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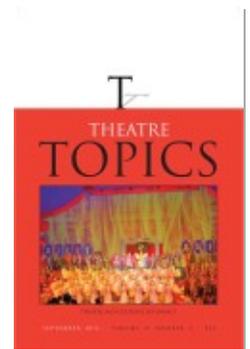
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# *Telling Our Stories: Community-Created Theatre as Intra-Cultural Diplomacy in a Transnational World*

*Sarah Ann Standing*

New York City College of Technology's<sup>1</sup> ("City Tech") classrooms are among the most diverse in the world. Students land in my speech and theatre classes from a range of countries, such as Egypt, Thailand, Ivory Coast, Peru, New Zealand, Yemen, and Hong Kong, among others.<sup>2</sup> One student told me how he escaped from a guarded clothing-sweatshop factory in Guiana and made his way to the United States; others come by winning the immigration lottery, borrowing money from extended family in India, and arriving here alone. Other scenarios include students who are received in large, intact communities, but then become trapped by being coerced to work in, say, Chinese restaurants and experiencing arranged marriages. Students can also be pressured to live and work in Chinatown and thus never really learn to speak English. Among these are others, students from New York City itself who come from drug violence, gang violence, or violence born out of frustration and boredom. Additionally, there are students from middle-class backgrounds—some even having parents who attended City Tech themselves.

In today's multicultural world, students must learn to work collaboratively with those who are different in order to thrive. Current diversity initiatives encompass, of course, the usual categories of race, ethnicity, class, sex, gender, and dis/ability across the spectrum of students, faculty, and staff on campus and in its communities. I posit that the ways students need to learn to work together are not merely a result of proximity (namely, the diversity of students within the same classroom), but rather a function of deliberately utilizing diplomacy.

The traditional definition of "diplomacy" is twofold: "1) The art and practice of conducting negotiations between nations, and 2) skill in handling affairs without arousing hostility" (Merriam-Webster.com). Diplomacy, in the context of students needing to understand those who are different, is the art of communication, such that others feel respected and understood, and a means of bridging one's experiences with those of others. Further, I argue that students must learn to *appreciate* difference, and not just to *tolerate* or *ignore* it. This essay offers one model for teaching students how to value difference, their own as well as others', by using individual diplomacy and community-created theatre as "cultural diplomacy."

In my "Effective Speaking" course classroom, individual diplomacy is practiced through mediated classroom discussions: for example, getting students from countries that are at war (or else in conflict) to engage in dialogue. I urge students to view themselves in a globalized framework by saying that "the future of the world depends upon people who are different, and may think very differently, learning to talk and *listen* to one another respectfully." Although initially wary, eventually these students begin to trust their new friendships and consequently relinquish histories of hatred and violence. In one class, a political discussion arose among students from Afghanistan, Iran, and Israel. When their words became heated, I reiterated the classroom rules: "You have to LISTEN to each other. You have to treat each other as individuals. Don't just repeat things you've been told by others or grew up hearing. You MUST learn (as a graded part of the class) to have a respectful dialogue." I had to intervene many times, but eventually they began listening to one another, viewing one another as individuals and not simply as representatives of distrusted nations. As Kanta Kochhar-Lindgren

has written: “much already has been written about the need for a nuanced understanding of multiple voices and the right to speak. Less, however, has been written on listening to the other—notwithstanding the ways in which the other is defined, whether political, cultural, or metaphysical. Not only do we have great difficulty seeing the other, but we also have great difficulty hearing the other as well” (424). Thus attuning both myself and the students increasingly toward listening as a key to individual diplomacy practiced through classroom discussion is part of most of my days at City Tech.

These classroom forays into individual diplomacy set the stage for a new kind of cultural diplomacy through community-created theatre. I developed *Telling Our Stories* as a public forum for students to share their cultural subjectivities in a way that makes others want to listen. One by one, the performers come from opposite sides of the stage to tell their four- to six-minute story—a story they have spent a good part of the semester working on in “Voice and Diction” class. A projection of a visual image punctuates the transition between performers. The format is deliberately simple—onstage there are only a microphone at center stage and a large screen upstage for projection—but the effects of the shows are profound. Individual storytellers share heart-rendering and elementally theatrical stories that resonate deeply with the audience. Sometimes it is an unexpected timbre of voice or a glance that helps the audience to envisage the space the speaker evokes, gestures that pull the audience in; other times, the rich narratives themselves, those personal and heartfelt reminiscences of family and culture, touch the audience members.

Once the students, most of whom have never been onstage before, complete such a production and experience the kind of impact it can have, they move from a position of outsider on the sociocultural margins to, literally, center stage. Their differences are foregrounded, highlighted, raised up, and celebrated. They become leading actors within the realm that Kochhar-Lindgren calls the “third ear,” which she defines as “my attempt to appropriate, and then revise, a term that will encompass both ‘spectator’ and ‘audience’ with their many implications for the vagaries of moving across categories of difference” (424). The audience, of course, sees who is wearing a headscarf, who is disabled and struggling to speak, who is clearly from “the islands” and talking about cooking roti and curry, and who talks about their ancestors from the Philippines. This multiplicity of performers provides a physical counterpoint to the stories and generates an unfamiliar hybrid public space, where the audience is pushed to attend to a multiplicity of voices and subjectivities of the particular storytellers and complete a “cultural transfer through a repertoire of what have traditionally been ephemeral, and thus unnoted, behaviors” (ibid.). Additionally, this project attempts to provide a “cultural space that escape[s] the binaries of essentialism and reductionism” (435). I will delve further into this idea below.

Last year, the students were so inspired by this project that they decided to compile a book of their experiences, and to illustrate and self-publish it. This year, the “Scholar on Campus”<sup>3</sup> participated, and fellow faculty are discussing using this format as part of a Title V grant in order to foster the faculty’s listening to student voices regarding general education. The simplicity of the performance design is particularly important, as the *Telling Our Stories* format can be used in places where there are people whose stories are not being heard. One student and I are discussing ways to take this format to the Haitian community of New York so as to address the earthquake that ravaged the island in January 2010.

The success of the project emanates from the multiplicity of voices on a single stage and the emotion generated within the audience as a result of the performers’ willingness to express and share their feelings onstage. The goal is sharing stories from unheard individuals in order to “consider the positionality of another” (425). The relationship between performer and audience (and the space itself as the performers speak onstage) effectively says, “Listen. Heed what is being said.” This is the focusing mechanism of theatre, and through practice and distillation the stories gain performance-quality power. However, there is a dialectic between encouraging the performers to genuinely express themselves and the need to edit their presentations, and I am always well aware of this balancing act.

Participation in *Telling Our Stories* is rewarded with extra credit, so obviously this becomes a motivating factor. Only a few students annually opt out, mostly because of work commitments. I continually wonder how we can encourage the “subaltern” to speak without coercion. How do we impart English-language skills without reinforcing racist/dominance patterns? I often wrestle with the discrepancy between the originality of students’ writing and City Tech’s academic requirements. My attention to this discrepancy is intensified by students’ obvious fear of writing and speaking English, because they have been told so often that their grammar is poor. I am in constant negotiation with different “selves” within my own head.

It is impossible not to have this project coded beyond my intentions; however, I think the way out is through respect and awareness, through trying to be as alert to one’s own presumptions as one is to those of one’s students. Pedagogically, this means taking note of a student’s resistance, and trying to ferret out whether it is resistance to work, to the unknown, or to a feeling of being exploited. My own listening and learning are always and already part of the project.

The first *Telling Our Stories* show, titled “What Surrounds Us,” concerned students’ relationship to their environment—defined in broad terms as a physical or cultural environment, or even a geographical memory. This piece investigated how different environments implicitly influence one another. I told my students to begin the writing process by locating a *specific* element in their surroundings. The show included a story about growing-up obese and having a cousin shot while the participant and cousin were out jogging to try to lose weight, and another about outcasts in the marketplace of Douala, Cameroon (this extremely shy student came up to me before the performance and, breathless, asked if she could sing a traditional song; when she sang it, the audience seemed to collectively hold its breath, transfixed by her unusual voice and evocatively beautiful singing).

The second *Telling Our Stories* show, “Emerging into Light,” similarly structured to the first, took the evolving conversation further by exploring the process of transformation through stories, such as one about a beautiful house in Malaysia that is contrasted with a dingy apartment in New York City where the landlord frequently comes in unannounced, and others about a person from South India finding true love in marriage after an excruciatingly difficult childhood, a nurse in St. Lucia imagining the life of the fisherman lying on the autopsy table before her, and a blind date for a possible arranged marriage.

This year, the third year of *Telling Our Stories*, was titled “Food for Thought and Action,” which in many ways activated metaphors of “checking to see who is at the table” and, even, “inviting oneself to take a place at the table.” Thus excerpts of the stories found throughout the remainder of this essay represent “having a meal together.” Each of the performers in the show were seated at a metaphorical table, where all shared an imaginary meal with the audience. Some of their recounted meals brought feelings of sustenance, reflection, and humor, and others of sadness and loss.

“Food for Thought and Action” can be contextualized by Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett’s idea of “an aesthetics of everyday life” (qtd. in Gablik 416). Kirshenblatt-Gimblett elucidates this in the following way: “The arts of everyday life are highly utilitarian arts: they give form to value” (417). She goes on to say that “[i]t involves everything. It includes domestic interiors, the table, food, language. It also includes the arts of sociability, conversation, etiquette and dress” (ibid.). In this manner, we can envision the depth of conversation about food among the diversity at City Tech, each participant paying homage to their cultural differences by elevating to art such differences in cooking and eating. One story, “A Wonderful Morning” by a participant named Shantel Paul, epitomized this art of the everyday:

The aroma of herbs and spices filled my nostrils with the first breath of the morning; sweeter and more comforting than the smell of the dew on the flowers of the garden. I made my way into the kitchen, a detour rather. Onions and garlic chopped up on the cutting board, the oil

in the cannery emanating a ready heat. The steam from the teapot hisses and threatens to erupt, filling the kitchen with the sweet calming scents of daisy. The early morning sunlight breaks through the windows and the cracks of the closed door and surrounds the dough sitting in flour waiting to be cooked. Quiet pots stood aside, covered.

“Good morning mommy, morning Solita, morning Roger, what y’all cooking?” I rambled!  
 “Is lunch,” my sister declared. “Roti and curry. Turn off the teapot!”

Additionally, I wanted to bring into the show suggestions of the current conversations people like Michael Pollan and Alice Waters are having regarding food. The poster for the show was a photograph of luscious fruit from a farmer’s market. Although this slow-food movement is tremendously important in terms of health, the current “locavore”<sup>4</sup> sensibility is sometimes divorced from the multicultural context. “Food for Thought and Action” sought to revitalize the connection among locally grown, handmade, and ethnicity. I never mentioned this objective to the students, because I wanted to see what would emerge organically from students’ backgrounds and associations with food. It turned out that students’ voices and observations add depth to these current conversations surrounding food. For example, everyone knows that processed food is endemic in the United States, but in Iliana Gonzaga’s story “Food from Back Home,” we hear about her particular experiences of the contrasts between foods in Mexico and here:

We were helping our grandma make tortillas out of dough in a tortilla presser where everything is done by hand in Mexico. Grandma is chatting away with my aunts, my sisters and I listening to the conversation. Where no man from my family is allowed into the kitchen [when] there are women cooking. . . . [M]y grandpa and uncles are enjoying themselves outside with cold bottles of beer. For me and my Mexican culture, food is time spent with family cooking and building relationships, while here in the United States food is viewed as a necessity and time spent in front of the television. . . . Now it’s a walk to the supermarket for frozen foods.

Through Iliana’s story we hear an individual and cultural particularization of the contrast in slow versus fast food. Thus “Food for Thought and Action” knits Pollan’s and Waters’s ideas of the slow/local food movement together with Kirshenblatt-Gimblett’s concept of the “aesthetics of everyday life.”

Additionally, here I thread in Kirshenblatt-Gimblett’s concept of “modes of aesthetic reception” (423), which considers the institutions we use to value art—for example, museums. Kirshenblatt-Gimblett calls attention to the relationship between the art inside, and the trappings of presentation that either validate or discount the contribution of that art. In the same way that everyday art—the art that is not inside museums—is often devalued because of its utilitarian or ubiquitous nature, theatre without a great deal of spectacle or pyrotechnics can also seem discounted, undervalued. *Telling Our Stories* takes place in a fairly simple space: a small stage and about a hundred seats. Students in the audience are often surprised by their own responses, because, knowing that this is not Broadway and not costing anything, yet are nevertheless finding themselves experiencing the power of theatre. This in itself is a valuable lesson: that students can begin to trust their own responses and not rely on the machinery of validation from the theatre world. Thus the performance empowers sensibilities of the transnational audience in this hybrid space. Consider, for example, the poignant resonance of Hizar Mohjazi’s story “Lost” as she embodies her struggle with leaving a temporary home or staying through the imagery of a bird leaving her cage:

On a nice, sunny day, everyone was getting ready to leave. Since I was in the cage, one of the creatures decided to open the window. It didn’t occur to them that I can open the door[,] I guess they forgot. I waited until everyone was away in their rooms. It was so noisy they wouldn’t hear the door of the cage closing because it makes a sort of a bell sound. I managed to escape the cage and headed straight out the window. But I didn’t fly away yet. I stood on the roof of the building in front of their place. Once they knew I was gone, they looked out the window to

see if I was still there. To their excitement they started to call me and shouted “come back” with tears in their eyes. I felt that they truly didn’t want me to leave. I felt as though I’d go back. But I refused to do so. It was the time they realized I couldn’t stay. And so I took the last glance at them and then flew away. I didn’t forget my home and my family, and I won’t forget them either.

*Telling Our Stories* embraces the possibility of intra-cultural diplomacy at the individual level, *within* diverse communities, and not in direct service of public or governmental policy, as cultural diplomacy frequently is. Students represent themselves in an open forum—a United Nations of theatre—and their dramatic exchanges serve as a testament to the power of the individual voice within the cross-cultural context. Consequently, it is imperative that there be a deliberate, conscientious attempt to provide a safe forum. As with all diplomacy, it is important to ask to what extent cultural imperialism occurs, and to what extent exchange takes place.

## Cultural Diplomacy

Cultural diplomacy can be defined as “the exchange of ideas, information, art, and other aspects of culture among nations and their peoples in order to foster mutual understanding” (Cummings 1). This idealistic definition, however, does not speak to the often thinly veiled diplomatic agenda of the exporting nation, nor does it address the power relations and discrepancies among nations. One way to examine power in the context of cultural diplomacy is to examine the contrast between “hard” and “soft” power. In a speech (available online) at the Institute for Cultural Diplomacy in Berlin, Joseph Nye Jr. describes power as the “ability to affect others to get the outcomes that you want.” This may be accomplished through various modes: sticks, carrots, and/or attraction. Sticks are obviously hard power, requiring the use of military force, economic sanctions, or blockades. Attraction, or soft power—“affecting others to *want* the things that you do” (Nye)—uses values, policy, and culture to obtain its goals. Although soft power can be employed as a weapon almost as easily as hard power, Nye argues for the former’s benefits, even as he cautions against its misuses. Soft power demands a willing acceptance in order to be effective, because it depends “on people’s perceptions.”

Theatre diplomacy in particular relies on this willing acceptance of soft power. A brief look at traditional forms of theatre diplomacy can help highlight the differences in impact between a national political agenda and a more grassroots artistic exchange. Theatre historian Charlotte Canning describes the United States’ advocating the establishment of a national theatre as a demonstration of cultural superiority: “[T]he United States needed to represent itself as an attractive culture, and not simply as a dominant geopolitical power, in order to reach out to an international audience curious about the country” (408). Demonstrating “attractive culture” has been a prime use of cultural diplomacy; however, as Antonio Gramsci has pointed out in his analysis of cultural hegemony, the complicity with which one takes on the master culture in no way excuses that culture from its agenda of domination.

One way to address the hidden agenda of cultural diplomacy is exemplified by Nicholas Cull’s call for a separation of art and the state: “There is a problem at the heart of cultural diplomacy. While easily aligned with broad foreign policy objectives, cultural diplomacy is best kept fire-walled from regular diplomacy. Cultural diplomacy’s credibility springs from this distance and its effectiveness declines the nearer it comes to the official foreign policy apparatus.” He also points out that the more secure a state feels, the more likely it is to risk self-criticism through performance. By implication, the state frequently officiates over content as well as agenda.

Cultural diplomacy’s history demonstrating attractive culture has made some artists suspicious, and these artists want an even bigger divide between cultural diplomacy’s “broad foreign policy objectives” and their own work. Joan Channick, in “The Artist as Cultural Diplomat,” asserts that there is

a fundamental difference between the official approach to cultural diplomacy—where the emphasis is on the diplomacy, and culture is merely a tool or, worse, a weapon—and the approach taken by artists. Artists engage in cross-cultural exchange not to proselytize about their own values but rather to understand different cultural traditions, to find new sources of imaginative inspiration, to discover other methods and ways of working and to exchange ideas with people whose worldviews differ from their own. They want to be influenced rather than to influence. (10)

She goes on to argue that artists have been working internationally for years, “collaborating artist-to-artist and artist-to-audience—finding shared values, mutual respect and understanding in the midst of difference.” These artists, she insists, are “the true cultural diplomats” (*ibid.*). It would seem that these artists are the ones truly interested in listening.

In the same speech previously cited, Nye points out that “soft power becomes increasingly important in a global information age, with large problems like global climate change.” Therefore, particularly with large problems that require many voices to be heard, the issues attendant to soft power—its potential superiority over hard power, as well as its potential hidden agendas—need to be examined more cautiously than ever. Even where soft power seems benign, its mere structure necessitates a continual probing for problems. Power must be continually stripped of inadvertent abuse. The paradigm put forth by Channick of treading carefully, of “want[ing] to be influenced rather than to influence,” is the approach I strive for as a theatre director and kind of cultural envoy in my own classroom. I want everyone to be influenced: the students by the work and by one another, and by the audience, in addition to the audience being influenced by the performers. Although even in *Telling Our Stories* there is a political agenda (that of exchange), this grassroots diplomacy using community-created theatre demonstrates a separation from the state and a move toward empowering the individual voice.

Nye also insists that we need to make the world not just safe for democracy, but also, quoting John F. Kennedy, “*safe for diversity*” (emphasis added). Because of their varied backgrounds, many of the students at City Tech are trying to blend in and assimilate. They do not necessarily feel valued in their difference, and they often have a complicated relationship to that difference within themselves. The story exchanges are both diplomatic and personally therapeutic, in that they elevate the concept of difference as something to be treasured and explored.<sup>5</sup> Students are encouraged to remember, rather than to suppress, as they shape their memories into narratives. Both speakers and listeners in *Telling Our Stories* are invited to discard their preconceptions of the other. A major goal of the project is to create a theatrical space that is “safe for diversity,” both inside the self and in the public, shared arena.

### Theatre Diplomacy as a “Glocal” Institution

Although cultural diplomacy has an important history of theatre exportation, current transnationalism argues for a broader interpretation of terms. Transnationalism demands a redefinition of cultural diplomacy as not just a valued export, but as a potentially precious “locally grown” commodity. Theatre diplomacy can even be regarded as a product and result of the “glocal” (both the global and the local) communities. This *reconception* of the traditional construction of cultural diplomacy turns the externalized exportation of theatre in service of state power to an “inverted gaze,” wherein cultural diplomacy can become a term used to describe intra-cultural projects within the country. Globalization encompasses not only the political and economic interactions among nations and the straightforward export of culture, but also the tremendous mobility by great numbers of people and with greater frequency, even within individual lives: traveling, migrating, transplanting, and returning, leading to the growth of transnationalism. In his article “Performance Studies Interventions and

Radical Research,” Dwight Conquergood writes that “[o]ur understanding of ‘local context’ expands to encompass the historical, dynamic, often traumatic, movements of people, ideas, images, commodities, and capital. It is no longer easy to sort out the local from the global” (145). Thus cultural diplomacy can and should be more than a means of exporting American art and ideas; the evolving transnational situation in the United States—and in every country of intermixed populations—calls for *internal* (within the country) cultural diplomacy.

It is important to regard internal theatre diplomacy as cultural diplomacy for two reasons. The first is that this places emphasis on exchange among various groups. Simply, internal theatre diplomacy starts with exposure to different cultures. This “inverse” of exportation demonstrates the need for cultural diplomacy through cross- and intra-cultural exchanges. The second reason takes account of the plurality in our society, which requires communicating in ways that are often difficult; we need to see one another as individuals with individual stories and not just “standing in” for a country or group, thus dismantling generalized and often harmful stereotypes. Conquergood emphasizes the need to listen to individual stories and realize that “knowledge is *located*, not transcendent” (149). Thus seeing and hearing the students tell their stories locates cultural knowledge for the audience; in fact, I would go further to argue that it is the particularized story juxtaposed with the background culture—the *located* in terms of the *transcendent*—that makes *Telling Our Stories* so effective.

“An important recent development in cultural diplomacy,” writes Cull, “is the rise of a sub-state presence. Regions or nations within a larger polity—or even cities—are now using cultural diplomacy to brand themselves and connect with the world in their own right.” Along with the “rise of a sub-state presence”—which I argue extends to the individual—it can be argued (as Cull does) that traditional cultural diplomacy *is* branding. There is, however, a downside to branding that Cull does not acknowledge. Currently, in the United States (and with the concomitant effects of globalization) we have moved away from producing products and manufacturing goods, and instead toward an economy that focuses on producing “brands,” which are, at heart, emblems or distillations—and, necessarily, simplifications—of stories.<sup>6</sup> Thus brands are reductions of potential nuance or complexity, because they lack individuated specificity or “location.”

The problem with cultural diplomacy as branding is that branding resides entirely in the “transcendent” and not at all in the “located” (per Conquergood). The limitations of branding demonstrate further reason to reorient theatre diplomacy back toward the notion of individual exchange. With *Telling Our Stories*, there is no cultural voice standing in for the individual voice. The students are the writers and speakers of their own stories; they are not trying to “speak for” all Asians, or even for all Chinese, for example. This project keeps the materiality of the individual exchange foregrounded; however, paradoxically, we gain further understanding of, and compassion toward, a group or nation through seeing this individual in terms of his/her cultural context. The students are an embodiment (being literally onstage) of their culture, and yet the individual has a different perspective, being in a different surrounding, and, most important, a particularized voice that is valued through the format of this theatrical presentation.

Students speak eloquently about their connection to their ancestors and cultural context, as Teddy Barboza does in his story “Ego Sum Panis Vitae” about the Eucharist as food:

For many generations my ancestors from the Philippines worshipped God via the faith brought to them by the Spanish explorers. This faith contained in Roman Catholicism spread during the voluntary Diaspora of Filipino immigrants and became embedded into the fabric of our culture. Many years later in America I have rediscovered my Filipino Catholic roots and become active in the Sacrifice whereby my ancestors knelt and adored. This is my testimony of serving the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass and ultimately receiving the Body, Blood, Soul and Divinity of Jesus Christ in the Eucharist.

Although it would seem that we swim in culture like fish in the sea—unaware of the water that surrounds us—when one is transplanted, changes in current and temperature become more apparent. Thus culture (and, by implication, thought) is something we can never be completely separate from or completely aware of, and even in our becoming more aware, we are not able to “see” it apart from ourselves. As Édouard Glissant writes in “Poetics of Relation”: “Thought draws the imaginary of the past: a knowledge becoming. One cannot stop it to assess it nor isolate it to transmit it. It is sharing one can never not retain, nor ever, in standing still, boast about.” For the transplanted, culture takes on an additional dimension. Layered into the transmission process of *Telling Our Stories* is a practice that calls cultural particularities into mindfulness. Through these different circles of awareness—the individual, their heritage, their current location, the project—exchange happens, intra-cultural diplomacy occurs, and consequently listening results and awareness increases.

In addition to the *textual* voices of individuals prevalent in much devised theatre, *Telling Our Stories* also includes the *speaking* voices of the people involved, as well as their presence onstage. Conquergood writes that “oppressed people everywhere must watch their backs, cover their tracks, suck up their feelings, and veil their meanings. The state of emergency under which many people live demands that we pay attention to messages that are coded and encrypted; to indirect, nonverbal, and extralinguistic modes of communication where subversive meanings and utopian yearnings can be sheltered and shielded from surveillance” (148). Thus the importance of the material body, and by implication (since it is not *dis*-embodied, but created physically) the voice onstage, becomes apparent. The individual voice, both writing and speaking voice in partnership, tells us this located individual’s experience. There is a bi-sociation onstage: the individual in terms of his/her culture, and the individual articulating a particularized experience in his/her own voice; the individual is both him-/herself and an ambassador for his/her culture, because we all are encoded by cultural referents and yet also remain ourselves alone.

For the students at City Tech, a feeling of being underrepresented or even silenced can be complicated by the lack of English-language skills, which both derives from and further reinforces their sense of low cultural capital. Unfortunately, most students tell me that their previous experiences of writing and speaking in class have been ones of humiliation because of grammar issues and consequently they choose to be silent in class, thus robbing them of one of the most important and effective elements of their education: the ability and inclination to participate in class discussions. The empowerment of *Telling Our Stories*, if we can take Marx out of context for a moment, connotes access to the “means of production.” Here, “production” literally becomes access to the means of a theatre production and its attendant visibility and opportunity to contribute to the cultural hegemony. Unfortunately, students’ silences rob two parties: first themselves, then also the rest of us.

Consider the gift of Milton Naula’s story of loss “My Life in Ecuador,” which relates his discovering that his mother would be leaving Ecuador for the United States as they shared a last meal: “I still remember her last words ‘take care and behave well with your grandparents because I am going to come back soon’ which she did not; the next time that we saw her was 11 years later. During those years, my life changed a lot, and I learned that you must appreciate the people whom you love and try to spend as much time as you could with them because you do not know when they are leaving you and for how long.” We know about the economic forces that necessitate migration to the United States, but to hear Milton talk about his mother and the last meal his family shared together puts us in touch with the feelings of a small boy, whose grown-up self is before us: scarred but resilient from the experience. This puts “knowing” in a different category—a category that is at once *knowing* and *feeling*. It is poignant, and this poignancy expands us, the listener; we are changed by the awareness of and contact with this individual and his particular story.

Naturally, there are us/them issues—for example, between myself and the students, between the students and the audience, and among the students themselves. Indeed, theatre diplomacy’s language often emphasizes a discrepancy between insider and outsider, even as it expressly seeks for

exchange. I occupy a mentoring role in my students' theatre-making process, yet I do not mention how my parents left one country soon after they were married and crossed an ocean with nothing and knowing no one to come to another country, and how five years later as a family we came to a third country. Most people, including my students, assume that I am from the United States because I am white and my first language is English. I rarely counter their assumptions, so I am at once an insider and outsider in terms of this project. I am an immigrant who "passes" as a nonimmigrant; I am also a professor, who is both an insider in students' perceptions of the college and an outsider from the students themselves. I am an outsider as a director as well, though I am the creator of the project.

Students have an empowerment following this work such that they talk about doing follow-up projects. Making more books, making more shows. They have a sense of themselves onstage for the first time in front of an audience rapt with attention. Additionally, although they are aware of the diverse mixture of people that is New York, they seem more connected—not only to their own power, but to the power of listening to others. Some will remain in the United States; others will return to their countries of origin or travel back and forth or on to other places. The world, for them, now looks different, because of a newfound sense of having a place at the table—where an interesting, vibrant, humorous, and often challenging conversation arises, like the best dinnertime conversation everywhere.

## Conclusion

Every voice—both the speaking voice and the writing voice—is unique, emerging from, as each does, a particular individual in an exact historical and cultural context. Yet not every voice is heard, and it is often at the heart-breaking point when language fails or is silenced that violence begins. As a potential counter to this tendency, however, intra-cultural diplomacy practiced through community-created theatre can generate inclusive sociopolitical public spaces wherein multiple voices are heard and responded to.

Older models of cultural diplomacy have been predicated on the nation-state, with government diplomats and other gatekeepers controlling cultural exports. Now, with transnationalism, globalization, and the extreme diversity of the population of the United States, we need to utilize cultural diplomacy within this country, and not just beyond its borders, to communicate among widely divergent populations. In the way that a national theatre codifies and coalesces a nation's identity, the kind of community-created theatre described in this essay can be a powerful grassroots effort to acknowledge and address changes to that identity. Practicing individual diplomacy in the classroom and intra-cultural diplomacy in community-created theatre, then, is an effective way of engaging different voices and taking steps toward increased intercultural listening and understanding. This process acknowledges the changes occurring in this country and provides an opportunity for integration into the larger cultural dialogue. Clearly, the better the communication, the less likely the need to resort to violence. The communication of theatre, with its potential for deep listening, can become the site whereby pain refuses to act itself out except on the stage of the intra-cultural dialogue.

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## Notes

1. New York City College of Technology is part of the City University of New York (CUNY).
2. At City Tech, I teach the following courses: “Effective Speaking,” “Voice and Diction,” “Small Group Communication,” “History of Theatre Scenography,” and “Introduction to Theatre.”
3. Every year, City Tech awards the title of “Scholar on Campus” to one faculty member who has achieved distinction in their field.
4. The “locavore” movement refers to people who try to eat food grown or produced locally.
5. I have had students say to me that this feels like therapy, and I acknowledge my own bias toward the effective and healing powers of self-expression through oral communication and theatrical presentation.
6. See Naomi Klein’s *No Logo* (2000) for an excellent discussion on branding.

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