

# Youth Spaces and the Power and Possibility of Performance

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While the previous two chapters analyzed the limits of Franklin High's approach to bringing students together across lines of difference, this chapter looks closely at two spaces where students engaged in practices and forms of cultural production with transformative possibilities. Throughout the research process I looked for spaces where youth were, in fact, making the most of the opportunity to attend a school with peers from across the city, and from across the myriad demographics that constitute Franklin's student body. Specifically, I sought out spaces where youth came together for one of two important purposes: to cross boundaries of difference or to affirm and re-imagine identities. I glimpsed a variety of spaces within Franklin High where students engaged in one or both of these two tasks, but the two spaces I discuss in this chapter capture best the limits and possibilities of such spaces. Specifically, these spaces highlight how performative forms of cultural production both reproduced and challenged the dominant institutional dynamics with respect to difference. Students created and ran one of the spaces, Lyric, an after school hip-hop club. The other space, an Asian American Studies class, came into existence through the collective efforts of a group of Asian American students.

As I discussed in chapter one, a nascent body of theory and research on youth and schooling documents and analyzes the power and possibility of spaces created for and by youth (Fine, Weiss, & Powell, 1997; Weis & Centrie, 2002; Weis & Fine, 2000). This work calls attention to the important identity work and educative practices that take place in such spaces, and it highlights how they can provide meaningful opportunities for youth to cross borders, resist forms of oppression, and imagine and initiate transforma-

tive projects (Weis & Fine, 2000). Nonetheless, the work that takes place in youth spaces is never simple, and always fraught with contradictions: [We] acknowledge that there are no neutral spaces, that all spaces are 'political' insofar as they are infused with questions of power and privilege. All spaces suffer the burdens of social contradictions. None are insulated from racism, sexism, homophobia, and classism. As such, all spaces carry the capacity and power to enable, restrict, applaud, stigmatize, erase, or complicate threads of youth identity and their ethical commitments (Weis & Fine, 2000, p. xiii).

Indeed, Lyric provides an example of how a youth popular culture form can play a contradictory and at times reproductive role in structuring performative forms of cultural production in a youth space that brings students together across lines of difference. On the other hand, the Asian American Studies class demonstrates how performative forms of cultural production can enhance the transformative possibilities of spaces for youth.

Building on the youth spaces literature, I use Conquergood's (1989; 1991; 1992) synthesis of performance theory as a framework for discussing the role of performance in Lyric and the Asian American Studies class. By focusing on the role of performance, I demonstrate how performance theory can enrich the important scholarship on youth spaces. Moreover, I call attention to how forms of performance can play a significant role in supporting the social and academic work that takes place in such spaces. In addition, both the performative nature of Lyric activities, and the use of student generated performances as the culminating project for the Asian American Studies course pushed me to

develop a framework that could focus and deepen my analysis of the forms of cultural production in these spaces.

Lyric and Asian American Studies had certain things in common: students created both; both involved performance; and both provided opportunities for meaningful engagement with forms of difference. On the other hand, three important differences distinguished the spaces: one site was a class, the other an extracurricular activity; one site was facilitated by a supportive adult, while the other was completely student run; finally, one focused on the experiences of a particular racial group while the other centered on a popular form of youth culture. In this chapter, I describe each youth space separately, focusing my analysis on one key performance in each: the cipher, an improvisational rap performance, and the performance project that I developed with the Asian American Studies teacher and his students. I conclude the chapter with a brief discussion of the role of leadership in structuring and facilitating the work of youth spaces.

## LYRIC

Rap, for the most part, was the common ground that was responsible for bringing us all together into one big posse. Earlier cliques separated girls from boys, the youngest from the oldest. We'd come together for the sake of rap. Whether young or old, male or female, if you could recite the lyrics to 'Rapper's Delight' in its entirety, you were the shit. Period. (T-Love, 1993, P. 309).

But I didn't infiltrate black teenage society instantly. Much of my initiation came from the loose-knit bunch of kids at my school who were into hip-hop. Partly popular, partly outcasts, our interracial band

of troublemakers grew up on hip-hop together (Wimsatt, 1994, p.25).

When I first saw flyers up around school describing a hip-hop club and inviting “poets, MC’s, writers, breakers” and others to come to Lyric, I sensed that this might offer a space for me to learn something about race, culture, and a particular kind of diversity experience. I knew from my own past experiences that hip-hop has this way of moving across racial, ethnic, and class lines, bringing people together to share in the pleasure of the music and linguistic play, while also raising contentious issues around race, class, and gender. Hip-hop always struck me as a cultural movement that seemed to attract attention through its ability to synthesize provocative themes with urgency and pleasure. Indeed, scholars have explored how hip-hop, a cultural form grounded in Afro-Caribbean, Latino, and African American urban cultural production (George, 1998; Perkins, 1996; Rose, 1994), has found resonance across lines of class, race, gender, and geography both in America (Cross, 1994; Forman, 2000; Wimsatt, 1994; Guevara, 1996) and internationally (Bennett, 1999a, 1999b; Condry, 2000; Mitchell, 1995). For all these reasons, Lyric caught my interest because it sounded like a space that might provide a glimpse beneath the surface of Franklin’s diversity narrative through which I might better understand how students managed the opportunities and challenges of coming together across lines of difference.

In early April, 2000, three months after first seeing the Lyric sign, I met Jamal, a lanky dread locked young man with dark olive skin, baggy cargo pants, and a loose fitting t shirt. Jamal was one the founders of Lyric, and I ran into him near the end of the school day, outside the Franklin Broadcast Network cage; he told me that he was attending some of the Lyric meetings while taking a year off from attending an Ivy League university to participate in the local City Year program. I mentioned that I had seen some of the signs advertising Lyric meetings, though I had yet to attend. Jamal enthusiastically en-

couraged me to attend that day’s after school meeting; in the months that followed, he provided me with a wealth of information on the club and its history.

As school ended later that day, I had no trouble finding the Lyric meeting; thumping beats pulled me down the hallway to the spot. The meeting was held in an unassuming classroom with desks arrayed in a U shape, the open end of the U facing the front of the room. Passing through a group of African American male students congregated around the door, I made my way into the room and took a seat in one of the desks. Several students sat in desks or leaned against the windowsill, while two white male students and Jamal caught my attention as they free-style rapped to beats emanating from a small boom box. They stood in the front of the room and swayed to the beat, taking turns rhyming. Discussing the role of freestyling in rap, hip-hop artist T-Love (1992) offers the following:

Freestyling is the ability to rhyme straight from the top of your head, as opposed to rappin’ lyrics which have been previously written and memorized, or ‘from page’ as some MCs would word it. Done to a funky instrumental beat, or to human beat box, even done a cappella, it is rapping in its freest form and where rap, as we know it today, has evolved from (p.306).

Freestyling constituted the main activity of the cipher, the performative practice I detail below.

Taking in the scene, I waved to Jamal, who nodded his head in acknowledgment. As I scanned the room, I recognized a number of students from other places spaces I hung out around school, including the Gay, Lesbian, Straight, and Bisexual Alliance (GLS-BA) and the South Steps. I also noted that the students in the room where a racially and gender diverse group. I saw several Asian and Latino students, although white and African American students were in the majority. The gender balance was near equal.

Jamal encouraged the students near the door to come in and join the group. As they took their seats, he rapped,

“I say ‘community’; you say ‘service.’ Community!” and we all shouted, “Service!” He then said, “When I say ‘not for’, you say ‘profit’. Not for!” and we all shouted “Profit!” Everyone clapped as Jamal turned off the music. Next, a tall, slender white male student with thick, wavy brown hair and a thick tuft of facial hair on his chin introduced himself as Yoseph, “a senior, and president of Lyric.” He explained that the meeting would begin by going around the room and having everyone say their name, class, and what teacher would be the best emcee (rapper). I counted twenty-four people present, with several more arriving during the meeting. After the introductions, Yoseph said, “We’re gonna start the meeting with the poets.” He then invited anyone who had prepared a poem to take the floor.

An African American female student with hair partially dyed dark red stood and moved to the front of the room. She looked at Yoseph and asked him if she was allowed to curse, and he said yes. She prefaced her piece by stating that the poem was, “From a ho’s perspective.” She rocked back and forth a bit and gesticulated as she shared her poem about sex, abortion, and conflicts over men. The poem struck me as powerful, incisive, and intense as well as sophisticated and lyrical. Everyone clapped for her.

Next, a white student named Bridgett, a South Steps regular, walked up front and opened a notebook I often saw writing in, and proceeded to read several poems. One centered on love and intimacy and the other described obnoxious kids on the bus. She didn’t look up as she read, but her recitation was strong. The poems were powerful, funny and angry. In one, she proclaimed her strength as a woman: “Yes, it’s that time of the month and no, that’s not why I express myself and my power as a woman.” As with the first poet, she received applause and encouraging comments from other students.

Kai, a light-skinned African American student with glasses and dreadlocks in the early stages of development, followed Bridgett. He also read from a journal, and his poem struck me as a kind of mini-epic about “ex-

otic” tangerines—a long flowing poem about identity and spirituality and life. His delivery was full of dramatic pauses and changes in tempo. Students actually clapped and whooped supportively during some of the pauses as well as when he finished.

Several more poets followed Kai, and then Yoseph moved the meeting into group discussion on the topic of the week: race and hip-hop. He began by saying,

What is really good about this school is that you can talk with your peers about important issues and learn from them and their perspectives, which might be different from yours. And this is kinda like class, but we all the teachers. Instead of just listening to the teacher all day, we’re being creative together.

Yoseph explained that the issue of race and hip-hop could be sensitive because hip-hop is in many respects “black music”, with a history similar to American jazz. A student asked about these similarities, and Yoseph suggested that both are African-American in origin. Jamal added that, “Jazz uses African beats and rhythms mixed with appropriated European music.” Yoseph clarified that, “I’m not trying to say that one thing is necessarily true, but this is my understanding and opinion.” As the conversation progressed, students differentiated between hip-hop, which they agreed is a culture, and rap, which signified the music industry and business. The students talked about the potential for hip-hop to really bridge cultures and become a multicultural movement. Highlighting the potential of hip-hop culture as a unifying force, Jamal said, “Look around this room!”

Some students questioned whether the popularity of hip-hop would destroy it. As they debated this question, an African American senior named Alex, another South Stepper, theorized that hip-hop, like other popular musical forms, started small and then developed through “bohemians”. It then went “mainstream to the masses”. He also suggested that music will always spawn and in-

teract with grass roots movements.

As the conversation shifted to hip-hop culture, Alex suggested that all musical movements have a culture, and hip-hop is just newer. Another student pointed out that hip-hop is often not accepted in public. The students then discussed distinctions between “mainstream rappers,” for example, how some of them often have negative messages about sex and making money. They agreed that this was the negative side of hip-hop. An Asian American student mentioned the song “They School” by the rap group Dead Prez. He described it as a good song that involved an interesting critique of urban education. He said it never gets played on the radio, and several students agreed to call the “so-called hip-hop radio stations” in the city and request the song.

The last part of the conversation involved sub-genres of hip-hop, like turntablism, as well as regional variation in the United States with respect to variation in popular styles of hip-hop music. In addition, they discussed the merits of lyrics as opposed to good beats, with some students admitting that there are times when, “You just want to hear some good beats, even like the Backstreet Boys.” This comment generated some laughter, but several students conceded that it was a valid point. Yoseph ended the conversation by acknowledging a central challenge for hip-hop: how to keep it going without excluding people.

After the discussion, Jamal turned on the boom box and several students formed a kind of circle of rappers, taking turns free-styling to the beats. Though I didn’t know it at the time, this was the cipher. Students occasionally joined the circle, while a number of students and I sat and grooved to the music. I noted a range of free-styling skills, but the students nonetheless supported one another, smiling, grooving and occasionally offering an encouraging remark. Several female students free-styled in the circle, as did students from various racial and ethnic groups. Yoseph eventually turned off the boom box, and several students proceeded with an improvised beat box ensemble. They each took turns

riffing, while the others kept the beats going. I also watched a small group of students do a little break dancing. As I left the meeting an hour and a half after it began, ten students remained, free-styling and break dancing.

The subsequent meetings I attended that spring lasted from 1 1/2 to 2 hours, following a similar format to what I describe above: some freestyle rapping; then around the room with everyone introducing themselves and maybe saying something about their favorite hip-hop artists; a free style cipher; opening up for students to read their poetry; discussion of a current issue; and ending with another cipher and perhaps some break dancing. During the meetings, Jamal and Yoseph would announce when it was time to shift activities, though they didn’t have a formal or consistent routine; they would subtly confer and then announce the shift. Discussions focused on significant, provocative issues, such as the WTO protests in Seattle and Washington, D.C., as well as issues that directly impacted the students’ everyday lives, such as police brutality and how schools were becoming more like prisons. These meetings—led by seniors Yoseph and Jamal through the spring, and then by Kai and Bridgett and an African American student named Lila during the 2000-2001 school year—explicitly focused on Lyric as a positive space where students could come together and share their creativity and learn from each other.

As Terry, an African American senior and member of Lyric explained to me, Lyric is getting people together and being open to other ideas. People at lyric are open to things, and try to be open. Freshman year, black, white and Asian students tended to hang out together. . . . But people in Lyric come together from different groups and they’re more open-minded.

Terry’s statement also subtly references part of Franklin’s diversity narrative—the notion of learning about and across difference as an important and unique opportunity offered by the school. In this way, Lyric seemed to provide a microcosm of

the promise of difference at Franklin: a space where “open-minded” students had the opportunity to learn about and across forms of difference.

When Lyric started again in the fall, the new leadership expressed similar sentiments about the purpose and promise of the space. At a meeting early in the fall of 2000, Kai began by explaining Lyric to the group:

Lyric is like a forum for people to express themselves, to maybe get feedback on poetry and flowing. It kind of came back last year, the third year, after a slow second year. It's a place where you can come and chill and get lost in the atmosphere, or get flowing or recite poetry.

Lila added, “It's a cool club for people to express themselves. It's a place of love, not like the Apollo; there's no cane and no sandman to pull you off stage.”

As I continued to spend time with Lyric, I learned that the students came from a variety of racial, cultural, and economic backgrounds, as well as from across the city. They also came from a range of academic tracks. Through involvement with this space, students produced and performed a particular kind of “diversity”, a “diversity” inflected with hip-hop cultural forms. Through hip-hop culture, they (re) produced and performed a range of orientations to socially significant forms of difference, particularly race, ethnicity, gender, and sexual orientation. While the club provided students with a performance venue—both in terms of the explicit performances of free-style rapping and poetry as well as the more subtle expressive stylistic performances of fashion, argot and hip-hop and popular cultural literacy—it also provided a space for social relations that formed and subsequently developed outside the temporal and spatial confines of club meetings.

In order to understand the virtues and limits of Lyric as a space where students came together across lines difference, I turn now to a discussion of Lyric's key performative practice: the cipher. I focus on the cipher because it constituted the focal practice of Lyric meetings; some meetings during the

2000-2001 school year only involved ciphering. Moreover, my analysis of the cipher captures both the possibilities and limits of performance with respect to bringing students together across lines of difference, as well as in terms of expressing forms of identity.

### THE CIPHER

“Yo, Yo, Yo” uttered rhythmically, keeping time or a beat; students would speak—more of a groove—these words to mark their entrance into the improvisational freestyle space of the cipher. Standing in a circle and freestyling as hip-hop beats emanated from a small boom-box; this was ciphering. The music was always cleansed of its lyrics; beats only. The beats provided the driving background, the aural canvas on which emcees painted Jackson Pollack style improvised rhymes. In the Lyric vernacular, they “spit” or “flow” lyrics. “Yo, Yo, Yo” the cipher literally and figuratively centered Lyric meetings as a circle in the middle of the room. Students entered and exited the cipher, but a core of students always seemed to keep it moving, to rock it—the emcees, the Lyric “heads”.

I first heard the term Lyric heads during the 2000-2001 school year. Lyric heads used it to describe themselves, and other students—some involved with Lyric and others who simply knew of the group—used it as well. In fact, in the winter of 2001, several students I spent time with in the Franklin Broadcast Network cage began to refer to me as a Lyric head.

The Lyric heads were all male, although two or three female students who were very involved with Lyric may have accepted the moniker. Some students suggested, explicitly and implicitly, that it marked the group's somewhat exclusive nature. Sam, an Asian American student who was involved but not a head, put it this way: “There was never a Lyric clique, but now the clique runs things. It's more intimidating to people outside the circle. Lyric was immune from the clique thing; now, even Lyric.” The Lyric heads included three African American students, two white students, and one Pakistani student; but as an extended peer group,

it also included two additional African American students and one Asian student. These other students attended meetings on occasion as spectators, but nonetheless spent time during lunch, free periods, and after school with the core Lyric heads. A third white male student didn't hang out with the heads very often outside of Lyric meetings, but he was a regular in the cipher during the 2000-2001 school year.

During Lyric meetings, those in the cipher bobbed their heads and shoulders to the beat or beat box, always looking away or looking down, unless the emcee spit something outrageous. They seemed to feel the flow, waiting for their chance to tap into its energy. An emcee would claim the flow and begin to spit, marking the entrance with a, “Yo, Yo, Yo” Sometimes two emcees would start the “Yo” simultaneously, but usually the individual with the more confident flow would take the cipher. As I discuss below, students often wove bits of their identities into these rhymes, referencing their race, ethnicity, gender and/or religion. The more skilled emcees never seemed to lose their flow, and they would at times rely on repetition (repeating a phrase or word) and/or bridging words (“word”, “yo”, “yeah”, and so on) as linguistic devices to keep their flow progressing. Newer, less skilled emcees often hit verbal brick walls, stopping in mid flow with a “Damn!” or “Shit!” When this happened, the arrested emcee would usually embody the break in flow by tripping forward, backward, or standing up, thereby physically breaking from the head and shoulder bopping of the cipher. During such breaks, the emcee would sometimes laugh and / or make eye contact with others in the cipher. These breaks usually didn't stop the flow, as another emcee would verbally enter the break and get things moving again.

In one of the first meetings I attended, Yoseph expressed his sense of the cipher to the group: “Freestylin' can be empowering. It can let you vent your energy. And it's not a battle; it's all peace.” Yoseph would often encourage students to enter the cipher and freestyle, emphasizing that individuals

would not be judged on their rhymes or style. When I asked him to explain the cipher to me, he said that it's, "A circle; a circle of creative energy." He told me about ciphers in the city that you could participate in to develop your skills. According to Yoseph, some of them were quite competitive and combative. Several of the Lyric founders also described early Lyric ciphers involving spectacular verbal battles. The verbal combat of such ciphers apparently involved emcees freestyling lyrics that were simultaneously self aggrandizing and disrespectful to other emcees in the cipher.

Despite Yoseph's encouragement and claims, certain elements clearly elevated an emcee's status within the cipher. While I didn't focus on this aspect of the performance during the research, comments made by various students, as well as countless hours spent watching ciphers—and audience responses—clarified two elements as critical when it came to emcee status: verbal and physical style and lyrics. In terms of the former, some students earned status through a smooth and extended style, avoiding verbal brick walls. But a loud, energized, and frenetic style could also provide a student with status. In terms of lyrics, status seemed to follow from clever and unexpected rhymes as well as the incorporation of lyrics from a previous emcee or even poet. I also noted some students gain status through outrageous violent and /or sexual subject matter. But as I discuss below, the controversial nature of such lyrics seemed to generate a limited form of status.

I turn next to a discussion of the cipher work of two specific youth that exemplifies how the cipher is a performative form that both creates possibilities for certain types of expression and identity work and limits others. In addition, this discussion calls attention to how the cipher (re)produced the disparagement of certain forms of difference.

## JIM

Within the cipher, students seemed to weave a whole host of references into their flows as a way to mark and test personally significant aspects of their evolving identities. Jim, a white

working class student, often flowed about sex and violence with profanity and bravado. He loved rap star Eminem, sporting shirts with his image. He also wore oversized pro sports team jerseys, football in particular—Tennessee Titan Jevon Kerse, "the Freak", because his body is so chiseled that he is a "freak" of nature, seemed his favorite.

While Jim didn't participate in Lyric during the spring of 2000, he regularly attended meetings and hung out with the Lyric heads during the 2000-2001 school year. At some point during the year, he clearly was a head. Jim was serious about emceeing. I remember a conversation with him and several other heads during lunch when he discussed recording equipment, and how he had rigged up his boom box to record himself and some friends flowing. Unlike the other Lyric heads, I never heard him read poetry.

Jim captured my attention the first time I saw him take the cipher. Dressed in baggy jeans cuffed at the ankle and a blue long sleeved button down, buttoned up but not tucked in, Jim rhymed in a kind of forceful, exclamatory style, talking about violence and sex, as well as touting his prowess as lover, fighter, and emcee—I jotted down the word "scatological" in my field notebook. As Jim flowed, I noticed that students smiled and seemed to enjoy his enthusiasm, energy, and outrageous lyrics. When he flowed that, "The Puerto Rican girls be calling me poppy," the crowd responded with laughs and hoots. His flow contrasted sharply with the more playful, pop culture referencing flows I heard in the cipher the previous spring. Even during 2000-2001, when students flowed more regularly about sex and violence, Jim set the outrageousness bar quite high. Common themes that filled his flow in the cipher as the year progressed included sexual acts, guns, and his prowess as a fighter. He also occasionally reproduced the homophobic discourse I heard at Franklin through derisively mentioning "fags" and "dykes" in his flows. Although Jim expressed his style through self-aggrandizing, violent, and at times homophobic and misogynist lyrics, many Lyric attendees

couldn't seem to get enough of his flow.

As the fall progressed, it got to the point that, during some of the more crowded meetings, when 50 or more students would pack the room, the majority of whom were African-American, the shift in focus to the cipher was palpable when Jim began his minimal-bass, maximum volume, "Yo! Yo! Yo!" I remember one meeting in particular where a group of female African American students could not seem to get enough of his flow. They would perk up, smile, and laugh at his outrageousness. Indeed, his outrageousness in the cipher consistently elicited positive responses—clapping, laughter, and even hoots—from the crowd. Jim's style and the content of his flow were clearly influenced by his favorite emcee, Eminem. Eminem was also well liked by a number of Lyric students, and I noticed several African American students don t-shirts with his name and image.

Eminem, while controversial, has established himself in the hip-hop world as a talented emcee. Though his Lyrics are at times misogynist and violent, the controversy that surrounds him centers on the fact that he's white. Jim's whiteness also played an important role in his cipher work. While Jim was not at the two meetings I audio taped, I always wrote down snatches of his flows. He often flowed about whiteness, for example spitting, "All white people, are not nice people!" which elicited laughs and claps from the crowd. On another occasion, he flowed, "Let me tell you how a white boy can act: white boy can say nigger, don't give a fuck you can call me wigger!" This was not the only time Jim used the word nigger in his flow, although he was the only white student I ever heard use the word in the cipher. While I did occasionally hear students quietly express disdain for Jim's cipher work, though never to his face, about the violence, misogyny, and homophobic content of his flows, I never heard students comment on the racial content. In fact, in two separate ciphers, I heard African American male students positively reference Jim. The first time, a student approvingly wove some of Jim's content in his subsequent flow,

and the second time a student flowed about having a gun and then said, "I can spit forever Jimmy style." Jim smiled in response to the second reference.

Jim's cipher work highlighted and perhaps pushed against boundaries of the acceptable with respect to gender, sexuality, and race. His flows expressed a hyperbolic Hollywood action movie sensibility, over the top and cartoonish. Students laughed at his outrageousness in the same way, perhaps, that youth audiences laugh at the outrageous carnage and mayhem of an action or horror film. And while I hesitate to push this analysis into the realm of Jim's intentions, his cipher work seemed less ironic than playfully pop. The violent, homophobic, and misogynist content he wove into his flows struck me as an attempt to entertain—and based on student responses, he did seem to entertain—through referencing popular Hollywood and video game images that pervade the popular cultural ether. For example, I spent time on several occasions with Jim and the other Lyric heads at Mario's Pizza Shop, and I remember how they often played a violent military video game called *Crisis Zone*. Jim, in particular, enjoyed the game, which involved using a real looking plastic machine gun mounted on the front to shoot at people and military vehicles on the screen. My point here is that the landscape of popular (youth?) culture is full of the kind of violence, misogyny, and homophobia Jim often referenced in his cipher work. In addition, the use of the word nigger has become increasingly common among hip-hop youth across racial and ethnic groups in particular stylistically defined contexts (Akom, 2000). It's one thing to encounter this sort of imagery through mediated expressive forms like film or video games; Jim, however, brought this stuff to life in the cipher. In this way, Jim's cipher work evokes the role of the trickster:

As soon as a world has been made, lines drawn, categories defined, hierarchies erected, then the trickster, the archetypal performer, moves to

breach norms, violate taboos, turn everything upside down. By playing with social order, unsettling certainties, the trickster intensifies awareness of the vulnerability of our institutions. The trickster's playful impulse promotes a radical self-questioning critique that yields a deeper self-knowledge, the first step towards transformation (Conquergood, 1989, p.83).

While many students seemed to find his flows entertaining, some, as I stated above, found them objectionable. As a trickster, Jim revealed an important fault line, a fissure that, with the right kind of engagement, might have opened up to productive conversations about issues of difference and power. Within the physically bounded space of Lyric this type of dialogue never developed, but some students nonetheless reflected on the meetings in ways that highlight the possibilities. For example, two weeks before graduation, I sat with Kai and three other Lyric heads on the school's front lawn. As they talked of prom, college, and the sweetly sad last days of high school, Kai said, "You know, I've been thinking that I shouldn't use the word 'gay' derisively. Some people were talking about the language in the cipher, and I realized some of it no doubt offended."

As a form of cultural production, the cipher expressed tensions around forms of difference in a way that at least opened up the possibility for productive dialogue. Indeed, as the above example suggests, some students managed to reflect on and discuss language use in the cipher, and how it might reproduce homophobic expressions and possibly make Lyric an exclusionary space. Moreover, I don't wish to judge Jim or his flows, to celebrate or condemn his cipher work. A more useful approach emphasizes how, as a trickster, Jim's cipher work potentially "opens up a privileged space for sheer deconstruction and reconstruction" (Conquergood, p.83). But the cipher, as a performative form of cultural production, seemed to limit such discussion within Lyric. To a certain extent, it seemed to actually favor repro-

ductive discourse. Here, then, is the contradictory nature of youth spaces highlighted by Weis and Fine, and the contradictory nature of performance:

Ethnographers are now asking, How does performance reproduce, legitimate, uphold, or challenge, critique, and subvert ideology? And with the influence of processualism, they are more and more phrasing their questions so that they embrace a both/and complexity, instead of an either/or polarization. (Conquergood, 1989, p.90)

Jim's cipher work captures the both/and complexity of ciphering as a performative form: his cultural production in the cipher both reproduced and legitimated homophobic discourse and created an opening for Kai and other students to have a critical conversation about it.

## NAF

Naf ciphered with an earnestness I didn't see among other students. He participated in the first Lyric meeting I attended, and continued to participate until he graduated. Naf's early flow wasn't particularly smooth, but during my time with Lyric I noted a major improvement in his skills. This was evident when he came back from summer break to begin his senior year, and again after winter break in January of 2001. He wasn't as choppy when he spat, and his sense of rhythm seemed to have improved. I asked him about this at both junctures, commenting that he seemed to have noticeably improved his skills. He downplayed my compliment, but admitted that he practiced a great deal. As 2001 progressed, I learned that he had a rap group with two other students from his neighborhood. Naf also spent time on the internet engaged in various chat groups centering on hip-hop culture. He even mentioned exchanging lyrics on line and getting feedback via e-mail.

Naf always interacted with me in a friendly and self-effacing manner. The other Lyric heads seemed to like him, though some considered him naive. Kai once said the following about Naf:

Naf thinks he knows a lot, like

he's deep or something. But he's kind of having an identity crisis. Naf has a lot of potential, but he's confused and kind of in denial about stuff. And he's not too socially adept. He's annoying at times, but he can still hang.

And during a conversation on the subway with Jim and Greg, an African American student who hung with the heads but didn't participate in Lyric, Jim said that, "Naf sucks." When I expressed surprise at this and pointed out Naf's improvement, Jim conceded that, "Naf is getting better, but he still says 'yo' too much." When I asked if he had given feedback to Naf about this, Jim responded, "Naf doesn't want to hear criticism." Nonetheless, Naf was clearly a Lyric head. When he couldn't attend the meeting on the day the yearbook photographer came to take the Lyric picture for the yearbook, two students held up a sign with Naf written on it as a way to symbolically include him.

Naf was from Pakistan, and he and his family immigrated to America at some point during his childhood, although I never got all the details. He found in Lyric a space to blend his Pakistani identity with an evolving Muslim/hip-hop/American identity. While some Pakistani students found support in Franklin High's Indian and Pakistani Culture Organization, Naf found a supportive space in Lyric, and more broadly in hip-hop culture. In late May of 2000, I recall a conversation at the tree—Lyric had taken to holding ciphers at this enormous thick old tree on the north side of the school building. The tree was ideally located as a performance venue; it stood tall right next to the main path up which students walked to and from school. And as it was on a hill, it provided a significant amount of visibility, both to see and be seen. Near the end of the cipher—a cipher in which he had woven in Urdu phrases—Naf expressed doubts and insecurities about his free-styling skills. I listened with interest as Kai and Lila offered supportive words, encouraging Naf by highlighting the significance of his commitment to ciphering, and pointing out how so many folks simply watch.

I also remember how the following

year Naf came to Lyric hungry and tired from fasting in observance of Ramadan. It was a particularly cold day, and he participated in the meeting without his usual verve. When the sun finally went down, he and Bill, a white student who seemed to be his closest friend among the heads, took off to Mario's so Naf could break the fast with a slice of pizza.

Naf exemplified how some students found within the performative vernacular of the cipher a relatively malleable space to explore and express elements of their identities through a multi-layered performance. First, the performative space of the cipher amplified the power of sartorial style to express identity. Students stood in the cipher, in the middle of the room, bopping and grooving, occasionally taking the cipher with physical and verbal gestures, sartorial style on full display. I saw Naf transform his sartorial style over the year and few months I knew him. During his senior year, he started to wear the baggy cuffed jeans, timberland boots, and superhero shirts—Spiderman was his favorite—characteristic of the Lyric heads. He also let his straight black hair grow out, following the coif style of choice for Lyric heads. In addition, he occasionally wore a black polyester doo-rag, an African American head wrap associated with the early days of hip-hop. Yet, Naf maintained a sartorial connection to his country of origin: during the winter of his senior year, he often ciphered with a red and white patterned cotton scarf his mother brought back from a trip to Pakistan.

Beyond the identity work expressed through his evolving sartorial style, the cipher created a spaces for Naf to express his identification with religious imagery, morality, good versus evil, God, and spirituality. He wove these themes and images into his flow, blending them, like most emcees, with self-aggrandizing images:

Yo, yo, the Pakistani Prodigy, yo, flowing and then so and so. Different type of cats going from here to Soho. Medina, Mecca, yo it's all in there. Might as well go to, China and just visit, yo, yo, you know what I might well, use my knowledge and the text of Islamic. I might as well

see I'm blasting away atomic. Lyrical bubonic, plagues in your rays.

Such flows, as well as his experimentation with free-styling in Urdu, received little comment from the other heads. Unlike spaces where speaking a language other than English might elicit derisive laughter, criticism or epithets, the cipher seemed to provide a certain level of freedom to play with and blur linguistic boundaries. Here was the promise of the cipher, how it provided a performative space for emcees to publicly explore, blend, and express certain elements of their identities.

Ciphering, as a form performance, throws into relief the poetics of identity work. Discussing the poetics of performance, Conquer-good (1989) offers the following:

Performance-centered research features the fabricated, invented, imagined, constructed nature of human realities. Cultures and selves are not given, they are made; even, like fictions, they are 'made up.' (p. 83)

This notion of fabricating and constructing identity via performance captures the power of the cipher with respect to identity work. While ciphering tended to limit or constrain the expression of some aspects of identity—for example, certain forms of sexuality—Naf's cipher work demonstrates how it nonetheless allowed for the expression of other elements.

For analytic purposes, I focused on the (re)production of divisive forms of difference in my discussion of Jim's cipher work, and identity construction in my discussion of Naf's cipher work. Both discussions clearly overlap, as Jim was crafting his identity and Naf was exploring forms of difference. And these discussions also suggest how Lyric, as a youth space, and the cipher, as a performative form of cultural production, created possibilities for identity work and dialogue about and across forms of difference, and simultaneously (re)produced misogynist and homophobic discourse. I will have more to say below about the limitations and possibilities of Lyric. I turn now to a discussion of the Asian American Studies class, a

space that provides a useful contrast to Lyric with respect to the possibilities of performance in youth spaces.

## ASIAN AMERICAN STUDIES

I met Paul Lee in the spring of 1999, near the end of his second year of teaching at Franklin. I met him through my involvement with a student group that produced an annual multicultural literary magazine; Paul served as the group's faculty sponsor. A slender man in his late twenties, his standard uniform was slacks, a button-down, a tie, and—on chilly days—a solid color sweater. The backpack he carried his papers and books in added to his youthful air. Paul came to Franklin directly from an Ivy League teacher education program, and he stood out among the faculty in two obvious ways: he was one of two Asian Americans out of a faculty of close to ninety, and he was, at the time, the youngest faculty member at Franklin. Both demographics factor directly into the circumstances of his hiring. The year before Paul came to Franklin, several Asian American students organized a campaign to increase the number of Asian faculty and secure an Asian studies course. Here's how the Franklin High Handbook sums up the story:

“During winter controversy emerges from complaint lodged by two students regarding the absence of Asian American staff, history, and teaching of Mandarin. All addressed and designated to be in place for September '97” (p.259).

Paul's hiring allowed the school to address the first two issues, as he was brought in specifically to develop and teach the Asian American studies course. The unique circumstances allowed Dr. Levy to get around the district's seniority rules and hire Paul right out of graduate school.

When Paul talked about how he came to Franklin, he put a great deal of emphasis on how the situation exemplified the way students can come together to create change:

I get frustrated because things happen, changes happen, because of students, and the students don't

realize how much power they have. I mean, students are really responsible for the Asian American Studies class, and even for the hiring of the Latino counselor. I'm not saying Levy doesn't play a role, but the students really generate it.

This emphasis on student power captures a philosophical precept of Paul's approach to teaching and working with youth. He often told his students that they had power to change things, that they could come together to address issues that concerned them. On several occasions, he took interested students to protests and rallies after school in the city's Chinatown section. And the curriculum he developed—and he always seemed to be developing curriculum, experimenting with projects, and trying to shake things up—further supported this emphasis. Examples of this include everything from taking his students on a field trip to a folk art museum exhibit on social protest, to creating a social change project for his AP Government course. The latter project was particularly anomalous at Franklin, but Paul felt like he could take advantage of the fact that even though the course material was designed for a half-year, Franklin rostered it as a year-long course.

Paul also enacted his student-power philosophy through how he configured his classroom, encouraging students to take ownership of the space through decorating the room. In addition to the standard hanging of student work on the walls, each class had their own section of wall they decorated with pictures and art work that they occasionally updated. Paul also had a couch in his room that offered respite to weary students before and after school, and sometimes during class breaks. In addition, he encouraged the student groups he sponsored—in addition to the literary magazine, he served as sponsor to the Asian Students Association—to adorn the walls with posters about upcoming events and projects.

The other precept that guided Paul's teaching was the notion that people learn through teaching. He took all his classes—Freshman World History,

Asian American Studies, and AP government—to teach and present projects at various local elementary and secondary schools. I was lucky enough to serve as a chaperone for many of these excursions, and this offered me a first hand understanding of how Paul worked with his students and encouraged their collaboration on the refinement of the projects. He always talked with them after to debrief and reflect, and he always solicited my feedback as well. In addition to these field trips, Paul took his classes to share their work with other classes within Franklin.

Students liked Paul, and many I spoke with named him among their favorites at Franklin high. Like several other teachers, Paul seemed to have a group of students each year who connected with him, felt comfortable, and often hung out in his classroom after school. While most of these students were Asian American, a number of white, African American, and South Asian students also found a connection with Paul.

In addition to sponsoring student groups, Paul encouraged students to organize events to share their work. For example, several of his students were involved in a local Asian American youth theater company, and he set up an event for them to come and perform at Franklin. He also helped students put on several after school open microphone and poetry events that were very well attended. And near the end of my research at Franklin, I noted a significant shift in the work of the Asian Students Association; with Paul's encouragement and support, they began to develop presentations and skits that explored stereotypes and the challenges faced by Asian American students. The students presented this work to classes at Franklin during Asian American Heritage month. Some of these students had taken the Asian American Studies course, and their involvement with the performance project clearly influenced their work on this new project.

Paul's Asian American Studies class was always a work in progress. As he told a group of students at another magnet high school assembled to watch his class perform, some of whom were



part of that school's Japanese culture elective, "Out of over 200,000 students in this district, all classes related to Asian studies are sitting in this room." In other words, there weren't any models in the district, and Paul created the Asian American Studies course from scratch. In terms of content, the course wove together and highlighted the intersections of Asian history, immigrant history, and American history, with an emphasis on social, political, and cultural issues. In addition, students learned about American immigration law, contemporary Asian American culture, and some of the more prevalent dynamics between Asian Americans and other groups, for example, African Americans and whites. Paul also peppered the course with activist stories, youth activism in particular. He worked hard to provide students with a core of knowledge on the Asian American experience, while also pushing them to explore relevant issues of their own interest. This created an opening for non-Asian American students to reflect on and explore how their experiences linked with and cut across those of Asian Americans; Paul pushed the students to recognize common ground, particularly in terms of their shared status as youth and public school students.

The four classes I spent time with—one each year over four years—were populated predominantly by Asian American students, although they were quite a diverse bunch. There were first and second generation Asian Americans who came from all over Asia: Vietnam, Laos, Korea, Cambodia, the Philippines, and China, among others. Each year several white and African American students took the class, in addition to several multi-racial and South Asian students. Every class had about twenty students and, for reasons that had to do with Franklin's curriculum, they were all sophomores and seniors. Paul did his best to bring in non-Asian American students, encouraging his freshman World History students to sign up. But numerous factors stood in the way of making the course more ethnically, racially and academically diverse. As an elective, the course carried no grade point

boost, and this seemed to turn away top track students. In addition, the roster office consistently scheduled the course late in the day. This precluded athletes from taking the course, as they generally took their lunch at the end of the day so they wouldn't have to miss class due to away games. Of course, many non-Asian American students probably didn't see the class as relevant to their interests or experiences.

I turn now to a discussion and analysis of the performance project Mr. Lee and I developed over the course of four consecutive springs. Drawing on the performance metaphor, I divide the discussion into three scenes that reveal the evolution of the project and the opportunity it provided for the students. I like the notion of scenes because, as with a play, we can't see everything that happens over days or weeks or months; the scenes filter the story, capturing for the audience the important moments and turning points. Here, then, are three important moments—three scenes—that highlight the power and promise of the performance project with respect to its role in creating a space where Asian youth could challenge stereotypes and articulate complex identities, as well as explore and bridge differences. In addition, the performance project created a space for non-Asian youth to strengthen their voices and explore and express the shared challenges they face as youth.

### SCENE 1: THE BIRTH OF A PROJECT

After our first meeting, Paul and I continued to chat periodically, often following meetings of the multicultural literary magazine. Several months into our relationship he asked me to accompany the Asian American Studies class on a field trip, and the two of us went out for coffee afterwards. We talked about his experiences at Franklin, my project, and recognized common ground in our politics and in our interest in supporting youth. As he shared some of his criticisms of Franklin and the challenges of being a young teacher, it was clear to both of us that this was a turning point in our relationship.

Several weeks after the turning point, we rode the subway together af-

ter school and found ourselves chatting about our college days. As we talked, I mentioned my background in theater. Paul had done some performing as well, and he took a keen interest in my description of several performance studies course I had taken as an undergraduate. When I mentioned that we always had the option in those courses of doing a written final or a performance, his interest was clearly piqued. "I've been thinking about how to use performance in my Asian American Studies class," he said. I told him about the work I had done adapting some non-fiction writing for performance, and we proceeded to brainstorm ideas for how his students might perform their final. Paul then asked if I would be willing to come to class and describe the project to his students. I agreed, and we decided to discuss the project more over the coming weeks.

Paul devised an outline of the project, devoting the entire month of May to work-shopping the student performances. He found some short pieces to serve as examples—a poem, a monologue and a very short scene—and he convinced a teacher at Brimley High, a magnet school across the city that had a Japanese culture class, to have her students host his class and serve as audience for the performances at the end of May. With all of this in place, he asked me to come in and serve as a sort of a consultant to his class. I knew some of the students, both from my field work and specifically from chaperoning for Paul, and I did my best to provide verbal and written constructive criticism.

My field notes on this experience are spotty, as I didn't think at the time that the performance project would fit into my dissertation. Nonetheless, I do remember that the performance at the magnet school across town was a success. Paul's class seemed to bond through the process, and the performances were well received at Brimley.

I played a similar role the following spring, and again the performance project felt like a success. At that point, I realized that the project offered an interesting case of the role of performance in youth spaces. Moreover, the themes Paul's students chose to

explore in their performances represented an unusual sort of meditation on difference. For example, a self-identified multi-racial student explored the complexity of her identity, the pain of hearing a variety of epithets and the power of blending the different parts of herself. Her performance was intense, a spoken word poem of sorts, and received loud applause. A Vietnamese student deftly crafted a montage of scenes that expressed the challenges of immigrating, leaving family behind, as well as the gender stereotypes he experienced as a result of his interest in figure skating. Equally powerful were a series of monologues and scenes by Asian American students that simply showed the struggles and joys of life: missing grandparents, struggling in the shadow of an older brother, and the silly adventures of a student trying to acquire a Gameboy. Performing these pieces provided the students with an opportunity to share their lives and develop their voices. Just as important, performing their stories challenged stereotypes by humanizing these students' experiences for their audience. Kondo (1995), discussing the power of performance, offers a similar appraisal:

Like so many people on the margins, Asian Americans are generally erased from realms of cultural representation. Perhaps worse, when we are depicted it is only to be stereotyped yet again, a kind of symbolic violence that influences not only how we are treated by others but also how we think of ourselves. In that light, plays, films, poetry, and novels written by Asian Americans can constitute a stunningly powerful affirmation that we exist.

Here the live aspect of theater is critical. Live performance not only constitutes a site where our identities can be enacted, it also opens up entire realms of cultural possibility, enlarging our senses of ourselves in ways that have been, for me, especially powerful. Theater shows us that Asian Americans can be other than model minorities or gangsters, lotus blossoms or dragon ladies, scientists or gardeners. We can write plays; we can

perform, act, design, direct. Theater helps to widen the possibilities of how one can imagine oneself as a racialized subject at this moment in history.

Kondo highlights the power of performance both for audience and performer: Performance both "opens up entire realms of cultural possibility, enlarging our senses of ourselves" and "shows us that Asian Americans can be other than" binary stereotypes. As Paul often pointed out to his students, this was true for non-Asian American's as well, as American youth similarly faced the challenge of enlarging self and breaking stereotypes.

After this second year of performances, I recognized the relevance of the work for my inquiry. The following February, I asked Paul if I could research the project as part of my dissertation. His response: "If you want to write about this in your dissertation, that's fine. But you're not gonna sit in the back of the class and take notes; you're gonna teach with me." I agreed, and we proceeded to meet several times to work out the arrangements.

## SCENE 2: REHEARSAL

Unlike my involvement with the class during the first two springs—when I came to class half a dozen times each spring to help out—I spent twenty four class periods helping Paul's students develop their pieces in the spring of 2002. In addition, Paul and I met regularly during his lunch period and after school to both discuss the progress of the students' work and plan activities.

I spent the first few class periods getting to know the students and allowing them to get to know me. Paul had them developing interactive group presentations on several Asian countries—their history and relations to America—that they would take to an elementary school and then, in revised form, a high school. This practice of having students develop presentations and lessons that they would then take to other schools captures Paul's approach to teaching learning: we learn best when we are teaching. As part of the development process, Paul asked the students to provide written and verbal feedback to each group,

and I provided feedback as well. Participating in the class in this manner helped me connect with the students through developing a collaborative relationship with respect to their work.

Early on, Paul and I had also decided that I would introduce the students to a variety of basic theater games. We agreed that starting the games in March, when they were working on their presentations, would both strengthen their public speaking skills and lay a solid foundation for the performance project in May. Of the twenty-one students, two white, two African American, one bi-racial (half Asian, half white), and the rest Asian American, most had virtually no theater background. Despite their lack of experience, the majority took the games seriously. The games centered on getting the students comfortable with standing up in front of an audience, focusing on other performers while sharing the stage, centering and focusing their own energy as performers, and a small amount of improvisational story telling. In addition, we worked with the students on projecting their voices.

Near the end of April, Paul invited students from his past classes to share their performances with the current group. A dozen of his old students showed up, including several that attended college in the city and one who made a special trip from college in New York City. The alumni performances energized the group and helped them envision possibilities for their work.

On May first, Paul and I formally kicked off the performance project with the first handout. Setting the tone early, he began class with one of his intense motivational speeches:

All year you've been going out and challenging stereotypes, in other classes and in other schools. Our goal has been for the audiences to break the stereotypes they have of you when your mouths are closed. The goal of these performances is for you to have a voice and use that voice to challenge stereotypes through telling your stories. And to make this work, you have to support each other as a group. With these words hanging in the air,

we passed out the overview of the project, highlights from which I offer here:

We are going to be devoting the month of May toward producing a theater piece that we will perform at Brimley High School.

Each week, you will be responsible for developing a performance piece. We will devote time in class for you to prepare. At the end of the week, you should have the performance piece ready to act out in front of the class. Each performance will count as 10 points.

#### What is a performance piece?

Basically, each week, you should be ready to present something that you wrote in front the class in an artistic way. That could mean:

- reading it
- singing/rapping it
- acting it out
- dancing it
- or doing something else creative...

You can do the piece by yourself or with others in the class.

The rest of the hand out included encouragement for the students to connect issues from the class with their personal experiences, draw from writings they produced earlier in the semester, and directions that they be as descriptive as possible in their written scripts.

In the weeks that followed, we continued to use the games as a sort of warm up, and we spent the rest of each class supporting the students as they shared their work in front of the group. Paul required the students to submit their evolving script each week, and both of us provided written feedback. In addition, Paul, the students and I generated a brief written critique directly following each performance. In other words, after a student shared their piece, s/he would receive twenty odd scraps of paper, each with some reactions and suggestions. We also encouraged the students to ask for specific kinds of feedback based on what aspects of their piece they were struggling

with. Not all the students consistently complied, but we kept emphasizing how this was part of their preparation.

Over the first two weeks, the students' work was uneven. Some students came prepared with props and ambitious scripts, and staged complicated ensemble pieces that included a narrator and scene changes. Other students opted to read poetry or monologues. And still others came unprepared and either refused to get up or found something they had written earlier the semester and simply stood in front of the class and read it. Paul tried to use both the stick of students not getting credit and the carrot of encouragement to prod tentative students up in front of the class. Some major breakthroughs occurred when the students performed their pieces for Paul's freshman world history courses. The freshman provided feedback, and the experience also helped the Asian American Studies students work through the logistics of props and scene changes and transitions, as well as the jitters of live performance. The following day, Paul's students headed to Brimley for the show. Inspired by the prior year's class' title, "Asians on Ice," the students decided to call their show, "When Asians Attack." I can't say what the title meant, but all the students seemed to find some sort of pleasure in it.

### **SCENE 3: "WHEN ASIANS ATTACK"**

When we arrived at Brimley, two students, an African American male and an Asian male, met us at the metal detectors near the entryway and escorted us up to a classroom where the Asian American Studies students could organize and prepare. Brimley was a clean, bright four story high building built in 1924, situated in a neighborhood just north of the city's downtown core. According to our student escorts, the student body was just under 600, and, "Everyone knows each other here."

After the guides dropped us off, the students set about the task of looking over lines, adjusting props, clarifying transitions, and generally trying to relax. They practiced alone and in little groups. Karen, a white female student, ran lines with Pat, a half Korean,

half white student. Sherry, Chinese-American, Nang, Cambodian-American, and Van, Vietnamese-American, practiced their rap about inter-ethnic violence and tensions, which seemed well memorized and particularly tight. Sav and Ngoc, both Cambodian-American, practiced the song they had written about friendship and love.

After checking in with the hosting teacher, Paul entered the room and we pulled the students together for a final pep talk. Paul had learned that Brimley has a no swearing policy, and he told the students that they would have to use their judgment about whether or not to edit their pieces. Paul then asked if I had anything to say, and I offered the following: "You all have worked really hard on these pieces, and it's a powerful show that covers pain and laughter and politics. I'm just really impressed with what you've put together." Paul followed this up with his own impassioned words:

You all are so brave, and this is important work. What you are doing is showing them, the audience, that you are human beings. I didn't tell you what to say; you really chose what you wanted to share. And this show is about breaking down stereotypes.

Paul's words excited the students, and after a brief theater game warm up, we headed to the classroom where the students would perform.

The performance classroom had shiny wood floors and wood trim, and several rows of chairs were set up in such a way that the front half of the room, by the door, served as the stage. The room was rectangular, and this configuration maximized the width of the stage. A table stretched along one wall, stage right, piled with plates of strawberries, fruit salad, bananas, sliced melon, platters of hoagies, and soda. Thirty students, mostly Asian American with a few African Americans and whites, filled the seats; in addition, several teachers and a counselor stood behind the back row.

After some welcoming comments from Ms. Hirsh, a white teacher in her forties dressed in a flower print dress, Paul introduced the class and the performance project:

One of the major projects that we do throughout the year is we go around to different schools to educate people about Asian American issues. And we do this to try to challenge the stereotypes that people have of Asian Americans. For the project that we do at the end of the year, we developed a theater performance as a way of challenging not just stereotypes of Asian Americans, but stereotypes that people have of each other as high school students. In other words, the pieces that you're gonna see here today—poems, the short stories, the monologues, the plays—are all meant to address the issue of how each of these students can challenge what people think of them before they open their mouth.

After a few additional comments about how long the show would run, the intermission, and so on, Paul opened the performances: "Without further ado, I want to present to you, 'When Asians Attack!'"

The audience respectfully listened and clapped as the students made their way through the pieces. Some students still did not project their voices, and others fumbled with scripts and lines and cues and props. At times, the pacing and blocking were off. Nonetheless, there were powerful moments in each piece, and the performers supported and encouraged one another with winks, claps, smiles, and pats on the back.

A Vietnamese American student expressed her struggles with weight loss and an eating disorder through a poetic monologue:

Alone, I started to loss weight again  
This time on purpose  
I dropped 37 pounds and sprung 5  
inches  
The compliments came in sound  
,

Alone, I kept going  
Losing more and more  
Standing at 5'5"  
Weighing in at 90

Alone, I ponder  
About how I lived my life  
Hating the choices I made  
And kicking my own ass

Alone, I laugh at my reflection  
Ironic how things turn out  
I once longed to be thin  
Now I'm crying for my own sins

Alone, it's impossible for me to gain  
weight  
Years of trying  
But no results  
Forever having to stay in my fragile  
state

A Korean American student reflected on the pain of epithets and her struggle to craft her identity between white friends and Korean parents:

When I was growing up I wanted to  
be white.  
Why was it so important?  
No one knew, not even myself.

I lived in a white neighborhood  
with my white friends.  
I was different from them.  
Amongst ourselves I felt like one of  
them.

I really didn't feel left out.  
I guess.  
Well, at least most of the time.  
The only time I would feel alone  
("different") would be whenever we  
went out,  
I would be the only "different" per-  
son and people passing by would  
yell out  
CHINK!...ching chong ching  
chong...go back to your own coun-  
try!!!!

Just assuming I was Chinese.  
Of course I would respond every  
time saying that I wasn't Chinese  
But they didn't care, because I was  
Asian.  
And in their eyes all Asians were  
Chinese.  
I felt anger inside and didn't know  
how to express that anger.  
I was angry cause no one under-  
stood what I was going through,  
Being an Asian in an American  
world.

No one,  
Not my parents,  
who grew up in a different country  
with a different culture.  
Not my friends,  
Who were white and lived in a  
household with American tradi-

tions.  
No one.

A white student alternated between narrating the story of her relationship with her father, his substance abuse, and his eventual disappearance from her life, and scenes of dialogue with him over the phone:

Jen: "Dad?"  
Dad: "Hey!"  
Jen: "Is Jules pregnant?"  
Dad: "How did you find out?"  
Jen: "Why didn't you tell me?"  
Dad: "I wanted it to be a surprise."  
Jen: "How far along is she?"  
Dad: "6 months."  
Jen: "I'll talk to you later dad."

Jules had a baby girl. Over the years we've become close. Jules and I have become close too. However, my father and I have become more and more distant. I don't know him anymore.

Closing the show with a powerful letter to an eight year old who was stabbed to death at his parents' Chinese restaurant, a Chinese American student whose own parents owned a restaurant expressed sorrow and frustration:

Your parents like so many other Asian parents out there probably came to this country for a better life and worked hard so that they could see you and your sister achieve great things one day. Now they will never get to see those things that all parents hope for their children, such as seeing you graduate from college or seeing you get married one day. You were only a carefree little boy like I was once, who played around at the restaurant and who enjoyed riding his scooter up and down the sidewalk. You did not deserve to die like this; you did not deserve to have your life taken over 1700 dollars.

And with that, the audience enthusiastically clapped and smiled. Paul turned to the audience for questions, and a teacher asked the students how they found the strength to open up and share so much. The students immediately gave credit to Paul, clapping for him. Paul quickly responded that it was all

their work and they deserved the credit. One student then added, "I think that everyone in the class was blown away by what other people were saying. You know, we just didn't know that such great things were gonna come out. I think everyone was kind of shocked."

Ms. Hirsh thanked the students again, and the audience gave another round of applause. A student from Brimley's school newspaper snapped several group photos, and after sharing the feast provided by Brimley and milling around and chatting with Brimley students, we returned to the prep classroom to gather our things and reflect on the day.

Both Paul's class—as a youth space of possibility—and the performance project—as a form of cultural production through which youth explored and bridged differences, challenged stereotypes, developed voices, and articulated complex identities—capture the promise of youth spaces and performance. The student's exploration of difference came both among class members and between performers and audience. As the students shared their experiences through the first stages of the project—their joys, pains, unresolved questions, and discoveries—they came to know each other in important ways. They generated bridges of empathy and insight through humanizing stories of self that revealed unique experiences of immigration and stinging epithets, as well as shared struggles with parents and with body image. With Paul's support and encouragement, the students found the strength and safety to share these stories and support one another in the process of sharpening their performances. All this helped the students develop confidence, develop their voices, and share their work with unknown students across town. In addition to exploring (and at times bridging) differences, the performance project—both the process of development and the final performance—complicated and challenged stereotypes of race, ethnicity, gender, and youth. Similarly, the performance project created a space for some students to articulate complex identities; it was such articulation that served to challenge and complicate stereotypes.

Despite its virtues, the performance project had limitations. First, some students didn't participate fully, generating only a brief poem or short monologue. Second, Paul and I struggled to find the class time to consistently provide quality feedback to all the students; things sometimes felt rushed. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, we never had the time for adequate dialogue between performers and audience; I imagine such dialogue would enrich the experience for both groups. For the audience, dialogue would have allowed questions and ideas to emerge, and for students to make connections across pieces and between themselves and specific pieces. The performers might have deepened their experience of performance by hearing such feedback from strangers, and it would have provided them with an additional opportunity to reflect on their work. Nonetheless, the performance project created an important space for students, and offers important lessons about the power of performance to support and enhance the work that takes place in youth spaces.

### THINKING ACROSS YOUTH SPACES: THE ROLE OF LEADERSHIP

The Asian American Studies course—and the performance project in particular—clearly provided a space for students to challenge stereotypes and articulate complex identities, as well as explore and bridge differences. In addition, the performance project created a space for non-Asian youth to strengthen their voices and explore and express some of the challenges they face as youth. In the cipher, Lyric students expressed complex identities and glimpsed possibilities for critical conversations about divisive forms of difference. While these students didn't quite realize this potential, my analysis of their performance work points out openings for educators interested in attending to youth popular culture and performance as a means to spur conversations on race, gender, sexual orientation, and violence. Moreover, my discussion of Paul's Asian American Studies class clearly demonstrates how a supportive adult can play a key

role in nurturing and fostering performance work that explores forms of difference, supports the development of youth voices, and challenge stereotypes. As Paul's leadership seems crucial in terms of structuring the types of cultural production that took place in Asian American Studies, I want to briefly compare the two spaces in terms of the role of leadership.

In many respects, the key structural distinction between Lyric and Asian American studies class was that the latter was a class led by Paul, a skilled educator. But my research also offers insight into what strong youth leadership might have provided for Lyric. As I described above, Jamal and Yoseph ran the first Lyric meetings I attended. Jamal was twenty years old, and Yoseph had actually been involved in founding Lyric. Jamal received a great deal of respect from students, both for his skills as a poet and emcee, and because, frankly he demanded it. He ran the meetings with authority, and he and Yoseph prepared the structure of each meeting beforehand. In addition, his status as a college student elevated him from the micro-politics that often infuse large American high school social scenes (Eckert, 1989; Foley, 1990). Jamal, then, served a vital role in facilitating the shape and quality of Lyric meetings, and the shift after he left was clear and significant.

In an interview that took place in the spring of 2002, after Lyric disappeared, Pam, a white senior who had been involved with Lyric for several years, provided an assessment of how the space evolved:

P: So, I liked Lyric my sophomore year [1999/2000].

JC: What did you like about it?

P: It was just cool. It was fun. It was like, it's like going to a free concert every week, kind of. And it's just kind of cool, and like, inspiring to do your own stuff or whatever. And then junior year [2000/2001], it was okay. It wasn't as cool last year [2000/2001].

JC: Last year. Yeah, what was your sense of what happened last year?

P: It kind of got weird. I don't know. It kind of got corny. I don't know. Not to put blame on any-

body, but just 260[2000/2001 senior class], the people who were running it. Like all these weird people showed up that just weren't down, I don't know.

JC: Well like, what was weird about them?

P: I don't know. It was like a whole different environment. Like, I don't know. It just wasn't as chill, I guess. And then this year it just disappeared.

JC: Yeah, I don't know what happened.

P: If I still liked it from last year, I would have tried to keep it up. But there's just nobody I didn't think, that would like, want to go. You know what I mean? Last year was just weird. It wasn't cool.

JC: Maybe is there, like, a metaphor or something for like, what was up with last year?

P: Huh. Just people started showing up that didn't really. . .

JC: Or yeah, what was it? What did it become last year?

P: I don't know. People started showing up and weren't really, either where just sitting there and not doing anything, or just like talking, and being like disrespectful. And then people who started showing up and doing, like, *gangster* rap in the middle of the cipher.

JC: Yeah.

P: And being, like, all, like, weird, and like violent about stuff, and it used to be such a peaceful thing. It was just corny. It wasn't what it was supposed to be.

JC: So yeah, what do you think it was supposed to be? When it was really good?

P: It was supposed to be a place where people who were interested in the same stuff, like hip-hop, and that whole lifestyle or whatever, could come and chill and, like, maybe draw, you know. Maybe write poetry, even though that wasn't that really that big of a thing when it first started. And like, you know, freestyle, and just show each other what they can do, and help each other freestyle, and like break dance, and like, all that stuff, and then it just got into weird poetry

and bad rap.

Pam's analysis of the problems with Lyric—it's shift from a cool and supportive space where students could come to engage in a range of hip-hop activities to a space of violence, weird poetry and bad rap—captures some of the tensions that developed in the absence of Jamal, a strong leader. In fact, I recall a moment during the spring of 2000 when a student came to Lyric stoned, and proceeded to laugh and talk as one of the poets attempted to recite. Jamal wasted no time in telling the student he either needed to quiet down or leave. The student pulled himself together, and the meeting moved forward.

Part of the challenge of Lyric might have involved some of the misogynist and homophobic content that constitutes certain forms of hip-hop culture. This lead to tensions which Pam alludes to and which I witnessed as well. But as I suggest above, structured engagement with such tension and conflict holds the possibility for productive conversation. In effect, strong leadership in youth spaces can harness the pull of hip-hop and other youth cultural forms, while working to make productive use of the more controversial elements of such forms.

### CONCLUSION: PERFORMANCE AND THE POSSIBILITY OF YOUTH SPACES

As the literature on youth spaces makes clear, public schools need to do more than simply allow spaces like Lyric and Asian American Studies to exist; as democratic institutions dedicated to encouraging and releasing imaginations (Greene, 1995), they need to play an active role in creating and supporting such spaces. Fine and Weis (2000) capture well the power and possibility of spaces like Lyric and Asian American Studies:

It is in these spaces that youth engage with a kind of deliberate agency, sometimes an urgency, in which reciprocity is assumed, mastery—of spirit, arts, the body, activism—is sought, voices can be heard, and differences can be articulated; deficit models are left at the door. . . . Youth need spaces to work through the

pains of oppressed identities, to explore the pleasures of not-yet identities, and to organize movements we can't even imagine (pp. xiv-xii).

Supporting such spaces will go a long way toward making sure students do more than simply get along. Indeed, they will help schools like Franklin become spaces of possibility and hope, as opposed to spaces of reproduction.

**Joseph Cytrynbaum** died from a cerebral aneurysm at age 37 in July of 2009. Raised in Evanston, Illinois, Joe returned to the Chicago area after receiving a Ph.D. from the University of Pennsylvania, where for his dissertation he immersed himself in the life of a Philadelphia public high school. Immediately following his doctoral work, Joe moved back to his beloved Chicago where he worked with Umoja, a youth advocacy organization, to design and execute programs not just to help students graduate from high school and move on to college, but also to help them understand their responsibility to their local and global communities. As coach to the "Louder Than a Bomb" poetry team through the Young Chicago Authors program, Joe coaxed students to write freely about their lives. After four years with Umoja, Joe accepted a teaching position in 2008 at the Northeastern Illinois University's School of Social Work. He is greatly missed by all those who were fortunate enough to cross his path.

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# Why Youth Culture

By Ralph Cintron, University of Illinois at Chicago

A few weeks ago I read an article by a philosopher (whose name I cannot recall) in the *New York Times* and the subsequent blog responses. The subject was Lady Gaga. Many of the responders could not fathom why a philosopher would want to waste her time on a cheap cultural icon who “clearly” was meaningless—or rather had only one meaning, namely, the commodification of meaninglessness under hyper-capitalism. They asked: Is this the irrelevance to which contemporary philosophy had sunk?? Several of the bloggers thought that “old” philosophers seemed to enjoy, perhaps even salaciously, commenting on the sexual practices of youth and making moral statements. Were they thinking of Plato?

As someone who has also written about youth culture—along with Joe, Dwight Conquergood, and many others—I would like to meditate on that theme just a bit. But before doing so, some *epideictic*. I met Joe only once, at the Palmer House in Chicago, if I recall. Rob Fairbanks on several occasions has told me that my writing had been influential on Joe. As I was reading Joe’s chapter on “Youth Spaces. . . Power. . . and Performance,” it was obvious that Dwight’s work too was very important for Joe. Dwight had extended a hand to me early on in my career. I was shocked when he died. He was much too young. And I was shocked when I heard of Joe’s death. Obviously, he was much too young. So two deaths embracing each other, even as I remain standing, was one reason for writing this. I hope, I genuinely hope, that Joe’s wife and child can feel this short essay as tribute, this thing done in memory of another for the memories and well being of those closest to Joe, the chance that the child at some point may read this and know something about their father. Scholarship, research—whatever you want to call it—is a strange action: someone be-

queathed something to Dwight, which he passed on to me without knowing it, and I, just maybe, passed it on to Joe, also without knowing it, and so on down the line, a thematic moving through the hands of those who may be real strangers, but in the actions of reading and writing turn out to be not so strange to each other. Again my best to Joe’s wife and his family.

So, some of us have this thing about youth culture. There is so much of it in the anthropological literature and in cultural studies, wassup? (To ask “what” of anything seems a bit portentous, but a “wassup” seems to lead to less ontology, and that seems about right here.) Why does Paul Lee, the teacher and organizer of the American-Asian Studies curriculum in Joe’s research, want the performances at Brimley High to “breakup stereotypes” and “articulate complex identities”? Why are stories that “enlarge the self” necessary and how do they counter marginalization? Is there some “natural” opposition between the two? Why should students be “empowered to change things”? Why do the leaders of Lyric and Asian-American Studies value resistance, agency, and the poetics of identity? Why do Fine and Weis at the end of Joe’s essay talk about the importance of voices being heard, the articulation of differences, and leaving deficit models at the door? And then most intriguingly, and also at the end, why are Lyric and Asian-American Studies linked to “democratic institutions”?

These are very familiar *topoi* or the-matics that seem to drive most work on youth culture. For many readers the answers to the above questions are obvious: justice and fairness are moral imperatives and acknowledging the worthiness of difference is one way to realize a more just world. I want to raise questions about their “obviousness” and frame things a little differently: why do Paul Lee and his performers

and the Lyric performers believe what they believe? Why has this become their commonsense? And why isn’t it everyone’s commonsense, for instance, those people on the other side of the culture wars? There is a need for the making of a sympathetic, historical inquiry that maps the evolution of the liberal/progressive social imaginary, what its foundational claims are and its particular dependence on a certain interpretation of social change. Such a map, I suspect, would have a number of scattered nodes linking up a very deep network of ideas at historical junctures.

My current work offers nothing like that, but it has begun poking around. Mind you, I am not just talking about youth culture now but something much bigger than that: all the tinkering that has gone into the making of the liberal/progressive social imaginary but also its right wing counterpart. Perhaps that last phrase sounds strange, but increasingly I am beginning to believe that the tea partiers imaginary, whatever that means, (and I use them as just one example of the right) is historically joined, sort of, at the hip of liberalism/progressivism—and this is what makes modernity look a bit monstrous, unwieldy, but at the same time rather wily. In a sense modernity is trying to survive, and the struggle between the right and left is an apt sign of the fragility of this most thorough-going artifice.

So, a few riffs unsustainable. That phrase “democratic institutions” mentioned earlier works well into my interpretive scheme. Some of the early modern and enlightenment writers on democracy fetishized democracy in its opposition to monarchy. Someone like Thomas Paine, for instance, is rather notorious, but even the Federalist papers written with much more sobriety framed the American democratic experience as a unique, unfolding experiment in the progress of civilization. There is a politics of enthusiasm here



that I summarize with the concept of *potentia*—that the democratic rhetorics (equality, freedom, rights, liberty, transparency, and so on) release human *potentia*, meaning that hierarchy must give way to the “will of the people,” the “common man,” and so on. It is this *potentia* that becomes the moral standard that replaces such older moral foundations as the “divine right of kings,” and even divine right itself for a figure like Nietzsche. Today, human rights talk speaks more convincingly to our metaphysically-abandoned world, but not even human rights can abandon vestiges of transcendence, perhaps because human law has its conceptual origins in natural law. So transcendence sneaks back in. At any rate, the democratic rhetorics released a very special *energia* that continues to consume us with the belief that the world we ought to live in should be a world of opportunity for everyone. Mind you, this is a strange belief. Even a cursory glance through history and ethnographies of others, including exotic others, indicates that such notions are not necessarily common. Social order and cosmic order are often hierarchical. Even in those societies where a version of egalitarianism does appear, it is more straight forward and ad-hoc; that is, egalitarianism in these instances functions without the deep formalities and thick entwinements of laws, constitutions, and theoretical notions such as rights, the self, social contract, and so on. Ours, but not theirs, is the systemization of egalitarianism—a rather oxymoronic concept perhaps. At any rate, now that democracy has become a thorough-going, global ideal, there are no “people” outside its political arrangement or its imaginary. Democracy has become the revolutionary force that one cannot revolt against.

There is something messianic about those early accounts that reappears in the language of Paul Lee and Fine/Weis: “Youth need spaces. . .to explore the pleasures of not-yet identities, and to organize movements we can’t even imagine.” Democracy as a grand opening of human *potentia*, a *dynamis*, an ideology that gives foundation to the not-yet imagined and says

that who we are are the not-oppressed. Indeed, the idea of oppression has moved from the early days of democratic imagining, where the physical oppressions of state power were the targets of revolt, to the later days of democratic imagining where the oppressions are of cultural bias and stereotype. And yet the same necessity, even urgency, to address what seem to be fundamental “wrongs.” The messianism cannot just disappear but must keep finding “spaces” to do its work.

The curious thing about democracy is that everyone buys into it even as they buy out of it. Edmund Burke and Jeremy Bentham never fully bought into it, but neither did Xenophon, Plato, and the other oligarchs of classical Greece. It’s just too careless and unpredictable—which in effect is what the liberals and progressives also felt as they saw Sarah Palin rise out of the populist nowhere. Ultimately no one quite believes in equality because we cannot truly live in it. So equality circulates less in our actions and more in our talk, particularly in those contexts where we can afford the talk of equality, that is, those contexts where equality cannot snap back on us to deliver people and ideas that we truly abhor. Hence, Yale and Harvard became the great bastions of contemporary oligarchy, sifting through the masses and training their charges to do likewise and assuring that global order will continue to be safely managed. Why aren’t they under siege? In a society truly wedded to egalitarianism they would be, right? Furthermore, why did the idea of the random lot distributed to the whole citizenry not become the mechanism for choosing political candidates? Think of it: all citizens with the obligation of serving in political office for a brief time once in their lifetime, but each one chosen randomly by lot? Instead, we create two parties that function, in effect, as massive monopolies in charge of the distribution of wealth and power. They too are not exactly under siege, but sometimes they seem to be. These entities can co-exist with egalitarian democracy and not seem anomalous because of some interesting moves, some rather primal

and others rather subtle. On the primal end is the simple fact that we stand to lose too much in a siege: all of our economic well being, even our poverty, is tied up in the existing order. We are all financialized now—even welfare recipients. On the subtler end is that we have found ways to dampen the punch of the egalitarian side of democracy through a set of tricky terms such as “meritocracy.” In sum, we buy into the democratic rhetorics even as we buy out of them.

Well, I have not said anything here that Foucault did not say much more succinctly on page 65, for those who have the 2008 Palgrave edition of his *The Birth of Biopolitics*: “Freedom is . . . constantly produced. [Liberalism] proposes to manufacture it constantly, to arouse it and produce it, [along with the] constraints and the problems of cost raised by this production.” That is, democracy through its rhetorics, and in some cases its empirical successes, has produced a certain subjectivity that is far from running its course. It is thorough-going in the sense that both the right wing and left wing subscribe, for instance, to the maximization of choice. The right may put the emphasis on the marketplace and the left on state power, but the real revolution would consist of a radical reevaluation of choice. But the fear is that such a notion would diminish the human and return us to the old hegemonies of theology. But notice how some contemporary fundamentalist Christians have finessed this problem with the argument that God too wants us to prosper by maximizing choice. Modernity indeed is wily.

But let me put an end to this. The point of these incomplete riffs was to suggest that Paul Lee and his Asian-American curriculum and the performances at Lyric have deep roots in a subjectivity that keeps reproducing us. It is a contradictory subjectivity delivering, as Joe says, positives and negatives—or what I am calling our antinomic social system, our divided mind. At any rate, we are on its roller coaster inventing hip-hop culture and its kin. Youth culture, then, outlines part of that vehicle for us—but so does the tea party.

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