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*Pedagogy and Theatre of the Oppressed Journal*

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## **The 'I Am...' Experience: Social Justice Art from Process to Product**

Billicia Charnelle Hines<sup>1</sup> and Dr. RAS Mikey Courtney<sup>2</sup>

*Paulo Friere said, "We cannot enter the struggle as objects in order later to become subjects." Freedom Players is one of the two ensembles within the Black Theatre and Dance Program at Wayne State University. As a group of young Detroit based artists met and interacted, challenges arose as they realized their birth was political. These artists explored how they can survive and thrive in a place where everything seems to be set up against them. As clashes built, their journey lead them on a path of discovery and renewal. The result was I Am..., a performance piece that illuminates for and engages audiences in current socio-political challenges, utilizing teaching artists through performance and conversation on race, gender, sexuality, and privilege as a means of bridging communities. This report documents the process used to create I Am... as a way of healing, empowerment, and discovery.*

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For the 2018-19 academic year, the Freedom Players<sup>3</sup> developed a play based on the theme of *liberation*. As the artistic directors we taught, directed, and created choreography for this ensemble. Our original play *I Am...* addresses the interpersonal experiences of these 9 students/artists from the Detroit area and their ever-evolving understanding of liberation of self.<sup>4</sup> We employed literature of writers, philosophers and poets such as Paulo Freire, Robin DeAngelo, Angela Davis, George Yancy, Nikki Giovanni, and bell hooks as the theoretical framework for our project. Also, we drew upon documentary film viewings of “The Mask You Live In” (2015), “Miss Representation” (2011), and “Hip Hop Evolution” (2016) to name a few. All the reviewed written and visual materials addressed themes of identity, gender, race, sexual preference, empowerment, and socio-political stereotypes.

As directors, we wrote preliminary notes and lead the students through creative writing exercises which helped initiate deeper dialogs on the sensitive topics that we present in this body of work. The creative writing and verbal discussions are what inspired the texts for our script. Other methods employed in our creative process were verbal and movement improvisations (Browning 2005), field research (Jackson 1987) and guided group discussions, which assisted us in developing materials that we synthesized into

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<sup>3</sup> In our efforts to reflect the times of our ever-changing socio-political climate, Freedom Players is committed to performing works centered on illuminating social justice themes. *I Am...* is about the continual challenge of seeking liberation. Freedom Players is one of the two ensembles within the Black Theatre and Dance Program at Wayne State University’s Theatre and Dance Department. In our efforts to reflect the oppressive socio-political climate of our times, Freedom Players is committed to performing works centered on illuminating social justice themes through the Black/African-American experiential lens. Our productions and outreach programs strive to use the performing arts as a bridge between cultural communities globally. We tour our current shows and offer workshops to the students in Detroit Public Schools and the Detroit Metro Community, to utilize the artistic process and performance as means for dialogical education and open conversations about race, status and social norms.

<sup>4</sup> The *I Am...* script is available at [https://www.academia.edu/40431269/Performed\\_by\\_Freedom\\_Players\\_of\\_2018-19\\_I\\_AM\\_A\\_Journey\\_Towards\\_Liberation](https://www.academia.edu/40431269/Performed_by_Freedom_Players_of_2018-19_I_AM_A_Journey_Towards_Liberation). A video excerpt of a performance can be found at <https://vimeo.com/361965663>.

the play. This report will use the embodied experiential understandings of the student performers and faculty directors of the Freedom Players, coupled with literature review, excerpts from the *I Am...* script and audience responses, to exemplify what this production reflects and the impact it can have on our society as a means of social justice.

As the title to an Angela Davis book suggests, '*Freedom is a Constant Struggle*' (2016) and with this notion the freedom or *liberation* of self is a '*constant struggle*' or journey that we endure throughout our lifetimes. The Freedom Players uses the performing arts as a means to explore the theoretical concept of 'Art as Social Justice' and with our production *I Am...* and the journey to liberation, we had to question from what or whom are we liberating. To be more specific, we are speaking of the liberation from the 'white' euro-centric, patriarchal, colonial institutionalization that regulates our human existence.

Throughout our intensive process of creating the script through to the production, we discovered how this process not only created an honest and truthful portrayal of a young person's journey to liberation, but all involved in this project were awakened and challenged by using theatre as a means to educate, restore, and empower. This report will analyze aspects of our creative process, personal development and the socio-political impact of our devised text and movement play entitled *I Am...* The next section examines aspects of our creative process and illustrates the 'problem-posing' educational approach the faculty directors used in order to further propel these student performers down their path of understanding what liberation means for them.

### **Creative Process**

Educator and philosopher Paulo Freire (1996) states, "Authority must be on the side freedom, not against it" (p. 61). As directors we are constantly refining what freedom from oppression means for us but through the creative process of *I Am...* we gradually understood the direction of the show based on student response to our prompts. In the early stages of our creative process, we researched the perspectives of the

earlier-mentioned socio-political writers, but, as directors, we quickly discovered that *I Am...* needed to be told through the perspective of these students. Noticing this, the directors used a form of what Freire (1996) terms *problem-posing education* as we guided the students through thematically structured exercises and other support materials that helped to create a more holistic environment of trust and support. Freire (1996) noted, “The problem-posing educator constantly re-forms his reflections in the reflection of the students. The students - no longer docile listeners- are now critical co-investigators in dialogue with the teacher” (pp. 61-62). To be able to gain a stronger understanding of how the students saw liberation, we required everyone who auditioned for the Freedom Players ensemble, in the fall of 2018, to create an original piece answering the question, “What does Liberation Mean to Me?” Through this we discovered that the students had limited ideas on this broad topic of liberation.

We began rehearsal for *I Am...*, a few days after the audition. These first few rehearsals were about establishing a general understanding of our theme, and to do this we led the students through some creative writing assignments. One of these assignments asked the question of “Who am I?” and gave us an understanding of the students’ perceptions of their own identities. We used these and other writings as material for discussions about identity, race, gender and other topics. We brainstormed ways in which these topics or categories could be broken down into sub-categories and the students did more creative writing about personal experiences related to these topics and sub-categories. (figures 1 & 2) The writing also inspired movements and text that would ultimately become parts of the play.

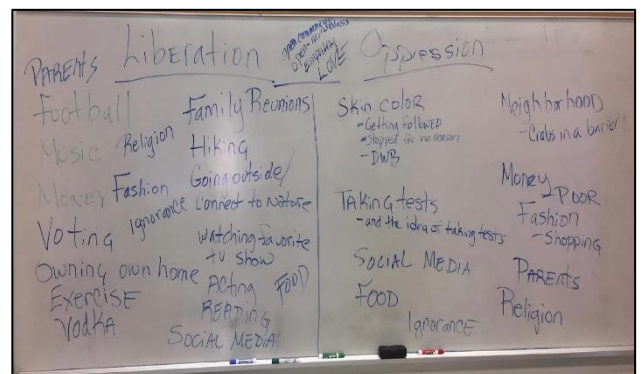
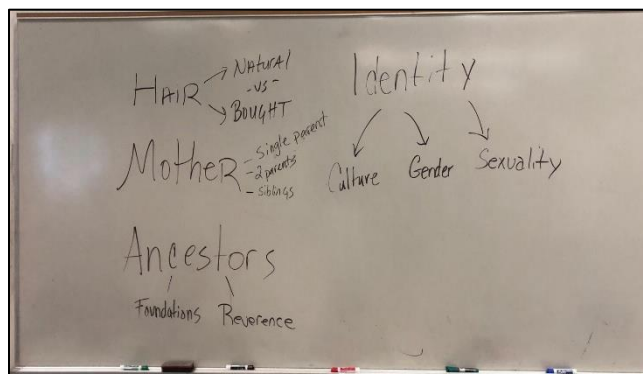


Fig. 1. Brainstorming

Fig. 2. Brainstorming

Aside from the written exercises, the students we lead through movement explorations that developed their interpersonal sense of self in relation to others and their environment. The students developed trust within the ensemble through partnering and weight sharing improvisations. Through sharing personal experiences, the students became more confident and self-aware, as they realized that some of their peers have had similar life experiences. This, in turn, gave many of the students more confidence in their performance. Freire (1996) argued, "It is only the oppressed who, by freeing themselves, can free their oppressors" (p. 38). This argument aligns with another profound aspect of the *I Am...* creative process, the students' exploration of what it means to be the 'oppressor' as well as the 'oppressed'. Freire (Ibid) further argues, "The existence of the oppressed is necessary to their own existence," (p. 40) and their investigation of oppression allowed the students to embody characteristics and understandings of both ends of this spectrum, based on their own lived experiences and their embodied interpretations of the written text. This process led them to further embody *liberatory* ways of being.

Some of the other elements of the creative process would include but are not limited too; music composition, soundscape selection, choreography, script development and others. The following section will illustrate the ways in which the creative process and performance of *I Am...* has impacted the lives and perspectives of the performers and audience participants.

### **Social Impact**

Philosopher George Yancy and sociologist Robin Diangelo both examined the theoretical concepts of institutionalized racism and sexism within our society, especially within the United States. They argued that by being raised in such a society, we are indoctrinated with racist and sexist ideals that are accepted as norms (Diangelo 2018; Yancy 2018). These socio-political norms and cultural stereotypes that come

with, are what we question with *I Am...* Through posing these questions our art, as a means of Social Justice, not only becomes therapeutic, but it is also educational and entertaining. As Freire (1996) states:

It is only when the oppressed find the oppressor out and become involved in the organized struggle for their liberation that they begin to believe in themselves. This discovery cannot be purely intellectual but must involve action; nor can it be limited to mere activism, but must include serious reflection; only then will it be a praxis. (p. 47)

This is why we shed light on the simple complexity that is the human experience. Staging personal narratives of marginalized communities in an effort to reduce this need to define oneself based on archetypal norms, designed by our oppressive society, that are not culturally or socially inclusive. For example, Cameron Blackwell, one student performer, has expressed the struggle that he has faced in his life with understanding and accepting who he is. Cameron identifies as a Black/African-American, gay, Christian male, who feels that the theatre has always been a safe space for him, even-though it challenges him to break out of his comfort zone. He argues that the *I Am...* creative process has illustrated what a 'safe space' is supposed to be like. He states, "We don't play it "safe" we open our artistic selves completely wide and share honesty which in the end makes us all feel safe." In a 'talk back' following one of our performances, Cameron mentions that the *I Am...* experience is therapeutic as he stated, "In the show I say, 'I'm gay', so I am literally coming out to the audience in every performance." It is experiences like this that have helped built Cameron's confidence to express who he is in environments outside of the theatre.

Another student performer, Alexandra Folic, who defines herself as pansexual, female, second generation Latina American, also struggles with questions of identity (Figures 3 & 4). We drew from her life experiences to address gender, race, class and other sensitive issues from a perspective that differed from Cameron. Within *I Am...* she addresses the liminality of feeling in between the 'citizen' to 'foreigner' spectrum. In her monologue Alexandra asks, "So where do I fit in? Cause either way, I am still an outsider." In post-performance discussions Alexandra has stated:

I am learning to trust myself more. *I Am...*, for me, has been a process of learning to be comfortable with vulnerability. Being vulnerable and telling my life story has helped me gain confidence and drop the judgements I have about myself. It has helped me to be proud of who I am, and my story.



Fig. 3. Alexandra confronting her identity.



Fig. 4. Alexandra confronting her identity.

Both Cameron and Alexandra confront race, gender, sexual preference, empowerment and many other themes within their work in this production and both have openly expressed how this process has given them a clarity and confidence that they did not have prior to '*I Am...*'. This need to define or categorize one's self is also questioned by our student performers, in the scenes entitled "*I'm a Man*", involving four Black/African-American, males and their own understanding of what being a 'man' means. Two of them state, "So many categories, they could build three stories..." and later "They just want to separate...They just want to spread some hate...". Lines like this reinforce the internal and external struggles that many people endure when attempting to refine their place in the world around them. The line implies that the more we refine our identity and assimilate to a culture, the further we separate ourselves as a human species. So, the question of, '*How does one's personal identity equate to unity within humanity?*' is one of contemplation, which may have no solution.





Fig. 5. "We are vessels..."



Fig. 6. "A dead man..."



Fig. 7. "I can't..."

## Conclusion

Within this production, we addressed themes such as race, gender, sexual preference, class, color, and religion, in an attempt to continue an ongoing dialog amongst the student, teachers and audience participants. Throughout every performance, we continually found places in the script that needed editing

and more developed. Our last performance at the N'namdi Art Gallery truly allowed us to fill in all of the gaps and strengthen the piece. One audience member who watched the show a few months ago responded that she was amazed how the production has grown and deepened. Another audience member expressed that she laughed, cried, was angry, and moved at how much of an impact this play had on her and how it could impact others. Other audience members felt very open to discuss their personal experiences as some of the stories and themes resonated with their lives. In addition, more audience members wanted to help book this performance in other venues, so that it may gain more visibility within the community. It was amazing to see the growth and confidence the students/artists from the beginning of the semester to the last performance. The broadened awareness and acceptance of self by the students, aided in their awareness and acceptance of others in and outside of the ensemble. We continue to question ourselves and our place within society so that others who witness this production will question their own understanding of themselves. As the Freedom Players grows stronger every year and change themes, we see that that liberating oneself is the first step in building an educated, empowered, restored, and creative artist.



Fig. 8. The cast post-production.

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