

**Legal Name**

Youth Speaks Inc

**Project Title**

To support two convenings to address the emerging aesthetic, demographic, and political trends in the field of theater and performance

**Project Progress and Successes**

"James and I were among a slew of hip hop generation creatives who entered the performing arts field with an understanding that our function was to do more than illuminate the value of hip hop aesthetics and pedagogy, but to advocate for the normalization of hip hop elements in the administration of the field as well. Our younger selves were bent on navigating a course to the center of the arts based non-profit (for mission) sector. A decade later, feeling more comfortable in speaking 'from' the center rather than in opposition to it, it's imperative to re-engage with both the processes and goals of cultural agitation vis a vis hip hop aesthetics. Now that we are tenure track professors, or are the leaders of stable organizations, or are more regularly programmed in prestigious venues across the world, have we fulfilled our function in the field or missed the mark altogether? Was our purpose to meld into the center and transition the lexicon and look of arts leadership, or is it more important to establish a different 'center' altogether? These questions of 'middle' and leadership are particularly poignant within the discourse of hip hop, a culture that thrives on energetic reciprocity, and demands within its cyclical nature a practice of anticipating what's next, and facilitating a pathway for the future facing."

- Marc Bamuthi Joseph, Director of Performing Arts, Yerba Buena Center for the Arts

**Report on Two Convenings**

Over the past six months, Youth Speaks hosted two convenings we're now calling Future Aesthetics 2.0. As per our initial application, these convenings brought some of the brightest, most engaged minds of the nonprofit hip hop generation together with some funders, like-minded partners/thinkers, and a new generation of artists, arts educators, and arts presenters to create a hip hop-inspired vision for better pathways for the next generations of artists, arts educators, and arts leaders.

This project has been prompted by the following realization: although many of us have found success in the nonprofit sector, or are on a trajectory toward it, it has been and continues to be a real struggle to get traction. The nonprofit performing arts ecosystem is not set up to welcome new people and new ideas into the system, unless those "new" people reflect already-constructed pathways. Many of us who hosted and participated in the convenings have benefited from visionary insiders, figured out survival tactics, or just been plain lucky, but the system is still as difficult for outsiders to penetrate as it was when we busted our way in 15 years ago. Although some of us have succeeded at moving from the outside to the center, we wonder if we have created more openings for others to do so too, or changed the system as a whole. To us it seems as though the "system" is still biased towards maintaining what already is, instead of opening to what might be coming next. This is particularly true in regards to the most marginalized voices, who often reflect the "audiences" everyone is trying to reach, but rarely are partnered with in deep and meaningful ways that can shift the arts sector to both be more inclusive, but also more reflective of the future of this country.

It has been well documented that the nonprofit sector is out of step with the demographic and cultural shift of the country. Over half (55%) of all charitable support to the arts goes

to just 2% of arts nonprofit organizations. Attendance patterns show that a majority of Americans don't attend "mainstream" cultural organizations (large museums, symphonies, operas, theaters, etc), and those that do tend to be white, middle-aged, and upper income. And yet the U.S. population is becoming younger and more diverse, ethnically and culturally, and a vibrant culture of arts participation reflects that. In the parlance of Youth Speaks, an ever-expanding series of counter-narratives exist outside of the dominant frame, but is not included in the "performing arts" lexicon, and exists largely outside of the formal nonprofit system. This disadvantages both the "outsiders" and the nonprofit system. The outsiders suffer because of their lack of access to the resources, knowledge, networks and validation that the nonprofit system provides. The nonprofit system suffers because it excludes the creative expressions of and participation by wide swaths of the nation, thereby becoming less and less relevant.

We asked participants at these two convenings to bring their own experience and creativity to bear on helping us imagine a healthier system and more encouraging pathways for the next generation of young performing artists who are working in the hip hop legacy and what it would take to get there. At the convenings, we looked at some needs for fundamental shifts to ensure that there is access and opportunity for artists, arts educators, arts leaders and audience members that do not currently exist within the nonprofit performing arts ecosystem. How might we create a system that respects the successes of those who have gone before, but anticipates and creates pathways for what is coming next? By sharing our vision of a more just system with others, we hope to spur a national discussion about change and multi-sector action towards it.

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During the second convening, a comment was made about how the hip-hop generation grew up largely in integrated schools, and how this has consciously or not informed the curation practice of hip-hop generation arts leaders -- and the assumption that this would be even more true now as the nation continues to diversify.

However, as recent studies show, schools are being re-segregated in new and different ways (New York City is the most segregated school system in the nation right now). What will this mean for artistic curation moving forward, when experience during critical years of personal development becomes more and more mono-cultural?

This gets to the point of the convenings, which we at Youth Speaks focused on ideas of equity, access, and opportunity (social justice). The following prompted a comment that led the 2nd convening:

In any unjust system, survival tactics are necessary. The ability to navigate systems of inequity and weighted balance is a particular skill set. Creating frameworks for these survival tactics to be taught, adopted, and accessible to all is part of a move toward a more socially just place.

But so is working toward systemic change. In any attempt to try to dismantle an unjust system (and here, we're speaking specifically about the financial structures and overall accessibility to opportunity in the nonprofit performing arts world), people who have developed survival tactics must also be involved in the dismantling, even if its ultimate impact is only to make the system a little more just.

When we at Youth Speaks first reconvened in January - many of us having been part of the earlier Future Aesthetic gatherings, alongside a few special invited guests - we talked a lot about various injustices in the (nonprofit) performing arts world, and discussed various survival tactics people in the room have employed. We also talked about challenges many faced and still face, celebrated artistic, financial, and institutional success, and built up an impressive catalog of works that we all admired.

It was great to get everyone into that room to gauge where folks were at. One of the things we walked away with was the recognition that when we were first brought together, although we came from different places and worked in different ways, we shared a similar set of values, principles, and economies (as in we were all hustling financially). Now,

though, the economies in the room are different. Several of us work for major institutions, are involved in major productions, receive significant funding for the work, and are highlighted as examples of "success." Some of us are still struggling to navigate the financial structures to the point where it's impacting our ability to work effectively. That divide would -- we hoped -- inform the conversation of the 2nd convening, but it shouldn't be the focus of the conversation. Our call was this: while some of us have learned to manage, even at times thrive, in the nonprofit arts world - and we understand from experience survival tactics that need to be shared - we perhaps can also land on methods to try to upset the setup enough to help change the system while navigating it (and helping others navigate it) as it currently stands. To put it in another way, as Bamuthi did in Brooklyn, we agreed that, yes, we needed to get ours, but we also needed to reach out our hands to help others get theirs as an ongoing practice if we are to remain true to the so-called hip-hop aesthetic.

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When this opportunity arose from the Duke Foundation, we first asked ourselves what could we do, uniquely, that would have impact nationally. It wasn't a public artistic event, per se, but it was something where the idea of artists as public intellectuals could be highlighted.

Where we could have -- and power -- a field-driven conversation.

We felt that if we believe in arts and arts education; if we believe that we represented something new on the continuum when we first entered, and there are and is the new coming down the line now; if we believe in equity, and if we believe in the alternate, non-commercially driven economy that the best of the nonprofit world can offer, we have to ask ourselves what can we do to make the system a bit more just for those who are sitting in the seats hungry and hustling as we were when folks like Roberta Uno from the Ford Foundation were reaching out hands to us.

So, this conversation is not about us, and it's not about "hip hop" per se, but it must come from us, and therefore come from hip hop. The aesthetic piece lives at the center of the conversation, around dynamism, about actual work that works, and that matters, that is impactful, but is and has been significantly under-resourced. And it's the path to an arts world that actually reflects the world. Part of this is making sure there are opportunities for the next generation to have true opportunities to eventually sit in these seats. And those opportunities have to be available for the most marginalized, the most silent, the most invisible.

We felt that this conversation must therefore be linked with current trends -- creative placemaking, community engagement, creative youth development, ideas of "innovation" etc -- but should even more so come from our own experiential knowledge. What do we know to be true? Regardless of the seat we are in right now.

We recognized this as is an opportunity for us -- artists, arts leaders, funders, writers -- to initiate a field-driven conversation together.

What's driving Youth Speaks to host this and ask these questions?

We are in the midst of launching an initiative that allows us to directly invest in a number of emerging arts leaders running small but impactful organizations across the country. While we have a strong hypothesis for this work, in the background is the burning question: just what are we setting people up with the skills to navigate? A lifetime of incredible experiences but ongoing, real, and enervating financial inequities?

In Brooklyn, at the first session, Mark Russell was remembering the cutting edge, anti-establishment work that was taking place in the lower east side when he first entered into the nonprofit arts world. He referenced the excitement, the newness, the sense of movement, of change, of imagining the possible. Clyde Valentin, another participant, pointed out that yes, while all that was there, every artist referenced was white.

So, the world has changed. Population and demographic shifts. Political and aesthetic shifts.

Technological shifts. Economic shifts. But the nonprofit economy still exists in a very similar fashion to the way it was created in the early 20th century (which, as Holly Sidford reminded us, was created to support the interests and pleasures of the wealthy). With many of the calls for innovation from the funding world usually about catching up to the shifting realities, rather than being way out in front of them, we have an opportunity here. We believe part of our work is to define the "aesthetic" from which our work comes. It's not just what is on stage; it's how we've been informed and how we inform the work. What hip hop gave me, as the founder of Youth Speaks, more than anything, was the idea of the cypher: while I have the mic I need to kill it. When you have the mic, I need to root for you to kill it too, otherwise the cypher just isn't fresh.

This conversation Youth Speaks is launching is not about individual artists only, this is not about who is in this room, only. This is not about who and what is hop hop and who/what isn't. This is about the arts ecosystem and how the hip hop generation informed, impacted, bumped up against and continues to bump up against the current system, which includes individual artists, and includes arts education systems, producers, directors, dramaturgs, stage designers, book publishers, the writers, fundraisers, managing directors, academics, etc etc. ec -- and how we can change it. Or at the very least, inform what specifically needs to change and what specifically change looks like.

So we told participants that we wanted their experiential knowledge -- their life - in this conversation, but we asked them each to think about the ways in which we are all moving through a system and what we are bumping into that is not working, what we are being guided through that is great, what we are doing that is great and what isn't. We wanted to explore myriad opportunities to enter the arts eco-system as a whole regardless of where a person is from, what his or her economic circumstance are. We asked - how does this world become an equitable, accessible, meaningful space in which all can engage... and in doing so, become a more vibrant field, more meaningful, more impactful because more stories, more visions, more people can participate in real ways?

And again, those new opportunities would be permanent -- and replicable. And would become part of the fabric of youth culture and the educational system and the arts ecosystem. And one of the motivating factors for those of us who have struggled to keep the doors open at multiple times in our institutions and orgs when more sane people would have closed them, was we saw the absolute value, importance and necessity of those spaces, of those opportunities and the need for them (or at least the commitment to spaces like them) to be permanent. Because when something good exists, you can begin to imagine what would truly be lost if they disappeared.

And let's not kid ourselves -- we were all talking about money. Not exclusively but that's been a big part of the conversation. Not how am I going to get money, but how does the system need to evolve so I can get mine, you can get yours, she can get hers, etc. etc. etc.

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The Logistics

Marc Bamuthi Joseph, Carlton Turner, Kamilah Forbes, and Clyde Valentin worked with Youth Speaks Executive Director James Kass and Producing Director Joan Osato, and Holly Sidford and Alexis Frasz from Helicon Collarboative on the planning of this project. The writers at Helicon have begun drafting the outline of the paper, conducting follow-up interviews, and laying out a timeline for completion and dissemination. We anticipate that the final draft will be completed toward the end of this calendar year, and we will begin presenting throughout the Winter and Spring of 2015.

The impressive roster of 24 attendees for the January convening in Brooklyn included Executive Directors of regional non-profit organizations and festivals, founders of performing arts groups - such as NYC's only break dance theater company -strategists and consultants for the nonprofit cultural sector, program officers representing arts funders, multidisciplinary artists including playwrights, visual artists, and Broadway performers, and,

of course, poets and hip-hop performers. Specifically, this roster included Holly Bass, Emily Cachapero, Teo Castellanos, Mayda Del Valle, Gabriel 'Kwikstep' Dionisio, Paul Flores, Kamilah Forbes, Alexis Frasz, Ana 'Rockafella' Garcia, Chinaka Hodge, Cheryl Ikemiya, Baba Israel, Marc Bamuthi Joseph, James Kass, Jamie Merwin, Joan Osato, Mildred Ruiz, Mark Russell, Steve Sapp, Holly Sidford, Carlton Turner, Roberta Uno, and Clyde Valentin.

Specific takeaways from the group's two days of facilitated discussions and presentations included:

There is clash between the values and goals of hip hop and the mainstream nonprofit cultural sector. Hip hop traditionally challenges the dominant power structure and tries to dismantle that hierarchy. It is about where art comes from, not just what it is and how it can be utilized. This can fit uncomfortably with the mainstream nonprofit sector, funders, and society at large, which has a vested interest in maintaining the status quo.

The parameters of what constitutes hip hop and standards of quality in hip hop work in the nonprofit arts world are not well-defined. Hip hop values, aesthetics, language and goals are not well-understood by "outsiders," including presenters, critics and journalists. This is a challenge for integrating hip hop within the nonprofit sector and building an effective and relevant critical discourse around the work.

As nonprofit practitioners and artists, the group owned up to not always having had enough knowledge to position and safeguard themselves, their organizations and their work as effectively as possible in this framework.

Looking ahead to the second convening, and the long-term work the cohort intends to undertake, the group began to question if there are alternative grassroots models that should be pursued to develop safe but challenging places for emerging artists and arts leaders. They acknowledged that while it may be smart to take advantage of the popular interest in hip hop to get commercial support for artists, there is no flexibility in the for-profit world -- no sense of responsibility to the community, no artistic agency. At the same time, the nonprofit sector is beginning to represent a 'burning house', as it is increasingly faced with challenges related to sustainability, business models, support for artists and new work, etc.

Specific questions raised included:

How do we move from our individual successes to "movement building"? What is the movement we want to build? Is it artistic, political, or both? Is it about the nonprofit sector, or culture and society more broadly? Where is the momentum? Where is movement already happening?

How do we stay true to our value to support our communities (both artistic and larger) and bring everyone up? How do we create a path for the next generation of artists, and yet leave room for them to define their own space?

If you remove the commercialism of hip hop, how does the hip hop aesthetic -- in all of its facets- thrive in the nonprofit world, if it can? Is it enough that several of us are now in power?

How do we attract more investment and interest in the artistic and community-building process led by so-called members of the hip hop generation? As we move forward, what can we do to create opportunity and access for future generations so that the economies question is not still first and foremost?

How do we help foster more spaces to innovate and fail?

What do we bring to the nonprofit field that it would otherwise not have? How can we be a resource and a catalyst for change?

What does it mean for us to claim innovation as a primary value? Can we serve as a bridge from what's been to what's next? How?

Do we need to define standards for our field? To defend against "imposters"? If so, who

gets to decide? What are the risks in doing this?  
How do we effectively capitalize on this work?

The second convening was held May 15-17, 2014 in San Francisco. As part of the itinerary, we were proud to include a performance of our world premiere of "Chasing Mehserle", a play written by project participant and Youth Speaks alum Chinaka Hodge. The two young actors playing the main characters in the play also participated in this second convening, adding the voices from very relevant emerging artists to the conversation. These voices were further represented by a larger group of young artists, directors, presenters and funders who were invited to join the attendees from the January convening (almost all of whom returned). These new additions included emerging arts leaders and artists, including solo performers, actors, dancers and playwrights, journalists and editors, teaching artists, program officers from arts funders, festival Directors, and Executive Directors of youth arts programs. In addition to the returning cohort members, we specifically welcomed the following new participants: Jacinda Bullie, Jeff Chang, Donte Clark, Hodari Davis, Goldie Deane, Jamilah King, Susie Lundy, Nate Marshall, Shannon Matesky, Jonathan McCrory, Elizabeth Méndez Berry, Anjel Newmann ('Medusah Black'), Amy O'Neal, Will Power, Diane Sanchez, Danez Smith, Michael Turner, Meiyin Wang, and Jason Yoon.

Like the first convening, this second convening carried through on our initial agenda and surpassed even our own expectations. In addition to laying the groundwork for the codification of best practices and effective models for integrating hip hop artists into the larger nonprofit performing arts landscape, the discussions at this second convening helped us to reflect upon and hone our own internal strategies and artistic approaches at Youth Speaks.

**Challenges / Obstacles / Failures Encountered in the Project**

We decided not to bring on Dr. Maria Rosario Jackson as facilitator for these convenings, as we had initially planned, although we did invite her to attend the second convening. She was unable to join due to a scheduling conflict and so we decided to do a rotating pool of facilitators.

**What was learned from these that might be of benefit to others?**

N/A

**Links to relevant website(s) and/or project publications, reports, etc.**

N/A at this time

**If someone wishes to speak with your organization further about your project, would there be a willing contact? Y/N**

If yes, please provide contact name and information for preferred method of contact (email, phone, etc).

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