

Cultural Perspectives: Honoring Tradition and Working Cross-Culturally

SESSION DESCRIPTION: What constitutes civic dialogue or participation in different cultural contexts or traditions? How do certain art forms or cultural practices embody or enable dialogue? How do we reconcile tensions between indigenous, non-Western, or international approaches and Western, European, or U.S.-centered approaches to art, dialogue, and engagement? How do histories of prejudice, exploitation, or even laws against inter-group contact affect a community's or cultural group's view of participating in public discourse? How do we work together given these histories? This session looks at cultural assumptions, expectations, and notions of appropriateness and power relations in arts-based civic dialogue. Artists and cultural organizers working in a wide range of cultural and political contexts will bring forward their particular challenges in working across borders or cultures, and important moments of realization, understanding, or learning. Brief informal opening comments by presenters will bring forward key issues and topics, followed by initial responses, and facilitated group discussion.

PRESENTERS: *Dora Arreola and Bernardo Solano, San Diego Repertory Theatre; Graciela Sanchez, Esperanza Center for Peace and Justice; Greg Howard, Appalshop; Arla Ramsey, Blue Lake Rancheria*

RESPONDENTS: *Raylene Lancaster and Sharon Hayden, Hawai'i Alliance for Arts Education; Wayne Winborne, national advisor and dialogue liaison, Animating Democracy*

SESSION LEADER: *Andrea Assaf, Animating Democracy, Americans for the Arts*

SESSION STRUCTURE: *Each presenter was asked to introduce the project s/he with which s/he has been involved, and to bring forward an initial question that has been important in his/her work. Respondents offered their first reactions, and the session was then opened up for discussion.*

CONTENTS: *Presenters; Respondents; Who Calls & Who Comes; Public Space/Private Space; Language; Media, Business and Culture; Ownership of Culture; Closing*

Andrea Assaf: A number of groups have been invited to begin the discussion based on their experiences with very different projects, and very different approaches to honoring tradition and working cross culturally. The topic of cross cultural work is extremely important for the future of any kind of civically engaged or democracy-oriented arts project, as the world gets more international and our communities, and individuals, get more and more hybrid, and as localized cultures struggle to keep their identities in the midst of the powers at play in the U.S. and internationally. The goal for this session is to bring out challenges and issues, things that work and didn't, plus directions for the future. What does this group have to say about what we need to do to make cross cultural work work?

Raylene Lancaster: *(Raylene opened the session with an opportunity to understand language and offered a Hawai'ian prayer:)* Recognizing that the powers that be are present and available to assist and inspire us, and guide us to say the things that need to be said in a manner that can be heard. A prayer: Let this be granted into me, may I understand the things that I know not. May I be able to take into myself all that is present, may we become one. I will repeat the prayer three times to bring mental physical and spiritual being in alignment.

PRESENTERS

Arla Ramsey, tribal vice chair, Blue Lake Rancheria: I'm not here as an artist, but as a supporter of Dell 'Arte, which received a grant to do the Dentalium project. I participated in the dialogues as the tribal representative. The purpose of the dialogues was to find a common ground between the citizens and the tribe. The tribe was building a casino and many of the citizens objected to it. I found the dialogues very useful because there was a lot of common ground, even with people who strongly objected to the casino. Once we sat down in small groups of 12 people and all talked about why we lived there, why we moved there, we all had the same answers. We all wanted the same things. At the end; even people who had strong objections came to me and said they felt better about it. But they still didn't want the casino.

How do history and laws against getting together affect participation in the public or civic realm? What happened to my tribe: In the early 1900s, the federal government came to the Indian homes and took the children at age five and sent them off to boarding school. They didn't come home until they were 15, if at all. The children lost their tribal identity, their culture, and their spiritual heritage—disconnecting the tribe. When you deal with tribal communities, they don't want to deal with the general public. They stay to themselves. They see themselves as a sovereign entity, another government, not a cultural group.

In our case, the dialogue part helped a lot. People on both sides of the issue were very angry, and I learned great lessons from doing it. I enjoyed the play a lot but didn't participate in creating it. I didn't want them to be influenced by something I thought. With everything going on at the time, the political correctness, they went out of their way not to offend the tribe. It was an enjoyable production, but it really didn't address some of the issues it could have.

Andrea Assaf: A clarification: Dell 'Arte produced a play called *Wild Card*, and many critiques pointed out that there was no native voice in the play itself. Native voices were heard in the dialogue, but not in the art.

Bernardo Solano, playwright, *Nuevo California*: I was the playwright for San Diego Repertory Theatre's production of *Nuevo California*, a play that takes place in San Diego and Tijuana in an imagined near future in which the two cities are merging as the result of an earthquake that leveled L.A. and hurt the infrastructure of San Diego and Tijuana, birthing a new city. I would like to address some of the issues that I needed to deal with in terms of representation. A main character in the play was a Kumiai Indian, one of the groups in SoCal by the border.

Dora Arreola, choreographer, *Nuevo California*: My question today is, living in this region and working in bi-national projects, which language to use? What kind of idioma is going to occur in this exchange? We finished right at the point where the project became more complex, and the issues were around language.

There were four phases in the work. Dialogues and interviews in both countries, no problem; Mexicali, Tijuana, San Diego had interviews and workshops. Finally, when they arrived at the point of making the script, intending to do it in both countries, the cast from Mexico and the U.S. had language barriers. They had a lot of challenges, got bogged down. The idea to do a production that could be understood in both countries was a real disaster. We thought we failed at this part. After that, we came up with the idea to do two versions—one for the U.S., one for Mexico. We started to work on the U.S. version, mainly in English, but when we tried to do it in Spanish, we had more difficult problems.

Bernardo: We were asking monolingual English speakers to do the play in Spanish.

Dora: We had bilingual actors from Mexico. We tried to create the piece and spent hours trying to translate one phrase. In the end, I have the thought that this issue is meaningful in the region. It is what is happening outside this workshop, what is happening outside this play: communication problems and the predominance of English. English is preferred.

Graciela Sanchez, Esperanza Center: This speaks to who the organization is that your partnering with. If it had been a Chicano organization, you might have found more bilingual actors.

Dora: We had Chicano actors, who were fluent in both languages, but that was only two out of ten. We had multiple communities represented: Black, Native American, Mexican, Asian. Resolving that aspect, the bilingual Chicanos flowed freely and gave a lot of possibilities to play with the language. But we still had an issue because the San Diego/Tijuana region is a very complex community with people from different backgrounds.

Graciela: Our project was dialogue centered on the role of culture and art in communities of color and the importance of it. In 1977, the city of San Antonio defunded the Esperanza, because of a city council that was a majority of people of color, saying that poor people didn't need the arts, they needed more basic necessities—streets, drainage, etc. Right after that, we spent three or four months talking with people in the community and had people sign petitions. We had conversations that lasted two or three minutes, and the concept of *Arte es Vida* came from that—scribbled on a card. But we realized that we almost never talk to our community about the significance of art and culture. For communities of color, they make connections to immigration issues, the whole gamut. When we came to Animating Democracy, the idea was to talk “across.” What is across? We couldn't talk to the white people, or the business people, or the people on the other side, until we talked to our own communities. Because of racism, sexism,

and homophobia, we don't even feel comfortable talking to ourselves, and we had to do that grounding first. The next phase, which I don't think succeeded, is that we now have to work with cultural organizations that have white leadership, and who don't want to engage in cultural grounding, because it's not important to them.

How does the history of racism affect cultural groups participating in civic life? Cities and governments want only to promote cultural tourism (cultural terrorism), and that leads to stereotyping our culture—sombrosos, lazy Mexicans, Chihuahuas—and that's what our leaders want to promote.

Greg Howard, Appalshop: Appalshop is a media arts and education center in Whitesburg, Kentucky, where West Virginia, Kentucky and Virginia all come together in the Appalachian Mountains. We didn't have an Animating Democracy project, but we do think a lot about tradition. We have documentary film, radio, theater, youth training, American Festival Project—lots of different projects. We started in 1969 as a War on Poverty program, when community film workshops were set up around the country. One was established in Whitesburg as a way to train young people and give them skills as TV production people. We started with giving high school kids cameras, and they got to decide what was important to people—the traditions of our community. This has to do a lot with older people. The kids, at the start, wanted to talk to their grandparents about how to live—cooking, gardening, butchering, etc. It had to do with the time—1969, the Vietnam War. Now I feel more connected to my grandparents, who live in a way that isn't offered much any more, that's not about consuming. I think this way is better. That's our relationship to tradition. What do we take from it? How does it teach us to be human? How do we use it? What don't we like about it?

Should we perpetuate all traditions? Or are there some we should leave behind? We also have a tradition of political corruption and natural resource abuse. We want to figure out a different way to live. But it's all in there together, good and bad issues. How do you talk about a different economy but still respect the labor of a coal miner who's done that for 50 years?

RESPONDENTS

Raylene Lancaster, hula master & director. Malama Kukui Cultural Learning Center: There are big issues here. It's difficult to judge from outside the communities. Really, you were successful, because you identified the bigger problems for your whole community. So in terms of civic dialogue, recognizing the problem is the first big step. Now you have to think about how we move forward. Everyone learn a new language? It's been a problem for many decades and hasn't moved toward getting fixed yet.

Graciela's problem is about who's in power, who's deciding who gets money for doing important things. It brings people to the table and to their feet, and now your community is coming together to define themselves. I think about how moments of discomfort are really important. Pearls are formed by agitation; they allow you to crystallize your belief and how you're going to move forward. Liz Lerman said yesterday, "Resistance is really just information." That was a big A-ha! for me.

Appalshop illustrates that white culture gets trivialized too, and gets lumped into one big "western thought" or way of doing, but there's a rainbow of thought in there. I think it's great that the youth have that going on. As usual, the answers are probably within the youth. Give them the tools to come up with the answers. Example: How do you make things but not create waste products that pollute that which you cherish.

Greg: We do a lot of youth work and cross-generational work. How do you *perpetuate* a culture, not preserve it? How does it evolve? The point is not to freeze it. What do you control or not control?

Sharon Hayden, community organizer, King Kamehameha Statue Restoration Project: That comes up in Hawai'i a lot because of historic sites. Restore it, or preserve it as it is?

Raylene: In Hawai'i, we have many different cultures, and sometimes we of the host culture feel displaced. We have specific values, and people come to our islands and start to understand a little of the Hawaiian culture, and they hunger for more. Yet in their hunger, they try to change the culture. We preserve our culture and we know it's functional. How does it become functional for a child in the classroom whose parents don't understand what it is to be Hawaiian,

because that story wasn't told? That's common among us. We find those who can talk from the spirit and the heart. We look for those specific places that touch someone's heart, so that now they will present themselves. It's been my experience that whether I'm talking to a developer or someone who might perceive things differently or value them differently than I do, I want to understand what they value—what's important to them—so I know where they're coming from. I can say to them, "I understand what you're saying, but I want you to know why I value this stone, which you see as rock, but I see as an ancestor. This stone has a whole story that impacts my family." Once they see it as heritage, not rock, then we have a common language. Sometimes you have to share the scary things inside you that you really value, and risk that someone's going to drown it—but I encourage you to share those precious things. If I can share something that's precious to me, perhaps you might see it as being precious. When you make the decision about funding something or not funding it, you'll know how I feel about it.

Our culture is an oral culture, and we learn oratory skills to say what we would like to have happen, in a way of honoring each other rather than demeaning each other. That takes great skill, when you're looking at someone who doesn't understand you. You defeat yourself when you try to pound others down. I have learned to speak honestly, about why things are important. When we choose not to speak, or chose not to be present because we might have an influence on someone else's perception, they too will not speak, or not address what's important. You won't know how I relate to things unless I tell you. I think we forget to do that, when we're tangled up in the end product, and we lose the path of how to get there. I don't make compromises. I only know that this is where I need to go, and how I need to get there, and if you choose to come along with me, we'll have a great time. In that manner, you intrigue them to come and be a part of what you're doing, because you're so impassioned with the value of what you're doing that they want to be a part of it. The other side is when you offer that invitation, be clear about what the invitation is. Maybe you say "come along" and they hear "I can write the script."

WHO CALLS & WHO COMES

Who's doing the inviting?

Who's got the funding?

Who's the host culture?

Why do cross-cultural work?

Sterline Lacy, Flint Color Line Project: I'm director of *You and Us*—workshops uniting people through stories (not related to the Flint Color Line Project). We have an outreach program where we go into schools. We've gone to Hawai'i twice to bring stories from here and to work with Hawaiian children on drama. That connected with another networking source, and we went to South Africa. The problem we have run into is funding. So these projects came out of our own personal projects because we passionately believe in sharing across borders. What you were saying was very interesting. When we first went in, we thought we had an agenda to do drama with the kids, to bring some of our stories, "us" to "you." But when we left, there was a feeling of incompleteness, a question of what we really did except share some art. What you were saying about taking it to another level is what we are still searching for. Now as part of Color Line, the story circle process could be incorporated into the process of *You and Us*. But I still feel lost about how to break down barriers with funding sources to allow us to do this. The next project is in New Zealand, but before we embark, we want to know our stuff better and have an agenda that's beyond the surface, that gets deeper. We need help about how to go in a direction so that what we are doing is beneficial and our passions have a purpose.

Andrea: The choice of whether to participate or not. In this example there's a strong desire to do cross cultural work. Why? What's that about? Why do we think we should? Some of us have the choice about doing it, some of us don't. The border is in some people's faces every day.

Sterline: Why exchange? I love to share. I love to share things from my family to my friends, to people here, to people across the world. That's part of who I am. I created this organization, but I still feel that I'm lacking in some way. Before I go to New Zealand, I need to know how not to offend people with language or gesture. But I know I'll still have to learn the local stuff, because I can offend people beyond knowing what's right and wrong from a textbook.

Graciela: This brings me back to the conversation of who has the power to call folks to the table, and who will come based on who calls it? In Hawai'i, my understanding is that it was the white conservator's project, and you wanted to make sure that it was done in the right way, so you came to the table. If you had called him, would he have come? I know for Esperanza, the white cultural arts executive directors have not come to the table, and aren't interested in coming because we're community-based, led by lesbians of color, etc. We're always making sure to be at their table, because if we're not, they're creating laws that are harmful to our communities.

Greg: Appalshop has initiated more international work—global region-to-region exchanges. So that we can have something to say to people in southwest China, we've had filmmakers visit both places. We show people through our documentary films that there are cultures in this country that are not shown in the movies. We're getting so isolated culturally and it's getting to be a larger and larger problem. There's a lot of damage being done by Hollywood culture, and people think we're that way. People are very surprised to watch an Appalshop film, because they've never seen us before. That's a reason to do exchange. We're going to northeast India for another exchange so it's not New York-Delhi: it's Whitesburg-Manapour.

PUBLIC SPACE / PRIVATE SPACE

Wayne Winborne, dialogue liaison, Animating Democracy: These projects and all of these issues are inter-related. It's appropriate that this be embedded in a conversation about civic dialogue. Part of our struggle has to do with questions of insider/outsider, what do we perpetuate, and what do we continue? If we are outside of the dominant culture, part of our struggle is holding on and making sure our cultures survive. In my culture, we also tend to glamorize. We think "good guys/bad guys," and human beings are more complicated than that. There are places where people and animals use up all their resources. I know people who are cultural nationalists, who believe in Africa. There are things going on there that I think are wrong, such as the mistreatment of women. Then there's the notion of "culture versus...." We opened with a Hawaiian prayer. But someone else wants a Baptist prayer, or a Native American chant, or something in Spanish. We get to a place where we're just fighting with one another, recreating the ills of this country.

I think one of the good things about this country is that we have defined (poorly) a public space where I get to be me, and you get to be you, and we can come in here and be equal. We have to agree on what language we use, and agree that my vote counts as much as your vote. I can go home and eat collards and chitlin, but I won't embarrass my friends over there. What I think is so important about what y'all are doing is you're interrogating that public sphere, asking what it means to be an American. The power of what can come from this is that we can benefit from stuff that's gone on and figure out something new. I know I don't have the answer, but collectively I think it's there.

Andrea: Just a reminder: Being an American may not be the goal for everyone in this circle. In a bi-national project, the point is how to deal with the U.S.

Wayne: One thing the U.S. has done well is public space. It hasn't been as inclusive as we want, but it's very fluid and dynamic. I know that if I can dominate, a strong black man from the South, probably my women friends, or non-English speaking friends, or younger people are going to lose. If I dominate, folks are going to lose; if others dominate, someone else loses. But if we define this jointly, we can all be the same.

Joanna: In Animating Democracy, we're talking about civic dialogue, and Wayne's making a clear definition about what happens when cultures meet in public space. But we're not applying it back to private space and the individual, and how it changes as we go back home. We're also talking about the idea of preserving tradition but at the same time moving it forward, so that it's a living tradition that functions as people grow and change. I engaged that prayer in the civic space, but what happens to me when I go home?

Graciela: That's why I like to speak about values, because that's where we find commonality. Public space and private space are fluid there. I don't want to erase any part of me here. I want the right to speak Spanish or Tex-Mex, or eat meat because my dad, who was poor, made sure we ate meat every day. I have to be who I am, in public space and at home. The value of respect—when you say that to a white audience, it brings up a lot of things that it doesn't bring up in Chicano culture. In the white community it has to be earned; in my community you get it because you exist. I have

to be honest and truthful, so I have to be all of how I am. That doesn't mean we don't clash around values, but we talk about them and we share. If we only have \$100,000, we share equally. That means that people who have always had, get less. That's where we clash.

Antonio Ayala, Teatro Activo: We have to lose our prejudices. I decided to come to the U.S. I knew that the South is really prejudiced toward the North. My question is: How can I accept all of us here, without prejudice? When one talks about creating space, who gets to use it and who doesn't it? We have a conscience of diversity, that's the richness. Cultural poverty is going to come at a rate that will kill traditions, unless we hold up our cultural values. We each have our own right to be part of the whole, but as ourselves.

LANGUAGE

Gwylene Gallimard, Alternate Roots: I disagree about free space. It's not totally true in the South. We can create it between black and white, but not white with a weird accent. As soon as I start to talk, people say "Why don't you go back to your country?" And there is nothing I can do except be here more and more, which I have been for 20 years, and my accent is not going to change.

Dora: Twenty years ago, if a kid spoke Spanish in school, he got hit by the teacher. Now they are implementing in San Ysidro (California), which is two minutes from Tijuana, programs for children to learn English. That's great, but when we try to collaborate we have language issues. One of the things that may happen is that schools could teach many languages—Spanish, Kumiai, etc.

Antonio: We live with this in Paraguay. Thirty percent of the population only speaks indigenous languages, 40 percent are bilingual, the rest speak only Spanish. Two cultures living in the same context. Where we work now, it's difficult for the people to understand Castilian Spanish, but there's resistance with those who speak Spanish. Spanish is perceived to be the dominant culture, and that causes resistance. It's resistance to cultural institutions, to class. Guarani is also an oral tradition for communication. However, Spanish-speaking people control the political and educational structures. It's a similar problem in the U.S. where English is the dominant culture.

Arla: It's ironic, because at the other end of the state of California, we sponsored a kindergarten class in both English and Spanish. We feel our children need to learn Spanish in order to succeed in California. Our children don't speak our native languages. It's important that they learn, but it's more important that they learn Spanish.

Wayne: This space I'm talking about is not where something is lost, but a place where we can hear one another and not be threatened by it. This is a conscious decision to teach Spanish; the transmission of culture is exactly this way. Everything we think in our culture is mishmash. The oldest cultures—Asian and African—are still mishmashes from collisions and intermarriage. Gwylene's situation is different. Folks in the South often don't have values of openness. That's a personal rejection, which is different from a state-sanctioned rejection. You can still vote, you can still open a business, and your children can go to school. There was a generation of Latinos who had to choose, either black or white. The Martinez family had to choose to be black or white, depending on whom they hung out with.

Andrea: I don't agree it's a personal rejection rather than systemic. What's systemic about it is the general political response to immigration in this country, which has really gotten worse since 2001. The accent thing is partly about white supremacy and cultural domination, but also about the assumption about accents and immigration policy. Tijuana and San Diego. When I started going frequently there, never having been to a border region before, I realized this is a *whole different thing*. It's not just about language and intercultural contact; it's about the intentional domination of the U.S. and immigration policy and control. Anyone can cross the Canadian border pretty easily, Americans can cross to Mexico without a passport, but Mexicans can't get in to the U.S.

Graciela: It's the perceived "other." State-sanctioned discrimination: white supremacy is white supremacy, and it creates laws. Now dual language programs are being created after 40 years of Chicano and Latino communities fighting for bilingual programs. Now the white business community understands that it's important to know Spanish, because there's money to be made there. It's about profit, not respect. In other countries, people know five or six languages, and not just because of investment possibilities. There's the element of accent. I learned as a child to do my *ch ch* sounds. I could have had an accent, but it was taken out of me. I can't be Mexican, I have to sound as white as I can.

Raylene: Sometimes we get caught in which language should be spoken, particularly in a presentation. It's not about the language, it's about the message: what am I trying to say to you? Whether I speak in Hawaiian, English, or another language, if you don't understand me it doesn't matter. How can I get what is important so that you understand it? I look for ways to present it so that you can give it back to me and prove that you understand it. We get hooked into identifying through language, and we lose what we're trying to share.

Comment: I work on a project that's in a rural corner of Vermont, a very small town of 2,000 people. I facilitate a project that's a partnership between the state arts council and the transportation agency, about highways and public art. The people in Danville are suspicious of outsiders. When we came in, there was a lot of resistance. People said, "What do we need art for? We've got art, look at those mountains." We said we're talking about making your world safer, nicer, and prettier. What about a sculpture on the village green? Art was a really scary idea for them, and it made people feel dumb. Sculpture was acceptable and then it got scary, so we switched to "monuments." They said, "But we already have monuments, we don't need more of those." How about "elements?" In the course of a year, we came back to the word "art" because people had gotten comfortable with it and it wasn't scary anymore. The open space is an openness of heart and mind.

Andrea: Note that we talked about different notions of language—the dominance of language, language as a means of communication, the use and acceptance of terms.

MEDIA, BUSINESS, AND CULTURE

National and International Perceptions

Marketing

Who defines protocols?

Greg: Relating to what Antonio and Wayne said, there is a public sphere, but television and the Americanization of global culture has a bigger impact on things. We can all agree to be civil or civic, but that assumes values that people aren't being taught.

Sterline: The word "perception" stood out for me. It's how we perceive things, usually right off the bat. When we were in Soweto, amongst the delegates from all over the world, they were asking us to give contributions to the village. They asked for \$10 from everyone, except they asked for \$100 each from those from the U.S. With the peer pressure that we were under, we dug in our purses and each gave them \$100. Then we asked ourselves why they asked us for that much. People believe that everyone in the U.S. is rich, and we helped them think that by giving the \$100.

Comment: What's been on my mind is the current marginalization of the African American community in this country based on numbers. I'm going to address the Public Relations Society of America on issues of inclusion and diversity. They're not talking about black folks anymore; we're not on the radar. They're talking about Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, and Transgendered peoples, and they're talking about Latinos. What was perceived as black culture is now considered American culture—fashion, music. But the buying habits aren't the same. There's no more marketing to African Americans, except for liquor and cigarettes. Big business is trying to capture these "new" markets. The Hispanic Chamber has all the ears; they're the new darlings of mainstream. It's disturbing, because both communities missed the boat on collaborating. The African American community is going to be on the short end. (*Graciela shook her head in disagreement.*)

Gwynne: It's very true. Discussions are happening in Charleston, SC about how not to hire African Americans, and instead to hire Latinos because you can pay them less and not get sued. They are training people on who to hire. It's disgusting.

Wayne: I have a friend who used to say, "Black folks are no longer cute," it's all about Latinos and Asians. In the black community there are lots of conversations of black men becoming extinct. We might not be around in 50 years. But I do feel the connection to other black folks in the diaspora. We can't make the mistake of letting commerce and media define us. We have to do the work of defining ourselves. I work in corporate America and this is classic corporate stuff. There's 35 million black folks. We're not going anywhere. And it's not a bad thing that we influence national

culture—that’s cultural transmission. One hundred years from now they’ll be talking about how music and fashion were changed by black culture. I think what we have to do is resist the domination of corporate values and media-driven values, and define them for ourselves. It’s the same with welfare people; the average welfare mother is white and Appalachian. But that’s not the media’s image. Unless we create coalitions among ourselves, we won’t define citizens of this hemisphere. And I know we won’t like their definition, because they’ve done it already.

Comment: I’m glad this conversation is going on in the basement of a library in Flint. It’s nice that our society has created opportunities to accumulate wealth and we are able to share in these conversations. I think we’ll all benefit in the long term from these conversations, and they’ll allow us in business to go forward. I don’t see anything wrong with cultural tourism (or “cultural terrorism”). It does help make the world go round.

Ben Strout, Australia Council for the Arts : I’ve worked in Australia for 20 years, and I have observed indigenous culture there. The business end makes me think about this. There are two big issues: indigenous cultures and the waves of immigration, now a lot of Asian migration. Lots of language issues, urban issues. We would begin this meeting with an acknowledgement of the traditional owners of the land. That’s only beginning to be done in government. The minister of education began a meeting that way, but it’s quite rare. We have very strong authenticity protocols, in which it’s inappropriate to represent indigenous culture without the authority of the culture you’re talking about. Proposals about indigenous culture have to come in with the validation of the community involved. Where it gets interesting, in business, is once you’ve done those sorts of protocols, there are business protocols relating to intellectual property and copyright, which is very different where things are community-owned. Indigenous art centers are selling individual paintings and the money is seen as belonging to the community. One artist owns the concept, but the family fills it in. The business relationship is a one-to-one relationship, one seller and one buyer. We are struggling with the appreciation in value of indigenous art—sold the painting for \$1,000, now it’s worth \$50,000. In terms of literature, where a story might be based on a family, we’re trying to build into the publishing houses that the final editorial right belongs with the community the author took the stories from—even if it’s their aunties. It’s not an individual right to say whether the book is accurate. It’s a big struggle for business, because it changes power and cost structures. We’re working on it in Australia because we’re struggling with preservation as well as contemporary issues.

OWNERSHIP OF CULTURE

Using Story

Representation

Cultural and Personal Appropriation

Artistic License, Censorship, Responsibility

Bernardo: Here’s a question for the group. When the artist encounters a story and sees the value in that story, he is faced with a choice: Do I use that story “word for word” and be as true to every element as I can? Or, based on the project or the circumstances, I see an opportunity to tweak elements and make the story something new. It’s *inspired* by that original story. How do we balance the needs of a project—aesthetic, casting, mundane things? Do you jettison a story or use it in a different way? There are so many factors in this.

Sterline: As a playwright, that’s hard. A family in Chicago happened to see one of my plays and contacted me to ask if I would write the story of their great great grandfather, whose memoirs are housed at the DuSable Museum. I said, “Yes, if I can do it my own way, with music and poetry.” I started working, had an agreement, but no money. We had an early showing in Chicago but I still hadn’t received any money. When they saw the first part of the book, all chaos broke out between family members who weren’t represented. They wanted input that would make it totally impossible. I thought, instead of doing a book, I’ll do a play and we can make it vague—not actual people but you’d have a sense of this being the family. It seemed to work, but I had started on a book and had a thirst to finish it. There were names and phrases I couldn’t use, but the story was the same: a young girl is snatched from Africa, brought to Virginia, lives on a plantation, atrocities—that’s in almost every African American’s history. They can’t say “that’s our story.” Each project has to be dissected and looked at for itself, to know where the lines are.

Joanna Lindenbaum: This is a question for me. How does an artist take a personal story and make it a collective story? When an institution uses a personal story as a collective question, what do they owe back to the personal story?

Comment: Dichotomy between professional and community production: professionalization bastardizes community stories.

Wayne: Anna Deveare Smith worried early on that artists would be pulled away from being artists. Artists have to go with what makes it work. And there is a question: Will it still be art? Paramount for her was that it had to be good art. Her answer would be “Do the art first.” The artists can have the fight over the art; I believe in the value of the community engagement.

Comment: It’s a false dichotomy between community and “good” art.

Andrea: The fight is about who defines what art is.

Wayne: The community or the market place.

Gwylene: I have found myself in the same dilemma and not able to voice it. The way I approach it is to look at the way art is part of cultures, more than the dominant culture. I learned that in Native American cultures the word “art” doesn’t exist, because it’s so integrated. Another artist, a storyteller from Vermont, wrote about how stories are destroyed by other cultures using them. I think those criteria are the questions of our time. It’s an extension of the question: Who is the art for? If you extend the process of making the art into the community, then you have all that information and you can’t just drop them to make your art.

Sterline: That family event was a different approach than the Flint Color Line Project. Color Line belongs to the community. The other was a family situation, not connected to a community. In Color Line, I have to watch over 600 stories from the story circles. I take them intact, without changing the language, and put them on the stage into a theatrical finale to the project. I have to find a way to keep the integrity of the story. So my main tasks are to use the story, to incorporate the community in the cast and on the stage, and to find a way that is aesthetically pleasing, educational, and enjoyable. I have to please everyone—the cast, the community—to make sure everyone has their ego food and find my own self-fulfillment in the project. It can be done. Once I leave this project, it is not mine. It belongs to the Whiting since they’re the contractor for the project. But mostly it belongs to the community. I had one man call me the other night and make me insert a correction into his story in the play—and I did. For the family piece, the memoirs weren’t written to become a play; I’m only using the parts that the family finds acceptable. Every time we work on a piece, we have to adjust to the conditions.

Bernardo: Here’s one example to show how complicated this was for us: I interviewed a Kumiai Indian in San Diego, and met with PaiPai in Ensenada, the cousins of the Kumiai that got split up when the border was drawn. I asked if there was a song we could use in the show. He said we couldn’t use the death song, but he offered a gambling song instead, because he said no one would know the difference. Dora, who had worked with the PaiPai in Ensenada, knew of a different song that was related to nature and we used that.

Andrea: Were the PaiPai able to see the play?

Bernardo/Dora: After 9/11, everything got harder. They were not allowed into the U.S. The Mexican actors weren’t allowed to come in to work; they had to say they were shopping to get across the border.

Wayne: What was the response of audiences at San Diego Rep?

Bernardo: Generally positive, but people on many fronts didn’t think we’d gone far enough to portray their experience. Anglos didn’t get enough credit for enlightened positions and the Chicano struggle wasn’t accurate.

Raylene: The first Animating Democracy Exchange I came to was in Seattle. It was enlightening. I never perceived myself as an artist, but as a cultural practitioner. I did crafts, singing, dancing, but I never saw it as art until that occasion. It raised the question of who owns culture, when you have a culture that’s being presented and others see it and want to duplicate it. They can’t duplicate the reason why it’s done the way it’s done. You see relativity in so many things that have to be intact, because that’s your connection. A question I’m frequently asked is “Can you do this blessing for us?” And I ask, “What’s the purpose?” Why is it important that what you’re asking for be included? Most

times, “Well it sounds so wonderful” or “I’m so moved.” Thank you, that’s nice, but there’s a reason why it sounds that way. I’m trying to figure out in my practice what the connections are. A lot of things are inspired by my ancestors, and they come through now, expressed through chant. Others might want to learn it, and they share it and learn it, but when you hear it later it’s not quite there, because it’s not connected to the same purpose. When you’re bringing forth cultural practice, it’s a good idea to know why. And be able to explain it. What I left Seattle with, in the end, was it didn’t matter what I perceive myself to be, it’s what you perceive me to be. In this case I am a practitioner and a practicing artisan as well, because you perceive me to be one.

Take the measure of the people present. If what you’re offering would be appropriate to everyone, then it’s appropriate. If people want something else, then do something else.

CLOSING

Honoring Wayne’s point about multiple prayers and public space, Andrea and Raylene checked with the group to see if it seemed appropriate for Raylene to close with a chant, or if anyone else wanted to offer a closing from a different tradition.

Raylene: This oli talks about unfurling a fine reed mat, and on this mat we were fed, and it nourished our bodies and fed with love. We understand that feeding comes in many forms—mind, body, spirit—and this exchange fed us. We acknowledge the Gods that watch over us, the ancestors who sit with us, and the sun that comes up in the morning, and we know we are loved. Aloha.