

## **“We Had That Spirit of Openness”: Performative Mobility for Global Majority Youth to Move Within and Out of the Struggle**

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Today we were being fancy, sipping chilled beverages as we sat under the “air cool” at Passion II Hotel’s restaurant in the heart of Liberia, Gbarnga City. We took advantage of the electricity to charge our computers and devices, a necessity that we had long learned to manage without. Over the six years I had known Silas N. Juaquellie<sup>1</sup> through administering free youth arts programs across three cities (Gbarnga, Buchanan, and Ganta), we had become friends and close colleagues. At age twenty-four, he was a trainee in the first cohort of fifteen arts instructors I coached in a Boalian-inspired model of theater for change in 2013. In my role as Executive Director of B4 Youth Theatre (Burning Barriers, Building Bridges), I hired him part time as the Liberia National Director the following year. Together, we struggled over how to sustain the work when resources were scarce since most of our funding came from grants or consultancies I acquired while in Liberia. I take these moments of disjuncture and interruption to consider the role of performative mobility in how global majority youth move within and out of the daily struggle for basic needs required to transform imagined possibilities into reality. I engage this conceptualization through co-performative witnessing, an ethnographic praxis of solidarity which transcends participant observation (Madison 2007; Strong and Blanks Jones, in press), to demonstrate how youth become collectively empowered through critical theater to build fruitful connections for opportunities they have reason to value.

This day marked a new direction in my journey with Silas, and I was thankful that he agreed to be interviewed for my research. The concrete walls of the restaurant, tile floors, and metal doors produced a cacophony of extraneous sound, at times overwhelming our ability to make out our own words. In this struggle to hear and be heard, we found ourselves reflecting on how we had learned to move within the struggle in order to move out of it. For example, Silas was discouraged when participation in the eight-week summer program dropped from more than sixty participants at one site to less than five because the students and parents had collectively determined there was “no benefit” to being involved in a free arts education program without immediate material gain. His recalling of this familiar incident led to a question I was hesitant to ask but knew was fundamental to understanding the political and economic realities impacting the youth actors. I looked up from my notes to ask him directly as much for my own personal knowledge as for the completion of my data, “Is there any benefit?”

Silas gave a large smile that made his eyes small and answered:

B4 Youth Theatre set the stage that we get connected to new people... *we had that spirit of openness. So we were able to move out to the, the Vice President [of the Government of Liberia] then, and we wrote his office to help us with a computer. All because uh, I went to school right here and everything, but I never had the idea of interacting with the different people that we've met since I joined the [theater] program... it brought something to me.*<sup>2</sup>



The spirit of openness is the liberatory potential of theater pedagogy that made Silas and his colleagues “able to move out” to make demands from the state in ways he had not thought to do before, namely requesting support for material goods such as a computer. Being able to move out signals the convergence between mobility and connection for youth in Africa (Langevang and Gough 2009, 745-753). This mobility is performative as it is enacted through connection rather than physical migration (Sweet 2021, 1-18). Through critical theater, youth develop the consciousness of their collective potential for action and reflection, or praxis (Boal 1979, 81-116; Freire 2014, 97-124). They become heard, seen, and known within their schools and local communities, by government leaders, and to international audiences including diasporans, development practitioners, and researchers. Through the movement of their performances, whether live in-person, digitally streamed, or through other modalities which feature their work such as this article, their personhood is amplified. Participating in community theater gave Silas “the idea of interacting,” which he modeled for his peers so that they could also build connections for their advancement and ability to secure material support for their communities. Youth who become arts instructors are compensated for their teaching and gain opportunities for paid consulting with other organizations. Through their public health campaigns, they were able to successfully advocate for medical supplies to be delivered to specific communities (Blanks

Jones and Juaquellie, forthcoming). This kind of collective action is at the heart of our theater pedagogy to “verify in praxis what we know in consciousness” (hooks 1994, 47).



My year of field work in Liberia from 2018-2019 allowed me the concentrated time to join with the B4 Youth Theatre actors in their collective praxis of theater for change. Following a 2019 performance at Monrovia City Hall on gender-based violence that I had negotiated in a consultancy with a large iNGO, I invited Cynthia N. Gaye, the youth playwright I had coached through writing and directing the drama, to have lunch with me and a few other company members at Royal Hotel. She immediately accepted and was appreciative of the opportunity for “exposure” and for the theater company “giving [her] the time and the courage to do what [she’s] doing right now”<sup>3</sup> as artistic lead for the consultancy. This was easily the fifth script on gender justice and the rights of girls and women that Cynthia had contributed to writing as a theater participant of six years. She was the first youth actor to advance to the senior-level arts instructor position in the theater company. As she reflected on the recent performance of her script, she shared her own relevant personal struggles:

When I was contesting as [student government] president for my [high]school, I was kind of being cheated because they say that I was a female and I was not going to be strong and besides, I cannot make it so there's no need for them to give me power. Yeah... I was like, what I'm going to do now? And sometimes Ms. Jasmine, it's true, it's good to be connected. Yeah. Because of the connection I have. I didn't have money, but *people were there to pay for my campaign. People were there to register my party, people were there to pay whatsoever on campaign day. I didn't, I didn't pay a cent.* Yeah. Because of the connection... Because of the connection I had. Yes, it is, it's true... Even as I'm speaking, because of connections, I know people know me abroad, that I don't know.<sup>4</sup>

The youth theater artists exercised their power while also navigating systems at multiple scales. Their performance practices embody potential solutions to community problems and thereby create opportunities for connection with other youth and across the gerontocratic divide. They also navigate various powerful institutions as revealed by the financial support Cynthia received for her campaign (also see Blanks Jones, 2018; Hansen 2005; Honwana 2012). The youth actors were collectively empowered to raise issues to a national audience through their writing and performances. Their critical theater work gave them courage to take actions in their everyday lives such as reaching out to former Vice President Joseph Boakai for material support for the local public high school or running for student government president. Such actions and interactions flow from the theater participants' ability to mobilize others to imagine something different for their lives and society.

For global majority youth, a performative mobility emphasizes building long-term and supportive connections over any immediate benefit. It pushes our understanding of mobility to include connectedness to multiple audiences as this occurs through performance and through ethnography. In co-performative witnessing, ethnographers commit to a "spirit of openness" by joining our interlocutors as coevals in the field and in research outcomes where we vision forward together. Performative mobility in the space of critical theater provides a mechanism to reimagine the everyday performances that can shift material realities for youth in Africa.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Both of my research interlocutors requested that their full names used in publications as they would be in a performance program.

<sup>2</sup> National Director, interview by author, Gbarnga, July 11, 2019.

<sup>3</sup> Youth actor and playwright, interview by author, Monrovia, June 21, 2019.

<sup>4</sup> Youth actor and playwright, interview by author, Monrovia, June 21, 2019.

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