

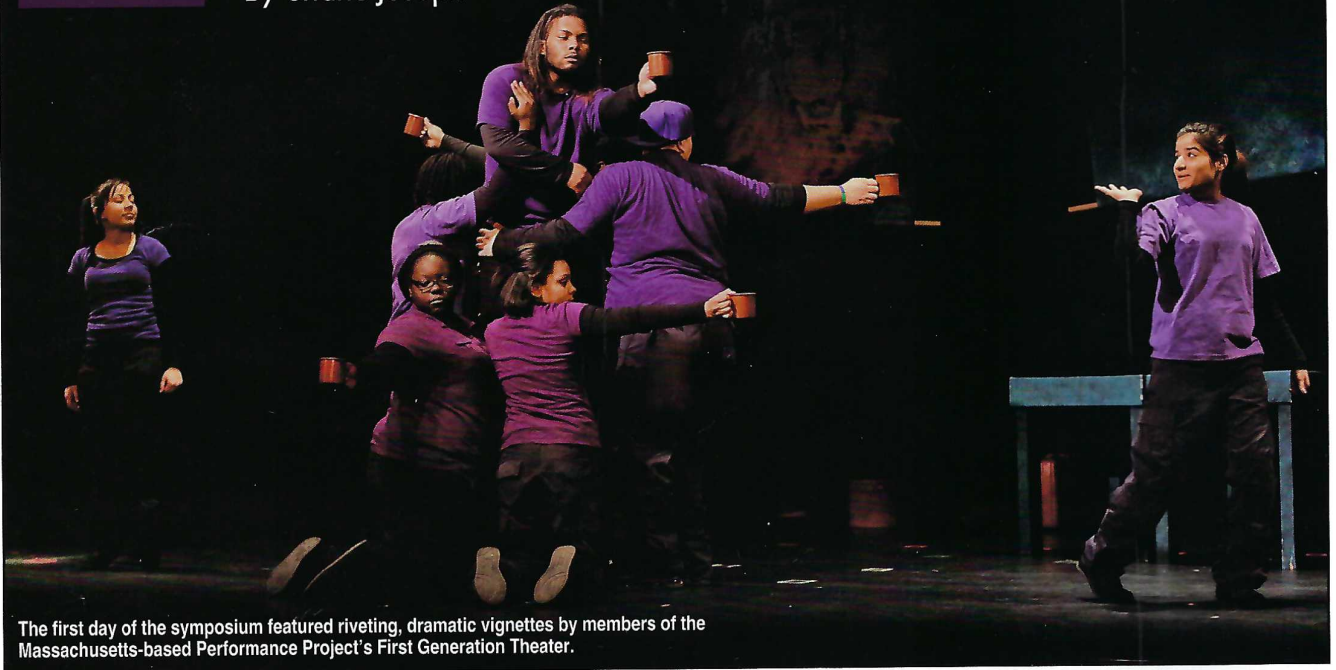
MenEngage

UBUNTU
SYMPOSIUM



North American MenEngage From Intersectional to Decolonizing

By Shane Joseph



The first day of the symposium featured riveting, dramatic vignettes by members of the Massachusetts-based Performance Project's First Generation Theater.

The North American MenEngage Network (NAMEN) is at a critical moment in its evolution, a time of reflection and commitment to examining its efforts through the twin lenses of intersectionality and decolonization. Those dual truths were central to a two-day Ubuntu symposium it offered last November 30 and December 2.

Ubuntu is often translated as “humanity towards others” or “I am because you are,” explained NAMEN board member Carlos Idibouo, a symposium planner. “It is a Nguni Bantu term from Southern Africa and speaks to the universal connection between every person,” Carlos said, “a shared sense of compassion, responsibility, and humanity for all. It is a concept grounded in African thought and identity, and has an important and positive message for the whole world.”



International talk show host Karen Carrington masterfully moderated the two-day symposium.

At the start of each of the two days of the symposium, Greg Grey Cloud led indigenous ceremonies. To say that Grey Cloud, a member of the Crow Creek Sioux tribe, is gifted with horses barely suggests his mastery with steeds. Symposium attendees were enthralled witnessing him lovingly circling his horse in a corral at his ranch in South Dakota, tenderly

testifying to the mystical communication between human and animal. His compassionate and obvious spiritual bond with his horse set a tone of nurturing connection for the some 100 attendees.

International talk show host Karen Carrington, a mental health advocate and award-winning broadcaster, moderated the symposium. Appreciated for her series on empowering men, her warm presence, professionalism, and skill at deep listening, provided a sensitive container for the gathering.

On day one, thought leader Tonya Lovelace, a member of the NAMEN board of directors and former CEO of Women of Color Network (which she founded), challenged the attendees. Now president and CEO of Lovelace Consulting Services, she encouraged participants to remember “who we are and where we came from,” and to address oppressive systems and histories that enable us to occupy the land we do. “It is critical that we—from across North America—take the essential steps to center intersectionality and decolonization in *all* aspects of gender justice work. We must leave behind single-



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NAMEN board member Carlos Idibou, a fierce advocate for the rights of LGBTQ2I people around the world, was one of the planners of the symposium.

issue approaches,” Tonya emphasized. “Breathing is political,” Tonya told symposium participants, inviting them to remember the importance of being intentional in their work. To do so, she added, requires remaining accountable at all times.

The first day of the symposium also featured riveting, dramatic vignettes by members of the Massachusetts-based Performance Project’s First Generation Theater where young activist-actors—even

in a video broadcast over Zoom—communicated a message of empowerment in a production that masterfully integrated art and social justice.

The Performance Project sees itself as an arts community. Its members feature a range of ages and ancestries, and through the arts engage young people in intensive artistic training, intergenerational mentoring, leadership development, and community building. Its casts are entirely made up of young people, incorporating into their performances a blend of drama, spoken word and music.

Symposium participants were captivated by the group’s vision of a world in which all people strive for personal and social liberation, where all individuals and cultures are honored, all embrace interconnectedness, and all are free to achieve their full potential.

The symposium continued its exploration of intersectionality and decolonization on its second day with a powerful presentation by Unoma Azuah, the Nigerian writer-activist whose personal journey is the basis of her far-reaching narrative on racism and how it impacts us all. Unoma’s research and activism—and her international award-winning books—focus on issues relating to queer Nigerians.



Acclaimed Nigerian writer-activist Unoma Azuah offered a powerful personal narrative on how racism impacts everyone.

“The search for authenticity is a laborious and often solitary experience,” Unoma said. “Occasions like this symposium, which brings together a community of humans united by their shared desire for truth, lessens the burden of uncertainty associated with self-discovery,” she said. “It confers on our quest a strong legitimacy that engenders in us a firm confidence in our

rights as human beings.”

The day wrapped up with a robust discussion of a recent “state of the field” report compiled by longtime “NAMENite” Rus Funk. Close to a dozen community-based practitioners, activists, professionals and academics from Canada and the US provided important feedback and key input on efforts to mobilize men and boys to prevent gender-based violence across North America. The rich, deep discussion reminded participants that there is much work still to be done, especially continuing

to coordinate and connect with and among people on the front lines. The report recognized the tension between viewing the work as a “field” vs. as a “movement”—a field being seen as inhabiting a professional (or professionalized) arena that focuses on offering programs to a target population. A movement, on the other hand, is seen as a mobilizing effort to advance social change. NAMEN remains committed to the conclusions in the report and will share more of its findings later this year.

“As a network of organizations, individuals, activists, and academics from Canada and the US, NAMEN works to transform masculinity and to dismantle patriarchy and other forms of oppression,” the board of directors said in a statement. “NAMEN both recognizes and promotes accountability and intersectionality in all its work. We are committed to building our work atop these two pillars.”

In the coming months NAMEN will further the work of the symposium by engaging with three organizational partners to provide online workshops: the Performance Project’s First Generation theater troupe; the US Native American Indigenous peoples’ group, “Wica Agli”; and the Canadian-based NextGenMen, which engages and educates boys and men to become advocates promoting gender equality.

For details and to learn more about where NAMEN is headed, visit namen.menengage.org.



A clinical social worker, therapist and consultant, Shane Joseph is a member of the board of directors of the global MenEngage Alliance and cochair of North American MenEngage (NAMEN).



“It is critical that we center intersectionality and decolonization in all aspects of gender justice work. We must leave behind single-issue approaches.”

—Tonya Lovelace