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The Art of Migrant Lives. Bicultural Identity and the Arts: The African Cultural Memory Youth Arts Festival (ACMYAF) in Western Australia

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Introduction

This chapter describes a research project conducted amongst Black youth of African migrant descent in Western Australia. The project had various components with one being a festival where African Australian young people used the arts to both inquire into their own lives, and share them with others. The festival included a range of arts-based inquiries that culminated into a series of performative events, the first being *Australian Oz Idol* that playfully drew on the popular Australian and American Idol formats. The second to be described here was a group-devised performance called *The Real Deal*.

In this chapter the processes used to develop the festival are described, and attention is given to some theoretical tools that help reveal the benefits to young people and the broader community alike. These tools include notions of a 'theatrical event' (Sauter, 2000), the role of performance in education (Garoian, 1999), and the power of the arts both as forms of inquiry and expression (Barone, 2000; Leavy, 2009). First, attention is given to the festival as a theatrical event. This conceptualisation enables us to think of it as a *third space* (Bhabha, 1994) both conceptually and physically where participants explored issues
relating to their cultural identity and enacted them. These enactments, developed from the young people themselves, became a series of public performances where African Australian identity is performed for both participants and audience alike.

Next, we describe the way that the project was an Arts based enquiry. This choice was appropriate in the way that the arts provided an ideal medium for exploring aspects of African culture and memory. For example, the processes embodied in this approach revealed specifically how ‘bicultural competence’ (Gordon, 2007), a concept that implies possession of those qualities that enable an individual to function effectively between and within the dominant and subordinate culture, is developed. Embodiment of such qualities is crucial for African migrant youth in Australia to function with agency (Gordon, 2007; Wakholi, 2007). Third, we describe how performative means enables participants to reclaim or recreate identities of their own choice in this liminal third space, thereby negotiating ‘who’ they might be.

Fourth, we describe how elements of The African Cultural Memory Youth Arts Festival (ACMYAF) function as forms of Arts Based Educational Research (ABER). In this approach, specific issues relating to the way that ABER provide a useful form of inquiry into the challenges relating to bicultural identity of the African Migrant descendant youth are described. For example, using participants' evidence from Reflective Visual Journals (RVJ), Song as an art form through which to explore cultural memory and bicultural socialisation (de-Anda,
1984) and the play, *The Real Deal*, the discussion will suggest that for minority groups, the arts provide innovative ways to develop empowering approaches to bicultural existence. Finally, the festival as a cultural event became both a means of renewing cultural memory and empowering participants through what was, what is, and what could be.

Rationale and Context

The African Cultural Memory Youth Arts Festival (ACMYAF) was located in a marginal group of migrants—a group of young people of African descent now living in Australia. As a research project, the festival assumed the existence of a dialectical power relation between the subordinate African, and dominant, Eurocentric Australian culture that influenced the performative nature of the participants' cultural identities (Akinyela, 1996; Darder, 1991). Hence, it was the researchers’ intention to create a festival that would be both a research and aesthetic space through which the participants would explore issues relating to their cultural identity and cultural memory, performatively. Conscious reconstruction of participant’s African cultural memory was assumed to be an important signifier of their African Australian identity and therefore an essential component to their bicultural identity competence (Gordon, 2007; Ferdman & Horenczyk, 2000; de Anda, 1984). Consequently, the research design, and hence the arts as forms of inquiry and expression, was contextualised in feminist and ethnic methodologies (Lincoln & Guba, 2003; Dei, Hall, & Rosenberg, 2000; Smith, 1999; Dove, 1998) which offered an appropriate context for exploration
of oppressive power relations that inhibit the mobilisation of cultural memory, its embedded symbolic signifiers and values. In addition, these methodologies also offer a ‘location’ for constructing counter knowledge to truths emanating from dominant cultures (Ladson-Billings, 2000; Smith, 1999). What this means is that these ethnic paradigms offer emancipatory possibilities that empower subordinate and marginal groups such as that of the African migrant descendant youth (AMDY) in Australia.

ACMYAF as Educatve and Aesthetic 'theatrical event'

The African Cultural Memory Youth Arts Festival (ACMYAF) was a theatrical event (Sauter, 2004), and as a theatrical event it included the concept of theatre as part of a 'Playing Culture'. The term 'theatrical event' extends playing phenomena beyond the margins of theatre as it is traditionally conceived. For example, this conceptualisation includes events outside the theatre itself, giving different emphasis to the events by defining them through their position in theatrical, cultural and social world at large (Cremona, 2004). In the context of this project, issues of intergenerational communication, biculturalism, African cultural memory, racism and the dominant Eurocentric culture were psychosocial aspects through which ACMYAF contextualised its theatrical events. Moreover, it was the researchers’ intention, through the project, to provide a space for playful dialogue and yet be serious in intent with informative research outcomes developed in authentic ways.
ACMYAF as an Arts based inquiry

Performance based methods can bring research findings to life, adding dimensionality, and exposing that which is otherwise impossible to authentically re/present (Leavy, 2009). For example, embodied knowledge, so often dismissed within Western culture, can be brought to life performatively. Performance as Arts based research inquiry can provide a balance between rigour and creativity, imagery and accuracy, the individual and the collective. Consequently, ACMYAF involved participants in diverse performative activities including: play, singing, dancing, drumming, story telling, reflective journal writing, script writing, painting, cooking, role playing and acting; public speaking and memory exercises. Therefore performance, as a research method had the benefit of both aesthetic and educative outcomes drawing on and linking experiences through somatic, kinaesthetic, affective and cognitive means.

The festival as a theatrical event became a public pedagogy in the way it used the aesthetic, and the performative to foreground the intersection of identity politics, institutional sites, and embodied experience (Denzin, 2003). Therefore, the festival was a form of agency, a way of bringing culture and the person into play, hence becoming a tool for cultural identity negotiation and reconstruction in methodological terms. Performative approaches, in this context, offered the African migrant descendant youth (AMDY) the opportunity to share their creativity and artistic talents in a reflective way thus enabling them to avail embodied resources for intentional identity reconstruction. For this group of
young people, caught between two worlds, the Festival offered possibilities for both performing embodied knowledge and critical reflection on the performance experience (Leavy, 2009) in a third space.

ACMYAF as a third space phenomena

The notion of a third space is a powerful tool for better understanding of ACMYAF. Bhabha (1994) used the term third space in his critique of modern notions of culture, and his argument is that third space is produced in and through language as people come together and particularly as people resist cultural authority, bringing different experiences to bear on the same linguistic signs or cultural symbols. The components of the festival itself extended language to encompass various modalities and foregrounded the body as a site for knowing and resistance. In the third space self-affirming knowledge is articulated in order to counter exclusive cultural narratives emanating from the dominant culture. In the context of the African Australian youth involved in the festival, third space merges the first space—the African Australian’s home, community, and peer networks with the second space of the discourses they encounter in more formalised institutions such as work, school, church, and media (Moje, McIntosh Ciechanowski, Kramer, Ellis, Carrillo and Collazo, 2004). African Australian youth display a compelling mix of optimism, pessimism, anxiety and fear, which reveals a duality in the formation and actualisation of their agency (Matekere, 2009). For example, through their ambivalent duality these African Australian youth are searching for and defining
an African Australian ‘essence’—elusive as that may be—and for most of them this occurs in a liminal, or third space. Bonding, or relationship building and knowing oneself through these relationships is key to this process.

Bonding as a processual approach to the ‘Theatrical Events’

Bonding in the context of this project was developed through performative processes in a liminal space, where participants were involved in artistic activities as a means of exploring cultural memory and lived experiences to achieve bicultural competence. For example, during the Bonding sessions the Ujamaa Circle, based on Critical African Centred Theory (CACT) became the method used to facilitate dialogue among the participants. In this technique the focus is on teaching participants, through dialogue, to think critically about their daily lives, relationships and behaviour and how they fit into the social, cultural and political environment of Australian life (Akinyela, 1996). It was a complimentary technique to arts based inquiry techniques applied during the research process. CACT is aimed at creating effective strategies of liberation from everyday domination experienced by black people (Akinyela, 1996). Bonding is therefore a signifying process through which Otherness is enunciated performatively in a third space. Bhabha (1994) proposes that as cultural meaning is produced through translation (both as representation and as reproduction), there is always a new cultural meaning that emerges. Therefore, all cultures are signifying systems that produce meanings and subjectivities. Consequently through the Bonding processes, youth participants appropriated diverse cultural symbols
including those from the African cultural memory to create new meanings. Accordingly Bonding was a third space through which the histories that constituted its participants were revaluated and given new meanings and relevancy performatively. What this meant for the participants was that Bonding was a translative process through which they created and experienced new epistemologies relating to their Otherness. Some of these elements that constituted the Bonding process and hence the ACMYAF festival will now be elaborated.

Elements of ACMYAF as forms of ABER

Visual Reflective Journal

Bonding through Reflective Visual Journals (RVJ) assumed an autobiographical and ethnographical approach which enabled the participants to reflect on personal experiences through writing and graphical illustrations. Caruso (2005) suggests that the intent of a biographical project is to problematise the social, economic, cultural, structural and historical forces that shape, distort, and otherwise alter lived experiences. Therefore, engaging in Reflective Visual Journal (RVJ) writing was a biographical transcendent context allowing participants to see and understand positions of inclusion and exclusion—margins and dominant culture (Ladson-Billings, 2003). Accordingly, journal writing was a valuable component of the Bonding process in the way it provided participants, both an individual and collective space to reflect on diverse themes
relating to their lived social reality. The following journal entry by one African Australian youth confirms this point.

I recall one time I was at a friend's church with my sister and they asked us where we were from. I think one of us maybe it was me replied with something like 'We're from Belmont' (a suburb of Perth, Western Australia). And my friends who'd brought us to the church laughed at my innocent response. At the time I may not have realised they were looking at my dark skin and frizzy hair (I used to get called Afro). I know I get curious about things but I always find it interesting….if I was a European would they have bothered asking where I was from?

This process of self-reflection also went deeper.

I don’t know…Growing up I was really shy and timid, and lacked self esteem. I reckon part of this came from earlier years of being teased. I think though I took it more seriously back then, I used to carry negative experiences and take them on board and get anxious and self-conscious as a result. As I get older though and through learning and my studies I have become better at separating people's ideas with the truth of who I know myself to be, God's unique creation, like we all are (EM/F/26/26)1.

EM’s entry provides a reflective profile about identity construction. It includes alienation and loss of self confidence during her childhood due to negative experiences but regaining confidence as she got older. Self-reflective witnessing of ourselves through writing helps us not to engage in accusation or self-blame,
but rather invites us to focus upon defining ourselves as active and engaged, not as passive, helpless and hopeless (De Salvo, 1999). Through a reflective journal entry EM appreciated herself as someone who had learnt to separate people's ideas and the truth of what she knew herself to be. For a marginal youth this is an important step towards the development of empowering self knowledge.

Appiah (1994) suggests that we need to tell our stories because personal dimension of identity work is important. "In telling that story, how I fit into the wider story of various collectives is for most of us important” (p. 160).

Participants reflected on their experiences and identity through the RJV and their reflections suggest that the RJV was a useful tool for exploring cultural identity construction and reconstruction.

Song

Song in traditional African cultures is synonymous with everyday social and cultural expression. There are songs associated with rites of passage: birth, initiation and puberty, betrothal or marriage, acquiring a new title or status, funeral and memorial celebrations (Bebey, 1975). Song in African culture plays an important role in expression of social reality and cultural history.

Consequently, song was used as a cultural tool in the ACMYAF and worked in two ways, first to facilitate an experience of African musical culture, and second in mobilising participants’ music ideas and interests in the context of bicultural socialisation. In particular song material drawing from the Zulu (South African), Swahili (East Africa) and Krio (West African) languages was explored with a
focus on three African indigenous songs, namely: Baraka za Mungu (the blessing of God) a Swahili spiritual song from East Africa; Nkosi Sikelel Africa (God bless Africa) a South African spiritual song; and a Sierra Leonean Krio ritual song from West Africa entitled Dumidu. A dialogue about these songs enabled the participants to appreciate their significance in African cultural and political contexts. Nkosi Sikelel, for instance, since its composition by Enoch Sontonga, a teacher at a Methodist mission school in Johannesburg (1897) has been sung both as a spiritual and political song. As a spiritual, it's a prayer for peace and harmony in Africa, as a political song it was sung as a resistance towards apartheid in South Africa. Therefore the song was explored in its aesthetic, political and spiritual context. Baraka za Mungu Ni za Ajabu (The blessings of God are amazing) is a Swahili spiritual song. Swahili is an African cosmopolitan language which originated from the contact between Arabs and Bantu people on the Eastern coast of East Africa. It is widely spoken in different parts of the continent and taught, formally, in many institutions of higher learning around the world. Therefore the researchers believed that the singing in Swahili would provide appropriate authentic aesthetic experience for participants engendering bicultural competence. Performance of the song was accompanied by a discussion of the lyrics and the history of the Swahili language. In a Ujamaa circle, the participants were involved in word pronunciation, voice, harmony and body movements that articulated the essence of the song.
'Dumidu' was a Krio song introduced and taught to the participants by one of the recently arrived refugee migrant participant (JIK). Prior to teaching the song JIK talked about the song and explained its meaning. He told participants that Dumidu was a welcome song to cultural events in his homeland, Sierra Leone. The song is an invitation to spectators of a performance. Teaching of the song was complimented by drumming, and as part of the cultural experience drumming patterns were taught to one participant who had spent most of her life in Australia. Therefore, through song and the entire Bonding process dialogue about culture was possible. As one participant observed: Bonding was really fantastic; it was well dealt with—people exploring their talent which is really amazing. I learnt so much from people and also they made me feel safe and I feel that I have met the right people or involved myself in the right community. Involving in the project improved me both mentally, physically and emotionally JIK/M/16/01. For a newly arrived migrant refugee this was an important outcome for as Korieh (2006) notes, individuals and groups have a social psychological ‘need to belong’ and express this need through their social identities such as ethnic groups, nationality, or political identification (p.94). These songs were subsequently performed during two public events, AfricanOz idol and the Real Deal; two public performances described shortly. Song is also located in contemporary popular cultural experience of the young participants. For example, most African Australian youth identify with African American popular culture and consequently they listen to a lot of African American black music.
A number of songs were performed, as part of the AfricanOz Idol, before a panel of three judges who provided critical feedback on the singing and questioned the relation between the performed piece and the performer. One of the participants, JW, who performed a Rhythm and Blues song by Joe Thomas entitled 'No one else comes close' when asked, by one of the 'judges', how the music by an African American artist influenced him, as an African Australian? He responded:

Joe is an R & B singer and comes from a Christian family and he is my favourite. Each time I try to do something I honour him first; and I was raised in a Christian family. People think that when you do music it is all about swearing but I want to show people, that music is not just about swearing and like Joe I try to do good music (JW/M/21/03).

From the foregoing, JW notes that Joe Thomas is a positive role model. Christian values and singing are an important connection point for JW and Joe Thomas. In other words religious values, Christianity in particular, influences his cultural identity and values. Similarly MNW, another participant, after performing Tony Braxton's 'Unbreak my heart' was asked by another 'judge' how Tony Braxton’s music influenced her identity. Her response was that "I grew up pretty much listening to R & B and I admire Tony Braxton because of her low vocal range and yet pretty much manages to still sound feminine (MNW/F/16/16)." MNW’s remarks imply that R & B has been a significant element of her cultural experience. Moreover, like JW, the character of an artist is an important factor in her music preferences of R & B. This is particularly important for African migrant youth to have artists on whom they model.
themselves, performatively. Moreover through music, cultural identity is constructed and performed. And as Ramsey (2003) observes:

African Americans have continually (re)articulated, questioned, abandoned, played with, and reinforced their ethnic identities through vernacular musical practices and many other activities….Black vernacular musical styles and the various cultural practices surrounding them have existed as historically important modalities through which African Americans have expressed various conceptions of Ethnicity (p.36).

Therefore, for these African Australian youth, music was an important medium for enunciation and performance of cultural identity.

The Real Deal

The Real Deal was a performance about the experiences of young people of African migrant descent. The process of developing The Real Deal culminated in a theatrical event where young participants explored and performed issues relating to their bicultural socialisation and identities.

As a third space theatrical event the play drew on both the African cultural memory and young people’s dominant culture. Through this performative process participants recalled their African cultural memories and interweaved them with their lived Australian cultural experiences to produce an educative play.

The process of translating and combining elements and symbols in a third space has been called articulation (Bhabha, 1990). Articulation is the starting point of critical elaboration: It is the consciousness of what one really is and a means to
knowing thyself as a product of the historical process (Rutherford, 1990). Therefore, the recall of the African cultural memory along with the Australian cultural experience was an act of articulation.

Bicultural socialisation and identity construction of the participants occurs in the intersection of their everyday lives with the economic, political and social relations of subordination and domination (Rutherford, 1990). Therefore, the metaphoric location of the play in a third space was important because the participants needed a secure space, a 'breather', through which to explore issues relating to their bicultural socialisation in a predominantly Eurocentric Australian culture.

In order to create characters similar to themselves the participants split into two groups: those who had lived in Australia for most of their lives in one group, and recent migrants from Africa in the second. Using a structured questionnaire each group was encouraged to develop a psycho-social and cultural context for their character(s) considering for example, What is the name of the character? How old is s/he? Where was s/he born? What is his or her cultural identity perception: African, Australian, African Australian…?

One character, Sara, who had lived in Australia for most of her life but with an African familial background, was developed by the participants who had lived in Australia for most of their lives. Other characters, Richardson and Kadijah, recent arrivals from Africa were developed by the participants recently arrived from Africa. This approach offered participants the opportunity to enhance the
realism of the characters and the play as a whole. An outcome of this exercise was that the nature of the characters in the play resembled that of the participants’ own cultural experiences and background. As one observed at the end of the play:

All the adults in the play were based on characters that all of us have come across be it in our travels back to particular regions in Africa or even from grown ups here in Perth. Often, one might have forgotten about a particular habit or nuance but then once we all started talking and workshopping scenes, certain traits would keep coming up and we'd have an 'a-ha' moment and say 'Yes! That is exactly what this person does', and often we would find that this was the case across the board (LM/F/26/26).

The methodological approach for developing the Real Deal was participatory, and involved: twelve young people, two parents, a theatre facilitator, and the researcher conjointly developing the storyline; characterisation; improvisation of scenes; recording and transcribing; scriptwriting; rehearsals; preparation of props and final performance. The participatory nature and critical African centred approach (Akinyela, 1996) employed during this process enabled participants to reclaim their African cultural memory and use it to explore issues relating to bicultural socialisation and competence (Gordon, 2007; de-Anda, 1984) in Australia. This is illustrated by a comment from one participant:

Through playing the character of Kadijah I was able to transform into a girl who had recently migrated here from Africa. I feel that it was a challenge in a way as I had to behave in a certain way that showed a negative attitude towards a fellow African. It was also easy as I have
experienced these mannerisms a lot with people that I have met, so I was able to imitate and use this to create Kadijah (RNW/F/20/17).

Psychological transformation to become the character demanded a cognitive and emotional connection with the character, and as one of the participants revealed, it involved ongoing practice:

…the fact that I am a young woman and the character I played was a middle aged man. I had to not only learn to move and talk like a man, but I had to maintain a fake accent too. But after weeks of practice it became almost natural, though I would constantly have to ensure that I would pretend to be the character a few minutes before actually going on stage and delivering my lines to help me recall who I was playing (EM/F/26/26).

Entering the world of an African male character implied getting to know the character’s psycho-social world. For this young female African Australian this meant entering the world of an African man, and gaining some knowledge about the patriarchal nature of his identity. Accordingly, this was a beneficial experience for participants because it facilitated access to the African cultural world and consciousness. As Gordon (2007) has observed through her own experience, gaining competence in her culture of origin was a significant challenge because it meant connecting with people she knew so little about, people in the African diaspora.

ABER as empowering approaches to bicultural competence

The final performance of The Real Deal took place at a University theatre before an audience of two hundred. For these young people performing before such a big audience was empowering. It represented the culmination of a year’s
work by participants, artistic facilitators, patrons and the researchers/facilitators. It was a moment to celebrate and to see fully developed characters, and participants at their best in these roles. Furthermore, it was also a moment to celebrate a theatrical production emerging from a third space. The young people, through humour, song, dance, colourful costumes and dialogue, engaged the audience, drawing their attention to issues that influenced their psycho-social worlds. In this way this liminal space became an educative space. The theatrical process was empowering because it enabled the participants to share their story with the wider community, and as one participant observed at the end of the play:

It was incredibly fun but more than that it was a challenge and one that we overcame and worked through. For those who were there from start to finish and committed themselves during the entire process it was rewarding and feeling that sense of accomplishment was grand. Nothing said team effort more than ‘the Real Deal’ (LM/F/26/26).

Conclusion

The African cultural memory youth arts festival (ACMYAF) functioned as both as a research inquiry and cultural event in the way that it provided young people with an empowering space for exploring issues relating to their cultural identities both performatively and educatively. The outcomes were informative to both Arts Based Educational Research (ABER) approaches and bicultural socialisation of the African Australian youth. ABER along with an African centered pedagogical approach provided important frameworks for exploring
African cultural memory and the Australian cultural experience of the African Australian youth in an educative and informative way.
References


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1 EM/F/26/26 this abbreviation means, names Initials/Gender/Age/Time lived in Australia.