

# The Hair Parties Project

## Case Study: Urban Bush Women

CARON ATLAS

“Everything I know about American history I learned from looking at black people’s hair. It’s the perfect metaphor for the African experiment: the price of the ticket, the toll of slavery and the costs of remaining. It’s all in the hair.”

—Lisa Jones, journalist, from *Hair Story: Untangling the Roots of Black Hair in America*

### PREFACE

In living rooms, beauty salons, community centers, restaurants, and theaters in Brooklyn, people have been talking about hair. Not just hair, but also race, economic and social status, education, and employment—and not just talking, but also dancing and telling stories. These hair stories about whether to straighten, curl, color, press, or tease are providing a creative avenue to dialogue about the broader social and political issues that surround hair, particularly natural African American hair.

Hair Parties is a project of the Brooklyn-based, internationally recognized Urban Bush Women, working in collaboration with 4W Circle of Art and Enterprise and 651 Arts. The project uses public dialogue to stimulate artistic ideas, and artistic work to stimulate dialogue. It puts into practice UBW’s belief that dance is “a celebration, a solution, and a necessity,” and that art is a catalyst for social change. And it also addresses the civic context of UBW’s neighborhood in Brooklyn which is confronting issues of development and gentrification. These issues involve politics, culture, and race as well as economics, and they play out more often through debate than through dialogue.

In 2004, UBW celebrated its 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary by going through a period of rebirth and renewal and rooting itself in a new home community. As dialogue became an opportunity to build new relationships in Brooklyn, it also becomes a means of learning and meaning-making inside the company. The company began to codify what it had been doing intuitively and became more deliberate about transferring knowledge. UBW affirmed itself as a process-oriented learning organization and has quickly incorporated the lessons learned from this project into its subsequent work.

The case study, written by site liaison Caron Atlas in collaboration with Urban Bush Women, is drawn from experiences of the project, written materials, and videos, as well as interviews with UBW Artistic Director, Jawole Zollar; Managing Director, Amy Cassello; Special Projects Director, Vanessa Manley; dialogue consultant, Tammy Bormann; community partner, Selma Jackson; presenter, Maurine Knighton; *HairStories* co-director, Elizabeth Herron; and UBW company members Maria Bauman and Wanjiru Kamuyu.

Together, the contributors explore the powerful combination of art, dialogue, and social analysis in the Hair Parties. How does embodying dialogue within dance deepen the dialogue? Can a party format encourage candid, from-the-heart “kitchen talk?” What is the role of conflict, passion, and point of view in these exchanges? How does the seemingly personal topic of hair lead to critical thinking about challenging societal issues, and how can this dialogue further social justice?

## BACKDROP

“When the Lions Tell History” is an African proverb that reminds us that when the lion tells his story, it is from an entirely different perspective than that of the hunter. UBW’s work has always offered the lion’s perspective, focusing on untold and under-told stories.

—Jawole Willa Jo Zollar

Urban Bush Women is an internationally recognized performance ensemble based in Fort Greene, Brooklyn that engages a diverse audience through bold and life-affirming dance theater works inspired by women’s experiences, African American history, and the cultural influences of the African Diaspora. Company activities include the creation and performance of works for the stage; artist training in dance and community engagement; and public projects that encourage cultural activity as an inherent part of community life.

Community engagement residencies are designed to respond to specific issues that are important to the host community. The focus in Tallahassee, Florida, for example, was HIV/AIDS awareness and prevention; in Flint, Michigan it was incorporating the arts as a vital part of Flint’s revitalization process. During these residencies, Urban Bush Women company members partner with local artists and residents through dance classes, workshops, trust-building exercises and a creation process that culminates in a community-wide performance.

Some of the basic concepts and assumptions that inform UBW’s community engagement work include:

- Each community is unique and has the answers it seeks to uncover
- The community engagement process that UBW uses must help people gain a sense of their own power
- In order to move powerfully into the future, a community must “own” its history, for better or for worse
- All change starts within
- Accountability is key to working with communities



Urban Bush Women in performance.

Artistic Director Jawole Willa Jo Zollar describes her founding vision for UBW: “My dream was to have a dance company that reflected my concerns for social justice, spiritual renewal, and the power that comes through connection to community.” Why do this through hair? The power and significance of hair has been evidenced over the years by the experience of UBW. As strong black women offering striking performances and powerful messages, the company makes a lasting impression. Years later people comment on how profoundly they were moved and ultimately changed by the company. Immediately, however, one of the most common reactions to UBW is to the various hairstyles of company members.

Zollar recognized that these comments went far beyond superficial curiosity, but rather reflected the complex relationship of African Americans to their hair. Hair had recently been a catalyst for debate on a civic level in Brooklyn. A white school teacher resigned as a result of protests by black parents who were incensed about her introducing the book, *Nappy Hair*, by Carolivia Herron (which celebrates nappy hair) to her third grade students.

Based on these experiences, Zollar was inspired to create the multi media performance *HairStories* to explore the concept of nappy hair and its relationship to images of beauty, social position, heritage and self-esteem. The Hair Parties began as way to collect stories for the *HairStories* piece and to present scenes from the work in progress in an informal setting. UBW quickly discovered that the parties had the potential to go far beyond collecting and trying out material; they could also provide a creative framework for dialogue that transcended the *HairStories* performance.

*“When our parents were straightening their children's hair it was to make them acceptable and to avoid the abuse they themselves had endured.”*

*quote from a Hair Party*

In 2000 Urban Bush Women moved to Brooklyn to the Alliance of Resident Theater/NY's South Oxford Space, which offers subsidized office and rehearsal space. Zollar had lived in Brooklyn for 14 years and felt strongly connected to the borough. The move was an important shift for the company, as it was the first time they had a home community. Their previous space in Manhattan was no more than an office, and their community engagement work took place on the road, in other people's communities. They acknowledged the significance of becoming rooted in a home community by changing their mission statement to describe UBW as a Brooklyn-based organization.

The Hair Parties provided a vehicle for building new relationships in Brooklyn. Stakeholders were identified as residents of the adjacent communities of Fort Greene, Clinton Hill, Bedford Stuyvesant, and Park Slope. The first three have large African American populations as well as significant artist, family, and working class populations. Park Slope is the most racially and economically diverse. It also has a significant family population as well as a sizeable lesbian and gay community.

*“UBW quickly discovered that the parties had the potential to go far beyond collecting and trying out material; they could also provide a creative framework for dialogue that transcended the HairStories performance.”*

These Brooklyn neighborhoods face significant cultural, economic, and social issues, which provided a civic context to the Hair Parties. Fort Greene, for example, is responding to a cultural district proposed by the Brooklyn Academy of Music Local Development Corporation. The LDC plan sparked concerns about gentrification and questions about how to carry out equitable development that builds on neighborhood cultural and economic assets. Moreover, some residents had concerns about how decisions were being made and the transparency of the process. A group called the Concerned Citizens Coalition, led by local

African American churches, came together to ensure that the cultural district reflect the needs and interests of community members. When the developer involved in the LDC purchased the

New Jersey Nets and proposed to build a new stadium on the border of Fort Greene, the questions about development became even more intense.

Against this backdrop, and with support from Animating Democracy, UBW took their Hair Parties and *HairStories* performance to a new phase.

## THE HAIR PARTIES PROJECT

“When my brother ‘locked his head, he was told by my mother that he was not a part of the family. When he got a promotion at work he cut off his hair and visited our mother. Evidently she said, ‘Now this is my child.’”

—Quote from a Hair Party

The Hair Parties had multiple and wide-ranging goals. These included:

### Artistic:

- Developing further an aesthetic model for using public dialogue as a means of stimulating artistic ideas

### Dialogic:

- Exploring the relationship between African Americans and hair
- Engaging diverse groups of people to learn something more about an unfamiliar perspective
- Creating an environment where people can feel comfortable talking about hair, both on a personal level and as it connects to civic issues of race, class, education, and work
- Addressing civic issues of community development and gentrification

### Organizational:

- Broadening the audience base for the Brooklyn presentation of *HairStories*
- Building a base in Brooklyn, UBW's new home base, and developing lasting community partnerships there
- Increasing UBW's effectiveness as an arts organization committed to social change and justice
- Developing leadership skills in the company through training in dialogue and facilitation, and greater knowledge and ownership of the mission and core values of the company
- Using hair parties as a fundraising tool

During the period of January 2002 through March 2003 UBW held 10 Hair Parties in private and public spaces, primarily in Brooklyn communities. Framed as parties to easily engage people, they focused on a subject about which everyone has an experience and opinion: hair. Whether the parties happened in living rooms or corporations, they included food and informal time, and often got neighbors talking to neighbors (See Appendix for a list of all Hair Parties at the end of this case).

UBW held a men’s Hair Party at the Bedford Stuyvesant Family Health Center; a Hair Party for teenaged girls at the Children’s Aid Society, and one for seniors at the Fort Greene Senior Center. Other Hair Parties included mothers and daughters, employees of Chase and Fleet banks and members of the Fifth Avenue Committee, an active local group addressing issues of displacement and community development. The Performance

*“I saw ‘the ritual between men in the barbershop. I never saw a fight in there. People would disagree and storm out, but there was a line you didn’t cross.”*

*quote from a Hair Party*

Dialogue at the “Grand Opening and Hair Show” of LockSmyths, a salon attached to 4W Circle “really put UBW on the map in the neighborhood,” said partner Selma Jackson. UBW also held hair parties at the Ford and Rockefeller foundations, to enable those funding the work to experience it in their own workplace context.

Each Hair Party was unique but all incorporated small and large group discussions, performance excerpts that stimulated dialogue, and interactive games to prompt memories and associations from participants. They began with a mutual agreement that participants would be open and



UBW Dancers perform the Hot Comb Blues at a Hair Party.

receptive to each other’s experiences, and would have fun. Some parties began with participants introducing themselves and giving a “weather report” about their hair. Some had participants write down three things that make their hair distinctive, three things you notice about someone else’s hair, and three hair fantasies. At times party participants acted out these hair fantasies.

One of the *HairStories* performance excerpts that got the greatest response at Hair Parties was the “Hot Comb Blues” which, with humor, physicalized the burn of a hot comb, the itch of a perm, and the yanking and tugging of a mother combing her daughter’s hair. The performance evoked visceral memories in hair party participants and inspired them to tell stories about their own “hair hell moments.” These stories stimulated dialogue about what people put themselves through to have “good hair.” Further questioning led the group to consider the social pressures behind “good hair” and “bad hair” and the origin of our values about acceptable forms of beauty.

The Hair Party for children combined visual art, movement and dialogue. Kids drew their fantasy hairstyles, danced the Jheri Curl and cornrows, and talked about where people get ideas about what kind of hair is ideal. This inspired UBW to incorporate hairstyle charades in subsequent parties for adults. At the “Hair Club for Men” party, men discussed their influence on women’s hair choices, the hair issues that affect men in the workplace, and the ritual between men at the barbershop, where “you can have a politician, drug dealer, preacher, doctor, and a police officer all sitting next to each other at the same time.”

Some of the Hair Parties were more performance oriented, and others more dialogue oriented. Each format had advantages and disadvantages. Smaller parties engendered in-depth dialogue and intimacy and worked well to build community, but they often were held in spaces like living rooms where movement was challenging. Some small groups, because of the intimacy factor, according to Zollar, were “very self conscious.” Larger “Performance-Driven Dialogues” allowed for less dialogue, but were often held in spaces more conducive to movement where complete scenes of *HairStories* could be shown. This allowed for multiple characters to represent different points of view, and offered participants more of a common experience. The performance framework helped people become less self-conscious, more open, and able to speak from the heart.

*“It’s good that we’re being honest. It’s amazing that we’re still even tripping about texture. People are saying ‘good hair and bad hair,’ even young people. And I’m not even talking about light skin/dark skin.”*

*quote from a Hair Party*

## A HAIR PARTY

BY MARIA BAUMAN, UBW DANCER

As people ring the doorbell, streaming into the house one by one, sometimes in small groups, they seem unsure what to expect. There is a certain air of optimistic expectation and anticipation that permeates the kitchen and living room as people chat and eat with each other. Eventually the host calls everyone to attention and introduces the Urban Bush Women and the idea of the Hair Party: that the various friends, colleagues, and acquaintances of the host have been gathered to use hair as an entry point to engage in dialogue about racial, socioeconomic, and gender issues, among others. All of these people who came from various places to ring the same doorbell now have a tenuous bond, a common purpose for the evening. Although individuals may still be unsure how the night will unfold or what it will reveal, they invariably look forward to the performance excerpts by UBW. And so the evening begins.

After various ice-breaking introductory questions and anecdotal sharing, the Bush Women stand in the center of the living room in a tight formation. They are conjuring up the idea of riding in an elevator, an activity everyone in the room likely does more than once a day. The room erupts with laughter as the guests recognize the uneasy feeling of being stared at in the elevator. The performers present two scenarios. In the first, white women passengers in the elevator stare at a black woman passenger's bald head, nearly falling over one another to gawk at what they seem to have never seen before. They are careful to look away, though, when the bald passenger turns around suspiciously. The second scenario seems to highlight one of the differences between black and white American culture. While the white passengers were afraid of appearing rude, the black passengers in the second vignette are extremely vocal and seem indignant that the bald woman would have the audacity to (not) wear her hair in such a way. The onlookers, who sit in chairs and on pillows throughout the living room, now have more food for thought. Why were the white passengers' and black passengers' reactions so different? Have I ever been the one being stared at? Have I been the starrer? Was I judging or making assumptions about the person based on his or her hairstyle, or was I just curious?

As the performers sit down to join in the lively dialogue again, another veil in the room seems to have been lifted. After having laughed together, the guests' bond is a bit less tenuous. Now, they have all gathered one evening for a like purpose, and they have also reacted in a similar way to performance bits. Men and women who have not known each other prior to the Hair Party are now sharing their own "hair hell moments" and elevator experiences. As the evening proceeds with more talking, punctuated by brief dance excerpts, the guests delve deeper and deeper into the subjects presented by the UBW co-facilitators.

When it is time to leave, people seem to gather their coats and coordinate taxi rides home in larger, and more boisterous groups than the ones and twos that they arrived in. The bond between the guests, while still fragile, has been intensified. Some people won't see each other again. Some have plans for lunch dates. In any case, the Hair Party seemed a great way to spend an evening. The house feels heady with new ideas and connections.

A party that many described as a success combined both characteristics. The Fifth Avenue Committee (FAC) party took place in a spacious apartment where many participants already knew one another and there was plenty of space and time for both performance and dialogue. FAC was also an effective host as the organization was in the process of exploring how to better weave arts and culture into their ongoing work.

An additional nine gatherings relating to the Hair Parties Project were also held, including a "Five Boroughs in Five Days" event throughout New York City that served as a teaser for a staged *HairStories* performance in October 2002. This performance ran for five shows at Long Island University (LIU), all of which were sold-out and standing room only. The performance was a

climactic moment two thirds of the way through the project and provided an opportunity to reconnect with Hair Party hosts and other partners. UBW held post-performance dialogues after every show, which addressed many of the themes of the Hair Parties and elicited reflection and engaged discussion from audience members. These dialogues were framed as an exchange rather than a Q&A, were facilitated by the presenter, and built on the enthusiasm of the audience and their shared experience of the performance.

UBW's presenting partner was 651 Arts, a Brooklyn-based arts presenter and producer with programming that focuses on contemporary artistic expressions of artists of the African Diaspora. 651 Arts presented *HairStories* at LIU, organized two of the Hair Parties, introduced the idea of doing hair parties at foundations, and made introductions to others in the neighborhood. 4W Circle of Art and Enterprise, a Fort Greene-based cooperative incubator for small businesses, played an important role in the project as a community partner. 4W Circle owner Selma Jackson helped UBW organize Hair Parties and helped them build trust and new relationships in Brooklyn. In addition, UBW worked with local businesses, neighborhood organizations, and neighborhood colleagues to reach diverse groups of people. (See sidebar for a list of partners.) Hair Party hosts helped frame the events and bring people to the dialogue.

A key partnership developed over the course of the project was the one between UBW and Tammy Bormann and David Campt. Initially cautious about working with dialogue consultants, UBW appreciated that Campt and Bormann had a background working in race relations, worked as a team, and responded well to working with artists and the creative process. When Zollar first met Campt she felt that he had a good handle on how artists could adapt their skills to doing dialogue work; he used the analogy of a jazz-structured improvisation. After they experienced the consultants in action they invited them to work with the company. Bormann debriefed UBW after the Mother and Daughter Hair Party and facilitated an evaluation dinner with Hair Party hosts. She and Campt offered a three-day training to build the company's capacity for designing and facilitating dialogue around particular outcomes and purposes.

## REFLECTIONS

“Dance lies at the point at which reflection and embodiment meet, at which doing and anticipation are intertwined.”

—Randy Martin, *Critical Moves: Dance Studies in Theory and Politics*

### Integrating Performance and Dialogue

The Hair Parties used public dialogue to stimulate artistic ideas, and artistic work to stimulate dialogue. Both of these approaches were fairly common in the Animating Democracy Lab. What stands out for UBW was the interplay between the two approaches—how closely art and dialogue were interwoven in the project, and how the ability to be “up on our feet talking” could lead to a deeper level of engagement.

The Hair Parties informed and were informed by the *HairStories* “live stage documentary” performance genre created by Zollar to stimulate dialogue. The *HairStories* piece combines video interviews, conversation with the audience, call and response church testimonials, and storytelling, with dance. The multiple characters featured in the vignettes bring forward multiple points of view. In a *New York Times* review on August 28, 2001, Jennifer Dunning described the impact of some of these *HairStories* segments.

... Everything comes together in a tender duet for sisters and a group section in which the dancers hop through the choreography patting at heads that itch from curl relaxers and hot irons but cannot be scratched without ruining the hard-won do. In a strangely powerful dance, women in a lineup, in large flings of the arms, pull straight the hair of a woman who sits before them on the floor. The stage temperature heats up in dances in which Ms. Zollar's six extraordinary performers — bodies and spirits taut yet resilient — abandon everything but their tightly wound hair to the moment.

Touchingly, Ms. Zollar is torn between admiring the immensely successful entrepreneur Madame C. J. Walker and abhorring the building of Walker's cosmetics empire on "black self-hatred." Even more affecting are the comments of one of the interviewees, a slow-talking, keen-hearted woman, older than the rest, who has seen it all and looks back on the old ways with endearing amusement. "We are a people who has been taught that everything about us is ugly, especially our hair," she says reflectively, zeroing in on the heart of the subject in much the same way Ms. Zollar cuts to that heart with a segment on the much discussed "attitude" of the tennis-playing Williams sisters. Times and customs do change for the better, after all.

The dance and movement incorporated into the Hair Parties also influenced the dialogue. Dance helps you be in touch with your authentic self and to understand things more viscerally. Physical warm-ups moved participants into an open state of mind and built community in the group. The use of segments from *HairStories* encouraged participants to tell their own stories, think critically, and make connections between personal and social issues. At the same time, the often humorous performance segments lightened the energy when the dialogue got intense and helped people to feel more comfortable. They provided opportunities to react on creative and emotional levels as well as intellectual ones, and helped to create empathy. As UBW company member Wanjiru Kamuyu reflected, "The performances allowed participants to breathe and laugh at themselves and others, rather than letting the barriers drain them."

*"The dance and movement incorporated into the Hair Parties also influenced the dialogue. Dance helps you be in touch with your authentic self and to understand things more viscerally."*

*"We all had to get comfortable with dialogue work. A lot of us have strong personal views on hair. We had to evolve ourselves to a place where we could hear other perspectives on black hair."*

*Elizabeth Herron*

dominate the conversation and appear too judgmental. By allowing the art to acknowledge and convey their perspective, UBW became increasingly more comfortable as facilitators of multiple points of view during the dialogues, able to celebrate diverse choices. They recognized the organic nature of the process and the value of leaving it up to the group to make up their own minds.

Performing elements of *HairStories* at Hair Parties enabled the company to continue working on the *HairStories* piece after it premiered and it evolved to a place of being "stronger point of view, clearer, more open and honest....We finally got off the fence, it was about celebrating nappy hair." The *HairStories* performance was a way that UBW could share their point of view as a company. In early Hair Parties, company members had a tendency to

## EXCERPT OF A LETTER TO MADAME C.J. WALKER FROM *HAIRSTORIES*

Dear Madame C.J.,

I have been contemplating writing you this letter for some time. It has been difficult for me to formulate my thoughts because I am so ambivalent about how I feel about you. Here you were this successful entrepreneur, philanthropist and activist and yet this success comes at the price of what I see as the heart of Black Self-Hatred—our hair. I often wonder what the world would be like if you had taught Black women to take pride in their beauty and style with their hair righteously nappy. I think of all the little Black girls I see and remember whose hair meets its demise through the frying process. I see the cry in that little twist of damaged hair, pulled tight with a ribbon, trying to make it something it is not and never will be. I imagine that same little girl with her hair short and beautifully nappy. Nappy so you can see how gracious each little kink is on the head, curling up to claim its own territory yet defining itself in relation to the whole. I love feeling this mass of unruliness in my hands and it reminds me of who I am and what I come from. I love it when I see all the beautiful textures of nap, curly nap, hard nap, wavy nap, kinky nap, rambling nap and I wonder if those little beautiful Black girls will ever see the beauty I see in nappy hair.

Sincerely,  
Jawole

Initially, the *HairStories* piece included a character called Dr. Professor, who helped clarify references that diverse audiences might not understand, explain history, and engage in a social and political analysis. Dr. Professor was a frequent guest at the Hair Parties. Over time, however, Dr. Professor “outlived her purpose,” Zollar says, and was cut from both the show and the Hair Parties. UBW no longer needed a purely didactic character, and relied more on their audience and dialogue participants to draw their own conclusions.

UBW's increased knowledge of dialogue is enhancing UBW's artistic work. Pieces such as *Give Your Hands to Struggle*, highlighting people fighting for justice, are being used in workshops to spark dialogues about why people choose to vote or not vote in UBW's upcoming election project. Zollar is imagining a new series of dialogue parties drawing from *Batty Moves*, a previous work that celebrates women's buttocks in relation to questions of notions of physically attractiveness and appropriate moves. And in UBW's newest piece, *Walking with Pearl*, about the legacy of Pearl Primus as an artist dedicated to social change, Zollar is working from an intimate and deeply emotional heart place, a place that she describes as the essence of dialogue.

### TRANSFORMING THE PRACTICE

“We began the Hair Party effort to gain source material for the concert piece *HairStories*. In the beginning, it was an “in group sista girl” conversation that became a self conscious, awkward and stiff attempt at dialogic learning. With practice, healthy self-critique and your help, we are moving closer to developing a consistent methodology. At each Hair Party, we realize something new and powerful about what we are doing that works.”

—letter to Hair Party hosts inviting them to a debriefing dinner

With the help of dialogue facilitators Tammy Bormann and David Campt, UBW company members came to distinguish between debate and dialogue, and were trained as facilitators and in working as teams. UBW, in turn, encouraged Bormann and Campt to further incorporate movement and nonverbal expression into their workshops.

Bormann and Campt offered UBW a common language about dialogue, giving form to impulses the company already had, but had not developed. This was much like the company's training with the Peoples' Institute for Survival and Beyond that had previously given them a common language about undoing racism. Bormann described it as helping UBW to “bridge artistry with another skill set, which has an art of its own.” Initially concerned that formal dialogue approaches could squelch the natural, informal conversation that they valued, UBW concluded that a meaningful exchange was more likely to happen by being intentional and establishing boundaries. The parties, which had started out free form, became more deliberately structured as a container for dialogue—both organic and purposeful.

UBW explored with Bormann and Campt the role of conflict in dialogue and in their own process. Their training in facilitation helped them make sense of conflict, not run away from it, and be aware of what's on the table and what's under the table. Company members described the most successful parties as those that included candid conversation and passion and at the same time did not shut people down. They learned to respond to cultural references and identify the ways that people could feel outside of the story. Rather than avoiding discomfort, the dialogue could create a space for people to sit with it awhile, and look to other participants to help them navigate it. For example, when in mixed-race groups where white participants don't understand some of the vocabulary or humor, they facilitated the dialogue so that the translation could grow out of the group.



A Hair Party dialogue moment facilitated by Jawole Willa Jo Zollar.

UBW aspired to what they describe as “kitchen talk” in their Hair Parties, the kind of real, honest, straight-up conversation that you have in the kitchen. This was in contrast to sugar-coated living room conversation that is too polite to get to the heart of the matter. While everyone agreed that the conscious shift to ensure dialogue rather than debate greatly advanced the parties, and was needed to ensure safety, there was also concern that parties could become overly polite. Said Kamuyu, “The format was great, but how would you revamp it to go deep, to be OK with kitchen talk?” One of the ways the company tried to address this was to add the distinction between kitchen talk and living room talk into the dialogue agreements.

The company began to conduct dialogue-based debrief sessions where members could reflect on what was working and what wasn't, and make appropriate changes. An example followed the Mother and Daughter Hair Party, where the mothers had dominated the event and had spoken on behalf of their daughters. In reflecting on the party with Bormann, UBW agreed that it would have been good to separate the mothers and daughters into affinity dialogue groups before bringing them all together. At their subsequent Mother and Daughter Hair Party in Flint, Michigan, UBW incorporated this improvement and others, such as a ground rule that mothers don't speak for or correct their daughters. Another, more external opportunity for a debriefing was the evaluation dinner dialogue with Hair Party hosts. Some of the hosts also provided valuable feedback through post-Hair Party one-on-one discussions with their guests.

Recognizing that all Hair Parties were not alike, the company developed each one to respond to the interests and needs of the hosts and their communities. They codified a template for approaching prospective Hair Party hosts to learn about their intentions and their group's dynamics, and come to a mutually

*“My mother and I did not have a good relationship growing up; the only time we bonded was when she did my hair.”*

*quote from a Hair Party*

agreeable framing of the party. In addition to a Hair Party prep sheet; they developed a primer for planning, implementation, and follow-up; a facilitator's guide and checklist; a tip sheet; and a set of Hair party agreements. Using these new tools, making clear key concepts and assumptions, scheduling regular debriefs, and integrating dialogue into residency activities all contributed to the success of subsequent projects in Chicago and Flint. UBW was also able to try out new curriculum based on the values and assumptions surfaced during their internal dialogues. (See the sidebar, *Urban Bush Women's Organizing Principles*)

## MOVING FROM THE PERSONAL TO THE CIVIC (AND BACK AGAIN)

### URBAN BUSH WOMEN'S ORGANIZING PRINCIPLES

“Critical moves. Steps we must take. Movement that informs critical consciousness. Dance lies at the point at which reflection and embodiment meet, at which doing and anticipation are intertwined.”

—Randy Martin, Critical Moves

***Urban Bush Women –  
Striving for an active unity of theory and practice:  
Value driven and process oriented.***

#### **Validating the Individual**

Our individual histories are authentic in and of themselves. Collectively, our histories and identities create a rich and diverse palette from which to do our work. Each individual has a unique and powerful contribution to make.

#### **Catalyst for Social Change**

UBW's work helps people make sense out of the world and prepare to take action in it. We offer bold and provocative viewpoints in our performance work. Our work encourages critical, creative and reflective thinking.

#### **Process Driven**

The answers to many challenges and creative investigations can be found within a group of people who share a commitment to working together. Building work and strategies together enhances learning, organizational development and creative works. We acknowledge the need for Leadership to provide vision and give focus to the inherent creativity within a group. The Leadership is responsible for outlining and directing the process.

#### **Entering Community and Co-Creating Stories**

No two communities are alike. Each community is unique and has the answers it seeks to uncover. In our Community Engagement Project (CEP) work, we are not doing the thinking for a community but helping to facilitate its thinking through listening and bringing to the table what we are hearing. We then interpret what we hear through the use of our artistic medium. Inspired by work like historian Howard Zinn and his book *A People's History*, our work gives voice to untold and undertold stories and perspectives.

#### **Celebrating the Movement and Culture of the African Diaspora**

UBW is committed to highlighting the power, beauty and strength of the African Diaspora. Dance from the African continent values the whole body in motion through a sophisticated use of polyrhythm, weight, pelvic and spinal articulation. The Urban Bush Women technique builds upon these principles.

“I fundamentally believe active dialogue is increasingly important in a world where we seem too focused on how to destroy one another. It is my heart's desire that this dialogue around hair will serve as a reminder to us to respect our differences—to learn something from an unfamiliar perspectives—as we actively work for the societal changes we believe in.”

—Jawole Zollar

UBW's multi-layered approach allowed the dialogues to move back and forth from the personal to the civic, from the micro to the macro. The topic of hair provided a bridge to such challenging topics as race, social status, gender, sexuality, educational equity, the impact of media and popular culture, economics, and the workplace. UBW developed probing questions that were customized to specific groups to encourage critical thinking. These questions, combined

*“After a scene of sibling rivalry such as The Zollar Sisters, where the sister with long straight hair has privilege over the sister who doesn't; the question might be ‘Where do you think this inequity comes from?’”*

with excerpts from *HairStories*, helped to connect personal experiences to their historical and social contexts and root causes. The questions ranged from exploring the motivations for black women to straighten their hair; dominant paradigms and where they come from; the legacy of slavery; the influence of family, church, community and work place on hair choices; and what lies underneath concepts of “good hair” and “bad hair.” After a scene of sibling rivalry such as “The Zollar

Sisters,” where the sister with long straight hair has privilege over the sister who doesn't; the question might be “Where do you think this inequity comes from?” The question “Why don't we see black women on TV getting their hair shampooed,” stimulated a discussion about the impact of the mass media.

How the Hair Party was framed, the context in which it took place, and the purposes of the hosts could make a significant difference in the content of the dialogue. Host intent included integrating culture into activism, connecting mothers and daughters, and providing an opportunity for seniors to stretch their bodies and their minds. One couple hosted a party at their home after seeing UBW perform *HairStories* to bring this experience to diverse neighbors to stimulate a dialogue about race and identity.

Hair Parties in corporations proved to be particularly challenging. The physical space limited performance and participants were fearful of disagreeing with their bosses. There was too much risk and consequence for speaking honestly. In one case, the host was zealous about her belief that natural hair was the only option for African American women, an admission not made until two-thirds of the way through the event. UBW learned how important it was to access the particular intents and circumstances of hosts prior to the Hair Party in order to create a safe space conducive to dialogue. They spent time with Bormann and Camp discussing how to recognize and address host agendas and deal with uneven power relationships in corporate settings.

*“My headhunter said, ‘You know what... You look great from the neck down... I can't send you to an investment bank with your hair like that. Do you think you could wear a wig?’”*

*quote from a Hair Party*

Whether the Hair Party was all African American or racially mixed also had an impact of the conversation. A goal for racially mixed Hair parties was to remain rooted in and true to the particular experience of African Americans, while being inclusive of others. This involved knowing what the issues mean historically and then making a space for people to make linkages to their own experiences. This could be difficult. For example one of the company's prompts

related to “hair hell moments” contrasted between the mostly cosmetic stories of white people, and the stories of African Americans that reveal a construct about hair in America and a history of injustice. Some Jewish participants took issue with this distinction, and at an early Hair Party a participant offered the example of the oppression of Orthodox Jewish women related to their hair. It was an important contribution, but felt out of place in a moment focused on the specific experience of slavery. It would have been a challenging moment for even the most experienced facilitator and reflects the complexity of cross-cultural work. It also became a learning opportunity for the company as they became more adept at letting participants move the agenda, while maintaining the focus of the dialogue.

One of the original goals of the Project was to use the Hair Parties to further the civic dialogue in Brooklyn about development and gentrification. This proved to be an overly ambitious goal.

*“The Hair Party provided activists with a welcomed opportunity to explore the human, and often personal dimensions of the issues, and the context of race and class that influences all of their work.”*

While several of their partners were involved in these issues, UBW was just becoming knowledgeable about them. The prompts in the Hair parties did not, for the most part, address these issues, and participants usually didn't take the conversation in that direction. An exception was at the YWCA Hair Party when a city councilwoman spoke against the stadium as a part of her welcome. Her remarks also illustrated the tension inherent in a party that aspires to deal with serious issues. As described by a participant, the speech served less to spark civic dialogue than to “cast a pall of crashing reality.”

The Fifth Avenue Committee party was another likely location for a dialogue about the impact of development and gentrification, given that FAC joins community development with anti-displacement activism. But instead of directly addressing these concerns the Hair Party provided activists with a welcomed opportunity to explore the human, and often personal dimensions of the issues, and the context of race and class that influences all of their work.

This is not to say that the issues of development and gentrification in Brooklyn were absent from the Hair Parties. Hair Parties have two parts, one formal and the other informal. Local civic issues were often discussed during the informal part as people ate and talked. The formal Hair Party dialogue often functioned to stimulate this broader civic dialogue. Though difficult to document, it would be beneficial to learn more about the conversations that happen following the Hair Parties, and about the continued ripple effect of a dialogue that begins with the topic of hair.

Ultimately UBW concluded that the civic goal of addressing development and gentrification was unrealistic for a project that was more catalytic than sustained.

*HairStories* co-director Elizabeth Herron said it this way, “We put a reality check on ourselves. We thought we could save the world talking about hair. We came to a place of realizing that the big mission for the Hair Parties is that dialogue happens when we leave, internal dialogue and dialogue with one another.” Zollar concluded that, “going from individual empowerment to systemic change can't be done in a one-and-a-half hour dialogue. That needs to be done through sustained dialogue.” She also noted that it would have required being tied into an ongoing effort such as that of the Concerned Citizens Coalition in Fort Greene, something that was not able to happen during the project. She does anticipate that as UBW's relationships grow and develop in Brooklyn, and as they develop ongoing and sustained programs there, the company can increase its impact as a social justice organization.

*“Zollar concluded that, ‘going from individual empowerment to systemic change can't be done in a one-and-a-half hour dialogue. That needs to be done through sustained dialogue.’”*

## ESTABLISHING A HOME IN BROOKLYN

“It’s not a one shot relationship. They show their commitment by being part of Brooklyn.”

—Selma Jackson

In March of 2004 UBW hosted a Brooklyn Breakfast that included representatives of many of the groups that they had developed relationships with during the Hair Parties Project. This gathering was a step toward establishing an advisory group of “women who care” who could help UBW advance their work in Brooklyn. UBW acknowledged that the Hair Parties only scratched the surface of what is possible, spoke about their continued commitment to the work, and asked for feedback on their upcoming programs in borough.

UBW built on a long history of collaborative work when they carried out the Hair Parties Project in Brooklyn. Through the years the company has learned how important it is to create reciprocal community partnerships. This is illustrated in Brooklyn with their partnership with 4W Circle. Selma Jackson was critical to the Brooklyn work as a connector who could make contacts and vouch for the company. She attended many of the Hair Parties and, drawing on this experience, recommended additional hosts.

Not only did Jackson make a strong connection with UBW, she also benefited from her active participation in the Animating Democracy Learning Exchanges. They helped to validate what she was already doing at 4W Circle, and challenge her to imagine how this work could be strengthened. She linked the Learning Exchanges experience to the recent 13th anniversary celebration for 4W Circle, where community members talked about how important the organization has been for them. These experiences strengthened her commitment, and raised for her the question “How can I make this an institution and make it last if people feel like that?”

On UBW’s staff, Vanessa Manley played a key community-building role. She not only attended other group meetings in Brooklyn to increase UBW’s profile in the borough, she also supported the work of their partners, going so far as to become a volunteer mentor in a high school mentorship program. The fact that Manley and Cassello both live and work in Brooklyn was very important and helped compensate in part for the fact that Zollar was teaching in Florida and the company was frequently on tour.

*“UBW has learned that the stakes are much higher when you work in your home community.”*

UBW took on a greater role in Fort Greene and laid the groundwork for valuable ties with the Brooklyn Borough President’s Office; and the offices of City Council members, the late James Davis, Letitia James and David Yassky; and State Senator Velmanette Montgomery. In March of 2004 they made a presentation to the New York City Council.

UBW has learned that the stakes are much higher when you work in your home community. They are determined to build credibility, to carry out their work with integrity, and, as Cassello says, to “live up in every aspect of our organization to what we put out publicly.” The opportunity is to continue and deepen partnerships in an ongoing manner, and to see the impact of the work over time. The challenge is to sustain the work and address growing local expectations for Hair Parties and collaborations when this community work is no longer funded and there is a lack of infrastructure to support it.

In July of 2004 UBW held their 10-day Summer Institute, “Building Community Through the Arts,” for the first time in Brooklyn. The Institute offers an immersion in dance training and in learning UBW’s community engagement techniques, of which dialogic learning is one part. Participants will partner with local artists and cultural groups to create a piece around the theme of voter education, registration, and voter turnout. Out of questions and dialogue UBW will create an “empowered dance” that will confront the barriers to participating in the democratic system. From this work, Zollar aspires to generate a series entitled, “Are We Democracy?” as ongoing dialogues that will lead to a point of action.

UBW is also holding classes at Atlantic Terminal housing project, a partnership growing out of the Hair Parties that involves one of the groups threatened by stadium development plans. And the company is continuing its partnership with the Brooklyn YWCA, whose mission, “fighting racism and empowering young girls and women,” is a good match with the company’s. After a hair party at the YWCA they received a letter from Leonard Marks, the Bureau Chief at the Brooklyn V. Division of Parole who had attended with a group of female parolees.”...I hope that you and your performers recognize that among the many groups of women you deal with are those who have been degraded, abused, taken advantage of and often humiliated by a system that rarely if ever celebrates what they are, where they come from and what they’ve done. Your show turned some of that around and I thank you for that.”

What is needed for UBW to carry forward the civic engagement work in Brooklyn as it should be done? The company replies: sustained support for the full-time staff member whose focus is community engagement, new board and advisory board members from Brooklyn, deeper partnerships, an expanded Institute, and regular programming in the borough.

For the long term, Zollar dreams of establishing a cultural center in Brooklyn as a home for UBW and other local artists working around community issues and social change. Having this kind of space in Brooklyn would provide the company an anchor and a focus. It would help keep African dance traditions alive by filling a gap in spaces that allow for drumming. And it would make it possible for UBW to engage with its Brooklyn community on an ongoing basis—and grow by being simultaneously challenged and nurtured by its neighbors.

## TRANSFORMING THE COMPANY

“To what extent is UBW willing to infuse dialogue in their internal and external work? What will you gain and what will you sacrifice to do that? What will be the risks to the mission of the company?”

—Tammy Bormann

The Hair Parties Project took place during a time of revitalization and rebirth for UBW. The company’s work with Bormann and Campt, and the embrace of their concept of dialogue as a learning process and tool for meaning making, played a role in this transformation. Bormann and Campt facilitated a session that explored the culture of Urban Bush Women, focusing on the company’s core values and helped the company move forward in a process of empowering leadership and codifying their work.

For Zollar, dialogue enabled the company to include feelings and experiences as well as facts, and as described by Managing Director Amy Cassello, “(It) made all of us more conscious of and

responsible for word choices, for not making assumptions, for seeking clarity and making a commitment to building better communication networks, both internally and externally.” Artistically UBW had always learned new artistic work by doing it. They now extended this process to the rest of their work, furthering their ability to be self-conscious and function as a learning organization. UBW was able to consolidate their learning into their planning for their Summer Institute in Brooklyn. They codified a more detailed methodology for working with the



Elizabeth Herron facilitates a Hair Party dialogue.

community and for training members of the company to engage in this work.

Challenges included the economic and personal realities that could make it difficult for dancers to remain in UBW. Like most dance companies, UBW cannot afford to pay its company members for full time work, yet their busy touring schedule makes it difficult for dancers to take on additional jobs. Also, in some cases, dancers were less interested in, or suited for, community engagement work. After significant time spent training dancers, only two remained as core members. These members took on leadership roles in training new dancers. In the case of Maria Bauman, her development

as an artist paralleled her development as a dialogue leader. She started as an apprentice documenting the Hair Parties, went through the dialogue workshops with Bormann and Camp, became a facilitator in the Hair Parties, and ultimately trained new company members in dialogue skills.

The four new members, who were chosen in part due to their ability to respond to something new, were able to build dialogic learning into the foundation of their experience with UBW. Former members continued with the company on special projects, often those that involved dialogue. They also brought their new skills to work outside of the company. Many of the dancers involved in Urban Bush Women are teaching artists and have found good use of their dialogue facilitation skills when working in schools.

Practicing dialogue, given the time and economic pressures of managing arts organizations, is challenging. UBW is working to integrate dialogue into the internal decision making process, a challenge made more difficult by the logistical fact that the company is often on the road and away from the office. Yet Zollar has become convinced that “you have to go slow to go fast.” UBW administrative staff is taking the time to set goals with more clarity, acknowledge assumptions, and hold regular debriefings. Manley's and Cassello's dialogic approach in these ways has paid off, for example, in building and strengthening relationships with local partners.

UBW's organizational structure changed to reflect company transformations. Initially, Managing Director Cassello was responsible for project oversight. As the project developed, it became clear that the organization needed to make a more specific, substantial and sustained commitment to their work in Brooklyn. Manley was promoted to Special Projects Director, a job with a clear set of expectations around raising UBW's Brooklyn profile and building relationships with the community. Bormann was invited to join the UBW board. Her acceptance demonstrates her expectation that the company will continue on its path of dialogic learning.

Zollar describes the 2004 season, with its celebration of the company's 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary, as being about making connections. “It brings me and Urban Bush Women full circle: a reflection on the past, an attempt to seek assurance in the present, and a determination to invest in the future.”

The company will connect to role models from the past like Primus from whom they draw strength and inspiration, and pass this wisdom along to young artists of the next generation. New work commissioned from emerging choreographers and new board members will further UBW's artistic and administrative transformations. Their new connections with Brooklyn partners and community members will help root and renew the company in their new home. Drawing on the experiences of the Hair Parties Project, and an ongoing process of dialogic learning, UBW will be an even more powerful catalyst for social change. Says Zollar, "I feel that Urban Bush Women's time is coming. The work is strong. The commitment is strong. We're coming of age."

**Caron Atlas** is a Brooklyn-based freelance consultant working to strengthen connections between community based arts, policymaking, and social change. Caron is the founding director of the American Festival Project and worked for several years with Appalshop, the Appalachian media center. She is the Animating Democracy project liaison with Cornerstone Theater, Intermedia Arts, SPARC, and Urban Bush Women, and coordinates Animating Democracy's Critical Perspectives reflective writing program. Other recent consultancies include the Leeway Foundation, National Voice, 651 Arts, Urban Institute, and A Cultural Blueprint for New York City. Caron writes frequently about cultural policy and teaches at New York University's Tisch School. She has a master's degree from the University of Chicago and was a Warren Weaver fellow at the Rockefeller Foundation.

## Appendix: Hair Parties and Hosts

*UBW held Hair Parties in a wide range of settings including those that were core to the Brooklyn-based effort and others held during the project period.*

### **BROOKLYN-BASED**

Urban Bush Women Board of Directors and guests  
Hosted by Sylvia Vogelman, UBW Board Chairperson

Children's Aid Society of Brooklyn  
Hosted by Leonie Shorte

Hosted by April Chapman and Phillippe St. Luce at their Brooklyn home

Fort Greene Senior Citizens Center, Brooklyn  
Hosted by Joan M. Eastmond

Hair Party for Men at Bedford Stuyvesant Family Health Center Inc., Brooklyn  
Hosted by Ulysses Kilgore III

Hair Party for Brooklyn Youth  
Participants from Lafayette Presbyterian, Emanuel Baptist, St. Paul Community Baptist, Berean Baptist

Hair Party for Mothers and Daughters at BRIC (Brooklyn Information & Culture) Studios  
Hosted by Maurine Knighton & 651 Arts

J.P. Morgan Chase Metro Tech Center, Brooklyn  
Hosted by Ujima Diversity Group

Fifth Avenue Committee (Park Slope)  
Hosted by Ibon Muhammad at her Brooklyn home

Brooklyn YWCA  
Co-hosted by The YWCA, Griot Circle (Gay, Lesbian, Transgender and Trans-spirited Senior Citizen Story-Tellers) and The Center for Anti-Violence Education

### **OTHER**

Fleet Bank-Manhattan  
Hosted by Bernell Grier

J.P. Morgan Chase, Manhattan  
Hosted by Ujima Diversity Group (Michelle S. Hall, director)

Boise City Arts Commission & Boise State University, Idaho  
Hosted by Julie Numbers Smith, executive director, Arts Commission

Association of Performing Arts Presenters Members' Conference

Ford Foundation  
Hosted by Roberta Uno of Media, Arts, and Culture