

BREAKING BARRIERS: CONNECTING THE GENERATIONS THROUGH APPLIED
THEATER, ORAL HISTORY AND COMMUNITY BUILDING

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ABSTRACT

This thesis examines how applied theater modalities such as devising, games, and oral history generate interest in intergenerational dialogue in the West African immigrant/refugee community on Staten Island's North Shore. I explore how Friere's theories about dialogue and praxis in conjunction with oral history theory and theories of cultural identity can improve relations between the generations. I look at how performance, according to Diana Taylor, can allow for "individual agency" (Taylor, 20) and preserve cultural identity and memory and investigate how oral history and story sharing can build "new cultural perspectives, opening up new dialogues about the past." (Clarke, 95)

Since 2000, West Africans have been fleeing their homes in increasing numbers as a result of violent civil wars and have come to the United States as refugees on asylum status. They have been met with several challenges as many immigrants are but one of the greatest challenges that the community is facing now is the conflicting cultural needs of the adults and youth. The youth, who mostly identify as bicultural, connecting with both their African heritage and the American culture, have difficulty relating to their parents' traditional lifestyle. As a result there is a breakdown in communication between the generations; the parents often feel like their children don't listen to them and the youth often feel misunderstood. Rachel Kennedy, Executive Director of Dance Center International asked me and my thesis partners, Aneka Fagundes and Laura Plaster to implement a theater project with the youth at the center that addressed these issues and helped generate interest with the youth participants in the experiences of their parents, especially through their immigrant or "Johnny Just Come" stories.

Obstacles with adult participation were encountered during the project and changed The work's scope and my research focus. Nevertheless, I continued to find ways, often indirectly, to investigate how interviewing, sharing stories and devising generates interest in creatively exploring cultural heritage and links the generations.