

What can a process grounded in art-making and aesthetic priorities accomplish that community organizing cannot?

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Every month we present a Global Roundtable in which contributors are asked to respond to a specific question as it relates to one or more of ArtsEverywhere's lines of Inquiry.



Aaron Landsman

Aaron Landsman is a New York City theater artist. He is Playwright in Residence at Abrons Arts Center and a Visiting Associate Professor and Humanities Fellow at Princeton.

Introduction

In 2012, I saw a private presentation in London by PlaNYC, the administrators of then-Mayor Bloomberg's "30-point sustainability plan" for New York City. As I watched this presentation, it became increasingly clear that sustainability had become a buzzword, an exclusive citadel for the wealthy. Soon after, I met Deland Chan, an urban planner/designer and faculty member at Stanford University, and a native born New Yorker from the Lower East Side, where I currently live. She reminded me that city kids are urban planners from day one. They know visible and invisible boundaries, ride the subway from the womb, and navigate space and safety in sophisticated ways, but people who plan cities are mostly suburbanites. She also shared that artistic processes helped her go from being a timid kid to a Stanford professor and urban planner. This has come to shape the project I'm currently working on called *Perfect City*.

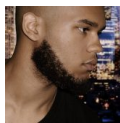
I invited a group of young people to form the creative core of the project over the next 18 months. As part of their job (they are paid for their participation), we meet twice weekly to discuss gentrification, neighborhood histories and boundaries, art-making and our own lives. The work has been dialogic, subtle, confusing and full of tangents and interruptions. I think that is because we do not know what the forms we are making will be.

As we continue this work, I must remember that I've intervened in the waking life of the neighborhood. I am a white, male, well-intended artist working mostly with

people of color who have less societal agency than I do. Despite these discrepancies, I want us to consider some questions:

- Can small-scale art interventions, made on a local level with specific populations, contribute to larger scale movements, or have larger impacts beyond the local, while maintaining an artistic process whose goal is primarily aesthetic or formal?
- What can a process grounded in art-making and aesthetic priorities accomplish that community organizing cannot?
- How can more city kids plan the cities we live in, and can an artistic process help that goal? What are the politics of aesthetic choices made by suburban-bred urban planners?
- Would integrating young people into 'urban planning' formally (as opposed to embracing their more informal appropriations, reuses and subversions) kill some of the spirit of those places and endeavors? Is there a way capital can embrace spontaneity and justice? Do we need a new system? What are we doing making art?
- What is the value of starting with questions rather than goals with an open mind toward forms, with no road map?
- Can a 'yes-and' approach to socially-engaged art making – in which difference is welcomed and explored – serve as a model for other endeavors?
- How do we reconcile different aesthetic choices with political efficacy? What are examples of "good" art projects that do "good work"?
- How is the way you see influenced by cultural background, class, and gender?
- Is capital the new central planning? Can radicalism exist within its confines? Should we all do the best we can and accept that it's better than the known alternatives?

On October 25, we will show our work around these issues at Henry Street Settlement, but this is only the beginning. We will premiere a more fully realized version of *Perfect City* at the 2017 Crossing the Line festival, which I hope will lead to more invitations to share this project around the world. Eventually, I'd like *Perfect City* to be the instigator of an international network of youth-led urban arts initiatives. They are the real experts on the life of their neighborhoods and cities, not me.



Jamel Ayala

Jamel Ayala: Young adult with a passion for the arts, and a goal to use art to inflict positive changes in the world.

Jamel Ayala

The questions “What is gentrification?” and “How is it affecting my community?” are two things I came into this project wondering. I thought I had a foothold on the topic and knew more or less what to expect as an answer; I was wrong.

The discussions we’ve had in the past few months, the moments of enlightenment, confusion, slight frustration have all opened my eyes to major issues that I’ve generally shrugged off in the past. I am a New Yorker, I am a Lower East Sider, I come from a lower class family and therefore I am at risk of being displaced. It’s a surreal moment when the reality of that sinks in. What’s more jarring to me however, is seeing how many thousands of other native Lower East Side residents are at risk of being displaced, and how the community isn’t effectively engaged in understanding or combating this epidemic.

My solution oriented mindset screams for us to come up with solutions, but sadly there are none directly available to us. This project is a very abstract effort at fighting against a multi-billion-dollar plan. I’ve worked hard at making positive changes and finding solutions to issues I come across in my life. This is a very personal passion, one where philosophy meets real life in a grand test to become the master of your fate and do something good with that power. This works well on a singular basis. I’ve made huge changes in my life when I work for it. But what matters more is the fate of a collective rather than a single man. It brings me sadness to realize that something you care about is protected by a wall of money that makes it untouchable. I can’t touch it. The community can’t touch it. This is a legend without the hero.

On a more positive note, I have come to understand that win or lose, it is highly important to educate our community on the matter and promote the helpful local resources that can help assist us with housing issues.

Some of these resources include:

- [Center for Urban Pedagogy](#) (Helps demystify the urban policy and planning issues that impact our communities, so that more individuals can better participate in shaping them)
- [CUFFH](#) (Organization with affordable housing resources)
- [Dap Map](#) (Map of displacement risk in NYC)
- [Inside Airbnb](#) (Explores the impact of Airbnb on residential neighborhoods globally)
- [LISC](#) (Equips struggling communities with the capital, strategy and know-how to become places where people can thrive.)

Before joining *Perfect City*, I had a much different view of the issues we’ve discussed in our meetings. Back in 2011 when my neighborhood first began being gentrified, I viewed it as a good thing. Thinking “It’s safer now” was about as much as I cared to acknowledge about the changes happening. Nice stores were opening up in the area, there was less gang violence, the streets were littered with middle and upper class people bar hopping on weekends. I could travel safer. It’s safer now. Some other locals I’ve talked to are looking through that lens as well. They say, “It’s safer for my kids. I don’t want them to grow up how I did,” or “I worry less when my kids are out late at night.” Slowly, I started opening my eyes to the faults in this way of thinking. My neighborhood is safer now, but safer for WHOM? This land is being prepped for the “arrival of gentries.” We can’t be fooled by the flashy new stores and the beautiful luxury buildings; it’s not for us. We are being colonized. Local businesses are closed down to make way for big corporate stores, native tenants are being priced out of the buildings they’ve lived in for generations

to make way for the luxury condos. If this continues it'll slowly overtake us until there's no one left.

We can't disrupt a multi billion-dollar plan, but we can speak to our community and let them know what's going on under their nose. We can educate, warn, hopefully inspire. And who knows, we may collectively create a solution.



Angela Choi

Born and raised in the concrete jungle where dreams are made, Angela is interested in exploring the intersection of community engagement and art. Having dabbled in various sectors from nonprofits to healthcare, across different continents from Asia to Europe, she continues to try to find her place in this world.

Angela Choi

As a contributor to *Perfect City* — an art project characterized by twice-weekly gentrification-themed discussions with other Lower East Side youth culminating in a 45-minute roundtable discussion/performance piece on October 25th, 2016 — I find myself grappling with variations of the question up above. While I thoroughly enjoy our discussions and have learned much from them, at times I can't help but wonder, "How do these discussions actually effect change? Is it enough to be talking about these issues?"

While I've witnessed gentrification in the Lower East Side unfolding in its usual manner — mom-and-pop shops being replaced by chain stores, and parking lots making way for luxury high-rises — being a part of *Perfect City* has been invaluable for me because it has brought about a level of awareness and concern that was previously missing.

In lieu of one of our discussions, Aaron Landsman, the artist spearheading *Perfect City*, encouraged us to attend a Town Hall meeting hosted by *Henry Street Settlement*, a nonprofit organization that has been providing social services to Lower East Side residents for more than a century. During the Town Hall, attendees were given the opportunity to select a topic of interest (e.g. public safety, education, etc.) and participate in breakout sessions where they could voice their concerns. Given my participation in *Perfect City*, I found it fitting to join the Housing and Gentrification group. It was there that I heard from longtime residents about the way gentrification has adversely affected their lives. One woman spoke of how a supermarket drastically marked up the price of its goods to offset the cost associated with a rent increase. The price differential was too high and as a result, she now ventures out of the neighborhood to shop for groceries. Other group members expressed similar grievances.

Since we spend a lot of time examining the impact of gentrification on local residents during our twice-weekly discussions, everything that was mentioned during this breakout session did not come as a surprise to me. Yet, I could not help but feel an emotional tug: The residents shed light on the reality of the situation that I had really only understood in theory up until that point.

Just as participating in *Perfect City* has made me more cognizant of the impact of gentrification, I believe that if we are able to effectively convey all that we have learned from one another (and community members) to a larger audience on October 25th, then we can raise a (heightened) sense of awareness as to how gentrification alters the lives of those originally from a neighborhood. It's really what people choose to do with this awareness that will determine the extent of social change. If, at the very least, people reflect on the performance, it's a sign that we got some wheels spinning and perhaps planted seeds for something bigger further down the line.



Jay Koo

Jay Koo is a native son of the Lower East Side. Just like you, he takes up space. He is convinced that what makes the Lower East Side remarkable is not the brunches or the lavish parties, it is the people. Jay works as a Resource Developer, helping people connect to jobs, supportive services, and other resources through Henry Street Settlement, one of the oldest nonprofit organizations in the Lower East Side. Jay is also a member of the Perfect City project, which is exploring the impacts of gentrification and neighborhood changes in the Lower East Side. For more information, contact Jay Koo at JKoo@henrystreet.org.

Jay Koo

Over my 28 years of living in the Lower East Side, I have seen many public art projects come and go. But over a decade later, a pink bear and nearly a dozen dolls remain on a wall off a sidewalk on Madison Street — a testament to the transformational and lasting power of small-scale art projects.

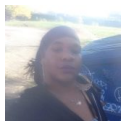
In the late 90s, a father lost his daughter to gang violence. The child was not even 12 years old when she was hit by a stray bullet to the throat as she was playing in a park off Madison Street in the Lower East Side. In her memory, the grieving father attached her favorite childhood doll to a rusted fence, just around the corner from the park. It was a bear, pink like the color of cotton candy. Within weeks, others began attaching dolls — more memories of family members that were also lost to petty grievances between rival gangs. Locals began referring to the fence as the “Wall of Dolls.”



As more dolls began to appear, the mourning family members transformed, channeling their pain and grief into a coalition committed to preventing further loss of innocent lives. They started with a neighborhood watch program, where locals took turns playing dominos and checkers on the sidewalks, keeping extra eyes on the streets — you can still see them out today. The coalition also facilitated discussions with local youth to learn about their needs, which led to organized stick ball competitions and baseball games as safe alternatives for youth who were craving after school activities.

But the biggest change of all happened in the gang members themselves. When they walked by and noticed the Wall, you could see a visible change in their step and tone. I have seen it myself. A boiling conversation on the brink of a fight would cool, and grown men would swallow their pride when someone pointed to the Wall. It was as if there was a sacred agreement that no one ever fights in front of the “Wall of Dolls.”

The family members who founded the Wall may not seem like your typical artists. They don't have Master of Fine Arts degrees, no arts foundation backs them, and most probably never even picked up a paintbrush. But they are, in every right, true artists. The French painter Edgar Degas once wrote, “Art is not what you see, but what you make others see.” When locals look at the Wall, they don't just see dolls, weathered and soiled with age, hanging on a fence. They see a reminder that violence often results in the death of our most cherished community members: our brothers, our sisters, and children. And what I see is a reminder that small-scale art birthed by something as visceral as the pain of losing a loved one can lead to transformations — both in individuals, and in broader communities.



Emani Love

Emani Love is a Detroit activist. She is active in youth organizing in Detroit and does national coalition building work. From 2012-2016, Emani worked at Ruth Ellis Center as an outreach worker, as well as organizer and facilitator of Trans-specific programming. She does outreach work with Detroit's LGBTQ+ community and is a founding mother for Trans Sisters of Color project in Detroit.

Emani Love

Detroit and her Art: Observations. Reflections.



Detroit, being the most majority Black city in the country, is the heart of the Black LGBTQ+ community in Michigan.^[1]

Detroit is Art. Detroit's artistic culture, history, and present is expressed through many identities and justice movements, and the uniqueness of these expressions is what reflects Detroit. Cultural and political, art in Detroit spans all mediums. The Black LGBTQ+ community in Detroit is vibrant, powerful, interconnected, wounded, healing. Pageantry/Beauty Arts is popular within Detroit's Black Trans community, and transphobia and cis-sexism exist within them. Pageantry is an art form that requires many resources, especially when done for sustainability/survival.

In Michigan, employment disparity for LGBTQ+ folks is still very much a thing in 2016. That doesn't stop the fact that we gotta do what we gotta do to survive; we survive by way of the intersections of art and street economies.

Show/entertainment culture is made of Drag Queens and ShowGirls, Drag Kings and ShowBoys, and a host of support persons, who are committed to the art of expressiveness, creatively coping, and navigating grief, all while surviving and fulfilling a commitment to art expressed through show/entertainment.

I have been blessed to witness the sharing of personal stories from various artists within the city, who like me, are navigating Blackness, Transness, gayness, and poverty. The dance style of vogue being performed by amazing practitioners has been discussed/expressed as an outlet, a form of release, a grieving art. Ballroom Culture is, as we know, very popular in the Midwest and definitely a part of Detroit. This culture is powerful and has been a hub for connection building and survival.

The Ball category “Butch Queen up in Drag Realness” was created for gay men to compete in drag and vogue competitively. This category has also included transwomen who have had no cosmetic surgery and/or aren’t on hormones. Ballroom Culture suggests that transwomen must have hormones or cosmetic work to be considered a Femmequeen/Girl/Woman/Tranny/TransWoman.

These are artists producing powerful aesthetics through sacrificial work: We put our emotional and mental well being on the line in the name of Beauty, presentation, and passability. Artists are affirmed for their work and contributions, not their humanity; artists are sensationalized for their productivity and not their spirits, even though they are spiritual beings.

We are absolute visionaries, and oppressed by the intersections of the criminalization of Blackness and survival sexwork, employment disparities, and hostile local borders.

Another venue for expression is muralism and graffiti art — both absolutely forms of radical resistance. Muralism in Detroit exists to convey clear, concise messages of solidarity, empowerment, and resistance. One of the most iconic and recent displays of resistance were the words “Free the Water” tagged alongside a Black Power fist on a water tower outside of Detroit. These words alone held utmost clarity, simplicity, and purity.

“Free The Water” was a political mural that addressed the absolutely fucked up ass water crisis in Detroit, with intentions grounded in resistance and love. The mural was intentionally made to ruffle the evil feathers of city government and it worked. This art caused a political crisis, one that only art can cause; it is the beauty of the intention that gives the work aesthetic value. The artists behind the mural faced prosecution by the state for the better part of 2016, all for advocating for water justice through art.

Often crisis, socialism, and social justice initiate Detroit artmaking. Artists are frequently activated and provoked to produce art for resistance and empowerment through screen printing, altar-making, direct action murals, etc. The criminalization of muralists prevents talented and sacred artists from publicly claiming their work because of legality. “Free the Water” poses the question, “Why are we fighting for water in a state that possesses 20 percent of the world’s fresh water?”

“Why?” will be a question that leads us into the reshaping of the next period of existence, answering hard questions can provide clarity, if clarity is what we seek. However, getting hung up on questions is unwise.

Asking or wondering why they don’t give a fuck about us is redundant. We know the world cares nothing about the poor. So basically, if you ain’t got no money you gotta grind harder to make it.

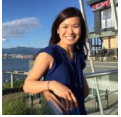
Capitalist central planning in our cities is extractive. It does nothing for us. But if we talk about economic central planning, that’s different. Especially if impoverished youth of color, youth in ballroom culture, and youth muralists are centered. Centering youth definitely radicalizes the process.

The solution for capitalism is in the goddamn problem: Share the wealth equitably.

We recognize that art expresses what has been, what is, and what can/will come. We have to be aware of when our art imitates the oppressive parts of life as we

strive to create art that shows what life should be. Real Eyes, Realize, Real Lies.

[1] I use the acronym LGBTQ+ to reference the community of Black Trans women, gay men, lesbians, and bi, etc. folks I was cultivated in because many members have expressed offense and discomfort to the label of Queer being used to encompass the complexity of attraction and gender-based social identities.



Deland Chan

Deland Chan teaches in the Program on Urban Studies at Stanford University and is a co-founder of the Stanford Human Cities Initiative. She comes from an urban planning and design background with project expertise in urban sustainability, transportation, and public space design. At Stanford, Deland teaches two project-based studios, Sustainable Cities and International Urbanization, where students collaborate with NGOs and government agencies on sustainability projects. She co-teaches the Defining Smart Cities seminar with the Department of Civil and Environmental Engineering and also teaches design thinking and participatory design at the Stanford Institute of Design (d.school). Most recently, she curated the Just Placemaking speaker series with the Stanford Creative Cities Working Group, a

Deland Chan

City Planning as an Art Form, and a Return to Human Cities

I began working on land use issues fifteen years ago, as a teenager, when I led an effort to restore a native species garden in the upper tip of Manhattan; but I rarely thought of myself as an artist until I spent a summer at a residency program nestled deep in the Adirondacks. As a native New Yorker, it was strange to experience this wild landscape just a few hours north of where I was born and raised. I was no longer surrounded by my circle of urbanists, engineers, and architects. Was it a mistake that the staff accepted my application? With others easily stepping into their roles as poet, composer, musician, playwright or visual artist, what was an urban planner doing several hundred miles away from the nearest city?

At first in this internet-less land of large and small critters, next to a lake and 60 miles away from the nearest hospital, I didn't quite know how to make sense of this world. But there was no place to escape in the remote mountains, so I buckled down. I wanted to break down the barriers in my mind that told me I did not belong, that I was a fraud for telling myself that I had a seat at the residency. Perhaps I was curious of what I might find if I gave myself permission to call myself an artist.

One night over dinner, a fellow resident described how an architect converted her home into a studio, integrating details such as tilting the bedroom at a 10-degree angle to simulate a treehouse. Listening to the impact of this place on her, I

realized that she was indeed describing the architect as an artist — a professional with a sensitive understanding of the human experience, a professional who sends off work into the world that inspires a range of emotions. The art of creating places for artists so they could achieve their best work struck me as a bit meta, but nevertheless, a valid form of artmaking.

At that moment, I realized architects and planners create physical spaces to express human needs and desires. Like artmaking, building cities can simply satisfy market forces to be traded and sold as a commodity to the highest bidder. There could be a different path of building cities — to enhance humanity and social good, to benefit the common welfare and to move our cities in a positive direction.

Most recently for work, I find myself commuting between Beijing and San Francisco, sometimes alone to meet with collaborators, sometimes with students for fieldwork. Despite differences between the two cities, I began to notice similarities. As people, we value the building blocks of good places: clean air, healthy places to raise families, safe streets where we can minimize our time in traffic and spend more time connecting with each other. As people, we have the same aspirations and want for dignity, the freedom to pursue our dreams, shelter where we can lay our heads at night and store our belongings.

For centuries, the master city builders knew this. There is an art to building cities. When done right, its enduring qualities remind us that we are human, that cities provide avenues for comfort and rest, for entertainment and recreation. Great cities empower us to self-actualize our ambitions and provide us with a sense of pride and dignity. Great cities acknowledge and house a full range of human needs.

Unfortunately, urban planning has veered away from thinking of itself — the act of city building — as an art form. Instead, we see a legacy of urban forms and landscapes that strip away our ability to be human. We see massive skyscrapers and wide ten-lane highways sprouting from the earth as unnatural landscapes that are devoid of people, as seen in [empty newly built cities](#) around the world. In American cities, [entire communities](#) are being uprooted due to a cycle of eviction and an overheated real estate market. Where is our humanity today?

In the process of building cities that strip away humanity, those of us who have been trained as professionals of the built environment in effect gave permission for our humanity to be stripped away. In allowing these landscapes to happen, we brutally suppress human communities and our desires for dignity, comfort, and well-being. We forget our power and responsibility to build cities as an art form to move humanity forward. The day that we become bureaucrats who enforce and adhere to laws without accounting for how people actually use these spaces is the day that we forget that we are artists. In an alternate vision, we can shape cities and places such that they allow people to be people: to create places where people can live and thrive— in effect, places where we can satisfy our fundamental human needs.

However, we must do more than just talk at this critical moment when the legacy of our cities continue to strip away our humanity on a daily basis. We need an action plan, and most importantly, a code of ethics for how we can create more human cities in this world. In this time, we need a vision beyond *what* cities should be, but for *whom* cities should serve.

To this end, my partner and I co-founded the [Human Cities Initiative](#) to change the conversation of how we build cities. Our goal is to inspire the current and future generation of city builders to think of cities as more than just technological

solutions. Cities are made of people who have dreams, aspirations, and needs. Remaining true to our interdisciplinary, cross-cultural core, we seek to create a common language that breaks down the traditional silos of architects, engineers, planners, and everyday citizens so we can share a common framework for resurrecting city building as an art form.

Kristian Davis Bailey

Kristian Davis Bailey is a Detroit-based freelance writer and organizer. He is a member of Black Youth Project 100 (BYP100) in Detroit and of Black4Palestine.

Kristian Davis Bailey

Beware of the Dandelions: A Translocal Detroit Production

Detroit was where I first heard the term “cross-pollination” three years ago. Due to the magnitude and nature of issues facing Detroit, the city attracts visitors from around the world, ranging from the neoliberal agents of capital that seek to extract human and natural resources from every corner of the globe, to activists seeking to fight racial capitalism in their own locations. For those in the latter category, Detroit has offered a host of historic and ongoing struggles to learn from: Black Power, revolutionary labor movements, food and housing justice work, the state takeover of community resources, and most recently the fight against water shutoffs in the city and poisoned water in our sister city Flint.

Many visitors leave impacted by the knowledge, visions and discourse of the city’s organizers who themselves frequently travel around the country and world to build with others. Cross-pollination from Detroit has global implications: It is the cross-pollination of movement knowledge from the largest Black metropolis in the heart of the US colonial empire.

So it is fitting that the Detroit-based collective Complex Movements built its latest art project around the decentralized, deeply rooted, and widely pollinating nature of what many of us know as a weed. *Beware of the Dandelions* (BOTD)^[1] is the title and warning (or organizing call) of the collective’s hour-long, interactive, multimedia show, which ran in Detroit October 7-29, 2016.

The collective is the effort of four Detroit-based artists and New Orleans-based producer Sage Crump: lyricist and organizer Invincible (ill weaver), graphic designer and animator Wesley Taylor, music producer and sound designer Waajeed, and multimedia artist/performance systems architect L05 (Carlos Garcia). Complex Movements examines the intersection of science with social movements. *Beware of the Dandelions* immersed participants in a 25th century dystopia where the conditions to sustain life had deteriorated, creating the need for “the

planetation hub,” a climate-controlled dome where genetically modified apples were grown to provide life extension properties; water was a scarce commodity trafficked inside and outside the hub in underground economies. For their labor on the apple orchard, workers were rewarded with rations of water. And if they became invested enough in the hub, they could become “groundskeepers” who patrolled the labor and plans of the townspeople. The planetation hub is effectively a mini-world sealed off from the rest of Earth’s poisoned environment.

For the show, Taylor and architect Aaron Jones built a 400-square-foot polyhedron — complete with projected animations and an 11-track, multi-character, live-performed set by Invincible — where the entire performance took place. The show takes participants through a process of witnessing movement memories of an earlier generation that had fractured and split in their pursuit of liberation from an oppressive society.

The show’s signature song “Apple Orchards” highlights the decentralized and dispersed nature of dandelions as a potential model for social movements: “. . . call it a weed, the best disguise / still can’t be stopped by pesticides . . .” This analogy was rooted in the political context of Detroit as “the blank canvas,” “the abandoned city,” “the most dangerous city in America,” “the ground zero of post-industrial capitalism.”

On the margins of US political discourse and at the center of the country’s racialized nightmares, the dandelion became a stand-in for the city, its people, and its organizing history. Strongly influenced by the lives and work of revolutionary activists James and Grace Lee Boggs, *Beware of the Dandelions* built on questions they and other Detroit revolutionaries faced in the aftermath of the 1967 rebellion. Grace reflected on the rebellion and subsequent era of a Black-governed Detroit as an example of the shortcomings of “burning down” oppressive systems without giving thought to what will grow in their place. In *Beware of the Dandelions*, viewers witness the before and after of the townspeople’s decision to burn down the hub — from the fracturing of the townspeople and development of factions, to the scarcity of resources and explosion of disease following the rebellion.

Although *Beware of the Dandelions* was rooted deeply in Detroit and its struggles, the show’s content and creation were informed by community members from cities outside Detroit. Complex Movements took BOTD for month-long installations in Seattle (April/May 2015) and Dallas (November/December 2015), bringing Detroit-inspired narratives to the West and the Southwest and hosting community storytelling sessions for local organizers to tell their own stories of movement lessons and challenges. These stories, as well as those of fellow Detroiters, were screened during installations during the October 2016 homecoming.

This first performance, despite technical difficulties, was the most powerful of the three shows I saw^[2] — in part due to the intentional audience we curated, and to the amount of energy and power Invincible put into their live performance. New and veteran Detroit organizers, ecological justice thinkers from Oakland, and other activists from Kansas City and Chicago all came away with breakthroughs in our thinking.

In the post-show discussion, the initial question that shaped our conversation was “What the fuck does ‘cross-dimensional ancestral communication’ mean?!” The show allowed us to discuss what it meant to connect with ancestors carrying the legacies of independent and self-sufficient African societies, our forced kidnapping and displacement from the continent, survival (through life and death) of the Middle

Passage, enslavement for two centuries, and lingering challenges of navigating an apartheid regime.

On a personal note, seeing the show in 2013 cemented my desire to move to Detroit and lift up its struggles through my writing as a journalist. Since I heard the word “cross-pollination” three years ago, I have striven to embody this action in my work in Black-Palestinian solidarity (at once transnational and translocal work), and in the information and messages I carry about Detroit when traveling to pursue my larger work.

The planting and dispersal of seeds is an incredibly important, intentional practice at a moment when many of our movements feel like they have more problems than solutions.

Final verse from “Apple Orchards”

Blow a Granddaddy Dandelion, make a wish
Strands are flying, pollinate and drift
Life in shambles, crying but your fate can twist

Expand your mind and let your candles shine
Like waistband of Orion, greatest weight can lift
A grand design tectonic plates can shift

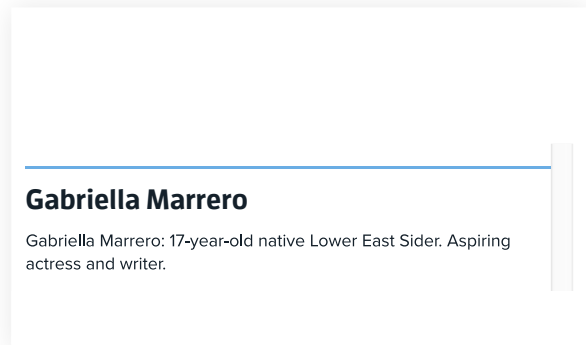
Instead of being trapped, controlled, and grown in rows,
We the wild seeds that overthrow

Dreams take root, deep in the soil
Cracking the street and reach like sequoias
Interdependent new ecosystem, babies in wombs in the fetal position
Soon as it blooms, people will listen

Call it a weed, the best disguise, still can't be stopped by pesticides
Or seeds of doubt, we destined to rise!

[1] I saw the first version of the show during its initial run in summer 2013, when I was first exposed to the city as a “comrade” (aka intern) of the James & Grace Lee Boggs Center. The initial run of the production came a year before the city and state colluded to shut off water to tens of thousands of Black residents who could not afford to pay their bills (while maintaining the water access of country clubs and sports facilities that owed hundreds of thousands of dollars; a year before the assassination of one of the city’s core visionaries, water warriors, and activists, Charity Mahouna Hicks in 2014; Grace Lee Boggs’s passing at 100 years and 100 days old in 2015; and the prosecution of two Detroit artists and organizers for spray painting ‘Free the Water’ on a water tower between Detroit and Flint at the height of the shutoffs. (The artists, Antonio Cosme and William Lucka, took a plea deal in late October and are raising funds to cover their fines.) The 2016 production included visuals from the “Free the Water” mural along with its iconic black power fist, and the communal process of grieving Charity, Grace, and Shaddy Rollins Sanchez (an organizer and friend of the city’s) was written into two songs, “Channel” and “Wage Love.”

[2] I had the opportunity to view the show three times — in its opening weekend as the facilitator of a regional retreat on Black land and liberation, in its third week with a broader audience, and once more on its final night.



Gabriella Marrero

Gabriella Marrero: 17-year-old native Lower East Sider. Aspiring actress and writer.

Gabriella Marrero

Following are two pieces developed for Perfect City, through roundtable discussions and individual writing. These were part of our performances in October, at Henry Street Settlement, through the Crossing The Line Festival.

Third Generation ^[1]

Gilberto ran away from his home in Puerto Rico, stowed away on a plane to New York at the age of fourteen. Some of you may ask, how the hell did he do this?

Gilberto grew up, married Margarita, raised Carmen along with eight other kids in Vladeks Project Housing. How did he do this?

At the age of 20, Carmen went against Gilberto's wishes and married Eugene. Girl got guts. We respect that. How the hell did she do it?

Fast forward to when Carmelo, Carmen's only son, was a kid. East Village, gang violence and all that stuff. Back when everyone actually knew everyone. I miss that.

Then fast forward to the young woman. The apple of Carmelo's eye, his little princess. Still is to this day. She was told to stay out of the projects and to be home before eight because that was when crime started to break.

Carmelo lost his job at Bloomberg when she was nine. Then all her favorite places closed. In April they got rid of the car. Now it's so bad, after she graduates high school, she might move to Queens before she moves into her college dorm.

Once a Lower girl always a Lower girl. She has to come back. How?

Rules for Coming To the Lower East Side ^[2]

1. Be part of the community in every aspect.
2. Notice all of the changes around you.
3. Know the history.
4. Stories: Listen to many while making your own
5. Enjoy because who knows if things would stay the same.

LES in 2036 ^[3]

I bought two apartments [and turned them] into one at the building I grew up in. My

father let me buy the other apartment and we morphed it into a nice home. Mom died a few years ago after a heart attack.

My husband and four kids move into my home, and I notice these changes.

The movie theater had been there since I married my husband. It was in progress when I was working with Aaron Landsman on this project called *Perfect City*. I sensed the piece as ironic and scandalous.

Henry Street ended up being this empire. That law firm went out of business. More condos were in place.

My cousin took my grandma's apartment and his family lives there now.

In the end, I was so happy to be with my father against [gentrification]. I was also excited to teach my children about this neighborhood.

My father and I decided to take my kids to Katz's Deli. They haven't been there since before my mother died.

I walk in, and I notice that it's crowded as usual. But then out of nowhere, the owner makes an announcement that this place is closing the next year.

At that moment, my heart stopped. I went to this place since I was a toddler.

After dinner at Katz's, I told my kids that we have to go there as often as we can for the next year because after next year, it's gone.

My youngest child asked me why do all of my childhood place close.

That was when I knew that it was the time I had to teach my children about gentrification.

[1] This came out of a session in which we told our families' stories related to the Lower East Side.

[2] As a group we worked out lists of rules for new arrivals to this historic neighborhood. These are mine.

[3] Working group members were asked to write about the LES in 20 years.



Ezio Rosa

Ezio Rosa, 22 anos, dançarino do corpo de baile do bloco afro Ilu Inã, performer, arte educador social, abordando as temáticas

englobadas na lei 10.639, DJ da festa Batekoo, criador e escritor do Tumblr *Bicha Nagô*, no qual propõe a discussão sobre homossexualidade trazendo as intersecções de raça e classe. Ezio Rosa, aged 22, is a performer; dances with the ensemble of the African Carnival block *Ilu Inã*; acts as a social art educator, approaching themes related to the Law 10.639, regarding instruction on Afro-Brazilian culture; is the DJ of Batekoo party; and also created the tumblr *Bicha Nagô*, where he discusses homosexuality at the intersection of race and class-related issues.

Ezio Rosa

Cena sound system nas favelas paulistas

(English version follows [here](#).)

É histórico que a cultura e o acesso à cidade sempre foi negado ao povo negro, da mesma forma quem também é histórico ver o mesmo povo se [aquilombando](#) para pensar estratégias, afim de conquistar o que nos foi tirado.

Nos últimos oito anos a cena sound system ganhou muita força nas periferias. As favelas e zonas periféricas do fim dos anos 90, início dos anos 2000, eram territórios de ninguém, abandonados pelo Estado e a mercê do crime organizado; quando o acesso à cidade nos era negado (principalmente pela onda de desemprego), a cena sound system surge então proporcionando uma resignificação destes espaços.

Como se deslocar para o centro da cidade para se divertir nem sempre era possível, os bailes de sound system são em sua maioria nas favelas. Composto por um paredão de som e um DJ, o som do reggae e vertentes atrai toda a população jovem local, e com a popularidade do baile, jovens de outras quebradas também. Com o movimento de pessoas, moradores das favelas onde acontecem os bailes, se instalam em pontos estratégicos para vender bebidas e comidas aos frequentadores, fora os botecos que ficam nas redondezas servindo cervejas e porções.

As festas costumam ser semanais e rodam pelas quatro zonas de São Paulo (zona norte, zona leste, zona oeste e zona sul), gerando empregos, cultura e lazer. Na maioria das vezes sem apoio financeiro algum, os bailes costumam ser autogerido pelos moradores e DJs.

A interferência do Estado nestes bailes é praticamente zero, digo praticamente zero, pois em alguns casos a polícia militar ainda aparece para reprimir estas organizações populares.

Depois de tantos anos promovendo estes encontros nos quatro cantos de São Paulo, hoje podemos notar que este trabalho ajuda a desmistificar este imaginário burguês que faz com que as periferias sejam sinônimo de violência. Com a efervescência dos bailes, pautas como a luta antiracismo, lgbtfofia e machismo passam a ser discutidas por coletivos de sound system, como é o caso do [Digitaldubs](#) do Rio de Janeiro.

Após quase dez anos da criação deste movimento nas periferias paulista os saldos são positivos, e percebo que esta movimentação pode ser o indício da união das quebradas para algo muito maior e mais potente.

* * *

The Sound System Scene in São Paulo Slums

Historically, culture and the access to the city have always been refused to Black people, just as it is also historical to observe such people gathering and joining forces, recalling the former [quilombos](#) in order to think of strategies and conquer back what has been taken away from us.

Over the past eight years, the sound system scene gained a lot of force in the peripheries. In the late 1990s, early 2000s, favelas and other marginal areas were basically no man's lands, abandoned by the State and at the mercy of organized crime. While we were denied access to the city (especially due to the wave of unemployment), the sound system scene came up, thus allowing for a resignification of these spaces.

Since going all the way downtown just to have fun was not always an option, most of the sound system balls take place in the favelas. Composed by a wall of speakers and a DJ, the sound of reggae and related genres draw not only the local youth, but also youth from neighboring left aside areas as the balls get increasingly popular. Along with the movement of people, local dwellers settle in strategic spots to sell food and drinks for people attending the balls, not to mention the surrounding bars selling beer and finger food.

These parties often happen weekly and cover the four zones of São Paulo — North, East, West, and South — , which generates jobs, culture, and leisure all at once. Considering they often have absolutely no financial support, the balls are usually self-managed by both local inhabitants and DJs. Also, State intervention in these balls is close to zero — I mean close to zero, for in a few cases the military police still show up to keep such popular organizations down.

After so many years promoting these gatherings in all corners of São Paulo, we can observe how performing this work helps demystify the bourgeois imaginary that renders the peripheries as a synonym to violence. Along with the booming of balls, issues like racism, homophobia in its wider sense, and male chauvinism became part of the agenda of sound system collectives, such as [Digitaldubs](#) from Rio de Janeiro.

Almost a decade after the rise of this movement in the peripheries of São Paulo, the outcomes are positive, and I realize that it might be evidence that peripheries can join forces toward something much larger and more powerful.

(Translation by Daniel Lühmann)



Tiffany Zorrilla

Tiffany Zorrilla, of Dominican descent, was born and raised in New York City. She is currently studying music and working to pursue her dream of becoming a Rockstar. She loves Rock and Roll music,

tattoos, and cats. She is a singer-songwriter, and plays the mandolin and piano. Tiffany dreams of making an impact on the world through her music and her activism. She is currently a part of the Perfect City group, an organization that fights against displacement and the problems that stem from gentrification.

Tiffany Zorilla

When we think about revolutionary groups, we think about their accomplishments and how it has changed the environment for better or for worse. I believe that leading a revolution takes a lot of courage, dedication, and tough skin. We oftentimes do not think about how revolutions were organized and what “conversation” provided people with enough information to spark a desire to make a change. Social reforms have the potential to grow into revolutions.

Art has a huge impact on the way we perceive social issues; it has the power to put a spotlight on the issues presented in society and will always stir a reaction from its audience by transmitting information and human emotion. As an artist myself, I feel I have a responsibility to fight for social and political change using *my music*. I hope that through being involved in the *Perfect City* project, I can educate the audience on topics they may be unfamiliar with. The media plays a big part in the way people perceive what is happening in their communities. What we see in media is what we accept; we never really seek out information for ourselves.

The *Perfect City* project is an educational, artistic, and conversational piece that covers topics including (but not limited to) the rezoning of neighborhoods in New York City, how neighborhoods have changed over the years (for better or for worse), and how to preserve cultures while also allowing communities to prosper. The *Perfect City* group came to a mutual consensus that to make art is to educate and provoke an emotional response from our audience. Art does not always have to offer up solutions to a problem, but rather provide information to make people aware of what is going on in society and/or their communities. That does not mean that art should be limited to highlighting issues, but rather creating a space where people have a say in creating solutions for their realities.

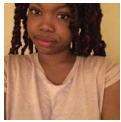
One working group member mentioned how we are so distracted and disconnected from our communities we oftentimes miss the changes happening right before our eyes. In New York City, we have a reputation as “the city that never sleeps.” The talk made me more observant of my city, looking up and watching my surroundings. Since then I’ve been taking photos of my neighborhood using my phone. A picture freezes time; *even when places change* a picture provides evidence of what used to be.



Photo by Tiffany Zorilla

Brand New Eyes – written by me

Take time to notice
 The leaves withering
 Orange rose petals kiss the ground
 Allow them to crunch and misshapen themselves beneath your feet
 The stop lights
 Red yellow and green
 The lady gripping her phone tightly on the subway car
 Tears forming in her eyes
 Her parents would be proud.
 The beggar that needs twenty dollars to get to his wife,
 Sadness makes his body shake
 The city that once made you feel at home
 You are a guest now
 Look up at the clouds dancing and making room for the sky
 The tall grey tower hanging over your head
 You may be small
 But the love for humanity lives inside you
 Don't dispose of yourself
 Take your time



Ashley Holden

Ashley Holden is a 20-year-old business student at LaGuardia Community College, and is going toward obtaining her Associates and then Bachelors degrees. She also participates in political conversations online and in groups on topics such as gentrification, race, women's rights, and more.

Ashley Holden

What is the value or impact of small-scale art projects that try to tackle large, complicated issues? Can a performance for 20 people around a table really help make social change possible?

Communicating complicated issues is in itself an art: the vulnerability of pain and struggle; the psychology of how our western societies have structured our whole beings. How can 20 people rewrite history? It starts with loads of creativity and courage. Having faith and relying on facts and theory to construct the art of the issue and move toward solutions.

The more you know, the more you can connect with people. Every single person in a collective can make an impact in their own individual way, and ideally make an even bigger impact to people around the world. What I believe to be "impact" is the ability to change one's mind, to provoke thought and to bring forth a change within people so we can fix our communities. In the *Perfect City* group our focus is

shining light on the topic of gentrification. Everyone in the group comes from different cultures and backgrounds and we all share our experiences.

For me, the physical, psychological and mental effects of gentrification are the main focuses that need to be brought out to the public: Policing in inner-cities where there are more people of color and lower incomes. Pushing people not only out of their homes but also out of their peace of mind. We ask, “Who is gentrification safer for?” Is it for the protection of people with paler skin and bigger pockets versus the bullying of people with darker skin and shallower pockets? Or is it the blatant arrogance of the upper class somehow saving “the poor” from themselves? Through *Perfect City* we show that you aren’t alone [in this fight], and there are resources still available to help you cope.

When we showed the first material from our *Perfect City* working group a couple weeks ago, I felt like we started something, but we didn’t really rise to the occasion. It honestly made me feel a little empty. I think we made a piece that people could appreciate, think about, and feel comfortable with, but that didn’t really get into the raw truth. So I feel like that’s my job, to ask the tougher questions. At our showings we talked about zoning, class, and the geography of our neighborhoods. I am hoping that as we continue to work we can get deeper into combatting the implicit, historic racism that is embedded in gentrification, both here in New York and elsewhere. I want to make the connections crystal clear, and I want to confront people’s assumptions about the way the city is changing.

Silence is the greatest threat to society today. Malcolm X once said, “A closed mouth doesn’t get fed,” and I believe that if we don’t voice our opinions, nothing will ever change. The purpose of a collective is to break barriers and show other people who face adversity every day that it is indeed possible to watch the night turn into day without a hand covering their eyes. If 20 people together around a table can lift that hand we can allow people to see and help guide them toward a more perfect city.

The race and class issues in gentrification on the Lower East Side present themselves like a rash; they’ve become insidious to the cultural foundation of New York. Do you want to live in a place where everyone looks like you, where the culture has been drained from the city? *Perfect City* is an informative group filled with amazing and talented people from all over NYC and we hope to spread love and information all over to help end gentrification. Confronting you gently with facts and deep expression to make you think. That’s why it might take 20 years. We bring a new meaning to art.

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