Director; that I continued to love my work both as an administrator/leader/ fundraiser and a teacher/director but that the work load was mostly unmanageable; that Destiny Arts Center had just moved from a temporary space at the Beebee Memorial Cathedral, a church in North Oakland to co-locate with the North Oakland Community Charter School; that I struggled with balancing the responsibilities of work, family and friends, and that I fell in love with cycling and salsa dancing during that time.

When people ask me what my ethnic background is, I say different things. Sometimes I say that my father is white and my mother is black and that I’m mixed. Sometimes I say that I’m mixed with black and white. Sometimes I say that I’m biracial. I used to be irritated with the question and feel like I didn’t want to explain myself. That’s when I was still absolutely uncomfortable with my own mixed race identity. I felt like I didn’t fit anywhere and I desperately wanted to feel like I was part of a group. I have done a lot of soul searching around this issue. I performed an original two-woman-show called *Portrait of a Girl from Nowhere* for six years that talked about issues of biracial identity. Performing the piece helped me find peace with my identity. So now I feel less defensive when asked what my background is. Of course people will be curious about me. My look begs the question: ‘What are you?’

**SHARMAINE**

Back then, I was going through a hard time. I was living in East Oakland with my uncle. It was a pretty good neighborhood. I could come home late and not have to worry about getting shot or robbed. When I wasn’t at Destiny, I was doing something else ‘cause I had to to survive. I put all my negative energy into my performance. At that time, singing was the only thing that made me happy. For me, to be in Destiny, it was a way to get away from society and reality. I was 19, still in high school, and older than all the other company members. When people ask me what my ethnic background is say that I am black. I am mixed, half Samoan, half black, but I really just tell people I’m black. If you really knew me back then, you would have known that I was a crazy loud girl with a red afro.
SIMÓN

I was born and raised in Baku, Azerbaijan. My family received war refugee status from the United States in 1990 due to a war that broke out between Armenia and Azerbaijan. We moved to the South Bay when I was 12 years old. My brother and I didn’t speak a word of English, and the first few years were definitely filled with many difficulties. This experience has had a huge impact on me and greatly affects my work as an artist and educator.

At the time of creating Unconditional, I was entering my fourth year as the Co-Artistic Director of the Destiny Arts Youth Performance Company. Sarah and I had found a great rhythm of working together, and the company was a solid combination of veteran performers and those who we were committed to developing. What was different about that year is that I was actually splitting my time between Oakland and Saratoga, CA. headRush, the performance group that I was a co-founder and performer of, was awarded a 3-months artist residency at the Montalvo Arts Center. This meant that I would be mostly living and creating new work with headRush in Saratoga, and then driving into Oakland for two to three days a week to rehearse and create with the company. headRush was also performing and touring quite a bit, and even though it was difficult at times, Sarah and I were able to still find a healthy way of working together on Unconditional. When I finally came back to Oakland at the end of the Montalvo residency, I moved into an apartment in East Oakland, just a few blocks from Fremont High School. I began to teach Theater & Leadership classes at Unity and Emery High Schools, which were a great compliment to the work at Destiny.

SUKAY

My name is Sukay Sow. Pronounced su like Susan, kay like "okay," and sow like "so what." When people attempt to read my name they tend to mispronounce it. Because I am not there in person to say my name, it is only fair that I clarify before there is confusion. In person, however, there are follow up questions about my name because it is unique. When people ask me what background I am, I say that my father is from Senegal, West Africa, which is where the name is originated. I was named after my grandmother and it means enlightenment. My mother is from Boise, Idaho and is Caucasian and Native American. When I was working with the company in 2005, I lived in Oakland, CA by Lake Merritt with my Mother and younger brother. I was 14 years old and in my first year of high school at Oakland School for the Arts where I was studying vocal music. I spent my time at school 8am-5:25pm Monday through Friday and Monday, Wednesday, Friday evenings and Saturday mornings at Destiny Arts Center either in dance class or hip hop theater. The rest of my time went to homework and sleep. I played a special role in the company as a special guest, which pretty much meant that I was only there to sing. I got a chance to be a part of the scriptwriting process as well. It was a bittersweet experience for me because I spent a lot of time on the sidelines watching, wanting so badly to be doing what everyone else was doing. When I did get my moment on stage, I loved every single second of it. I laid my heart on the stage and was happy to have the chance to do so.
Chapter 2: One-On-One with Self

To create the possibility to change the world around them, company members began by changing themselves. They went one-on-one with themselves to develop their awareness of their own attitudes, feelings, and beliefs; imagine the world they wanted to live in; and cultivate the capacities needed to relate to themselves and others in ways that would embody that world. Going one-on-one with themselves in this way was a key component in their process of creating social change because, the company believes, as Morgan says, “Change comes from open mindedness. No one will ever be able to change other things without changing themselves.” In the company process, opportunities for company members to go one-on-one with themselves simultaneously functioned as a foundation for their artistic practice. As artists, they had to develop their awareness of what was in themselves and their experiences that they wanted to express; imagine a work of art that could embody and convey that vision; and develop the capacities to create it. The company process built on this connection and intentionally supported company members in an interlinked trajectory of personal and artistic development.

Beginning With Where You Are

To begin every rehearsal, company members came together in a circle in the center of the studio and meditated. On the first day of rehearsal, Sarah and Simón initiated them into this practice. “Cross your legs. Sit up. Close your eyes,” Simón said to the group. “We are beginning a journey. Notice; where’s your body; where’s your mind; your soul?” Adjusting their bodies on the floor, the company members settled into
stillness first and then silence. Like many meditative practices, the goal of this opening meditation was to “bring calm and clarity to the body-mind” helping company members to focus and become fully present in rehearsal, as well as to enable them to become more aware of how they are feeling emotionally and physically and what is on their minds.

(Rockefeller, 2006, p. 1777). As fourteen year-old company member Dharma says, it “helps you concentrate on your thoughts” and “keep in touch with yourself.” After a few minutes of meditation, Sarah called the company’s attention back to the circle, “Take a deep breath in and let it out. When you are ready, gently open your eyes.” “You are beginning a journey, a journey of change,” she then said. “The show [you will be creating] is about change; about changing how others see young people; changing how you see yourselves; and changing how we and others see social issues.” Taking stock of where you are—going one-on-one with yourself—she and Simón made clear to the company, was an important first step in engaging such a journey. The company’s practice of beginning every rehearsal with meditation kept this imperative present throughout the rehearsal process.
After a rehearsal’s opening meditation, Sarah and Simón would invite company members to check in with each other and share things that they noticed during the meditation and any news or updates that they had. This sequence embodied another fundamental tenet of the company’s process of social change—that company members go one-on-one with themselves and become present and self-aware before giving voice to how they are, and going one-on-one, relating and creating, with others. Rashidi, one of the company hip hop instructors, who choreographed two of the dances for Unconditional, says that this opening sequence of rehearsals is key. In meditation, he says, “You get to be with yourself and be quiet for a minute. You can actually see where you are. Then the check-in gives a voice to where you are. You make yourself present and then people can see where you’re at.” Only after this opening sequence of activities does the company move on to its artistic or collaborative rehearsal activities.

Art and Third Space

The arts themselves also provided a means for company members to go one-on-one with themselves. The artistic process requires that an artist enter into a relationship with an artistic medium. The artist brings to this relationship her own imagination, experiences, skills, and capacities and the artistic medium offers her formal structures and possibilities. The artist draws on both of these dimensions to create a work of art. “The creative process,” as Press (2009) says, “is not necessarily a direct one but an inter-subjective exchange between creator and medium” (p. 222); it happens in a temporal space between artist and medium. Arts education researchers and practitioners call this space a “third space”—a space that opens between artist (in a first space) and artistic medium (in a second space) as the artist draws on the possibilities inherent in each to
create (in between) something new (Hannula, 2001; Stevenson & Deasy, 2005). This third space is akin to what developmental psychologists, following Winnicott, call “third area” or “potential space” (Spitz, 1982; Ogden, 1985; Grant, 2006). It is an “intermediate zone” in which, “taking elements from both the inner and the external, ‘shared’ world, a new construct can emerge that contains elements of both” (Creme, 2008, p. 51). This third space supports the cultivation of self-awareness by giving the artist opportunities to explore his inner world in concrete form—be it, for example, movement, words, or character.

**Dance**

In dance, company members describe experiencing third space as an alternate place and time to which dancing transports them. Arianna calls this space her “fairyland.” In Bond and Stinson’s (2000) meta analysis of dance education studies, young people use similar phrases to describe the space they inhabit when they dance: “a world of imagination,” “my own little world,” “escape place,” “a home away from home,” “a zone around me,” “a beautiful world” (p. 72). This space is created as company members bring something of themselves to their relationship with the medium of dance and experience and explore the possibilities of the interconnection between the two.

For Kash, a seventeen-year-old company member and b-boy (or breakdancer), a third space opens as he relates to music through movement. “I like to move to the rhythm of the music, to embody it, and to give it a visual form,” he says. “I use my body through dance to express how the music makes me feel.” “Dance to me,” he says, “is just giving music a body.” When people dance freestyle to the same music, “They all dance in different ways. …Freestyle is like primal. It is just how the music specifically makes you
feel at that instantaneous point in time,” he explains, “Two different people freestyling to the same song would be two different dances, and that shows your specific personality and style even without you meaning it to.” “Dance improvisation,” Bannon & Sanderson
(2000) say similarly, “Is an engagement in the manipulation of the potentialities of form, open to the instantaneous moment of creation and performance” (p. 18). Freestyle dancing, Kash says, is ultimately “a bit of my personality and the music’s personality, because that music has sharp hits and pauses and breaks, and whatever I do for that specific moment is my personality, a relationship to the way the music works.” The relationship that Kash describes is an embodiment of third space—a little of the music’s personality coming together in movement with a little of the dancer’s personality.

*Kash in rehearsal.*
Choreography, like music, is a form with which dancers can relate to create a third space. Choreography carries something of the choreographer’s person and something of the traditions out of which it grows. A dancer in turn brings something of herself to bear in learning and performing the choreography. These two elements come together in her dance, in a third space in between, embodying her relationship to the choreography. Rose, a fifteen-year-old company member says, “I like to have that structure of the choreography and then off of that—I mean it is just like a set of movements, and that is how I think about it, like each one is a movement and then it is your responsibility to make each of those movements fit your body and fit the mood you are in and just make it your own.” “It is like you have a play; it can be produced so many
ways. Two people could produce the same play and they will be completely different,” she explains, “and it is something like that; two people can dance choreography and they can look completely different depending on how they are feeling and how much energy

*Rose in rehearsal.*
they want to put into it, how much of themselves they are willing to pour into that choreography.” In contrast to Kash, Rose finds it easier to be transported to a third space while dancing choreography rather than dancing freestyle. “I actually do not enjoy freestyling that much,” she says, “just because I never know what to do.” Music does not offer Rose what she needs and does not draw out of her enough to create a dynamic third space experience where she and the music meet in her movement.

When Rose rehearse choreography there is interplay between the form of the movement and her body, personality, and feelings. As she explores this interplay, she becomes more aware of how she is feeling and the parts of herself that the choreography is activating in the moment. Press (2008) refers to this phenomenon as a self-empathic relationship. In dance, Press says, “We establish a relationship with movement, and in so doing we establish a self-empathic relationship with ourselves, for we (or our dancers) create the movement” (2008, p. 223). The increasing awareness Rose develops of her inner state of being while she is dancing is essential to finding her optimum fit with the choreography, it also leads to an expanding sense of self-awareness that builds overtime with each opportunity she has to dance choreography. Similarly, as dancers practice freestyling over time they have the opportunity to cultivate self-awareness in the experience of expressing through movement the parts of themselves that are activated by a piece of music and its potential combinations with the vocabulary of movement on which they might draw in their freestyle. “Experienced improvisers,” Bannon & Sanderson (2000) find, “bring to their work knowledge and self-awareness developed from many occasions” (p. 18).
When company members are dancing in third space, they are in what Bond and Stinson (2000) call a superordinary state “in which bodily feeling is heightened with a corresponding emotional and cognitive awareness or transformation” (p.56). In this state, they experience what Susanne Langer (1957, p. 8) calls, “the pulse of our own living” or what young people in Bond and Stinson’s (2000) meta analysis, call “an ‘innerself’ or a ‘transformed self,’” one not always shown to others and often not previously known to

*ARIANNA (LEFT) AND LENA (RIGHT) WORK ON NEW CHOREOGRAPHY WATCHING THEMSELVES IN THE STUDIO MIRRORS.*
themselves” (p. 61). “Whatever you are, when you dance, it’s just you,” says fifteen-year-old company member Amore. Dancing, Javier a sixteen year-old company member says similarly is, “all about you and what you’re feeling.” Arianna says, about the fairyland she goes to when she dances, “I can go there and just find myself. …I find that I’m exactly what I’m supposed to be.”

Interestingly, company members say that one of the ways they find themselves in this space is by first losing themselves. They lose themselves as they become completely absorbed in the moment and movement of the dance and enter a state Csikszentmihalyi (1996) calls flow in which “self-consciousness disappears” (p. 112). In this state, they are removed from the social structures and pressures that ordinarily surround them. As a result, Arianna says, they don’t have to pretend to be anything other than they are. “We walk around every day with this front on because we feel like we have to have this front on,” she explains. But in dance, she says, she enters her own world where these fronts are not needed. In this space she can be herself as she is, freed from responding to external pressures. Fifteen year-old company member, Lena says similarly, “I feel as though where I live and my culture and all that, there’s a lot of judgment and skepticism and just everyone is looking at you like under a magnifying glass all the time, for the most part, and dance is a way even though people are watching you …it is a way for me to really express myself regardless of what people are thinking.” Arianna and Lena’s comments resonate with Csikszentmihalyi’s (1996) finding that, “In everyday life, we are always monitoring how we appear to other people; we are on the alert to defend ourselves from potential slights and anxious to make a favorable impression” (p. 112), whereas, in a flow experiences, “We are too involved in what we are doing to care about protecting the ego”
Csikszentmihalyi (1996) finds that, “after an episode of flow is over, we generally emerge from it with a stronger self-concept” (p.112). Enhanced self-concept is a developmental outcome commonly associated with young people’s engagement in dance and other forms of art (Catterall, Chapleau, & Iwanaga, 1999; Heath & Roach; 1999; Deasy, 2002).

**Writing**

Like dance, writing provides company members a third space in which they can explore their own thoughts, feelings, and experiences. Throughout the rehearsal process, Sarah and Simón ask the performers to free-write, responding to writing prompts—usually a single word, phrase, or question—as a means to explore their thoughts and feelings about particular social issues and to reflect on the relevance of these issues in their own lives. Free-writing offers a space of potential (Creme, 2008) between the issue presented in the prompt and company members in which they can explore their own experiences, emotions, and ideas that the issue brings up for them.

In October, about one-month into the rehearsal process, the company did its third writing exercise. A local foundation had commissioned the company to do a short performance piece about the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. The company created this performance while they were working on *Unconditional*. They performed the piece for several audiences around the San Francisco Bay Area—including a theater in the Presidio, Alameda Juvenile Hall, and Balboa High School—and adapted several of its scenes to be included in *Unconditional*. Before they began the exercise, Sarah explained that the writing that they were about to do would be an important part of developing material both for this piece and for the script for *Unconditional*. The week before, the
A foundation staff member discussed the history of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights with company members, many of whom said they had not known the document existed. As a group, they then read and discussed parts of the Declaration. They spent a lot of time talking about a passage from its preamble that said: “The advent of a world in which human beings shall enjoy freedom of speech and belief and freedom from fear and want has been proclaimed as the highest aspiration of the common people” (UN General Assembly, 1948, p. 1). In the writing exercise, Sarah picked up on this text asking company members to explore the idea of freedom from fear by thinking about how feelings of being safe or unsafe affect their lives.

Company members spread out around the dance studio to find spots where they could be by themselves and reflect and write. Sarah and Simón handed out scrap paper and pencils. “Close your eyes” Sarah then said. “Think about a place you felt completely safe. Open your eyes and write. …If as you write a situation comes up where you feel unsafe, write about that; that's the next part of the exercise. Go from safe to unsafe. If you are in a flow with the first question, stick with it. You don't have to go on to the next question.” Company members wrote quietly. They described moments in their lives they felt safe and unsafe and how those moments mattered to them. They also explored the contexts, people, and situations that influenced their feelings of safety—of being free from fear. As they wrote, company members brought up a range of other social issues that affected their ability to exercise their human rights.

Javier, a seventeen year-old company member who lived in ‘deep East Oakland,’ raised the issue of violence:
I don’t feel safe because I see on a daily basis things that shouldn’t happen like this past Friday I was at a party and my friend… got killed, shot four times. No because I see people scared daily because of the funk they have with other people. Four of my friends have been killed this year.

On the day that Javier wrote this passage, he did not read it to the group. He also did not talk about what happened to his friend with other company members. One of the ways that Sarah and Simón cultivated third space in writing activities was to make it optional for company members to share out with the group what they had written. The material they were developing and the related thoughts and experiences could stay in their writing space, where they could be free to explore it as long as they wanted. Company members did know that Sarah and Simón would collect and read their writing to fuel the scriptwriting process, but company members didn’t have to bring the material out of the written form and into the physical and social space of the company unless they chose to.

Javier continued to explore the moment of his friend’s murder in future writing exercises in rehearsals and scriptwriting sessions. The effect of this death and the regular violence and loss in his life came up in relationship to a range of topics the company explored. In January, in a free-write on the topic of “family,” Javier wrote a piece that became the first draft of the monologue that he would deliver in the final performance about his friend’s murder:

105th Ave. Sobrante Park standing in front of the liquor store at 2:00 in da morning me and Jamal1 waiting for everyone inside to come out to go to spend da night cuzz all of us were tired and half of us drunk. Me and Jamal just talking outside about the party earlier on that night and how one of our friends R.I.P. … got run over cuzz he had some funk wit some b-boys frm da East. My friend Jamal had beef with them, but he wasn’t trying to worsen the situation.

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1 Pseudonym.
Again on the day that Javier wrote this piece, he chose not to read it aloud to the rest of the company. But when Simón and Sarah read they piece, they checked in with him outside of rehearsal and encouraged him to develop this story into a monologue for *Unconditional*. Javier wrote the monologue and in February, a little more than a month out from the show, read it to the company:

> I’ll never forget that day. Me and my friend Jamal were on our way home from a party. We stopped by the liquor store by my house, and waited outside for our other friends. All of a sudden, in a blink of an eye, a car pulls up with some gang bangers. My friend Jamal had beef with them, but he wasn’t trying to worsen the situation. They pulled out the car with black hoodies and black bandanas tied around their noses, pulled the gun in his face and said, ‘Now what? Ain’t gona be F’in with my girl no more, huh?’ 1 2 3 4. Four shots to the head. His blood stained my clothes, stained my hands, stained the street. Lights out.

Javier’s monologue struck a chord with other company members most of whom had been directly affected by violence or had someone close to them who had been. They agreed that the monologue should be part of their performance and Simón helped the company create movement to perform behind the monologue to help heighten the sense of emotion that it conveyed.

Developing the story in writing gave Javier a medium to explore his own thoughts and emotions about his friend’s murder and the effects of violence on his life—topics he said he didn’t talk about with people. “It helped me to be more open about it,” he says. “He told his story,” said Sarah. “I thought it was huge for him, actually – very emotional – and he was really shut down emotionally. Simón noticed it a lot, too. He didn’t want to talk about it. His friend got killed, but he didn’t want to talk about it. ‘I’m cool. I’m cool. I’m cool.’ And then he just got to say it. He got to share it.”
Javier performing his monologue about his friend’s murder in Unconditional.
At another rehearsal where the company was working on the human rights piece, company members talked about the 139 shootings that had already happened in Oakland that year. A visitor from the American rural South asked company members how they dealt with that. Javier said, “It’s no big thing.” Sukay said, “We’re used to it.” A company alumna who was helping with scriptwriting explained that with all the violence you get numb. She said, “Pinch your arm in one spot 139 times. Eventually, you don’t feel anything. It’s numb.”

Javier’s monologue and the movement company members performed behind it became a means for the company to disrupt the numbness that they felt as a result of the recurring violence in Oakland. First, through writing, Javier found a way to allow himself to feel the emotions that he had about the shootings that had affected his life. Through his monologue he then shared these emotions with the company and gave company members an opportunity to feel emotion around the recurring violence in Oakland. The company in turn provided a similar opportunity for others, performing Javier’s story for wider audiences that included hundreds of other Oakland youth. In a sense, the process of creating, rehearsing, and performing Javier’s monologue is a microcosm of the process of social change radiating out from the one-on-one to the group- to the community-level.

**Imagination and Cognitive Liberation**

In another scriptwriting session in January, Lena, fourteen years old and of Lebanese and Ukrainian descent, began work on a performance piece through which she wanted to “reveal” her “passion about the injustices going on in the Middle East.” These passions included, in particular, Anti-Arab sentiment in the US and the lack of knowledge Americans in general have about people living in the Middle East. During a
free-write in a scriptwriting session, she began formulating her ideas about the character she wanted to portray in *Unconditional*.

I feel really hesitant to do an Arab character because I want to be really careful and non-generic. You always see Arabs portrayed as these – or a lot of times female Arabs – as these “hidden” or “trapped” things – seductive, docile, silent, unhappy or you see a slutty portrayal of them – the rebellions. I don’t know how I want to portray her.

I think – she has a fascinating history – she has a lot of emotion harbored inside her and she’s ready to explode. She’s tired of the misrepresentation of her people and she doesn’t have anyone to truly confess her pain to because she’s surrounded by those unalike to her. She has traditional qualities to her – she can cook, but her intelligence is a threat to others. She doesn’t shy away when others do and she questions people.

She’s very warm and people are very attracted to her. But she still feels lonely and is unsure as to why.

I want this character to be fresh… I want to create a character that touches people. Arabs or non-Arabs. I want a clear representation of my people. I just don’t know how to achieve that. URGH!

In developing her character, Lena drew on her own life experience and emotions.

Because of her brown complexion, many people in Lena’s life did not recognize that she had Arab ancestry. “People just really are not used to dark-skinned Arab people,” she says. Because of the assumptions that others made about her skin color, Lena often felt invisible or misunderstood both in Arab and non-Arab communities. In the past, Lena says, she went out of her way to let people know her ethnicity. “I was just going through this phase,” she explains, “where I was really angry at anybody who misidentified me and I would just walk into the room and just make it pretty darn clear [what my ethnicity was]
even when no one really cared. Kind of an embarrassing phase.” But, she says, “so many people are still clueless [about her ethnicity].” Lena was now looking for a different way to embrace and express her own identity as a young woman of Arab descent, despite her contexts in which she felt isolated and even invisible. This experience inspired her idea that her character:

Has a lot of emotion harbored inside her and she’s ready to explode
She’s tired of the misrepresentation of her people and she doesn’t have anyone to truly confess her pain to because she’s surrounded by those unalike to her.

In addition to addressing Anti-Arab sentiment, Lena also wanted to use her performance piece, to “expose” herself “as being Middle Eastern” and to step into and express her Arab identity in an empowered way.

As she worked on the performance piece, Lena came to imagine her character speaking in a voiceover while she simultaneously expressed her emotions through a modern dance solo. In the dance, the character would go through the same arc of emotion that Lena was going through struggling to become strong and visible in her Arab identity. In the early stages of developing the choreography for the dance, Lena said, “It has a lot of expression, a lot of anger and frustration and hurt and confusion. It’s just that whole process that she goes through like being really confused first, and then angry, and then she’s getting really upset and more in the state of that sadness and then just how she emerges from it and in the end just being sort of resilient and like, I’m not going to let this get me down.” Through the combination of writing and dance, Lena was able to explore her experience of how the issue of Arab-American relations affected her, and her struggles to establish and be visible in a self-confident identity.
Lena’s mom observes, “To me, Lena’s piece is about not being seen for who you are and about being judged because of being Muslim. …And personally, for Lena, that was a piece about Lena.” “Lena has struggled so much with being really tired of explaining that she is Ukrainian-Lebanese and not African-American,” she added, “And not that there is anything wrong with being African-American Lena says, but who she is is Ukrainian-Lebanese. And so I think that that was – and modern [dance] is really her thing. So I think she got to express it that way.” A Destiny alumna, Lisie, who was in the audience for Unconditional, says that Lena’s piece was one of her favorite numbers in the show. Lisie has known Lena for several years and said that it seemed like performing the piece had a powerful impact for Lena. “I felt it was probably really freeing for her,” she says, “because it seems like finally she was in her body. Being like this is me and I’m beautiful and I’m dancing and everything. …I think a lot of people have the desire to be a certain way or to like express themselves in a certain way, but then it is really hard, I think. Doing it creatively makes it a lot easier.”

When Lena imagines herself putting her fist in the air at the end of her dance solo, feeling confident in herself and her Arab identity, and being seen by others in that way, she creates the possibility for herself to get to that moment and that feeling. This kind of imaginative activity helps foster what social movement researchers calls “cognitive liberation”—a shift in consciousness that enables individuals to believe that change is possible when they previously did not believe it to be so (McAdam, 1982; McAdam, 1988). “Mediating between opportunity and action are people and the subjective meanings they attach to their situations,” says McAdam (1988, p. 132). Without the belief that change is possible, people are unlikely to take action to effect change (Snow,
Imagination—the ability to “look at things as if they could be otherwise” is a necessary ingredient for social change (Greene, 1995, p. 19). Imagination, Eisner (2002) says, “Gives us images of the possible that provide a platform for seeing the actual, and by seeing the actual freshly, we can do something about creating what lies beyond it” (p. 4).

The imaginative capacity that company members hone in their artistic process supports their personal change. It is also a tool through which they make change in their community. The job of a “revolutionary artist” engaged in making social change, says company hip hop instructor and choreographer Rashidi, is to “think critically about what’s going on… to imagine what the world could be like and put it out there.” Often he says, “It’s hard for people to see the world differently, and if you don’t, then you won’t ever change. If you just see it like it’s always going to be this way, then it will always be this way.” Greene (1995) says similarly, imagination is key to social change because, “a general inability to conceive a better order of things can give rise to a resignation that paralyzes and prevents people from acting to bring about change” (p. 19). Through their process, company members not only imagine how their individual lives might be different than they are, they help audience members imagine how their own and our collective lives might be different (this discussion is continued in chapter five).

**Teaching and Directing for Third Space**

The structures of an art form are key for creating third space. Third space is created between these structures—for example choreography and/or music in the case of dance—and the artist as the artist draws on material in both realms to create a work of art. The relationship between artist—especially art student—and these structures can,
however, also constrict the possibility for third space. This can happen, for example, when an artist becomes so beholden to the structures of the form that there is limited opportunity for him to bring to bear anything of himself to the creation of the work of art. The locus of activity in such instances is skewed toward the domain of the art form rather than taking place in a third space between the form and the artist. Sarah and Simón are careful in their instruction to help company members cultivate a relationship with their art that maximizes the potential of third space and the kinds of superordinary experiences that it enables. They do this in dance, for example, by balancing instruction in dance technique with opportunities for company members to find and feel themselves in their dance. It is possible, Sarah says, “to be oppressed by technique” if the focus on technique is too heavy-handed. “I’ll teach my kids technique,” she says, “but I’m really into how they perform and how they feel and what they can give to an audience. What are you giving and what then can you receive from that gift?” “I had a teacher once who said to me, your technique is beautiful but I don’t see you. You’re absent. That messed me up,” Sarah says, “because this was a teacher I really respected and I was now in the dance company and we were touring to her town and stuff like that. And she was like, oh your technique is beautiful but ...I’m not interested, basically. I thought that was one of my greatest moments of feedback from a mentor—be there, in it.”

Based on this lesson and her experience working with young dancers for more than a decade, Sarah teaches company members technique as a means to express themselves rather than as an end in itself. In practice, this includes scaffolding the learning environment in rehearsals so that company members can learn from her expertise and develop their own by actively engaging in learning as a process. For
example, Sarah would not just teach technique, but would give company members an opportunity to play with it, find themselves within the related movement, and explore its possibilities for expression.

Sarah’s instruction creates another form of third space (Stevenson & Deasy, 2005; Guteirrez & Larson, 1995) in which there is interplay between her expertise and knowledge as a teacher and the knowledge, feelings, and experiences students draw on as learners. This space is an embodiment of what Vygotsky calls the zone of proximal development or “the difference between what the child can do on her own and that which she can do in collaboration with a more knowledgeable other” (Forman, Minick, & Stone, 1993, p. 185). Dharma says that both Sarah and Simón are skilled at creating this zone, “They teach you things. They show you how to do things. They tell you what to do, sometimes,” she says, “and then they let you go off and try things that you already know. …They let you create things of your own and then they help guide you. They do not really tell you exactly what to do, but they guide you through things. And then you can take it from there.” “What I’ve noticed,” Sarah says, “Is that they [company members] appreciate the adult supports rather than just giving them something or just throwing them out on their own and letting them do it all by themselves.” It’s crucial for teenagers to have both “a strong adult that’s giving you really clear boundaries or guidelines,” she says, and “some room to move around in those guidelines.” This dynamic tension is important for helping company members learn an art form at the same time as they learn how to be inside and express themselves through it; it helps company members learn, create, and perform in third space.
Keeping a balance between cultivating technique and cultivating expression, and between youth-driven activity and adult-driven activity is challenging. “I’ve had a lot of trouble with it – and I’ll continue to have trouble – because I think it’s almost the nature of striking that balance,” Sarah says, especially in a process where the adult directors and

Sarah (right) directs an activity during company rehearsal.
youth performers are collaboratively creating a work of art. “Mistakes happen all the time when you’re trying to strike that balance between holding the process as a director and letting the kids be really directors as well. I’ve often tried to describe that to people because it really is a hard balance to strike,” she says. “I think that I do it pretty well a lot of the time and then awful some of the time and mediocre some of the time.” “I think the nature of back and forth is trial and error,” she says.

As a result of their balanced training, Sarah finds that company members stand out among their peers who are learning to dance. She went to a dance production at a local high school, for example, and said that one could easily pick out the Destiny company members on stage. “Five Destiny kids were in the performance,” she says, “and I’m sorry, but those kids can perform.” The high school’s dance teacher agrees. “I can spot a Destiny dancer from a mile away,” she says. They “always stand out: they are remarkably poised, self-possessed and well-trained. …They have a clearly developed sense of their own power on stage… and view performance as a forum for expressing the best parts of themselves.”2 When company members perform they are fully present in their movement; they are feeling it. “Feeling it,” Arianna says, means, “My soul is in it. It means I know what I’m doing. It means I got this.”

**Self-Regulating Emotions**

Part of changing oneself is self-regulating one’s emotions—finding ways to process, release, and channel them that are constructive rather than destructive. Company members say that when they can do this, they are empowered. They are in the driver’s seat in their lives and in a position to create more positive relationships and more positive

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2 Letter of support written by a local high school dance teacher for inclusion in the Destiny Arts Center’s application for an arts education award January 28, 2011.
outcomes in difficult circumstances. Company members say that performance in general, and dance in particular, allows them to do this. Nineteen year-old Sharmaine, a guest artist who sung with the company, says most directly, “Performing for me is more of an anger management thing because I am a very angry person and not to be so evil to

people. I could be evil and I get evil as hell and I think that that’s therapy for me.”

“Performing is therapy,” she says, “because if I’m mad that day or I was mad the whole week about something, I let it out in my performance or in my poetry or in my writing sometimes or even when I sing I let it out, you know. And it is—like as you dance, it’s like a burden lifted off your shoulders, you can feel lightened and can be like, ‘I feel better.’” “I don’t know how to explain it,” she says “it’s just like this feeling you get after you perform and it’s just like the way you feel. It’s like you feel good about yourself, like

Sharmaine working on song lyrics for the performance.
when you take a shower and you’re just feeling fresh, you know. That’s how it is, for real.”

Without the kind of release she gets through performance, Sharmaine says, she can be at the mercy of the emotions she feels and in a state where she is more likely to react destructively than constructively toward people and challenges she might encounter. “When I bottle my emotions in,” she says, “I can lash out any minute and just lash out at somebody or I just break down and cry for no reason. …Because I’m under a lot of stress.” Javier says similarly, “Instead of taking my anger out on something else, I can just like put on some music and I just dance it out – because when I’m dancing it’s kind of like I’m thinking about things and just this movement comes out. …I don’t have to worry about anybody else, just me and the movement, just me putting all my emotions aside, and just laying them right down on the dance floor. Just putting everything right there because that way I won’t have to go out and take it out on somebody else.” Fifteen year-old company member Navarra says, “It is like when you’re in a really bad mood and everything is going wrong and it’s just like, man, this day is not getting any better. But when you come to Destiny and you dance and you just feel everything is going to be all right and you just get all these positive endorphins.” “That makes you feel better,” she adds, “and you usually get it all out, and then, you feel good about yourself when you are dancing.”

For fourteen year-old company member Imelda, dance was an especially important outlet for what she was feeling during the time that she was participating in the company. Imelda lived in Oakland with her parents and twin sister. She and her sister were American citizens but her parents were not. A couple of months into the rehearsal
process with the company, Imelda found out that her father was going to be deported. Her family worked with a lawyer to fight the deportation while wondering what would happen if they had to leave the United States, leaving behind the business that Imelda’s father had built and the only country that Imelda and her sister had ever known. Imelda felt enormous anxiety over the possibility of moving to a country where she had never lived leaving her friends and community in Oakland behind. “I have a lot of problems going on at home with my dad, mom, and my sister and at school and everything. …So when I come here to Destiny, sometimes I felt like, oh, another day at rehearsal, it’s so tiring or whatever. I feel so numb. I think that every time before rehearsal but when I leave, I’m like, I got all of this out.” “When I’m mad,” she says, “I feel like I do it at dancing because I’m taking it out on this dance move, I need to do this. So it does help me get rid of stress.”

Dance gives company members a physical way to process and release their emotions and a constructive medium in which to channel them. It also gives company members a way to express emotions that are difficult to describe in words, an outcome of dance experiences recognized in arts education and youth development research (Ball & Heath, 1993). Rose says, for example, dance “is like definitely an outlet for how I’m feeling. …a lot of times I can talk but it is hard for me to find words that actually describe how I feel. So that if I just put music on, then everything seems to fit into place.”

The Destiny Arts Center initially added dance to its repertoire of nonviolent conflict resolution and martial arts training programs in large part because of the ability of dance to foster young people’s capacity to self-regulate their emotions in the way that the company members describe. Destiny Arts Center founder, Kate Hobbs, believed that
dance would not only draw youth to the center, but that it would allow them to release emotions and to come into their bodies—ingredients that she believes are essential for non-violent conflict resolution. Simón says that non-violent conflict resolution skills are essential to the company’s ability to make social change because, “It’s giving yourself ammunition to be like, ‘Okay. I can flash at them, and they will never listen, or I can slow down... You can’t do social change without conflict resolution.” “Violence,” Sarah says, “often stems from pent-up emotions and feelings of anger. Dance is physically cathartic. It gets youth moving, and expels those tough emotions” (as quoted in Rogin, 2003). In giving company members a means to self-regulate their emotions, dance, says Sarah, is helping them create peace inside themselves. This shift in turn supports them in creating social change beyond themselves by readying them to be constructive forces in the world.

**Creativity, Self-Efficacy, and Agency**

Winnicott (1971) finds that one of the powerful things about a space of potential like the third space in the arts, is that it allows the individual to be creative. “It is creative apperception more than anything else,” he says, “that makes the individual feel that life is worth living. Contrasted with this is a relationship to external reality which is one of compliance.” “Compliance,” he says, “carries with it a sense of futility for the individual and is associated with the idea that nothing matters and that life is not worth living.” The experiences that company members have creating art and creating a vision for social change help foster a sense of self-efficacy—a feeling that they can affect their environment in meaningful ways and shape their own lives and the world around them (Bandura, 2004). This, Simón says, is social change. “If you live your life as a creator,” he says, “you're going to create social change. If you live your life as a consumer and
passer of information that somebody else passed to you, then what's the point?” “In
general in our society,” he says, “We believe that it's up to other people to create for us.
…And it's a scary idea, it's a scary idea that we're all supposed to be passive, and we're
supposed to be consumers. …I feel like all around us, 99.9% of the things we see are
telling us to ignore everything,” he says, “to buy and consume and to just keep walking,
just keep going through it, walking through the motions.” Winnicott (1971) says
similarly, “In a tantalizing way many individuals have experienced just enough of
creative living to recognize that for most of their time they are living uncreatively, as if
captured in the creativity of someone else, or of a machine” (p. 65). “In some way or
other,” Winnicott (1971) says, the “theory [of potential space] includes a belief that living
creatively is a healthy state, and that compliance is a sick basis for life” (p. 65).
“Knowing that you're a creator – living like life is an art form,” you become an agent for
change, Simón says. “To be an agent, is to influence intentionally one’s own functioning,
and life circumstance” (Bandura, 2004, p. 76).

**Voice**

Company members use “voice” to describe the sense of efficacy, agency, self-
confidence, and self-concept that they develop in the company process. Voice is
essentially self-awareness coupled with the capacity to express oneself and one’s beliefs
to others and, in so doing, affect one’s life and world. Rashidi says that, to him,
cultivating voice is one of the primary functions of the company. “The company is a
voice for youth,” he says, “It provides youth with a place to talk about what they feel,
what is going on… It gives them a platform. To me, it is confidence building and helping
them find their voice without telling them, “This is your voice.”” Evoking the idea of
third space, he says, the company stance is “Whatever you feel your voice is, we are going to help you cultivate it, but you got to figure that out.” He points to Javier as an example of a company member’s cultivating his voice through the company process. Javier, he says, had an opportunity “To speak up and to see that his thoughts made a difference. …There were people listening to what he wanted to say, people who responded to what he said. I think that seeing that kept him able to keep speaking up.” Being part of the company, Rashidi believes, helped Javier “to realize who he truly is.”

Javier says that when he first auditioned for the company he did so because he wanted to dance; he was not interested in the “social change piece.” By the end of his first year with Destiny in which he wrote and performed the piece about his friend’s murder, he came to embrace the social change components of the company due in large part in part it seems to the experiences he had in company cultivating and exercising his own voice. Despite his instinct at the beginning of the rehearsal process that he would not continue on with the company in future years, Javier, stayed in company for another year until he graduated from high school (and thus the company) and then returned in subsequent years as a guest, alumni choreographer.

Dharma says that one of the most important outcomes of the company process for her was that she, “found her voice at Destiny.” Her mother agrees, saying that the company gave Dharma and Dharma’s sister who participated in earlier years, “A sense of self that they might not have gotten in school.” In company she says, “You get to explore from all these different angles and find out what you really believe in. And I think that you cannot really know who you are, have a sense of self without knowing what you believe in and what you think is right and good for your own life.” Neenee says echoing

3 Please refer to the Afterword for Javier’s thoughts on this matter.
these comments, “The company, it taught me to, like, just be myself, and that being myself is okay, because people like me being me, a lot.”

Amore says, that because of her experience in the company, she has learned to exercise her voice more in other parts of her life. “I did not use to talk to nobody. …I would say more people know about me now that I have been in the company than when I was not in the company. They knew about me before but they did not hear it from me,” she says. “Before I was in the company, people knew about me but it was not from me. But now that I’m in the company, people know about me and it came from me because I told them and it made me speak more or get out of my comfort zone, as you can call it.”

This change that Amore describes is not easy says Macio, a fourteen year-old company member. “I think that what is hardest for young people,” he explains, “is being able to find themselves so they can say something to other people.” He says that the company experience has helped him with this by helping him develop his self-confidence. “I'm still learning—we never reach that like, ‘I know everything’—but I think my confidence level has increased. All my skills—dancing, martial arts, and whatever physically—have improved a lot. But I think what has most improved is my self-confidence.” Simón says that after the year with the company, “Macio grew tremendously. He is a whole different person. …Way more confident. His confidence level is so huge right now.” Macio’s father agrees saying that he and his wife feel like they watched Macio turn into a butterfly as a result of the company process. The personal transformation that company members undergo through the company process is social change, and it is also the way in which they prepare to make change in the world around them—creating the possibility to relate to others and the world in new ways.
Chapter 3: One-On-One With Others

To create *Unconditional*, company members also had to go one-on-one with each other—they had to develop their relationships to one another, learn each other’s stories, understand the texture of the life experience and opinion in the group, and collaborate to create an original work of art and social change out of this material. As they went one-on-one with each other, company members pushed each other to step out of their comfort zones and question and expand their own perspectives, and in so doing they served as instruments of change for one another. Dharma’s mother uses the metaphor of a rock tumbler to explain this change process: “It is like they are put into the rock tumbler and polished. Each one of them is the rock and the sand as well. It is like they are bumping up against each other and they are bumping up against Sarah and Simón and all their other teachers and choreographers.” “I think that is what the company really is,” she says, “because they come out these shining, beautiful beings, having gone through the fire of self-examination and bumping up against each other’s stuff. And I think that is the very root of social change.”

Holding Space

The third space of the arts helped to facilitate the process that Dharma’s mother describes. In the company process, company members not only experienced the third space of the arts individually, but they experienced it together as collaborators. In the collaborative performing arts, collaborative artists stand together (in the first space) as co-artists to engage the potentials of an art form (in a second space) to create a work of art in a third space in between. To open this third space so that they might enter it
together, they must get to know one another and learn the collective repertoire of experiences, emotions, and ideas on which they might draw along with the potentials of their art form/s in their artistic process. Many theater artists call this space “safe space” (Hunter, 2008; Rohd, 1998). As Augusto Boal says, theater “allows individuals to create a safe space that they may inhabit in groups and use to explore the interactions which make up their lives. It is a lab for problem solving, for seeking options, and for practicing solutions” (as quoted in Rohd, 1998, p. xix). Just as Sarah and Simón are intentional about helping to keep open the space between individual company members and their art, they are intentional about supporting the third space in which company members work collaboratively to create their performance. They consider this space a container for the company process—following Dharma’s mother’s metaphor it is the rock tumbler itself.

Sarah and Simón refer to the role they play in monitoring this space and making sure that it effectively supports the company’s collaboration as ‘holding space.’ This language resonates with the term “holding environment” in developmental psychology, which Winnicott (1960) used to refer to the psychosocial environment that a mother provides for an infant’s development. Kegan (1982) and others (Helsing, Drago-Severson, & Kegan, 2003; Noam & Tillinger, 2004) pioneered the application of this concept to other developmental contexts across the life span, using it to refer more generally to an environment that supports positive personal and social development. “A holding environment must hold,” Kegan says, “where holding refers not to keeping or confining, but to supporting (even ‘floating,’ as in an amniotic environment) the exercises of who the person is” (Kegan, 1982, p. 162). In holding space for the company, Sarah and Simón work to create just this kind of a context where company members can be fully
present in the space as who they are—and therefore visible to one another—and where
they can determine together who they are as a company and what they have to say to their
audience.

Sarah and Simón hold space in part by structuring rehearsals in a consistent
way—these structures are the most tangible manifestation of the temporal container for
the company process. To begin every rehearsal, Sarah and Simón call the company
members into a seated circle on the floor in the center of the rehearsal studio for
meditation and facilitate a group check-in and give an introduction to the day’s rehearsal.
Every rehearsal ends with company members seated back in a circle in the center of the
studio. In this circle they debrief the day, make announcements about upcoming rehearsal
and performance activities, and give each other “props.” Shorthand for “propers,” props
is an expression meaning to give someone the proper respect he or she is due. During
props, company members often take the opportunity to recognize contributions that
others made to the day’s rehearsal both artistic contributions—for example, a well
executed dance—or in regard to the social life of the group, for example, an act in which
one company member helped another out or played a leadership role in the rehearsal.

Following the closing circle, the company members all stand, put a fist in the center of
the circle, and say one word together while raising their fists up toward the ceiling. This
word is often “destiny” or another word or phrase, such as “trust” or “human rights,” that
might reflect the theme of the day’s rehearsal. Company members then gather their things
and leave.

In addition to beginning and ending rehearsals with a circle, company members
will gather in a seated circle in the center of the studio whenever they are sharing out

writing or holding a group discussion. The circle as a structure thus, not only functions to contain the company process by book-ending rehearsals, but also by embodying the container for group exchanges. As a form, the circle is a common feature of safe space because it allows participants to see one another (Holley & Steiner, 2005). It is frequently used in theater as a working form among actors who are in the early stages of rehearsing a piece that they have not yet staged and gotten up on its feet. The circle, or cipher, is also an important form in hip hop—providing a container or embodiment of community for emcees and dancers performing in interplay with one another.

During the company’s first rehearsal when company members were sitting in a circle to share their writing and stories with one another, Sarah called their attention to

*Company members sit in a circle for a read through of the script for a new scene.*
the importance of the circle as a container for their process and the need for company members to keep the container intact with confidentiality. Sarah said that everything said in the circle should stay in the circle, which meant not discussing the things company members shared outside rehearsal, not even with company members who normally would be in the circle but who had been absent that day. The only exception to this rule she explained is that she and Simón are mandated reporters and they, “have to tell if you are being hurt or hurting someone.” Visitors to company rehearsal are required to join the circle rather than to sit outside it and watch in order to keep the container of the circle intact. While Sarah and Simón generally call the company to “circle up” at appropriate moments, company members will also call for a circle when they feel one is needed. In a rehearsal during tech week, for example, tension was building between some of the company members back stage, and Javier said to the group, “Can we please get into a circle where we can handle this properly?” Over the course of the process, company members increasingly helped hold the space through these kinds of actions.

**Openness and Trust**

Openness and trust are the two key qualities that Sarah and Simón cultivate in the space in order to support the company process. These qualities facilitate company members’ taking risks to share things about themselves in the space—a necessary condition for them to get to know one another and to bring into the space the material from their lives that will become the basis for their performance. In the early stages of the company process, Sarah and Simón lead icebreaker activities as a means to foster openness among company members. They begin with activities that are “not too deep” and then work their way into exercises that get at more personal issues and stories.
In the company’s second rehearsal Simón led an icebreaker activity asking company members to stand together in the center of the rehearsal studio. He then gave company members two options and directed those who agreed with the first to move to one side of the studio and those who agreed with the second to move to the other side. “If you’d rather spend the last day of your life on the moon move over here,” he pointed to one side of the studio. “If you’d rather spend the last day of your life at the beach move over there,” he said pointing to the other side. The company members sorted to the ends of the studio and noticed where everyone was standing. Simón then continued, “If you were a superhero would you rather be able to fly or read people’s minds? Fly, stand over there. Read people’s minds over there.” The topics Simón introduced were light in nature, but allowed company members to begin to learn about each other and to have the experience of becoming visible to other company members as they moved and stood to be associated with a particular opinion or experience.

As the rehearsal process continued, these icebreaker activities asked company members to take bigger risks and make visible aspects of themselves that were more personal. In the following rehearsal, for example, Simón and Sarah led an activity called “if you really knew me.” For this activity, the company sat in a circle on the floor of the studio. They took turns going around the circle and each person completed the phrase, “if you really knew me, you’d know…” Sarah instructed the company members to share something about themselves, but not to go “too deep” yet. She modeled what she meant by not too deep, saying, “If you really knew me, you’d know that I went to high school in the Bahamas.” They went around the circle, taking turns. “If you really knew me, you’d know I have a twin sister,” Imelda said. “If you really knew me, you’d know I’m in a
band,” said Dharma. After all the company members had had a turn, Sarah asked them to do another round going a little deeper. Again, Sarah went first and then the company members followed. “If you really knew me, you’d know I’m bi-racial,” Rose said. “If you really knew me, you’d know I live in a foster home,” said Dawon.

After they had gone all the way around the circle again, the group debriefed the activity. Sarah said, “I noticed laughing. We were laughing with each other; I want to emphasize *with*. But I also want us to notice whether we had any moments of ‘Ok, I know that person. I’ve gotten them figured out. I know that type and kind.’ I want us to stay open to get to know each other and not to type or judge one another.” Openness, Sarah suggested, means meeting and understanding others in their own terms and not letting preconceptions and stereotypes get in the way.

Sarah suggested to the company that sometimes when we judge other people, it often is rooted in something we are not comfortable with within ourselves. Cultivating compassion and openness for others requires cultivating understanding for ourselves and being able to examine and reconsider the things that make us uncomfortable—another reason why the company’s process is grounded in opportunities for company members to go one-on-one with and create change in themselves. “I was at this meeting for bi-racial people,” Sarah shared with the company. “I’m bi-racial—my mother is black and my father is white—and people were going around telling their stories and I was being harsh and judging: oh they’re this, they don’t get xyz. And then when it came around to me, I had to make a confession that that had been my attitude. I was being harsh to them because I was being harsh on myself.” “Sometimes when we’re being harsh on someone else,” she said, “it’s because you’re being harsh on yourself. You’re seeing something in
them something you’re not comfortable with—maybe something about yourself. I want us to stay open.” A good company member Dharma says is, “Someone who is open, very open, because you kind of have to be. Everybody in the company is different, and you cannot be close-minded because that is just going to shield—it is going to block you from communicating and being able to talk or to expressing yourself to the fullest.” This quality of openness Dharma says is something that company members develop naturally during the rehearsal process, “It is not really anything you have to work to be. It is just going to happen.” At the beginning of the rehearsal process she says, “Of course there was judgment; there is always judgment. You make assumptions but then you learn more about the people you are with and you kind of learn to expect the unexpected.”

In addition to icebreaker activities, one of the ways in which Sarah and Simón help to nurture this quality of openness is by modeling it in the stories they share about their own lives and experiences as Sarah did in telling the company members about her experience in a meeting for bi-racial people. “The culture that Sarah and Simón set for us was really out there, open, really positive,” says Javier. “Sarah and Simón let us know that they made it to be okay for us to be open about ourselves and not be judgmental.” “The stories they tell us about themselves, it is like, ‘Wow!’” Javier says.

Openness and trust are mutually reinforcing in the company space. Openness cultivates trust—as Imelda says, “Because here people are free to be unique and people are not afraid to show who they are, that kind of builds trust because they trust us not to make fun of them because they are being themselves”—and it also demands trust. Company members are more likely to take the risks to be open with one another about what they have experienced and what they think and feel, if they believe they can trust
their peers in the company. As Rose says, “I do not really like trusting people with my stuff just because you do not know what is going to happen, and I’m scared they are going to blurt it out, so I think trust is really important.” To help build trust among company members explicitly, Sarah and Simón use trust games—particularly trust falls and trust walks—which are common tools for nurturing trust in arts and education settings (Rohd, 1998). Referencing the importance of trust to safe space, Rose says, “We take a good couple of months to do those games where we make sure that we know we are in a safe environment and we create a safe space for each other.”

The qualities of trust and openness also facilitate the development of voice discussed in the previous chapter. They support company members in taking the risk to exercise their voice in rehearsal thereby giving them opportunities to get feedback from
company members and to further develop, with this input, their sense of self, what they have to say, and their ability to communicate it to others. As Neenee says, for example, in company, “I learned to be myself and that it’s okay to be myself. Because when I was in school, I used to just try not to say anything, as much as like, just comment on what other people say by using what they say as an answer, to not be wrong. But Destiny made it okay to be wrong, to say what you think is on your mind.” Macio’s father says similarly, the company “Is giving [company members] that opportunity to just say what they want to say, do what they want to do, and follow through it, and look at how you would follow through with it.” “I think a lot of it has to do with that safe environment,” he explains, “to be able to express yourself and find yourself and to not worry about how you are going to be judged or how you are going to be perceived.” For the company, safe space does not mean risk averse. In fact, much the opposite, it means a context in which it is safe to take risks.

**Pluralism**

In Dharma’s mother’s rock tumbler metaphor, the company members are the rocks. They shape one another’s development in their interactions. As Kim says, “I think Sarah and Simón are just facilitators. They kind of facilitate the process for us. I don’t think we realized it but it’s us who are really educating each other.” Sarah, says of this phenomenon, “I let the conversation happen because that’s just social change in and of itself to let kids talk about stuff and write it and perform it. And I give them ideas, ask them questions, talk about my own experiences so that it’s a role model to them that talking about their own experiences is powerful.” Sometimes, she says, the change “Happens verbally or on a page or in the theater or it happens nonverbally, like some
people might just watch somebody for a year and be like, wow! I get to be around somebody that I never would have thought of being around. That’s changing somebody’s life without even the conversation.”

Clockwise from bottom center: Javier, Krizia, Navarra, Rose, and Kash pose for a photo.

The company’s diversity is a critical mechanism for creating one-on-one change. Every year, Destiny recruits a diverse pool of young performers to the company audition and selects for the company a group of performers that as much as possible mirrors Oakland’s socio-economic, racial, and ethnic diversity. As a result, the company process gives company members opportunities to cross the boundaries of social categories that

5 According to the Census 2000, the population of the City of Oakland was 31.3% white, 35.7% black or African American, 0.07% American Indian and Alaska Native, 15.2% Asian, 0.05% Native Hawaiian and Other Pacific Islander, 11.7% some other race, and 5% two or more races. The population was 22.9% Hispanic or Latino and 78.1% not Hispanic or Latino (http://www.bayareacensus.ca.gov/cities/Oakland.htm downloaded 10/25/10). Of the 16 full company members and two guest artists selected for the company described in these pages, six are black, six are bi-racial, three are white, and three are Latina/o. Twelve of the company members are female and six male. Thirteen were eligible for scholarships to pay for the dance classes at Destiny that company members are required to take outside of company rehearsals to further support their growth as dancers.
keep them separated in other parts of their lives—particularly in their neighborhoods and schools—and learn about each other’s lives and how social structures and issues shape the lives of those from backgrounds different than their own. Navarra says, “We are getting to meet other people of different races and who have different stories and who have come from different places. So I think you learn a lot. Because a lot of times we are in our classrooms, we just stay in our own little world,” she explains, “and we do not really get to know other people, like maybe not as many different people. You kind of like stay with the people that you are familiar with—people who look like you.” By contrast, in the company she says, “You just really get to know other people. You really get to know their stories.” Amore says similarly, “I like being in Destiny because it is not just dancing; it is acting and being around different people. …You meet new people, get new friends, get to know new things every day.” “When you come to Destiny,” she says, “you just get out of your comfort zone.”

Being in such a diverse performance company Kim says, has “been so awesome, because I feel like only in a group like this, where there’s so much diversity, would I be able to be exposed to so much culture and a lot of things that I wouldn’t receive in my environment at school.” “Like we perform at Carnival,” he says, “None of my friends really want to go to Carnival. It’s just like, different, and I really like it, because all these kids have backgrounds that nobody around me in my environment really have. They haven’t experienced the things that these kids have experienced.” “If I hadn’t been around these kids,” says Kim, “would I have really taken an interest in kids living in East Oakland, would I have a reason to? I’m in my environment at Lick [Lick-Wilmerding High School, a private school in San Francisco], and I’m comfortable there, so why go
out and try to understand other people, you know? So it’s like, definitely one of the most educational experiences I’ve ever had.” “In many ways a day at Destiny teaches me so much more than a day at school ever could,” Kim says, “because it’s like hands on addressing the world, the real world and what’s happening today around us. … And I think school education is very important but Destiny is just showing me a completely different side, a completely different world, a kind that I’ve never experienced before.” “I feel like I’m one of the only kids in the company that goes to a school like Lick-Wilmerding, and that kind of made me like pretty uncomfortable and self-conscious at first,” Kim says. “I really didn’t want to say that I went there. All these kids are saying I go to Oakland Tech and stuff. That’s kind of passed, I feel like these kids are really accepting. I feel like hanging out with these kids and being around them I learned so

*Left to right: Macio, Javier, Kim, Amore, Navarra, and Kash rehearse a scene on the theme of family.*
much just by sitting in a room and discussing things with them and discussing where I’m coming from.”

To Simón, “moments of being uncomfortable” like the one Kim describes are the most important outcome of having a diverse group of performers in the company. “You have to be uncomfortable to create change,” he says. “You have to be uncomfortable to create a show that's going to open up people's hearts. Because if we did everything that's comfortable, it would be static; it would be static noise—the same old thing over and over again.” Arianna’s grandmother says that comfort with this kind of discomfort is one of the things that impress her about Destiny. “There’s a certain transparency” at Destiny, she says, “that living in a multi-cultural world doesn’t mean that everything is all beautiful, that everybody gets along, that everybody loves each other in the same way, in the same focus, in the same intensity. Living in a multi-cultural world – living – means that we are able to ride the ups and the downs, the ins and the outs of who we are, and still manage to stay together.” The safe space that the company creates is key to enabling moments of discomfort to be generative. As Holly & Steiner (2005) find examining safe space in educational settings, “Safe space does not necessarily refer to an environment without discomfort, struggle or pain. Being safe is not the same as being comfortable. To grow and learn, students often must confront issues that make them uncomfortable and force them to struggle with who they are and what they believe” (Holly & Steiner, 2005, p. 50).

Because of their experience going one-on-one with each other and getting to know young people from a range of backgrounds and with a range of interests, company members say that they develop the capacity to be friends with a larger range of people
than they might have before. Kash says, for example, “Everyone at Destiny is talented in what they wish to do, and the fact that Destiny mixes all these different talents together for the show opens our range to who could be our friends and what we can and intend to
do.” Kash found that, though he and Kim come from different backgrounds in regard to race and socio-economic status, he learned through the company process that he shared more in common with Kim than with any of the other company members. “Me and Kim,” Kash says, “of all people in Destiny, have the most in common. We both like to dance and to act and we write; we listen to the closest thing in music. Me and him both have this motivation off of each other to constantly improve, and I do not know why he started breaking but I think that I might have had something to do with it.”

Similar to Kash, Navarra says that Destiny has opened up the possibility for her to be friends with a wider range of people. “My school is pretty diverse, but everyone stays in the same, like, group of people as their race so even though it’s so diverse, it’s like, you might as well be in your own school,” she explains. “So at Destiny – it’s not true for me, because I have friends of a bunch of different races and like Destiny makes you value that more,” she says. “And since Destiny is so diverse, and you think of it as home, so it’s just kind of more like, I don’t know, a nice building block for your life.” Dawon says, “I have changed in a way where I can accept people more due to performing with the company and just talking with each individual.” A company alumna, says similarly, “Destiny young people are much more conscious – much more comfortable and also, much more comfortable with people of other races.”

**Getting to Know One Another—Beyond the Superficial**

One of the reasons company members say that they learn to become so comfortable with people from different backgrounds through the company process is that it gives them opportunities to get to know one another in depth and to learn the different facets of each other’s personalities. As one alumna says, in the company, “You get a
chance to know people beyond superficial levels. You really get to know people for who they are.” Amore says similarly, in the company, “You see something new in these seventeen people who come every Monday and Wednesday, and then for two weeks [leading up to the final performance] every single day, from four to ten.” “At school,” she explains by contrast, “We have 1,200 kids... and it’s like you don’t really get a chance to meet everybody and fully become their friend, you get to know them, of course, but you only get to know the obvious of that person, and you keep seeing the obvious, and keep seeing the obvious.” “You get to see a lot more. You get to see every side of the people in Destiny instead of just one side of the people in school. So it’s kind of like better friendships in Destiny than school,” she adds. Amore and other company members
attribute the opportunity they have to get to know one another beyond superficial levels, not only to ice breakers, trust exercises, and group discussions included in rehearsals explicitly for these reasons, but also to the dance and writing that they do together.

**Dance**

As described in the previous chapter, when they dance, company members explore and express who they are. As they dance together in rehearsals and performances they have an opportunity to witness one another’s expression of self and to learn about each other and the different facets of one another’s personalities. As Neenee puts it, “Individuals are showing their personalities through dance and others are seeing them and experiencing their energy. You feel the person when they dance.” This opportunity to learn about one another through dance was particularly pronounced during rehearsals of a dance number called, *Sexy Back*. Rashidi choreographed this number for the company to Justin Timberlake’s song by the same title, out of a desire to draw attention to the way in which hip hop has traditionally called on dancers to express their own “flavor” through movement. When the company began work on the number, he explained that it was not about what you might think based on the title. “It’s not about sexy in terms of sex; it’s about bringing yourself and how you feel to the dance,” he said. Arianna responded, “You don’t have to be sexual to be sexy.” “Yes,” Rashidi said, “sexy can mean fly, sexy can mean feeling yourself.” The song has a “hard beat,” he said, and invited them to feel it and to hit the choreography hard like the beat with their own personality and attitude. When he first heard Timberlake’s line, “I’m bringing sexy back,” Rashidi says, “What it hit for me is like, ‘I want to do a hard core b-boy routine to this,’ because to me, that is sexy, bringing back the old school, …bringing sexy back in the form of the original idea
of what the hip hop experience was.” “The way hip hop is going,” he says, “It’s going away from the dancing right now. …I feel like we are bombarded with sex and sexual images and women think that they have to wind on the dance floor in a sexual way. …And I say, ‘No, you do not,’” “If you really want to learn about that type of movement,” he says, “Go back and think about Tahitian, think about African, think about Latin music and dance. …Because it is not always sexual when they are winding. What makes it sexual is when you start licking your lips and putting that face on it.” “It is all about the energy put on it,” he says. In teaching the company the choreography for Sexy Back, he emphasized the importance of their putting their own energy into the movement.
“When I’m saying sexy back,” he emphasized in rehearsals, “It’s about hitting it with your own flavor.”

Morgan performs his monologue in Unconditional.

The idea of sexy as feeling yourself and embodying your own flavor rather than being sexual became a theme in Unconditional and Morgan wrote a monologue on the topic. The idea was important to him. A fourteen-year-old with long hair who many people mistook for a girl, Morgan was secure in his own style. He wore what he wore—including pink and purple, his favorite colors—because it was what he felt, not because he was trying to make a point or get a particular reaction from other people. In Unconditional, he performed his monologue right before the Sexy Back dance number:

No, I’m not trying to make a political statement. I was not raised to think that pink was for girls, I don’t wear pink so people will think I’m weird. I wear pink because I like it. My long hair is not me calling out for someone to help me. I don’t try to push gender boundaries; that is not what I do. Me
wearing pink and purple, a trench coat and long hair does not have a
greater meaning, I’m wearing it because I like it and it’s comfortable. I’m
not calling out for you to look at me twice. I just want to wear the clothes
that I wear without anyone bothering me about it. I’m just another person
out of six billion in the world and I’m not an advertisement for anything.
I’m me. And I’m just sexy. Sexy…what I know from the mainstream
media’s interpretation are breasts popping out of shirts, skirts that don’t
even cover anything, high heels to break your ankles, tattoos leading
down, tall muscled men. We are taught that sexy is to be sex, not to be
attractive using your uniqueness. We are taught that sexy is mindless, not
a style or attitude that’s attractive. Sexy is no longer an adjective, it’s a
verb. I think sexy should be an attitude where in the first 5 minutes of a
conversation you should be able to make people smile. Not like “hey
baby” but like “hey.” A confidence. That’s sexy. I’m sexy.

Company members, said that Sexy Back was one of their favorite dance numbers in
Unconditional because, not only did they get to embody their own uniqueness as Morgan
calls it, but they got to move together with others doing the same. “It feels really good
doing it,” Macio says. When they get to see and feel other company members’
personalities while they dance together as they did during Sexy Back, Neenee explains, it
not only helps them to learn about one another but it inspires and fuels their dancing.
“You bounce off of what they [other company members] have,” Neenee says. “You’re
sharing energy at the moment because when you see them going all out and feel’n it you
wanna feel it like they feel’n it, so you go even harder and you share that with them, you
share that with everybody because you’re juiced, and they get juiced, and we’re all
sharing juice.”

When Lena worked with Jamilla, a company alumna, to choreograph her solo for
her piece on Arab-American relations, they had an experience of the sort that Neenee
describes—each moved in her own way and they bounced of each other’s movement and
style to create a dance inspired by both. When they started working on the piece, Lena
says, “We just played the music for a while and just started moving. …It’s way easier
when there’s two people because you can sort of bounce off of each other’s ideas. …We just started moving and we just started slow and it came out.” “It was cool,” says Jamilla who was primarily responsible for developing the choreography. “I was making it up, but then I felt like I did it and then she would do it and then she would do something extra. And I was like, ‘Oh, that was really cool.’ …and I would do something and she would say, ‘Oh, wow. That was really cool because you did this but I hadn’t done it like that.’” Jamilla remembers in particular, one movement that Lena did that made her think of a woman covering her face. She says that she then adopted the movement into the choreography and then Lena noticed and liked it. “But,” Jamilla says, “I only did it because I was watching her do it and then she was watching me.” “And then, she is just like – she would just do stuff because she can do some stuff like her back is a lot more flexible than mine. She just has a really cool way of moving that I do not do. So I was like, ‘Wow. That looks really good. You should do that,’” Jamilla remembers. They each learned from the other as they collaborated and created a dance that embodied their interaction with each other and the music for the piece.

**Writing**

Company members also learned about each other through writing. When they did writing exercises, they wrote independently going one-on-one with themselves first. Then they would circle up and debrief the activity. During this time, if company members chose, they could share what they had written with other company members and respond to one another’s writing. The day that Javier began writing about his friend’s murder, for example, other company members wrote about their experiences of feeling safe and
unsafe. Though Javier did not share his writing on this day, many other company members did. Dharma read:

The times that I feel totally safe are when I am at a local show in a mosh pit believe it or not. I am surrounded by people I don’t know and I’m sure

Dharma at rehearsal.
some are crazy, but you can trust that the minute you get knocked down, there will always be someone to help you back up, maybe even the person who knocks you down helps you up. You know that when someone else near you falls, you in return will help them up. In one instance, to me a mosh pit is like a big whirlpool that you’re caught in and it is certain that you will lose balance at some point, but by being a community to help someone up, the whirlpool is stronger. It is strong with unity and trust and unconditional respect. It’s the village that raises me up. We keep each other up. In another instance, a mosh pit is also like a big chanting circle at a pow wow, which brings me back to my Native American roots and that makes me feel safe in my culture of many colors and cultures.

Navarra read:

I feel safe walking into my parents’ bedroom, light shining in through the big windows. My mom and dad lying in bed, it’s a Sunday morning. I crawl onto the big white bed and snuggle under the warm covers my mom on one side my dad on the other. I snuggle in between them and tell my parents about my dreams. I always feel safe in my parents’ bed …I always feel safe when I’m with my parents.

Kash read:

I feel safe when I dance to music I know well. I feel each movement better and each breakdown. The words are in my head but I can’t hear them. I can’t hear myself breathe. I know everything I’m about to do even though its freestyle cause I know my body. Most people hate what they don’t understand and they also don’t feel safe around it. …That’s why people create groups and stereotypes to help relate to and identify with these groups. Most people who are alone feel unsafe.

Dawon read:

The only time I felt safe was the day I was born as my mother held me close and even to this day as she lies in her grave I can still feel the touch of her finger tips and arms around me. A time I felt unsafe was when my father snatched me from my mother and for years he kept me in solitude until I was saved by my loved ones.

Sharing their stories in this way allowed company members to learn about one another’s stories and the variety of ways that feelings of being safe and unsafe surfaced in and affected their lives.
The insights that they gained into one another’s lives through this process helped cultivate empathy—the capacity “to step outside of given situations to watch, to listen, and to feel, and to feel as others as much as to feel things about others” (Smith, 2006, p. 22)—an outcome often attributed to collaborative artistic processes like the company’s (Catterall, 2002; Eisner, 2002; Greene, 1995; Heath & Roach, 1999). One result of this growing empathy for one another’s experiences was a heightened sense of understanding and patience with certain behaviors that company members exhibited in rehearsal. As Kim says, it was important for him to learn everyone’s stories and then “see the way they behave with these stories inside of them.” Navarra says, similarly, “Sometimes things would like hella irritate you, and then you find out like, the other side, the big story, like, more about the person. Then you’re like, ‘Oh, okay, that’s why. Now I cannot be so annoyed.’” As youth create performances together, Heath (2003) finds, they “take on learning how to see and feel the world as another. …In doing so, they accept the need to decouple their previous expectations of others and of themselves” (p. xiv).

In a scriptwriting session, Dawon shared more details about life experiences he had hinted at in the piece he wrote about safety. He spoke about being taken from his mother by his father, his mother’s death, his sibling’s death, his life in foster care, and his experience in the juvenile justice system. Simón recalls this as one of the importantly “uncomfortable” moments in the company’s work together. “Everybody in their own way heard his story and how much pain he's been through,” he says, but they didn’t

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6 While addressing these behaviors, their roots, and their effects was an important part of the company process, the specifics of these behaviors are not detailed here due to the ethical standards of reporting research in studies like this one where participants do not have anonymity. As artists, company members considered themselves public figures and elected to have their real names used for this study. The personal stories that are revealed in this research narrative are those that company members had already chosen to make public in their performance of *Unconditional*. 

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necessarily “know how to take it in. …And I feel like people kind of ended up resorting to the same old words that they were used to, like I remember Rose being like, ‘It's amazing, it's amazing.’ It's a word that she knows, so she used it.” The experience was outside of her comfort zone. From this place of discomfort, company members then had to open to learn from Dawon in his terms how these experiences affected and shaped him.

“I wanted to finally start to express my feelings about what happened in a new way and let everybody know a little bit of what happened behind me that they could understand.” Dawon added what he shared that day to what he had written about the only moment he remembers feeling safe to create a poem, which he performed as a monologue in the company’s final performance:

The only time I felt safe was the day I was born as my mother held me close and even to this day as she lies in her grave I can still feel the touch of her finger tips and arms around me. Rehabilitation, beers floating, marijuana in the air, I see a dove flying about in the sun, but, when the earth shifts and shakes, the dove falls into a child’s sleep creating emotion, through the trees, through the grass and the dirt and roots beneath it. I want… the distinct breath of life, the precise sip of water and the strength to bear the world as it comes. I am breathing, I am breathing, I am, I am the tree breathing into the cold earth. Empty and alone.

In this poem, Dawon explains, “I used metaphors all through …It is about me, my mother, my father, our struggles that I went through with all of it.” Dawon delivered his poem and then danced a solo center stage while Sharmaine, standing behind him upstage, sang Motherless Child. In the second act of Unconditional, Dawon’s storyline continued with an ensemble dance, which Sarah choreographed to Wade in The Water. The dance featured Dawon supported by other company dancers. Together, these numbers, Dawon says, tell the story of his journey through life and how “I left my father’s house …I just left and I never came back, from what he was doing to me.”
When Dawon shared his story, it gave the company insights into some of his behaviors in rehearsals. He often, for example, would move in exaggeratedly large movements while learning choreography, sometimes entering other dancers’ space in a way that frustrated and sometimes angered them. Learning the experiences that Dawon had been through and the social and developmental supports that he hadn’t had growing up, helped company members to be more understanding when Dawon crossed the boundaries of their personal or dance space, even when their own frustration persisted in such moments. During his second year in the company, Dawon was able to articulate in words the connection between his childhood and his behavior in rehearsals. He said he realized that to many people his behavior could seem childish at times, but that often in those moments he is acting child-like rather than childish. He said that company
rehearsals were a place where he could act childlike in a way that he hadn’t had the
opportunity to growing up, and he asked the company to be patient with him and
understand the importance of that experience for him. Through the process of working
with the company, Dawon says, “I have learned to pull more people in rather than push
them away like I would normally do.”

Sharmaine sings “Motherless Child” behind Dawon (unseen) dancing center stage.

Company members also recognize the importance of empathy for their
collaborative artistic process. Sharmaine says, for example, “I think that if I do
collaborate with somebody they have to feel what I’m feeling. …If somebody feels what
you’re going through it’s like, our writing will come together and it will piece together.
It’s like clay, you’re molding it together like yeah, this with this and this together, you
know.” Sharmaine said that the empathy she had for Dawon’s story played an important role in her collaboration with him on his scene. About singing *Motherless Child* while Dawon danced she says, “When I did my part with Dawon, I was really singing from my heart, you know, because I know what it feels like for your mother not to be there.” “My mother is alive,” she explains “and she's never been there for me, so, it's like I feel where you're coming from, I mean I know my mother, she might as well be dead. She don't call me or nothing like that, or, never give me nothing for my birthday.” During the scene she says, “I was singing from my heart, and he was dancing, you can tell, when he was dancing, he was feeling it. It's just like, you put your emotions in your performance it shows, and I think we did a good job on that part.”

Company members say that the way they go one-on-one with each other through the company process also changes them as individuals. As Sarah says, company members “connect with themselves through connecting with each other” (Destiny Arts, 2005). “I mean it changes us,” says Rose of this phenomenon. “I learn a lot. And I develop and mature as a person. My views on other people and situations always get changed and go back and just bounce around. … I think any situation [like this one] where people become more aware of what is going on, become more inspired, and more motivated to do something positive is social change.”

Arianna says that being in the company has made her a better person and has improved her social skills. “When I first moved out here [from New York City],” she says, “I’m not afraid to admit it; I did not have really good social skills, at all, not even a little bit. I just spoke what was on my mind, because I have a really mean mind that I usually talk mess about people in my mind a lot of the time. I would just say it, and think
everything was okay, and people hated me. But I think, because of Destiny,” she says, “and because of my grandmother, I’ve learned, ‘Can’t do that.’ I’ve learned how to make family, and I’ve matured in so many ways I can’t even say. Like, I’ve learned how to connect with people and how to be a good listener, and how to be a good learner, and how to be a good teacher – just all around good person.” “I learned,” she adds, “that, like, even though you have problems with people, you can’t always give up. It’s not good to give up. Keep trying when you have a problem with someone, keep trying to work it out.” Resonating with the rock tumbler metaphor, Arianna says, “Just being in the company with so many people, and with some people that I didn’t get along with, it taught me a lot. And now I’m like, best buddies with people I didn’t get along with. Well, no, I’m not best buddies – but I can agree with them on some things, and we can live civilly.” Destiny, she says, “Basically just brings out the best in people.”

Neenee says, echoing Arianna’s words, the company “really changed me as a person and the way I look at other people and what are they doing. It also taught me …that it’s okay to be friends with different people, because they have things in common that you do.” “The more I stayed at Destiny,” Kash says similarly, “the more I started to like the Destiny company members and became good friends with them and I was interested in their opinions on things.” “The way that everyone is really specific about who they are and what they believe,” he explains, “let me realize that I could have an opinion about something and understand it and that it would not devalue me or anything.”

Morgan says similarly, “I definitely think that a lot of the people in company—theyir minds open up a bit—they become more aware. …It is like at the beginning it is just a bunch of people who have some views, they want to be heard, they are artistic, and they
want to perform. But then after the process …they learn to accept things and to understand what is going on. …Well, not accept, to understand how they affect things. How every single word you say affects something.”
Chapter 4: Group-Level Change

Midway through the company process, Simón led a trust activity designed to help company members focus—beyond the one-on-one relationships that they were forging—on their connection and interdependence as a group. Forming a cohesive group with the ability to support one-on-one level change and enable company members to act collectively to change their surrounding community is a central aim of the company process. Simón began the activity by whispering a number into each company member’s ear. He then instructed them to stand up and start walking slowly around the studio. “I’ll call out one number at a time,” he said. “When I call your number, I want you to cross your arms over your chest, say ‘falling,’ and then fall backward trusting the group to catch you. Be aware. Look out for the person falling and work together to catch them.”

The company members continued walking around the room, Arianna and Sharmaine whispered nervous side comments, a few other company members inhaled noticeably. Drawing the focus and energy in the room back to the activity Simón said, “This game is very important to me. In our communities people need help and it is important for us to be there to catch each other. It is also important to ask for help or other people don’t know you need it and you may fall and get hurt.” The room became silent. Simón began calling one number at a time. With each number one company member crossed her arms over her chest and fell backward keeping her body flat like a plank and the company members standing nearest caught her. During the exercise, Simón coached, “Call loudly; make sure you can be heard.” “Stay aware of what’s happening around you.”
After the exercise, company members sat in a circle and debriefed. Several company members reflected that the group was so quick to catch them that they didn’t even really have a chance to fall. “Everyone was right there and like, ‘no you’re not falling,’” said Neenee. Simón observed that the company members had done a good job being aware of their surroundings, tuning into who needed to be caught, and working together to catch them, and that the people falling called out loudly so that the group could hear, helping the group to help them. Trust games that the company did in earlier rehearsals, gave company members opportunities to practice trusting other individuals in the group and having that trust fulfilled. This exercise gave them the opportunity to practice trusting the group as a whole and to have an experience of the group fulfilling that trust. It also allowed company members to practice working together as a group to support its individual members.

Trust among collaborating artists is an important ingredient for the collaborative artistic process as it helps to facilitate the risk-taking and coordinated action that such a process requires (Rohd, 1998; Mandell & Wolf, 2003). Having the experience of being able to trust a group is also important for social change. As Jan Mandell says, “If you don’t have faith that a small group can work together, then how can you have faith that a family can work together, that the community can work together, that the world can work together?” (Mandell & Wolf, 2003, p. 9). The opportunity that this activity provided for company members to practice being trustworthy as a group and to trust the company as a whole to be there for them, was an important building block for their process, which brought them many opportunities to work together as a company to support individual members through both artistic and personal challenges.
One such opportunity arose at the end of a February rehearsal, a little more than a month out from the opening of the company’s show. In their normal practice of closing rehearsals, company members stood in a circle and gave each other props. Sarah then opened the floor for other thoughts and announcements and Imelda made a request that the company think of her and her family the following day. She started to cry and asked Simón if he could explain to the company what was going on. Simón asked everyone in the circle to hold hands and said that in the morning Imelda’s father was going to court to fight deportation orders. If her father lost the fight and got deported, Simón explained, he would have to return to Guatemala and so would the rest of the family including Imelda. Sarah reminded the company of the connection to the show—which was shaping up to include many of the company members’ stories and stories of their families. She then said to the company, “When we hold Imelda, we hold her family; when we hold each other, we hold our families.” “And this is a family here in this circle,” Simón added, “It’s not just a group, it’s a family, I hope you all know that.” Company members nodded and looked at each other, holding a silence that seemed to honor Imelda’s emotions and the palpable feeling of connection in the circle. “Whatever you do,” Sarah said to the group, “Whether it’s focused thought, meditation, prayer, remember the power of positive energy. Let’s all close our eyes and imagine Imelda and her family walking out of the courtroom tomorrow feeling victorious.” To close the circle, all the company members put their fists in the center of the circle and raised them calling out “family.” As the circle broke, company members came up to Imelda, hugging her and offering their support. Imelda remembers that day, “When I opened up to them,” she says, “I saw how they were
– they were there for me. They were there, they came, they hugged me, and they were, like, ‘Whatever you need we’re here,’ you know? They were there.”

The company members were the first people that Imelda told about what was happening with her dad. They were also some of the only people that she told when she started losing her hair because of the related stress that she was under. “I told these people my problems and I barely know them, like I only met them in like October [five months prior],” she says, “and I didn’t tell my friends who I’ve known for nine years.”

Looking back on her time with the company at the end of the process, Imelda says, “Everybody is different here, and everybody knows everybody has a different story. Some people might have something that they went through and I feel like I could trust them because of that.” About her hair loss, in particular, Imelda says, though she didn’t feel like she could tell many of her close friends, “When it came to Destiny, I knew I could tell them everything, because I knew they weren’t going to judge me.”

Present in Imelda’s comments is not only the importance of the feeling that she could trust the company to be there for her, but the unconditional nature of the company’s support. Rose says about this aspect of the company, “You could understand each other and you can have a conversation that does not have judgment in it. It can be really, really deep, it can be funny and you will still love the other person no matter what.” “That is basically the whole thing,” says Dharma, “like unconditional everything, unconditional love, unconditional respect, unconditional everything. Everybody is family.” The company titled its performance *Unconditional*, reflecting their value for this quality, particularly in a world where many contexts and relationships they experience are
conditional, and where there are many forces that seem to aim at conditioning their behavior (like the media, as they would take up in one of their scenes).

**Family-Like Relationships**

All sixteen members of the company and both of the company’s guest artists, describe the company’s group dynamics as family-like. “Company to me,” says Neenee, “It’s like family. It’s like a good tight family that you can talk to about anything. A family that’s like there for you, that you can really depend on.” Company members do not necessarily have to be best friends, they say, or like all members of the group equally, but they know that they will be there to support one another and that the group will embrace them for who they are. “Everybody is a family,” says Javier. “Everybody connects with each other. Everybody has a bond with each other even if it is not as strong as with another person. I think everybody could go up to one another and tell each other their problems and get support from them.” Company members’ descriptions of their group relationship resonate with arts and education research that finds that collaborative arts experiences forge a sense of connection or community among participants characterized by positive and supportive social relationships (Heath & Smyth, 1999; Landay, Meehan, Newman, Wootton, & King, 2001), shared purpose (Wootton, 2004; Heath & Roach, 1999), and respect for difference (Davis, 2005).

The family-likeness of the company is both the sum of the one-on-one relationships that the company members develop with each other (described in the previous chapter) and a crucible for forging these relationships and supporting company members’ individual development. The better company members get to know one another, the more comfortable they feel being themselves and sharing their stories in
From left to right: Sharmaine, Krizia, Kash, Dawon, Arianna, Amore, & Neenee.

rehearsals, and the closer and more family-like they become as a group. “Everybody is becoming more comfortable with each other, like putting stuff out there,” Javier says. “You’re not just going to tell a stranger your whole life story, no. You know everything comes with time. …It seems we’re just getting more comfortable the more time we spend.” In turn, as the company becomes more family-like, company members feel even more comfortable being themselves in rehearsals and in sharing their stories with each other and, as a result, have the opportunity to get to know themselves and each other better. “I love this group of people,” says Kim. “The family atmosphere that we’ve created is something I’ve never experienced. I feel comfortable being me; I don’t feel judged.” “Unless you are in a family kind of mentality where you feel you can talk to
people and that they would understand you and you can connect with them and they can help you,” says Dharma, “then ideas do not come out and certain feelings cannot be communicated to other people.” Through the company process she says, “I think what we got to was becoming a family. I think that is kind of what it has to get down to because if you are not as honest with each other and you are not as honest with yourself, it just does not work as well.”

Company members who participate in other youth organizations and other arts groups report that the family-like group bond that they experience at Destiny is different from anything they have experienced anywhere else. “It’s different,” says Kim. “I don’t know why that is, because I’ve been in plays where people are very close, but it’s like,
Company members having lunch on the way home from a two-day retreat.
with this, I don’t know if it’s the environment where it’s just kind of like, you’re here, and you’re performing as a group, as like a family.” Dawon says, “I have been a part of a lot of groups – peer groups, teenage groups – but this one, in particular, was more of a family environment whereas all the other groups I have been in… It is more everybody competing with each other to get a certain role or everybody competing with each other to get you kicked out in a way; whereas this company is loving and caring.” “It’s pretty unusual,” says Javier. “I went to a couple of auditions to be in companies and excuse my language, there would be some straight snitches up in there, it’s kind of like, damn, you know, I take this as seriously as you do, this is my life so, I love doing this, I’m trying to have fun with it.” Neenee says that the company sometimes feels even more family-like than her own family, “Because with Destiny you are always invited. It’s always okay for you to go and you’re never locked out.” Sharmaine felt so strongly about the company’s being, “a home away from home,” during her time working with the company, her voicemail greeting announced, “If I’m not answering, I’m probably at school or at Destiny.”

Company members’ descriptions of their group relationships as family-like, resonate with social movements research examining the dynamics of activists’ novel associational group forms. As Polletta (2002) notes, activists participating in such groups, “have compared them to more intimate relationships: ‘We are like family’; ‘we became incredibly close.’” “But the point,” she says, “is that the relationships in these groups, are not like intimate relationships insofar as the latter are vulnerable to exclusivity and an avoidance of conflict” (emphasis in the original, p. 223). This distinction is true in the case of company members’ relationships. Company members do not exclude any other
company members from the family-like feeling they have about group members based on how much they do or don’t like one another, and the strength of their group relationship is predicated on processing rather than avoiding conflict. Polletta asks, “Why is developing them [such intimate-feeling relationships] more effective in producing a successful participatory democracy than simply encouraging members to be respectful, trusting, caring, and open is likely to be?” “Probably,” she suggests, “because they provide a space within which participants can experiment with new behaviors knowing that other participants are also committed to the enterprise and will be supportive of their efforts” (p. 223-244). This is true in the case of the company.

**Ensemble and Collective Action**

Company members’ descriptions of the company as family-like resonate with youth development research that finds that effective youth organizations have qualities of idealized families (Heath & McLaughlin, 1991; McLaughlin, 2000; Strobel, Kirshner, O’Donoghue, & McLaughlin, 2008). In general, this body of research focuses on how the family-like qualities of these organizations foster the positive development of individual youth participants. Similarly, when discussing the importance of the company becoming family-like as a group, company members highlight the importance of this group-level shift in supporting their individual development and strengthening their capacities for understanding and supporting one-another. The company members, however, also offer an additional analytic framework for examining the social change that takes place at the group level through the company process. In addition to describing their group in family-like terms the company members also describe their group as an ensemble. This framing of their group relationship, grounded in the arts rather than human development, focuses
attention not on how the company develops as a group to support its members, but on how company members develop their capacities to act collectively and have an impact on the social world outside, rather than within, their group.

The process of becoming an ensemble is a process of mobilization—a process of organizing for collective action. As an ensemble the company takes collective action in two senses. In artistic terms, it collaboratively creates and performs an original work of art. In social change terms, it collectively develops a vision for social change and takes action—through performance—to engage others in understanding and advancing that vision. Because the company’s performance is the mode of action in both of these frameworks, the process of mobilizing for collective action in artistic terms and in social change terms overlay one another in the company’s process. Acknowledging this interconnection, Lena says, “If you’re just here to dance, then you shouldn’t be here. I mean, you can be here but you’re probably not going to get exactly what you’re looking for because this is a lot more about, it has that whole spoken word aspect too and it’s processing things and social change too. So it’s not just choreography that you’re performing. You can find that at a lot of other places but this place is very special.”

Ultimately, says Macio, the goal of the company’s process is “To express ourselves as a group; to be able to convey messages as one person.”

From the very beginning of the process, in auditions, Sarah and Simón emphasize the importance of company members working together as an ensemble. At the auditions, Sarah and Simón explain to would-be-company-members that they are not just looking for talented individuals. They are looking to build a company, which, they explain, means that they are looking for performers that support their peers—applauding, smiling, being
attentive when others are on stage, helping others—and performers that take risks and engage others. The dance portions of the audition take place in a group format and all participants learn a new hip hop and new modern dance combination together and then take turns performing the combination for the audition judges in small groups of four. This structure helps to make visible not only participants’ technique and discipline, but also how they relate to and support one another in the process of learning and performing something new. Researchers and practitioners emphasize the importance of a strong ensemble, “for theatre making of the highest quality” (Neelands, 2009, p. 182), as well as for theater education (Mandel & Wolf, 2003; Rohd, 1998).

Throughout the company process, the company’s directors and choreographers draw on techniques from dance and theater in evaluating the company’s progress in becoming a strong ensemble. In dance, Sarah says, when she is gauging the company’s progress in becoming a strong ensemble, she is observing, whether they are fully present “Are they in their eyes? Are they in their faces?” she says. She is also observing the synchronicity of the company members’ movement, “How well are they able to work together and how in unison is their movement?” “As they’re coming along as a company,” she says, “Their movements start being in more unison.” To do ensemble dance, Lena says she’s learned, you have to have “the ability to be unified with other people and not just want to stand out on your own but to move as a group because it looks so different when everyone is synchronized and moving together.”

In a rehearsal about one month out from the show Sarah said she noticed the company truly dancing in unison. “All of a sudden, man. I was just tripping off that the other day because they were running the Stravinsky piece [one of the ensemble dance
numbers] and they were walking as one. I could feel the difference.” She said that in that moment she noticed that the company members were not only aware of themselves and their own movement, but they were aware of and tuned into one another. At first she said, “I could feel the difference between the kids who hadn’t been there for a minute; they were a little bit off. Like Imelda; she hadn’t been there for a minute.” Imelda had missed several rehearsals while her family was going through legal proceedings to fight her father’s deportation order. By the end of the rehearsal, however, Sarah noticed, Imelda was fully present and the group had helped her get into step with everyone else. Imelda, “was already connected to the group in a really cool way even though she had been gone,” said Sarah, and “people kind of pulled her back in real quick and sweet.”

Dancing as an ensemble is not easy, Sarah, Simón and the company’s other choreographers frequently remind company members during rehearsals. It requires hard work and discipline—capacities, which are the foundation for acquiring the technique and precise command of choreography that strong unison work requires. In a February rehearsal in which the company worked on a hip hop dance number called Count Me In, Simón and Rashidi, who choreographed the piece, emphasized this connection between hard work, discipline, and ensemble performance. Rashidi broke down the choreography helping the company to clean up its movement in a technical popping and locking sequence. He ran them through the hand movement, then the foot movement, and they put it together. As they ran the sequence, Rashidi called attention to the mirror asking company members to watch themselves and notice how much better the movement looked when each dancer executed the movement with precision and the entire company was in synch. They worked the movement over and over again until everyone had it and
then ran the entire piece. Simón came into the studio to watch the run and joined Rashidi in giving the company notes.

After one run of the dance, Dawon said, “This wasn’t our best.” Simón responded, “Why are you doing it then?” “You all know how I say. When you’re doing a routine, you do it like you’re performing it,” Rashidi said to the company. “You do it like you’re on stage. There’s no, ‘this ain’t my best.’ No, it’s always your best. Everybody needs to push forward.” Simón continued giving the company notes calling attention to mistakes company members made in the choreography and to moments where they made facial expressions that announced, ‘I just messed up.’ “If one person messes up on stage,” he said, “Everybody will just say, ‘ah well, that group was just alright,’ because people notice one thing. If somebody messes up, it’s on the group. It’s not about, ‘oh, you one
dancer, you’re amazing.’ It’s not about that. It’s about the group being on point. If one facial expression is off, everything’s off.”

Simón wrapped up his notes saying to the company, “But that was really good.” Arianna responded asking him how he could say that after he had just given so much criticism. He responded, “It was good, but it could be better.” Rashidi added, again emphasizing the importance of discipline, “When you get better, then we’re going to look harder at what you need to work on. Because you can always step it up. And if we always give you props and at the same time say, ‘there’s this and this you can work on,” that means that every time you perform it you’re going to go up up up. …We’re always going to be pushing you. We’re never gonna let you be, like, ‘Oh, I’m comfortable. Oh, I’m so tight.’ As soon as you think you’re tight, that’s it. As soon as you think, ‘Oh, I don’t need to practice anymore,’ you just go all down hill.”

The importance of discipline to dance in general and ensemble work in particular, was a drumbeat through the company’s rehearsal process. During a rehearsal where company members were not dancing full out and were not listening to direction, Sarah said to them, “You all have no discipline again. We’re going to build it up again. You all are in the company. You need to show up ready to work.” “When I’m running group pieces, I don’t want to have to call all your names individual,” she added emphasizing that part of the function of discipline is to keep the cohesion of the ensemble. She told the company a story of a girl getting kicked out of another company because she was chewing gum when she wasn’t supposed to be. “It’s not about the gum,” Sarah said, “it’s about discipline.” To reinforce the point she had the company do 30 push-ups, 75 jumping jacks, and 25 sit-ups.
In another rehearsal, when company members were talking while rehearsing an ensemble modern dance number, Sarah made a similar point about the importance of discipline and emphasized the interdependence of company members in ensemble work that Simón and Rashidi had highlighted in their notes to the company during the rehearsal of *Count Me In*. “Give me 20 pushups,” Sarah said. “Some of you weren’t talking and you may not think it’s fair, but you’re a company. If one of you falls, you all fall. If one of you goes ‘ehh’ on stage [she makes an ‘I just messed up face’] it doesn’t just reflect on that person, but the whole company, and on me and Simón. They’ll say we didn’t rehearse you properly and give you good discipline. Or they’ll say ‘that’s just a youth performance.’ I’m not having that!” The strength of the company’s ensemble work, the
message also included, would be important if their performance—their collective action—was to have the strongest possible effect on their audiences.

All but two of the dance numbers in the company’s final performance were ensemble dance numbers. In the opening circle at a rehearsal two weeks out from the show, Kash raised a concern about how many ensemble numbers there were in the show. He said that he didn’t like to see all the same people in every dance and that he had taken it upon himself to take himself out of some of the numbers. He said it seems as though the choreographers are trying to cram everyone into a small space and asked if they could cut the number of people down in some of the dances. “That’s fair,” said Sarah. “There are definitely a lot of group numbers. I woke up thinking about that this morning,
however, there are also small group pieces that some people haven’t seen yet.” She also said that in the overall show, she and Simón were considering the pacing and mixing theater and dance so that there’s not too much of one thing back to back. Ariianna pointed out that when they get in the theater, they will have a lot more space on stage than they do in the rehearsal room and that the dance numbers won’t look crowded.

Kash said that he wanted to make sure that his artistic point had been received. Artistically, he said he felt that it wouldn’t make for as interesting a show to have all the same dancers in every piece as it would if the dancers for different dance numbers varied. “You don’t want to see the same dancers throughout the entire thing,” he said. He gave music videos as a contrasting example, “Any music video you see,” he said. “You never see the girl twice unless it’s for a specific part, like the same dancers for the chorus.”

Sarah said, “I hear that you don’t want to have the same dancers on the stage all the time. …I hear that and what’s different about this show is that we’re having different dance styles; we’re having different music styles; we’re having different sections cut up. I hear you and I guess it’s just a different take.” Sarah said that she felt it was important to take a moment to have this conversation. Morgan and Dharma both had their hands raised to speak. Sarah said, let’s take two more comments and then we have to move on.

Morgan said, that to him, “The difference between a music video and this [the company performance] is the music video is the artist’s video and all the dancers are supporting the specific artist, whereas with this it’s a collaboration. We’re all supporting each other.” “We’re all the stars,” Morgan added, “It’s not a single person thing; it’s a group thing.” Dharma said that she had seen many company shows over the years and had been in one before and that those shows also had included mostly ensemble dance
numbers featuring the whole, or virtually the whole, company. She said that artistically, she felt the ensemble dances looked pretty good and that, to her, they were an important element of a company show. “As a company, we’re all dancing, we’re all showing our talents, we’re all expressing ourselves as a whole, instead of as sections.” Morgan and Dharma’s comments both emphasize the importance of the collaborative nature of the company’s artistic process and the fact that the performance functions as a collective voice for the company members.

Sarah told the company that she and Simón would keep all of the thoughts shared in mind as they completed the script for the show. “I appreciate that conversation, and obviously there’s no right or wrong answer,” she told them. “So we won’t spend a lot of time having this conversation but it’s really important, even when we’re trying to get fast and hurry up and learn everything, that we stop and have those types of conversations for moments and that we continue moving forward. Thank you for having that deep ol’ conversation.” Switching gears, she said, “Everybody take a deep breath in, and let it out. The show is in two weeks. Two weeks. So, let’s work it out. Let’s get up; we’re gonna run Wade in the Water.”

Conversations like this one, in which Kash raised his concerns about the dance numbers in the show, were an important part of the company’s collaborative artistic process as an ensemble. Even in moments like this one, where two weeks out from the opening of their performance the company was feeling extreme time pressure, the group would take time to talk about the creative decisions shaping their performance, and they would take time to air differences of opinion. As Mandell & Wolf (2003) find, in collaborative artistic processes like the company’s, “Rather than seek a utopian ensemble
in which all conflicts are squelched or avoided, students learn to be ensemble members who accept conflict as a natural part of working together” (p. 34). Company members learned to embrace conflict in their collaborative process; this was another way in which their work required them to be comfortable with discomfort. “If something comes up,” in the company process, Lena’s mom appreciates, they “actually have to stop and deal with it, as a group. And it means taking time to do that and having the skills to be able to do that nonviolent conflict resolution piece.” Mandell & Wolf (2003) find that ensemble-based performance like the company’s shares many qualities with formal conflict resolution processes. In ensemble performance, performers learn that “Conflict is both the obstacle and the step up over the obstacle; that conflict is at once the thing separating people and the thing drawing them together” (Mandell & Wolf, 2003, p. 34). In ensemble and collaborative arts, performers also develop capacities that support conflict resolution including tolerance and understanding of complex social issues (Horowitz, 2002) critical thinking (Catterall, 2001; Eisner, 2002), imagination (Greene, 1995), and empathy (Catterall, 2001; Greene, 1995).

In many instances when company members aired a difference of opinion in rehearsals, they would discuss the issue until they reached consensus on a solution. In other moments, particularly when time did not permit, Sarah and Simón would take responsibility for making the decision. They reminded the company in these instances that that is their responsibility as directors. If company members had strong feelings about a particular issue that was not resolved in rehearsal, they would often take them up with Sarah or Simón outside of rehearsal for further discussion. Once an issue was aired in the circle, it became part of the company’s collaborative process—entering the issue
into the circle meant bringing it into the container that held the collaborative process. Because of Sarah and Simón’s roles in holding the container and directing the company performance, company members received the decisions they made on such matters outside of rehearsals as part of the company’s collaborative activity rather than separate from it.

Sarah and Simón work on the script for the company performance.

Through the company process, company members learned to appreciate that in an ensemble, individuals play different roles. As the directors, Sarah and Simón held responsibility for making sure that the overall rehearsal process staid on track and for making final decisions about the content and shape of the performance. Company members understood, even if they didn’t always like it, that it was necessary for Sarah
and Simón to execute these responsibilities if the company was going to be ready when their show premiered. Like democratic social movement organizations—such as the “workshops” of the Southern Civil Rights Movement—the company embraced “the tension between equality and authority” and “fostered relationships that were intimate but action oriented, firmly supportive but encouraging internal challenge. Inequalities in the relationship between leader and participants were often domain specific, limited in duration, and mitigated by the parties’ mutual dependence” (Polletta, 2002, p. 223). In the description of the company as family, company members were as likely to refer to Sarah and Simón as brother and sister in the family as they were parents, suggesting that their authority, was indeed specific to certain moments and tasks in the process, and that in other moments they were equal participants with company members in the company’s collaborative collective process. The practice of being an ensemble in the performing arts is a template for a system of group relationships embodying careful balance between authority and equality in a group taking collective action.

When working in an ensemble, everyone is interdependent. As Mandell & Wolf (2003) find, “Ensemble membership is a balancing act, a constant weighing of the needs of the self against those of the group. …a group is most productive when each member contributes to the fullest extent of his or her abilities, and at the same time, the sum of a productive group exceeds its individual parts” (p. 34). Through participation in the company, all of the company members said that they developed an increased appreciation of and skill with the interdependence that is required in ensemble work. Dharma says, for example, “You have to definitely be considerate of everyone else. You cannot really make choices thinking about only yourself, especially when it comes to performing; like,
for example, what you want to wear or anything. You cannot make choices – you cannot be selfish, really; there is no room for that. Basically, everybody is kind of integrating with everyone.”

Sarah says that to her, the interdependence that the company members cultivate in their ensemble work is social change. “I think it is social change,” she says, “Because we’re just so individualistic in this society …but how do they feel about themselves and can they work in society collaboratively?” “We’ve got to be able to work together,” she says. Neelands (2009) finds that in youth, art and social change programs like Destiny, “Young people are beginning to model the conditions for a future society based in the necessity of learning how to live with the grave importance of our interdependence as humans” (pp. 175-176).

Company members are also gaining practice and capacities necessary for living in such a society. Rose says that she appreciates the practice that she got at working in an ensemble even though it was challenging at times. Of the “troubles” she had during the process, she says, “I felt like they were good for me to deal with. I’m glad that I went through them because I feel like if that ever happened again in another situation, then I will be more able to cope with it. I can be like, ‘Okay, this already happened. So now how am I going to tackle it differently and make it work in a more positive way earlier?’” Company members, Arianna’s grandmother says, “do a lot of work to hone themselves as instruments, then they share that work. So they’re learning and they’re teaching, which is a beautiful relationship. And in the process of doing that, they’re building community. And they’re understanding – particularly in a culture that is so prone towards
individualism – they’re learning the importance of community as well, by being part of community and by offering that community to others.”

That company members develop family-like relationships, have experiences of interdependence, and gain practice at collaboration and collective action with other young people from backgrounds that are diverse with regard to socio-economic status, race and ethnicity, and life experience, is another important aspect of the social change that the company creates at the group level. The company is “an ensemble of unlikely people,” says Sarah. “We’ve got a lot of different people. We’ve got (Macio) a home-schooled Filipino-Latino boy self-proclaimed as questioning his sexuality. Then we have (Dharma) a punk rocker, pierced, biracial girl and then you have (Kash) a kid who grew up in the ‘hood an African-American intellectual. I mean, those are some different people. How can you be an ensemble with that? That’s interesting. That’s just fascinating to me. How can you move as one but yet be who you are?”

The enormity of the fact that company members do indeed figure out together how to be themselves and move as one, is not lost on company members. Lisie, an alumna of the company says, for example, that she thinks company members are “a walking example” of the kind of social change that they seek to make through their performance. “Look at all of us,” she says. “We have overcome all these things to working together in the first place and so it is like, you are social change, but then you are also like trying to make it happen in other places and that is why you perform.” Company members, are “all different races and with different experiences,” says Imelda. “We are just so different. Like Dawon, you know, he’s been living in a group home. My dad is getting deported and then we had Rose tripp’n about global warming, and then we have
Javier getting his friend shot, you know? And we all got these hardships, like experiences that we go through, and we’re all just so different, but we’ve all come together as a company, and as a family, and we’ve created a show that has definitely changed and impacted other people. And now we understand that we can all be different, we can all come together and still, like, create social change.” That, she says, is what she wants the company’s audiences to understand too.

**Collective Identity**

Through the company process, company members forged a sense of collective identity. Collective identity, Polletta and Jasper (2001) state, “Describes imagined as well as concrete communities,” and “provides categories by which individuals divide up and make sense of the social world” (p. 298). In regards to social change, collective identity is important because it fosters a sense of solidarity among members of a group that supports mobilization, “suggesting bonds of trust, loyalty, and affection” (Goodwin, Jasper, & Polletta, 2001, p. 8). Through their process, company members develop a hybrid collective identity that includes an identity as ‘company’ and as ‘youth.’

‘**Company’ Identity**

In the performing arts, a company, in its most basic sense, is a group of artists engaged in creating a collaborative work of art. As such, it has the qualities of an ensemble described above. When company members talk about their collective identity as company, however, they reference not just these qualities of ensemble, but also the family-like attributes of their group described above—they fold together the language they use to articulate the family-like and ensemble attributes of their group. The
performance that they create as a company is not only a work of art but also a collective act for social change. Their identity as company thus encompasses the shared goals that they have toward each of these ends and the group attributes that contribute to each. It also draws on their shared passion for the arts. As artists, Imelda says, “We all have something that we have in common, lots of things that we love, and we have a passion for, like, I feel like we all share some things that are similar to each other.” When company members talk about their collective identity as company, they reference solidarity that they have in all of these dimensions—as ensemble, as family, as artists.

![Amore helps Miranda with her hair before opening night of the company performance.](image)

Many company members say that the moment when they truly become company is in the theater during tech week leading up to the opening night of their performance.
This, they say, is when their family-like system of relationships and their life as an ensemble crystallize and meld. Dharma says that company members were “already pretty connected” going into the theater for tech week, but that it wasn’t until that week that they really became a company. “I think tech week was the biggest challenge with us. …There were a lot of arguments and there was a lot of tension and stuff and people were tired or people were hungry and getting all snappy and grouchy,” she says. “After tech week and right before the full performance, we really became like a true family, a really strong family like we knew each other. We have been through all that stuff and we really became a company.” Reflecting on her experience in two different Destiny companies, Arianna says that the moment when they truly become a company often happens right before the first performance and “It’s really visible.”

The coming together as company that company members felt in the theater right before their first performance, stemmed in part from the fact that their performance functioned as a shared ritual. The arts have long been recognized as important forms of ritual for fostering solidarity and supporting mobilization for collective action (Aminzade & McAdam, 2001). They give rise to what Victor Turner calls communitas, “the ephemeral sense of connectedness experienced by a group through the common experience of a unifying ritual” (as referenced in Kuftinec, 2003, p. 81). Arianna describes having a feeling of communitas the opening night of Unconditional, “We were all backstage holding hands in a circle with our eyes closed just like, ‘we’ve got this.’ And that’s when I just felt the pulse of the circle. And it was cool. And then the show was amazing.”
As shared rituals, the performing arts and theater in particular, have long been used in communities “to strengthen the self-determination of the community, to contribute to the empowerment of the community, and through that to augment the ideological survival of the community within – or against – the dominant socio-political order” (Kershaw, 1992, p. 66). In social movement terms, they serve the function of “dramatizing injustice, discharging distressing emotions, generating emotional energy, building solidarity, and affirming identity” (Verta Taylor as referenced in Aminzade & McAdam, 2001). As a shared ritual, *Unconditional* unquestionably fostered a sense of solidarity among company members. Arianna says of this feeling, “I would literally take my shirt off my back and put it on the back of this company because of the work that I feel that we’re doing.” Highlighting *Unconditional* as a vehicle to be heard as a
collective, she says. “It is a huge deal for youth to be bringing information that we feel is important to everyone around us because other people may not even be aware of it. And if you’re not aware of it, how can we change it? How can we fix it? How can we work on our differences, our difficulties?”

The solidarity that the company developed through Unconditional, however, was not achieved solely in the moment of the performance itself. It was also forged in the rehearsals leading up to it. During tech week rehearsal, for example, Imelda said she felt like they really became a company because, “We knew that, like, this was it; we all had to work hard, and we all wanted this really, really bad, and we knew that we had to work hard, because …It was not even four days away, and we went four, three, two, and one
day away,” she says. “And it was when you really worked hard together as a company, and talked to each other as a family. We were like, ‘we’re going to do our best, because then all of our efforts are going to be put into that show.’” Schechner, Elam (2001) says, “has theorized that ‘the essential ritual interaction of theater takes place during rehearsals’” (p. 105). In rehearsals, Elam (2001) finds “theatrical exercises and sociopolitical activities” can help “build the performer group into a community of shared experience” (p. 105). This was true for the company.

‘Youth’ Identity

Today, there is much public discourse about disengagement of youth in their communities. This concern is shared by those worried about the well-being of youth themselves (Ginwright, & Cammarota, 2002; Cook-Sather, 2002) as well as those worried about the social and political life of the country (Atkins & Hart, 2003; West, 2004). West (2004) theorizes that the “disaffection” of young people today, “stems in large part from their perception that the adult community neither understands nor cares about the issues in their lives” (p. 186). When company members talk about their collective identity as youth, they reference their common disenfranchisement from formal means of power and voice in their communities, and they talk about the solidarity that they have developed through their performance as a means to be empowered and heard in a way that youth often are not. “I think a lot of young people feel like they cannot make any change—like what they say is not really important because they are not grownups,” says Dharma. “They do not know it all and they cannot really have much say in anything
because people would not take them seriously or they are saying, ‘Oh, they are teenagers. They have issues anyway. They should not have a say.’” Describing the importance of the company’s work in this context, Dharma says, “We are young and we are kids and not many kids really have their say in much. And so when youth have the power to say something and to get to be heard, that is a big thing.” Dharma’s comments echo Neelands’ (2009) findings that young people use ensemble-based theater for social change, “to find solidarity in their common disadvantage” (p. 176). “Emotional energy from intense solidarity with similarly positioned people,” Summers-Effler (2002) finds, “can create collective identity” (p. 49).
Company members’ collective identity as youth is not a monolithic identity. It bears similarity to women’s identity in women’s movements, which functioned “To create solidarity between women who experience a wide range of emotional conditions that reflect the very diverse contexts for gender oppression” (Summers-Effler, 2002, p. 56). The company member’s collective identity as youth gives them a shared “injustice frame” (Snow, Rochford, Worden, & Benford, 1986)—framing youth as a group that is often disenfranchised from the means necessary to support their own positive development and their abilities to contribute to their communities (Cook-Sather, 2001; Fielding & Rudduck, 2002; Gutierrez & Larson, 1995; Lensmire, 1998). Oriented around this injustice frame, the company’s youth identity served both as a mobilizing identity (Polletta, 1999; Polletta & Jasper, 2001) and an umbrella under which company members explored the pluralism of their experience as young people in regard to other aspects of their social lives and positioning—including for example, Imelda’s experience as a youth who is an American citizen and has parents who are not; Javier’s experience growing up in a neighborhood where violence is endemic; Navarra, Miranda, and Morgan’s experiences of white privilege; Dawon’s experiences in foster care; and Rose, Dharma, Kim, Sukay, Lena, and Macio’s experiences growing up multi-racial.

Practitioners of community arts find that regardless of what kind of community one works with—whether it is a community based on collective identity or whether it is a community of place—that all communities have a cultural ecology which should be consciously explored (Filewod in Haedicke & Nellhaus, 2001). Community arts projects should never approach community as though it is a singular thing (Kuftinec, 2003; Warner, 2001). The plurality of company members’ experience as youth underscores this
point. At the same time, the company’s process points to the value of a mobilizing collective identity or injustice frame within which this plurality can be explored. Collective identity, Summers-Effler (2002) finds, “provides a meta perspective on one’s self. By moving the identity toward the group and away from the self, one is able to look back at one’s self from the position of the group.” “When one can see one’s self from a meta perspective,” she adds, “one can come to see one’s own experience as part of a larger pattern rather than an individual experience of fear, inadequacy, lack of fulfillment, depression, or unhappiness” (Summers-Effler, 2002, p. 50). This meta-perspective enabled company members to identify personal experiences as instances of larger social phenomena and to analyze how larger social structures shaped these experiences. Drawing connections between micro and macro social experience in this way, had important impact for company members’ individual personal and social development. It provided company members the opportunity to address negative emotions they experience as a result of social structures and forces in their lives in context; and thus not interpret them as a fact of their own person. This makes it less likely that they would internalize oppression they experienced in their lives—that is the “physical, emotional, mental, verbal, economic, social, and political forms” of mistreatment exacted on them by those who have more power than they do (Creighton & Kivel, 1990, p. 20). “If deviant emotions are handled within the self,” Summers-Effler (2002) finds, “there is little opportunity to realize that one’s experiences are not necessarily a personal problem or inadequacy” (p. 49). The fact the company’s collaborative process was arts-centered facilitated company members sharing and processing their personal experiences and related emotions. As Summers-Effler (2002) finds, “In artistic communities …individuals
make themselves emotionally vulnerable to do their work, so there is an increased likelihood that deviant emotions will surface, become the focus of interaction, and possibly a source of solidarity” (2002, p. 57).

In creating scenes for *Unconditional*, company members had the opportunity to examine deviant or difficult emotions in larger social contexts in a way that helped them to see their personal experiences as meaningful beyond their own lives. Company members’ collective identity enabled Imelda, for example, to examine her personal experience—facing either separation from her parents or being sent to live in a country where she had never lived before—in the context of the larger issue of immigration in the United States. Standing in solidarity with other youth, Imelda could look at her own experience as an experience of a youth in America and explore the social structures and forces that shaped that experience. The following chapter describes the process through which company members used their personal stories to frame social issues in *Unconditional* in more depth.
Chapter 5: Community-Level Change

The company creates social change in its surrounding community through two mechanisms, one individual and one collective. As individuals, company members themselves are instruments of change for those they come in contact with outside the company. Through the personal transformations they experience in the company process, they relate with others more openly and with greater understanding, and they relate across lines of race, ethnicity, and class that typically separate youth. Collectively, the company members take action through performance to express their collective vision for social change. This performance gives audience members opportunities to think differently about their own lives and about important social issues and to learn about others who have backgrounds different from their own. It also inspires audience members to treat others differently and act to create social change in their own communities.

Individual Action

The personal transformations that company members have in the company process enable them to be instruments of change in their own communities. Looking back on the year with the company, reflecting on such transformations she saw in individual company members, Sarah said, “The first person I thought of was Amore. …There was a competitive thing about her and I think Destiny was a huge influence on that part of her. …She deepened in her feeling of community, a sense of community, and I thought I saw a little spark happen about her commitment to social issues,” Sarah says. “There was a big transformation about her compassion for other people, and like her stopping the judgment piece; she kind of softened, and she got to be more who she was instead of
trying to be fronting all the time and being cute and whatever that she thought that she had to be in order to be successful, acceptable.” “In terms of her skill level and her confidence, that was like huge,” Sarah added. “That was huge. She’s always been a really honest person, which I like about her. I just think skill-wise she got better as an artist… and she did not hold back. She didn’t do the teenager shut down physical thing. She really went for it. So it just took her to the next level of the theater.”

Amore center stage in the final number of Unconditional.

Amore’s older brother says that he has also noticed changes in her since her since her participation in the company and that these changes have had a positive effect on their relationship. “Amore’s more open to a lot of things. I’ve noticed her maturity,” he says. “Because back, like when I came out of the closet with her about my sexuality,” he says, “she didn’t care, but then again she did, she was really weird about it. She didn’t
want to ask questions about it, she didn’t want to know about it, she just kept my business
to myself, don’t share me type-of-stuff. But ever since she grew up in the company,
she started to see more things out there, and it just brought her to attention, I guess.” “I
just see a different person in her,” he added, “She’s more – I don’t know. She’s acting
like a young woman. I think that shows a lot. In Destiny, you grow up not just as a dancer
or performer, you grow as a person.” Both Sarah and Amore’s brother observed that as a
result of Amore’s company experience, she walked differently in the world—she had
more confidence in herself and a greater capacity to understand and to relate to others
with openness, compassion, and across difference than she had before her time in the
company.

**Walking Differently in the World**

Creating a legacy of company members who leave the company walking
differently in the world, as Amore did, is one of the mechanisms through which the
company makes social change. As a result of their experience in the company, company
members change as individuals in ways that in turn create positive changes in their
actions and relationships outside the company. Company members observe these changes
in themselves, as do other members of their communities, including their siblings,
parents, and educators. Dharma’s mom says of this chain of outcomes, “I mean the
company is effective, absolutely, because it is changing the participants involved in the
process and then they go on to effect change in their own world, in their own lives.”

Lisie, an alumna who participated in the company for three years, observed this
chain of outcomes in her own life. “I think company gave me a really, really good
foundation for who I am and what I believe in and knowing that I can create social
change,” she says. “And it also made me really vocal about things that I care about, because I know that in class when things come up at school, I’m so like, ‘Ahhhh’ and just say what is on my mind.” This year, for example, she says, “My school had an environmental day. They called it Green Day. And I actually showed my piece, my global warming piece that I did in the company show last year. I showed it to my school and they got to see where I was coming from about that. So that is a really direct example but there have been tons of little examples.” “I have been active in a class I took, called racial relations this year,” she said. “I was constantly bringing up stuff from Destiny. I was so proud like, ‘At Destiny, dah, dah, dah, dah. I’m involved in this thing like dah, dah, dah, dah. Destiny blah.’ There are so many things that I said. It just like stemmed from being here and what I have learned here and everything. I cannot even pinpoint everything. There is so much.” “Every day,” she says, “I think, the way that I think about things has been helped or has been formed through my experience here.”

Lisie believes that one of the things that prepared her to speak up about things that matter to her was the opportunity that she had in the company to practice talking about social issues and experiences that are “under-discussed” and that people find risky to talk about. She says that, talking about those things in her community outside the company, “It is hard because people are not necessarily always open to hearing that and people make judgments based on what you say and like, I do not know. It is hard but it is worth it. I’m really glad that I have learned to express myself in that way.” Lisie’s experience in the company helped her develop the self-awareness, persistence, confidence, and comfort with risk-taking to carry what she learned in company, beyond.
The dance teacher at Lisie’s high school has had many company members in her classes over the years and says that they have an observable positive effect on the classroom environment. Company members, she says, “consistently come into my dance production class with a very positive inclusive approach to art-making and collaboration. They have clearly been trained to work in the spirit of inclusion and discovery, rather than competition and exclusion—which is so often the case in traditional programs.” “Year after year,” she says, “the Destiny dancers emerge as the quiet leaders of our dance class. Their training in non-violence positions them to handle the complexities of group decision-making and collaboration with aplomb. They tend to gain the universal respect of the class, and are viewed as fair-minded and hard-working artists.” In the way that they participate in her class, company members help to extend to other students the kinds of experiences they have had in the company of inclusion, discovery, and collaboration.

The capacities for inclusion, discovery, and collaboration that the dance teacher observes in company members as well as related capacities evident in Lisie and Amore’s cases—including self-awareness, persistence, ability to take risks, openness, empathy, tolerance of difference, and compassion—are commonly cited by company members and those close to them as outcomes of participation in the company process. They are also commonly associated with collaborative arts experiences in general. A significant body of arts education research has demonstrated that collaborative arts experiences nurture these and other personal, social, and cognitive capacities that are key to success in school, life, and work (Davis, 2005; Ross, 2005; Stevenson & Deasy, 2005; Catterall, 2002; Deasy, 2002; Eisner, 2002; Heath & Smyth, 1999; Horowitz & Webb-Dempsey, 2002; Burton, Horowitz, & Abeles, 2002; Landay, Meehan, Newman, Wootton, & King, 2001;

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7 Letter written by a local high school dance teacher in support of Destiny’s application for an arts education award.
Company members find that these kinds of capacities—which they develop as they go one-on-one with themselves and one another and learn to function together as a company—not only contribute to their individual, personal well-being, but also are tools with which they create social change in the world around them.

The personal and social development that begins while the company members are in the company unfolds over time. Though in many ways company members start walking in the world differently almost right away—as is evident in Lisie and Amore’s cases—Simón says he thinks many of the changes that they begin in the company and the impact that they have for the world around the company members, are not fully realized until five or ten years later. At the end of the year with the company, Kim, for example, had a sense that that was true for him. “It’s been like, an unbelievably positive experience, and that’s for sure,” he says, but he could not yet fully describe how he had changed as a result of that experience. “Like, I don’t know how I’ve changed, from when I had no idea what Destiny was until now, but I know I have,” he says. “And it’s been – I think it’s been a very positive change, and I think I’ve definitely grown.” “I feel like … it’s slow change,” Simón says. “It’s gradual, it’s not going to be like an Advil that you take and you feel better right away. That to me is the main issue of this whole – of everything that’s going on around me, is that, people look for Advil. People look for change that can happen in a four-year term. You know, none of this change in Oakland will happen in four years.” This kind of gradual change process, Simón says, takes imagination. It requires being able to imagine that change can happen and that it will happen.
The way that Simón and others describe the social change that happens as a result of the company process evokes an image of ripples radiating out across the water’s surface from a stone dropped in a lake. The company’s process scales radially as the company, as a center of activity, creates waves that ripple outward over time through the worlds in which the company members walk. Arianna’s grandmother describes this process of the company’s unfolding impact as “a continuum.” Coming out of the company, she says, Arianna’s “job is going to be to teach the ones that come behind her, so there’s a continuum, of being able to share what she’s learning about who she is, and her place in the world.” She says that she believes that all of the company members, many of whom she got to know well during Arianna’s time with the company, will be a part of this continuum. Arianna, describes the growing impact of the company similarly. “It goes like a cycle,” she says. “The people who facilitate Destiny, the adults, the teachers, everyone – they are Destiny because they are the people that start it. They start it and the kids learn it and then they pass it on to other people.” Macio’s father imagines that the number of ripples that Destiny sends out through the world add up over time. “I just see what an impact it has made for my son,” he says. “You multiply that by the years that Destiny and the Youth Performance Company have been doing this. You can imagine how much impact that is to a lot of families.”

*Social Network*

As a result of the company process, company members effect change in their communities, not only by how they walk in the world, but also with whom they walk. In the company, company members develop friendships with other young people from a range of different racial backgrounds. Marianna, a white alumna who was in the company
for four years, says that when company members walk together in the world outside the company in multi-racial groups, their very presence is a challenge to the norms in other settings. “Like, I mean at my school it is very segregated,” she explains. “It is very diverse but if you are a white person, you hang out with white people. If you are black person, you hang out with black people – you do not mix races very much.” By contrast, she says, “I know that most of my friends of color do come from Destiny, and it is weird when we go out in places …It’s like one person of every race, and people do not know what to do with that. It’s like, ‘Why are they hanging out together?’” “People look at me,” she says, “and they are like, ‘Whoa, that is weird that she doesn’t just hang out with people who are her own race.’ Which also leads people to be like, ‘Oh, I do not know what race she is because she doesn’t just hang out with one particular race.’” The presence of a group of youth who do not fit the norm of mono-race social groups, she says, makes people wonder and take stock of their own assumptions about race and social relationships. Company members walking in the world in multi-racial social groups make visible a more pluralistic possibility for race relations among youth.

Company members, Lisie says, also embody social change because of the work that they have done as a group to be able to understand and work with one another. “It’s like we are a walking example of social change,” she says. “Look at all of us. We have overcome all these things to working together in the first place and so it is like, you are social change.” Company members believe that the sense of solidarity that they have developed as a company and as young people, will keep them connected in the long-term. “I think performing together and being in a company with so many other people your age, it really connects you,” says Rose. “And you are going to have that Destiny bond that is
going to keep you together forever no matter where you go or what happens to you.”

Lisie says that she has already seen evidence of the strength of this Destiny bond in her own life. “Getting older,” she says, “I mean, first of all I developed some of the most amazing friendships in the world, like I have stayed in touch with so many people from Destiny; people that have not been to Destiny for three years because they graduated.”

Company members say that they expect to be connected with their fellow company members through the Destiny bond, even when they don’t necessarily consider them best friends or hang out with them often outside of rehearsal. Dharma says, for example, that even though company members “Are different from most of my friends and people I usually hang out with and I may not hang out with company members that much outside of the company and stuff, you can tell that they are always going to be my friends and they will always look out for me. They are not my best friends, but they are a family away from my family.” Rose says similarly, “I just know that we are all going to walk away at the end of the year, and we are going to be so close to each other. And it is not going to be like the, ‘Oh, I'm going to call you every night,’ kind [of connection]. It is just going to be if you ever see that person again you are going to understand each other. And you are going to realize that you shared an amazing experience together.”

Having a feeling of connection to and solidarity with others with whom they share what Rose calls, “the Destiny bond,” may be another mechanism through which the company spreads social change. Social movement research finds that being part of a network of people who share common values for social change, makes participation in future collective action for social change more likely (McAdam, 1988). Such networks help keep shared values present in people’s lives—as Lisie says, “I think keeping certain
friendships also helps me keep in mind everything that is important to me.” These networks also provide a sense of social support that empowers individuals to the risks often required to participate in collective action (McAdam, 1988).

**Performance as Collective Action for Social Change**

The company process culminated in the creation and performance of *Unconditional*, an original hip hop, modern, and aerial dance; theater; and spoken word production drawn from company members’ lives and experiences in their rehearsal process. The company’s performance of *Unconditional* was a collective act to create social change at the community-level. Community—here construed in geographic terms—means the areas of Oakland and the greater San Francisco Bay Area from which the company drew audience members. The company performed an eight-show run of *Unconditional* at the Malonga Casquelourd Center for the Arts in downtown Oakland. Six of the eight performances were open to the general public. These shows were advertised through the Destiny Art Center network—of current students and their families; alumni; and peer youth, art, and education organizations—as well as through announcements in local radio and print media outlets. Approximately 1,200 audience members attended these public performances. The company’s other two performances were ‘fieldtrip shows’—performances where the entire audience was made up of classes of middle and high school students attending on fieldtrips from local schools. The fieldtrip shows combined drew about 500 students.

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8 Outside regular company rehearsal time, some company members trained in aerial dance with Oakland-based dance company, Project Bandaloop. They choreographed aerial dance movement that the company incorporated into several of the company’s ensemble dance numbers.
Destiny Arts Center presents
The Destiny Arts Youth Performance Company in...

"unconditional"

hip-hop,
modern
and
aerial dance,
theater,
martial arts,
rap and song

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Performance and Third Space

Most people hear about social issues like immigration on the news, Imelda says. Hearing about such issues from the company she says, is “Totally different, because it seems like in the media, they’re just saying it so people know, but us, we’re saying it in a way so people can change and that’s what’s different about it.” Following Maxine Greene (1995), saying it in a way so people can change means, “freeing audience members to take initiative in reaching beyond their own actualities, in looking at things as if they could be otherwise” (p. 124). Today’s media, Greene (1995) says, inhibit this process by presenting audiences, “with predigested concepts and images in fixed frameworks.” In this style of media, “Ideas of possibilities are trapped in predictability” (p. 124).

By contrast to offering predigested concepts, and images in fixed frameworks, the company creates a third space between the performance and the audience in which audience members can actively engage the performance and the issues it addresses, feel something from it, relate to it, and bring to bear their own experiences and ideas in its interpretation. In this third space, audience members are active participants in making meaning and not simply the recipients of information or someone else’s agenda for them. This quality is important for theater of social change, Doug Paterson (2001) says, because theater should not aim to change people. Theater that attempts to do so is coercive (p. 66). Theater that truly aims at social change, “progressive theater” in his words, must instead create “performance in which the relation between theater and social change is clearly acknowledged.” In progressive theater “information, emotions, and ideas are presented so as to create a condition in which if people wanted to change their ideas or
emotional orientations, they could” (Theater, 2001, p.66). This is what company performances strive to do.

Through dance and theater, company members embody the effects of particular social issues on their lives. In doing so, they allow the audience to experience the emotional impact these social issues have on their lives (Adams, 2002). The performance, Simón says, “Is bringing you into somebody else’s life, and it’s helping you relate to them.” Through dance he says, “You can take an issue and you can put it into your body. You can really bring it into you, and you’re not just saying it, but you’re moving it, you’re living it.” Theater complements dance he says, by “taking that movement, and giving it voice.” Theater is a form of storytelling he says. “It makes it personal for you. ‘Okay, I hear that person’s story.’ And it’s like, you’re all of a sudden, you are walking into somebody else’s shoes, you know. You really do, you walk into their life and you become them for a minute. …If somebody can really take you on that ride,” he says, “You've got to keep going and figure out your own answer to it.”

In describing how she thinks the company performances affect audiences, Louise Music, the director of arts education for Alameda County where Destiny is located, references the concept of third space as she has seen it used in arts education research to describe how the arts can support educational change (Stevenson & Deasy, 2004). “It’s really all about third space. …It’s like, seeing kids [change], but we get changed too,” she says. At company performances there is interplay between the audience and the performance. When Sarah watches the audience members at company performances, she says she sees this interplay evidenced in audience members’ bodies. “I see people go, like, people are in those moments,” she says. “They feel connected to the kids; they feel
connected to their stories; they feel connected to parts of their own lives that they maybe had forgotten.”

**Framing and Sociological Imagination**

One of the ways that the company members facilitate the connection between the audience members and the social issues that they raise in *Unconditional*, is by framing them using their own personal stories. “Framing” in social movement terms, is the “conscious strategic effort… by groups of people to fashion shared understandings of the world and of themselves that legitimate and motivate collective action” (McAdam, 1996, p.6). Framing is a natural component of all art making, political or not, in that art making is itself a way of making meaning and expressing it to others (Dewey, 1934; Adams, 2002; Eisner, 2002). “By rendering events or occurrences meaningful, frames function to organize experience and guide action, whether individual or collective” (Snow, Rochford, Worden, & Benford, 1986, p. 464). Company members used their personal stories to frame social issues that mattered, making an implicit claim to the audience of their importance by embodying in the performance the emotional impact that these issues had on their lives.

To frame social issues in relationship to their own stories, Company members engaged what sociologist C. Wright Mills (1959) calls, “the sociological imagination.” The sociological imagination, says Mills, is seeing the relationships between personal troubles, which “have to do with self and with those limited areas of social life of which [one] is directly and personally aware,” and public issues “having to do with social structure, and to do with placing biography in the context of history (p. 8). Mills believes that artists are “major formulators of private troubles and public issues,” but that artists
do not try to relate these two milieus to each other—a job, Mills considers the purview of social scientists. While artists in general may not attempt to explore the relationships of personal troubles and social issues, the revolutionary artist who creates art intended to make social change—like those in the company—do just this. Company members explore the social structures that shape their personal experiences and, rather than take these social structures for granted as fixed, imagine what our lives could be like if these structures—and the social relationships that they influence—changed. In creating their performance, Arianna’s grandmother says, company members are “learning political analysis, and they are learning to be able to see how their stories fit into the larger story, and what some of the political components of their stories actually are.” In their rehearsal process, for example, the company examined the issue of immigration in the United States and used Imelda’s story of having her father face deportation to frame United States immigration policy as an issue that affects young people in real and painful ways. They created scenes in which they connected the emotional content and intensity of Imelda’s personal story to this larger social and political issue as a way to convey its urgency.

As part of the company’s process creating these scenes, an outside facilitator from an organization called World Savvy, dedicated to preparing youth to become leaders and responsible global citizens, led a workshop on immigration issues at the two-day retreat the company took to the Montalvo Art Center. She gave them a history of immigration in the United States and an overview of key current issues in American immigration policy. To begin to engage this information as a group, she had company members brainstorm things that came to mind when they heard the word “immigrant.” Company members
called out words and phrases, and Simón wrote them down: Guest workers, criminal, native land, creep, border crossed us, not human, naturalization, contradiction, American dream, dead men, Xenophobia, American reality. Drawing on traditional practice in community arts, the company then created physical sculptures representing items from the list they generated (Boal, 1985; Rohd, 1998).

The group then debriefed the activity. Arianna said that the experience made her feel inspired and also angry about the injustice that was so visible in many of the sculptures that they created. Sharmaine said it made her think about, “As young people, what are we doing to make change?” Neenee said that it made her feel like an outsider
and made her think about “Why aren’t we all accepted? We’re all on this earth.” “It shouldn’t be a right for some people to move freely and not for others,” she said. The facilitator then asked the company to write for fifteen minutes. She instructed them to pick one topic related to immigration and make a point. Company members spread out around the theater where the session took place, lying on the stage and sitting in the theater seats to write. After a few minutes, the facilitator directed the company to stop what they were writing and to write the counter argument to the point they had made. After a few minutes passed, she asked the company members to partner-up, share their writing, give each other feedback, and then revise their own writing.

Morgan (left), Amore (center), and Arianna (right) create a physical sculpture. In the background, Sarah takes notes for use in the company’s script.
Amore shared her piece first, and Arianna noted a line that she liked about blacks and Mexicans fighting but still having love for each other. Dharma shared that she felt that today many people seem unwilling to take the risks they would need to take for “real freedom,” and that many people seem to assume that they don’t need to get involved in social action because they expect others to do the work. She read an excerpt from the piece that she had written about that issue: “We have activists who can do that for us. After all, they must be pretty active if they’re called activists, right? They’ll clean all this stuff up for us, right? WRONG!”

Krizia shared a story about her mom immigrating to the United States from El Salvador. “My mom had suffered a lot here in the U.S.A.,” she wrote, “But she had found
her way to have freedom and have rights.” The facilitator asked Krizia to share adjectives that she would use to describe her mom. “Hard worker, brave, full hearted, strong, courage, faith, determined,” she responded. Arianna said she liked the idea that you have to have a full heart to be courageous.

Kash then read the poem he had written, which later became a monologue in the company’s performance called *Real Americans*:

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Ask me how many real Americans there are
I say none
We’ve all come
From women who’ve been in many a place
Humans date back to before race had a face
I want to eat the food of my culture but I’ve forgotten its taste
Am I a disgrace?
A family line stolen and not yet to return
Can a conqueror be an immigrant ‘til they make the land their own?
Can you take a people’s culture just for a crown to please the throne?
We all know about borders and that some are kept with guns
But will the laws that provide the funds destroy the future of our daughters & sons?
This is supposed to be the land of the free and the home of the brave
but we’re rejecting our own, these modern day slaves…
Some call this the American dream, I call it the American reality covered with a make belief glaze.
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When Kash finished reading his poem, the company applauded. Sukay said that she liked the line, “before race had a face.” Neenee and Arianna said they especially liked the reference to the fact that we’ve all come from mothers and the way that it gave a sense of how we are all connected. Kash shared that he had had a dream in which everyone mixed to become one—“everyone had a little of everything.” “When Kash read *Real Americans* for the first time,” Simón says, “it meant a lot to me to see an African American man write a solidarity piece for immigration, something he's not familiar with personally.”
In Unconditional, the company juxtaposed Imelda’s story with Kash’s Real Americans poem in order to show that the effects of immigration policy are relevant, not just to immigrants living in the United States without legal status, but to everyone. In their pairing of Imelda’s story with Real Americans, the company also hoped to frame discrimination against those living in the country without legal status as a case of a broader social phenomenon with which many people might relate more immediately. Kash articulates this phenomenon saying that, to him, Real Americans, “Is about how we as humans have this natural instinct – well, not all of us but a lot of us have this natural instinct to separate ourselves from another type of person. We always have different groups and cliques, organizations, things which separate ourselves in a lot of different ways.” With Real Americans, he says, “I wanted to explore that in the specific sense of ‘I’m the real person from my country and you are just a person who came here,’ which is a really specific topic to Americans because America is, of all countries, made up of mostly immigrants. And that’s why I thought it would be interesting to call the piece Real Americans.”

In the opening act of the company’s performance, Imelda, Kim, Miranda, Neenee, Javier, and Rose delivered a series of “cell phone monologues,” in which they appear on stage alone talking on a cell phone and telling a friend about something that is going on in their lives. In these monologues, they play themselves and share stories about things happening in their own lives. Imelda wrote her cell phone monologues about the experiences that she was going through with her father’s deportation hearings. The first time Imelda appeared on stage at the beginning of the first act, she said into the phone:

I’ve been stressin’ over this whole thing for so long and it’s finally the day. (PAUSE) Yeah. We’re going in soon, I think. (PAUSE) My Mom and my Dad

A few scenes later, Imelda appeared back on stage by herself again speaking into her cell phone:

Yup, everything went wrong. Everything. They’re gon’ deport him. The judge gave him 30 days to leave the country or we can appeal, try to fight it. (PAUSE) If he goes we’re all gonna have to go with him. (PAUSE) Yup. (PAUSE) I just can’t think about going back to Guatemala. I was born here. This is home. (PAUSE) God. It feels like we’re criminals in our own country.

After her monologue the stage lights faded to black. When they came up again, Kash, standing in a spotlight center stage, delivered *Real Americans*. When he finished, the company entered in two lines and stopped in front of Kash, one line in front of the other.
They began a dance they called the *Freedom Medley*, choreographed by a company alumna. In the opening sequence, company members’ hands were together behind their backs as if tied in invisible chains. They moved their bodies as though struggling to free themselves from these chains, their bodies heavy and distorted from their weight. Company members then froze kneeled on the stage, bodies folded over forward, hands behind their backs and Kash delivered another poem written by company alumna who helped the company with its script development.

The original people of this land are still fighting not to be erased, how can any human being ever be considered illegal, ever lost in Rio Grande crossing.
As he spoke, one dancer at a time popped up with each hard beat of the music and struck a pose standing with one arm raised until all were standing together as if victorious and then broke into unison movement.

Darkness crowds at the corner of vision and I know this is just a dream 'till we write in our actions like primero de mayo, flooding the streets with bodies moving in time together. Stop comparing our pain, stop measuring one sad story for another one and listen to each other.

The final lines of the poem in the context of the dancers’ movement seemed to suggest that the moment of solidarity represented in the company’s unison movement was “just a dream.” It was a momentary representation of what is required on a larger scale; not just unison movement on a stage, but unison movement in the streets. The last line of the poem, brings the audience into the equation as part of the royal we comparing “our” pain, and measuring “our” sad stories against those of others. They frame their grievance about immigration in the context of an experience that most people would relate to having—being so caught up in their own pain and sadness that they have not been attentive to that of others. In so far as an audience member can locate him or herself inside that frame, inside that experience, she may find in the poem that she is implicated in the injustice and therefore also part of the potential solution. The poem then points to a potential avenue for participation in social change—listening. The poem frames listening as a radical act—an act with the potential to create a significant shift from a focus on ourselves to a focus on one another and our interconnectedness.

In the following sequences of the dance, the company members alternate between movement embodying moments of struggle and freedom, moments of connection and isolation. In the final section of the piece, they dance in unison. Their movements are strong but in an almost effortless way, as if the strength is inside them rather than in the
force of their movement. In one move, they brush their shoulder as if dusting it off—one side and then the other. At the end of the dance, they turn and walk upstage together as the music and lights fade.

The dance brought the company into the energy of the solidarity that Kash had expressed during the retreat for those experiencing prejudice and exclusion as recent immigrants to the United States, and that was expressed for Imelda as he performed *Real Americans* in juxtaposition to her monologues in the performance. The company’s solidarity with Imelda was particularly palpable during the unison movement at the end of the Freedom Medley. Unison movement, like other “bodily dimensions of rituals,” Aminzade and McAdam (2001) find, “help give them their emotional power,” and build solidarity (p. 42).

*Navarra (left) and Amore (right) walk upstage at the end of the Freedom Medley dance.*
After the dance, Imelda walked down stage into a spotlight. The audience erupted into cheers and applause as if also in solidarity with her. She waited for them to quiet and then delivered her last cell phone monologue.

You know what? I’m hecka mad now. How they gon’ deport him after being here for so long? My dad worked so hard for this country.

With this line, tears started to well in Imelda’s eyes. As she continued they streamed down her face.

He pays hecka taxes. And they’re gon’ pay him back like that? That makes no sense. Yo soy orgullosa con quien soy. Yo soy 100% Guatamalteca. Pero tambien soy 100% Americana. I’m proud of who I am and where I’m from. And I don’t care what they say. We’re staying here whether they like it or not.

In the second act of the performance, Kash and Imelda appear on stage on their cell phones talking, revealing that it was Kash that Imelda was talking with during her cell phone monologues in the first act. They talked about Imelda’s situation and they connected it to larger immigration issues. They talked, for example, about what it’s like for a human being to be called an “alien” and about Operation Return to Sender, an initiative of the United States Immigration and Customs Enforcement agency, which allowed authorities to go grocery stores, community centers, schools, and other public places, pick up immigrants who did not have legal status in the United States, and send them back to the countries where they were born. Before they get off the phone, Imelda shared that her family had gotten a lawyer and she was trying to stay positive but audience members were left without knowing what the resolution to her story would be.

Boal (1995) suggests that open endings of this kind are important in theater for social change. When situations that a performance has framed as unjust are resolved on stage, Boal (1995) finds that audience members experience catharsis through which they
Kash (left) and Imelda (right) perform their cell phone dialogue.
discharge emotional energy generated through the performance that they might otherwise use to engage in action to create change. An open ending of this kind helps to facilitate third space for the audience members by allowing them to draw on their own experiences, ideas, and emotions to imagine possible solutions of their own to a presented situation.

**Show Don’t Tell**

Another social issue that the company addressed in *Unconditional* was the impact of media on American culture. In a scene-sequence called the *Media Beast* they framed the American media as a political and social issue warranting attention. They engaged in what Snow and colleagues (1986) call the transformation of a domain specific interpretive frame—that is, through the scene they suggest “fairly self-contained but substantial changes in the way a particular domain of life is framed,” in this case media, such that that domain “previously taken for granted is reframed as problematic and in need of repair” (p. 474). The *Media Beast* scene grew out of a free write that Kim did during a company rehearsal reflecting on the media influence on his own life:

I hate it, but I can’t escape it. I’m lost in a labyrinth of 600-channel-changing-freedom. I have the choice to turn right or right, the freedom to back up, rewind, and fast forward in T.V. land. I have the ability to cover my eyes, to press power. But do I have the freedom to think?

Simón suggested that Kim develop this piece into a monologue and write and perform it from the perspective of a CEO of one of the big media conglomerates. Kim tried this approach and found that it didn’t work well for him. Writing the monologue in that way he felt distanced it from his own experience and made it easy for him to slip into writing the character in a stereotypical way. Simón then suggested that Kim think of the character
like a monster or otherworldly beast that could capture the emotional response that Kim had to the media influence he felt in his life. He recommended that Kim do some more research on the American media to inspire his writing. “I tried that” Kim says, “and eventually one day I just sat down and wrote, like, a poem, kind of. Just kept writing and writing and writing. And I did a lot of research on the Internet, and I looked up statistics and like, how much these corporations controlled the media, how much was controlled by people of color, and all of that.”

The research he says was not so much to inform him, because he was already aware of the structure of the American media, “It was more of like to get me riled up, and get me writing more furiously, rather than just saying, ‘the media controls this percent of whatever.’” He said he used his own emotions, “To get that beast out on the page.” “I didn’t want to make it too preachy,” he says, “I guess it was more …to just point out some things. I was just like, ‘Look at this, look at that.’ Just to get people to think about it.” “I guess that’s like always the first step,” Kim says, “I think this whole show [Unconditional] is …trying to say, ‘imagine this. Think. Just think about it….you in the audience, think about this and look at what these youth on stage are doing right now, look at all the issues they are talking about, look at what’s possible, look at what we’re doing right now.’” Kim worked with Simón to edit his poem into a monologue and to develop the Media Beast character for the stage.

In the performance, before Kim delivers the monologue, he is seen center stage, sitting, watching television, and talking on his cell phone with his grandfather.

Hey Granddad. I told you I would call right back. (PAUSE) What? (PAUSE) You had a moment of clarity? What, did you meditate or something? (PAUSE) Oh you’re back to the whole change-the-world thing. (PAUSE) Wait, wait…I got to go. I’m sorry, I’m sorry…but my
show is coming on. I know but… Wait wait, what? I’ll call you back you later, no…no…bye…bye…

Kim then sets his phone down, and begins to move out of his chair toward the television set, his body twisting and turning, as if he is being pulled into it. Hands then grab him from the back. Other company members, wearing all black so that only their hands are visible dress him up as the Media Beast character in an oversized white suit and mask.

Kim delivered his monologue with still frames from real television, news, and music video footage flashing in quick succession behind him, frames that resonate with the images his monologue invokes.

You might not know me, but I know you…
Very well.
I know the things that make you smile, make you cry,
make you angry, make you lie.
I know the things that will make you give up endless hours of your life
every night just so you can glue yourself to your couch
and let your little eyes glaze over in a haze.
I even know how to make you take out your wallet and empty it into my
palm without leaving a trace.
Each and every morning you roll out of bed to the sound of my voice,
thoughts spiraling about what I fed you the night before.
Don’t worry…
You’re in control.
Just step right into one of my endless strip malls and let your soul breathe
with ease.
I’ll take your money, sell your image and make you look weak.
Primetime is your time!
So don’t turn the other cheek.
Watch me smear you and your people all over the globe.
Look! Your women are on T.V.
And they aren’t wearing any clothes!
And look at you ridin’ high.
Gold teeth, a shinin’ smile.
You got your glocks, your forties, and ya grapes…
You stay high.
So maintain that clouded brain,
and I’ll keep selling you drugs to ease the pain
of a dying youth,
and that’s the truth…
You’re the loser of this game.
And look at that liquor store vandal who doesn’t bother to open a book,
and check the sparkling weight
of generations of labor hanging from his neck,
and listen to the sizzle as he brands an emblem to his chest that reads…
“I am Hip-Hop!”
Yes…
You sure are.
So tell your friends that they can buy culture for $100 a pop!
And it still don’t stop...
The Media Beast’s prop suitcase in front of images projected as a backdrop.
After Kim’s monologue, Arianna, Miranda, Javier, Amore, Krizia, Neenee, Dawon, and Kash, dressed in brightly colored suit jackets, performed an “advertisement” for the American media in which they delivered facts about the American media in over-the-top, cheerful, salesman-like voices as “upbeat commercial music” played in the background. This scene grew out of discussions that company had about who controls the media and whose interests it serves, informed by the research that Kim did in writing his monologue.

**Arianna:** In 1983, 50 corporations controlled over half of the media businesses

**Miranda:** By the end of 1986 this number had shrunk to 29

**Javier:** Now 5 media corporations

**Amore:** Time Warner

**Dharma:** Viacom

**Krizia:** Disney

**Neenee:** News Corp

**Dawon:** and General Electric’s NBC

**Javier:** Control over 80% of primetime television, most cable channels

**Kash:** Vast holdings in radio

**Miranda:** publishing, movie studios

**Neenee:** the internet and the music industry

**Arianna:** and only 3.3% of television stations are owned by people of color

**Kash:** And let’s not forget about Clear Channel, who now owns more than 1,200 radio stations,

**Amore:** That’s a third of all the stations in the US
**Dharma:** And then there’s BET

**Dawon:** Black Entertainment Television

**Krizia:** Now owned by Viacom

**Kash:** In 2005 they gave employees a list of artists that they thought were "too intelligent" for its audience of young black teenagers

**Amore:** That list included Hip-Hop artists such as Dead Prez, Little Brother and Talib Kweli.

**Arianna:** And now the news

**Rose:** Where we hear what’s really going on in the world

**Dharma:** You wanna know who appears on the evening news?

**Miranda:** Check it out…92 percent of all U.S. sources interviewed are white

**Javier:** 85 percent are male

**Krizia:** And where you can identify a party, 75 percent are

**All:** Republican.

**Dawon:** Right before and right after the invasion of Iraq

**Amore:** There were just 3 out of 393 sources that were affiliated with anti-war activism.

**Neenee:** That’s less than 1 percent

**Kash:** Freedom of speech?

**All:** Ha ha ha ha

Through the *Media Beast* scene the company draws attention to the questions of who controls the media; what their interests might be; and how these factors might shape the media we receive in ways that influence our lives and constrain our possibilities. The *Media Beast* also raises the question of media audience’s complicity in perpetuating,
even helping to fuel, this media structure—or “media beast.” Kash says that, to him, what Kim is saying through this piece is important because, “Society is determined by what we see in the media” in ways that people often don’t pay attention to. Behind the media, he says, “There are specific messages and plus traditions that have never been questioned and things like that; all that builds up and adds together to make a society.” He says that there are people determining those messages and making decisions about what is and is not seen in the media and about what constitutes good and evil. To create social change, it is important, he says, to be aware of “who controls those things.” “To have a society change,” he says, “would be to really redefine what we think is good and bad because good and evil is really an opinion.”

Kim remembers when he first saw a company performance, a year before he auditioned to get into the company. He said, he felt moved and inspired by the performance because, “It was very raw and these kids were able to just address these issues with complete commitment and do it with style, like, they weren’t up there lecturing. They were up there dancing, rapping and I don’t know; it’s hard to explain. It was in a kind of way that it made me feel, after a dance piece, like I would have shivers or after a monologue, you know.”

Almost two years later, Kim’s Media Beast monologue gave audience members a similar experience. Lena’s mom, who was an audience member at the company performance, says, for example, that she appreciated the way in which Kim “embodied” the Media Beast. “It was so powerful. I thought that was brilliant,” she says. Echoing Kim’s comments she distinguished between the effect that the piece had on her—one of captivation, emotion, reflection, and inspiration—and the experience of having someone
lecture or tell her something. “I’m not engaged by the telling,” she explains. “I mean, I can turn on the radio and I can listen to facts and figures, but it is not going to affect me as much as it does when somebody tells me how something personally affected them; I mean, what their experience is. …I’m much, much, much more engaged when someone is showing me.” The difference between a performance that is showing rather than telling Kim says, is that it, “really hits you, it really sticks with you. I feel like the performers are doing their jobs – they are expressing – they’re not just like a wall up there speaking at you; they are up there showing a part of themselves and they are incorporating that into their art.” When performers express parts of themselves and their experiences related to a particular social issue, they invite the audience to relate to the social issue and to imagine different relationships to it. This Kim says, “Forces people to open their ears.” His comments resonate with Archon Fung’s (2001) belief that, “Theater can be a kind of political hearing aid” (p. 68).

The way that the media delivers information, by contrast, Kim says seems to cultivate separation and fear. “Like you hear news reports and you read the newspaper about kids getting shot … in East Oakland,” he says, “and I feel like people reading that in my neighborhood … I think it just kind of makes you want to be separated from the youths that are out there. I mean when shootings were happening down on Lakeshore or in Grand, like by my house,” he says, “my mom got really scared and she didn’t want me to go out at all. She just wanted me to stay in the house, lock the doors, lock the windows and make sure that I came home before 10 o’clock.” “I think that’s just the wrong idea,” he says. “I feel like instead of trying to understand we kind of just shut ourselves off from
the people that we’re afraid of.” Kim says that the company performances are important because they present opportunities for audience members to engage rather than close off.

In the company’s treatment of the issue of youth violence, framed through Javier’s story, for example, the company allowed audience members to experience youth violence by walking in the shoes of someone whom it affected very directly. Audience members had an opportunity to empathize with the emotions that Javier felt as his friend was murdered in front of him. Eighty percent of over 800 audience members responding to an audience survey said that they learned something from *Unconditional* about the effects of violence on young people’s lives. This finding is striking in a context where youth violence, and shootings in particular, are already so visible in local media. These data provide evidence that audience members learned something more, or perhaps of a different nature, from *Unconditional* than what is available in the news about violence in young people’s lives.

Several company members and parents said that in past company shows they had seen there were some scenes that felt like they ‘told’ more than they ‘showed.’ In general, they felt like these scenes were not as effective because they did not have the emotional energy through which they, as audience members, could forge connections with the content of the scene and they did not allow them to participate in constructing the meaning of the scene bringing to bear their own experience, ideas, and emotions. In the company performance of *Unconditional*, the scenes that audience members felt came the closest to feeling like this were two scenes in the *Media Beast* scene-sequence that book-ended the commercial for the American media that followed Kim’s monologue. In the first of these scenes, directly following the Media Beast monologue, Morgan, Macio,
Imelda, Navarra, and Lena—the figures wearing all black that had dressed Kim in the Media Beast costume—reappear and deliver the following lines:

**Morgan**: We are all conditioned by this beast we call the media.

**Macio**: We sit alone in our cells, isolated from the person sitting right next to us,

**Imelda**: And eat whatever kind of food this beast feels like feeding us.

**Navarra**: We eat and eat without question, without thought.

**Lena**: Knowledge becomes shallow, cold and ignorant. Ignorant knowledge.

**All 5**: Independence? Please…

Following the commercial for the American media, these players return to the stage. They remove Kim’s *Media Beast* costume and return Kim to the chair in front of the television. As they do so, they say:

**Morgan**: The messages that are being stuffed into our heads every day

**Lena**: slowly pickle our minds and eat away at the spirit,

**Imelda**: What reason do we have to care?

**Macio**: We get inebriated by the sights we see…

**Navarra**: We are being divided while screaming

**All 5**: The revolution’s dead.

**Morgan**: And even if it isn’t you can bet that it won’t be televised

In many ways, these two pieces of the *Media Beast* sequence tell the audience how to interpret the other scenes in the sequence—the monologue and the commercial. In doing so, they constrain the third space and take away from the audience members’ opportunity to feel their own emotions about the other scenes and to form their own
interpretations. In so doing, they detract from rather than add to the audience experience. Morgan said that, while he thought Kim’s monologue and the commercial scene were some of the most interesting and impactful scenes in the show, he didn’t really “feel” the scenes that he was a part of in the *Media Beast* scene-sequence. These scenes had a more didactic rather than moving quality. Lena’s mom said that, to her, these scenes felt a little like what she calls telling rather than showing, but that it didn’t bother her in this particular instance because the emotional content of Kim’s scene, which framed the whole sequence, was so powerful and palpable that the *Media Beast* sequence overall was evocative. As a whole, it created a sense of third space.

**To Be Moved**

Company members felt that one of the most powerful pieces in *Unconditional* was Lena’s piece about Arab-American relations. At every performance, company members came out of the dressing rooms and gathered in the wings to watch Lena dance. When she was creating the piece, Lena worked hard at trying to figure out how to express to audience members the hurt, anger, frustration, and isolation she felt as a result of the way Arab-American relations affected her experience. Though she didn’t call it that, she was explicitly trying to create a third space in which the audience could enter. She didn’t want to other them by pushing them away or by telling them what to think. Striving for this effect, she tried many cuts at the dialogue for her character’s voiceover. She said she wanted the words to make audience members think about Anti-Arab sentiment, but struggled with early drafts feeling too heavy handed and aggressive. “Being aggressive never really solves anything,” she says, “I mean, it is good to let out your anger, but it is not really progressive to just be like, ‘Why are you guys calling us this?’”
In one scriptwriting session, Simón suggested to Lena, “Just write a bunch of questions down. I just want to see what it looks like. Just write out whatever questions you have for people, whatever you think people want to ask you, just write them down.” Lena wrote a series of questions and she and Simón agreed that they should be the text for the voiceover. The beauty of that approach Sarah says, is that rather than shoving a story or agenda down people’s throats, it invited audience members to think, and to “Let us sort of reveal our ignorance about that area of the world [the Middle East] and what we think. You know, we can just go over there and kill people but we really do not know what we are doing and we do not know who we are killing; we do not know what it is.”

In the end, in her voiceover, Lena said to the audience:

Salaam alaikum – do you know what that means?
Do you know what language I speak?
Terrorist. Towelhead.
Do you know the meaning of my name?
What’s your name? What does it mean?
What’s the color of your land’s soil?
I’ll tell you mine.
What do you know about me?
What do I make you think of?
Dark shawl covered faces of men holding enormous guns staring at you?
Demure yet suggestive eyes staring at you?
Fading, hunger stricken communities with no name streets, staring at you?
Just in case you weren’t aware…
When you aren’t looking at us…
We stare at you too.
So I’m curious about you.
Masalaam.
That means goodbye.

This voiceover begins with questions that ask audience members to take stock of their own opinions, assumptions, and questions about people of Arab descent. At the end of the voiceover, she then flips the perspective asking audience members to imagine what people living in the Middle East think when they see Americans. “Basically,” Lena says,
“I just wanted to convey how it is sort of a two-way game here. …What I mean is that people here just have so many misconceptions and assumptions and stereotypes, and really awful ways of thinking about us. And I just wanted to say how the people that this country is oppressing – they also are developing these same stereotypes and bad thoughts about us as a country and they do not really know or some do not really know how a lot of Americans are really angry and upset about what is going on,” she says, adding “I mean, I know some people they are just like, ‘All Americans are bad. They are killing our people and all this stuff.’ So you are looking at us like we are these terrible terrorists, but we have some same assumptions about you.”

At the end of the piece, Lena says, “I look at the audience and I sort of raise my fist and then I turn around. I guess what that meant was just that it was a combination of, ‘If there are any Middle-Eastern peeps in the crowd, here we are.’ And also, just sort of a ‘this is who I am’ in a personal way, like ‘this is who I am; I want everybody to know it.’ And then also, ‘this is who we are and you cannot just degrade us this way.’ I was not trying to be like staring people down. I was just trying to get the message through.”

Simón says, between the voiceover and her movement, Lena created a mirror and invited the audience, ‘Look. Look at this. This is a mirror. Look at yourself. …I think it's just a beautiful piece. Not even looking at any of the words, the movement itself is questioning. The movement itself is making it uncomfortable and comfortable at the same time. It's just this weird tension in that piece, and so I think that's another reason why it's such a powerful one.”

Describing why she hid in the wings to watch Lena every time she performed her piece, Arianna stepped back and reflected on her take on the piece from an audience
member perspective. To me, she says, it was “About a Middle Eastern girl, who basically sees what America is doing to her country, and she’s basically saying, ‘You don’t know us. You know nothing about our culture, you’re criticizing us and you’re making all these judgments against us, when really, you have no clue, you just have no idea.” “I think one of the reasons it was really powerful,” she says, “is because it did give an idea of what the Muslim perspective on it was. And it did help people really understand, even though it was like, a two-minute piece – not even – it gave so much, and it was so beautifully done, because she’s a really great dancer. So the beauty of the dance, and just, the story of her dance.”

Dharma, Neenee, and Javier also said they watched Lena’s piece from backstage at every show. There was something about it that transfixed them. Explaining its draw,
Dharma says, similarly to Arianna, “Lena has always been such a beautiful dancer, so it had a lot of extra feeling to just what she was saying. Like what she was saying in the voiceover was already really strong and really touching and then when she put dancing to it, it just added way more feelings, like over the top, like double the feelings you would get just from someone speaking about something.” “It just made me think about everything she was talking about,” Dharma says, “and the way she danced made me feel the way she might have felt about people viewing her or her culture as very foreign and weird and thinking a lot of presumptions and stereotypes about where she may come from and no one sympathizing with what she might be going through or what people in her culture might be going through.” Neenee says similarly, that to her, Lena’s piece was, “About struggle, and about how people look at you different, and how we look at other people, and not noticing that we make them feel, like, intimidated, because of where they’re from.” Javier says, he thought that Lena’s piece was powerful because of, “The whole story she put behind it, all the emotion she put; you could really see it in her face and when she did it, it just seemed effortless. It was like, ‘Wow’.”

Dharma’s mom who was in the audience for one of the public performances of Unconditional, says, “What Lena’s dance spoke to for me was just that, ‘I am powerful. I'm alive. I am open and free. ...I'm this – you cannot take this from me.’ It was just like, ‘Bring your guns. You cannot ruin my spirit. You cannot trash me.’ It was really affirming.” Lena’s piece she said allowed her to feel that emotion and to imagine herself in the shoes of an Arab woman. “When you think of what Muslim Arab women are going through right now, you think about just the possibility of that ever happening to someone
like us, for instance,” she says “and that it is happening to them every day, all night and all day and their children. And it is just like to see that kind of affirmation. And it was almost like she was naked …the way she was like, you know, ‘I absolutely disregard your violence. I absolutely give it no respect.’” “There is so much power in that kind of expression,” she adds. The emotions in Lena’s piece moved audience members to think, to feel, to imagine, and to empathize. “To be moved,” Tony Kushner (2001) says, “is to be changed, if only a little” (p. 63).

**Audience Impact**

As a collective act for social change, the company’s performance of *Unconditional* created social change by giving audience members the kinds of opportunities that company members had in the company process to look at their own lives differently; to learn about the experience of those from backgrounds different from their own; to think about social issues and their effects on their own lives and the lives of others; to experience change within themselves that will change the way they understand and relate to others; and to feel inspired to take action to make their community a better place. In an audience survey [see Appendix] conducted at five of the company’s eight performances, 61 percent of over 800 respondents said that *Unconditional* made them think differently about their own lives; sixty percent agreed that they learned something from the performance that will change the way they treat other people; and 65 percent said the performance made them want to take action to make their community a better place. Audience members’ responses were unrelated to racial/ethnic background and sex.

When audience members agreed that the performance connected with their personal experience, the odds that they would agree that the performance made them
think differently about their own lives increased by a factor of more than two. [See Table 1.]

Table 1. – Logistic Regression Analysis of Agreement with “The performance made me think differently about my own life.”

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Cox and Snell $R^2 = 0.343$  Nagelkerke $R^2 = 0.467$
Audience members who agreed that the performance connected with their personal experience were also almost twice as likely to agree that the performance made them want to take action to make their community a better place [see Table 2]. These findings suggest the importance of the racial and ethnic diversity of the company to its ability to create social change through performance. The audiences for *Unconditional* shows were also racially and ethnically diverse (19% black, 27% white, 13% Asian/Pacific Islander, 19% Latino, 9% bi- or multi-racial, and 2% other). The company’s diversity made it likely that all audience members could identify with the racial or ethnic background and/or life experiences of at least one company member. One youth audience focus group participant, explained, “I think that in that show there was someone that has something that connects to at least everybody.” Rashidi says similarly that the diversity of the company members and their stories pushed youth who saw *Unconditional*, “To look at themselves even though it is not them on stage because any youth in Oakland could identify with at least one youth in the company, at least one.” *Unconditional* survey data reinforce Bandura’s (2004) finding that dramas are most effective in creating social change when they have “a cast of characters who represent the different segments of the population” among whom the performance seeks to make social change (p. 89).

Given that the *Unconditional* is based on company members’ real life experiences, the combination of the diversity of the audience and the diversity of the company made it not only likely that all audience members had an opportunity at the performance to see a connection between their personal experience and the performance, but also that they would have an opportunity to learn something about someone from a
Table 2. – Logistic Regression Analysis of Agreement with “The performance made me want to take action to make my community a better place.”

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<td>.002</td>
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Cox and Snell $R^2 = 0.396$  Nagelkerke $R^2 = 0.549$

different racial or ethnic background from their own. Seventy-four percent of audience members agreed that they learned something from the performance about people with racial/ethnic backgrounds different from their own. Those who did were about twice as
likely to agree that they learned something from the performance that will change the way they treat other people. [See Table 3.]

Youth focus group participants said that the fact that the company stories were real mattered to them. “It would have changed how we felt about it if it was made up,” said one participant. “Since the stories were real,” another said, “We could say, ‘Wow, it is not only happening to me; it is happening to somebody else.’ If it was not them, if it

Table 3. – Logistic Regression Analysis of Agreement with “I learned something from the performance that will change the way I treat other people”

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Predictor</th>
<th>$\beta$</th>
<th>SE $\beta$</th>
<th>Wald’s $\chi^2$</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>$p$</th>
<th>$e^{\beta}$ (odds ratio)</th>
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<td>.005</td>
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<td>.946</td>
<td>1.020</td>
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<td>.542</td>
<td>.815</td>
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<td>1</td>
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</table>

Cox and Snell $R^2 = 0.360$  Nagelkerke $R^2 = 0.489
was [made up] stories, it’d be like, ‘I guess I’m the only one that feels similar to that.’”

Another participant said, “Because it’s based on their life story, and it’s not just a little play they’re doing, they’re going to let people know they’re not the only one going through it, it’s like they’re going through it too.” Resonating with these comments, Javier says that he thinks Unconditional was effective at making social change in part because, “A lot of people who came to see the show could connect to it – I thought they could really relate to what we were saying – and it was like, ‘Oh, well, we are not the only ones going through these issues.’ So it was an outlet for us, the company, to put it out there,” he says, “and also to make the other people in the audience feel like, ‘Oh, well, this person has gone through this; well, maybe I can go talk to this person about this.’ Just be more aware of yourself and be more confident of yourself.”
Bandura (2004) finds that when audience members feel connections between themselves and characters in a social drama, like those the focus group participants describe, the characters can serve as models for audience members. “Models,” he says, “Are a source of inspiration, competencies, and motivation. Seeing people similar to oneself succeed by perseverant effort raises observers’ beliefs in their own abilities” (p.79) and can help increase audience members’ self-efficacy, or “beliefs in one’s efficacy to exercise control over one’s functioning and events that affect one’s life” (pp. 78-79). Focus group participants described increases in their efficacy and courage as a result of the models that the company members offered. One said for example, “To see another person that is going through the same thing that you went through being so successful and not looking down, not looking back, keeping their head up, gives you more courage.” The survey data reinforce this finding showing a connection between the efficacy-related emotion of hope and action for social change. Seventy percent of audience members agreed that the performance made them feel hopeful. When they did, the odds that they would agree that the performance made them want to take action to make their community a better place increased by a factor of two. [See Table 2.]

Not surprisingly, adults were more likely than youth to agree that the performance made them think differently about young people. It is notable, however, that 56 percent of youth audience members agreed that the performance made them think differently about young people. It may be that the feelings youth audience members had that the young people in the performance were exhibiting strength, courage, and success in the face of some of the challenges that they too faced, made them think differently not only about their own lives, but also the prospects of youth more generally as a group.
At first blush, the audience survey seemed to suggest that youth were less likely to agree than adults that the performance made them want to take action to make their community a better place. Instead, this finding seems to be a result of a selection effect. At fieldtrip shows, 93 percent of audience members were youth whose teachers had brought them to the performance as a non-voluntary school activity. At weekend performances, by contrast, the majority of audience members attended voluntarily. When controlling for whether an audience member attended a fieldtrip or public performance, the apparent effect of being a youth goes away. Audience members attending a public performance were about twice as likely to agree that the performance made them want to take action to make their community a better place. [See Table 2.] This suggests that it is likely that the audience members who selected to attend a public performance had a greater predisposition toward or readiness to take action than audience members who did not themselves select to attend the performance. Whether company members attended a fieldtrip or public performance had no effect on the likelihood that they would agree that the performance made them think differently about their own life [see Table 1] nor on the likelihood they would agree that they learned something from the performance that would change the way they treated other people [see Table 3]. These data suggest that whether or not an audience member had selected to attend the performance did not mediate the performance’s effect on their thinking about their own life or their treatment of others.

**Performance Embodying Process**

As a collective act for social change, the company performance drew efficacy from the depth of the process that preceded it. Louise Music at the Alameda County Office of Arts Education says, “I go to things where I see kids performing on stage, and
kind of ranting at ‘the man’ or the government or something. And it’s like, ‘Okay, well, where did this really come from? How thoughtful is this, really?’ I see a lot of stuff packaged as social justice, and I’m like, ‘Whose social justice is it?’” By contrast, she says, “Destiny’s social justice feels really different—because it’s an enquiry, because it’s an honest expression, because it’s based on who the individuals are.” Company members, she says are “Honestly interrogating the world, asking questions, opening hearts, opening their own hearts. Working so hard at developing their artistic passion. Feeling confident in themselves.” Louise says that, to her, is not only why “Destiny’s social justice feels different,” but also why she thinks it is more likely to contribute to cultivating peace than so many other approaches. “It’s very hard to be hopeful in this world,” she says. “It’s the hardest thing to be happy in this world with your eyes wide open.” Company members though, she says, seem to develop this stance through the company experience. That to her is real social change because, she says, “We can’t be happy and hopeful, and open hearted in the world and go fight in the war. It’s just not possible to do. Or make a choice on the street that you’re going to pull a gun over some argument. But it is possible to feel self-righteous, and say, ‘I want a just world,’ and to go kill people.”

Dharma’s mom says similarly, that to her, the company performance was “so effective because company members are coming from a true place, places within themselves.” “The work that leads up to actually doing the show is the company work,” she says. To give a company performance, “You have to get those edges moved and you have to find those true words and there is a process that allows that to happen.” The fact that the company performance embodied the process through which company members created it, and created change in their own lives and their group, allowed it to have real
impact on the audience. “That perfection and expression just does not come with like, ‘Oh, I can do this,’” Dharma’s mom says. “Well, yeah, maybe you can, but I will not feel it if you do not feel it. So they go to their authentic expression and it takes a long time; it is a process.” Augusto Boal (2006) says to be effective in creating change in the world, “The Artistic Product—the work of art—must be capable of awakening even those who did not participate in the Aesthetic Process by which it came into being, the same ideas, emotions and thoughts that led the artist to its creation” (p. 18). The company’s performance of *Unconditional* met this demand.
Chapter 6: Implications for Practice, Research, and Theory

In this ethnographic study, I examined how a company of youth performing artists collaborated to create an original work of art for social change. I surfaced and described a theory of social change embedded in the company’s ten-month process. This theory conceives social change as a process of changing relationships—relationships to one another, to ourselves, and to the world around us. It offers a way to think about social change that provides a useful companion to traditional theories, particularly to those most visible in the United States.

In the United States, the phrase ‘social change’ evokes perhaps more vividly than anything else, images of the civil rights movement, which emphasized forms of social change that are realized in social structures. This movement and its related “family” of movements—“the women’s movement, the environmental movement, the Vietnam antiwar struggle, the anti-nuclear movement, and the gay and lesbian movement” (McAdam, Sampson, Weffer, & MacIndoe, 2005, p. 3)—have altered American social structures to more effectively hold the principles of social justice and equality. Human activity, however, has not yet fully aligned itself with the intentions embodied in these changes, and inequality and prejudice persist.

The primary strategy that the civil rights and related movements have used to try and advance this alignment is to wield social structures—particularly, laws—as tools to enforce the ideals that they embody. The NAACP, for example, used a litigational strategy to bring social life into greater alignment with legal precedence that protects the
equal rights of black Americans (Kluger, 2004). In this tradition, social change is a process of changing social structures and then using them to influence the social life that takes place within them. This structurally oriented approach to social change is a deeply engrained part of the American DNA.

The company’s theory of social change, offers a companion to this approach. As a complement to social structures pushing in to affect the social life within them, the company’s theory of social change, in Sarah’s phrasing, emphasizes the possibility for change to radiate outward from an individual, to a group, to a community level, to greater and greater levels of community. This model of change shifts focus from compliance to actively creating our social life. By altering relationships with an awareness of how they are shaped by social structures, the company believes, we create new possibilities for social life within them and in so doing change the structures themselves. As Simón puts it, “If you live your life as a creator, you're going to create social change.” This model reinforces Bandura’s (2004) notion that social structures are constituted by human activity at the same time as which they influence it.

The company’s work recommends three strategies that practitioners concerned with social change and art for social change might use to build on this study and facilitate changing relationships: supporting cross-cultural collaboration to create social change; engaging youth programs as a lever for social change; and building on the potential of third space in the arts as a locus for social change. These findings are described below along with implications for research and theory that would extend them and contribute to our ability to align human activity and social structures such that both embody the principles of social justice and equality of opportunity.
Cross-Cultural Collaboration for Social Change

Perhaps the most important finding of this study for practice is the value of plural group settings as a strategy for creating social change. The plurality of the company members’ experiences and backgrounds—with regard to race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and gender—enabled them to co-construct social change across lines of difference. As such, their work responds to Wilson’s (1996) call for an approach to social change that has at its heart a focus on common concerns and a building of understanding across racially and socio-economically diverse groups. “Discussions that emphasize common solutions to commonly shared problems,” he states, “promote a sense of unity, regardless of the different degrees of severity to which these problems afflict certain groups. Such messages bring races together, not apart, and are especially important during periods of racial tension” (p. xx). The opportunity the company provided for meaningful and intensive cross-cultural and cross-group interactions for creating social change is rare in most social environments. Though schools may be racially and ethnically diverse, for example, research shows that students are often socially isolated from peers of racial and ethnic backgrounds different from their own and that many schools offer few opportunities for meaningful cross-cultural interaction (Moody, 2001). The company members reported this to be true in their own schools.

My findings suggest that practitioners working to advance social change will benefit not only from creating plural group settings as a condition for their efforts, but also from facilitating cross-cultural interactions and collaboration within them. Such interactions appear to have helped company members develop capacities—including understanding of difference and social tolerance—that not only enabled them to change
the way they related to individuals of different backgrounds within the company, but also in their communities outside it. In addition, as they got to know each other better, they learned things about others in the group that challenged assumptions that they had held about them and people of the racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic backgrounds from which they came. These ‘ah hah moments’ dispelled stereotypes and enabled company members to discover new possibilities for relating to one another and, more generally, to others who came from backgrounds that were different from their own. At the company retreat, for example, Dawon said that he thought I was mixed race. Sarah asked him whether he might have made that assumption because on some level he thought I couldn’t be white because I was able to relate with him and he felt comfortable with me. He agreed that that was true. This prompted him to reconsider the possibilities for how he could relate with white people. Such possibilities would not have been as readily available in a homogeneous program setting.

**Youth Organizations as a Lever for Social Change**

My findings suggest that, in particular, youth organizations that provide diverse participants opportunities to collaborate in creating social change may offer a powerful lever for such change. The collective identity that company members shared as youth was an important force in mobilizing them to act together to create change and in enabling them to capitalize on the plurality of the group. As youth, company members shared a sense of “common disadvantage” (Neelands, 2009, p. 176). Youth cannot vote and do not have the legal standing or control to make many decisions that affect their lives (Creighton & Kivel, 1992; Cook-Sather, 2001; Fielding & Rudduck, 2002; Lensmire, 1998). They are often stigmatized as lazy, disinterested, disengaged, and unintelligent
and face prejudice as a result (West, 2004). Experience of this common disadvantage was mobilizing for company members as it gave them a powerful sense of connection and cohesion as a group and desire to work together to overcome their disadvantage to have a positive impact on the world around them. At the same time, the company’s collective identity as youth gave them an umbrella under which to explore the ways in which their lives were different, and the ways in which the structures of the social world disadvantage and privilege them in varying ways and influence their relationships to one another and the world around them.

In positioning youth programs as a key lever for social change, this study speaks importantly to current trends in the youth development field. Over the last two decades, the youth development field has increasingly focused on youth as positive resources to be developed (O’Donoghue, Kirshner, & McLaughlin, 2002; Rajani, 1999). Along with this shift, practitioners and researchers have examined how youth programs can help young people develop the capacities that will help them to have healthy and productive lives (Eccles & Gootman, 2002). My research reinforces the idea that youth are a resource. It also urges that youth programs not only consider how they might help youth develop capacities that will serve them well in their lives, but also how they can support youth to apply these capacities to positively affect their communities.

Researchers studying youth development and social change could build on the findings of this study with a multiple case study design allowing for comparison across youth and adult and demographically plural and homogeneous social change programs. Such a design might allow them to examine and extend the notion that I have presented here that youth and plural groups may provide especially strong contexts for advancing
social change when social change is considered a process of changing relationships.

Where possible, researchers will want to keep constant a group’s conception of social change, while varying whether cases have youth or adult participants and whether participants are diverse or homogeneous with regard to their demographics.

**Artistic Practice, Third Space, and Social Change**

When I set out to conduct this research, I was interested in examining how arts and social change practice might inform and support one another when a group implemented the two in tandem with equal attention to excellence in each. I intentionally selected a research site that embodied this dynamic and not one in which arts practice or social change practice were engaged unequally, one in service of the other, as is often the case in applied arts practice (Heddon & Milling, 2006). My findings illuminate important benefits of a program design that balances depth in arts practice with social process for facilitating social change. In particular, it suggests that practitioners would be well-served to engage deep and aesthetically realized arts practice in art and social change programs in order to build on the possibilities for social change inherent in the transformative third space such arts practice opens. My findings show that third space was one of the key qualities of the company context that facilitated the social change they created.

The third space in the arts—or the space between the artist, in a first space, and her medium, in a second (Hannula, 2001; Stevenson & Deasy, 2005)—is a space of potential (Spitz, 1982; Ogden, 1985; Grant, 2006). In it, company members were able to explore their own internal landscapes in concrete form—for example, through movement in dance or character in theater—and develop their self-awareness and voice. While collaborating to create their performance, they entered this space together and explored
within it, again in concrete form, their relationships to one another and to the world around them—including social structures and issues central to that world. This space was critical in facilitating the company’s processes of social change at the personal, interpersonal, and group levels.

The company’s work suggests that to realize the potential of third space in an art for social change program, practitioners must allow for a dynamic tension between participants and the art form they are engaging. Both participant and art form must offer enough gravity that a space holds open between them. Participants must have access to the disciplinary tools of an art form/s and training in how to wield them. Similarly, in order for third space to hold open, a process must allow for participants to have room to bring themselves into the third space and to explore self and personal experience and to imagine new possibilities.

Many of us have had arts experiences that lack the dimension of third space. Rote experiences in the visual arts, for example, where we are asked to color in shapes that make a design following a prescribed approach for doing so. In these lessons, we may have experienced line, color, shape, form, paper, and paint but not their possibility for exploring and expressing ourselves—a fact that is clear when we look around the room and see that our peers’ work looks exactly like ours. While my findings are limited by the lack of possibility for comparison across multiple cases where the arts are engaged in varying depth, this single case study nonetheless directs attention to the value of third space for facilitating social change process and suggests that practitioners engage deep, rather than rote or superficial, arts experiences that might bring this space to art and social change programs.
The company’s work also suggests that the highly aesthetically realized performances created out of a deep engagement with the arts, help to make possible an experience of third space for audience members. My audience survey and focus group data show that the company performance created such a third space and in doing so offered its audience members an experience of change similar to the ones that company members had in their process of creating it. Audience members reported that the performance made them think differently about their own lives; learn something about people from racial and ethnic backgrounds different from their own; learn something that would change the way they treated other people; and want to take action to make their community a better place. Additional research could extend our understanding of the connection between third space and audience impact as well as to examine additional mechanisms through which performance might affect audiences.

In examining third space in the arts as a medium for social change, researchers will do well to take into account the nature of third space across different art forms. In the company process, for example, the third space in dance and writing functioned in both different and similar ways as media for social change. A multiple case study design comparing programs that vary by the art form they engage, could allow researchers to deepen our understanding of how third space and other mechanisms function differently across these forms to facilitate social change. Such research may support practice in applied arts by helping leaders select the appropriate art form/s to apply in particular contexts.
Methodological Insights

A criticism of arts education research has been its frequent use of ‘numbers of hours of arts instruction’ as the central variable with which particular outcome measures are correlated (Arts Education Partnership, 2004; Horowitz & Webb-Dempsey, 2002). Though studies of this design underscore the importance of consistent participation, they generate little knowledge about what happens during the hours of instruction, or theory about how particular arts experiences relate to the outcomes of interest (Hughes, 2004).

In designing this study, I took this criticism into consideration and sought to employ a methodology that would allow me to examine an arts learning environment, its qualities, its processes, and how these processes unfold over time. This intent, along with Sarah’s belief that I would need to document and participate in all company activities in order to develop a valid understanding of its work, led me to design an ethnographic study in which I played the role of participant observer. This methodological decision resulted in learning that has important implications for future research on arts learning as well as applied arts settings.

First, in learning to be in the company space as a participant observer, it became clear to me what Sarah had meant when she said in our first meeting that I could negatively affect the company process if I attempted to collect data from the vantage point of a fly on the wall. Creating a space in which it was safe for company members to take the risks that their process of social change and artistic creation demanded, I found, was a delicate matter. Sarah and Simón took great care in “holding” this space so that it would provide an effective “container” for the process. Over time, the company members
built trust and openness with each other that strengthened the container, and learned to help hold the space along with Sarah and Simón. Had I not been a participant in this process and evolution, I believe I could very easily have compromised the container and inhibited its ability to effectively support the company process.

Particularly in the early stages of the research I struggled with how to be present as a participant observer in rehearsals in a way that was meaningful to the company but that did not get me tangled in its processes such that I got in their way. Constructing my role as participant observer was complicated and at times uncomfortable. In one early iteration of this role, I participated in planning and leading a rehearsal with Sarah and Simón drawing on my own background in theater. We all quickly realized this was a mistake. Sarah and Simón had a finely tuned rhythm of collaborating as co-directors and trying to include me threw it off. In addition, it became clear to me that playing such a role on an ongoing basis would have required that I think about the company process in a way that might have obstructed my understanding of it. That is, I would have had to try and anticipate its course in order to help shape it rather than to understand it as it naturally unfolded. While some researchers might find this position of needing to anticipate the process they were studying a generative one, I found I preferred to stay in present time with the process. In present time, I was better able to keep an open lens on the company’s work and to do the inductive analysis that this particular study demanded. In the end, I landed in what I would call a ‘middle distance’ stance. I was not as ‘close up’ to the process as Sarah and Simón who co-directed it and its culminating production or the performers who created and performed the production, nor was I a removed outside observer. I found myself happily in between—a meaningful but dispensable part
of the process—serving as an extra set of hands and responding to needs that surfaced for the company. I helped, for example, with costumes, cleaning, typing up script material, and driving carpools.

Researchers conducting ethnographic studies in settings that have qualities like the company’s—in particular, artistic or other collaborative activity, arts learning, or social change practice—might benefit, as I did in this study, from constantly revisiting the question of how to construct a participant observer role that will best serve their research goals and exploring options for positioning themselves in what I refer to here as a ‘close up’ or ‘middle distance’ stance rather than in a removed outside observer role. In the end, my role as a participant observer allowed me to see the changes in relationship that happened within the company over time, and to understand how they constituted a form of social change. I do not believe that I would have been able to reach this understanding if I only had data from isolated moments in time spread across the company members’ ten months working together.

**Scale and Enduring Impact**

Researchers might advance our understanding about how programs applying a relational model of social change create change at the community level by following participants in the years after they leave a program. Such research might, for example, explore the impact of the program on participants and examine if and how they continue to participate in making social change. Developing indicators for such studies is likely to be challenging. Researchers will benefit from developing indicators that grow from the programs they are studying and the way in which they define social change. Understanding, in particular, how a program conceives the locus of social change will be
important for helping researchers determine where and how to look for evidence of lasting program impact on social change. Take for example, the updates that company members provide in the afterword to this study. These updates describe where they are five years after they began work together on *Unconditional*; how their experiences in the company have affected them; and what is next in their lives. Looking at these reports through a lens that holds social change as a matter of directly changing structures rather than relationships, one might easily misinterpret what she sees. One might notice that few company members report participation in traditional forms of collective action—such as protest rallies—or traditional movement organizations and conclude that company members have not gone on to be active agents of social change.

However, if one looks at these same reports with the company’s conception of social change in mind, one might look instead for evidence of whether company members continue to engage in activities that enable them to change their relationships and navigate social structures that might be constraining these relationships. Looking through this lens, researchers might hone in on and explore, for example, Imelda’s reported desire to become an immigration attorney to help others affected by American immigration policy in ways similar to her family; Javier, Dawon, Rose, Kim, Navarra, and Lena’s continuing commitment to the arts as a medium for social change, leadership of performance companies and student organizations that act on this commitment, and career goals that would enable them to continue to realize this commitment throughout their lives; Krizia’s mentorship of younger students and desire to inspire other youth in their education; or Miranda’s enrolment in a graduate program for adolescent development and mental health that would allow her to work with “vulnerable
populations.” Developmental and social psychologists may contribute to developing our understanding of how a relational model of change scales by theorizing the indicators and chains of influence that researchers might use to examine lasting program effects on social change.

* * *

The company’s theory of social change directs attention to the ways in which our relationships to one another, to ourselves, and to the world around us, are shaped by our social structures and the possibility that exists—due to the fact that human activity creates these social structures (Bandura, 2004)—to shift them by shifting the way we relate. Transforming our relationships in this way is a means to create the world we have imagined. Evoking Gandhi’s words referenced in a company alumna’s poem at the outset of this dissertation, this theory of social change is fundamentally a theory of how we can be the change we wish to see in the world. This dissertation has articulated this theory and the way in which the arts—as a means for exploring, creating, and expressing or life and culture—are a medium for this change.
Afterword: Where Are They Five Years Later?

Five years after they started their journey with the company, company members share where they are living; what they are up to; how the company has affected the people that they are; and what’s next for them.

AMORE

I now live in Alameda California with a roommate from college. I’m a cosmetology student and will be graduating in three months. I plan to work in a hair salon and eventually own my own chain of salons. Destiny has extremely influenced my life, kept me grounded, and taught me to look outside then box — look beyond yourself, and keep steady improving yourself.

ARIANNA

I now attend Hampton University which is located in Hampton Virginia and is a historically black university. Although I am not dancing and acting as much as when I was in High school with the company, I still have many artistic outlets. I am in the band and am a color guard, we twirl a flag pole and bring color to the field and the band; we also dance with the band on the field and dance in the stands as the band plays during first and second half of football games. The company has influenced the person I am today in so many different ways starting with my outlook on people. Instead of immediately judging when I meet or see how a person acts, unlike most people I am able to instead try to understand what someone is going through. I also do not know many college students that are well educated on Global warming especially not at an HBCU. The company gave me confidence in myself and the woman I have become and am still growing into. The company is the reason I am the Arianna Butler that I am. Hopefully in three year I will have my bachelor’s degree in chemical engineering and will be able to help support my mother and rest of my family. If a reader really knew me now they would know that I don’t have everything figured out but because of the company I have the know-how to make sound decisions and stay true to my values and myself.
DAWON

I’m currently living in Oakland hills. I started a dance company called New Growth — Urban Prodigy, which I direct. The company exists to stop assumptions about youth, especially youth of color, and to show that we can do more than sit on the corner and be violent. We are strong. We are going places in life. We are breaking stereotypes. I started the company two years ago when I was 16 and have made a name for my group in the community. People come to me now looking to dance or looking for performances. We are working very hard now to be the best company we can be. Destiny helped bring me to a level of responsibility that I will always thank them for. Most of who I am is because of the teachers at Destiny. I am working on an album now. One of my songs reached top 100 within a week’s time for the Bay Area on ReverbNation. If you really knew me now, you’d know that I am trying to become one of the greatest entertainers on the earth and that I want to change the world before I’m thirty.

DHARMA

Five years later, I live in West Oakland with two friends. I am a bookkeeper/accountant for a company that manufactures organic stretched ear jewelry in San Francisco. I recently ended three years of fronting a punk/hardcore band; one of the few current bands fronted by a woman in the Bay Area. A new band is currently in the making. To keep myself in shape, I play on a local baseball team. It is quite apparent to me that my ability to voice the things that mean so much to me, to large crowds as I have, would not have been possible for me without the privilege of performing Unconditional with the company; and from this, I have learned to embrace my peers and band members as family, to resolve conflicts, as well as walk away from them. If you really knew me now, you'd know that I never stick to one thing for very long; I learn what I must from each experience and move on to something new shortly after. I was at Destiny for almost 10 years, and I learned something new every day. Out of the learning experiences throughout my youth, company holds great significance, because it was my rite of passage into teen-hood and into the rest of the world, where I now walk with a level head on my shoulders, full of ambition and creativity ready to be offered. Company gifted me a foundation for all my most prized achievements to follow.
IMELDA

I am still living in Oakland. I began my undergraduate education at Mills College in the Fall of 2010, but due to a family emergency that brought my depression back, along with financial issues, I was forced to leave Mills College. I am taking courses at the local community college in order to transfer to a more affordable four-year college or university. I am thinking UC Berkeley, UC Davis, UCLA, UC Santa Barbara, and Scripps, among other schools I am still looking at. I am an Ethnic Studies major and I am hoping to go to law school in the future. I want to become an immigration attorney to help the lives of people who undergo similar situations to the one my family has and is continuing to face. We are still in court fighting my father’s deportation order. Our lawyer told us there is not much hope for his case and since he appealed to the ninth circuit court, this is his last chance to appeal. Being a member of the Destiny Arts Youth Performance Company taught me so much. Destiny became my second family. Everyone supported me in every way possible. I developed acceptance of others that before I couldn’t relate to. Problems that seemed irrelevant to my life became real, and everything that affected my peers began to affect me too. Destiny has helped me become a dancer, performer, and educator within my community. The company taught me to always follow my heart and to speak for what I believe in. I became a more open-minded and accepting person. These are qualities that I am now able to bring with me to every new community I step into. I am proud that I continued to follow my passion despite my parents’ disapproval, and I am proud of the values that are now part of who I am.

JAVIER

Now I'm currently applying to performing and media arts schools in the U.S. and internationally to finish my last two years of college so I can continue to use the performing and media arts as a mean to create a strong voice with the power to make change happen. I'm looking into schools in NY, Paris and Italy as my 1st choice picks, otherwise I'm looking at L.A., Chicago, and Philly and my 2nd draft of choices. I still live in Oakland and I continue to dance, teach dance and perform all around the Bay and beyond with different groups and organization. I'm finishing my last semester of general education classes before I am able to transfer. The company has influenced me in a way where words will never be enough. I always say that "Dance taught me how to be Human" and the company was a major part in my human development in building character and showing me how to stay grounded even through the harshest conditions. I would not be able to stand tall and strong as I do now if it were not for Sarah, Simón and Rashidi who have influenced the way I view the world. Next up for me, I will be traveling to NY this summer to train at the Alvin Ailey school and New York hip hop Dance Conservatory to further my knowledge and strength and I will also be working with other choreographers and dancers for special projects that will be released in the Fall and to strengthen dancer relations in the Bay and NY.
KASH

Right now I’m living in Paris because it’s much closer to all the events that me and YAKfilms attend and film. In the last two months our calendar was Brooklyn, Paris, Copenhagen, Portugal, Beijing, etc. I’m lucky because I get to go to these events and film them as well as dance myself when there’s a moment of break. I get to meet a lot of the superstars of dance and even make videos of them. Because of Destiny, I have definitely become a person who cares more about the character of a person over their possessions and popularity. I know I’ve auditioned for other dance groups but later quit because of the lack of respect they gave each other. Destiny definitely taught me to cherish relationships and my love for music. Also Destiny was the connection to Shakti and Rick Butler, who helped house and nurture me on my way to college. I’m currently hosting an online TV show (thanks to the help of my film team YAKfilms) and that’s going very well so far (search "LYK" on youtube). I’m also about to be featured on the TV show "So You Think You Can Dance" alongside the Turf Feinz and other amazing dancers. I’m practicing with French breakers and hip hop dancers and taking classes almost every day. I’m always making new videos and connections. I am hoping to return to Cali soon to start a new all styles dance team that I would head and promote using the international connections to events I have created on my own or from my team. Maybe even modeling or acting if offered. If you really knew me now, you would know that I travel a lot but barely speak any language but English (I kinda understand French); I miss the days I lived in San Diego the most of all the places I’ve lived; I spend a lot of time thinking about how I want my dance style to be.

KIM

I live in NYC now finishing up my last semester at NYU Tisch Drama. I am currently working on a show I wrote, directed, and am acting in with 4 other actors. My experience in the company influenced me as an artist and a person more than I could have imagined. It got me in touch with what’s important to me and what direction I feel I want to go in with my art. Understanding the impact that Destiny has on inner-city youth in Oakland and the community in that area made me realize the power that art has to inspire change and progress. I was one of the only private school kids in the company and felt almost as though the program was not intended for me at first. But I was immediately accepted into the group and we created a family of support and expression that has driven and continued to inspire me to create meaningful, impacting, and truthful art and performance. I graduate in two weeks, and then I’m going to start auditioning for roles in the city while continuing to create my own work and collaborate and hopefully form a company of my own. It is my dream to perform in the hip hop Theater Festival. If the reader knew me now they would know that I am confident, grounded, passionate, with a love of movement, an interest in social justice, politics, film, theater, and hip hop.
KRIZIA

I am currently attending Chico State. I am majoring in Child Development with a minor in Spanish. Being a member of Destiny has taught me to be disciplined and has shown me a sense of responsibility. I have been hired as a Dance Instructor Assistant at Destiny Arts Center and now I am a role model to the younger students. Destiny helped me find the confidence in myself to achieve whatever I set my mind to. My goal is to teach and to inspire young children to be successful in their education. If you really knew me now, you’d know… I am extremely proud of myself for coming this far and having the privilege to attend a four-year college.

LENA

Currently I’m taking a year off before I attend college next fall. I’ve been living in Boulder, Colorado. I’ve been working part-time, volunteering, getting involved in internships, and dancing a ton. Destiny Arts Center has influenced my career interests and passion for inspiring social change through art, whether it is performing or visual. It has helped me value diversity and creative self-expression. I really appreciate the Destiny Arts community for helping me launch my pursuit of studying dance. What’s next for me is college. I’m hoping to get a BA in Dance. Anybody involved in my life now, that also knew me back during the time of “Unconditional”, would know that I’ve come a very long way in terms of struggling with my body image and identity. Struggles continue to present themselves in my life; however, I’m in a place where I’m much more stable and comfortable dealing with them. Some dance communities can be demanding and promoters of unhealthy body image. Luckily, the person I am now has no interest in feeding into those unhealthy standards. I know my eating disorder went much deeper than just wanting to be skinny, but sometimes my thoughts on it all these days are as basic as having no desire to resemble a swizzle stick anymore. I feel grounded, liberated, and beyond content when I move. I’m very grateful that throughout my life, I’ve been a part of communities, like Destiny Arts Center, that know how to nurture the healthy solace dance brings to me.

MACIO

I still live in my Grandma's house with the rest of my family. Being a member of the company for three years sparked an interest and passion for the performing arts that has yet to go out. I am extremely grateful for the experience I had in the company for it was the stepping stone which led me to find my life's greatest passion. I now dance at ODC and LINES Ballet in San Francisco. In the fall of 2011 I will be attending Dominican University of California for the LINES Ballet BFA program. If you really knew me, you would know that I know now, more than ever, that I want to dance professionally. The uncertainty of this decision still scares me at times, but I'm ready, willing, and excited to dive in head first and see where this journey takes me.
MIRANDA

I live in New York City, where I attend New York University. I will be graduating with Honors this coming May from the Gallatin School of Individualized Study where I am majoring in Integrative Psychology with a minor in Child and Adolescent Mental Health. I am interested in the clinical aspect of working with vulnerable individuals and communities. The company has absolutely shaped me as a person today because has taught about who I am and who I want to be. It has provided me an artistic education, a way to express myself through the arts. It is also I place where I go back to every summer to teach at their CAMP DESTINY. It has also helped guide my career path and provided me tools that I can use in my day-day life and work place and internship settings. Next year I will be attending Graduate School at Washington University in St. Louis. If the reader really knew me, she or he would know that I secretly love neuroscience.

MORGAN

Now I live in Seattle and I’m attending Cornish College of the Arts majoring in theater. Destiny has been a huge influence on my life, when I was younger it dictated my sense of what was right, then later on it gave me a core of people who I will always feel a deep connection with. Hopefully I’ll finish off my undergraduate degree and get some work as an actor. If you knew me now you’d probably see someone a lot more confused than they were four years ago.

NAVARRA

If you knew me now you would probably say the same thing. Currently I am an Anthropology concentrator at Brown University. Destiny Arts Center is one of the main reasons why I continue to do social justice work. Here in Providence Rhode Island I teach theater, dance, creative writing and visual arts workshops to women in prison. I also teach conflict resolution, violence prevention and art workshops to elementary school students. In addition, last August I traveled to Mali on a research grant to look at the ways in which theater and traditional Malian proverb and dance can be used to raise awareness about Malaria Prevention techniques. I believe that theater, dance and other forms of creative expression is an important way to reach youth and spread messages about social justice and public health and I know that if it was not for Destiny I would probably not feel so strongly about the ways in which art can transform and heal lives. I am not sure what my next move is but I know that whatever I do will keep the spirit of Destiny at the forefront of my mind.
NEENEE

I am living on 59th in Emeryville, going to Alameda Beauty College, and babysitting, and trying to balance all that and Destiny (it’s my last year with the company before I graduate). Destiny influenced me to be a positive role model in my community. It taught me to love myself and to know that confidence is key. I don’t know where I would be without Destiny.

After beauty school I want to act and dance. I’d like to move to LA and do hair and work my way into acting. I’m going to be a striving actor. If you really knew me, you’d know... that I’m more comfortable with myself, life is great, and I can’t complain. I thank God and Destiny for everything they’ve done for me.

ROSE

I currently am entering my third year at Macalester College in Saint Paul, MN. I am a history major with an American Studies minor, and was just recently rewarded with the Mellon Mays Undergraduate Fellowship, with which I am planning on doing research on the hip hop dance as a form of cross-cultural communication, a way of preserving and passing on stories, as well as a transnational art form. I am also the president of a student organization called BODACIOUS that serves to bring hip hop dance and performance to the Macalester and greater Twin Cities community. It is hard to pinpoint how Destiny has influenced who I am today because I feel like everything I do is intrinsically linked to my 12 year-long upbringing at Destiny Arts Center. Through the years of dance classes, leadership training, performances, and teaching opportunities, Destiny imbued me with the morals and values I carry to this day, while also showing me how essential the arts are in daily living. Destiny also taught me how to effectively communicate my feelings and articulate my thoughts in a clear way, an important skill both within academia and beyond. Destiny’s influence and support has helped me thrive in school, continually explore new opportunities, and find ways to continue the feeling of community I was so lucky to be a part of at Destiny. Short-term future plans include traveling to Beijing, China during spring of 2011 for study abroad and then graduating in 2013. After that, no idea, maybe graduate school, some traveling, or trying to find a job.
SARAH

Right now, I still live with roommates about 3 blocks from the Destiny Arts Center site. I am no longer the ED at Destiny but have the title of Artistic Director and thus my job is much more manageable. I am still co-directing the Destiny Arts Youth Performance Company, although I have a new co-artistic director – Rashidi Omari, who has worked with Destiny as a hip hop dance instructor for over 9 years and who choreographed for the company for a number of years before stepping into the new position. I still ride my bike, hike and dance salsa. I still travel to warm climates during winter months whenever possible. I have a new partner, Christina Tavera, who is a much better match for me. We will be moving in together soon! I asked her to marry me and she said yes! I couldn’t be happier in the realm of love. The company has been my artistic incubator for 18 years. While I developed and expanded the program, I learned the art of teaching, directing, mentoring, facilitating and collaborating. I wrote a book about the process and learned to use my writing skills to break down the process of co-creating original movement/theater productions with teens. I have learned the value of collaborative process and have watched young people find their confidence and their socio-political voices. I have become a better teacher, artist, director and human through the company process.

What’s next? I will continue to do my work at Destiny and continue to grow and change as the needs of the communities we serve change and as our capacity to serve them changes. I will do more professional development work with teachers who teach young people so that the work has a life of it’s own. I will do a re-write of the company curriculum to reflect new insights and to include the new documentary about the company process, which will be completed within the year.

SHARMAINE

Now, I live alone. I have two kids and I’m engaged. I’m a certified nurse assistant and I’m working to get my RN license to be a pediatric nurse. From Destiny, I learned to be more open minded to different things. I felt like we were a family. It wasn’t like life changing for me, but Destiny is still in my heart. I got to experience things I never experienced before, like when we went on the retreat and I walked up a mountain for the first time. It was a challenge; I felt like I accomplished something. If you really knew me now, you’d know that... I’ve kinda calmed down a little. No, a lot.
SIMÓN

I have recently relocated to New York City to attend the MFA program in Theater Directing at Columbia University. Leaving Destiny Arts was an extremely difficult decision, but I knew that I needed to do it for my personal growth and development. I am about to complete my second year in the program and I’m happy to say that this is exactly what I was hoping it would be and more. I am learning from some of the most prominent theater artists in the world and have the benefit to be immersed in the theater world of New York. Since Arriving in New York I have directed over seven productions, including My Artichoke Heart (Theater for the New City), Can't Stop, Won't Stop (2010 hip hop Theater Fest), The 6 Project (Brooklyn Arts Exchange/Toured to over 10 cities nationally). Destiny Arts has played a tremendous role in my development and its impact can be seen in all that I do now. After graduating from Columbia, I am planning to take a few years to freelance as a director and educator, before starting my own theater company, which will focus on creating new work.

SUKAY

At 19 years old now, I moved out of my mother’s house for a year only to come crawling back home. I am looking to move out again soon. Those who know me would be sad and disappointed some maybe even angry, like my mother, to hear that I have not picked up a microphone in over a year. I am not and have not been since 2009 involved in any form of performance art. I am currently working at a TOGOS making sandwiches and going to school part time. I go to Heald College in San Francisco working towards a degree in medical assisting. Working with company has helped me build the confidence for the young woman that I am today and continuing to become. Maybe in the future I will get back into music and performing, but as of now it is not in my plans.
Appendix: Audience Survey

DESTINY ARTS YOUTH PERFORMANCE COMPANY
2007 Audience Survey

Please complete the survey and give it to any usher. Your opinion is important to us. Thank you.

I. Please check yes or no:
1) Do you know someone who was in today’s performance of Unconditional?
   □ Yes  □ No
2) Have you seen a Destiny Arts Youth Performance Company show before?
   □ Yes  □ No

II. Please rate how much you agree or disagree with the following statements:
3) I enjoyed the performance.
   □ Strongly Disagree  □ Disagree  □ Neutral  □ Agree  □ Strongly Agree

4) The performance connected with my own personal experiences.
   □ Strongly Disagree  □ Disagree  □ Neutral  □ Agree  □ Strongly Agree

5) The performance made me feel hopeful.
   □ Strongly Disagree  □ Disagree  □ Neutral  □ Agree  □ Strongly Agree

6) The performance made me feel angry.
   □ Strongly Disagree  □ Disagree  □ Neutral  □ Agree  □ Strongly Agree

7) I learned something from the performance about the effects of violence on young people's lives.
   □ Strongly Disagree  □ Disagree  □ Neutral  □ Agree  □ Strongly Agree

8) I learned something from the performance about people who have a different racial and/or ethnic background than I do.
   □ Strongly Disagree  □ Disagree  □ Neutral  □ Agree  □ Strongly Agree

9) I learned something from the performance that will change the way I treat other people.
   □ Strongly Disagree  □ Disagree  □ Neutral  □ Agree  □ Strongly Agree

10) The performance made me think differently about young people.
    □ Strongly Disagree  □ Disagree  □ Neutral  □ Agree  □ Strongly Agree

11) The performance made me think differently about the media.
    □ Strongly Disagree  □ Disagree  □ Neutral  □ Agree  □ Strongly Agree

12) The performance made me think differently about my own life.
    □ Strongly Disagree  □ Disagree  □ Neutral  □ Agree  □ Strongly Agree

13) The performance made me want to take action to make my community a better place.
    □ Strongly Disagree  □ Disagree  □ Neutral  □ Agree  □ Strongly Agree
III. About you:

14) Gender: □ Female  □ Male

15) Age: □ 18 or under  □ 19-30  □ 31-40  □ 41-50  □ 51-60  □ 60 or older

16) Race/Ethnicity: ________________  17) Household Size: _____

18) Annual Household Income:
   □ 0-$15,000  □ $16-$30,000  □ $31-$50,000  □ $51-$70,000  □ $71,000+

19) How did you hear about this performance (please check all that apply)?
   □ Poster/Flyer  □ Newspaper (ad or interview)  □ Radio (ad or interview)
   □ Friend  □ Cast Member  □ Email  □ Other______________

Comments (optional): __________________________________________________________
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Bibliography


