

DOMESTIC CULTURAL DIPLOMACY: HOW THE ARTS BUILD CROSS-  
CULTURAL UNDERSTANDING IN U.S. COMMUNITIES

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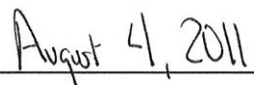
  
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## DEDICATION

This work is dedicated to my family and friends in the United States and Togo.

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ABSTRACT

This thesis frames cross-cultural arts programs within the U.S. as domestic cultural diplomacy, examining how arts organizations can increase their relevance in a community through socially inclusive participatory programming. Research includes an investigation into the arts as a means for building social capital, arts and conflict resolution, identity theory, and immigrant/refugee arts. Data comes from both existing sources and interviews with field experts and practitioners. A case study highlighting the way in which Mixed Blood Theatre engages with the Somali community in Minneapolis, Minnesota is integrated in order to demonstrate that arts organizations can play a mediating role in culturally divided, U.S. communities.

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## CHAPTER 1

### DOMESTIC CULTURAL DIPLOMACY

Cultural diplomacy, as a field, has received much attention for its use in cultivating relationships between nations and “winning the hearts and minds” of people abroad (Cummings 2005, 2). Sharing artistic practices with others creates a humanizing effect capable of mitigating unflattering stereotypes and imbuing otherwise tenuous relationships with trust and understanding. During the first part of my graduate education, I looked closely at cultural diplomacy and its relevance in post-9/11 society. Between the highly publicized human rights abuses occurring at the United States’ Guantanamo Bay prison to the controversial wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, it is no surprise that Muslims around the world have increasingly high disapproval ratings of Americans and U.S. foreign policy. According to a study done by the Pew Research Center, 53% of Muslims surveyed said that the U.S. and Western policies in general were to blame for the lack of prosperity in Muslim nations (Pew Research Center 2011). Negative attitudes are also prevalent amongst Americans, who associate much fear and blame with Muslims and people living in Arab nations. The same survey reports that an average of 58 percent of Western public surveyed thought of Muslims as fanatical and 50 percent said Muslims were violent (ibid). These surveys, taken nearly ten years after the 9/11 attacks, are evidence that Westerners and Muslims have not found a way to connect with each other beyond what the media has to report.

Hate crimes, Quran burnings, and the 2011 Peter King hearings proved that anti-Islamic sentiment is also directed toward Muslims and those commonly assumed to be Muslims<sup>1</sup> living in the U.S. Cultural gaps within communities with high concentrations of Muslims – such as Minneapolis and the Somali population – have created distrust and increased segregation. Clearly, the tensions occurring between nations are mirrored domestically.

Many U.S. diplomats and politicians claim that a lack of funding and prioritization for culturally-based diplomatic initiatives has resulted in a lapse in relationship-building (Committee on Foreign Relations United States Senate 2003). If international relationships between Muslims and non-Muslims could be improved through cultural diplomacy, is it possible that these same frameworks could be applied to cross-cultural situations within the U.S.? This is the question I seek to answer with this paper.

Best practices for public diplomacy include engaging in a conversation rather than talking at an audience, and offering possibilities for real exchange and interaction. I researched whether these same principals have been applied to build bridges within ethnically diverse U.S. communities. Unsurprisingly, the factors that make international arts-based diplomacy successful are also prevalent in social inclusion arts projects conducted with U.S. immigrant and refugee populations.

While some might see these projects as domestic cultural diplomacy, others might

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<sup>1</sup> Although incorrect, East Africans and those of Middle Eastern descent are often automatically assumed to be Muslim by other Americans.



see them simply as organizations fulfilling a mission of being a productive part of their community. Depressed economic conditions and increased competition have had deleterious effects on the non-profit arts and culture sector, leading some organizations to re-evaluate what they are about and who they are for. A few organizations shifted in order to remain relevant in the community in which they operate. Not only are they striving to engage with new demographics, they are also providing opportunities for divergent groups to connect through the arts. These connections both bond homogeneous groups together and bridge across ethnic lines, creating valuable social capital.

Arts organizations have been conducting community outreach and engagement programs for years, with varying degrees of success. Their efforts – as well as writings by Arlene Goldbard, Donna Walker-Kuhne, and James Bau Graves – serve as a foundation for cultural engagement within U.S. communities. However, by reframing these concepts as domestic cultural diplomacy, they carry more weight and are become relevant to several different fields of study. While the arts remain central to the practice, the reach is extended and thus multiplies possibilities for implementation and funding of such activities.

To examine how art can find its relevance in communities by serving as a tool for unification and understanding, I examined Mixed Blood Theatre in Cedar-Riverside neighborhood of Minneapolis, Minnesota. This is a neighborhood with a large population of Somali immigrants as well as a large population of white, middle-class Americans. While one could argue that tensions between immigrants and the native population are nothing new to this country, this situation was further exacerbated by a fear of “home-grown terrorism” after incidents involving U.S. born, Somali youth joining al-Shabab

reached the media. What is the arts intervention in such a complex issue? How can an organization remain relevant and accessible to both sides of a polarized community? I argue that the same principal of mutual exchange used within cultural diplomacy on an international scope can be used to create a new paradigm for building bridges between cultures living here in the U.S.

## CHAPTER 2

### CULTURAL DIPLOMACY

Over the past century, the U.S. State Department has employed culture as a means for diplomacy in its international relations. According to historian Milton Cummings, cultural diplomacy is “the exchange of ideas, information, art, and other aspects of culture among nations and their people in order to foster mutual understanding” (Cummings 2005, 1). The practice involves the strategic use of various cultural components, including the arts, education, and language, as catalysts for international dialogue. Examples of cultural diplomacy activities include the Fulbright Program for academic exchange, Voice of America radio broadcasting, and American Corners at U.S. Embassies abroad (ibid 3). Its proponents claim that cultural diplomacy can be used as a tool to communicate a humanitarian message in face of profound cultural differences. It can also be used to show a different side of our nation – one that differs from popular entertainment, such as the episodes of *Baywatch* and wrestling that are broadcast internationally. According to former diplomat Cynthia Schneider, these efforts succeed in spreading American ideals and communicating “the intangibles that make America great: individual freedoms, justice and opportunity for all; diversity and tolerance” (Schneider 2003, 6). In more recent years, scholars such as Schneider have noted that the best kind of cultural diplomacy also allows foreigners to communicate their culture and values to Americans.

Ideally, cultural diplomacy is a two-way street where nations engage in a true exchange of cultures and values that facilitates understanding and appreciation for the other. Examples of these types of cultural diplomacy activities include Alvin Ailey and his dance company travelling to Tanzania not only to perform in their own style, but also to collaborate with and learn from local dancers. The alternative, which was most popular during the Cold War, closely resembles propaganda as it aims to communicate a definitive message rather than leaving the door open for a conversation to occur. Visual art displays typify this category of diplomacy. While it is true that showing Jackson Pollak's abstract paintings around the world may have helped to glorify free-thinking and individualism and subsequently combat communism, it failed to engage audiences in a greater connection and conversation. This type of action does little to bridge the cultural gap that has developed as a result of the often-negative image of Americans abroad.

### A Need for Domestic Cultural Diplomacy

If cultural diplomacy works to create a “foundation of trust with other peoples, which policy makers can build on to reach political, economic, and military agreements” (Cummings 2005, 1) on an international scope, presumably it can work in the same way domestically, forming a basis for community building. The premises of both international cultural diplomacy and domestic community building through the arts are the same: to use culture as an expression of humanity to establish a set of shared values and engender

empathetic understanding between seemingly different groups of people. “What we need,” according to prolific author Azar Nafisi, “is cultural diplomacy inside America” (Nafisi 2010). Nafisi is not referring to the State-run programs that bring artists from other nations to the U.S. to perform, but rather the process of using culture to start dialogue amongst heterogeneous populations living in the U.S.

As a nation of immigrants, the U.S. represents a broad range of religions, cultures, and languages. Along with this diversity comes a long history punctuated by divisiveness. Currently, the U.S. has found itself at an important crossroads regarding the political and ideological opinions surrounding American Muslims, stemming in part from the September 11, 2001 attacks on the World Trade Center. Preceding atrocities such as the World Trade Center Bombing in 1993 have also encouraged the stereotype of Muslims as terrorists. In his book *Journey into America: The Challenge of Islam*, Akbar Ahmed researches the dynamics behind this division, conducting interviews in over 75 U.S. locations in order to discuss Islam in our nation.

Ahmed starts his book by defining American identity, noting that from his research, he is able to cull American identity into three categories: primordial, pluralistic, and predator. The primordial and pluralistic identities, as Ahmed describes them, are “rooted in the seminal landing at Plymouth... The aim of the early settlers was to survive and create a Christian society. While some of their actions were the result of excessive religious zeal and fear, others, who still clung to their Christian faith, hoped to create a society in which everyone could live according to his or her faith and under the rule of

law. The majority of the founding fathers would subscribe to this latter view, which I call the pluralistic identity” (Ahmed 2011, 45). The protective primordial, therefore, provided the foundation for the pluralistic identity to come forth.

The third identity Ahmed describes, the predator identity, is also linked to the primordial, as it grows out of an instinct to protect the land regardless of cost. Settlers of this mindset grew arrogant and strived to “demonize and destroy the enemy” (ibid). As Ahmed points out, although our nation was founded by individuals of the pluralistic identity, the tensions created by the other two groups (the predator in particular, who is a polar opposite of the pluralistic) form the basis for most ideological clashes in the U.S. In more recent history, we can contextualize the predator identity as members of the Ku Klux Klan, who have often resorted to violence in order to preserve the community as they wish it to be.

In the context of Islam in post-9/11 U.S., these identities once again come in to play to describe the great divide between those Americans who oppose the Bush administration’s War on Terror – drastic domestic and international measures in the name of homeland security – and those who value liberty first and foremost. In an attempt to protect their country, some U.S. citizens have taken on the role of predator, stereotyping all Muslims as murderous jihadists<sup>2</sup> through the conjuring of enemy images. An extreme

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<sup>2</sup> The word “jihad” literally translates from the Arabic as “to struggle.” This struggle can refer to an inner-reflective struggle with one’s faith, an effort to improve Islamic society, and defense of Islam, often through violence. It is the latter definition referred to here.

example of predatorial anti-Islamic behavior is the 2010 death of a New York City taxi driver, who was stabbed after answering his passenger that yes, he was a Muslim. An example of a violent verbal attack was the threat by Florida preacher Rev. Terry Jones to publically burn a copy of the Quran, the Islamic holy book, in 2010. Though President Barack Obama stated in subsequent interviews that the preacher's views were "completely contrary to our values as Americans", (Associated Press 2010) it seems that some within the U.S. hold similar views, even if their opinions are not acted upon.

For many Americans, 9/11 marked the beginning of a long entrenchment in fear and suspicion. Egged on by particular media outlets, which often skew facts and promote an "us versus them" mentality, the pluralist identity is slowly shifting into a primordial, protectionist mindset. One of Ahmed's interviews with a Texan man can serve as an example, describing his fear of a changing America: "Muslims will attempt to make inroads one step at a time. Take a look at what is happening in Dearborn, Michigan, or how about Minnesota cause this is happening already right under our noses. Yes you can go right ahead and be complicit with them and someday and mark my words one day you will come to realize that their sole goal is to rule the world" (Ahmed 2011, 113).

Certainly, public policies and political events of late have only served to fuel this sense of fear. George W. Bush's War on Terror, the Patriot Act, and most recently, the Peter King hearings have given a sense of legitimacy to concerns such as those stated in the above quotation. Some individuals have acted upon this anti-Islamic sentiment, such as the vandals who recently spray-painted swastikas on the side of a Somali-American home.

This family has experienced similar attacks in the past (Yuen 2011). Unfortunately, hate crimes against Muslims persist throughout society.

### Art Addressing Cultural Divisions in the U.S.

This division between the pluralists and primordialists in society is exactly what artists such as Eric Fischl seek to address with domestic cultural diplomacy. At a recent Aspen Institute conference in Washington, DC, the artist spoke about *America: Now and Here*, his mobile visual and performing arts exhibition with which he is travelling from town to town around the U.S. The project debuted in May of 2011 with a six-week stay in Kansas City, and will travel to Detroit, Chicago, two small towns, a community college, and a military base as a part of its tour. Several trucks full of visual arts, as well as poets, filmmakers, and actors make up Fischl's entourage. Once on location, the trucks will unfold to form several visual arts galleries, music listening stations, stages, a movie screen, and a retail store. The project's central mission is to share experiences and opinions on a subject we all have in common: America. Content includes artworks on America as Place, America as People, and American as Icon, short plays written as conversations overheard in the U.S., and a 'renga' (linked poem), highlighting experiences from one coast to the other.

The idea behind *America: Now and Here* is to explore commonalities in a time when so much divides U.S. According to Fischl, the project was born out of



“an attempt to try to use art , the language and experience of art, as a way of redirecting the conversation we have with ourselves in this country about who we are. I felt that America was suffering an identity crisis, that events over the last so many years had thrown U.S. off our center and 9/11 was a catalytic event that firmed that spin-off of our center and threw U.S. into a world of fear and uncertainty, self-doubt, etc. and the country was becoming more and more polarized, tribal, and losing what our foundations are. I felt that because it’s a national crisis, we should turn to America’s greatest artists and ask them if they would create a work of art specifically about America” (Fischl 2010).

As the project’s name states, the artists were requested to create pieces based upon their impressions of present-day American life, rather than nostalgia, placing an emphasis on the unique dynamics of post-9/11 American society. Rather than educate audiences about Islamic art and culture specifically, this project takes a broad approach, highlighting the themes that run throughout society and unite us all.

Another increasingly prevalent form of domestic cultural diplomacy project is the large-scale Islamic Art Festival. These types of events involve dancers, musicians, poets and visual artists from the Islamic world travelling to the U.S. to perform for American audiences, most often in larger cities or at university towns. Unlike *America: Now and Here*, the artists involved in these projects are seldom Muslim-American, and usually come from the Muslim world. The overarching goal of many of these projects is to familiarize Americans with another side of Islamic culture and make a connection through a facet that is valorized in both cultures: the arts.

The John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts in Washington, D.C. was host to such a festival in 2009. *Arabesque: Arts of the Arab World* showcased the arts from 22 Arab countries over its three-week run. The festival was presented in cooperation

with the Arab League, and largely funded by the Kuwaiti, Qatari, and the Emirati embassies in Washington, DC. While some of the disciplines and content was classic – such as the Syrian Whirling Dervishes – others were more modern and commented on current events. *Alive from Palestine: Stories Under Occupation*, a play performed by Ramallah's Al-Kasaba Theater & Cinematheque, was created by Palestinians in response to being displaced within their homeland. The highly political subject matter is something that many arts events shy away from.

Despite the fact that *Arabesque* and other events like it include both modern and traditional art forms from a variety of Arab cultures, critics continue to question the ability of these events to bridge cultural gaps. Much of this stems from the way in which such festivals are curated. What U.S. audiences end up viewing is something deemed as “good art” by either U.S. curators or politicians from the country involved.

In her paper critiquing the diplomatic efficacy of Islamic arts showcases in the U.S., Jessica Winegar asserts that:

“scores of visual artists and major trends in painting and sculpture existing in the Middle East are regularly disregarded by American curators and arts organizers, and forms of cultural production that some Egyptians would classify as art (such as pop films and music) are not deemed art enough (or art at all) for many events in the United States...By selecting particular forms of cultural production from a larger and extremely diverse field, and labeling them “Middle Eastern art” or “Islamic art,” this representational exercise reproduces, as Orientalist representations do, a one-to-one homogenizing correlation between region, culture, history, and religion. Although most event organizers try to avoid such generalizing and want to fight the stereotypes that motivate and are produced by generalizations, they cannot escape the dominant frameworks for presenting such works in the U.S.” (Winegar 2008, 654-55).

While many audience members are mesmerized by the sound of traditional music, they do not often pause to question why this type of music and these specific performers were selected to be a part of the festival and why others were excluded. Exclusion of a certain group can be due simply to a language barrier or lack of broader artistic appeal, or -- more villainously -- politics. The source of funding and impetus for the project is often overlooked by audiences.

Another critique of larger, Arab arts festivals as a form of cultural diplomacy are the lack of opportunities for exchange. As noted earlier, pertaining to international cultural diplomacy, efforts are most effective when they engage people in a dialogue, rather than leaving audience members to be passive viewers. The *America: Now and Here* project has made strides in this direction, with art installations that engage viewers by projecting their text messages as a part of the artwork. Additionally, the project includes an interactive website to engage those who live in locations untouched by the tour.

Comparison of these two types of domestic cultural diplomacy initiatives leads to a more expansive conversation on the value and prevalence of arts participation in the U.S. In the next section, I will explore research on why participatory arts are particularly valuable in creating social capital and furthering the goals of cultural bridge-building within a community and between communities.

## CHAPTER 3

### PARTICIPATION

#### Arts and Communities Today

Within the non-profit arts and culture sector, it is well known that now more than ever, organizations are facing challenging financial times. As evidenced by the shuttering of once-thriving institutions such as Seattle's Intiman Theatre in 2011, arts organizations are extremely vulnerable to volatile economic conditions<sup>3</sup>. Furthermore, many organizations have faced a decline in visitor/audience numbers in recent years, as new competitors for people's free time and discretionary spending have entered the market. This includes new non-profit organizations that are created around the country, but also an expansion of the field to include television and internet offerings. Technology has certainly changed the way that people consume and think about the arts. Those seeking a cultural experience today have the choice of watching world-class opera from a local movie theatre (as the Metropolitan Opera has started to implement with its *Live in High Definition* program) or visiting the Smithsonian Latino Virtual Museum online through Second Life.

Additionally, audiences have expanded their definition of the arts to include graffiti and popular film. Whether or not one sees these things as art is irrelevant to the

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<sup>3</sup> This is mostly due to a reliance on contributed income. Ticket sales alone cannot cover the production and administrative costs.

matter of increased competition for attendance. In a speech at the University of Wisconsin, National Arts Strategies CEO Russell Willis Taylor noted that one of live theatre's strongest competitors is not live dance, but HBO (Taylor, 2010). One of the factors at play in the choosing of television programs such as Sopranos over Shakespeare is convenience – which is a subject for discussion in an entirely different paper. But the other consideration in making the choice of how to spend one's leisure time is relevance. Consumer preferences today lean toward connectivity, meaning that people are more apt to support an organization that involves them in the art in some way. The National Endowment for the Arts' 2008 Survey on Public Participation in the Arts (SPPA) corroborates this assertion, stating that “expectations for personalization and individual control over [arts and culture] experiences have increased” (Novak-Leonard and Brown 2008, 15). In other words, people are simply looking for ways in which the arts are relevant to their own lives.

Many arts organizations are doing this by offering their customers a chance to create art themselves. For some, this not only aligns their mission, but also helps to bring in revenue through increasing their customer base. The research completed by the SPAA team provides valuable information on the way in which Americans engage with the arts: although the number of people attending at least one arts event in a twelve month period declined from 2002 to 2008, the rates of those *creating* art have remained stable (ibid 16). Therefore, arts organizations would be wise to invest in education and amateur arts programs that offer customers the opportunity to participate on a different level. As the SPAA document confirms, “over the years, much attention has been devoted to rates of attendance; yet almost a quarter (23 percent) of U.S. adults participate in the arts

*exclusively* through other modes than attendance. Of the approximately 50 percent of U.S. adults who do attend arts events, 84 percent also participate through electronic media or arts creation” (ibid 83). Perhaps the issue is not that people are no longer interested in theatre, but rather that they are *most* interested in joining a community ensemble of players. The SPAA document is a groundbreaking work, as it reveals the breakdown of which demographics are participating in which manner, giving arts organizations greater insight into the preferences of their particular communities.

Offering arts creation programs not only helps organizations maintain financial strength, it also creates value in the community. In the following sections, I demonstrate that the arts – and arts creation activities, in particular – help to build community cohesiveness and civic engagement. I also argue that these types of activities are most vital for integrating immigrant and disenfranchised groups within a population. The two authors I followed most closely for this section are Robert Putnam and Alaka Wali. It is interesting to note that at the same time Putnam was writing about the decline of the American community and its potential revival, Wali was writing about the proliferation and of the informal arts sector in the U.S., and the social capital it creates in communities.

### Building Bridging and Bonding Capital

In his seminal work *Bowling Alone*, Harvard professor Robert Putnam describes social capital as “connections among individuals – social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them” (Putnam 2000, 19). Putnam’s notion stresses the importance of connectedness as opposed to an individual’s civic virtue. Social capital can come in many different forms, such as one’s extended family, church

choir group, or college alumni group. What social capital helps U.S. achieve ranges from psychological benefits like increased resilience in the face of tragedy, to community incentives such as ease of problem-solving. Putnam describes social capital as having two forms: *bridging* (inclusive) and *bonding* (exclusive)<sup>4</sup>. While both are important, Putnam notes their distinct differences: “Some forms of social capital are, by choice or necessity, inward looking and tend to reinforce exclusive identities and homogenous groups. Examples of bonding social capital include ethnic fraternal organizations, church-based women’s reading groups, and fashionable country clubs. Other networks are outward looking and encompass people across diverse social cleavages. Examples of bridging social capital include the civil rights movement, many youth service groups, and ecumenical religious organizations” (ibid 22). Bridging social capital is vital to breaking down stereotypes and increasing capacity for empathy.

Participatory arts activities, such as community theatre groups or amateur singing ensembles, are most often of the bridging variety, as they bring together a heterogeneous mix of people who may not have much in common outside of their artistic interest. In a study on informal arts participation<sup>5</sup> in Chicago, researchers found that “considerable diversity exists in informal arts venues across racial/ethnic lines, by age, and by occupations or socioeconomic status.” (Wali 2001, 220). Within one community drumming circle, the group found an older white man playing and joking alongside younger men of various ethnicities. Additionally, participatory arts activities often take

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<sup>4</sup> Putnam credits Ross Gittel and Avis Vidal’s *Community Organizing: Building Social Capital as a Development Strategy* for these terms

<sup>5</sup> Analogous to arts creation or participatory arts. All three terms are used interchangeably throughout this paper

place at a location that is accessible to many demographics – such as a church basement or a city park – rather than exclusive private clubs or offices. As Alaka Wali and her research team discovered in a subsequent study on informal arts participation, this inclusiveness works to “induce trust and solidarity among participants, and promote greater understanding and respect for diversity” (Wali 2002, xiv). Of course, the extent to which a group can be considered bridging also may vary given the art form – and moreover whether or not the group is culturally specific. An organization of African-American amateur painters, for example, is likely to be primarily a homogenous bonding group.

Putnam points out that simply belonging to an organization does not necessarily indicate that social capital is created, as many of today’s membership associations require little more of their members than paying an annual fee. Members rarely – if ever – engage with each other, as the majority of these mass membership organizations have a national headquarters but no community chapters. Putnam describes the relationship: “The bond between any two members of the National Wildlife Federation or the National Rifle Association is less like the bond between two members of a prayer group or a gardening club and more like the bond between two Yankees fans on opposite coasts (or perhaps two devoted L.L. Bean catalogue users: they share some of the same interests, but they are unaware of each other’s existence. Their ties are to common symbols, common leaders, and perhaps common ideals, but not to each other” (Putnam 2000, 52). These types of affiliations fail to produce the community-building benefits that face-to-face engagements provide.



Participatory arts, on the other hand, require a tightly knit community of ‘frequent attenders’ in order to exist. You cannot produce a community presentation of *Taming of the Shrew*, for example, if the actress playing Kate only attends rehearsals sporadically. Wali’s survey on informal arts participation reveals that participants dedicate an average of four hours per week to practicing their art form within a group (Wali 2002, 43). Furthermore, participating in the arts often requires a higher level of interaction between group members, due to the level of collaboration and trust needed in order to accomplish a goal such as choreographing a dance or painting a community mural.

The informal arts afford participants the opportunity to interact with others, many of whom they share few common demographic traits and might not otherwise encounter in society. Therefore, the arts help build social capital because they help to construct those fibrous bonds that result in strong networks. These networks help individuals by giving them greater access to jobs, information, and other external assets. However, as Putnam notes, this type of bridging social capital also has powerfully positive effects on society, generating broader understanding and reciprocity (Putnam 2000, 23). In short, participatory arts benefit society by breaking down barriers that exist between individuals and cultivating cohesion in communities.

### Participatory Arts and Special Populations

I have demonstrated how the arts – and informal, participatory arts in particular – are important community assets, as they help to build capacity amongst participants and create social capital. The availability of knitting circles, photography clubs and brass

bands is vital to attaining optimum community health. However, we know that the demographics of the U.S. are swiftly shifting, and communities look very different today than they did even a decade ago when Wali and Putnam published their respective research. The U.S. Hispanic population alone rose over 43 percent from 2000 to 2010 (U.S. Census Bureau). In the next section, I explore the importance of the informal arts in communities with high concentrations of immigrants and/or refugees. I argue that these communities in particular benefit from the social capital created through informal arts participation.

## CHAPTER 10

### IMMIGRANTS, REFUGEES AND THE ARTS

As a part of culture, the arts help us to establish identity and infuse our lives with meaning. They help us improve certain skills such as those of the analytical variety, problem solving, and team building. Additionally, the arts can help us make sense of the world around us by acting as a mirror that reflects society back upon itself (Boal 1979, 128).

For most of those born in the U.S., the word “art” conjures up images of museums or auditoriums, as art in our society is most visible in these formal settings. However, in the native cultures of many of America’s newest arrivals, the arts are much more integrated into everyday life and found in what native-born Americans might consider to be unlikely settings. Townspeople in the West African country of Togo, for example, may not ever participate in the performing arts through purchasing a ticket to view a dance performance in an auditorium. Nevertheless, they participate in the arts on a regular – if not daily – basis. Dance, for example, is deeply imbedded in Togolese culture and can be found at virtually every funeral, religious ceremony, and community celebration.

Indeed, research has shown that immigrants find value in and derive joy from the arts (Gadwa 2009, Moriarty 2004), but their keen interest does not necessarily translate into attendance at local arts offerings. In a 2004 survey of low-income Philadelphia

neighborhoods, only 25 percent of immigrants reported that they had attended a concert in the past year, whereas 56 percent of U.S.-born respondents had attended (Stern et al. 2008, 4). Immigrants may not be frequent ticket buyers, but their appreciation for the arts is fervent. The same Philadelphia survey reported that “across a range of informal creative activities, immigrants were often *more* involved than U.S.-born respondents” (ibid)<sup>6</sup>. Often they choose gathering places unconnected to an arts organization such as a community center, church, or even a private home.

Some of the barriers to immigrant arts attendance include language, location, content and price. In a 2009 study of the Minneapolis arts community, 85 percent of arts providers noted that they were interested in engaging the city’s immigrant population. However, the majority of that group said they were interested in programming content that is appealing to the immigrants, rather than starting any kind of arts creation program (Gadwa 2009, 6). While these arts administrators see the need to involve Minneapolis’ immigrant population, they are either unaware of or unwilling to accommodate the population’s preferred way of engaging.

Perhaps one of the major attractions of the arts to immigrants is the appeal of the network and the ability to create with others, rather than sit silently in a dark concert hall. According to Jennifer Lena and Daniel Cornfield who studied immigrant arts participation in Nashville, immigrants may view arts participation as a “venue or mechanism for producing or affirming social and economic relationships” (Tepper and Ivey 2007, 148). If one of the major factors in choosing to participate in the arts is the ability to make social connections, most offerings from U.S. arts institutions – even if the content were appropriate -- would have little appeal to immigrants.

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<sup>6</sup> Emphasis not included in original quote

### The Arts and Identity Creation

For immigrants, participating in arts creation serves as more than a hobby; it is a way in which one negotiates and reinforces identity after being uprooted from all cultural context and readjusting to life in the U.S.. Though the U.S. is an amalgamation of many languages, cultures, and ethnicities, its citizens are not always keen on adjusting to the languages and cultures of others. Rather, immigrants are expected to quickly adopt new cultural practices, such as speaking English. As one of the American interviewees featured in Ahmed's book remarked about immigrants, "anyone who really wants to come here, however long you think it takes, you must learn the English language. This crap they're saying that everything has to be written in German and Spanish, whatever, you know" (Ahmed 2010, 103). Clearly despite the pluralistic approach under which our country was created, there is an expectation for others to adapt to our way of life rather than the other way around.

With this adoption of new characteristics often comes the shedding or transforming of other cultural practices. This is true for culturally specific artistic practices, as well. For example, when folklorist Felicia McMahon studied the artistic performances of Sudanese refugees living in upstate New York, she noted that their traditional songs and dances had gone through several changes to reflect the new experiences of the refugees. Though the songs were quite similar to those they had learned in their native country, they had replaced the rattles and reed trumpets typically used for instruments with found objects such as aluminum pans and kitchen cutlery. Assuming this switch occurred out of necessity, the folklorist supplied the performers

with more suitable instruments purchased from an African shop. Much to McMahon's surprise, the performers continued to use the kitchen objects in their performance (McMahon 2005, 367).

The example of the Sudanese refugees performing in New York reflects how migrants combine traditional and newly learned practices to form hybridized art forms. While older generations might bemoan the erosion of tradition and culture when the younger set performs old songs in new ways, others contend that hybridization is a validly authentic mode of carrying on customs. Culture is not frozen in time, and must change in relation to geography and circumstance. Just because a traditional dance might incorporate new moves or costumes and selectively omits old ones over time, does not mean that the artform is at risk of extinction. Rather, contends Jabbour, quoted in Bau Graves' book *Cultural Democracy*, "A second feature, functioning in tandem with selectivity is tenacity....The fact is that, within the parameters of selectivity, ethnic traditions maintain themselves very well and for long periods in the United States" (Bau Graves 2005, 55). Access to the participatory arts can help immigrant populations to honor ethnic traditions while asserting newly formed identity.

## CHAPTER 5

### BENEFITS FOR INDIVIDUALS AND COMMUNITIES

Despite the fact that artistic traditions are often changed as people migrate from place to place, many senior generations tend to look at these altered traditions as tainted or inauthentic. They mourn the loss of the old way and fear that their culture will not be passed on to future generations, resulting in a disconnect between grandparents, parents, and the youth. For the sake of sharing common heritage and preserving in-group harmony, it is beneficial for organizations to provide first and second generation American communities with bonding experiences, where cultural traditions are shared among the homogenous community. But here, asserts, Moriarty, is where the line between bridging and bonding capital begins to blur (Moriarty 2004, 18). When Putnam discussed the two types of social capital in *Bowling Alone*, he notes that they often overlap. An example Moriarty point out is a group of Vietnamese teenagers who were released from school one afternoon to perform traditional songs for a group of Vietnamese senior citizens. These seniors were not related to the high school students, and therefore the event constitutes *bridging* form of capital rather than simply bonding. “Activities that would be seen from the outside as simple in-group bonding can actually be instances of bridging across a generation gap that is experienced as acutely problematic. The multigenerational participants at this Vietnamese event are not a

homogeneous group. Even the elders are separated by class and political distinctions that roughly correspond to the three large waves of refugees who arrived in 1975, in the early 1980s, and in the mid-1990s” (ibid 19-20). When we talk about the benefits of bridging social capital – such as pluralism and a reduction in stereotypes – we must be sure that we correctly identify what constitutes as heterogeneous group. An outsider may be aware that there are differences in age between the two Vietnamese parties, but would otherwise lump them into the same cultural cohort. A closer look reveals that the relationship is multi-faceted. The two groups may share the same ancestry, but the degree to which they identify as Vietnamese or even which ethnic subgroup they belong to may vary greatly. Thus, it is important for funders, policy makers, and arts administrators to consider the nuances of culture and ethnicity when classifying an activity as bridging or bonding.

### Bonded-Bridging

Moriarty also introduces another important categorization into the paradigm: *bonded-bridging*. Bonded-bridging activities occur when a group of like participants bond together to engage in bridging across cultural lines. For example, a group of Ghanaian-American women who rehearse dances to be performed at a community dance festival could be considered bonded-bridging: the women bond together over their cultural similarities, but then go a step further by performing the dance for the broader community. This can help facilitate cross-cultural understanding between the Ghanaian women and the community at large, while cultivating a sense of pride and loyalty among the women.



Another type of bonded-bridging activity helps facilitate acculturation for immigrant groups. At a Silicon Valley Vietnamese-American center, school children are required to sit at quiet tables and finish their school work before they are allowed to join their martial arts instructor in the next room for a cultural activity. “When the site is an after-school homework center, it is easy to see the participatory arts as the ‘spoonful of sugar’ that makes the civic engagement medicine—in this case, schoolwork—go down. However, the equal status implied by side-by-side programming makes this metaphor cut both ways, to create a space of safety around new or threatening American practices, and at the same time to validate traditional ethnic arts,” writes Moriarty (ibid 25). The prevalence and benefits derived from bonded-bridging activities suggest that they should be given priority amongst funding and programmatic options that administrators have. If we are using Putnam’s taxonomy as a way of examining types of immigrant participant arts experiences, Moriarty’s bonded-bridging must be included to create an accurate depiction of the current trends, as 85% of activities fall into this category (ibid 19).

Certainly these bonded-bridging activities are beneficial in and of themselves, but perhaps their significance is the “spoon full of sugar” aspect Moriarty mentions above: they provide a comfortable way for immigrant groups to access the benefits of bridging activities. If bridging capital is significant to greater society because of the networking benefits it provides, then it is of crucial importance to immigrant communities. Migrants (including those who frequently move from city to city within the U.S.) are less likely to vote or otherwise engage in society (Putnam 2001, 204). However, they are often the people most in need of networks which can provide them with access to jobs, social services, and community support. According to the Philadelphia study *Migrants*,

*Communities, and Culture*, “for low-income migrants who in the past relied on informal social networks to secure these necessities, daily life can pose overwhelming challenges” (Stern et. al. 2008, 8). Participating in the arts can help immigrants to reconstruct some of those networks in their new communities.

In fact, many social service organizations are using the arts as a way to connect with and disseminate information among immigrant communities. The Nuestra Casa Family Resource Center in Ukiah, California used the arts to connect with its community with its *Noche de Estrellas* performance showcase. Immigrants were tapped to display their talent before local audiences in the sold-out performances. Commenting on the benefits of the event, Nuestra Casa wrote, “Arts programs create an opportunity for interpersonal interactions and for the development of healthy relationships between people who might otherwise not have the opportunity to do so” (Marcus et. al. 2006, 23). By connecting with the performers in a fun, comfortable environment, the social services organization was able to open up an avenue of communication that will benefit the community as a whole in the long term.

Outside of building community-wide networks, participatory arts also generate personal benefits for immigrants and refugees. When participating in the arts, one not only hones discipline-specific skills such as a quilting stitch or reading sheet music, but also more generalized skills that translate to everyday life. These can include the ability to work collaboratively, critical thinking, public speaking and problem solving skills. Of course, the development of these same skills is used in the argument for arts education in

schools and for the promotion of public funding for the arts<sup>7</sup>, but as newcomers, immigrants in particular can benefit from acquiring them. Due to language and cultural barriers, developing the ability to work collaboratively and problem solving skills are the most crucial to newcomers.

First, the ability to collaborate can help newcomers connect with others within their cohort as well as those in the greater community. Working in teams – especially cross-culturally – can be very challenging without prior experience in striving towards common goal with others. By rehearsing the steps involved in reaching a consensus, as well as troubleshooting mechanisms, immigrants are better equipped and have more agency to face collective issues in society. According to Americans for the Arts, young people who participate in the arts are three times more likely to be elected to class office than those who do not participate (Americans for the Arts website). Clearly, the arts empower people to work in tandem with others, tackling issues that require input from diverse sources.

Finally, participating in the arts can help to develop the ability to find fresh solutions to problems – a challenge often facing immigrants who must navigate their way often without sufficient language or cultural cues. According to the study done on informal arts participation in Chicago, participants note that the problem-solving capacity cultivated during arts participation is evident in the workplace. In the study,

“Ethnographers observed a myriad of ways in which artists improved work performance or adapted new techniques, bringing a versatility to their jobs. Artists were observed substituting materials, figuring out how to do something

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<sup>7</sup> For more information on arts education, see Americans for the Arts, Arts Education network [http://www.artsU.S.a.org/networks/arts\\_education/default.asp](http://www.artsU.S.a.org/networks/arts_education/default.asp)

quickly, resolve emergencies and at times just get around bureaucratic obstacles to get things done. During a focus group with some of the visual artists at the museum, they stated that they often found themselves applying artistic skills to their work, particularly if they were involved in the design or construction of a space within the institution. The artists mentioned that problem solving was often something they just did and rarely reported to their supervisors” (Wali et. al. 137).

Finding and obtaining employment is difficult for anyone in recent times, much more so for those who speak English as a second language or have no previous employment/schooling in the U.S.. Cultivating these problem-solving skills helps immigrants excel at their work, securing their employment status. Additionally, informal arts participation often requires participants to supply their own materials and practice space. Like the example of the Sudanese refugees in New York, necessity often cultivates creativity, and thoughtful substitutions are made to overcome costliness or limited availability.

## CHAPTER 6

### PEACEBUILDING AND THE ARTS

One of the major reasons why the arts are valuable in civil society is their ability to foster harmony and mutual understanding within communities. The arts have been used in the fields of conflict resolution, juvenile delinquency prevention, and trauma recovery to build peace and understanding. Through the arts, people are able to express themselves in ways that verbal communication does not allow, and empathy is cultivated between widely divergent parties.

#### Engaging as an Audience Member

Simply performing a play on a hot topic in the community can help to open up the channels of communication that lead to mediation. This approach has been used for decades in the field of international development, where practitioners creatively frame a pressing social issue in a way that is both accessible and entertaining. U.S. Peace Corps includes theatre as a useful tool for both information dissemination and conflict resolution in their volunteer handbooks<sup>8</sup>.

As theatre theorist and teacher Jerzy Grotowski put it, “the core of the theatre is an encounter” (Grotowski 1968, 56). By viewing one side of the story in a safe, neutral space, the topic is broached in an indirect manner. Audience members watch the conflict

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<sup>8</sup> From author’s personal experience as a U.S. Peace Corps volunteer in Togo from 2006-2008

play out on stage and examine the situation from the perspective of outsiders looking in. This gives them the necessary distance and space to examine the topic removed from the “heat of the moment”, providing a clearer opportunity to think critically about the problem without anger and personal biases clouding judgment. As Grotowski references, provocative performances often open up audiences to discover not only the subject of the play, but also their own lenses through which their opinions are colored.

Aside from exploring controversial issues, the arts can also help mitigate conflict by increasing understanding and subsequently decreasing stereotypes about a certain culture. Often these stereotypes originate in the media and entertainment industry, washing certain ethnic groups with negative attributes. Lacking an opportunity to connect and clarify the misconception, the stereotype deepens the divide between “self” and “other”, leading to fear, further isolation, and even hatred. “Real and vitalized ethnic cultures are badly needed as a corrective to the bland inanity of commercial popular culture. America needs to actually address issues of race and ethnicity, not on the television screen but in person...Public culture, if it can be accomplished in an inclusive rather than an exclusive fashion, if it can provide a comfortable haven for insiders as well as outsiders, can be an agency for the alleviation of these anxieties.” (Bau Graves 2005, 171). This is the same concept used in cultural diplomacy (i.e. U.S. symphony orchestras are sent abroad to give others a glimpse into American values. The visit’s objective is to elucidate Americans’ love of orchestral music and lessen the stereotype of Americans’ affinity for music with violent lyrics).

According to some scholars, this concept relies on art as the “humanizing” factor (Winegar 2008, 658): a diverse audience comes to see Somalis reciting their poetry and

feels a connection to the shared affinity for expression through a cultural form. Even though the mode of delivery might be quite different, love of art in any form is what makes the connection possible.

### Peacebuilding and Participatory Arts

Another type of peace building project involves participants from different cultures interacting directly to create a work of art. Examples include a mixed race drumming group in Chicago, a play performed by teens of varied ethnicities or a creative writing group made up of writers from diverse backgrounds. On an interpersonal level, the arts have been used to resolve disputes peacefully<sup>9</sup>. In all of these projects, the same benefits derived from bridging social capital apply: participants increase tolerance and understanding of other cultures.

Participatory arts projects are especially valuable in reconciliation efforts after violence or trauma has divided a community. Conflict Resolution practitioner Craig Zelizer examined the arts presence in postwar Bosnia-Herzegovina<sup>10</sup>. Though its people had endured over 1000 days of brutal fighting until the conflict came to an end in 1995, a burgeoning art scene appeared in Bosnia-Herzegovina. Along with art therapy projects initiated by international relief agencies were bridge-building choirs, youth programs, and theatrical productions, all involving multi-ethnic and multi-religious amateur artists. In

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<sup>9</sup> For more on the arts and interpersonal conflict resolution see *The Art in Peacemaking* (Brunson et al)

<sup>10</sup> The war in Bosnia and Herzegovina was an international armed conflict that took place in Bosnia and Herzegovina between April 1992 and December 1995.

any of these programs, participants were able to make connections that are simply too painful and difficult to negotiate without art as the intermediary.

As one of Zelizer's interviewee's noted about participating in a diverse choir, "In the times that were really difficult and challenging, we had to focus on the music. So that sort of as our superordinate goal was perfect. That's why it works, that's why this whole thing functions. If it were just some group of people getting together to talk about their experiences, it would have folded three years ago. But the fact that we do have the music to focus on and we all agree on that. What I think is amazing about the choir is that we learn to sing each other's songs" (Zelizer 2003, 70). This powerful account epitomizes why the arts are such a powerful tool for stimulating connections. According to Qamar-ul Huda, who writes about the U.S. after the trauma of 9/11, "dialogue between the religions offers the opportunity for uncovering the common ground of shared values and goals that resonate in each of our faiths, even as we clarify real differences" (Huda 2003, 194). While engaging in a dialogue between two sides of a conflict might seem unbearable to those who have been traumatized, sharing a song or a craft has been proven possible. The following chapter explores in depth how the arts have been used to repair damaged relationships bridge a cultural gap in a divided community.



## CHAPTER 7

### CASE STUDY: SOMALI POPULATION IN MINNEAPOLIS

#### Minneapolis

Located at the convergence of the Mississippi and the Minnesota Rivers, the city of Minneapolis is the hub of economic and cultural activity in the Upper Midwest. When combined with its neighboring city of St. Paul (the two together are known as the “Twin Cities”), Minneapolis is considered the 16<sup>th</sup> largest metropolitan area in the U.S.

Historically, Minneapolis’ wealth comes from the flour milling industry, home to the headquarters of Pillsbury and General Mills. These companies jolted the city’s economy into prosperity in the late 1800s, producing 10 percent of the nation’s flour. The prosperity that residents enjoyed resulted in increased appreciation for leisure activities such as the arts. These “wealthy and art-loving elite” started a tradition of philanthropy that eventually spurred the growth of Minneapolis’s arts and culture scene (Sloan 2006, 01d). Nationally respected institutions such as the Minneapolis Institute of Art and the Walker Art Center were created at the turn of century and established Minneapolis as possessing reputable arts and culture offerings.

Despite a period of economic depression at the end of the industrial era, the city’s art scene continued to burgeon with not only powerhouse museums and concert halls, but also growing numbers of individual artists. Indeed, the city is now a mecca for the arts – theatre in particular – ranking second only to New York City in seats per capita (ibid).

Aside from the plethora of work opportunities, Minneapolis also offers artists a number of social services and other forms of assistance. Artist housing, for example, is offered at subsidized rates in the city's northeast arts district. This community has capitalized on its industrial heritage by converting old factory buildings (as well as creating new structures on vacant lots) in order to transform the area into a vibrant cultural destination. Artists are drawn to the area not only to enjoy the cultural offerings, but also to live and work at a reduced cost (Artspace U.S.A). Spurring economic development and attracting tourists, the arts have played a significant role in city's economic re-development plans.

### Cedar-Riverside

Another city neighborhood with a high density of artists and cultural organizations is Cedar-Riverside. Geographically, Cedar-Riverside is defined by the Mississippi River and two major interstate highways marking off a triangular-shaped area. Cedar-Riverside is also known as the "West Bank" because the west bank of the University of Minnesota's campus also marks the area. Cedar-Riverside is widely known today as both an urban arts hub and as one of the city's most ethnically diverse areas.

Dating back to the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, Cedar-Riverside has served as a landing point for various immigrant populations. This area was of particular interest to immigrants because of the availability of low cost rental apartments that the city made available to laborers. The Germans, Bohemians, and Swedes were first to populate the area, followed by the Scandinavians. Due to the concentration of Scandinavians, the area was then known as "Snus Boulevard". During this period, Cedar-Riverside defined itself as a vibrant entertainment scene through the proliferation of locally-owned bars, theaters and

vaudeville clubs. Prohibition and the subsequent influx of eastern European immigrants post World War II changed the cultural landscape of the neighborhood significantly (Placeography). According to a National Register of Historic Places document, “as immigrants became successful and joined mainstream society, they moved away from the densely developed area. Their place was taken by other ethnic groups” (National Register of Historic Places). Thus, the Cedar-Riverside neighborhood developed a reputation as a dynamic ethnic enclave.

The neighborhood went through a period of deterioration before meeting the influence of the emergent hippy and beatnik counterculture coming from the University community. These people migrated towards the low-cost rental housing and began to congregate in the budding district of coffee shops, bars, and music venues which would soon redefine Cedar-Riverside. The not-for-profit West Bank School of Music was established in 1970, and trained/presented famous folk artists such as Bonnie Raitt and Dave Ray. Other neighborhood favorites that are still in existence include the Hard Times Café and Mixed Blood Theater.

### Somali Influence

Today, the Cedar-Riverside neighborhood is once again defined by a dominant group: the Somalis. Smaller groups of East African immigrants coming from Eritrea and Ethiopia have also moved into the neighborhood. Just as the immigrant communities defined the area’s arts and culture offerings in the last two centuries, Cedar-Riverside has changed to reflect its East-African influences. Community gathering spaces now include

African Malls, where Somalis congregate to socialize, dine, and shop for their traditional dress. Mosques and Islamic Centers now populate the area, serving as community centers and hubs of cultural activity. The Somali culture and the University's artsy-hip counterculture have converged in the Cedar-Riverside community, creating a unique cultural landscape. A mix of African restaurants and punk rock bars line the commercial corridors. Many of the area's arts institutions cater to both the Somali and University crowds. The Cedar Cultural Center features traditional and contemporary Somali music, as well as American folk and contemporary music.

Fleeing civil war in their own country, the Somalis began arriving in the U.S. in the mid-1990s. Most of these refugees consist of Somalia's rural poor, who experienced many hardships after the collapse of Somalia's central government nearly two decades ago. Somalis now make up the third largest refugee group in the world. An estimated 100,000 Somalis now live in the Twin Cities, the majority of them in the Cedar-Riverside neighborhood. The State Department identified Minneapolis as an ideal location for settling the Somali refugees and immigrants because of its wide availability of social services, including Hennepin County's Office of Multi-Cultural Services, which operates as a liaison between service providers and the county's immigrant community (Grady 2009).

Like the immigrant groups that came before them, many of the Somalis have settled in "the towers", as one local resident referred to the Riverside Plaza residential skyscrapers. Originally created in 1973 as part of the U.S. federal government's New

Town-In Town<sup>11</sup> program, the Ralph Rapson (who also designed the city's famed Guthrie theatre) designed structures house up to 4,000 residents. Today, 70 percent of the building's residents are East African (Cedar Riverside Adult Education Collaborative). The Riverside Plaza so many Somalis call home is no longer the pristine, idealized structure as in the days of the Mary Tyler Moore show (the show's central character lived in Riverside Plaza). It has now fallen into decay and is referred to as the "Ghetto in the Sky" and "Crack Stacks" (Marsh 2007).

The arrival of the Somali community has marked a significant shift in the demographic and cultural makeup of not only the Cedar-Riverside neighborhood, but the whole of Minneapolis. Historically, Minnesota has been known as a fairly welcoming state with liberal politics. However, its tolerance has rarely been tested, as is evidenced by the homogeneity of the Minneapolis population: as recently as 1970, the city was 93 percent Caucasian. Recently, with the influx of poor and jobless displaced persons, has come an increase in crime, including murder. A study done in the mid-nineties revealed that 90 percent of those arrested for murder in Minneapolis were non-white (Johnson 1997). Minneapolis, in turn, has had to test its progressive politics in order to deal with seemingly intractable problems. According to one reporter, many Minnesotans are starting to question its "soft-hearted" politics in preference for stricter policies (ibid). To a greater extent than ever before in its history, Minneapolis is facing a clash of cultures.

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<sup>11</sup> The program strived to create mixed-income, ethnically diverse communities

Aside from crime, religion is another element deepening the divide between the Somali refugees and the rest of the Minneapolis community. The Somalis have built many mosques in connection with their Muslim<sup>12</sup> faith in the predominantly Christian city. Many wear traditional religious garments such as the *hijab*, making their faith visible in the community. As I will explore later, Americans post-9/11 have a spectrum of opinions on Islam, some automatically attaching the label of “terrorist” to anyone practicing the religion. The skepticism between the Somalis and the greater Minneapolis population grew when as many as 20 young Minnesotans of Somali descent went missing from their U.S. communities and were suspected of joining al-Shabab, a radical Islamic group fighting to take hold of the Somali government. One of these men, Shirwa Ahmed, joined other al-Shabab members in a suicide-bombing in Somalia. The FBI immediately began questioning members of the Minneapolis Somali community, suspecting that some of the al-Shabab recruitment had occurred on U.S. soil. The Abubakar As-Saddique Islamic Center, Minneapolis’ largest mosque, became the center of the investigation, as many of the 20 men in question had spent significant amounts of time worshipping and studying at the mosque and some family and community members believed there might be connection. According to a special report for Al Jazeera, local law enforcement dealing with the Somali community went from “issues such as gang violence, petty crimes and social exclusion to the shock of now having to deal with homegrown jihadists with an international agenda” (Omaar). The distrust in the community was palpable, as Somalis turned inward, fearing law enforcement and the reaction of the community.

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<sup>12</sup> The majority of Somalis are Sunni Muslims. There are also some Shia Muslims and a small number of Christians, as well.

### The Role of the Arts in Cedar-Riverside

The arts have always played an important role in the Cedar-Riverside community, providing entertainment for local residents and branding the area as a cultural destination point for visitors. Given the cross-cultural tensions that currently face Minneapolis, the role of the arts in community has expanded to include the role of a diplomat, negotiating between cultures that reside within one geographical location yet often times seem worlds away from each other. Arts organizations in Cedar-Riverside have cultivated safe spaces for both bonding and bridging arts activities to occur. This is achieved through their business models, programming, and community involvement.

The story of Cedar-Riverside is a fascinating study of convergence and collaboration. Institutions ranging from traditional nonprofit theatres to participatory community centers to for-profit bars and concert halls come together to cultivate interest and provide increased access for all members of the community. Through collaboration, these organizations are able to share resources and raise awareness about the importance of the arts in communities.

A second interesting aspect of the Cedar-Riverside arts and culture field is the way in which longstanding arts providers have changed over time. Organizations have proven nimble by responding to demographic, economic, and cultural shifts in the area. Sector-wide, this agility is somewhat rare and the lack thereof can render arts organizations irrelevant within the context of their communities.

### Mixed Blood Theatre

Mixed Blood Theatre (MBT) is an exemplary case of domestic cultural diplomacy. They have remained relevant to their community throughout tumultuous political shifts through continuous reinvention, collaboration, and community engagement. Founded in 1976, MBT sits in the heart of Cedar-Riverside. The organization's website describes the mission as "Mixed Blood Theatre, a professional, multi-racial company, promotes cultural pluralism and individual equality through artistic excellence, using theater to address artificial barriers that keep people from succeeding in American society" (Mixed Blood Theatre website). An egalitarian spirit has been at the heart of MBT's work since its inception: Martin Luther King Jr.'s teachings inspired Jack Reuler to found the theatre (Kerr 2011). In its early years, the theatre received much criticism for its social and political stances. "It took a lot of courage to keep on," said long-time employee Raul Ramos. Ramos remembers a time when a local man used to post notes on the theatre's door, warning the white female actresses of the dangers of acting onstage with black men.

Though MBT has always embraced interracial dialogue, it is now adjusting to the new wave of Somali immigrants, moving the focus from bridging the gaps between blacks, white, and Latinos to creating a conversation between entirely divergent cultures. With this shift, the gap between dissimilar groups broadens to include the precarious issues of religion, identity, and language; compounded with the country's burgeoning



anti-Islamic sentiment and recent FBI probes in the community, creating a multi-ethnic organization took on a new meaning for MBT.

Forming an open channel of communication with the Somali community has allowed the theatre to understand these cultural differences and continue to fulfill its mission. MBT has worked to remain vital to today's Cedar-Riverside community in three ways: increasing accessibility through a new business model, offering opportunities for informal arts participation, and programming relevant mainstage productions. In this section, I explore how these facets of the MBT make it a model for arts organizations throughout the U.S. facing demographic changes in their constituencies. Additionally, I demonstrate how MBT's community engagement efforts are an effective method of domestic cultural diplomacy.

### Increasing Accessibility

Providing diverse audiences with access to a particular discipline is part of the core mission for many arts and culture nonprofits. To do this, organizations analyze the barriers to attendance – such as price, lack of knowledge about the art form, or a feeling of exclusion -- and develop a strategy for breaking through those barriers (Walker-Kuhne 2005). One strategy often employed to address the price barrier is reduced price tickets for groups who are unable to pay full price, such as students and seniors. While some arts marketing professionals would say that lack of knowledge about or interest in an event are the most prevalent barriers to attendance, the economic situation in neighborhoods such as Cedar-Riverside cannot be ignored. In 2009, the median household income in the neighborhood was \$17,325 (City Data). This makes it impossible for many residents to

reserve any funds for leisure activities such as arts events. Thus, MBT was tasked with developing a strategy to serve its community when the majority of its residents were simply unable to pay for reduced-price tickets.

In May of 2011, MBT announced “Radical Hospitality”, the theatre’s new pricing strategy which eliminates ticket costs for all shows, starting with the 2011-2012 season. According to the MBT website, “whether a patron is a long-time Mixed Blood attendee, a new immigrant living in Mixed Blood’s Cedar-Riverside neighborhood, a person with low income or disabilities, a college student, or someone who has never been to theater, he or she will be welcomed, free of charge—with radical hospitality” (Mixed Blood website). Patrons have the option of going online and reserving a seat for \$15 if they want to secure a spot in the audience, but otherwise theatergoers are only requested to give their names and contact information. The program is expected to continue through subsequent seasons.

Many theatres have offered free or “pay-what-you-can” admission for certain performances, but MBT is the first theatre to provide an entire season of free shows. While “Radical Hospitality” certainly is radical, it makes sense from the perspective of mission fulfillment. If MBT’s goal is to achieve equality and stimulate cross-cultural dialogue, it must find a way to get a range of community members in the door. In an interview with Minnesota Public Radio, Jack Reuler commented on the initiative: “It’s really to create an open and inviting place that everyone can come to and call their home. It is new and unusual in our field, but it’s just an expansion of what’s been in our hearts and the way we have tried to reach out since the beginning” (Kerr 2011). The website explanation lists three goals of “Radical Hospitality”: to build relationships with those

who have been traditionally underserved by the arts; eliminate real or perceived barriers to participation; and increase the number of Minnesotans participating in the arts (Mixed Blood website).

Gathering contact information for each audience member will not only serve to help build relationships, but also assist the theatre in financing the program. Audience members will be asked to consider making a donation after attending a performance. Although finances are a natural concern with a program like “Radical Hospitality”, Reuler does not think that eliminating income from ticket sales will significantly hurt the theatre’s financial health. In past years, ticket sales have made up only 15-18 percent of the annual budget (Kerr, 2011). Reuler believes that that amount will be made up in support from the community. Funding from the Minnesota Arts and Cultural Heritage Fund has already been secured for the 2011-2012 season, and MBT hopes to receive additional sponsorships for subsequent years from individuals, corporations and foundations.

### Relevance through Programming

Attracting the broadest possible audience is essential in order for MBT to fulfill its mission of addressing artificial barriers and sparking social change. However, the theatre also must make sure that there is also equal representation on stage, including diversity within the performing cast and the stories they tell. According to Raul Ramos, “We are called mixed blood because we try to be inclusive. We try to put underrepresented people on the stage and not exclude anyone’s story. We try to tell the stories that aren’t told” (Ramos 2011). This has always been a large part of MBT’s

programming philosophy. Casts are inclusive of not only diverse ethnicities, but also a range of languages. Throughout the years, many shows have been presented in both Spanish and English, with the same cast members performing both versions. The plays presented at MBT are generally provocative and represent a range of perspectives. The 2011-2012 season, for example, includes plays addressing racism from the perspective of an African-American, the disabled, the concept of the American dream, and the politics of sexual and ethnic identity. MBT and its leadership have won numerous awards for their unique approaches, including Theatre Communications Group's Peter Zeisler Memorial Award for pioneering practices in theater, dedication to freedom of expression and risk-taking for the advancement of theater (Mixed Blood website).

#### Making Connections through Arts Participation

Mixed Blood Theatre has a long-standing reputation for producing challenging, high-quality work. However, as an organization rooted in the community with a mission to affect change in society, it turned its attention from what was happening onstage to the people making up its audience. In 2009, the MBT team sat down to discuss their strengths and weaknesses, only to realize that there was a gaping hole in their success story: the failure to engage the local community. Box office receipts showed that the zip code least represented in MBT audiences was the theatre's own: 55454. "This showed a lack on our side of connecting our intentions and our mission with the activities of the organization," said Scott Artley, former Community Engagement Manager at MBT (Artley 2011). The realization that MBT was not engaging neighborhood residents provided the impetus for gaining a greater understanding of their fellow Cedar-Riverside locals.

With a very small budget to conduct research for a pilot community engagement project, Artley and his colleagues did just that: they set out to get to know their neighbors in a very grass-roots manner. Artley visited local hubs of activity not frequented by those outside the East-African community. “I went in African malls in these concrete buildings that you wouldn’t expect to have so much activity, but they are vibrant marketplaces. Beautiful scarves, people doing hair, it’s just this whole world boxed away in this unassuming concrete building,” said Artley of one of his visits (ibid). There, he introduced himself and the theatre, and spread the word about a new paid position MBT was trying to fill: Community Engagement Liaison.

The role of the Community Engagement Liaison was to use his or her local knowledge to help MBT identify and connect with networks. That way, MBT would gain a greater understanding about the Somali community’s values and preferences while also spreading the word about the theatre’s offerings. In general, the community was receptive of what Artley and the Community Engagement Liaison had to say. Networking through a Community Engagement Liaison proved valuable for MBT and there are now four such positions with the theatre.

With input from the community and their new staff member, MBT was ready to start developing programs that would engage the East African community. *Welcoming Spaces* is an invitation for community members to come and get to know MBT by using the theatre’s space for any type of artistic use. Unlike many organizations who rent out space, there are no fees attached to accessing the venue or technical support. Groups from the 55454 area code started using MBT’s auditoriums for their own artistic uses. According to Artley,

“We saw participation as the first step in access to the arts. No matter their motivation for getting in the door, we wanted to create an opportunity to experience one part of what we had to offer. We especially wanted to provide a home for rehearsals, readings and performance, but also make the space available as just a gathering space. In our minds that’s what an arts space is. So we had fundraisers, performances, a comedy activity, and these were all ways that were not necessarily specifically tied to our producing aesthetic, but it was our way to increase our reputation as a resource and to get people familiar with the space” (Artley 2011).

The *Welcoming Spaces* initiative was a necessary first step in building a long-standing relationship between MBT and the community.

The 55454 series was another early community engagement effort. Named after the theatre’s zip code, the program strives to include all members of the neighborhood, rather than a single demographic or ethnic group. In this series, MBT offers free admission<sup>13</sup> for 55454 residents to any of its touring productions, which are also presented in the Cedar-Riverside community.

Working with youth has always been an important part of MBT’s community engagement work. Previously, the theatre held summer theatre training camps for Latino and Hispanic youths. The theatre now needed to broaden their reach in to address new demographics. MBT met with then neighbor Bedlam Theatre<sup>14</sup> in 2010 to discuss possible collaborations in youth programs, as Bedlam had some previous experience in engaging with the younger generation of the East African community. The meeting produced the idea for *Voices of Cedar Riverside*: an ensemble of neighborhood young

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<sup>13</sup> This program predates “Radical Hospitality” (see above). Free tickets are now available for all mainstage shows, as well.

<sup>14</sup> Bedlam Theatre has since moved to another part of Minneapolis.

adults who develop and perform plays based on their own experiences. The program is a collaborative effort between the two theatres.

### Welcome to Our Neighborhood

Currently, the Voices of Cedar-Riverside is a great source of pride for the theatre and the entire community, as the program is reaching its culmination in July of 2011. The process, however, has been just as important as presenting the final product. For the past year, the Voices of Cedar Riverside ensemble has held story circles where community members shared life experiences with each other and playwright David Grant. Grant, who is not a member of the East African community, used these personal narratives as inspiration to weave together “a tapestry of fictionalized stories” (Mixed Blood Theatre website). As the plot slowly started to form, The Voices of Cedar Riverside ensemble kept the community involved in the process. They scheduled public staged readings of the script as it developed, where anyone in the community was invited to come and give feedback about what should and what should not be included in the play. After all, the presentation was meant to be representative of who these young adults were and how they see themselves in society. From these feedback sessions, the ensemble, the playwright, and the community were able to come to a consensus over how precarious issues such as a terrorism subplot should be handled.

In many ways, the plot of *Welcome to Our Neighborhood* deals with timeless issues that have always faced teens of any ethnicity: two people falling in love despite the disapproval of their parents and the struggle to challenge gender roles. However, it also deals with topics that directly relate to being a first generation American, such as change

and tradition. "For the adults, it tells the story of what the young people are going through as being this generation growing up in America," director John Beuche said in an interview "And also show the young people are still very interested in their parents' stories and their background culture" (Kerr July 21, 2011). In this manner, the play creates three kinds of social capital: in-group bonding capital for the members of the ensemble, bridging capital that cultivates intergenerational understanding, and bridging capital from performances and feedback sessions.

After the script was finalized, the ensemble of 16 actors began rehearsing for the culminating presentations of *Welcome to Our Neighborhood*, scheduled for late July of 2011. The venue for the play was neither Bedlam Theatre nor MBT, but the Cedar Cultural Center. The first weekend of presentations is geared specifically at the Cedar Riverside community, with East African music, comedy and storytelling creating a festival-like environment during the day, leading up to the play at night. This performance will be free to all 55454 residents. The second weekend is open to the general public for a modest ticket price.

### A Model for Domestic Cultural Diplomacy

Mixed Blood Theatre demonstrates how the arts make invaluable contributions to civil society because of their ability to build social capital. It also exemplifies effective domestic cultural diplomacy through connecting with diverse populations and creating a cross-cultural dialogue around important social and political issues. Participatory arts activities, such as *Welcome to our Neighborhood* are a democratic way in which voices from marginalized groups can be heard throughout the larger community. As a Somali



community member remarked on how organizations can effectively engage with the Cedar-Riverside community, “Good partnerships involve sitting together, planning together, and agreeing on content and how to do it” (Gadwa 2009, 29). MBT earned the trust of community members by bringing them into the strategic and creative processes of *Welcome to Our Neighborhood*.

By telling their stories on-stage, these young people are challenging the stereotypes and pre-conceived notions that many Americans today hold about Muslims, immigrants, and teens. The staged readings and feedback sessions have also given the Voices of Cedar Riverside ensemble the chance to discuss important issues in a diverse group. “What I heard a lot in those sessions from the youths was that they got a chance to get to know other people that they wouldn’t have otherwise met,” said Artley (Artley 2011). Performances and feedback sessions became a safe place to discuss the difficult issues that might otherwise be too wrought with emotion to address.

Expressing their identities on stage in such a highly collaborative process is also therapeutic for the ensemble members. Many Somalis have voiced the desire to dispel rumors about their community, using arts as the vehicle. According to Gadwa, “Lately, many local Somalis have felt that the media has negatively portrayed them. Some expressed hope that art projects could teach outsiders about the Somali culture and challenge misconceptions. One Somali community leader suggested telling a story through a piece of art or a play could be much more effective as a communication strategy than giving a press conference to ‘talk at Westerners’” (Gadwa 2009, 20). Clearly, this is was the feeling of the Voices of Cedar Riverside ensemble.

Raul Ramos worked closely with the community teens, and noted that recent years have been very difficult for them due to the ongoing FBI investigation into the al-Shabab youths.

“As the kids would say, ‘they were all looking at U.S. as terrorists. They weren’t just looking at U.S. as different; they were looking at U.S. as the enemy.’ And distrU.S.t turned into anger. And it got ugly. In Cedar Riverside, they surrounded themselves with themselves and put up barriers either to keep others out or keep themselves protected. So there was a lot of distrU.S.t from both ends. [Ensemble members] talk a lot about all this. They go out into neighborhoods to tell [their peers] about the shows, that they are not alone and that seeing it on stage would be helpful to start a dialogue” (Ramos, 2011).

While MBT has not developed a way of tracking what (if any) kind of social change has occurred due to projects like *Welcome to Our Neighborhood*, it is clear that participating in MBT’s programs has given the teens a sense of agency. One of the Community Engagement Liaisons, Mohamed Jama, has become increasingly active within the Somali youth community. As a high school student, he is a co-founder and spokesperson of the Cedar Riverside Youth Council. Jama has been instrumental in arranging meetings between government officials and the Youth Council in order to address pertinent local issues (ibid). This is an outstanding case of civic engagement, however the courage to stand up in front of the Minneapolis community and reclaim identity is alone evidence that MBT’s approach to empowerment is indeed working.

## CHAPTER 8

### CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

Participating in the arts has numerous benefits for all, but marginalized populations (such as immigrants and refugees, in particular) gain a sense of empowerment, identity, and stronger networks when the arts are a part of their lives. However, these populations often engage with the arts in different ways than what is traditionally assumed. While some visit museums and attend plays, many prefer to connect informally, as demonstrated by the Chicago-based studies (Wali 2001). Within the Somali population, specifically, research has shown that people are interested in expanding access to participatory arts (Gadwa 2009, 12). For many ethnic groups including the Somalis, the arts are an essential part of everyday life, and people will find ways to participate regardless of the offerings from their local art institutions. This is indeed healthy and enriching for individuals. However, Putnam's research has shown that there is importance in coming together to pursue these activities because they build both bridging and bonding social capital, expanding networks and creating more civically engaged citizens (Putnam 2000). These benefits only multiply when arts activities can bring together people of different cultures and ethnicities, creating the type of bridging social capital that increases tolerance and empathy. Organizations such as Mixed Blood Theatre are pioneering new models of engagement that emphasize collaborating with the community to determine what offerings would be of most value to them. Just as the

public and private sectors have relied on the arts to build bridges of understanding between the U.S. and other nations, the arts and culture sector should be implicated in the effort to combat the burgeoning problem of anti-Islamic sentiment and xenophobia within U.S. communities. Experts on cultural diplomacy contend that the most effective types of engagement happen when sharing is a two-way street (Cummings 2005). Scheduling performances by Muslim-American singers, for example, can be taken a step further by organizing post-performance discussions with the audience or collaborations with other local choruses. Finally, engagements that are sustained over time (such as the year-long process of story circles and staged readings for *Welcome to Our Neighborhood*) have more possibility for creating change because a basis of trust and stronger bonds are able to form with the program's continuance.

### Evaluation and Funding

Unfortunately, most U.S. cross-cultural events are fleeting, with festivals and traveling productions as the most prevalent in the category. It makes sense, as these programs require fewer resources and can generate more revenue. Even programs that have received funding to carry out a sustained community engagement initiative have a difficult time renewing the grant for consecutive terms. MBT's Latino youth engagement program (a predecessor to *Welcome to Our Neighborhood*), for example, ended when its funding was not renewed. "Often programs are ended for no other reason than that turnover in a foundation's leadership or a public agency's board and staff has anointed new grantmakers who want the same chance as their predecessors to feel creative and garner attention by generating their own, new thing," says Arlene Goldbard (Goldbard

2006, 191). While Goldbard's reasoning seems logical, one also must ask what type of evidence funders have received from the organizations that the programs are meeting their objectives of creating social change in the community.

In a study done by the Arts Council of England, research revealed that participatory arts programs involving refugees suffered from a sector-wide lack of evaluation. This dearth of data "curtails the dissemination of learning and good practice. It has also limited levels of impact assessment, weakening the possibilities for strategic advocacy for the work. Hence, whilst there has been some recognition of the value of cultural activities in working with refugees and asylum seekers there is no strategic engagement with the refugee sector on a national level" (Kidd et. al. 2008, 7). It is understandable that program officers would have a difficult time making the case for renewing a project grant if the organization fails to produce social impact evaluations.

This is the same issue that has plagued the international cultural diplomacy efforts throughout the years, eventually making lack of evaluations the norm for this field. In a survey of 134 individuals and arts organizations, only 54 percent reported a requirement from funders and/or governance structure to evaluate cultural exchange initiatives (Fullman 2009, 33). As for MBT's community engagement programs, it is unclear how the theatre plans to measure success. Similar to the situation with refugee arts funding in the UK, it seems that most people in Cedar-Riverside agree that MBT's activities have merit, but any sort of evaluative data remains to be seen.

Another benefit of having evaluation data for community arts programs is the ability to share best practices with others and improve offerings, sector wide. A standard evaluation rubric to be used for all cross-cultural projects in the Cedar-Riverside

neighborhood would give organizations the chance to share large-scale successes with the greater Minneapolis community and garner support from funders. MBT and Bedlam Theatre have made tremendous strides in the way of sparking civic dialogue, but their limited budgets and organizational capacities in turn limit the amount of reach they have. Thus, convincing, evaluative data needs to come forth to encourage other organizations in Cedar-Riverside's densely populated arts and culture community to collaborate. Working together, these organizations have more leverage to have more impact in the neighborhood.

### Broadening Reach

Domestic cultural diplomacy projects, such as Mixed Blood Theatre and Bedlam Theatre's *Welcome to our Neighborhood* program, illustrate how arts organizations can better connect with their communities. Projecting these kinds of successes to arts organizations nationally will help expand the field. However, confining domestic cultural diplomacy to only the arts and culture sector would be a mistake, as this paradigm is applicable to public policy, education, social service, health, law enforcement and many other fields. After all, international cultural diplomacy is often initiated and/or organized by the State Department rather than the arts and culture sector. A partnership between local law enforcement in Minneapolis and a Cedar-Riverside arts organization would benefit the community in two ways: by re-establishing trust between police and the Somali community and by engaging youth in positive, capacity-building activities. Cultural diplomacy projects in public schools could combine youths from different parts of Minneapolis to build bridging social capital in the city. These are just a few examples

of how multiple sectors can use cultural diplomacy to affect change in a community. Further investigation into existing cross-sector projects is needed in order to build the case for partnership.

### Practitioner's Guide

Looking at other locations where the arts have played a role in bridging cultural gaps would add credibility to the best practices outlined in this document. From these case studies, a practical guide to domestic cultural diplomacy could be created. Though many books have been written on the subject of community arts management, a collection of lessons on using the arts as domestic cultural diplomacy from the perspective of multiple sectors is needed. This could aid arts organizations and their collaborators in planning and implementing the project.

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