

Abstract

Roxie, Mr. Bingo, Kewl and The Gate: Street Gangs in Kinston Participating in One City's Game of Chance to Save Itself

By

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This project in pursuit of social and aesthetic experience involved the Kinston Community Council for the Arts, the Kinston Department of Public Safety and The Gate of Kinston (Gang Awareness Training and Education; a community center for the development of youth). Following the Gate's mission to increase advocacy among police officers and youth, this project comprised art sessions, two days a week, one and a half hours each day over the course of three months. Participants included Jasmine Coleman, Caleb Fisher, Tavon Green, Officer Kevin Jenkins, Tayler Morgan, Alexis Monshay Sutton and Sergeant Dennis Taylor. Youth and police worked together on screenprinted images which were publicly exhibited in February 2010 at Kinston Community Council for the Arts. The core group of five students and two officers investigated ideas of perception, projection and what makes someone "cool". All were offered opportunity to socially act in taking control of their images and vocationally act by studying the rudimentary tools of visual art and developing the entrepreneurial skill of screenprinting (addressing the belief that part of the problem Kinston faces with gang affiliation is economically driven). Socially, this applied process provided an atypical and productive environment encouraging officers and students to speak and listen outside their typical street interactions. With much instability present in the daily lives of at-risk youth, screenprinting offers youth a tangible form of communication and control; a marketable skill executed with one's own hands. The objective was to ascertain whether process, product, or both could build social capital, affect social and/or socio-economic change. The narrative and place-making created together, the history and narrative of place and the transfer of entrepreneurial skills to the students, all carried weight in measuring this endeavor's investigation and pursuit of art as an agent of transformation.

Roxie, Mr. Bingo, Kewl and The Gate: Street Gangs in Kinston
Participating in One City's Game of Chance to Save Itself

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By

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Dedication

In loving memory of my mentor, teacher and friend

Paul Hartley

(1943-2009)

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Roxie, Mr. Bingo, Kewl and The Gate: Street Gangs in Kinston Participating in One City's Game of Chance to Save Itself

They would have had an easier time building a jail.

---Tony Jordan, Gate volunteer, speaking at Gatekeepers'
Reception, October 22, 2009

When Chief Smith took the podium at the Gatekeeper's Awards, October 22, 2009, I felt a piece of the puzzle slip into place. The event was honoring Greg Smith, his wife Margaret, and other volunteers who built and continue to work at the community development center in Kinston, NC, known as The Gate (an acronym representing Gang Awareness Training and Education which has broadened to mean "a gateway for young people to become good productive citizens"). (Project 3: The Gate). Introduced that evening as a person who has offered 23 years of progressive leadership to Kinston, most concede The Gate is Greg Smith's vision and sweat of his brow. Since 2006, with Kinston's escalation of gang-related activity in North Carolina, Smith's project was awarded \$169,000 from the NC Governor's Crime Commission and \$100,000 from the State Gang Grant specifically earmarked to lessen gun violence and send a message of zero tolerance to the rapid organization and growth of street gangs in North Carolina. Receiving matching funds of \$50,000 from the City of Kinston (exceeding the State's requirement) and in-kind donations of \$50,000 in material and labor, The Gate, ringing in at \$350,000, is a model facility of its type in the state of North Carolina. With passion and candor, Smith recounted its beginnings:

I knew we could hire more officers, buy more weapons, or vehicles and we wouldn't be any nearer to solving the problem. So, we bought a bingo parlor instead. Our thinking was to intervene before they [youth] get involved with drugs and crime. The grants were written for prevention, not bricks and mortar. With the purchase of Mr. Bingo we watched the walls come down and go up. Just about every church in the community was involved. Policemen, firemen, anyone looking for a job, found work here. The project gave the community an opportunity to connect. We've got to invest, but Kinston also has to invest in securing hope for its young people.

With Kinston's unusual decision a few years back to consolidate Law Enforcement, Fire and Rescue and Code Enforcement all under one administration, the Kinston Department of Public Safety, there were many able hands to assist with new construction. A few days earlier, I had heard about the Gate for the

first time, met with its executive director, Wanda Jordan, and was joining Sandy Landis, the Executive Director of the Kinston Community Council for the Arts (CCA) that evening for the GateKeepers' Reception. It was Sandy who first mentioned this non-profit organization to me, had arranged the meeting with Wanda and, in every way, was shepherding me through the community flock. Located in downtown Kinston, CCA had offered their capacious main floor Hampton Gallery for my Master's of Fine Arts thesis exhibition. I admired the space based on its impressive scale, thoughtful measure of adaptive reuse, and high traffic. The facility is constantly booked by diverse groups for many purposes. Leasing space downstairs, the model railroad club on Saturdays troubleshoots faulty rail switches and cuts tunnels through their formidable papier maché mountains; veterans gather to honor fellow Lenoir county vets who have died in service; aging high school graduates return for reunions; flower arrangers busy for wedding receptions; and middle and high school musicians perform big band to progressive jazz. With the racial demographics in Kinston approximately 68 percent black and 32 percent white, I was impressed to see at CCA roughly equal racial representation for most events. Sandy, who frequently refers to herself as a Yankee white woman, speaks proudly of CCA being described by one black patron as a useful gathering place because of its secular efforts to provide "neutral ground".

A desire grew to honor the opportunity for an art exhibition at this site by re-presenting a part of Kinston to Kinston. I traveled there October 1, 2009 to sign a CCA exhibition contract. Upon arriving, Hampton Gallery was characteristically alive with preparations for a kick-off event for Big Read—a National Endowment for the Arts program promoting literary reading. Students from area schools were anxiously awaiting their turn to read either a poem or short story by Edgar Allan Poe. As well-heeled Kinston luminaries poured in for the kick-off, underdressed, I looked to sign the dotted line and slip out. Sandy Landis caught my arm and introduced me to Adrian King, native Kinstonian and Executive Director of downtown revitalization, The Pride of Kinston. Suddenly, I heard myself asking of them the feasibility of a collaborative project with Kinston youth and what public mural spaces were in town. Well aware it would take a good bit of time to work within the school system, Sandy suggested contacting a new organization called The Gate which focused on serving at-risk youth. She further explained a street curfew, the Youth Protection Ordinance, was enforced in Kinston nightly between 11:00 pm and 5:30 am for anyone under the age of 18. Kinston, like many cities, struggles to direct their young in productive safe occupations

during the immediate after school hours. Sandy further added, “Just around the corner, in what used to be the old Napa Auto Parts store, there is a 48 foot blank mural wall, constructed of plywood. It’s been sitting there for about two years now. I’ve not known any artist who wanted to take it on. Come on, I’ll show it to you.” In less than fifteen minutes, there was the possibility of not one but two sites in Kinston to work. The CCA exhibition gallery, a beautiful space I appreciated formalistically, broadened into a chance for deeper investigation of place and place-making. By asking only one question about collaboration with youth, the way opened to explore relationships and a set of conditions in time and place. More than site, more than space: I had a potential situation in which to work.

How and where can artistic engagement with place begin?

How do we understand and pitch the potential for artistic agency in specific places (particularly as a relative stranger), well enough to engender trust and risk-taking among the participants? Claire Doherty, editor of Situation: Documents of Contemporary Art asks, “Do the curatorial systems, refined over the last twenty years, to support artistic engagement with specific places, and in particular public space, truly acknowledge the conflictual and changing nature of public space and place itself, and if so, might the term situation (a set of conditions in time and place), offer an alternative to the exhausted notion of site?”(14). Needing to act as my own curator, or caretaker (*curare, to take care of*), of this fledgling project, it was helpful to think in terms of situation; to respond to place in terms of its occupants, their dialogues and narratives.

Taking care by using the finest research tools, I headed straight to Wikipedia to look up Kinston, and Google to find The Gate and Kinston’s distinction as a 2009 All-American City. Even taking such a broad, unspecified course, connections surfaced, including news that The Gate was one of three initiatives garnering Kinston’s 2009 national recognition. Reviewing the Gate’s mission statement at www.kinstonallamericacity.com, I looked to see what specific goals were already in place to which I might offer my skills and there it was: “One of the goals of the non-profit organization [Gate] is to...help them [youth] view police as their advocates, rather than enemies.”

The objective seemed incomplete. I held a mental mirror to the sentence, adding “and to help police view youth as their advocates, rather than enemies.” Aware of Suzanne Lacey’s *The Roof is on Fire*, a performative piece with Oakland teenagers and police, I reached for Grant Kester’s, Conversation Pieces: Community + Communication in Modern Art to recall her project. The piece grew in response to a riot whereby a teenager kicked in a plate glass window. Irretractably, that act became the event’s icon in repeated news coverage. Kester relates, “In *The Roof Is on Fire*, Latino and African American teenagers were able to take control of their image and to transcend the one-dimensional clichés promulgated by mainstream news and entertainment media (e.g., the young person of color as sullen, inarticulate gang-banger or violence-prone troublemaker).”(4,5).

In her *Code 33* project which involved conversations between 100 police and 150 high school students:

Lacey...created a performative space in which the police and young people were encouraged to speak and listen outside the tensions that surround their typical interactions on the street and to look beyond their respective assumptions about each other....each performance was preceded by several weeks of intense discussions between smaller groups of young people (and police in the case of *Code 33*)...These more intimate exchanges laid the ground for, and helped authenticate, the conversations staged during the actual performance.”(5).

Kester’s research illuminates the work of artists who replace the production of artwork using traditional materials with production, or “concrete intervention,” of sociopolitical relationships, focusing on the complexities of social process as a creative act, in and of itself: “The relevant legacy of modernist art from this perspective is to be found, not in its concern with the formal conditions of the object, but rather in the ways in which aesthetic experience can challenge conventional perceptions...and systems of knowledge.”(3)

Late that October 1, I wrote a project proposal to submit to CCA, The Gate, and Kinston Department of Public Safety grounded in my conviction that it is that very job of aesthetic experience to “challenge conventional perceptions and systems of knowledge.” I believe that art has been succeeding in that objective long before, and will continue to long after, modernism. However much I admire the work of artists working solely with social process as both means and end, I chose a departure in my practice. With

this project, I maintained concern with the formalist conditions and physical production of objects in the form of screenprints, as much for the sake of process, as product. I proposed that the participants, both officers and youth, investigate ideas of perception and projection in the creation of images and text. All were offered opportunity to socially act in taking control of their images and vocationally act by studying the rudimentary tools of visual art and developing the entrepreneurial skill of screenprinting (addressing the belief that part of the problem Kinston faces with gang affiliation is economically driven). Socially, this applied process provided an atypical and productive environment encouraging officers and students to speak and listen outside their typical street interactions. With much instability present in the daily lives of at-risk youth, screenprinting offers youth a tangible form of communication and control; a marketable skill executed with one's own hands. The objective was to ascertain whether process, product, or both could build social capital, affect social and/or socio-economic change. The narrative and place-making created together, the history and narrative of place and the transfer of entrepreneurial skills to the students, all continue to carry weight in measuring this endeavor's investigation and pursuit of art as an agent of transformation.

My initial strategy was guided by two overarching criteria: the work would be fueled by collaboration with youth and police in Kinston; that process allowing time for youth and police to work together privately on a project which then, is presented publicly, to include the viewer's reflection and implication in the process. Instead of Lacey's 100 police and 150 students, I proposed working with twelve students (six male and six female), and three police officers. (The core group ultimately stabilized with five students and two officers). Appropriating a concept of Roland Barthes', at least fifty percent of my role would be scriptor, or intertextual operator. (Bourriaud, 82). Inevitably, the remaining fifty percent would result in my projections onto the participants and inscription in their images. A layer of narrative would be re-presented through my eyes, understanding and inevitable anxieties.

Countertransference, recognized by Freud, Lacan and others, is an emotional entanglement; a redirection of feelings and desires, especially those unconsciously retained from childhood, toward the emotions, experiences or problems of another person. Many of us, including myself, believe that the ability to feel for another is an important dimension of life. However, I knew going into this project, I could not escape the burden of my own motivation, needs and desires, or the tendency to see what I expected to see. There

was the clear risk that my work with the students and officers could wind up being the road to hell paved with good intentions. However, the empathetic mechanisms of transference and countertransference can be managed toward a productive end: such interaction can help determine what we, the participants, do in close relationships and what patterns of interactions have developed, or are likely to, in current life. However risky, with a cursory trust of the process and of one another, we all decided to dive in.

We'd rather be playing four-square than shaking doors on a Friday night.

--- Greg Smith, October 22, 2009,
regarding interaction between police and youth

Chief Smith spoke eloquently on and between the lines that awards night. He emphasized consistent reconsideration of accepted conditions of exchange which have, however comfortable, become ineffective. Listening to him alone in the spotlight, we, collective in the darkness, sipped our coffee and nibbled our delicate desserts in the Gate great room; nearly 7000 square feet ordinarily whaling with 70 kids playing games. For many different reasons, every person in attendance was an investor in this project. By calling in favors, contributing time and money, their actions expressed willingness to believe in the Gate's potential to effect positive change in their community. Several present had already enjoyed open, frank dialogue with youth by investing "one-on-one" time, the most precious resource of all.

Occasionally Sandy leaned in, pointing out this council member, that board member, while I scribbled largely illegible notes in the dim light. Behind us, like a quiet herd, the air hockey, foosball, and ping pong tables stood dark and still. One student, Eric Wright, stepping to the podium dressed in graduation regalia was given a rousing standing ovation for completing his GED through tutorials sponsored by Lenoir Community College at The Gate. It was no small spark of hope amid Smith's numbing litany of recent juvenile crime statistics:

We've arrested three 11-year olds in the last nine months, 28 twelve-year olds since Jan 1, one with a concealed weapon, one for rape; 64 charges against 13-year olds, five of those for rape; 113 fourteen-year olds charged with fighting and drug-related violence; 108 fifteen-year olds charged, nine for possession; 130 sixteen-year olds charged, some with felonious crimes; 167 arrests of 17-year olds to include cocaine possession, felonious firearms and six with concealed weapons.

We lost two students who were regular participants at The Gate. I just saw pictures yesterday of one of them, 15-years old, with semi-automatic guns. They found another way. These kids are looking for hope and they don't see any. They see a vicious cycle, they don't see hope. What they see is their brother with 4,000 dollars cash in his pocket. Between the Bloods, Latin Kings, Crips, IGD's and homegrown organizations, we have 314 validated gang members; 21 of them, ages 15 to 11. We've got to give them a vision of hope. If we save just one child, it will be worth it.

A sense of belonging is what keeps people in communities. In a group, whether raising and plastering new drywall in an old bingo parlor or fist bumping a new initiate into the Bloods, the pledge of a strong community is when the members feel they belong. On October 13, Commander Russell of the Kinston Gang Unit shared the following four-point profile of a youth who joins gangs: age 15-17, frequent runaway, frequent victim of sexual assault and chronic shoplifter. My interpretation: teenagers who have run away from whatever they knew of as home, who pocket bologna and candy to get by, who now belong to the street. When courted for gang affiliation, youth are not only assured a running \$4,000 pocket change, but tempted with the greatest prize: a chance to belong to a community. As the majority of human anxieties at any age reflect concerns over social exclusion, for a teenager, belief that s/he has been rejected by his or her peers, is one of the biggest factors driving them toward criminal behavior.

Jono Bacon, in The Art of Community: Building the New Age of Participation, deconstructs one's sense of belonging, "From the outset, belonging is an abstract concept...I identify belonging pragmatically: as the positive outcome of a positive social economy...In a financial economy, participants put goods and services on the market to generate financial capital...A social economy is the same thing—but we are the product, and the capital is respect and trust."(5). Bacon shares that first use of the term "social capital" was by L.J. Hanifan, a school supervisor working in rural Virginia during economically stressful times of the early twentieth century. In his 1916 article, "The Rural School Community Center," of social capital Hanifan clarifies:

I do not refer to real estate, or to personal property or to cold cash, but rather to that in life which tends to make these tangible substances count for most in the daily lives of people, namely, goodwill, fellowship, mutual sympathy and social intercourse among a group of individuals and families who

make up a social unit...[in order to] bear a social potentiality sufficient to the substantial improvement of living conditions in the whole community.”(130,131).

Bacon supplements the elements Hanifan sets forth with an important final point, “...for an economy to work, every participant needs to *believe in the economy*. Belief is a critical component in how any group of people..function. This can be belief in God, belief in values, or belief in a new future. Whatever the core belief is, the economy and the community can be successful only if everyone has faith in it.”(7).

It was belief in one of the few programs in Kinston proving effective for youth that encouraged Chief Smith to build on its success by constructing the Gate. On October 27, 2009, Sandy and I joined him at police headquarters the following week to hear more of the story:

Sammy Hudson, at Queen Street Methodist Church, opened a Coffee House there in the church on Friday nights. Kids could play video games, ping pong and on average, there were more than 50 kids attending every week. One night, Sammy gave them a video recorder and asked that they record themselves answering one question, “Why do you come to the coffee house?”

Smith’s upturned hands held the question mid-air. His Pennsylvania accent strengthened and clear blue eyes narrowed as he took aim on the punchline:

Safety. In one way or another, of *all* the things they could have said, every kid, pretty much without exception, said they came to the coffee house because it was a *safe* place. I was so struck by that. Here the city was paying me to keep these kids safe. I was challenged by their words and knew we had to take our next move from the truth told by these kids.

The world has a real need for forgotten truths in society’s forgotten spaces.

---Shepard Fairey, *E Pluribus Venom*.

While we contemplated safety with the Director of Public Safety, Commander Russell silently slipped into a chair at our conference table. In his last year running the gang unit, we learned Russell’s tactics have consistently focused on relationship-building, as his Chief proudly related, “He goes out and talks with the kids *every day*.” Considering Russell, as quiet as Smith is gregarious, it is all the more impressive to imagine him hitting the corners, addressing young and old by name in his soft Lenoir county accent.

Russell's eyes are big; his powers of observation and visual sense well-developed. I like his pictures in words. One in particular offers a clear image of his world and the difficulty he faces each day, "We have officers working The Gate and particularly on a Friday night, you watch those kids come in wearing armor. Maybe, before the night is through, they take that armor off. But the minute they walk back onto the street, they put that armor right back on."

During crossfire between Crips and Bloods, inverted letters, numbers, and pictograms mutate, replicate and spew hotly from spray cans in dialectical warfare.

Gang language, hand signals, symbols and territory rapidly morph and evolve, requiring constant re-education and adaptation on the part of law enforcement. The "Book Of Knowledge," is the gang Bible and mandates are set forth by two international nations, People and Folk. Under "People" are the "Bloods" and "Latin Kings"; under "Folk" are "Folks", "Crips" and "IGD" (Insane Gangster Disciples). Commander Russell spent the remainder of the afternoon giving me a crash course in gang motivation and symbology, "In addition to the well established gangs, there are many homegrown or non-traditional gangs which spark and flare up. They are mostly disorganized and often short-lived, like the recent KKK, Kinston Kop Killers." He shared photographs of gang graffiti spray painted on street corners, convenience stores, abandoned buildings and in schools, the hottest place to recruit new initiates.

Momentarily, Russell left the office and I noticed photographs on his desk of a young man mugging for the camera. Pulling up his baggy, camouflaging shirt, the boy showed off his hard belly, dark blue bandana "flag" and two .32 caliber semi-automatic handguns holstered inside his pants. An ironic grin masked his child's face. Russell sighed, "Yeah, we just confiscated those yesterday," as he reentered his office, "That kid is the current bane of my existence. He's bright, attractive, a brilliant salesman, an ideal recruit. Yes, the blue bandana signifies his membership in the Crips." Continuing to look into the eyes of this 15-year old, I felt a chill, realizing he was one of the "lost" kids to whom Smith referred on awards night, a former regular participant at the Gate. It is arresting the connection—imagined, at least—it is possible to make with individuals, with a community, in just a few short days.

I bet you got a big yard—can I come home with you?

---Officer Russell, receiving question from a child at the Gate.

However educational, hearing the stories and looking at images of misguided boys and bathroom stall graffiti was only partial reason to go to police headquarters that day: full purpose was to request on-duty police officers' attendance for art sessions with youth at the Gate, two days a week, three hours, for three months. The officers would participate in the same exercises as the students, to include using sketchbooks and disposable cameras to document aspects of their lives and to participate in role-playing and performative exercises.

Smith did not flinch. "Whatever you need," then laid out his terms, "The kids just need someone to pay attention to them. All I ask is that you don't abandon them. Work out the scheduling with Commander Russell." Frequently, I return to and reflect upon that moment. Consider: Kinston, population 23,000, Lenoir county unemployment at 12.4% and its poverty rate at 25.7% among the highest in the state. Add to that high profile shootings spiking since 2006. Yes, I was a new person to pay attention to the kids. But I was also an artist asking a police chief to invest in art as a change agent, art as a venue to shakeup preexisting stereotypes and roles, to offer instead: the experiential specificity of one world with another. Los Angeles, no, Oakland, no, but I challenge departments of public safety in any other American city, large or small, facing such adversity, to take a chance supporting a similar request by an artist.

First day with the kids arrived, Thursday, October 29 at 4:00 pm. Now thinking "be careful what you ask for," I had emphasized to Sandy and to Wanda Jordan, the director of the Gate, that I needed backup; Lacking training in psychology, I could lose control of the situation and be out of my depth working with the kids. Expecting anywhere from six to eight participants, I was nervous, relieved, disappointed and given much to contemplate afterward when only one boy showed up.

In walked Tayler Morgan, 12 years old, a student at Rochelle Elementary School. Behind clear eyeglasses, his bright eyes held mine. Guileless, open, and intelligent, courteously he answered all questions and insightfully asked questions in return. He took notes, and dutifully completed every exercise. Just the two of us, we walked downtown together for eight blocks. I showed him the mural wall

we would work on in the old Auto Parts store, asked him what books he enjoyed reading and what activities he liked most. I learned he had a turtle, math comes easily to him but science is more interesting. He loves skating and Japanese animé comics, particularly Naruto Shippuden. Tayler was born near Philadelphia, lives with his mother and two younger cousins he calls brothers, Shyquann and Donterrio. Driving him home that day, I discovered he aspires to do medical research and find cures for the incurable. Arriving at his home, his mother Winnie met us at the car, her beautiful smiling face heavily scarred and pocked from lupus, an incurable autoimmune disease.

Here I was braced for interaction with a group of tough kids and instead had an inspiring afternoon in the company of a self-assured little boy, with little boy likes and dislikes and the growing perspective of a man within. Fortunate for me, my work began that day one-on-one with Tayler; through him I was forced to confront anxieties and preconceptions regarding my notion of what an at-risk youth is. I had been holding the idea of “at-risk” as other, different and apart. An at-risk youth is first and foremost a child, and regarding basic needs, like any other. Smith’s admonition was audible: Just pay attention.

Others who subsequently attended the sessions most every Thursday and Friday afternoon were Tavon Green, Alexis Monshay Sutton, Caleb Fisher, Jasmine Coleman and Officers Dennis Taylor and Kevin Jenkins. Everyone needed to maintain a high degree of flexibility with the process as other youth came and went—attendance varied due to sporadic interest in the work and to transportation challenges to and from the Gate. Ages of the youth participants ranged from 8-14, with the core stabilizing at 11-14. Each person received a sketchbook and a disposable camera to document autobiographical aspects of their life. Photographs of family members and pets predominated with writings about themselves and their beliefs in their sketchbooks. Four of us: Officers Taylor and Jenkins, Wanda Jordan and I repeatedly combed through their photographs and drawings looking for gang tags. If even one symbol or hand sign was made public in our final project, it would confer ownership of our work to that gang communicating through us. We might as well post an ad for the Bloods or Crips.

When you encounter a stranger, what do you want them to see or to think about you? This question and investigations of perception and projection jumpstarted our dialogue, fully mindful that where we began was not necessarily where we would end up. I looked for an identifiable theme, from what surfaced as

important to the participants. We started by eating cookies and playing quick warm-up games like Protean Catch suggested in Sheila Kerrigan's, The Performer's Guide to the Collaborative Process. As she explains:

Studies show that people who have been joking and laughing think more creatively than those who have not. One way to overcome the fear of starting is to play silly games to warm up...Playing builds rapport, explores possibilities, stimulates creativity, fosters safety, allows for risk-taking, encourages spontaneity, releases aggression and awakens us to the moment. Play nurtures an intimate and healthy relationship with failure.(6).

Others in the group besides Tayler are ardent readers of Naruto comics. They peruse copies in WalMart or check out the latest in the series from the Lenoir county library. Caleb Fisher, the keenest draftsman in the group, copies images of Naruto and creates his own comic book characters and story lines. Hoping to be famous one day, Caleb, age ten, is protective and wary about theft of his artistic property. We decided to create a collaborative comic strip with new characters and plot development. Never were the kids more animated, nor more revealing about themselves and their day to day interactions in school. Fluently, they poured out vivid character profiles. In our session on December 4, Alexis Sutton, age 14, crafted Laura, in 90 seconds: "Her mother is a second grade school teacher, she's geeky with microbraids. Her Dad's in jail for robbery, his second offense. Some of her clothes make her look old. He's on disability, got hurt on the job as a carpenter and got one of his hands chopped off. Her mom's boyfriend's name is Mario." Tayler, of his character Chris: "He's light-skinned, medium height, brown eyes. He's popular, cool, lean, no worries. He likes his clothes to match. Good football and basketball player and hates waking up in the mornings." Jasmine created Ashley: "She's feisty, willful, manipulative, good student and a loner. Always keeps her hair in updos or braids and when she has money she gets French manicures. In school, if anybody messes with her, she will defend herself." Tavon Green grew very animated describing his Sasuke: "An honor roll student, always sad in school, really energetic, has a skateboard and an undercover superhero family. He can fly and make his own force field to protect someone or somebody. He works at McDonald's 30 hours a week. His sister Jessica is popular, if anyone tries to mess with her, he protects her." Together, they wrote an opening scene:

Laura and Ashley come upon Chris in the hallway at Rochelle. He is a bit uncomfortable at the locker with Sasuke when they walk up, because his friends don't like Laura and Ashley, they are good students and not so cool. They inquire, why are you acting so funny? You are acting totally different. Just understand when you see us, don't act funny toward us. Don't mind those Haters. Don't become Hater #2.

The girls participating were more interested in the "slice of life" comic book genre and the boys, more in superhero plots, so we attempted to create a hybrid of the two. The students impressed upon me the power of the comic book medium and its global agility in crossing cultural and geographic lines. Take Naruto's influence on Tavon Green. Tavon is over six feet tall, 14 years old and in seventh grade. Living in a 750 square foot apartment with his mother, infant brother and three other siblings in (at present) Simon Bright public housing in Kinston NC, this American black adolescent, living below poverty line, cannot wait to open Japanese comic books at the back cover and excitedly leaf right to left through scene after scene. Reading Naruto, he travels not only outside of his reading orientation, project, town, culture and situation, but confronts limitless possibilities of time and space.

I'm all the creatures in the world and some that have never been seen before.

---Tavon Green, age 14

The officers and I were quiet as the students acted out their characters and drew pictures of them in their sketchbooks. We all wound up investigating ideas about what makes someone cool, a trait of great interest to the kids. Officer Jenkins, currently working in Kinston's Gang Unit, at 6'7" shared that he did not have to work at cool; being tall made him immediately cool in school. Officer Taylor, ten years a Kinston Firefighter and ten years a Kinston Police Detective inspired serious reflection from the students on the subject. As a boy, he watched people promote status quo as the path of cool; that same boy precocious enough to recognize that in some instances, even painful ones within his own family, there arose times when "somebody has to break that mold." Early on, he realized he needed to be that somebody.

The students decided unanimously: bravery is cool. The officers' presence and influence upon the youth, both in and out of uniform, was significant. Both men were forthcoming about their personal journeys, as

interesting to the kids as whether they had ever “tased” anyone. However, affirmation that the officers had tased on occasion evoked oohs in unison from the kids; tasing, evidently, the height of cool.

Do ya’ll really get together and eat doughnuts?

--Caleb Fisher, age 10, to Officer Kevin Jenkins

On November 11, two weeks into our sessions with youth and officers at the Gate, Kahlid Byrd, age 14, died due to a gunshot wound inflicted one to three inches from his head. Also in Kinston during March 2009, Marvin Earl Shackelford, age 15, Donnie Lavar Smith, age 21 were shot in the head. Byrd’s death is being reviewed as accidental or as suicide. Published in the *Kinston Free Press* on November 13, 2009, Byrd’s aunt vociferously denies the suicide claim, “Kahlid would never have committed suicide,” Sharhonda Tull said. “When he turned 15, he planned on getting a job so he could have some money in his pocket and have some nice clothes; he was looking forward to making money without having to sell drugs like many do around here.” Tull said Byrd had two friends die in apparent suicides, but that he wasn’t thinking of killing himself. [She continued] “...Kahlid was not obsessed with suicide; he kept two (funeral programs) of friends that had committed suicide because he attended the funerals,” Tull said. “I’m not sure if they committed suicide, but that’s how it was reported.” (Dawson and Hanks).

The game of Russian roulette is one form of gang initiation, along with being blessed-, sexed-, jumped-, beaten-, jacked-, lined-, circled-, courted- deeded- or punched-in. (Carlie). Breaking and spreading news of gang related deaths or activity begets more of it; gang news is a notch in gang’s belt. With the viral vigor of gang life dependent upon gossip and media, it makes it difficult to openly address the problems of gang affiliation. Only by overhearing a passing remark made by Chief Smith did I understand Byrd likely died by losing at Russian roulette. To my knowledge, regarding Byrd’s death, there has been neither follow up news nor release of any investigation or autopsy reports.

The students, officers and I met at our regular time on November 19, and additional students happened to participate that day. One 14-year old I will call Abel, the son of a pastor, was suspected by concerned staff and attending officers at the Gate, of being courted for gang membership. His parents denied their son was vulnerable to gang coercion. It was curious Abel showed up this particular day and that our

unplanned group conversation focused on news of Byrd's death. All week, school counselors had been encouraging students to share their reactions to the horrifying news as did the Gate on their Open Gate Friday, 7:00 to 10:00 pm. In our small group session, several of the kids began to talk freely, including Abel who shared his difficulty understanding the tragic report, "My friend called and told me. At first I thought he was joking, then I checked MySpace and knew." Rhetorically, his last question hung in the air unanswered, "What do you do when you wake up one morning and he's gone?"

We face the same tests that you do.

---Officer Kevin Jenkins, November 19, 2009

With the passage of more than a week's time and our gathering being a small group of adults and students, open dialogue grew in an intimate, safe and trusting venue. Everyone rose to the occasion. Officers Taylor and Jenkins did not miss an opportunity to add comments and ask frank questions of the students. Riveting, it was one of our best sessions. The youth acknowledged it was a bit easier to talk in a small group about the tragedy that befell Byrd that day.

I'm trying to get you to where you'll be OK.

---Sergeant Dennis Taylor, November 19, 2009

Mo, The Pallbearer: An Anti-Gang Book, written by Ralph Burgess, features Mo Baker a student who, while appreciating the "cool points" he receives from association with gang members, rethinks it after serving as pallbearer at the funerals of four friends. From Newark, New Jersey, Burgess was invited to speak at a public event at the Gate on March 12 and the Gate purchased 125 copies for youth to read prior to his appearance. The book is thin, pocket-sized and written in large-print dialogue. In it, Mo confronts the posture of cool, "I remember he [Lukemon] used to hide the fact that he made honor roll in middle school. He was afraid of losing cool points with his clique, as dumb as that sounds,"(17) and acknowledges the absurdity of revenge, "Y'all are killing each other over minor beefs and turf, property that y'all don't even own. Y'all not even taxpayers, man!"(26,27). As public speaker and author of the Cool Calvin anti-gang children's book series, Burgess lays bare how gang life is a dead end dressed up in glamour:

It's just that some people wake up and smell the coffee while others keep following the leader all the way to jail or to the morgue. Then there are others with one foot in the game and one foot out. They're the ones who just want to be perceived as cool without actually doing the thuggish chores...It's another one of us killing one of us."(33, 21).

Hearing Burgess' words and hearing the kids ask one day if they can meet an incarcerated "real" gang member, I considered how place shapes and informs the present, recalling the gang glamour inscribed at the site of the Gate.

On June 23, 2006, Kinston's streets were paved with golden opportunism, illuminating the truism that the greater the visibility of an event, the more susceptible it is to being hijacked. Intended as intimidation, a 4:00 am gun-brandishing visit to a liquor house at 410 Orion Street turned into a shootout with two people killed, five wounded and a firestorm of tension rolling across town. Dante Suggs was shot and Roxie Brown, hearing gunfire from a nearby house, ran over to help. She grabbed Suggs and attempted to pull him out of the house to safety. Gunfire resumed. Roxie was shot and killed.

LaGeana Roxianne Brown, age 25, was well-liked, had a reputation for helping people and frequently assisted as unofficial manager at Mr. Bingo, located at McLewean and Gordon Sts. That day, Roxie was martyred as a fallen member of the Bloods. In public, her body was laid out in red, her casket was surrounded by sprays of red flowers and as Commander Russell recalled, "There was an awful lot of red worn that day." Ironically, Dante Suggs, the young man she was trying to rescue, was laid out in Crips' blue and the letter C was visible in memorial flowers. An incident not wholly gang-related, became such a hotbed of potential gang warfare across Kinston, that both funeral processions were police escorted right out of town. Mr. Bingo closed the day she died and coverage in the *Kinston Free Press* documented her parents' desire for the establishment of a community center in her name. Despite consistent denial that their daughter was involved in gangs, her parents supported her fifteen minutes of fame and gang glory.

She's still missed just like she was.

---Lee Koonce, Jr., father of Roxie Brown,
Kinston Free Press, June 24, 2007

Ten months later, Mr. Bingo was purchased, gutted and construction began on the Gate community development center for gang awareness and training. The narrative of the place and its history is not something that the students, officers and I could retell or interpret in the screenprinted narrative of our work; to acknowledge Roxie would be to paint our project in her same shade of funereal blue. Yet, I feel the construction of the Gate at that site by the Kinston community reinscribes the gunfire of the shootout through the sound of Kinston's percussive, productive hammers.

Narrative follows much more than a linear path. Our stories overlay in a palimpsest and as artist Sherri Levine claims, culture itself is a palimpsest. (Bourriaud, 82). Taken back to that first meeting with Chief Smith, I remember the inspiration he gains from the work of the LA Homeboys, the largest gang intervention prevention program in the country. Its members have travelled a few times to impoverished Prichard, Alabama, to help Prichard youth gain a sense of belonging and direction in ways other than gang affiliation. The most dangerous place in south Alabama, youth living in the Third Ward there call it Death Valley. In the *Los Angeles Times* video by Katy Newton, the founder of Homeboys Industries, Father Greg Boyle, sums it up, "It's all about kinship, it's all about connection, about linking ourselves to one another and staying committed to the truth that we belong to each other, and then you discover that that's really powerful in the world—that no bullet can pierce it."

Situating the Gate at McLewean and Gordon Streets, young people from Simon Bright public housing get there by walking or by bike. With its perimeter zoned residential for this low income housing, the sprawling commercially zoned area shuts down at night. Four blocks from the heart of downtown, the Gate is adjacent to the health department where, by day, one sees mostly older residents and mothers with small children queue for flu shots. In the same vicinity, legal and illegal public images and text catch the eye. A parking lot abuts well rendered murals of black and white Kinston businessmen and a physician; Richard Greene of Greene's barber shop, James Herman Canady who was instrumental in establishing First National Bank and a physician, one whose illegible name has faded from decades of rain and wear. Two blocks up, another mural of Lenoir County's colonial, agricultural and confederate history is at East North

and Queen. The Confederate States ironclad replica, the CSS Neuse II, was spray painted with profanities repeatedly and removed repeatedly while Hispanic gang graffiti tagged area industrial sites. When street curfew became law in 2006, Kinston also started a vigilant graffiti clean-up program, bringing tags to a minimum.

Underground comics, stencils, wheat paste and graffiti comprise street art and are the mediums of social and political activism. Stencils and spray paint are associated so strongly with crime that spray cans are locked behind screens at Wal Marts in California. The same way ammunition is purchased in New Jersey, so spray paint purchase requires store employee assistance there. It is as easy to make respective assumptions about “certain” artistic mediums as it is to make about “certain” people. My objective extended to shake up preconceptions about both.

Stencilled and screenprinted tee shirts have never been more popular among youth, particularly with the instigation of uniforms in public schools. The inscription of images and text worn across chests and backs brand group allegiance as well as individuality and independence. The importance of particular clothing as a prerequisite for “kewl” continued to surface during sessions with the Gate youth and officers. As the group built inventory of images through photographs, drawings and writings, the idea to represent our material by stencilling or screenprinting appeared the clearest way to streamline and seize our means of production. For four reasons, the immediacy of screenprinting seemed most appropriate for the re-presentation of our project: it clearly translates the actual mark-making used as source material, offers the potential for making multiples in a series, is a transferable, low cost entrepreneurial skill, and, used positively, (or negatively) can be a powerful medium of the street. Our theme which presented itself during several sessions became: What is cool? What makes someone cool? The students agreed on “ten commandments” of cool: reliable, caring, stylish, smart, fun, brave, up-to-date, wise, pleasant/nice and versatile.

Caring is the coolest of all.

---Sergeant Dennis Taylor, December 11, 2009

We looked at screenprinted portrait images by Andy Warhol and Shepard Fairey (the kids were familiar with his iconic screenprinted portrait of Obama); street art of Rigo, Susan Kelk Cervantes, Juana Alicia and SWOON; deciphered overlayment of text and images, discussed linear narrative versus cyclical, imagined culture as a palimpsest, watched film clips of Warhol painting freehand on the paper support (such as Marilyn's lips) before screening stencils (the black ink photo image of Marilyn) over the painted images. Using screenprint inks, we painted and squeegeed color, painted simple images and text, and used oil pastel as a resist to create a ground for our screenprints. Participants learned about rainbow rolls or split fountains and simple monoprinting techniques. To broaden what I could bring to students, I studied street art web forums and visited graffiti chat rooms like stencilrevolution.com to learn everything from unclogging spray paint nozzles to enlarging and creating simple stencils from photographs. As with many interactions with artists, I found the international street art community extremely generous sharing shoptalk tips picked up through trial and error.

Gate director Wanda Jordan joined us for many sessions and when we painted, came up with a technique eagerly we all had to try. Strong and very energetic, Wanda quickly painted simple images and words on her paper, then completely hid them beneath a fat body of screenprint ink. Squeegeeing back through the top layer (to an "uncool" outburst of "COOL!" from young onlookers), she uncovered the pentimento buried beneath. Still retaining its contour, color saturation and integrity, the screenprinting ink stains the paper upon application, so no smearing took place when first she buried, then exhumed the image.

With a background in Ministerial Ethics and a degree in sociology from East Carolina University, Wanda Jordan has been executive director at the Gate since 2008. This non-profit organization is faith-based, and Wanda tows a strict Christian line with the 70 plus youth who are now regular participants. Everyone knew better than to ask for access to MySpace and if, for example, Alexis hummed a song by Beyoncé while monoprinting, Wanda quickly chimed in, "If it ain't about Jesus, you don't need to be singing it!" Nonetheless, her tough love approach for the most part commands respect from youth. Her ability to maintain order while still facilitating activities is inspiring to see in action. Wanda's nourishment of every aspect of their well-being is as solid as the fortress of stacked snack packs lining the walls of her office.

Through her vigor, integrity and love, she brought as much to our sessions as the officers. Also, the dynamic of both male and female representation among adults as well as youth added a critical dimension to our work.

Limited by several logistical factors at the Gate, I returned to the East Carolina University screenprinting studio, and burned and screenprinted images from the participants' photographs and sketchbooks onto their paintings, creating unique or one-of-a-kind prints. I scanned their writings and drawings, wanting to preserve their handwriting and mark-making as identifiers to spark recognition from the students regarding their own work. An example of text translated for screening:

I am good, nice, determined to get my work done and use my time wisely is how Alexis describes me. I think of myself as strong, brave and confident. Brave is cool and awesome is cool. How can I describe myself? I act very different at times. I'm quick tempered too. That's me. I'm Tavon Green, 14 years old and the ultimate chess champion player.

On February 4, we opened an exhibition of 30 screenprints, 30" x 22", in the CCA Hampton Gallery. Throughout our project and integral to future successful growth of it, CCA has acted as a true collaborator and supporter in time, moral support, liaison communication, and money. CCA organized, advertised and hosted an impressive reception for our exhibition, "Kewl and The Gate". The prints were offered for sale at fifty dollars each, the proceeds were evenly divided between CCA and the Gate. Thirteen prints sold that night, with several donated back as gifts to the Gate. The youth were publicly recognized and honored that evening while middle and high school students from the only jazz mentoring program in North Carolina, TAPS, located at CCA, played big band selections. John Brown, the prestigious director of Duke University's jazz program sat in on a few numbers.

It was of great significance that the Gate and its participants have a presence downtown, outside the confines of its peripheral downtown location. Over the course of the evening, approximately 150 people attended including parents and guardians of the youth, Wanda Jordan, Greg and Margaret Smith, Officers Taylor and Jenkins as well as several board members of the Gate.

It's about...that spark, creating through the most economical means, to just get a little bit ahead of life itself.

---Jeff Koons, on the subject of Andy Warhol's work (PBS: Andy Warhol)

Considering the objectives of the project, it was a start. The key components and dynamics with which we began-- time spent with youth and police officers, narrative and place-making determined by the participants-- created a momentum which needs to continue for any measure of success. With desire to continue on the part of all flourishing but resources diminishing, CCA and I submitted a grant on March 1 to the North Carolina Arts Council for an at-risk youth arts education initiative. The proposal picks up with the students' comic book narrative translated to large scale screenprinted images for our second site, the 48 foot public art mural space on Blount Street in downtown Kinston. We included two more teaching artists besides myself, September Krueger and Tunde Afoloyan to work with the Gate youth. The materials include rudimental thermal screenprinting supplies for a modest studio setup at the Gate. Sales of prints at the exhibition opening was an important part of the project for the students to witness; the entrepreneurial aspect of screenprinting a critical "selling" point of this educational process for our entire group of participants and supporters.

Rudolf Frieling's essay, "Toward Participation in Art," investigates open systems in art. He speaks about a type of interactivity that excites great possibility:

What interests me...is...an opening up to conditions, locations, and participants who contribute actively to the realization of a participatory work. The sculptor Richard Serra once defined artistic activity by listing a series of physical actions: to roll, to crease, to fold, to store, etc. The art historian Miwon Kwon later translated Serra's concept to site-specificity: to negotiate, to coordinate, to compromise, to research, to organize, to interview...Today we might augment these lists with other activities that specifically highlight the participatory act: to generate, to change, to contribute, to enact, to dialogue, to translate, to appropriate, to tag, etc. (35)

The significance of our work resides in its effectiveness to encourage and promote dialogue between the officers, youth, Gate staff, parents, guardians, viewers, Kinston community and me. The dialogue of our imagery set up another dynamic. Despite my rigid adherence to use photographic images lensed through

the participants' eyes (or eyes of their friends and family) and reproduction of marks made by their hands, my assumptions, commitments and aesthetic decisions informed every step of the process. Therefore, my role as an artist turned to maker other than sriptor or technician; a discovery I find not only acceptable, but have learned is necessary. Frieling reflects, "Despite the demise proclaimed by Roland Barthes, we cannot seem to get rid of the author; the harder we try, the stronger the myth returns. Ultimately, if artists wish to operate within the art world, they will inevitably be perceived as the ones responsible for the work, even if they involve collaborators..."(35). Mark Hutchinson, in his essay "Four Stages of Public Art" involves the artist in the shift from a monological to a dialogical stance to begin reconciling the sum of our parts:

Non-unity is the first step for any process of transformation...Totality is a term of self-consciousness, of self-reflexive awareness; it is also a term of interaction: the unity of theory and practice. Totality is dialogical and reciprocal...the idea of dialogue, however implies the acceptance of a structured and differentiated reality, where one level of reality or explanation does not necessarily exclude another. (Doherty; 102,103).

A level of reality as palpable for me as the anxious afternoon we all discussed Kahlid Byrd's death resided in the hours spent screenprinting images of the participants. Studying the quality of lines where Tavon's chin rests in his fingertips; printing multiples of Tayler's 'turtle with waterbowl' drawing; mixing the lime green of Alexis's heart-shaped earring; spray painting Tavon's hair silver; registering the alignment of Jasmine's teeth; watching Wanda's cross painting in red on red emerge and recede like Ad Reinhardt's 1960s paintings of "crosses" black on black; choosing type face for Caleb's doughnut quote; trying to get Officer Taylor's moustache right, or pulling a split fountain through Tayler's mandate, "Believe in yourself": working with the images was how I transferred and inscribed my love for these individuals I had the good fortune to get to know. The Gate's logo features a puzzle with some missing and some interlocking puzzle pieces. I knew I was one of the missing puzzle pieces the night I heard Chief Smith relate the past, present and future needs of the Gate community, realizing the exchange, the dialogue we have to offer each other, matters.

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