

Winter Miller RACE project paper March 2013

## **PART ONE: The Project**

### Project description

Conduct six weekly workshops with a group of girls who are participants in the non-profit organization Girl Be Heard, (<http://girlbeheard.org/who-we-are/mission/>) using theater as a tool to encourage free and creative expression, self and group connectedness and to enhance self-esteem. The monologues created in the workshop were then presented in the Estrogenius Festival November 10-27<sup>th</sup>, 2012 in NYC.

Girl Be Heard is a group of young women ranging in age from 12-22 and attendance at any given workshop could be 15-30 members. The group is led by two adults, Ashley Marrinaccio and Jessica Greer Morris, who founded the group about five years ago. Ashley and Jessica are theater makers, producers, feminists and activists. Girl Be Heard's mission, philosophy and range include:

- Mission. Create a safe space for girls to write and perform their own work. Theater is our vehicle to empower young women to become brave, confident, socially conscious leaders and explore their own challenging circumstances.

- Philosophy. Every girl's voice is valued. Our youth-led movement is committed to raising awareness about issues facing women and girls both locally and globally. Mentorship is a trademark of GBH. Seasoned members mentor new girls. Older girls are also trained to take on leadership roles within the collective.

#### Topics GBH addresses include:

- Identity (race, class, sexual orientation, ability)
- Bullying, body image, self harm, teen pregnancy
- Violence against women and girls
- Civil and human rights
- Global issues (sex trafficking, forced child marriage)

My goal with this project in collaboration with GBH was to encourage the girls to write about parts of themselves they feel they have to keep hidden or separate as well as parts they want to openly celebrate. I tailored workshop exercises to this specific group of girls, keeping in mind the girls' backgrounds and experiences were vastly different from one to the next and from my own.

I wanted to improve their ability to tell their own stories, gain skill at hearing what works in their writing and have the discipline to edit out what is less compelling or general in favor of the specific and dramatically (truthfully) rendered.

I knew that I would not be bringing in the physical elements traditionally associated with RACE work (cube, gloves, mat, etc.) because we were working in a

synagogue in Brooklyn and not in a Core space; because there would be a range of girls attending each week and I wouldn't be able to count on consistent attendance (though certainly a good 15 or were the same each time); and I was coming in as a playwriting mentor bringing my RACE training and interests to the fore, rather than as a Core therapist coming to work with girls. So the trick was how to combine Core principles with discussions and exercises.

#### Target audience(s)

- A group of girls ranging in age from 12-22, from the five boroughs of New York City and from New Jersey with vastly different socio-economic, cultural and religious backgrounds who are involved with the performance group Girl Be Heard.
- The audience who came to see the girls perform their monologues as part of a two-week festival featuring the work of women and girls with five performances. Audience was comprised of friends and family of the participants and facilitators and others.

#### Services I provided:

- Between the months of September and November 2013, I led six Sunday afternoon workshops of 3 hours each to a group of girls assembled as part of the performance collective Girl Be Heard.
- Brainstormed topics and discussion ideas with the two-facilitators of Girl Be Heard for the groups.
- Developed questions and exercises to work on with the girls designed to connect them to themselves, enhance self-confidence, enhance group connectedness, and result in creative expression through theater.
- Challenged habits, blind spots of the girls as well as encouraged them to speak and write freely.
- Created a container in which their life stories could be shared safely and in which the co-facilitators of Girl Be Heard were present or aware of issues in girls lives that may need ongoing attention, follow-up or guidance (I did not work with the girls on their daily issues outside of the workshops).
- Provided the girls individual writing prompts tailored to circumstances in their lives currently or in their past that I thought would be appropriate or helpful for them to work on and explore more deeply.
- Worked with some girls on their monologues in front of and with the whole group, encouraging the group to participate in feedback for how to make the work they were creating stronger, more articulate, more specific, more lyrical etc.

- Worked with several of the girls via email and via phone to continue revising and refining their monologues.
- Worked with Girl Be Heard's co-facilitators on the editing process of the material with the girls, such as what questions to ask, what revisions to shoot for, and how to hold the girls accountable for doing the work, showing up and meeting deadlines.
- Attended the first and last performances of the group performing in the festival.

### Roots of the project idea, planning and creation process

Surprisingly, the scope of this particular project fell into my lap. Last June, I was asked to be a moderator after a performance given by some of the members of Girl Be Heard of material they had written in a theater festival in New York City. The group was performing a piece they had written and created with the help of two artists about the issue of sex trafficking of girls and women. Selling girls into prostitution domestically and internationally is all too common yet many people aren't aware it happens right under our noses.

When the group's founders invited me to moderate, I turned them down as I wasn't an expert on trafficking statistics or the movement and I didn't think I would have much to add to the discussion. They responded persuasively, "The girls know your work and they would be really honored if you would participate." I said yes. I watched the show, and while I thought it uneven artistically (they are teens, not yet the artists nor experts they may become), I was so moved by what they had to say (awareness of the effects of trafficking), how they were saying it (heartfully) and that they were reaching an audience of their peers (young women *and* men) about an issue that most people are ignorant of or do not pay any attention.

With *Trafficked*, this group of young women had the ears of young men, and they were talking about feminism, inequities, rape, and how degrading language and customs harm women and the young men were rapt. Their hearts and their intentions impressed me. So when the leaders asked me if I would want to lead a workshop with the girls, I said, yes, I would do a series. For this reason I changed the initial\* scope of my project; I would do six three-hour workshops with the girls and help them prepare monologues for a theater festival in the fall.

\*Initially, my project idea had been to travel to politically insecure and/or war-torn and/or post-conflict spots and conduct independently held monologue workshops with members of the local youth population. But why? Read on.

### **Roots, seeds, impressions of why theater is a lifeline:**

#### **1. Northern Uganda, 2007.**



I believe I can best tell you why I make theater, and why I involve others in the process by sharing a story about a young woman I met in Uganda.

*Scovia looks at the ground when she speaks, mumbling her words and talking as if her listeners were buried in the blue-black folds of her neck. When I meet her, Scovia is 16 and living with her mother, her grandmother and siblings or cousins in a mud hut about ten feet in diameter in an internally displaced person's (IDP) camp in Northern Uganda. The Lord's Resistance Army has victimized the region for more than 20 years, so Scovia has never known peace nor lived outside of the camp. Earlier this year, her father died from AIDS and the family is surviving on very little.*

*I have come to Uganda with a group of actors and filmmakers to make a documentary about the youth of Northern Uganda putting on a play about their lives. The goal is to create awareness about a forgotten war which keeps Ugandans imprisoned in camps, unable to find work, unable to live amongst their families and traditions, and has eroded the culture, traditions and hope of the Acholi people. I've been brought in as the resident playwright, to spend three weeks with a group of 14 youth who have signed up to be part of this theater group and write them a play. At the last minute Scovia's older sister is deemed to valuable to spare from gathering wood and other chores and Scovia is offered her sister's slot.*

*We meet every day, but Sundays, the NGO day off and we must be out of the camp by 4pm--security rules. The first week, Scovia says next to nothing and appears often to be staring into space. In a place where many people are hungry, Scovia's belly is plump—not distended as the malnourished appear—so is she chubby or pregnant? We cannot ask direct questions, the youth can volunteer whatever information they want, but we are not to ask them leading questions. More importantly, how do we engage Scovia?*

*The youth come up with two plays they want to be written for them to perform. One is about preventing the spread of AIDS and the other is about welcoming back former child soldiers into the community. I work closely with the youth, interviewing them and doing improvisations in order to incorporate their actual words into the text as a means of giving them ownership in the work. In the play about AIDS, Scovia is given the role of doctor. It's an important role, as she must tell the boy and girl in the play the myths and truths about AIDS. The director asks Scovia (who is still talking to her neck), "Scovia, you are the doctor, what are some of the characteristics of a doctor?" Scovia whispers doctors are smart and powerful. So if Scovia is to play the doctor, (who incidentally, is named Doctor Scovia) it appears Scovia is going to have to stand up straight, speak out into the world with confidence, for she is an important doctor. A transformation begins. Scovia begins to speak out in group exercises, to josh with the other youth and with us. Scovia the girl takes on some of the leadership and authority of Doctor Scovia.*

*On the day of the performance, for a crowd of upwards of a thousand IDPs, Scovia performs magnificently—she is clear, strong and authoritative. After, Scovia's eyes meet the camera's lens as she says, "My mother, she tell me she is proud of me. I feel strong, very strong."*

*To me, this is gold. This is as rewarding as collaborating with some of the finest actors and directors at home in New York City. What's more, Scovia taught me something I didn't understand when I went to Africa a year prior, along the Chad/Darfur border (to interview survivors of genocide for another play)—because there, I was taking their stories, but I was leaving them with nothing, just a promise that yes, I would tell their stories.*

*What Scovia taught me was that I could leave something substantial behind too. That theater, the experience of expressing oneself and building hope and community around a play is the kind of sustenance just as valuable as providing food, shelter, medicine and safety.*





*This is Amos, a member of the original troupe. This photo was taken when he was 22, former child soldier and theater maker, father of four on the day of the performance. Amos was killed in 2012 by a mob of people and we were not able to get more specific information from our contacts. He was a sweet and talented man.*

## **2. NYC, 2009-2010 Weekly youth workshops with Theatre Askew.**

*I first began to see the influence of workshops geared towards self-expression via theater about four years ago with a theater company working with gay, transgendered, questioning and sometimes homeless youth in NYC. I worked with two different sets of underprivileged, underserved teens for two consecutive years each with a theater production at the end. The first year the production was written by me based on their writings from exercises we did in class and I assigned, and the second year it was written by them and edited/curated/shaped by me.*

*In the process, I learned a lot about what I did and didn't want to bring to the equation. For instance, I did want to push kids to go more deeply into what they wanted to say and not rely on any old tricks they'd come in with. For instance, a couple kids had found some comfort and praise in spoken word and while their rhymes were great, they often forfeited meaning simply to go along with the rhythm and the beat, resulting in poems that volleyed from insight to discursive babble. I had to be willing to set my aesthetic vision for what these kids would create aside, in favor of letting them tell the story they wanted to tell how they wanted to tell it and to know when to step back. One time, I pushed too hard and one youth felt really betrayed by the process, she wanted*

*to do it her way and she dug her heels in and later, in the time of feedback at the end of the year, I learned how deeply angry she was for the ways in which I was urging her to try new territory. I don't know what I would have done differently, except maybe stepped back sooner, but I did stay present for her rage and allowed it to exist and supported her to have it and while I struggled with not taking it personally, the part of me that wanted to be liked and a beloved mentor had to just sit with that not happening with that particular student.*

*I learned how important access to a social worker is, for times when troubling stuff comes up in the room, in the workshops and I don't have the experience to handle it properly or the ability to keep an eye on what came up for the participants outside of the workshops. Topics like underage molestation came to the fore, as well as members who were in unstable homes, as well as those who required extensive psychological attention (hospitalization in some cases).*

*The last piece, I learned again how wonderfully powerful it is for youth to be involved with the expression of their own story, that it builds strength and confidence and seems to decrease feelings of inferiority and isolation. That said, what's tricky is doing the work when the skill levels of communication and writing are vastly different—the youth who feel more confident want to take up more and more space and the ones who feel less skilled, want to fade into the wall.*

*Sometimes, I needed peer supervision to work through what I had seen and heard and how it made me feel—powerless, often, about the kind of stuff these kids were living through. However I was conscious of the flip side, of watching them feel good and connect to each other and more deeply to themselves and seeing how beautiful and enriching community can be.*

### **3. Palestine, 2012, Refugee Camp for Palestinians.**

*In January, 2012, knowing I was preparing for my RACE Project and traveling with a delegation of health and human rights activists to Palestine, I wanted to set up a prototype of my monologue workshop. The idea was a portable workshop that could work nearly anywhere and where translators could be involved where necessary to facilitate communication. I conducted a monologue workshop with about 30 Palestinian students who were part of a theater group in Ramallah. The kids were aged 9-21, approximately and some had been working together for months and some were just meeting each other for the first time, as it was a combination of two separate groups.*

*It was challenging to conduct the workshop in English with a translator for a group this size. It was hard to hold the attention of teenagers who were excited to hang out with each other and play, and not want to hear directions for a writing prompt or to sit down and work. But we made it through. The*

*acting teacher led them through some warm-up tableaux about scenes they see in the world and how to convey meaning without words but with the placement of bodies on a stage and with expression. I gave them a writing prompt along the lines of: Tell about a moment in your life when a) either everything changed and you were no longer the same person you were before or b) a moment in time when you felt fully yourself, like you did something you felt really proud of.*

*The youth then sat and wrote monologue responses to these questions. Then, we gathered in a circle and they performed their improvised monologue based on what they had written. They wrote and performed in Arabic, so their words were translated to me in whispers while they were performing. This made it a little difficult to soak everything in, but it was what we could do in a pinch, to have translated and waited for me to get it would have slowed down the process and left us with little time for the entire group.*

*I then took a similar workshop idea to adults teaching at Birzeit University in Ramallah, Palestine. A middle-aged professor, two young researchers (one non-Palestinian, an Arabic speaking Canadian) and an administrator took the workshop. I had them do an exercise where they told each other about an experience they remember their lives changing but to tell about it in the present as if it were happening now, and to tell it to another participant. Then, the participant was asked to listen intently, and to ask any questions they thought might help the storyteller get more specific in the telling. Then, I had them sit down and write out their monologues, again as if happening in the present. Then, they each spoke them aloud to the group.*

*This continued to confirm my theory that people learn a lot about themselves by telling their own stories, that they find connection in talking to other people about their lives, and that they feel a sense of agency and self-esteem in the act of telling and being listened to by others. I would have liked more opportunities to do these workshops and to do several in a row with the same group so that we could work on the actual writing one day and have them do revisions, and then spend another day working on their performance of their stories, and then, finally, have a time when they present their performances to their community.*

These were the roots of the idea for the RACE project: to lead writing workshops in places of conflict. What I realized is that I don't have to look globally for these kinds of communities and people weathering institutionalized oppression, the people and the conflicts are right outside my door. I had been trying to figure out how I was going to get back to Palestine, when the opportunity to work with GBH landed right in my lap. I almost didn't work with GBH, because it wasn't something I had to chase after and solve and make happen against some great odds—it was handed to me, it seemed too easy. It was neither too easy nor too hard; it was simply an opportunity that presented itself. Instead of saying, no, this isn't international, doesn't involve a war or a recent war, is outside of my vision, I said, yes.



What's more, there were two women leading the group Girl Be Heard, I would have some infrastructure, some support in taking care of the detail-oriented stuff, like scheduling workshops (already scheduled), finding a venue to meet weekly (already found), getting participants (already done), getting permission slips (already done), booking a venue to perform the monologues (already done), all that was left for me was to plan the curriculum, recreate/enhance/stretch the group's container, and take some risks. So that's what I did.

### **Original purpose and intentions of/for the GBH project**

#### **• Intentions for participants:**

To have a safe and sacred workshop space in which to express through writing and performance and dialogue deep personal truths and strong emotions. The voice of girls in our society is not valued except as consumer, there's a market for whatever tween and teen girls want to buy, but when it comes to hearing what they have to say and what their needs are, there's rarely anyone to listen and there's rarely a public forum.

Theater is a way to express personal truths in a way that the speaker can be transformed by her own words and the listener may be transformed by what she hears, perhaps in how it resonates personally or how it unveils a truth and experience previously unknown.

#### **• Intentions for myself as a leader:**

To create a safe space for young women to really express themselves through language, both written and spoken; be willing to step into an already formed group and work in tandem with two people I didn't know as leaders or as artists; be willing to be flexible, humble, open to change.

In particular, I wanted to be self-aware about what "goals" or accomplishments I set for the participants to achieve, so that I never pushed anyone to go deeper than they were willing, that I allowed their pace and expression to be their own pace.

To be unwed to expectations and willing to go wherever the group went; be really present during the workshop; set boundaries, so that I didn't seek to solve problems or take on issues outside of the time we spent in the workshop; trust in my own intentions and to be guided by my instincts regardless of topic, circumstances or events in the workshops.

To experience my own sense of flow working with others and mixing RACE concepts with other group-work concepts and theater practices. To be completely willing to not know the answer and not be driven by ambition or an outcome for the girls, the project, or myself.

#### **• Objectives of the workshops:**

Explore ideas of privilege, self-responsibility, the expressions of grief, anger, and joy—to dig more deeply into the participants' emotional experiences and to be able to share them within a community of young women 12-22.

To facilitate a beginning understanding of the concepts of mask, lower self and higher self and how the individual employs all three with an eye towards awareness and self-knowledge and self-empowerment.

To create theatrical work that could be shared within the community and with a larger community.

• **Goals:**

- 1) The girls progress in their writing skills, in their skills to think critically about the world around them and what kind of art they're making—specifically how their activism and creativity link.
- 2) Noticeably enhance the girls' trust in themselves and their instincts.
- 3) Encourage the girls to create raw material for a show they feel proud to make. Each girl writes and performs a monologue she is proud of in her own voice or the voice of someone else.
- 4) The show is performed on the dates selected for invited audiences.
- 5) We are all challenged to think outside of ourselves and to learn new techniques of looking at the world and of communicating with each other.
- 6) Allow a free-flow of information while keeping a container of security and sacredness in the space/community.
- 7) We (including the audience) learn something new about others and ourselves in the process of witnessing these stories.
- 8) Incorporate Core Principles of understanding and awareness of Mask, Lower Self, and Higher Self; encourage an understanding and respect for Kali, the destructive force in all of us as well as how to stir our own authentic creative self.

## **PART TWO: Conducting the Project**

I had weekly check-ins with the two women who run the organization, Jessica and Ashley related to the weekly theme of the workshop. Each week I would ask them if there was anything they wanted me to address with the girls related to the topic at hand and then I would brainstorm how it related to Core teachings.

Below is excerpted from my journal of what we did and my experience of leading. **WORKSHOP ONE:**

- Opening Ritual
- Physical warm-up 10 minutes
- Group check in sitting in a circle: best thing/worst thing about your week, including using physical gesture to describe.

- Members read pieces from an assignment: Write about something that scares you! The group gave feedback about what resonated.

- Introduced Kali and destroyer energy, asked group to come up with and share examples of their own destroyer energy.

- Introduced concepts of mask, lower self and higher self.

DESTROYER / LOWER SELF: I want to destroy you, I want to take revenge, I want to get away from you

MASK: what I use to hide my real feelings—I'm fine, this doesn't bother me, I will hide... the unconscious things we do so that we don't have to feel or acknowledge we feel, the way we protect ourselves.

CREATOR/ HIGHER SELF: to connect with oneself and others. To give and receive love. To be in connection with the universe/higher power.

- Exercise:

Asked the girls to just freestyle yell out examples of each self while three appointed stenographers took notes. \*See later for things I wish I had done.

- Group discussion about above concepts and:

- .. What is our mask, creator, and destroyer and when are we in each?

- .. How do we use these mechanisms to survive?

- .. Could you notice these facets of yourself over the course of the next few weeks and see when you are in which self and why and what kind of choices do you have to do things differently than you have previously?

- Writing Exercise:

Write a rant from the place of the destroyer, someone has crossed your boundaries and you're going to tell them what they did wrong and how you're going to fix them. Go all out, exaggerate, get ugly and messy. Don't pick up your pen from the paper, just keep writing, no matter what comes out, repeat words or sentences if you get stuck, but keep going.

(Approx 20 minutes of writing time)

*For the two girls who didn't feel able to go to their destroyer self, they were invited to stay in mask and write from there and take their mask self to the hilt—i.e., I'm going to be so sweet that... I'm going to be so nice...)*

- Closing Ritual

- .. Friendship circle, squeeze, bring the energy back and to the group.

- .. An adjective about how you feel.

Notes on this first class:

Approx 15 girls, ages 12-22 showed up. The girls have all signed waivers about their expected participation in the workshop, their aim for a collective theatrical experience and their expected participation with regard to scheduling and

being part of the group. *Question: is there some kind of ethical use of touch document that is used when working with minors?*

*Self-awareness prior to workshop: nervousness about how to present the RACE teachings to the girls—would I be able to use accessible language and examples to illustrate the three spaces of mask, lower self and higher self and would I be able to do it in a way that wasn't mumbo jumbo, too psychology-speak, without dumbing it down or chickening out in favor of something less Core-like?*

#### Methods of Instruction:

I brought in a small Hindu statue of Kali, with her mouth dripping blood and skulls around her neck and explained that she was both creator and destroyer, and that those two energies exist in all of us and that in order to be free and creative beings, we can't squash one and expect to just live in the other. That we need our destroyer self in order to have our creator self.

I explained that the MASK is just our way of living in the world and dealing with people's expectations, that it is our armor against our very soft, sensitive selves. That the mask operates by making us socially acceptable in a way that we have learned from a very young age to be. So we might be overly nice and try to get along with everyone, but secretly want to take revenge on some people and really love others but be afraid to be vulnerable.

I talked about the EGO, that what the ego wants is to remain separate from other people, and that it basically plays tricks on us in order to maintain that separation. So that we constantly slip into this place of thinking, oh no, everyone else is better than me, or I'm better than everyone else, or everyone belongs here but me, I'm not smart enough, I'm too smart—all of these thoughts that allow us to put ourselves in a category by ourselves.

That our CREATOR self wants to connect with ourselves and with other people. That creating is not just about making art in the world, it's about connecting with people, feeling empathy, feeling compassion and finding links, that creation is also an exchange of energy. I explained too that there aren't value judgments around that energy, that it can be an expression of energy so long as it's true—that it is the authentic self—which may at any given moment be happy, sad, angry, etc. And that the lower self is the self is the self we are hiding also with the mask because we've been told that those thoughts are ugly or messy or bad and that it's not acceptable to express them. So that if we are in a fight with our mother, we might say, fine, I'll do x or y and that's our mask talking if what we really want to say is, ooh, I'd like to punch you in the face I'm so angry at you.

I took questions from them about what were examples of each category, and if a girl came to a conclusion that wasn't in line with my understanding of how these categories work, I said something along the lines of, yes, great example, but that's actually of Mask, because of x or y, so that she would feel like she was involved in

the conversation and participating. I said things like, see how tricky this stuff is to nail down, because it's very squirmy, how the mind works to fool us into our patterns. I said, listen, you don't have to change the way you are, what I want to do is just make you aware of who you are and how you are functioning in the world so that you know you have a CHOICE whether you want to be in your mask or not, and in your destroyer or your creator self. The girls then came up with examples of what could constitute MASK, DESTROYER, or CREATOR selves. I had three stenographers have a piece of paper on which they each wrote one of the following words: MASK, CREATOR, DESTROYER. This is what they/we came up with:

MASK: eye roll, walking away, rationalizing behavior, sarcasm, fake, physical manifestation of avoiding emotion, show anger instead of real emotion (example used was feeling sad but instead showing anger as a defense), the façade to protect your emotional self, laughter to prevent feeling other people's emotions.

LOVING CREATOR: Takes stuff in genuinely—really means it when she says, Thank you, or I understand, I accept you as you are, I accept me as I am, and it is genuinely ok. One example given was how if someone says to you on the street, Nice legs. That depending how you feel about that comment you might answer Thank you, and really mean wow, thanks for noticing I like them too (creator self), or Thank you, and really mean it sarcastically and say it with a certain tone (mask), or Thank you, and mean it very menacingly as if to get across if you say another word I will fucking kill you motherfucker don't even look at me don't even see me on this earth or I will fuck your shit up (destroyer self). Of course, all of these can also function, depending on how the words are expressed as any of the three categories—that what defines it is the emotion and intention behind the words as well as how the words are expressed.

DESTROYER: says or has the attitude of FUCK YOU! Don't hurt me or else... you will not hurt me... get the hell away from me or else...

\*Thing I didn't have time to do that would have been great. I wanted to have them walk around the room in one of these three categories, taking each other in and presenting their different selves, so they could get a feel for it in their individual bodies of how they DO these selves. I wanted to illustrate to how one behavior is one person's mask and for another that similar behavior may be their creator self—that it's in the intention behind something that dictates what it really is—that words are only half the expression.

*Awareness: I kept sneezing and my head was incredibly stuffed up. I explained I was having some sort of allergic reaction that had started the evening prior and just kept happening at inopportune moments. I suggested that perhaps it was a Mask, my way of keeping separate from them, by having to pull myself away, or by saying hey don't get too close to me, or my body's way of saying, hey, I'm just a human don't be*

*intimidated by me... and that I didn't know which it was, but that I was aware of the sneezing and how uncomfortable it is.*

*Also, I felt conscious of time, like how much time do we have in the workshop, can we get thru the bureaucratic scheduling and conduct codes in order to get to the fun stuff (my stuff, the creative expression stuff), and having to wait patiently when I wanted to interrupt the other leaders.*

*I was conscious of how much I was going to wing it, in the sense that I hadn't written down for myself clear definitions of mask, lower self and higher self, that it was just by an instinct as I was leaving that I grabbed Kali and at the last minute decided to use her as a tangible example of these energies.*

*I was self-conscious and frustrated with myself that I arrived late, after the workshop was in session. Here I am to set an example for the youth of arriving on time and I get there 20 minutes late. I was given the wrong address, but I also didn't leave myself enough of a cushion to get there. I really want to change that about myself and not be late but be 20 minutes early. One of the leaders, Jessica, mentioned the 20/20 club—get to an event/mtg 20 minutes early and expect to stay 20 minutes late so you don't have to run out of places. I love this idea. I should stop scheduling things so close together and leave time for 20/20. My goal is to do 20/20 with this entire workshop of six weeks.*

*I did stay about 30-40 minutes late with the girls because for one girl, some very emotional stuff came up with the monologue she shared. She was sobbing and then even throwing up in a trashcan—It was just like a RACE workshop... which somehow made me feel I was on an okay track.*

*During the workshop I was aware that they were seated and I was up on my feet, trying to be extra animated to show that I was a) cool b) worth listening to and c) the one they should focus on. I looked around the room at them all the time. I made eye contact. I didn't ask them to stand up, which maybe was a mistake, maybe in future I should have them on their feet and we can scan ourselves to say, am I in mask right now? Pretending to listen?*

Some ground rules and thoughts about our coming work together I shared with them:

- There would probably be times when they felt like punching me in the face because I was asking them to step outside their comfort zone. I said, look, if you write x way, I'm going to try to get you to step out of that and broaden it and also try writing y way, so that you're being pushed to take risks.

- Any use of language is acceptable, but that there is a responsibility not to say hurtful things to other people, like slurs, to be responsible for who you say what to and how you say it, to be conscious. And that it isn't just about the words, but about how we say them. I used the example of calling Dominique a table, and doing



it in a way that was really insulting and a way that was really admiring to show that it's also how we use a word that gets the message across. I said they could use any curse words, like fuckshitassbitch etc., and that that may offend some of the people in the workshop and that everyone has a right to say how something lands\*

*\*actually, I may not have said that very last part, I may be wishfully thinking I did say it like that. I said people might be offended, but I don't think I said what they might do if they find themselves in that position. Or maybe I said they could say, I'm offended by that, but I think I didn't....*

I did not say, you can do whatever you want so long as you don't harm yourselves, someone else or the room. I wish I had.

The girls (the ones who wanted) shared their assignment from last week (to write about something that scares them to talk about) and share it with the group. They were seated in chairs in a circle. About half of them, in the thirty minutes provided, read monologues. They were all personal and deep and some of them were so painful to listen to. The room was silent when each girl read and instead of clapping at the end or snapping, I had the girls simply say thank you to the reader. I think this worked well. I think it keeps the feeling of wanting to compete and get the most noise at bay, perhaps. But it also felt like a way to express gratitude, thank you for sharing yourself with the group.

### **Blind spots/weak spots/judgments/tricky moments of uncertainty**

-A lot of girls, I struggle to learn names. And when they all come back next week and sit in different spots and have changed their clothes and their hair, I will be completely lost. Must do some name/word games with them.

-Time. I wanted more and I think I could have managed it better. It was hard to move things along, hard to know when to stop and tend to someone and when to keep things moving.

-One thing that bothered me is the girls were asked to contribute 5 bucks for the rehearsal space (if they can, and that no one would be turned away for a lack of funds) and that they were expected to buy the project girl t-shirts if they were going to perform and that those are 20 bucks each. I didn't like the idea of them buying their own shirts and it feels expensive. Couldn't they be sold at retail cost if they had to be sold? I later asked if there could be a bake sale at the next performance. I worried that I was starting to meddle too much in their affairs—having judgment about asking them for any money at all, and I was aware of my own urge to say, how much needs to be made in order to cover the shirts—ok, I'll take care of it. But I resisted my urge to save, make things easier by putting some money on it. \*Some weeks later, I learned that it's part of having the girls be responsible members in the group and feel like they're contributing to the group's momentum.

TOPICS shared:

Rape, sexual abuse by other kids, absent father, falling in love and sweetness of being corny, and some abstract work that I was less sure what it was about. Some

of the girls read really fast, but not yet knowing them, I didn't feel comfortable to slow them down, as I didn't want to interrupt them. But we will get to that slowness.

If a girl didn't want to read, she just said Pass. No one was made to read. One girl started to read her monologue about her absent dad (gone? Dead?) and began to cry and then fully broke down. One of the leaders was advocating we go to the next girl in the circle and the girls were unsure what to do, but I just decided to give this girl space. I said, it's ok if you cry, let's all just be here with you, let's all take a deep breath together and notice that one of our members is in pain, and that it's okay to feel this and can we support her just by being present. I invited her to continue reading and she said no thanks. Jessica invited her to have another group member read the monologue for her, if she wanted. She declined. We took a little bit of a breather and then resumed going around the circle. At the break, she asked Jessica if she would read her monologue out loud. I suggested yes, but at the end of the workshop after we stand in a circle and pass the squeeze. Another girl, who had passed on reading her monologue, then asked if she could read hers aloud then too. I said, I think so, but let's see.

#### WRITING:

I had them write for 20 minutes from their place of the destroyer, a rant about something they feel is unjust, that they hate, that is directed toward them or that they witness and it really churns them up. Most girls started writing. Three just looked around. I asked them individually if they were stuck and they said yes. I took them off to the side and asked them if there was anything they could think of that really pissed them off. I asked one girl how did she feel when someone invades her space, or doesn't take her no seriously. She said she thought of something to write about and went off.

The other two girls, I asked them a few more questions and I could see from their eyes and body language that they were resisting the exercise. So I said, great, you're in your mask right now, you're smiling, but this is probably because there is something underneath you don't want to feel. And you know what, let's not push that. Let's let you remain in your mask and write from the mask place about what it feels like when someone pushes you to do something and you don't want to do it, what does your mask self do in that place, how does it protect you.

After 20 minutes, they put their notebooks down and we came into a circle. We passed a squeeze around the circle, talking about energy and intention. This is when Jessica read the girl's monologue who wasn't able to before and the group stood shoulder-to-shoulder and listened. Then, I could see another girl, we'll call her X, really wanted to share her monologue and I made a decision, to let her then and there. She read an amazing monologue about her grandmother—about their contentious relationship and what she longed for and how guilty and sad she felt when her grandmother died of cancer. She was sobbing through it. At the end, it was time for the workshop to end and we needed to be out of the room.

I was going to have everyone say an adjective, but instead I said, let's just hold X in this space and just be here with her. And some girls came around to hold her up because she was leaning over. Then, I invited X step into the circle and invited everyone else that if they felt connected to X in any way, to step into the circle. I had the girls now go around and say an adjective about how they were feeling.

One girl said she felt disconnected, so I invited her to come into the circle and just be physically connected that she didn't have to do anything or feel anything. I couldn't tell from the look in her eyes whether she wanted to or wanted to break out and if she felt obligated to be in close proximity when what she wanted or perhaps needed was space. I didn't get a chance to check in with her after.

After the workshop, X was still sobbing, some girls were surrounding her and it was time to get out of the room and move the chairs and tables. I was unsure, as a leader, what to do. I hadn't expected this. X then began throwing up in a trashcan, while some girls looked around wondering what the hell was going on, others began stacking chairs. I felt pulled—do I go to the girl in the most pain? Do I go to girls who are silent but I can see something in their faces about some feeling or another? Do I help stack chairs? I ended up going over to Dom, comforting her and the others and telling her she was doing good work by not keeping this in and look at the love she was creating.

Then I went over to this girl, we'll call her Y, who had been one of the two frustrated girls. She looked upset. In the circle her word had been frustrated. I sensed that she was frustrated that she couldn't have access to her emotions like X or some of the others. I checked out if this felt like a true observation to her. She nodded. I said I understood, that sometimes that happens to me and I just shut down, maybe because I was told not to be so sensitive so I try to cover it up with my mask, but when doing so, I don't actually transform the feeling, instead, I feel separate and distant. She said this rang true in this situation. We then moved the chairs and tried to tend to X who was still crying and surrounded by girls. I was aware that I was very late for a baby shower that began earlier that afternoon and was going to end. But I didn't want to not leave the girls. We stayed in a group for a bit, and Jessica remained to comfort X.

*(End sample/blow by blow of Workshop One).*

### **A few samples of some of what we did in later workshops:**

Example:

One week it was about personal finances, specifically focused on letting the girls know that scholarship opportunities for college exist and some ideas/methods for how to go about applying and asking for help. A therapist was brought in to talk to the girls about money and about scholarship.

On that week, I used a combination of Radical Aliveness and the teachings of theater artist Augusto Boal\* to work with the girls on the topic of privilege, their perceptions of themselves, each other, and others in the world. We also talked about their individual core beliefs about money.

*Group Exercise:*

Without speaking arrange yourselves in a line according to most privileged and least privileged. It's up to you to decide which end of the line refers to most and least and where you exist in the line but you must do it all without communicating verbally or non-verbally with each other.

Discussion: how do you define privilege? Which end of the line (or middle) did you choose and what did you think that end of the line represented? The answers were so far from what I expected; I thought they would involve their socio-economic class and their race, and I wondered how they would come to specific conclusions about themselves and about each other. Instead, the answers were vastly different. One young woman M., said, "I arranged myself according to the privilege of who was least likely to be killed." Another young woman, E, said, I put myself at the side of the line I thought was most privileged because I have been given many opportunities.

Later, when E. shared her monologue that she wrote in the workshop that day, she shared that the one-bedroom apartment she shares with her mother and father has no furniture, only books, except for the bed that the three of them share. She lives in a rough neighborhood in Bed Stuy. But, her mother believes in education and learning and E. is confident in her performing ability and is an extremely adorable thirteen-year-old. For her, opportunity defined privilege.

\*Augusto Boal is a hero and inspiration of mine for this work.

To give you a sense of him, here are a few key bits from an obituary:

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2009/may/06/augusto-boal-obituary>

*Augusto Boal, the visionary Brazilian theatre director and dramatist, who has died aged 78, spent his life proving that you didn't have to wait until "after the revolution" for worthwhile social improvements - you could use theatre to make radical changes in the here and now. Best known as the author of the 1974 classic *Theatre of the Oppressed*, which had grown out of his theatre movement of the same name, Boal was an inspirational and internationally recognised theatre guru.*

*Based on the radical teaching of Paulo Freire, whose book *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* was a direct influence, Boal's ideas aimed to wake up the passive spectator, inviting members of the audience on to the stage to act out their real*

*life problems, turning them into what he called "spectactors", and empowering them to find strategies for personal and social change.*

*He set up a major Theatre of the Oppressed centre and formed more than a dozen companies to develop community-based performances. He also experimented with other kinds of intervention, such as invisible theatre, where actors set up a situation in a public place to stimulate debate among onlookers, or culture theatre, which involves members of one ethnic group performing a play from a culture antagonistic to their own - for example, Palestinians putting on a Jewish play.*

*He was slight of build, modest, but always full of energy and quiet hope; Boal's terrific energy came from his faith in the creativity, spontaneity and ability of all people, however underprivileged, to change their situation. In London, for example, he often worked with Cardboard Citizens, a homeless people's theatre company, and he continued until recently working on projects both in the developing world and in the US, which he visited every year.*

Another sample exercise:

- Question: what is something you heard in your family repeatedly about money? For example, "Money is the root of all evil." "Money doesn't grow on trees." etc.
- Writing exercise: Take the phrase that stands out most in your mind about the message you got from your parents about money, use that phrase as the first line of your monologue and write what you think about money. If you want to get playful with it and exaggerate, go ahead, but try to be specific, and write in the present about money. For instance: What does it feel like to have it, what does it feel like to want it.

The participants then had 20-30 minutes to quickly write something on this theme and their instructions were those above, but also to write without stopping to erase or think, to simply write. Then, they read them aloud for the group. After each reader, the group thanked them and clapped.

Some further instances of things we did and what transpired:

HAVING YOUR NO. I began by talking about the role of girls in society as often a place to be seen and not heard. That their bodies are looked at, judged, catcalled, but that there's little interest in what they have to say, let alone what they want and how they want it. I talked about the importance of having your NO in order to truly have your YES. I suggested to the girls to take up space in the room, to have a comfortable distance and to begin by just saying no with their voices. I then encouraged them to say a stronger no, a no to anyone, anything, to the world, just no.\* I then encouraged them to put their bodies into it, however they wanted to express No with their bodies.\*\* I hate to say it, but I have a feeling that I did not take them through having their yes, expressing it and putting it in their body. I am pretty

certain that we did YES, but I don't think it got the same weight as No. I think I was more focused on No.\*\*\*

*\*what I would have done differently: In hindsight, I don't think I did this, but I would have had them role play someone in their lives with one other person so that person A would say No and person B would ask person A for something. And then switch roles for A and B, and then later, in the yes portion, do the exercise again but with the word Yes.*

*\*\*what I would have done differently: I would have given them some physical tools they could have used specifically. Such as bringing both elbows back on the exhalation of No, or pushing out the arms and hands on the word No, or giving a front or back Karate kick on the word No. This seems obvious in hindsight, but I was thinking on my feet and this didn't occur to me at the time, to stop and do a demonstration. I was conscious of the various things I wanted to have time for them to be able to do.*

*\*\*\*what I would have done differently: Provided ample time and encouragement for Yes. Clearly that's quite important.*

This segues into a more general section of challenges, blind spots and pitfalls!

### **PART 3: Reflections on the project**

#### What didn't work throughout? Challenges, blind spots:

I had trouble with the planning of the workshops, I had anticipated it was going to be a much more collaborative process, both the planning and the execution. In the room, I was pretty much left to my own devices. I liked being in charge, but there were times that I needed some help around people arriving late or leaving early, or fitting in announcements the group leaders needed to make or going over scheduling, or getting a sense of what the leaders thought would be relevant to the focus of each week. I felt myself get frustrated around feeling like I was holding the whole room. On the flip side, I did enjoy being free to take things organically where I thought they needed to go.

Hurricane Sandy happened in the middle of our workshops, so we had to dismiss the kids early for safety and that cut into our time that day, and then the following week we had to reschedule because the subways and trains weren't working, so things got scrunched into a shorter period of time to go over the monologues as they were written and give us more in-workshop time to work on revising the pieces up on their feet in front of the group. I would have preferred to be able to do this with all of the monologues because I think this really allows for growth and sharing, as people are able



to see how the process of rewriting works and learn from each other as well as offer each other suggestions.

Mostly what was difficult was in the revision stages, there wasn't a clear system for who was going to help which girl rewrite and revise her monologue and the system that had worked previously didn't work in this iteration because there were four of us combing through the work to select which monologues and to work with the girls. I was frustrated because I would write notes for revision and then someone else would do the same monologue, different notes and work on it with the girl and then the girl would feel finished and I would still have a host of questions, so it was a little tough morale-wise, for girls who weren't used to being asked to rewrite their work and who thought just because they wrote it, it was all done and ready to go. So there was a battle of wills on that one, just trying to keep the girls open to receiving feedback. Though, some girls would have just taken and taken feedback and written and rewritten, so there was a balance needed. In my opinion a bunch of girls and their monologues fell through the cracks in this revision process. I know I certainly was not able to go over each person's work individually and I felt guilty about not putting in more time, but I didn't have more time and we were pressed for time because of the hurricane.

*--One thing I notice about myself is that while I have a strong sense of feeling the organic movement of the energy in a room and when it's ok to morph into a deeper expression of something and when it's time to switch things altogether, I don't have a real knack for combining this with the time allotted for a workshop—in other words, things always take longer than I think they will, or, something comes up that seems so right to pursue, that it's hard to realize in the moment that means there won't be time for x or y later.*

*--Another thing I notice is that I often forget to take breaks. I have a strong preference that we do the work together and then we take a break together, rather than people trickling in or out for a bathroom break and missing some instruction while they're gone. I found myself having to remember that of course people need breaks and even if you break at the same time, people do sometimes need to go at another time. That sounds tyrannical, and I don't think I visibly showed any frustration, and I worked to incorporate all comings and goings, without slowing down the work for people who were following along and would have perhaps exhibited boredom or interrupted their flow if we had to go back and re-explain or stop. This wasn't a huge obstacle, but I was aware later of my own annoyance.*

*--The following is something I struggled with weekly.*

*When one participant reads a monologue that is particularly moving (such as, surviving incest beginning at age 5, or, making suicide attempts, or, being sexually trafficked at the age of 9) it's natural to take a moment at the end of a monologue like that and just breathe in and out and acknowledge that something very powerful has been shared. You don't want to just rush over it, it needs space to breathe. Sometimes it*

*needs more than that, but mostly, these girls are accustomed to reading and then sitting down and the next person reads. I wanted to avoid a lot of opportunities for some monologues to get a lot of accolades based on the skill of the storyteller while others are met with less enthusiasm or praise. But, what to do when something really painful emerges? My instincts said, just to pause, let us all be in the same space, and acknowledge what has been shared and the sharer. And then go to the next person.*

*Here's the problem. Some girls shared monologues that were, shall I say, less moving--less because of content and more because of style of storytelling, but both matter in this case (say, a boyfriend who is thoughtful, a disagreement with a best friend). How do you not give more credence to a story that is full of tragedy (or joy, if there had been an expression of that) than a story that seems mild in comparison? By credence I mean something as simple as, a breath in, a reaction of wow, an honest expression of being moved. Because as the leader, my reaction carries so much weight. And while I want to be equally receptive to the monologues being shared, I don't have a honed ability to do that in the face of surprising revelations.*

•• When I am moved by something, I show it. When I'm not, I don't try to recreate the same response—I try to be respectful and open to the sharer.

1) What's the proper way to react so that all participants feel their voices are equally valued?

2) What are the methods of encouraging people to write about moments of extreme pride or belonging, when the telling of those stories does not seem to be as "rewarded" as the telling of painful stories/secrets? One girl kept talking about how happy her childhood was and adolescence is, and I kept thinking, there must be something for you to write about? Even if you write about how great it is? And what I could see, of course, was that there were things beneath the surface she didn't want to deal with, small comments that led me to believe that it was her role in the family, maybe even the group to have it all together and be the ideal. I couldn't figure out how to tap into any expression of what that felt like, any rebellion of it, or any joy of it—beyond sort of a mild response—not one that lends itself to storytelling, so I was flummoxed.

3) Some months later, a parent of one of the girls whom I know outside of the group shared with me that there was a feeling among some girls that in order to fit in they needed to have a really sad story and that there wasn't a place for them if they didn't have some major trauma to share. I totally understood where those girls might be coming from—it's true, people were more likely to be moved by a girl talking about incest than a girl talking about getting an A on a paper and getting parental approval. I acknowledged that to the parent as one of my failings, that I couldn't figure out how to get people to write about their joy and self-love in a way that was compelling. Maybe the pull was too great towards tragedy—if you look at great works, like *Les Misérables*, these people have destitute lives they're constantly overcoming something and if the book had been *Les Kind of A Bummers*, would readers and audiences have cared?

I deeply regretted that some of the girls had that experience. I was aware of the pitfall at the time, and worried about people maybe making things up just to fit in and get attention. My sense is that each person has a story to tell and that that story lies in talking about overcoming adversity—so in some cases the degree to which there is adversity to begin with affects the storytelling. You can sometimes get away with a not particularly moving impulse for a story if your words are really beautiful and lyrical, you can sort of mesmerize people and there was at least one example of that, a genuine talent for writing. But what of those girls who were just beginning to learn how to express themselves in this way and who had the double whammy of not being able to find something “tragic” to write about? I think they got lost in the shuffle and I feel sad about that. There wasn’t enough time for me to do individual work with more than a few people and get them to really get to the heart of what they wanted to say.

As it was, for the two people with whom I got to do more extensive work on their monologues over email and phone, I could have used more time. And I could see their work changing and their skills improving and that was exciting. But I didn’t have that to give to the entire group, and this is a place where I thought the co-facilitators of the group would be able to pick up more of the slack. But, for reasons of their own, they were slammed and so I think some girls didn’t get as much attention as they needed. Remarkably, this didn’t stop them from participating and really putting their hearts into the performances and into supporting each other as colleagues, I have rarely, if ever, witnessed this kind of closeness. It was inspiring to watch them care for each other when things came up in the group.

### **What did work in the workshop?**

#### **Sample of an impromptu exercise and a personal strength.**

Exercise:

Conducted Orchestra:

Celebrating your vagina: I don’t know how this came about\*, but we were doing an exercise where the intention was to have your voice heard and be part of a group and they were set up as if they were in a large a capella orchestra—each girl had her own sound and I was conducting them. Somehow, it morphed into the girls repeating the word vagina, over and over in whatever key, volume and duration felt right for them individually, and I let them freestyle in the group what their voices sounded like as a unit, and then I encouraged them to move their bodies in whatever way they felt the impulse to move and I let it go and there was a differing quality to the experiences—there was a period of curiosity and relative tentativeness about the word vagina and the expression of it; there was a period of glee, about the freedom to speak the word and have a group of women all saying or chanting it; there was a period that contained a determinedness, perhaps a rage, but what looked to be like a sense of power of the word, of the body, of the feminine, of the demand to be heard; then there was a period of deeper

joy—and this is where the body movements seemed to shift from marching, fists, stomping, clapping, into more fluid and more free movements. The girls were smiling, laughing, swaying, and there was a change in the energy, a mix of jubilation and silliness along with a sense of solidity, as if they were saying, we are women, we are here, we have vaginas, we will be heard. I highly recommend viewing or participating in an orchestra based on the word vagina, it was one of the most amusing spectacles and I think it really enhanced the sense of community (which was already strong among members of the group, but there were new members joining), and I think it provided a freedom to play with language.

\*what I appreciate in the act of this exercise is that it was entirely spontaneous, both the decision to make a sound orchestra and the way it progressed to the word vagina. I show a willingness to think on my feet. The instinct for the exercise was that we had been sitting in a circle, talking about something fairly heavy as often happens, and I thought they needed an injection of energy and goofiness before sitting down to do some writing. I wanted them to be playful. I have a sense of when it's time to get people moving in order to keep their focus in the group, as well as what exercises are appropriate to try with a particular group in order that members feel included in the process. Anyone can be in a sound orchestra, for example, you do not have to have a talent for singing or dancing or acting or making words, and, it can urge people who are shy to step in to the exercise more fully.

#### Overall strengths:

I really enjoyed working with the girls and when I got in the room, I felt things just move into flow, as if I knew what to say and when to say it. I felt very much myself and I felt in service to this group of young women.

I think I was good at explaining what we were going to do each time and keeping it relevant to their lives, particularly on the fly. I often felt in flow and like I was moving off of what I sensed they wanted/needed, rather than sticking to a script I had planned. As the workshops went on, I got less rigid and didn't make specific outlines or lesson plans as I had at the beginning. It made more sense to come in with a theme and some possible exercises and choose at the moment what direction might best suit the group.

I enjoyed myself. I enjoyed feeling in flow. I enjoyed helping them come up with ideas, designing exercises specifically for each girl based on what she was writing, and I enjoyed meeting their families and having a rapport with them.

People didn't drop out, we had consistently good turnouts at the group workshops and I often heard positive feedback from the girls themselves and from the leaders, Jessica and Ashley.

### **How the project actually turned out:**

There are two possible answers to this: aesthetically as a piece of artwork and emotionally, as a lived and shared experience. Aesthetically, the work itself was a mixed bag, some pieces were great, some pieces had great potential, and some needed a lot of work. The audiences were visibly moved. This is, I believe, because the girls were really putting their hearts into what they were doing and were really taking risks sharing what they shared. There were monologues about incest, sexual trafficking, self-harm, bullying and love, and a lot of bravery went into the telling of these stories in front of family, friends and strangers.

Which gets to a second point: as an emotional experience, it seemed the girls got a great deal out of the experience, out of telling their own stories and hearing feedback that they were not alone, they could feel self-pride, and in being brave and loving young women. I think some of them learned some great writing skills, I saw their writing improve—they became more specific storytellers with greater depth to their words. They learned how to use humor and levity to balance out pain, when necessary for their own telling.

### **What would I do differently?**

I would get more clarity from the organizers what my role was; I was surprised often to find myself running the show instead of being the guest facilitator working with the group. This meant that I had logistical stuff I wasn't always prepared for, like a guest speaker who took up more time with a presentation than planned, or a film screened that also took longer.

I would definitely ask that a hurricane named Sandy not rip through the middle of the process and throw absolutely everything off schedule. The day the hurricane began we had to leave group an hour early and then we couldn't meet for the next week because there was no transportation services working. So time we would have had to work on stuff with the girls would have made it a less chaotic process as the dates of the festival approached.

In this vein, I would work more closely with more of the girls on the refining of their monologues, on expressing the subject matter more potently, and on the performance of their monologues. They're new to this work and you can really see the changes in them when they get notes on their ideas. They all need help structuring and presenting their thoughts. Actually, one or two were standouts and needed less help in the writing and more help in the performing.

## **PART FOUR: Fruits**

### **Two works created by girls in the program:**

**I Was Ugly and I Knew It**

**By D.A.**

*When I was six, I thought I could swim instead of just dropping to the bottom of the pool. I was one of those poor kids from Harlem who got shipped to the some white family's home in Pennsylvania with the "Fresh Air Fund." They were perfectly nice but had no idea I didn't know how to swim. I remember holding a big pink noodle in their backyard pool and next thing you know, I was drowning and had to be saved.*

*A few years later, I turned into a nerd. Picture me at 9. This little girl who studied Bill Clinton's autobiography and encyclopedias as if they were as simple to understand as multiplication problems. So small and frail with big buck teeth... you'd think it was cute.*

*And you'd never know I was drowning. Depression was the biggest secret I ever kept. You'd see the happiest 4th grader in the world. Ready to conquer the world. Ready to learn with glee. See, it's funny...because no one back then would have known. Gussed my secret.*

*Nine years old, and I'm banging my head on the white walls of my bedroom for hours on end. With each thud I could temporarily dull the pain. My head ached, but no major damage, and it did job.*

*Constant teasing and bullying at school made it all worse. They beat me up cause I was a nerd. And different. And little. And most importantly, because I was ugly. I was ugly and I knew it. Mother's words of encouragement that I was beautiful and those kids were jealous were no watch for their chants of "Beaver" or "You're mad ugly!" I was never enough.*

*And because I wasn't enough, I had to escape. Every year, something new to help me get through school.*

*At age 10, the kids at school said my hair was ugly so I cut it. It looked horrendous but they left me alone. Began overeating at 11 after being asked if I was pregnant in front of the whole lunchroom.*

*Had a classic emo stage at 13 which I thought would save me. Painted my nails black and listened to rock. This only only brought on more*



*humiliation when a boy in my homeroom, yelled "Hey Beaver, you're a fucking nerd!" in my face. "Bitch, you're fucking ugly, you hear me?!" And the punishment he got for that? Was having to write a meaningless letter of apology to me that I ripped to shreds. And when his friend threw a history textbook at my head, I decided take matters into my own hands. I swallowed a handful of Motrin. It turned out it wasn't enough to take me down but ended me in the hospital. What a poor excuse of a first suicide attempt before eighth grade graduation. Mom thought it was a stunt for attention. So once again, my secret was safe.*

*Finally to my relief, high school arrived. I thought people would change. That I would finally be pretty to someone. Wrong. Instead, "Beaver" became "Buck Tooth Betty" after it was decided by some popular, Bronx bred girls I was a whore for wearing fishnets to school. And of course, I was ugly. And now, fat. So I dealt with my depression once more, this time with an eating disorder that left me at 98 pounds by the time I was 15. Mom tried to force feed me nasty ass Spam so I stopped that.*

*A purge did not end the ugliness. Did not end the name-calling. Did not end the bullying. So I started a dance with a friend called a blade. I did the tango all over my arms, did pirouettes on my breasts, and fox-trotted up and down my thighs. The sight of blood was the greatest feeling. My most beautiful of coping mechanisms. And by the summer, there was no stopping me. I was drinking anything I could get my hands on and smoking weed but mostly cutting. Cutting during work. Cutting after work. Cutting during dinner. Cutting was my best friend. It emphasized my ugliness and I embraced it with open arms.*

*By the time I started junior year, I was a bloody mess. Mother finally paid attention and took all of my friends, my precious blades, from me.*

*So I just got another from the toolbox in the kitchen and dug into my face this time, in addition to my body. When mom broke into the bathroom, I was bleeding everywhere. Mother took the blade from my hand. (pause)*

*My will to live was somewhere on the floor. Ready to be mopped away.  
On the mirror, to be windexed out of existence. On my journal too.  
My life line. My little book of secrets... no more.*

*Two days later, I had an awakening. That although it was going to be  
hell to swim from the bottom, I didn't want to keep drowning myself in  
this misery. I still felt ugly but there was that little six year old  
girl inside of me who wanted to be saved. This time however, I had to  
be the one to save me from myself.*

### **Family Owned and Operated**

**By B.P.**

*At age nine, I was too much body for my age. I don't know if it was the platanos or  
the quest frito, but this girl was busting out of everything when I got my period.*

*"Maaaami, toy sangrado de mi cosa,"*

*All I heard back was "Que?! Mira muchacha no relaje."*

*I swear I thought my mother was going to rush me to the emergency room but all  
she said was, "Ya eres señorita, a young women."*

*Keep in mind, I'm nine and here is this part of me that I kind of, sort of knew  
existed only cause I peed through it, is now bleeding.*

*My mother and I hadn't had "the talk." The one about becoming a woman. About  
how to safeguard "it." Not let anyone touch "it." It was so confusing. Especially  
since everyone was touching "it" but me.*

*At five, I opened up shop without even realizing. It was a family owned business, I  
guess. Cousins and a very involved Uncle Freddy, took pride in my shop. Polished  
me up, every week... Being sexually abused so young for so long became normal. I  
thought that's how you relate, how you show love. So I started very young, like 1st  
grade young, sucking Lina Santos' tits in the bathroom. I was taught that  
everyone's first sexual experiences are supposed to be with your cousins. Los  
primos se priman is what we call it in Latino culture. It's a saying we have for  
incest. I don't know how true that is for you, but it was for me.*

*Every weekend, my family would get together for dominoes, bingo and cards. I conveniently found myself scheming situations that involved touching one of my cousins, Lorena or Cynthia. Or my neighbor \_\_\_\_\_ (name) (who was only \_\_\_\_\_ years old), the neighbors pride and joy. I always was the initiator; it felt great. Uncle Freddy taught me everything I knew. He asked my mother every weekend to let me come over to play...allegedly with cousin Lucy but she was never there. Uncle Freddy would ever so subtly trace the straps of my tank top. Then he'd ask me to come see something in his bedroom. Then touch me, have sex with me. He would catch me in the cuts. Rub me down quickly, our "quickies" he called it. He was my mentor. I learned the art of luring and manipulation. I learned to say "It's ok, no one is looking." To reassure Lorena and Cynthia -- "I won't tell. I promise." I hated it but loved the control, the only one I had. The control over someone else's body. Uncle Freddy taught me well. It's Incest 101.*