

'In tune with the beat of where they are': the AfroReggae UK Partnership in 2007  
Louise Owen

"Can culture be our weapon?" This ambivalent question introduced the work of Brazilian arts company AfroReggae to the UK for the second time, in a debate between artists, activists, police and policy makers at the Barbican in May 2007. Fighting the cultures of violence in the *favelas* (shantytowns) of Rio de Janeiro, AfroReggae's artistic work has achieved notable success. Straightforwardly, AfroReggae proposes that 'culture is our weapon'<sup>1</sup>. The company systematically works to claim space for art to take the place of the drug trade – materially, in the form of more than sixty-five projects and the provision of cultural centres in five *favelas*, and imaginatively, by inspiring confidence and trust in environments where armed conflict between drug gangs and the state habitually sabotages the security of daily life. On the basis of AfroReggae's ambitious and hopeful practices, a long-term collaborative project called the AfroReggae UK Partnership was launched in 2006. The weapon in question - learning how to make music and performance - drives AfroReggae's work and that of many artists and organisations in the UK. However, the majority of cultural institutions in this country perceive education as additional to their 'real business'<sup>2</sup>. The UK Partnership looks to AfroReggae for ideas and inspiration for cultural work that shares similar aspirations here – in particular, to tackle the increasingly urgent urban problems of gun and knife crime and gang culture. The practice of AfroReggae's accomplished artists encompasses both large scale performance and work with young people. By bringing the main band to the Barbican on an annual basis, the project offers the possibility of knowledge sharing face-to-face, and the invigoration of cultural debate and practice, crucial to establishing the most amenable conditions for the work. What were British artists, teachers and young people able to learn from AfroReggae's practice in the events in 2007 and beyond? What questions arise from the attempt to develop a longer-term model of arts work inspired by AfroReggae? And what new cultural spaces might the project imagine?

[AFROREGGAE HANDS] credit: Nicky Dracoulis

The AfroReggae UK Partnership was initiated by People's Palace Projects, an NGO based at Queen Mary, University of London. It is a long-term project, running until 2012. AfroReggae's main band performed at the Barbican for the first time in 2006, the large-scale act of performance the most high profile element of a much bigger programme of workshops and performances in London, Oxford and Manchester entitled *From the favela to the world*<sup>3</sup>. As part of this programme, AfroReggae's artists worked with young people in two secondary schools, Hackney Free and Parochial School and Stoke Newington School in the London borough of Hackney, at the end of which process the two schools came together to show their work at the Amnesty International Centre for Human Rights<sup>4</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> A short book by Damian Platt and Patrick Neate, *Culture Is Our Weapon* (2006), is one of the handful of detailed accounts of AfroReggae's work written in English.

<sup>2</sup> Robinson, Sara and Greenstreet, Teo, 'Mission unaccomplished: the place of education and learning in our national and regional performing arts and cultural organisations'. *Missions, models, money: catalysing a more sustainable art and cultural sector*, October 2006, pp. 1-25

<sup>3</sup> For a detailed account of AfroReggae's work in 2006, see Ings, Richard, *From the favela to our manor: Translating AfroReggae: the impact and implications of an international intervention in arts work with young people at risk*. (London: People's Palace Projects 2007)

<sup>4</sup> Speak-It Productions' short film, *From the favela to Hackney* (2006) documents this work.

Outside of formal education settings, workshops took place at the Blue Hut youth centre in Shoreditch, Arcola Theatre in Dalston and Contact Theatre in Manchester. At Queen Mary, University of London practitioners came together for a symposium led by percussion and a dynamic exchange of ideas and practices. Each of these projects lasted for no more than a week, but the excitement they generated showed the potential for more sustained work.

Rather than create a centralised hub or franchise of projects with a connection to AfroReggae, the aim of the UK Partnership is to establish the ground for artistic projects to germinate, and then to flourish on their own. Hackney Free School began running its own AfroReggae drumming project and Amnesty Human Rights Group soon after the March 2006 sharing at Amnesty, purchasing drums with funding from the Learning Trust, which set a very positive precedent for future work. To cultivate further projects, the plans for the 2007 programme were both notionally straightforward and practically complex. At the conclusion of the 2006 phase of projects, People's Palace Projects began work towards gathering together a more extended network of organisations: Barbican BITE and Barbican Education, Rich Mix, Contact Theatre, Asian Dub Foundation Education, Shoreditch Trust, the Learning Trust, the Black Police Association and the Brazilian Embassy. Scheduled for the second time to coincide with AfroReggae's performance at the Barbican, the programme (again entitled *Favela to the World*) staged a series of seminar and training events aimed at everyone with an interest in working with young people through art. By bringing artists, teachers and youth workers into direct contact with AfroReggae's work, the UK Partnership sought to stimulate dialogue and create further informal partnerships among those attending.

The accent on partnership is critical to the project, both on the practical level of collaboration between people, and the models of cultural action it endorses. The UK Partnership events in May 2007 launched with *Can culture be our weapon?* a panel discussion in the Garden Room at the Barbican chaired by activist filmmaker Roger Graef. Jeremy Weller, artistic director of the Grassmarket Project, an Edinburgh-based theatre company whose projects work with young people who have been involved in drugs, prostitution and robbery reflected upon the socio-cultural and spatial segregation endemic to urban spaces. Taking up Kids' Company director Camilla Batmanghelidjh's diagnosis of the experiences of disenfranchised young people – lacking robust care from parents or carers, denied access to key services, and turning to violence to establish and protect status on the street - he suggested that these represent "part of the culture that actually many of us never enter. We don't know anything about it. It is a subsection to our society that we're in the Barbican right now discussing, but it's outside the door in its raw reality"<sup>5</sup>. These words position, and reflect, the Barbican as a site of cultural and economic privilege, worlds away from the street. They invoke Zuenir Ventura's conceptualisation of Rio as divided city, governed by the 'parallel powers' of the drug gangs and the state<sup>6</sup>. There is no doubt that economic and social deprivation and its consequences are unevenly, unjustly, distributed. And in the education, youth justice, and arts sectors alike, infrastructures in this country encourage specialism and fragmentation, with the result that they frequently fail young people with the most difficult circumstances<sup>7</sup>. Part of the task of the UK Partnership, therefore, is to complicate

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<sup>5</sup> 'Can culture be our weapon? Raising the stakes in the fight against gun crime and gang culture', Monday 14 May 2007, Garden Room, Barbican Centre

<sup>6</sup> Heritage, Paul, 'Parallel Power: Shakespeare, Gunfire and Silence'. *Contemporary Theatre Review*, 15, 4, 2005 p. 393

<sup>7</sup> See for example *Barriers to Engagement* (2006), a Youth Justice Board study, which concludes that "responsibility for the education of the hard-to-reach

such parallel structures and bring separate social actors into dialogue for mutual benefit.

In part, the critical thinking the UK Partnership promised made the project attractive to Arts Council England, which supported the project. Karen Taylor comments that in the UK “when it comes to inclusion, we tend to think projects should be local and delivered by local companies or artists. This project does this on the one hand, but by including AfroReggae, their experience and skills, they bring a very interesting international element”<sup>8</sup>. AfroReggae’s artists work on high profile international stages and in the *favelas*, negotiating ambitious symbolic exchanges between the two. As part of their large scale concert series *Conexões Urbanas* [Urban Connections], in September 2007 AfroReggae brought Brazilian popular singer Marisa Monte (whose collaborations include work with Laurie Anderson and David Byrne) to perform in the impoverished Rio favela of Complexo de Alemão, where only three months earlier a brutal police intervention had deployed 1,350 soldiers and killed 24 people as part of the state’s war on drugs<sup>9</sup>. The differences in cultural and economic status between Complexo de Alemão and, for example, Carnegie Hall in New York, the prestigious Manhattan scene of thousands of accomplished performances since 1898 are not hard to detect. But for AfroReggae, the artistic practice in marginalised communities and particularly with young people is not secondary to their commercially successful concerts elsewhere. AfroReggae weave these facets of their work together strategically to advance their social agenda, epitomised by a slogan displayed on a huge poster near to their base in Complexo de Alemão – “*Onde os outros não vêem saída, a gente vê arte!*” [Where others see no way out, we see art!]. The programme of work, from capoeira with children to Banda AfroReggae opening a Rolling Stones gig on Copacabana Beach, is governed by what Jose Junior, executive co-ordinator of AfroReggae describes as “the logic of quality and profit”<sup>10</sup>.

In the UK, Karen Taylor continues, “we tend to make unhelpful distinctions between the community and the ‘professional’”<sup>11</sup>. These binaries crudely map onto others, for example ‘local-global’ and, arguably, ‘instrumental-intrinsic’, and construct a common-sense separation between social and aesthetic action, and between those people and actions that should remain tied to place and those at liberty to travel freely. The idea that artistic practice might be a means of delivering ‘instrumental’ social outcomes in terms of crime, health and economic and social regeneration has become a policy commonplace across the developed and developing world, within both public funding frameworks and corporate social responsibility programmes. George Yúdice theorises this as the re-conceptualisation of culture as *resource*<sup>12</sup>. It is a demonstrably global phenomenon, and the cultural sponsorship policy statement by Petrobras, Brazilian oil company and sponsor of AfroReggae, framing its funding of art and culture in line with “the Company’s strategic planning which, in addition to

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appears to be a baton that is regularly passed and frequently dropped. It can fall between schools, local education authorities, custodial institutions and local learning and skills councils, with YOTs and Connexions partnerships being intermediaries, often for limited periods of time”.

<sup>8</sup> Interview with Karen Taylor, Arts Council England.

<sup>9</sup> Phillips, Tom, ‘Blood on the street as drug gang and police fight for control of Rio favelas’. *The Guardian*, Friday 29 June 2007

<sup>10</sup> Neate, Patrick and Platt, Damian, *Culture Is Our Weapon: AfroReggae in the Favelas of Rio*. (London: Latin American Bureau 2006) p. 153

<sup>11</sup> Interview with Karen Taylor, Arts Council England.

<sup>12</sup> Yúdice, George, *The Expediency of Culture: uses of culture in the global era*. (Durham: Duke University Press 2003)

profitability, emphasizes the company's commitment to social responsibility and the country's growth"<sup>13</sup> resonates with those of commercial organisations more familiar in the UK. But for the UK Partnership project to ask, after AfroReggae, if it is possible to make a weapon of and for 'our' culture in fighting gun crime and gang culture rightly suggests differences between cultural forms, cultural organisation and ownership, and the nature of the urban experience of poverty and violence – complicating a singular narrative of 'instrumentalism' and asking after the texture of landscapes of practice.

Partnership working, though complex, promises dialogue and learning between organisations, and effective use of different sorts of resource – material, artistic, intellectual. And specifically for this project, there is the question of how best to reflect AfroReggae's simultaneous position as acclaimed main stage musicians and community practitioners. Malin Forbes, producer of AfroReggae at the Barbican, comments that "certainly it's the most inspiring project I've worked on and I know that Louise [Jeffreys, Head of Theatre] has similar feelings. We're very interested in all that AfroReggae are trying to do in their work"<sup>14</sup>. For the Barbican, involvement in and financial commitment to the project offers an opportunity for growth and development, in particular in engaging new audiences. The cultural identity, commissioning structure and resource of the Barbican provides the touring opportunity for AfroReggae's large scale performance, and enables a process of dialogue between AfroReggae's artists visiting the UK and other artists and organisations involved to take place. On this level, the UK Partnership's collaborative status complicates strict institutional divisions. And as Malin Forbes reflects, "it would be very hard to get the momentum of the project going without the involvement of those artists sharing their knowledge"<sup>15</sup>.

[AFROREGGAE EAST LONDON] credit: Nicky Dracoulis

The AfroReggae UK Partnership events from 14 to 18 May 2007 were devoted to knowledge exchange – a combination of presentations, discussion groups and practical workshops with AfroReggae artists over a week. In the days following the panel discussion at the Barbican, artists, teachers and youth workers gathered at Rich Mix. Like so many other cultural spaces in post-industrial urban centres, this large multi art-form venue in Bethnal Green was converted from an old garment factory. But as distinct from spaces like Baltic or Tate Modern, Derek Richards, former Director of Creative at Rich Mix introduced it as "pretty much 60,000 square feet of participatory arts space"<sup>16</sup>, a resource specifically intended for local people. On Tuesday evening, in a fourth floor studio offering spectacular, sweeping views across London, a large group of artists and workshop leaders, working mainly in east London, came together for a free session entitled *Artist as warrior, artist as mediator*, a discussion with AfroReggae artists Altair Martins, Carla Martins, Johayne Hildefonso and Junhinho. Given that, as one participant pointed out, time in the evening means money for freelancers, the substantial size of the group suggested a desire and need for meetings like this to allow otherwise isolated artists to network and share ideas. Some of the participants in this session then either attended or observed the three day Training Forum, the rest of the week's events, but by and large these were populated by teachers and artists based in institutions. The Training Forum gave an introduction to AfroReggae on Wednesday evening, with a presentation by

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<sup>13</sup> Petrobras Cultural. <<http://www2.petrobras.com.br>> [accessed on 1 December 2007]

<sup>14</sup> Interview with Malin Forbes, Barbican Centre

<sup>15</sup> Interview with Malin Forbes, Barbican Centre

<sup>16</sup> Derek Richards, *What is AfroReggae?*, Rich Mix, 16 May 2007

Altair and a screening of a short film. This segued into practical workshops in percussion and theatre, between which the group was split equally. This pattern was repeated on Thursday and Friday, with presentations, discussions and question-and-answer sessions in the mornings, and workshop practice in the afternoons, and a session about how to make drums from found materials. The training finished with a performance bringing the theatre and percussion work together. Derek Richards closed his introduction to the Wednesday evening session by describing the programme as "one of the three most exciting things that has happened here in the last 15 months"<sup>17</sup>.

[AFROREGGAE DRUMS FOUND MATERIALS] credit: Nicky Dracoulis

The discussion sessions shared knowledge and strategy regarding gun and knife crime and gang culture in work with young people<sup>18</sup> which were rich and informative. Angus McLewin's session, mapping out the uneven contemporary landscape of arts policy and practice regarding gun, knife and gang culture was particularly helpful. But an equally powerful outcome of the Forum was the sense of excitement and new-found energy for their work with young people generated among the practitioners. The practical workshops offered skills training in Afro-Brazilian drumming and theatre, but as importantly, they allowed practitioners who are normally cast in the role of teacher to be learners and to play. Kieron Jones, a film-maker who subsequently visited AfroReggae in Rio in 2007 with his project *Shakespeare in the Favelas*<sup>19</sup>, said that "as someone who spends all of his time leading workshops, performing one-man shows, it was motivational to spend two days alongside like-minded, good-hearted educationalists"<sup>20</sup>. Within AfroReggae's practice, the interchange between roles and questioning of status is enormously important; in fact, central to their anti-violence agenda. As Carla insisted in the Tuesday evening session, "we have to look at the other person as we look at ourselves. If we see the other person as ourselves, if we see each other as equals, we can eliminate and eradicate violence. Art can bring that. Through workshops and connection with people we can reach this aim"<sup>21</sup>. AfroReggae see artistic action and action in everyday life as interwoven, and the relationship between group and individual as reciprocal. In one of AfroReggae's workshop sessions in Stoke Newington School, Carla articulated this to a group of Year 9 students plainly: "Your participation inside the group is fundamental. If you go wrong, don't care about a simple game, it could be harmful. We are responsible for our own actions and we do make a difference individually"<sup>22</sup>. Both during the sessions, and on evaluation form after evaluation form, practitioners talked of happiness and renewal: "refreshed my opinion and enlightened me on more dynamic, playful and organic ways to teach", "AMAZING!!!", "I will take the shared understanding of this training, the joy and warmth, and translate that through my work", "Impossible *not* to get swept up in the passion, emotion and energy...this is a seed that's going to grow", "it's great to have a forum like this, to remind us why we do the work we do, and not to forget and get lost in the

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<sup>17</sup> Derek Richards, *What is AfroReggae?*, Rich Mix, 16 May 2007

<sup>18</sup> Sylvan Baker discussed ideas engaged by projects such as status, identity and trust and vulnerability; Sonia Mehta described the history and work of Asian Dub Foundation Education; Derek Richards reflected on authenticity and sustainability; Bevan Powell discussed the Black Police Association's work with arts projects to combat racism; Altair Martins responded with thoughts regarding AfroReggae's *Youth and the Police* project.

<sup>19</sup> *Shakespeare in the Favelas*. <<http://www.kj-films.com/favelas/index.html>>

<sup>20</sup> AfroReggae UK Partnership Training Forum evaluation form.

<sup>21</sup> Carla Martins, *Artist as warrior, artist as mediator*, Rich Mix, 15 May 2007

<sup>22</sup> Workshop, Stoke Newington School, May 2007

reality of it all”, “there are NO! limits – push as hard as you like, work hard, play harder”<sup>23</sup>.

[AFROREGGAE JOHAYNE AND CARLA] credit: Nicky Dracoulis

The workshops at Rich Mix reflected these principles. The first theatre session on Wednesday evening gently began by asking participants each to find a space to work with, to mark it out as their territory, and having established it as their own, gradually to allow the body to explore that small territory. As bodies moved in the space, rolling on the ground, stretching, treading, Carla and Johayne asked participants to close their eyes, and continued to talk, their words translated for the British practitioners by an interpreter: “Don’t be greedy for space”, “You are still within your territory, you can’t trespass that”. A quiet environment of tranquillity and trust slowly built over the extended time of being and moving in the space. The artists produced large brightly coloured sacks, made of a light elasticated fabric, and handed them to each person. As the unseeing participants found their way inside the sacks and began to explore how the space felt enclosed in the fabric, continuing to mark the territory, aquatic, percussive music began to play from a small stereo. The suggestion “try to transform yourself into something” produced bigger gestures and movements, stretching the fabric spikily, and finally they asked that everyone gradually begin to push themselves out of the fabric, ending by pulling the fabric slowly over the head. Although no-one had moved more than a metre during that time (which could have been forty minutes, or hours), the space and people seemed different, utterly transformed; the neutral studio’s white walls felt alive. The studio next door meanwhile was a kinetic blast of sound. Altair tapped out samba and reggae rhythms on a drum at the front, and expressions of intense concentration creased the faces of the group as they followed. As confidence grew, participants’ bodies became looser, enjoying the rhythms. Paula (producer of AfroReggae) yelled “From the top!” and the routine began again, Altair directing encouragement through his whole body, head brought down forcefully to mark the end of each phrase. At one moment, a woman playing one of the bigger drums became stuck, unsure of what to do. Watching her partner, she suddenly picked up the rhythm again, seeming to have caught its flow almost involuntarily, like whitewater rafting. As the group reached the end of the routine, chests turning red, sticks snapped in two and huge grins spread across the faces of its members, the irresistible sound replaced with enthusiastic cheers.

[AFROREGGAE DRUMMING PARTICIPANTS] credit: Nicky Dracoulis

Through actions like these, the artistic practice at Rich Mix explored the creation and assertion of spaces of respect and co-presence, and the work of communication this entails – listening, watching, feeling. The primacy of feeling in AfroReggae’s work, celebrating emotional responses and speaking to them plainly, made for an extraordinary experience, at its clearest when the groups finished their performance together on Friday afternoon, which combined the Maractú theatre forms the group had subsequently worked on with percussion. Johayne declared that his happiness was so great that it didn’t fit inside of him, and sitting in the stage space, practitioners were visibly moved, some to tears. Speaking with Derek Richards at Rich Mix about the Forum later in 2007, he reflected that

it’s interesting when you look back on May and June this year, because I think it is a very different situation [in the UK], and that was probably the thing that excited people most this year with working with AfroReggae. It

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<sup>23</sup> AfroReggae UK Partnership Training Forum evaluation forms.

was inspirational: the impetus, the energy they have, and the willingness to accept and even incorporate the emotional engagement in what they do. And that's what made the environment upstairs what it was, and that's what made the environment in Hackney Free School in 2006 what it was. And so yeah, you forget about those things until you're introduced to something that comes from outside what has developed here, and kind of punctures that bubble.<sup>24</sup>

These explorations were the starting point for the bigger project of the Training Forum – to experiment with ways of realising work practically in settings in the UK. Its final purpose was to devise a series of ten UK projects influenced by AfroReggae. Paul Heritage, artistic director of People's Palace Projects stated at the outset of the programme that "the next few days will feature workshops. But the idea is not to teach technique, but to use the practical workshops as a way of discovering and taking AfroReggae's method back into our own settings, into the creation of the projects. Jorge Lopez, theatre director and Rudi Rocha, carnival and drama practitioner, will be on hand to assist. But it might not necessarily be the Brazilian popular cultural forms that are important to us"<sup>25</sup>. The longer-term purpose of this structure was to establish a means of running work into 2008 and beyond. The presentations that followed could be anything and of any size – a project description, a video screening, or performance.

A month later, on Wednesday 27 June 2007, the performance space at Rich Mix hosted a series of projects at various stages of development. Inspired by the knowledges and experience offered by AfroReggae, either through the Training Forum or, as in the case of Hackney Free School, their longer-term engagement, ten groups – theatre companies, schools and an art gallery – showed ideas in various forms. In the intervening time, AfroReggae artists had visited a series of settings, including Stoke Newington and Hackney Free in Hackney, and Swanlea School in Tower Hamlets, leading drumming and theatre workshops. Kate Chahal from FBA & Mall Galleries gave a short presentation about her plans for a 3-D sculptural graffiti project with a youth group she was working with. Rachel Scott from TIPP (Theatre in Prisons and Probation) screened a short film of a theatre project with young men in a Manchester detention centre. Young people from Contact Theatre – I recognised Kelly from the Arcola sessions in 2006 – spoke of their passion for performance, their ongoing workshopping skills' development and a project they were planning with and for people of their own age. A group from Theatre Royal Stratford East gave two performances of drumming and devised theatre work, and Central Foundation School for Boys, a short performance about rivalry between two estates. EJ Trivett from Immediate Theatre spoke about the peer mentoring their drumming project involved. Catherine de Sybel from Elizabeth Garrett Anderson School in Islington outlined a plan for music activities with a small group of girls at risk of exclusion from school. A group of Year 7 boys from Stoke Newington School showed the drumming routine they had learned and a street dance performance they had devised themselves, which until the moment they arrived at the venue they had decided not to perform. And a large group from Hackney Free, many of whose members had performed at Amnesty the previous year, gave performances of drumming and dance.

It was a celebratory afternoon. Karen Taylor felt that "you could see how AfroReggae had inspired them and that it was a very rewarding experience for them"<sup>26</sup>. Helen Wood from Stoke Newington School agrees. The boys,

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<sup>24</sup> Interview with Derek Richards, Rich Mix.

<sup>25</sup> Paul Heritage, AfroReggae UK Partnership Training Forum

<sup>26</sup> Interview with Karen Taylor, Arts Council England.

completely new to AfroReggae, were among the lowest achieving students in the year in terms of their academic attainment and effort, attitude and behaviour; some were statemented, others looked after. She reflects that

the group were extremely excited by the visits and workshops led by members of the AfroReggae group. However excitement did lead to extreme hyperactivity and even when AfroReggae arrived on mass the group were lively and difficult to manage. This was even more true of when James and Angharad [teachers at Stoke Newington School] were left to work with the group alone. Normally, these students would never be put together in a single class and so James and Angharad did struggle at times particularly as the in-session support of members of the Inclusion team was not as strong as had been hoped for. There were moments of despair and frustration but then out of that came moments of sheer exhilaration and true sense of success and achievement when James and Angharad realised that the group were on task and were beginning to regulate themselves, supporting and teaching each other and reprimanding those who lost focus. Although not sustained these periods added evidence to the fact that this type of work can be hugely beneficial to children whose engagement with school tends to be negative. Some really began to shine – one was seen smiling for the first time, another showed any adult he came across the positive comments on the report card - possibly the first time he'd been praised at school.<sup>27</sup>

She felt that the performance was a 'triumph': following this sometimes chaotic and demanding process of rehearsing, "the group finally understood why they needed to work together, to focus and to do the best they could – because they were being taken seriously and treated with respect by a live audience". For the group to have something they had made placed before a different and supportive audience re-contextualised their work's meaning, and allowed the people in the audience to take pleasure in their performance. Helen Wood witnessed the boys' own pleasure as they "received real whoops and cheers and visibly grew in stature and pride"<sup>28</sup>.

Since June 2007, AfroReggae UK Projects have been growing and developing in their various settings. They vary in size and scale and their level of identification with AfroReggae. Some projects have developed as a result of artists or teachers translating experiences from the training into their own settings, or taking advantage of the opportunity to bring AfroReggae artists to work with their groups. Daniel Shindler, drama teacher at Swanlea School in Tower Hamlets has been developing a big performance on the theme of slavery with an ensemble from three year groups. He arranged for AfroReggae to work with the group in summer 2007. Though their theatre work with Johayne influenced the performance's aesthetic development, he says "it was less the skills, than their kindness that the kids came away with. It was wonderful in bonding them as a group, building their ensemble, which is an important point"<sup>29</sup>. Their work was performed at Swanlea School in February 2008, and will appear at the Museum in Docklands later in the year. Kate Chahal's plans for the 3-D sculpture project evolved into an AfroReggae-inspired graffiti project exploring figurative images of wildlife with a group from a PRU in Brent, resulting in a permanent installation of the young people's work in the building.

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<sup>27</sup> Interview with Helen Wood and Alexis Watts, Stoke Newington School.

<sup>28</sup> Interview with Helen Wood and Alexis Watts, Stoke Newington School.

<sup>29</sup> Interview with Daniel Shindler, Swanlea School.



Three bigger, ongoing projects are taking place in Hackney. Hackney Free and Parochial School now runs several groups under the AfroReggae banner including boys' dance, girls' dance, African dance (a group which comes together annually to perform for Black History Month), capoeira and drumming, which meet once a week. Stoke Newington School likewise demonstrates its clear connection to AfroReggae with a microsite documenting the work so far, with video clips streamed online<sup>30</sup>. Plans are in train to develop an offsite teaching unit on a local estate for the most difficult and disruptive students, and the Head of Inclusion at the school is keen to integrate artistic practice inspired by AfroReggae into the general curriculum. Working with the Tenants and Residents Association on the estate will also open up out of hours sessions to a much wider base of participants from the local area. Helen Wood says that "with a hall and a stage and a rehearsal space, we have suddenly been presented with the opportunities to spread our work still further and work with the young people on the estate – many of whom in their late teens have been excluded from the education system years earlier and have fallen through the net and been provided with no alternative"<sup>31</sup>. Commissioned by the Shoreditch Trust, Immediate Theatre have meanwhile been running an AfroReggae samba drumming group, first in the Blue Hut and then Hoxton Hall in Shoreditch, with plans to run two groups concurrently during 2008. The project also participates in a national Peer Mentoring scheme run by Youth Music, managed in London by Sound Connections, and designed to encourage skills and leadership development towards the acquisition of nationally recognised qualification the Arts Award. The projects will show work as part of the Barbican's contribution to the Mayor of London's East Festival in March 2008.

This clutch of projects offers a view on the complex terrain of negotiations required to make projects happen in the UK – both to set them up, and to attract young people to work on them. Even the sixty or so practitioners involved in the AfroReggae UK Partnership events represented enormous organisational diversity – from building-based organisations of all sizes based in local areas, local authorities, large production companies operating out of offices and studios, schools, to smaller companies and freelancers moving between contracts and projects. One or two arts organisations had long-term relationships with partner schools. Others developed relationships by tailoring programmes of work to harmonise with a school calendar or curriculum. Outside of the school setting, others entered into projects with pre-determined partners, developed projects in collaboration with government or non-statutory agencies, or worked as freelancers across all kinds of settings – schools, youth centres, PRUs, theatre organisations. Some had international links and toured work overseas. While schools and school-based projects can access young people relatively easily, other projects work hard to attract participants through offering taster workshops, networking with teachers, youth workers, members of the youth justice system and local organisations, using the internet or simply talking to people in the street. It offers a sense of a diffuse and fragmentary field of work, made more complex by the short-term nature of projects and funding cycles, and the limited time that overstretched partner institutions might have to devote to cultivating projects with artists.

This contrasts strongly with AfroReggae's model, of cultural centres embedded in their communities, offering workshops and classes on a continuous and daily basis, and weaving support from psychologists and social workers through the programme. It is a model that has been in development since the organisation

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<sup>30</sup> *AfroReggae with Stoke Newington School.*

<<http://www.sns.hackney.sch.uk/afroreggae/Index.htm>>

<sup>31</sup> Interview with Helen Wood and Alexis Watts, Stoke Newington School.

began in 1993. In a context of the highest levels of unemployment Brazil has ever seen, and prejudice against *favela* dwellers which compromises employability, young people are readily drawn into work as *traficantes* (drug runners), and it is this which the company seeks to challenge. It runs centres in four *favelas* in Rio de Janeiro, and another in neighbouring Nova Iguaçu. It is easy to imagine that all shantytowns are the same<sup>32</sup>, but in fact they form a differentiated landscape, one that AfroReggae responds to with programmes of work tailored to context. In the steep hillside *favela* of Cantagalo, an unexpected

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<sup>32</sup> Rio de Janeiro has upwards of 600 *favelas* housing over a million people. They are improvised communities illegally squatted on vacant land. The first was established in 1898 by Bahian soldiers, to whom accommodation was promised following military action, which did not then materialise from the state. Their growth exploded during the 1940s as state sponsored industrialisation encouraged migration to the inner city (Pino, 1997 p. 111). Janice Perlman's *The Myth of Marginality* (1977), a pathbreaking study of three *favelas*, was researched between 1968 and 1969 during a moment of struggle over slum clearance; during the research process, Catacumba in the Zona Sul which she and her team studied was summarily demolished by a federal agency. The agency's mission, to eradicate the city's then 300 *favelas*, was obviously not completed. Her project was to demonstrate that the *favelas* were not marginal sites of social and economic immiseration sealed from the rest of urban society, but in fact related in complex ways to the ecology and economy of the city – its residents workers in the service sector, in domestic roles (where the employer's address would often be used to get the employee's children into school), casual labourers, and regulated by internal structures of governance. But writing in 2004, she commented that the term 'marginality' is now experiencing a renaissance in public discourse about the *favela*: "although the *favelados* [*favela* dwellers] themselves are no longer considered marginal, the physical territory of their communities has become tightly controlled by the drug dealers, who have now inherited the term 'marginais'" (Perlman, 2004 p. 189). This new marginality is produced through the actions (and representations) of organised criminal gangs, in concert with police corruption. During the 1980s cocaine trafficking increased in Rio, and dealers took advantage of the comparative spatial isolation the *favelas* represented for packaging and shipping drugs out. With the threat and use of violence, gangs also took over local *Associações dos Moradores* (residents' associations) to assume political and procedural control of those spaces for commercial advantage. As such, Bryan McCann (2006, p. 159) argues that

the problem of gangs in Rio's *favelas* is primarily one of territorial control and only secondarily one of drug trafficking itself. Within the *favelas*, the gangs have arrogated many of the rights and duties of the state: they control the use of violence, the levy taxes and regulate movement, and they provide sporadic public assistance...Reforms that do not address the fundamental issue of territorial control offer little hope of substantial improvement.

When we visited four *favelas* in Rio in November 2007, we saw many visible signs of this territorial struggle. The continued presence of a military police guard at the entrance to Complexo de Alemão following the attack in June; holes marking the impact of bullets on concrete walls; the distant sight of men standing on a bridge speaking into radios to alert their companions to our arrival in Parada de Lucas; and the permanent concrete picnic tables and chairs erected in the road in Vigário Geral, both for their ostensible use but also for preventing the military police from driving into the *favela* in armed vehicles at will, signal an ongoing battle for spatial control.

ten minutes walk from where we were staying in Copacabana during our visit to Rio in November 2007, AfroReggae run scheduled circus and dance activities in the huge basement of what used to be a casino, with an eye to developing professional circus performers. In the neighbouring, and warring, grey concrete favelas of Vigário Geral and Parada de Lucas in the flat northern periphery of the city, an hour's drive from the Zona Sul, AfroReggae have accessed funds to build entirely new centres. In Vigário Geral, building was in progress of a large centre for dance, capoeira and percussion, to be open 24 hours a day for classes, internet access and unstructured leisure-time open to everyone in the community, and studios to host external visitors. Parada de Lucas' new building, which opened in 2006, is called the Centre for the Democratisation of Intelligence [*Centro de Inteligência Coletiva Lorenzo Zanetti*], and offers IT classes, violin lessons, percussion, capoeira and houses AfroReggae Digital, a digital radio station. In the huge amalgam of favelas Complexo de Alemão, AfroReggae's circus, dance and percussion activities were initially held in the Villa Olímpica, a SESC building just outside the favela, and the open air *quadro* within the favela, a space used for sports and *baile funk* parties. They now take place in a refurbished community association building. The spaces are colourful, full of light, and meticulously kept.

[AFROREGGAE CIRCUS CANTAGALO] credit: Alex Bowen

The *núcleos* follow a clear hierarchy with centre co-ordinators leading their operations, but are holistic in their aims and intentions. Support from social workers and psychologists is woven through all of AfroReggae's activities, following different patterns in each centre, and a monthly meeting brings all five staffing teams together. In Complexo de Alemão, young community residents and long-time participants in the organisation act as paid 'project agents', advocating on behalf of the centre, encouraging others to get involved, monitoring groups and teaching. Feedback from all staff - social workers, canteen staff, co-ordinators - consistently informs the artistic work. For AfroReggae, children and young people already have expert knowledges about their lives and experiences which others would not be able to teach them. The task of their work is to bring those knowledges into dialogue with art - as theatre and dance artist Carla put this, "to be better able to bring their universe into the universe of popular dance, to work with young people's capacity to confront the new"<sup>33</sup>. The buildings are dedicated to icons of Afro-Brazilian culture, for example, poet and AfroReggae mentor Wally Salamão, educationalist and activist Lorenzo Zanetti, and black Brazilian circus performer Benjamin de Oliveira. As examples of joined-up provision, there are no easy comparators in the UK. Karen Taylor remarks that such a

level of integration is still very unusual here. For example, the Bromley by Bow Centre is (rightly) celebrated for integrating a holistic and creative approach to improving health and well being. It is now nearly 25 years old and even though there is evidence that it works, spaces which integrate creative practice into service delivery like BBBC are still very unusual. Having said that it does feel like there has never been so much art in public spaces, but we struggle to make the case for creative practice in our everyday lives and to make this integral to running of those spaces and services<sup>34</sup>.

In the research I conducted towards this article, practitioners involved in the UK Partnership called repeatedly for their work to be made more sustainable through

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<sup>33</sup> Interview with Carla Martins, AfroReggae

<sup>34</sup> Interview with Karen Taylor, Arts Council England

longer-term funding to allow forward planning, and the creation of structures to offer young people greater freedom to develop their own artistic skills and interests – “a young persons’ touring company”, “the freedom to allow participants the right to lead one another – without constant adult surveillance”, “decisions made by children reflected in national government policy”<sup>35</sup>. One of the other repeated calls – for access to spaces which young people feel some ownership of – is one of the key challenges for projects working with ‘hard to reach’ young people, and is related significantly to the group and gang activities the work seeks to challenge.

[AFROREGGAE LORENZO ZANETTI] credit: Alex Bowen

Regarding young people and criminal action, simplistic oppositions of the ‘law-abiding’ and ‘lawless’ dominate public discourse (strikingly similar to generalising representations of *favela* communities in Brazil’s mainstream media<sup>36</sup>). These binaries are ritually performed – whether by sensational news headlines, such as the *Evening Standard*’s ‘Top judge attacks ‘feral’ yobs in a courtroom tirade as Cameron calls for National Service’<sup>37</sup>, or Blair’s controversial Callaghan lecture in Cardiff in April 2007, in which he called for measures to deal with knife and gun crime (a problem he drew as specific to black young people)<sup>38</sup>, concluding that “what we are dealing with is not a general social disorder; but specific groups or people who for one reason or another, are deciding not to abide by the same code of conduct as the rest of us”, requiring that “the ringleaders be identified and taken out of circulation”<sup>39</sup>. *Groups, gangs and weapons* (2007), a Youth Justice Board study, meanwhile suggests that a singular model of ‘the gang’ inadequately describes what are really more differentiated forms of social association, in the main among young men. Gang or group membership – and the study points to the glamorising effects of describing all such groups as ‘gangs’ – runs alongside other friendship groups and connections with ‘non-criminal peers’. If weapons are carried, they tend to be knives rather than guns, a finding echoed at the launch of the UK Partnership by Commander Rod Jarman of the Metropolitan Police<sup>40</sup>; what marks a group out from a ‘real gang’, that is, one

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<sup>35</sup> AfroReggae UK Partnership online questionnaires

<sup>36</sup> See Leu (2004, pp. 343-355) for an analysis of *O Dia, O Globo, Extra, Folho de São Paulo* and *Jornal do Brasil*. She argues that these representations are an attempt to secure the long held, but disintegrating cultural hierarchy of the *morro* and the *asfalto*: “the city’s spatial divide, which is reinforced in the press, means that figures like the sadistic Elias Maluco – believed to be responsible for the death of [O Globo journalist Tim] Lopes – come to suggest metonymically the potential violence and atavism of the *favela* population as a whole” (p. 352). The article opens with a citation from AfroReggae’s CD *Nova Cara*.

<sup>37</sup> ‘Top judge attacks ‘feral’ yobs in a courtroom tirade as Cameron calls for National Service’, *Evening Standard*, Thursday 18 January 2008

<sup>38</sup> Wintour, Patrick and Dodd, Vikram, ‘Blair blames spate of murders on black culture’. *The Guardian*, 12 April 2007

<sup>39</sup> Blair, Tony, Callaghan Lecture, Cardiff 11 April 2007. Transcript available at <<http://keptonyblairforpm.wordpress.com/11-april-2007-cardiff-blair-callaghan-speech/>> [accessed September 2007]

<sup>40</sup> In response to panel chair Roger Graef at the launch of the UK Partnership, Rod Jarman remarked: “when you were speaking before you asked about what was it that we could do to stop people carrying guns, young people carrying guns, and I think that there are some things we have to understand. The first thing is who has these guns. We talk about young people in such a general way that it makes it sound as if every young person has a gun. And we talk about it in areas which are very diverse, so it creates all sorts of questions about young black people or young Asian people, instead of looking at the individuals and what’s going on. My

involved in organised crime, is the latter's strategic use of extreme violence. There is a critical correlation between gang or group membership and exclusion from mainstream education. This study, and another on the issue of gun crime conducted on behalf of the Home Office in 2006, point towards a need for greater specificity regarding the constitution of groups and gangs, and their connection with professional criminality, in particular drug trafficking. A broad functional typology is 'peer groups', 'gangs' and 'organised crime groups'<sup>41</sup>. Hales et al find that

local social geographic conditions, including the built environment, the local economy - including the criminal economy - and the presence of distinct communities, appear to be instrumental in creating the conditions within which cultures of gang membership and gang identity can develop and become entrenched. They appear to thrive where clear spatial or social boundaries can be identified, such as town centres or housing estates, and where there is a reasonable degree of community stability, such that people locally know (of) each other and gang identities can bridge generations.<sup>42</sup>

In the densely built environment of London, borough, postcode and estate boundaries act as a focus for collective identities, whose mutual constitution places limits on young people's movement in and around those areas.

Immediate Theatre's AfroReggae samba drumming workshops were staged initially at the Blue Hut in summer 2007. Funded by the Shoreditch Trust, with additional funding from Team Hackney, the project was targeted to reach thirty young people, in particular those who live on the Murray Grove estate. However, the Blue Hut was too small to accommodate the specified group size, and its location in a residential area meant that the noise generated by the drums was unwelcome, especially later in the evening. But at the Blue Hut, embedded in the estate, the group was building successfully. When the sessions moved to Hoxton Hall, less than ten minutes' walk away, attendance dropped off sharply. Jo Carter, Artistic Director of Immediate Theatre says "it's a problem, because our focus is the young people who live on the Murray Grove estate, and none of them will go to Hoxton Hall. They won't leave their area. The barrier is Pitfield Street, which divides two different gangs. A young boy, 11 or 12 years old, was attending the sessions at the Blue Hut but he stopped coming after the move, because his mother said it was too far for him to go"<sup>43</sup>. As a consequence, two groups will be run in 2008 - one at the Blue Hut, and another at Hoxton Hall. Damian Atkinson, Education, Youth and Sport Programme Manager at the Shoreditch Trust reflects that "young people here live quite a local life. People don't go very far, people might not ever leave Shoreditch, or very rarely. But

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personal belief on this is that very few young people are involved in carrying guns and using guns. More people are involved in carrying knives, but in certain areas of London there are a few people who are a significantly large number to make a massive impact on the lives of very many young people. And it's that impact which I think is so important, especially if we're going to break the sort of cycle of people carrying weapons for their own protection". 'Can culture be our weapon? Raising the stakes in the fight against gun crime and gang culture', Monday 14 May 2007, Garden Room, Barbican Centre

<sup>41</sup> Hales, Gavin, Lewis, Chris, Silverstone, Daniel, *Gun crime: the market and use of illegal firearms*. Home Office Research Study 298. (London: Home Office Research, Development and Statistics Directorate 2006) p. 31

<sup>42</sup> Hales, Gavin, Lewis, Chris, Silverstone, Daniel, *Gun crime: the market and use of illegal firearms*. p. 30-31

<sup>43</sup> Interview with Jo Carter, Immediate Theatre

people are very conscious that 'this is my patch', and therefore to move something ten minutes, you wouldn't think it would make a difference, but actually it does make a huge difference...in maximising resource you would say well look, it's crazy to have two things going on ten minutes away, but in reality you will not make a difference [unless you do]"<sup>44</sup>.

The entrenched territorial divisions in Shoreditch and elsewhere in London – EJ Trivett, manager of the AfroReggae UK project at Immediate Theatre in 2007 describes them as "those invisible lines"<sup>45</sup> – are qualitatively different to the visible, physically demarcated lines between *favela* (shantytown) and *asfalto* (city 'proper'). They cultivate fears for personal safety that are unlikely to be swept away wholesale through the action of a single, short-term project. As Damian Atkinson suggests, resources need to be deployed strategically in response to the contextual needs of a place to gradually and carefully encourage participation that performs that place differently. Renegotiating imagined boundaries goes hand-in-hand with economic investment – as private sector investment in Shoreditch over the past decade shows. Shoreditch now attracts a raft of other cultural meanings, and functions as recognisable shorthand for urban chic. Opportunities for conspicuous consumption, and the cultural and social mobility it implies, are plentiful – the White Cube, for example, or the fashionable restaurants and bars near to it on Hoxton Square. But these sit only a few minutes' walk from an area of Hoxton that is in the top 3% of the most deprived areas in England<sup>46</sup>, indexical of widening inequality<sup>47</sup>. Establishing alternatives is necessarily a long-term process, and the contribution of the UK Partnership is only just beginning.

In December 2007 Immediate's group, led by artists from Taru, staged *Festa das Ruas* (*Festival of the Streets*), a sharing of their work followed by food at Hoxton Hall. The young person who had stopped attending the workshops came along with his mother. The performance, given to an intimate audience of friends, family members and representatives from agencies connected to the project felt relaxed and welcoming. With drums made from found materials Rudi Rocha encouraged us, the audience, to experiment with a simple samba rhythm – 'HELLO---HOW DO YOU DO---LET US PLAY THE SAMBA NOW!' – suggesting one rhythm for the bass drums made from large cardboard cylinders with layers of clingfilm stretched across, another for the snares made from biscuit tins and washers, in patterns of call and response. Rudi would pick individuals from the audience to improvise for a moment, single voices speaking through percussion in the midst of the group rhythm. Then a young performer gave a complicated performance of body percussion, accompanied by the now more confident audience. At first it didn't work. The bass rhythm we were playing slightly too fast sat stubbornly out of joint with the beats he was producing. And then almost imperceptibly the rhythms found a harmony, and fell in time with one another. It was beautiful; in a meeting later, Rudi said it seemed "like magic, somehow"<sup>48</sup>.

It is tempting to romanticise moments like this, and invest them with the utopian promise of perfect communication and community. But the reality is both more prosaic and more exciting – that they are the result of the work of listening and

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<sup>44</sup> Interview with Damian Atkinson, Shoreditch Trust

<sup>45</sup> Interview with EJ Trivett, Immediate Theatre

<sup>46</sup> Hackney Local Implementation Plan LIP (2006-2011). << [http://www.hackney.gov.uk/local\\_implementation\\_plan\\_-\\_section\\_1\\_-\\_local\\_socio-economic\\_impact.pdf](http://www.hackney.gov.uk/local_implementation_plan_-_section_1_-_local_socio-economic_impact.pdf)>> [accessed 15 February 2007]

<sup>47</sup> Smith, David M., *On the margins of inclusion: changing labour markets and social exclusion in London*. (Bristol: Policy Press 2005) p. 32

<sup>48</sup> Meeting: AfroReggae in Shoreditch, Immediate Theatre, December 2007

responding that is an integral part of musical performance. Sacha Stanley, head of music at Hackney Free School and facilitator of the drumming group says "the work is very disciplined – it is learning that you have to work together and to do that you have to listen to each other. The simple act of listening to and watching each other has often passed them by. We work with very challenging students and rehearsal practice is often difficult to manage...And it can be frustrating for the children who are more advanced to work with those who are less advanced, but it's important for them to know that if they are going to be successful they need to listen"<sup>49</sup>. As making music or performance does not necessarily call on academic skills, it can play to the strengths and learning styles of young people who struggle elsewhere in education. Sacha Stanley continues: "One boy is leading the drumming group. He is in Year 10 and has been in a lot of trouble at school – he goes to school offsite for one and half days a week. But he's really advanced and has developed very strong leadership skills. Academic learning is not for him but he loves the drumming and the dancing. We are thinking of nominating him for an award to acknowledge his leadership of the group"<sup>50</sup>. Similarly, EJ Trivett saw how the body percussionist and drummer in their group spent time after the sharing practising with his sticks, "not even on the drums, but on the stage with his sticks, ra-ta-ta-ta, ra-ta-ta-ta. We need to take that energy and drive him"<sup>51</sup>.

Cameron Reynolds from Serious, the international music producing company says that making art and performance offers young people "the stretching of imagination. The illustration of the positive value of being alive"<sup>52</sup>. Art can negotiate new forms of communication and expression. But, as AfroReggae's model and the examples inspired by their work show, this artistic practice is not exclusively focused on the learning of the individual person or even communities of people, but stages dialogue between the work and its institutional and social spaces. The AfroReggae UK Partnership is at the beginning of its life, but already projects are beginning to take hold in their local areas. For Contact Theatre, the energy and drive which shone so clearly at the AfroReggae UK Projects sharing in June 2007 is taking material shape in *Future Fires*, a series of individual cross-art form projects for which the young people have drawn down funding themselves. Like AfroReggae's tailoring of projects to the *favela* communities in which they work, to make the work relevant to young people and their everyday experiences, as Sacha Stanley affirms, "it is about finding a structure that supports them – in which guidelines are on the side, but we let them lead it. Then it is in tune with the beat of where they are"<sup>53</sup>.

[AFROREGGAE DRUMS AND HANDS] credit: Nicky Dracoulis

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<sup>49</sup> Interview with Sacha Stanley, Hackney Free and Parochial School

<sup>50</sup> Interview with Sacha Stanley, Hackney Free and Parochial School

<sup>51</sup> Meeting: AfroReggae in Shoreditch, Immediate Theatre

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