

# The Question of Cultural Diplomacy: Acting Ethically

*Daniel Banks*

“When people ask me, why are you interested in politics, I always answer, because I’m an artist. Whatever affects the lives of human beings, ecological, economic, political, social, cultural, or psychological, is within my province as a writer. I am not in art because of politics; I am in politics because of my artistic calling.”

—Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o (1998, 5)

The symbiotic relationship between art and politics is especially vivid in the work of cultural diplomacy. As a US-based theatre practitioner, I have been invited to use arts-based projects in diplomatic contexts abroad to:

- encourage self-expression, leadership training, and community-building in high poverty and crime areas;
- build bridges between youth at risk from a marginalized and persecuted ethnic group and their peers from the majoritarian population;
- substitute for diplomatic relations in a country where the United States’ foreign policy estranged it from the local national government; and
- work with youth in a renegade region controlled by organized crime that has strained relations with the national government of that country.

Sometimes working at the intersection of art and politics provides healthy alternatives and opportunities for communities; sometimes the results are potentially quite unhealthy and exploitative—of the art, the people, and the people doing the art.

It is crucial in cultural diplomacy, as it is with cultural exchange, to consider the ethics embodied in the content and structure of the work. Through my association in recent years with two organizations, Theatre Without Borders (TWB) and DNAWORKS, I have participated in an in-depth inquiry into the ethos of cultural exchange and diplomacy. The former, TWB, is an “informal, volunteer, virtual community that shares information and builds connections between individuals and institutions interested in international theatre exchange” (“About TWB”). Founded in 2005 by theatre artists Deb Brevoort, Erik Ehn, Catherine Filloux, and Roberta Levitow, TWB values transparency and partnerships and is concerned with the process of exchange, art-making, and governmental policy. Most importantly, TWB is open to anyone who wants to join.

Also in 2005, dancer, educator, and community activist Adam McKinney and I cofounded DNAWORKS, which is an arts and service organization dedicated to dialogue and healing. We use theatre, dance, and visual arts to catalyze community dialogue around issues that are important to the participants. Our work is funded either by local cultural organizations that invite us to their regions or through US embassies and consulates abroad.

In this essay, I will share the mission and philosophies of these organizations, and how these ideas have been applied to actual projects.

## Approaches

I have been deeply influenced by the community-building theories of Paulo Freire, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o, and bell hooks. What these theorists have in common is a commitment to liberation in education and leadership, which has provided a crucial framework for my work on TWB’s steering committee and as co-director of DNAWORKS. Both organizations share a fundamental belief that the ethics and efficacy of a given project are embedded in the structure of the work itself. Therefore doing cultural work calls for a reflective “practice”—a moment-to-moment awareness of the complex dynamics at play, a kind of continuous radar sweeping the room.

In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1985), Freire describes this ongoing examination as a process of “conscientization,” or coming into consciousness, the core of critical pedagogy. Reflecting on ways to dismantle hierarchies, he also advocates a community-based strategy of problem-posing and group learning, rather than a single-voiced, expert-driven approach. In keeping with these principles I have asked colleagues to lend their voices to this essay, with the objective that it will serve as a community forum for discussing the ethical questions posed by the practice of cultural diplomacy.

## The Politics of Cultural Exchange and Cultural Diplomacy

An ongoing conversation in TWB is the move away from the notion of fixed “best practices,” toward recommending a more fluid application of what works in each individual situation—often now referred to as “better practices.” We hope to shift the thinking that there is a discrete or stable approach to the work of cultural exchange and diplomacy. Each situation is different, laden with its own complexities and paradoxes, and requires a methodology that can be adapted to its uniqueness.

Similarly, applied theatre practitioner and theorist James Thompson discusses the “complex web” in which artists often find themselves when working on projects that have, at their core, cultural diplomacy (16). These programs are often organized by agencies that will, understandably, have their own agendas and matrices for assessment. Where a program is held, with which population and under what conditions are elements that comprise this “web.” Therefore artist-practitioners often find themselves needing to negotiate the politics of the space between art-making and diplomacy, before, during, and after a given project.

As discussed by Roberta Levitow<sup>1</sup> (Fig. 1), there are potentially different desired outcomes between an artistic process and a policy-driven project (see also Cynthia Cohen<sup>2</sup> [Fig. 2]). At its best, an artistic practice will come in with a question and not know precisely in which direction the creative process will lead. One of the benefits of this approach is that, along the way, there will be spontaneous and intuitive detours that will enrich the lives of the participants—including the facilitators. One of the potential challenges, in the context of cultural diplomacy, is that certain messages or voices may be heard that do not support the type of diplomatic work that the sponsoring organization hopes to achieve. Genuine cultural exchange will, in most cases, favor process, as this will stimulate dialogue and people learning about one another; strengthen local leadership; and rehearse moments of self-expression and self-definition. Instances of cultural diplomacy may allow for these types of experiences, but often within the container of an agenda.

A creative project that is also doing the work of diplomacy may be asked to provide different outcomes and measures than one that is not. Such a project may be structured to have uni-directional vectors of influence, especially when one group is brought in to “aid” or “educate” another. What

Cultural diplomacy works to subtly manage the mechanisms of culture and cultural expression towards goals of political, social and economic interaction between nations. At its best, it brings forward cultural workers within societies and recognizes their power to dramatically and concretely influence the hearts and minds of their respective societies. Art at its best in such a context can lay the emotional and mental groundwork for positive social change.

However, cultural diplomacy, by its nature, preferences using artists towards accomplishing specific predetermined goals. The artistic process works in the opposite way, in that artists pose questions, they don't predict or calculate outcomes. Artistic exploration regularly leads to unanticipated and unpredictable revelations of inner, often unspoken and even unacknowledged truths. The unearthing of unarticulated "knowledge" within individuals and communities can be the true mirror of truths that must be reflected before real change begins.

Therefore cultural exchange offers possibilities that cultural diplomacy cannot match. Not knowing ahead of time where the road may lead can be frightening and an anathema for the diplomat. But it is the oxygen and inspiration for the artist.

When cultural workers meet in exchange, they are innately engaged in dialogue, deep listening, teamwork creation, capacity and dignity building amongst many other things. The process of interaction profoundly influences the lives of the artists and alters irrevocably their world-view, allowing for new communications between artists within and about their communities.

The inevitable results of cultural diplomacy and cultural exchange may resonate closely with one another. But, they are two very different paths towards a common goal of mutual understanding and respect.

—Roberta Levitow

FIG. 1. Roberta Levitow on cultural diplomacy.

makes cultural exchange so valuable as a point of reference in discussing the ethics of cultural diplomacy is how exchange potentially allows for influence and sharing to flow equally between groups. Achieving this balance requires vigilance. Sometimes the organizational culture of a sponsoring institution will be incongruous with the ethos and methodology of creative, liberatory work. How, then, can the facilitator negotiate the goals of a host organization without making a workshop space over-determined by the need to produce certain results? How can practitioners partner with hosts to create a space that is genuinely liberatory for the participants, within the context of being funded, programmed, and assessed from a policy or institutional perspective?

### Being Good Guests

"When the Mexican government held its celebration of the Camino Real in Santa Fe, New Mexico, some years ago, they touted the contributions made by the Spanish Conquistadors—including horses and sheep and iron tools. When Phillip Tuwaletstewa (Hopi) came to the podium to speak about the history of the Camino Real, he opened by saying that when the Conquistadors came to the land of the Native peoples 'they were not very good guests.' This

I think cultural diplomacy refers to a powerful idea, an idea that contains both ethical risks and ethical possibilities.

The possibilities are based on the opportunities for people of different cultures and nations learning about and with each other, bringing the creative resources of different parts of the world into generative relationship with each other. Stereotypes can be challenged; a recognition of our interdependence can be enhanced; people all around the world can be inspired by the virtuosity and the sensitivity of the artists and cultural workers of cultures not their own.

The ethical risks emerge from the power of nation-states and how they choose to assert their interests in the world, and the risks associated with the instrumentalization of the arts. Sometimes national diplomatic efforts are based on principles of mutual respect and reciprocity. All too often, though, diplomacy is pursued as one strategy of control or domination. When cultural resources are deployed as part of such a strategy, however positive the actual encounter, these activities are implicated in the larger agenda. I believe it is the responsibility of artists to become aware of these agendas and to take them into account when making decisions about participating in cultural diplomacy initiatives.

The transformative power of the arts depends on respect for artistic and cultural integrity. Especially when an artistic event is being marshaled in service of another agenda, concern for aesthetic quality and for relationships of mutuality can be compromised. These concerns suggest responsibilities for the sponsoring agencies: they should bring artists into planning processes at the earliest feasible stages, and, to the extent possible, respect their autonomy, the spaces they create, and the technical requirements of their work.

In general, we tend to think of “cultural diplomacy” as a phenomenon associated with nations. There is, however, a growing movement of “citizen’s diplomacy” and “public diplomacy.” These initiatives are organized by non-governmental organizations and hold great promise for cultural exchanges based on principles of reciprocity.

—Cynthia Cohen

FIG. 2. Cynthia Cohen on cultural diplomacy.

simple phrase became a major ideological check point for me in my interactions with other cultures and has helped me immensely in developing my own version of cultural diplomacy.

“When we enter another cultural domain, we need to avoid dashing in with our solutions and ideas before we have spent time as a guest, listening and contextualizing our ideas in terms of the visited culture.”

—Diane Karp<sup>3</sup>

“To ‘listen’ another’s soul into a condition of disclosure and discovery may be almost the greatest service that any human being ever performs for another.”

—Douglas Steere (14)

Part of “being a good guest,” especially in cases of having more access and mobility than the visited country or culture, involves thinking about the process of entering and exiting a community.

DNAWORKS has developed an approach to be prepared both for moments when we are asked to lead projects with sufficient lead time, as well as moments where we are asked to facilitate on the spot. While being thrown into a new situation is usually jarring for facilitator and participant alike, the reality of this kind of work is that, often, timetables shift, local logistics vary, and the artist engaged in cultural diplomacy has to be at the ready. Our process is gentle, collaborative, and, at the same time, has a built-in progression.

First, we do not arrive with an assumption of what will be important or meaningful to people, despite whatever research we have done or what we have been told prior to arriving. Whenever possible, we attempt to spend time in a community before beginning our work; and, equally important, to remain for a period of time after the official work is complete. Projects are often short because of financial restrictions; so we do this in order to learn about the community firsthand and make personal connections before the actual workshops begin. These interactions allow us to pick up on cultural subtleties we might otherwise miss in the middle of a work session.

In the first session, we introduce exercises that foreground the experiences of the participants. We begin by listening, with the community's voices coming first. One approach is to ask people to pair off and then give the dyads an open-ended prompt for sharing that does not have a "goal" in mind, other than for the two people to listen deeply to each other and begin to learn—or learn more, depending on the situation—about each other. Such a question might be: "What did it take to get here?" or "What is your first memory of a live performance?" One person speaks and the other listens generously, and then they switch. Another introductory exercise is a "story circle," with a question about a family artifact, a proud memory, or, more generally, why they came to the workshop—often, the simpler the question, the more deeply a participant shares. (We have been influenced by John O'Neal's work in this area.<sup>4</sup>)

Next, we look to the group to lay the foundation for the creative work that will follow. Standing in a circle, we invite participants, one by one, to say their names and offer a gesture and/or a word that expresses how they are feeling at the moment, or to share something they want the group to know about themselves. We may also ask group members to teach us exercises, games, songs, or dances. The practice here, as with the listening exercises, is to dismantle the notion that we are the only leaders in the circle.

Many of the subsequent exercises are in smaller groups where there is no one leader—people create writing, songs, movement, or short performance compositions as an ensemble, and the workshop, as a whole, creates a protocol for feedback and critique. For example, in working with a group of Roma and non-Roma teens, we asked them to free-write what they wanted to say to the world. Then, working in small groups on their own, they combined their writings to create a "hook" (chorus) that could be repeated. Over the past two years, the following sung hooks have emerged: "Faith, strength, determination, and love"; and "Wake, wake, wake up the world / Peace, peace, peace for the world / Wake, wake, wake up the world / And save the world." In performance, these refrains were interspersed with the participants' individual poetry and improvisations. This process of group decision-making demystifies the model of top-down artistic direction. A discussion of performance choices can still be facilitated and guided by one individual; however, the entire workshop offers feedback on suggested edits and revisions from within the clearly enunciated context of the performers' creative goals, and the composition is then re-rehearsed. This process can be repeated several times.

We pay attention to the language we use and the internal and external realities it creates, as discussed by Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o in *Decolonising the Mind* (1986). We are careful to model words, phrases, and concepts that are not exclusionary—that is, that embrace multiple realities and circumstances and create a space of freedom, not conformity. For example, being mindful of gendered language (working hard not to use "you guys" as a catch-all), minimizing terms (avoiding "kids"),

and culturally relative assumptions about values, practices, and privilege. Thus we attempt, while working, to view the room from as many perspectives as possible.

Also crucial when moving between and among cultural and national groups is an awareness of the politics of local languages. For example, in observing, prior to our own workshop, an organization that works with Arab and Jewish Israeli youth, we discovered that it translated instructions and interactions into Hebrew first. So, in our sessions, we asked one of the Arab Israeli leaders to assist us, and we suggested that the first translation be into Arabic. Even so, the power dynamics were so engrained that it took a while for the two translators to coordinate and for the Arabic translator to speak first. Whether the members of the majoritarian population realized it or not, the Arabic-speaking participants were being marginalized linguistically in a project whose goal was to build understanding and peace between groups that each have radically different statuses within their shared society. Everything matters.

Another way to stimulate leadership within groups is, when appropriate, inviting participants to serve as translators, and asking the given translators to take part as participants. Especially in groups of teenagers and young adults, this has the wonderful effect of flipping power structures. In one workshop in Hungary, we discovered that a 15-year-old Emo young man in our group was fluent in English from online gaming. He was painfully shy and self-effacing for the first few days. Yet, in taking on translating for the project, he began to show more of himself and completely transformed, making friends quickly and translating effectively. This past summer he returned as a youth leader to assist us more formally.

The workshops build gradually so that both the individuals in the circle and the group as a whole walk away with something they can sustain. We are not always able to control what the circumstances of the work will be, such as: how long we will have together; whether participants will be able to attend full or multiple sessions due to their own family, work, or other circumstances; what the environment of the program will be; or whether we will be able (through language or logistics) to do official follow-through with them. So during the creative part of the workshop we ask participants to explore their own hopes and desires, and before we close we take time to build into the future. This approach introduces an element of self-sustainability. In most of the communities in which we have worked, an organization has formed or community members have stepped forward to take action in response to certain societal issues.

For instance, during a daylong workshop in Atlantis, a township in South Africa, we spent forty minutes meeting with the older youth and adults who wanted to discuss continuing the work after we left. Together, we created a leadership committee and game plan, and steps to secure a space, hold regular meetings, and remain in communication. Although this particular plan did not last due to financial limitations, following the workshop several participants who took part in the conversation began separate campaigns against domestic violence and substance abuse in the township. Similarly, in the former Buduburam refugee camp in Ghana, workshop participants continued to meet to create Hip Hop Theatre and poetry, eventually founding an organization and an arts safe house for youth when they were repatriated to Liberia. We have found that introducing this conversation plants important seeds for future local action.

Although as a small organization we do not yet have the infrastructure for formalized support after we leave a site, we also do not want to foster the culture of dependency that sometimes results when philanthropic/service-based organizations work within socially and economically marginalized populations. Last year, we supported a group of teachers during our work in Hungary to create a collective organization. At their request, we assisted them in receiving books on alternative pedagogies. We stay in touch with them sporadically via Facebook and e-mail. But given the tenuous political situation with an ultra-right-wing party currently in power, we believe the teachers themselves have to determine the safest way to have this dialogue publicly and professionally.

As much as possible, we attempt to be catalysts for dialogue—and let the group participants guide the direction of the work that will be meaningful to them. Freire writes that “[i]t is not our role to speak to the people about our own view of the world, nor to attempt to impose that view on them, but rather to dialogue with the people about their view and ours” (85). This approach of participants having an open space to use their voices and rehearse their responses to the world is crucial. Thus in completing a workshop, we also ensure that we do not have the last words; we finish with an acknowledgment circle or a feedback exercise, during which everyone in the circle takes a turn and a group member is the final person to speak.

### **Culture and Double Consciousness**

In creating a liberatory space, great vigilance needs to be paid to each step of the process. What is often missing in setting up and carrying out projects is a dialogical approach, or what Mikhail Bakhtin terms “bilingual consciousness” (62)—namely, being able to think and interact from multiple subject positions. W. E. B. Du Bois, father of critical race theory in the United States, writes of this phenomenon as “double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others” (102). While Du Bois describes the process of a minoritarian population seeing itself through the dominant culture’s eyes, so too can a sponsoring organization—one invested with resources, hence power—invert these dynamics and plan the work of cultural diplomacy looking through multiple lenses, with a sensitivity to the social, economic, and cultural realities of the program participants.

Freire, similarly, writes: “In order to communicate effectively, educator and politician must understand the structural conditions in which the thought and language of the people are dialectically framed” (85–86). And bell hooks, following Freire, also advocates paying attention to the structure in which the work is contained: “education as the practice of freedom is not just about liberatory knowledge, it’s about a liberatory practice in the classroom” (147). A conversation about ethics—and liberation—needs to address both content and container.

An inattention to these important elements can lead to what Freire terms “cultural invasion”: “In this phenomenon, the invaders penetrate the cultural context of another group, in disrespect of the latter’s potentialities; they impose their own view of the world upon those they invade and inhibit the creativity of the invaded by curbing their expression. . . . cultural invasion is thus always an act of violence against the persons of the invaded culture, who lose their originality or face the threat of losing it” (150). In thinking about the work of cultural exchange and diplomacy, I take “culture” not just as national or ethnic belonging, but also as related to class, region, gender, sexuality, age, all levels of ability, and the multiple ways that individuals constitute their own identities.

One area that is often overlooked is the way in which young people are oppressed—a crucial awareness, since many cultural projects are designed to work with youth. Margaret Pevac, a writer, blogger, and ally to young people, explains in her article “Adulthood: The Hidden Oppression of Young People”:

Most people are at least familiar with the major “isms” of our social life: racism, sexism, classism. Many of us seek to understand the impact of these oppressions and at minimum try not to perpetuate them. But there is one group whose oppression we seem blind to: that of young people. Ask an ordinary person on the street what the term for youth oppression is, and he or she will most likely give you a blank stare, even though it is the one oppression that hits all of us early and hard and keeps on hitting until we cross that mighty stream into adulthood and begin to oppress the younger ones behind us. (1)

Even with the best of intentions, projects will likely experience missteps if not thought through from multiple subject positions. An example of the delicate dance between cultural exchange and



cultural invasion took place during a project that would have been better served by an application of double consciousness—that is, thinking from the perspectives of the participants—rather than from an institutional mode.

As soon as we arrived at the shanty community center where the group of street youth made their art and many lived, the project organizers initiated the move to a new venue. They were concerned about the nature of the space and our comfort, as their “official” guests. Without checking with us, they secured a “more comfortable” federal building for the workshop. Had we consented, this move would have derailed the entire program. The youth would not have come because they were continually attacked by the police and their art criminalized. In addition, the suggestion to move was read as an insult, given the time and effort they put into making this space a safe haven for their community. We stayed, working productively into the night with only one light bulb connected by a series of extension cords stretched a hundred feet across a courtyard.

In another location during the same program, the organizers, who had left at the beginning of a session, reentered the space with a group of other adults, talking loudly and opening soda cans and food in plastic wrappers. The five young people, of ages 8 to 14, were in the middle of a quiet writing exercise, bravely expressing hopes for their families and community. There was a lack of awareness on the part of the adults that the young people’s workspace would merit, for example, the same respect and consideration as a room full of professional, adult participants.

Fortunately, in both cases, the young people were so passionate about using their voices that they persisted. During the latter situation, the five participants created a physically evocative devised-theatre composition about the sea, its inhabitants, and the negative environmental impact of pollution, litter, and tourism. Their work was poetic in word and movement—a breathtaking moment of young people speaking their truths.

The challenge of carrying out arts-based cultural-diplomacy projects with young people and other marginalized groups is often, thus, having sufficient time to build a unified ethos around the work environment and the tone of communications with participants. It may be necessary to create an accord with organizers from different disciplines regarding the unique potential for working creatively in an intimate, protective setting—for example, introducing alternatives to “shushing” youth participants. On this particular project, because we did not place enough emphasis on this crucial step, we had to work hard during its course to protect the participants from the corporate culture of the host institution. Although the program organizers had “good intentions,” there were moments that were not liberatory for participants. To do this work ethically and with integrity, organizers and artists, together, need to establish a protocol to view critically all behavior and decisions on an ongoing basis—everything matters.

## **Understanding Risks**

Thus projects of cultural diplomacy work best when all parties—agency, facilitators, and participants—are in regular, early dialogue and time is dedicated to discussing all aspects of a program, including, especially, philosophy and methodology. Initiating this type of communication may prove challenging, as many agencies plan multiple projects simultaneously and do not yet recognize the need for a deep level of contact beyond logistics. However, we have discovered that an explicit discussion of values is crucial. The politics of these relationships are complex and often difficult to perceive. Thompson addresses this dynamic by asking, “which show are we part of?” (30). There is always a larger frame than the one created in the workshop or project itself. Exchanges between host organizations and local populations are never neutral (see Erik Ehn<sup>5</sup> [Fig. 3]). To believe that they are can result in physical and/or psychic violence to all involved.<sup>6</sup>



I'm disinterested in diplomacy as a neutral space, although I recognize and value the elemental importance of neutrality. Neutrality, properly constructed, doesn't mute dissent, but allows space for diversity. The reality is that any frame is definitionally partial, and peacemakers as well as productive-problem-makers alike need to acknowledge that they are violent to a degree in their exclusions.

How is our neutrality violent? To what degree do we: a) long to intervene? and b) actually intervene in ways we are not declaring?

—Erik Ehn

FIG. 3. Erik Ehn on cultural diplomacy.

The United States' history of intervention can complicate international work (see Adalet Garmiany<sup>7</sup> [Fig. 4]). Sometimes this presence is appreciated locally; other times it is unwelcome. As US-based "emissaries" of cultural diplomacy, we carry this history with us, whether we realize it or not. Therefore we need to plan responsibly, with an awareness of the multiple levels of meaning of our presence. Local participants are often not as helpless or disempowered as organizers and facilitators might think, or be led to think. There can be great cachet in a local participant aligning with a Western embassy or nongovernmental organization; while, in other circumstances, there are great risks. When working in Palestine with Jewish Israeli and Palestinian women, the women in Palestine asked that we never use their names or images or reveal the specific location in which we met, due to a fear of reprisals for attempting to bridge that particular cultural and economic divide.

But until the playing field is leveled, as Roberto Varea<sup>8</sup> describes (Fig. 5), or at least *more* level, facilitators in situations of cultural diplomacy need to continue to practice the "critical consciousness" that Freire advocates. The dynamics of "the web" are complex and often misleading. As Levitow explains: "The cultural diplomats think they are using culture intentionally to influence others; and seldom consider that they are being used by those others in the context of local politics" (personal communication, 29 April 2011). Cultural diplomacy is often set up in ways that look like an organization or agency thinks it is in control of who is influencing whom; but inherent in this structure is a "level of presumption" (ibid.). Artists and organizations in these projects cannot afford to presume that there is no evolution involved in these relationships and power dynamics. It has long been the practice of disempowered groups to negotiate ways of manipulating entities with more political/economic power and resources. I have met local artists and workers who have either participated or chosen not to participate in moments of cultural diplomacy and their webs of influence, especially if they are repeatedly selected as the "local informant" or safe participant. An artist-diplomat needs to consider and interrogate all these dynamics from moment to moment—making no assumptions about local contacts, participants, and colleagues—for circumstances can change very quickly.

### The Future of US Theatre (Programs)

More often than not, in workshops with artists around the world, I learn that their fundamental goal is to use art to move society forward and positively impact the state of the world. Similarly, I have encountered theatre students in both undergraduate and graduate programs across the United States who share the same passions. In programs where formal opportunities exist, such as the minor in applied theatre created by Jan Cohen-Cruz in the Department of Drama at New York University (NYU), students expressed gratitude that they would graduate with skills, knowledge, and experience that provided them with options other than or in addition to commercial careers.

Despite the usual definition of “cultural diplomacy,” I believe it is one of the best ways of communication internally and globally in our complex current time—if, of course, it is far from any political agenda. Its benefit is that it reduces the gap between the fields of politics, civics, science, and the arts, in particular challenging arts and artists to explore new areas of human life. It offers a new role and responsibility for our lives and is also the fastest network that can reach any area on this planet.

It is problematic, especially in the Muslim world and in the Middle East, because generally there is a concern that cultural diplomacy is a new way of Western colonization. This is due to the lack of trust people in this area have for any Western effort, because of the political legacy that goes back hundreds of years. Also, the other reason for this suspicion, I believe, is the main force supporting this phenomenon, the politicians and authorities (especially in conflict areas), which makes it hard to understand in many parts of the world. This makes our work harder and tough to restore the confidence and trust among the public. Also, in my personal point of view, it is very important for people who work in the field of art and culture and cultural diplomacy—I mean Western in particular—to not act and treat other cultures or countries in the same way that politicians have been doing for many decades. If they do, which I have seen happen, they are repeating their mistakes. However, cultural diplomacy can offer awareness, dialogue, peaceful communication, regeneration, and rebuilding and have a great impact on human rights issues.

—Adalet R. Garmiany

FIG. 4. Adalet R. Garmiany on cultural diplomacy.

Growing up in Argentina, I was inundated by American films and TV programs. Even as a child I wondered what it would have been like if the world, instead of Dick Van Dykes alone, would also have gotten a weekly dose of the Mohammad Hassan Show, if the smart private eye was Maria García from a noir Mexico City, or the beautiful immigrant family was Mnong and the land to tame was the Mekong Delta, far away from their ancestors’ highlands, ravaged by storms and unlawful poachers.

Cultural diplomacy will only fulfill its promise when the playing field is leveled and we can enter in relationship in reciprocal terms, celebrating that what makes us *all* human, and not what makes some of us more human than others. Also, that there is a thin line between cultural diffusion and propaganda, and there is a lot of work ahead of us in making the exchange a true dialogue.

—Roberto Varea

FIG. 5. Roberto Varea on cultural diplomacy.

As my NYU students persistently proved, introducing a focus in applied theatre or theatre for social change to a curriculum does not mean creating a fallback or a watered-down theatre practice. Most of the students I trained who are performing on Broadway, in national tours, in films, on television, and making commercials balance their time working in the United States and abroad with youth, using their love of theatre in underserved communities of all ages and identities. From my perspective, US theatre is currently experiencing the resurgence of the “total artist”—one for whom the ritual and community origins of theatre are of utmost importance, and who feels a responsibility to carry on this legacy.

In all DNAWORKS projects, we invite an assistant, usually an undergraduate or recent graduate, to join us. The bonds between these young, future leaders and their counterparts abroad are, in my mind, some of the most powerful and lasting examples of cultural diplomacy I have witnessed. I am more and more convinced that the current times and the health of the planet necessitate the consistent integration of art and service. I look forward to seeing additional theatre programs provide training for their students to use their skills in the service of society on multiple levels, for I firmly believe this is the direction in which the field is moving.

### **Moving Forward**

In thinking about the ethos of cultural work, it is important, as discussed above, to realize the potential for diplomacy, like exchange, to happen in both directions (see Cynthia Schneider<sup>9</sup> [Fig. 6]). The impact the workshop participants have on the artists may just as significantly influence ways in which these artists engage in activism on behalf of the particular population. This is a porous process that sometimes results in unexpected actions. The evidence of this bilateral diplomacy is currently visible in the increased interest of US-based artists in such countries as Iraq, Iran, Afghanistan, and Palestine, and small US-based touring productions that discuss human rights in these places.

As such, cultural diplomacy can learn from theatre research to see itself consistently as process, not product. As Dijana Milosevic<sup>10</sup> highlights (Fig. 7), one attribute of the artist is the ability to foreground human capacities and struggles. Therefore, rather than primarily measuring, documenting, reporting on, and analyzing a project’s quantitative data or “deliverables,” assessment of projects can equally privilege qualitative findings. Including human data as a matrix for assessment—such as observing shifts in quality of life, joy, a sense of personal and creative freedoms, inspiration, ability to connect and communicate across cultural or other dividing lines, and ability to create together—drives projects in different ways and eliminates a tendency toward cultural imperialism or invasion.

In addition, as practitioners engaging in cultural exchange and diplomacy, we need to reconsider the politics of viewing during this kind of sensitive inter-group work. Oftentimes host organizations will want to invite observers or create official documentation during a project’s process phase. Given the need for grants and other types of funding, artists genuinely need to show funders the nature of their work. While rehearsal documentation is often useful for artists in developing a performance, photographs and video footage can be equally exploitative if created for export beyond the walls of the workshop space. These records reveal the secret, sacred rituals as elements of society reorganize themselves through collaborative efforts. This is an ethical conundrum for practitioners that has yet to be resolved and that I struggle with continuously. How can a project sustain itself in a market economy without being appropriated by external interests?

Such ethical concerns drive the work as much as hinder it. Cultural diplomacy, at its most human and aware, would be self-reflective: constantly striving for better ways to interact; consciously working to deconstruct multiple levels of hierarchy in a room; and seeking the space of pure presence where participants paradoxically celebrate the implicit humanity that connects all people, while learning about significant differences. There is no finite answer to the question of cultural

It is always artists who lead in criticism of society and the government. In theatre, which is such an intimate experience, the emotional power of that kind of criticism is all the greater. So you have people like the Belarus Free Theatre using incredibly powerful plays, which are partially allegory, partially reality, to portray in such a gripping way the repressive regime of Belarus. Or in Pakistan, the theatre of Shahid Nadeem, where he so skillfully introduces ideas of moderation, toleration, openness—a kind of counter-extremism narrative—through the theatre and through using Pakistani history.

I think that the old concept of cultural diplomacy, of us sending people abroad, has really changed dramatically. The State Department is looking more and more at a partnership kind of model where we send a company or a representative to another country to collaborate and work together with people there. And the other side of cultural diplomacy that is so important today is funding the travel of artists and performers from other countries to the United States, to travel around the United States, because we unfortunately are not getting any education about the rest of the world in our schools. And this is one way to show the human side of people in other parts of the world and help improve the global knowledge of Americans.

—Cynthia P. Schneider

FIG. 6. Cynthia P. Schneider on cultural diplomacy.

The meaning of the term “diplomacy” implies: balance, negotiation, being in the center, keeping the situation calm, acceptable, resolution-result oriented. Art implies being out of balance, negotiation only on behalf of one’s self, involving others in extreme vision, suspense, active resistance, question rather than resolution. The position of the artist is of one who dances with the controversies; thus, bridging controversies within an idea of cultural diplomacy might speak about an artist who keeps the position of awake observer, being on the elitist margin, moving from the margin to the center and back, being shape-shifter rather than diplomat.

—Dijana Milosevic

FIG. 7. Dijana Milosevic on cultural diplomacy.

diplomacy and what its ethics are or should be. Jean McNiff and Jack Whitehead, in *All You Need to Know about Action Research*, describe Amartya Sen’s work advocating a “process in which human beings are integrally involved in the production of their own futures” (19). It seems to me that this is an ethical place to begin, a humanizing practice and an awareness of the fragility of community-building in a time of ever-present global violence and exploitation. This balancing act—the quest for the most ethical practice possible—would thus take the form, for all parties engaged in cultural exchange and diplomacy, of an ongoing inquiry how to generate an even more liberatory space for self-expression and leadership.

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## Notes

1. Roberta Levitow is a director, educator, founding member of TWB, and Sundance Institute artistic associate for the theatre program's East Africa Initiative. Levitow's comments on cultural diplomacy (Fig. 1) were sent to me via e-mail (personal communication, 19 April 2011).
2. Cynthia Cohen is director of the program in Peacebuilding and the Arts at the International Center for Ethics, Justice, and Public Life at Brandeis University in Waltham, Massachusetts (see <<http://www.brandeis.edu/ethics/peacebuildingarts/actingtogether/index.html>>). She has been a key collaborator with TWB since 2005. Cohen's comments on cultural diplomacy (Fig. 2) were sent to me via e-mail (personal communication, 15 April 2011).
3. Diane Karp is executive director of the Santa Fe Art Institute (personal communication, 22 April 2011).
4. John O'Neal is founder of Junebug Productions and cofounder of Free Southern Theatre, both located in New Orleans. He has been using story circles for over fifty years to facilitate antiracism and community dialogue (see O'Neal, "Story Circle Methodology," 2011).
5. Erik Ehn is a TWB founding member, founder of the Arts in the One World conference, and head of playwriting and professor of Theatre Arts and Performance Studies at Brown University, Providence, Rhode Island. Ehn's comments on cultural diplomacy (Fig. 3) were sent to me via e-mail (personal communication, 15 April 2011).
6. See, for example, Thompson's important account of his work in Sri Lanka at the Bindunuwewa rehabilitation center for child soldiers in his *Performance Affects* (2009).
7. Adalet R. Garmiany is chief executive of ArtRole and an artist and curator specializing in developing international contemporary art and culture exchanges with the Middle East. Garmiany's comments on cultural diplomacy (Fig. 4) were sent to me via e-mail (personal communication, 22 April 2011).
8. Roberto Varea is a TWB member, associate professor, and co-director of Performing Arts and Social Justice at the Center for Latino Studies in the Americas, University of San Francisco. Varea's comments on cultural diplomacy (Fig. 5) were sent to me via e-mail (personal communication, 25 April 2011).
9. Cynthia P. Schneider is a Distinguished Professor in the Practice of Diplomacy in the School of Foreign Service of Georgetown University, senior non-resident fellow at the Brookings Institution, co-director of the MOST (Muslims on Screen and Television) Resource Center (see <<http://www.mostresource.org/>>), and former US ambassador to the Netherlands. Schneider's comments on cultural diplomacy (Fig. 6) were sent to me via e-mail (personal communication, 23 April 2011).
10. Dijana Milosevic is artistic director of DAH Theatre in Belgrade, Serbia. Milosevic's comments on cultural diplomacy (Fig. 7) were sent to me via e-mail (personal communication, 2 May 2011).

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